

Marriage in the Bible, Society, and the Church Today

Session 2: Marriage in the New Testament

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg
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A. Starting Points--Principles of Interpretation

1. Texts never interpret themselves. Reading involves an interactive process between reader, text and contexts.
2. Biblical texts present a variety of viewpoints, and we need to allow different voices to speak independently.
3. There is a historical gap between our world and the world of the New Testament. Therefore, we have to explore what the text *meant* and what the text *means*.
4. While the Bible is authoritative for the church, "it is not an encyclopedia of information about every area of human knowledge and understanding." We read the Bible in light of what God has revealed to us through knowledge and experience as well. (See "Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture" (1983), https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/_resolutions/scripture-use.pdf)

B. Marriage at the Time of the Writing of the New Testament

1. Roman Understanding

Legal understandings of marriage were primarily applicable to Roman citizens. Various local customs in the empire largely dictated practices. However, we can make certain general claims about Roman marriage. It was:

- a. contractual
- b. arranged
- c. financial
- d. not necessarily related to love

2. Jewish Understanding

Judaism has always prized marriage, including sexual union and procreation of children. Some conceptions central to Jewish understanding include:

- a. Marriage between man and woman reflecting God's plan

- b. Procreation as a primary function of marriage
- c. Marriage provided blessings for both partners.
- d. Marriage was beneficial for rabbis and priests.

C. Observations on Paul's Teaching about Marriage in 1 Corinthians 7.

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. This I say by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. (verses 1-10)

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that. I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry. But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancée, he will do well. So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God. (verses 25-40)

1. Reciprocity

Each partner belongs to the other, and both have to be attentive to the needs and desires of the other.

2. Sexuality

Sex takes place within marriage. In fact, one of marriage's functions (its prime function?) is to provide an outlet for sexual activity. Notice that Paul says nothing negative or positive about the sexual act itself.

3. Children

The importance of marriage for producing children nowhere appears here though it may be implied (cf. verse 14).

4. Sexual Desires

Paul describes celibacy as a "gift" and perhaps non-celibacy as well (cf. v.7).

5. Romantic Love

Simply put, romantic love is irrelevant to marriage.

6. Relative Importance

Marriage and devotion to one's partner is of lesser importance than one's calling by God in Christ.

D. Household Codes—representing a hierarchical view of marriage within the framework of the Roman household.

1. Ephesians 5:21-32

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a great mystery, and I am

applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

2. Colossians 3:18-19

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.

3. 1 Peter 3:1-7

Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

E. Other NT Passages on Marriage

1. Jesus' Direct Teaching (Matthew 5:31-32, 19:4-5, 22:30; Mark 10:10-12; Luke 20:28-35, e.g.)
2. Jesus' indirect teaching (various parables, Mark 3:31, 10:29, e.g.)
3. Bridal imagery in NT (John 3:29, Ephesians 5 (see above), Revelation, e.g.)

F. NT passages about homosexuality

1. 1 Timothy 1:8-11

This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, **sodomites (arsenokoites)**, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching 11 that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

2. 1 Corinthians 6:9

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, **male prostitutes (malakoi) sodomites (arsenokoites)**, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

3. Jude 7

Likewise, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, **indulged in sexual immorality (ekporneuein) and pursued unnatural lust (apelthousai opisō sarkos eteras**—lit. “departed after other flesh”) serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

4. Romans 1: 18-32

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

G. Steps Toward Conclusions

1. The NT has a few things to say about homosexuality, but it is not a topic at the forefront of NT teaching. This scarcity of information does not tell us anything about its importance to the NT writers.

2. What the NT does have to say about homosexuality is fraught with difficult questions, both of meaning and of context.

3. By and large, our notions of marriage, its functions, and its importance do not correspond closely with marriage in the NT. This does not imply that we are *contrary* to the NT or that the NT has *nothing to say* about marriage in our world, but we have tended to base notions of marriage more on custom than on theology.

4. At various times in Christian history, the dominant teaching on marriage and sex **has been explicitly contradictory** to the NT.

5. The story of Cornelius in Acts 10 gives us an example of A. how to think about decision-making in the church and B. how we understand the way that God's revelation can change previously held notions.