



The New Life in Christ

Lesson 11

Marriage and Family Life

The Principles of Marriage

The relationship between a husband and his wife is the most important human relationship that we can achieve in our lives. It is in marriage that we can learn how fully to love another person, how to forgive one another, how to be considerate and caring, how to be selfless. The Bible tells us a great deal about the principles of marriage and what it should mean for disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke these words about marriage to his disciples.

"Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."
Matthew 19:4-6

Jesus was reminding his disciples of the way in which Adam and Eve came together as man and wife. The Lord God brought Eve to Adam in the Garden of Eden and this is recorded for us in Genesis 2. However it is obvious from the way Jesus described a man leaving his parents that there are lessons for men and women of all generations, not just for the first man and woman (who were created directly by God), and we can learn the following points from what he said in Matthew 19.

1. In the beginning God made two sexes and brought a man and a woman together. He did not bring a man to a man or a woman to a woman; homosexuality is abhorrent to God and is strictly forbidden in the Bible. (Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26-27, 1Corinthians 6:9-10)
2. Marriage is the joining of one man and one woman. Adam was not given many wives, just one.
3. The marriage union is ordained by God, when Eve was brought to Adam God spoke to them both the words commencing 'Therefore...' In the beginning marriage was a solemn, serious commitment made by two people in the presence of the Angel of the Lord.
4. God intends that this joining, or 'union', of a man and woman in marriage should last as long as they both remain alive. God forbids anyone to break this union that He has blessed and later in the Bible we are told that He hates divorce.

"Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.

"For the man who hates and divorces, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."
Malachi 2:14-16

These words are not easy to follow and we need to think carefully about them. Malachi was writing about events in Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah. These events are recorded in Nehemiah 13. Jewish men had divorced their Jewish wives and had married foreign women. They had put away the wives whom they had married when they were young, when both had shared a belief in God. They had been seduced by women who did not share their faith and had married them. In doing these things they made the same mistake as their ancestors who were seduced by pretty girls and turned away from God (Numbers 25). We can summarise Malachi's warning like this.

1. Your wife is supposed to be your good friend and partner. You should be faithful to her because you made a solemn promise (a covenant) when, as a young man, you took her to be your wife.

2. God wants godly offspring - that is God-fearing children. So God commands that husband and wife should stay together for life, as one flesh that must never be separated. In doing this they will be able to provide a good home in which their children can learn to serve God.
3. Every husband must be faithful to his wife for all of his life.
4. God hates divorce and men must not put away their wives and take new ones.

We need to think further about the idea of a 'Godly offspring'. The very first instruction that God gave the newly married Adam and Eve is found in Genesis 1.

"And God blessed them (Adam and Eve). And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Genesis 1:28

When we put this verse together with those from Malachi 2, which we have already considered, we can see clearly the purpose of God. He wants the earth to be filled with people, but they must be people who are God-fearing and who worship Him. It is the responsibility of husbands and wives together to bring up their children in this way.

The Place of Sexual Relations

We have seen from Matthew 19 that the physical union of a man and woman within marriage is a God given gift. It is an act of tenderness and love between two people who come together as one and the Bible tells us that this union must be respected and kept pure and that it is spoiled by adultery.

"Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." Hebrews 13:4

We are taught that two people become one flesh (1Corinthians 6:16) - but *only two*. Before a man or a woman marries, they should not have sexual relations with another person. When they are married they should be faithful to their husband or wife. We need to look again at the words of Jesus in Matthew 19.

"Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast (be joined) to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." Matthew 19:4-6

1. A man shall leave his father and mother – this does not mean that he should now ignore his parents and have nothing to do with them. It means that his new wife now becomes the most important person in his family and he needs to put the care of her first.
2. He will be joined to his wife – the word Jesus used means 'to join closely, to be glued to' and it is unlikely that Jesus was describing sexual union in this way. Rather he is teaching us that a mental and spiritual union comes first; there should be 'a meeting of minds' between the husband and his wife. This understanding between a man and a woman should first be developed in courtship and engagement so that there is a clear understanding between them about what is really important to each of them before they commit to a joint life together in marriage.
3. The two become one flesh – sexual union comes *after* a husband is joined to his wife in the way described above.
4. The husband and wife are joined together by God – Jesus uses a different word here to that used in Point 2 above. This joining by God means 'to be yoked or united together' as two oxen might be yoked to pull a plough. The wife is the help given to the husband by God (Genesis 2:18) so that they might both work together for the Lord as they await the Kingdom of God. When Jesus talked about being yoked together with him (Matthew 11:29) he used a very similar word and we shall return to this idea later.

When we think of marriage in this way we can understand a little more clearly how important it is and why we should respect God's teaching about the need for faithfulness. People who break God's

commandments about sexual relations are called fornicators, or adulterers. (Fornication means any kind of unlawful sex; adultery means unlawful sex by a married person.) Those who continue to commit fornication or adultery will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Most of the book of Proverbs was written by King Solomon. He was a man who had many wives and many women – we are told that he had 1000 of them (1 Kings 11:3)! Yet none of them brought him the true happiness which comes from a Bible based marriage (Ecclesiastes 7:27-28). Perhaps because of his own unhappy experiences, he wrote much about sexual relationships in the book of Proverbs. In one vivid passage, he wrote about the harm adultery causes. (Proverbs 6:27-35). He wrote that immorality is like a fire out of control, it destroys the lives of all it touches and brings great harm and unhappiness.

Preparing for Marriage

Choosing a Wife

True disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ know that they should only marry someone who shares their faith. However, sometimes it is very difficult for a disciple to find a husband or wife who shares their beliefs. Some men and women in this situation are able to remain unmarried for all of their lives. They do this in response to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 19:12. Jesus recognised that this is a very difficult thing to ask and his words tell us the divine ideal in this situation. It is not a commandment to all disciples in this situation. The very first thing we should do if we wish to get married is to pray about it and to entrust the matter to the Lord God.

The Bible warns many times about the dangers of marrying someone who does not share one's beliefs.

- In Genesis 6 we are told;

“When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose.”
Genesis 6:1-2

Those called ‘the sons of God’ were the descendants of Adam through Seth, who began to ‘call on the name of the Lord’ (Genesis 4:26). Spiritually they were a ‘godly seed’ as described above. In contrast, the ‘daughters of man’ had no interest in worshipping God and the resulting wickedness brought the terrible judgement of God upon the earth by the Flood (Genesis 6 and 7).

- Abraham and Isaac opposed their sons’ marriages with the heathen Canaanites (Genesis 24:3-4; 28:1-2).
- The Law of Moses forbade the Israelites to have anything to do with these people or to take their daughters as wives (Exodus 34:15-16) and Moses specifically forbade the children of Israel to inter-marry with the foreign nations around them (Deuteronomy 7:3-4).
- Joshua reinforced the same message (Joshua 23:12-13).
- King Solomon’s foreign wives turned his heart away from God (1 Kings 11:1-11).
- Ezra (Ezra 9:1-2, 12) and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:23-27) met the same problem and spoke of the evil of these alliances.

You will find it helpful to look up all of these references in your Bible.

In the New Testament Paul makes it very clear that a believer is not free to marry an unbeliever:

“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?”
2 Corinthians 6:14-15

“A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”
1 Corinthians 7:39

Those who are considering marriage must remember that complete fulfilment can only be achieved when both partners belong to the Lord. Where there is no unity of thought, belief or purpose,

a marriage has no real spiritual foundation. It is not surprising that so many such marriages become just two people living together or they break down completely.

True followers of Christ must always keep the following clear in their minds. Whoever has not obeyed the Gospel is not a member of God's family and will not be in the Kingdom of God when Jesus returns to the earth. This is God's judgment, not ours. So, however charming, tender, kind and gentle a person may be, he (or she) is not part of God's family until they have obeyed the Gospel. Many people are 'good' people according to the judgement of the world and we might be attracted to them and think that we can find a marriage partner amongst them. However, God only accepts into His family people who have accepted His salvation through Jesus Christ. He asks of us that we exercise similar judgement when seeking someone to marry and to join us in forming a new family together.

This call of God must be kept firmly in mind, for our salvation depends upon our faithfulness to it. Our loyalty to God and to Jesus must come first, if our faith is a real faith - and this includes our friendships and our marriage partner. Jesus was very clear about this when he said;

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."
Matthew 10:37

In some countries the extended family, or the village in which we live, can exert strong pressure about marriage and family matters. If we are in Christ then we must obey him. If our family or village wants us to do something which is against his commands - like marrying someone who does not share our faith - then we should resist this pressure for the sake of obeying our Lord and for our own spiritual well-being. In marriage we form a partnership with our spouse, helping each other through life towards God's Kingdom. This cannot happen if we marry an unbeliever because our family wanted us to!

A man generally has only one opportunity to find a wife for himself. Once he has taken a wife he should stay with her always. If he makes a wrong choice he may have to pay for his mistake by being unhappy for the rest of his life.

The Bible often warns us of this, sometimes in very blunt language!

"It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.
It is better to live in a desert land than with a quarrelsome and fretful woman."
Proverbs 21:9, 19

"Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised."
Proverbs 31:30

Men admire beautiful women; in countries where bride price has to be paid a woman's beauty often determines her price. After all, it is a very natural thing for a man to want a beautiful wife. However, if a man is concerned only with a woman's beauty, he may find himself married to an unsuitable wife. Look back at the proverbs quoted above. The first tells us that life with the wrong sort of wife can be very miserable. The second tells us that beauty alone is not enough; what really matters is that a woman should have reverence and respect for the Lord God.

Behaviour before Marriage

In New Testament times, Corinth was a very wicked city - like many cities today. The Apostle Paul wrote twice to the disciples who lived there and his letters contain much sound, practical advice for disciples of all generations. In 1Corinthians 6 he gave six reasons why believers should avoid, or flee from, sexual immorality.

1. Immoral people will not be in the Kingdom of God.

"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."
1 Corinthians 6:9-10

2. Disciples are forgiven all their past sins when they are baptized and this includes immorality. They begin a new life in which they leave these things behind.
 "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."
 1 Corinthians 6:11
3. Disciples belong to the Lord; they commit their bodies to his service, therefore they are not free to do as they wish with them.
 "The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."
 1 Corinthians 6:13
 "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."
 1 Corinthians 6:19-20
4. Their bodies (which they have committed to Christ) will be raised from the dead.
 "God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power."
 1 Corinthians 6:14
5. Their bodies are described as being part of Christ's body and immoral unions spoil this unity with Christ. The believer is one with the Lord in spirit, meaning there is a unity in thinking and attitude. You cannot be 'one with the Lord in spirit and also of 'one flesh' with an immoral person.
 "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!
 Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh."
 But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him."
 1 Corinthians 6:15-17
6. Fornication is a sin against one's own body.
 "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body."
 1 Corinthians 6:18

Sexual relations before marriage are very common in many countries. People who have no intention of getting married will have intercourse together. This should not happen between true Bible believers. Intercourse is intended only for those already married and is an expression of heart and mind between a married couple. Casual sex is totally unscriptural; it makes nonsense of the sanctity of the marriage bond and encourages unfaithfulness after marriage.

Family Life in the Lord

Bringing up Children

We have already looked at the prophet Malachi's teaching about marriage. He said that its main purpose was for godly children to be raised and we should consider this further. To begin, let us look at two Proverbs:

"Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it".
 Proverbs 22:6

"Discipline your son for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death."
 Proverbs 19:18

These words are as true today as when Solomon wrote them three thousand years ago. It is the parent's duty to train up a child in the way of the Lord. If they do this, even when old he or she will not forget this teaching and the importance of it.

This proverb does not mean that it is the parents' fault if their child, when grown up, rejects God's teaching. Solomon also wrote these words:

"My son, **if** you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you,
 making your ear attentive to wisdom
 and inclining your heart to understanding;
 yes, **if** you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures;

then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.
Proverbs 2:1-5

We must bring up our children to understand the Gospel message, if we do this they will never forget it, but acceptance of it must come from a mature, adult heart.

Both father and mother should be involved in teaching their children these things and in correcting them when it is necessary. In some countries, physical punishment of children is forbidden by law whilst in others children are still beaten very harshly indeed. As ever the Bible gives us the right view about what we should do.

“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”
Ephesians 6:4

The language Paul uses here is very interesting and he tells us of three stages in the guidance and correction of children.

1. ‘Bring them up’ - the words carry the meaning of to nourish or to feed. Just as we give our children natural food, we are responsible for giving them spiritual food also.
2. ‘In the discipline’ - this does not mean physical discipline but rather teaching. When a child does something that is wrong, we should teach it the right way, carefully explaining the reasons behind our decisions.
3. ‘And instruction’ - finally Paul uses a word which means admonishment or correction but note that this is to be used last, after the previous two stages. Punishment should never be so harsh or unjust that it makes our children angry and resentful against us; that will simply turn them away from the truth of the Bible.

Barrenness

Sadly, sometimes a married couple cannot have children. There may be physical problems that prevent conception. On some occasions things can be put right medically but at other times a husband and wife may have to accept the fact that they are not able to have children.

We know that in some countries this can be a major problem and husbands even divorce their wives because of it. This should *not* be so in the Lord - we know that children are a gift of God but we also know that, if we are in Christ, God is in control of our lives. We have to accept that God knows what is best for us and for our spiritual development however hard it seems to us.

“We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”
Romans 8:28

Abortion

This should not be an option for sisters in Christ under almost all circumstances, because:

1. Conception is given by God (Hebrews 11:11; Ruth 4:13)
2. He oversees the development of the child in the womb (Psalm 139:13-16)
3. God is there at birth (Psalm 22:9; 71:6; Galatians 1:15).
4. The child is an inheritance from Him (Psalm 127:3).

An abortion is usually requested to do away with an unwanted pregnancy and this is wrong for all the above reasons. However, there may be medical exceptions where, for example, a mother’s life may be at risk due to damage to her foetus or womb. Such cases should be made a matter of prayer and husbands and wives should decide together the right course of action in conjunction with their doctor and according to their own consciences.

Respect for Parents

When the Children of Israel left Egypt and reached Mount Sinai, God gave them His law through Moses. The first part of this we know as the Ten Commandments and the sixth commandment is as follows:

"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God is giving you."
Exodus 20:12

Paul calls it the 'first commandment with promise'. If the children of Israel cared for and honoured their parents, then they would have prospered in the land of Canaan. The whole basis of society, the way in which they were to live together, was that of honouring parents and respect for family life. Jesus condemned the leaders of his day because they had rejected this commandment (Mark 7:6-15) and it led to a break down of family values in their society, just as it does so often today.

Christ and His Ecclesia

We have seen so far that the Bible teaches us a very powerful lesson about both marriage and family life and that marriage for disciples of Jesus Christ is quite different to marriage for non believers. There is one Bible passage which explains, more than anything else, why this is so.

"For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour.

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,

because we are members of his body.

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."
Ephesians 5:23-33

We saw earlier that, in marriage, God joins a man to a woman and that the word used by Jesus carries the idea of being yoked together. In Matthew 11 we read these lovely words of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30

This use of similar words to describe a marriage in the Lord, and a disciple's relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is quite deliberate. From the beginning, the whole relationship between a husband and his wife pointed forward to the relationship between Jesus Christ and his ecclesia. He is described in Scripture as the bridegroom and the ecclesia as his bride. God joins true believers together with him. When we want to know how a husband should behave towards his wife in marriage, we should look at the Lord Jesus and see how he cared for his disciples, how he loved them and protected them. When we want to know how a wife should behave towards her husband, we should look at the disciples of the Lord. They were men who looked to Jesus for guidance and teaching. They were the ones chosen by him to help him in his work. They belonged to God and God gave them to Jesus (John 17:6), just as a woman is given to a man as his bride.

We expect Jesus Christ to be faithful and true to us and, in turn, we have promised to be faithful and true disciples to him. Therefore we should be faithful and true to our husband or wife, as a husband we should seek to love our wife in the way that Christ loves his ecclesia.

In the way we behave in our marriage we follow the example of the behaviour of our Lord.

Questions

1. What are the principles of marriage that we learn from the way God brought Eve to Adam?
2. Why is divorce wrong?
3. What should it mean to a man when he leaves his parents and is joined to a wife?
4. Why should we only marry someone who shares our beliefs?
5. How does the relationship between a man and his wife represent the relationship between Jesus and the ecclesia?
6. Read Ezra 9 and 10. What did Ezra do when he heard of the problem of mixed marriages? What did the people decide to do? What are the lessons for us today?