

The Biblical View of Sex and Marriage

By Richie Temple

The Christian life which is built on God's redemptive work in Christ begins with God's grace, continues in God's grace, and culminates in God's grace. It is because of this grace – God's undeserved divine favor - that a Christian believer can live with peace, certainty and confidence in all of life's situations. Knowing that one's sins have been forgiven through faith in Christ allows a person to grow as a child in God's family in all aspects of life despite imperfect understanding, mistakes and failures of many kinds. However, it is also part and parcel of the Christian life that as a child in God's family the Christian believer should want to know and do what is right in God's sight. Fortunately, this is usually clear from the Bible and it really simply becomes a matter of us "putting off" our old selves and "renewing our minds" so as to become more Christ-like in our thoughts, words and deeds. Sometimes, however, forces align in society and life to confuse issues that biblically and historically were clear. Real confusion may occur for many both in the world and in the body of Christ. Today that is true of the biblical view of sex and marriage. Only in recent decades - primarily since the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s - has there been much debate about what the Bible teaches about sex and marriage. There is a good reason for this: *the Bible speaks with one voice from Genesis to Revelation that marriage is a godly and a holy union that is to be between a man and a woman and that the only proper place for intimate sexual relations is within that relationship.* Whatever the secular world at large in any historical time and particular place may say in regards to sex and marriage, Christians are called to live a holy life in all its dimensions and, therefore, to be lights in the midst of the darkness of this world. This involves every aspect of life and is defined by our relations first and foremost with God himself and only then with each other. When God created mankind he made them -male and female -in his image and likeness so that they could rule over the earth in fellowship with him. The Book of Genesis sets forth this famous foundational passage in the Bible:

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'"

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"(Genesis 1:26-28 NIV).

It is from God's original creative purpose for mankind – as male and female created in God's image - that all else follows in the Bible. The relationship between any man and any woman with God – as creatures made in God's image - is the primary relationship upon which all other relationships are to be built. Apart from living in fellowship with God by loving God and loving others all other human endeavors are ultimately meaningless. However, in fellowship with God every life is important and all can enjoy a close relationship with their creator in every endeavor of life. As Christ himself taught in the New Testament,

to love God and then to love one's neighbor in accordance with God's will are the first and second great commandments; everything else flows from them (Mark 12:28-34; cf. Matt. 22:34-40). These two commandments were both originally stated in the Old Testament and are simply the logical response to God's creative purpose for mankind as set forth in Genesis. On Christ's authority this understanding continues over into the New Testament and is emphasized throughout. Importantly, loving God comes first and loving one's neighbor as oneself can only be understood properly in relationship to loving God first. Otherwise, loving one's neighbor as oneself can become a free-for-all of "free love" or "sham love" defined in any way that anyone wants at any given time and at any given place. However, the proper context of loving one's neighbor as one's self is to recognize that we are all made in the image of God and are responsible to treat each other in a godly manner in all of life's activities and relationships. It is in this biblical context of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself that sex and marriage are to be properly understood, lived, and enjoyed.

Biblically, the most important human relationship beyond our basic general responsibility to love others as ourselves is marriage. Of course, not everyone marries and those individual's lives are every bit as important as those who are married. Many marriages also fail; however, for those who experience it in a godly way marriage is the most intimate of human relationships. Though it requires a godly, loving and giving attitude on the part of both husband and wife over a lifetime to be most successful, it has for good reason traditionally been considered one of the greatest God-given blessings available in this earthly life. Amongst its many blessings is the enjoyment of intimate sexual relations between husband and wife. Biblically, from Genesis to Revelation, this is the only proper sphere for sexual intercourse and similar intimate sexual relations. These sexual relations are part of the "one flesh" union of a man and woman in marriage ordained originally by God in the Book of Genesis for the benefit and blessing of mankind:

"That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."
(Genesis 2:24).

In the Bible, all other intimate sexual relations between a man or woman with another living being are considered outside of God's will and are, therefore, sinful – that is, a missing of the mark in regards to doing God's will. In the NT all such sexual sins are included in the Greek word group of "porneia", "porne", etc. These Greek words (from which we get the English word "pornography") are usually translated in the NIV and other modern translation as "sexual immorality." In the King James Version and other older translations they were usually translated as "fornication." The exact meaning of the particular Greek word used in any given passage is determined by its context, but in its widest usage these Greek words refer to all intimate sexual relations outside of the marriage of a man and a woman as forbidden by the OT Law (e.g. Lev. 18, etc.). When Jesus spoke in Mark 7 of "that which defiles" being "evil thoughts that proceed from the heart" (thus leading to evil actions), he included the plural "porneiai" or "sexual immoralities" (NIV) in the widest sense (v. 21). However, he never confronted specific sexual practices like homosexuality or pre-marital sex head-on simply because they were not issues at the time and, thus, he was never asked about them. It was a given in the Jewish society of his times that any intimate sexual activity outside of the marriage of a man and a woman was "porne" or "sexual immorality." All faithful Jews at that time would have been of one accord on this matter. It was

only when Christianity began to spread into Gentile areas of the Roman Empire and beyond that such issues came up. Once they did come up they were addressed by the apostles Peter, Paul, James and the other Christian leaders almost immediately at a major council (Acts 15) and the entire Christian church has been of almost one accord about these matters – until very recent times – ever since. Why the historic unity? Simply because the biblical evidence is so clear and mankind's role – both male and female - in the natural order of God's created world is so clear as well.

This is not to say however that people of the Jewish faith or Christians have always actually lived in accordance with this godly view of marriage and sex - far from it! In fact, we have many examples of missing the mark on this in both the OT and the NT. The scriptures make no effort to hide the failures of God's people; instead, they set forth examples – both positive and negative – for God's people who read the scriptures to learn from. However, what is most clear from all of these examples is that failing to live in accordance with God's will always brings hurtful and harmful consequences both to those involved in sinful behavior and to those directly and indirectly affected by that behavior. God's will and desire for mankind in regards to marriage and sex is for the blessing of mankind. And let's face it, failure to live in accordance with God's plan for mankind in regards to sex and marriage hurts people themselves – men, women and children - as we all instinctively and intuitively know if we are open and honest about it before God and each other. The promise of “sexual liberation” for every generation that has proclaimed it and for every individual that has tried it has always been a false and empty promise that has brought pain and bondage rather than freedom and contentment.

Of course, even in times such as today of sexual permissiveness in so many forms a good marriage still generally remains the gold standard of adult contentment and fulfillment. Most people still desire it and those who have experienced failed marriages still continually seek a better and more fulfilling marriage. Surely this is not simply the result of traditional religious indoctrination over many centuries since even most unbelievers also desire a good marriage. It is rather a natural desire that most people have as they grow and mature from birth to adulthood. There are exceptions to this rule but the desire for marriage is still the norm of human existence. This is in fact how God designed the world as well as mankind's role within it. To see how clear and consistent the Bible is on this subject of sex and marriage let us start in Genesis and give a few representative examples:

Genesis 2:22-24: "Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man.' That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."

Matt. 19:4-5: "'Haven't you read' he [Jesus] replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

Ephesians 5:21: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

These verses represent the norm of the biblical view of marriage which is assumed throughout the entire Bible. The only biblical exception to this view of marriage was the allowance of polygamy in OT times which, though not in accord with God's original intent, was allowed for particular reasons and in which the marriage relationship was still between opposite sexes. All other sexual relations between a human being with another living being (sex with the opposite sex outside of marriage, homosexual sex, or sex with an animal) were prohibited and condemned in both the OT (e.g. Ex. 22:19; Lev. 18) and in the NT (e.g. Rom. 1:25-27; I Cor. 5-6; Eph. 5:1-7; I Thess. 4:1-8; I Tim. 1:8-11). It was a given that the nations that Israel displaced in the promised land, then those that later surrounded them while they lived in the promised land, and then those that later captivated, exiled or subjected them (Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome) would live immorally in their marital and sexual practices. Sometimes these immoral extra-marital sexual practices - both between opposite sexes and homosexual -were actually a part of the religious ceremonies of these pagan nations. However, Israel, and then the Christian church, were explicitly commanded to not live like the pagans but rather to live holy lives according to God's will including in the realm of sex and marriage (e.g. Lev. 18; I Cor. 5-6).

Because of their belief in one holy God and the holy lifestyle that he commanded the ancient Jews and early Christians were often considered a threat to the established polytheistic pagan order of any particular empire in which they lived. They thus were persecuted and became an easy scapegoat for the political and religious leaders of those empires when times were bad. It is perhaps true that this may be where we are headed today in various countries of the world as the forces of atheism, paganism, religious syncretism, and/or secularism continue to advance. It is not, however, "inevitable" - which one so often hears. As history has shown, ungodly trends can be stopped, changed and reversed. After all, even the ungodly Roman Empire was to a great degree Christianized in the early centuries after Christ - to the great relief of the world for the next millennium and a half. At any rate, the biblical Christian is supposed to live this life in the light of a better life, age, and world to come. The Book of Hebrews sums up this biblical view:

Hebrews 13:4: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and the sexually immoral."

As with all things biblical there is a right and wrong way to live. The biblical view is that those who live righteously will be eventually vindicated and that the unjust will eventually be punished. This is true of marriage and sex as well. However, as with all biblical rights and wrongs God's love, grace and mercy "cover a multitude of sins" when we acknowledge our wrongdoing and seek his forgiveness. The same love, grace and mercy should be true of us in our relationships with each other as we live in imitation of God and Christ in our marriage relationships. However, love, grace and mercy are necessary precisely because there are clear biblical rights and wrongs on this topic of which we all at times may fall short. The rights and wrongs, however, do not change and Christians should not compromise on them since they are God-given and the source for blessings and fulfillment - not as the world would have us think - of pain and bondage.

Of course, the Bible has much to say both in the OT and NT about the great and many blessings of a godly marriage and I recommend that faithful Christians take the time to study this topic in great

depth over the course of their lifetimes. With the true sanctity of marriage being undermined more and more in our societies in recent times it is vital that its true biblical meaning and blessings be understood and properly practiced -at least, by those who want to live in harmony with God's will. Fortunately, for Christian believers who desire to do God's will this is not really a complicated issue. Ever since its establishment in Genesis 2 marriage has been the bedrock of society, especially when practiced in the light of its original biblical foundations as a God-ordained institution. It has on the whole been the main source for human society of social stability, moral certitude, and, of course, the pro-creation and care of children. On a personal level, it has often been the source of some of the greatest joy and fulfillment that this present life can offer. The decrease in the stability of marriage and in how it is viewed has occurred correspondingly with the decrease in religious belief and practice over the last few decades in Western society. Unsurprisingly, this has also led to a corresponding increase in many other moral, social and economic ills. Unfortunately, the connection between all of these is not something that a morally relativistic society wishes to see. In today's Western society one is free to take any view of marriage that one desires to take and laws are changing in many directions. A person can already find some nation, state or local region that will support his or her view. Indeed, it is ever increasingly likely that one can even find a professedly Christian denomination, local church and/or synagogue to support that view irrespective of how out of step it may be with traditional Christian values. And, for that shrinking segment of Christian denominations that believes that biblical support would be helpful, there are plenty of pseudo-scholars to provide an interpretation - however unlikely and textually unjustified - to fit one's every view.

Of course this flies in face of thousands of years of near unanimity on the subject since the biblical evidence is, in fact, crystal clear. However, if one decides to depart from seeking the original intent and meaning of the biblical authors and instead substitute a post-modernist viewpoint in interpreting the biblical texts then it is certain that the texts will yield an interpretation that will fit whatever view you want. That is, after all, the true basis and goal of post-modernism: to "deconstruct" texts so that they have no certain meaning at all, thus, allowing a person to choose any interpretation one desires and, correspondingly, to choose any lifestyle one so desires to live. However, for those of us who believe the Bible to be the expression of God's will for mankind the true issue is simply to know and live in the light of God's word and then to receive the blessings thereof. Fortunately, the true biblical view on marriage and sex is clear and is consistent from Genesis to Revelation for those who truly want to know it and live in the light of it. Thus, whatever the laws of any society are -or become -in regards to marriage and sex faithful Christians can enjoy the certainty of knowing God's will and living in a deep, rich and meaningful marriage relationship as God originally intended and still intends today.

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