

Spiritual Relationships That Last

What the Bible Says
About Dating and Marriage

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one

Marriage Success Today: What Are Your Chances?

They dream in courtship, but in wedlock wake.

—ALEXANDER POPE

Marriage is like twirling a baton, turning handspings, or eating with chopsticks. It looks easy till you try it.

—HELEN ROWLAND

There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage. One wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtails on the pillow that were not there before.

—MARTIN LUTHER

Kim and Jay were like so many other couples when we met them. Before getting married, they had lived together for over a year in a trial marriage. But it didn't help. After several years of stormy marriage, they were separated again. First Jay, and later Kim, began attending home Bible studies in our area. Within a month both met Christ personally.

As they learned to build trust in their new Christian friends, each recounted with tears the soul-numbing pain they had inflicted on each other during their failed effort to forge a lasting relationship. They struggled with their relationship for months, eventually undergoing counseling. Finally they were reunited. Things didn't go smoothly, especially at first. But today, thirteen years later, they are still married, well-adjusted, and now have three beautiful children and a powerful Christian ministry. Their former addictions and unfaithfulness are nowhere in sight. Jesus Christ changes lives.

As our culture hurtles downward into marital failure and

despair, couples like Kim and Jay are headed the opposite direction—toward marital success. As postmodern culture opts for lonely autonomy, unqualified freedom and cheap thrills; others are finding the mystery and contentment of union with another. A union relationship: It's God's answer to loneliness.

God's Pattern

In Genesis 2:24, God decreed that a man and woman should "leave" their parents and "cleave" to each other, and the two "shall become one flesh." This union of two distinct individuals is what we call marriage. Such a union relationship involves much more than procreation, although children are certainly a wonderful expression of the oneness of husband and wife. Thousands of years later, both Jesus and Paul quoted this very text when explaining the essence of sex and marriage. (See Matthew 19:5 and 1 Corinthians 6:16.) These passages both confirm that a union relationship, as described in Genesis 2, is God's central idea for marriage.

As people created in the image of God, we all desire the experience of union in a relationship and the sense of completion that comes with it. We can see this need illustrated in Genesis 2. Shortly after Adam's creation, God showed him the animals because, as God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (v. 18). On one level, Adam wasn't alone. After all, he was surrounded by God's creatures. But God brought the animals to Adam to teach him something important about his humanity. The man learned that none of the animals was "a helper corresponding to him" (v. 20, NASB, literal marginal rendering). In other words, Adam could not experience real unity with anything but another personal being like himself.

Today, the need for union in relationships is as central to being human as it ever was. Without union relationships we feel incomplete and lonely. We learn from the New Testament that God meets our desire for union first by uniting us with himself through our faith in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 6:17). This union relationship with God is his foundational answer to loneliness and alienation. When we are united with Christ, then we can also experience substantial union in relationships with other Christians because of the union of believers in the body of Christ. (See Romans 12:5 and John 17:21. We will give a complete explanation of this teaching in Chapter 4.)

Many also have the opportunity to experience the oneness of marriage—a union so real that it demonstrates the union of Christ and the Church in a unique way (Ephesians 5:28-32). Single Christians are rightly excited about the prospect of experiencing such a relationship. Do you want to succeed in marriage? If so, you've come to the right place! This book began as material primarily intended to help single Christians get off to a good start in marriage, even if marriage lies years in the future.

If you are single, we will explore important choices you can make before marriage that will help you forge a successful union. For those of you who are already married, this book will help you move ahead to build lasting unity in your relationships while working on your current problems.

Whether single or married, we are all making choices today that will affect our future. How can we know which ones are right? Let's examine together how to evaluate our choices according to God's timeless standards, and how to avoid the pitfalls of postmodern thought about marriage and romance.

Marriage in the Late Twentieth Century

Unfortunately, the Western world is profoundly unsuccessful at marriage. Although in the 1990s more people than ever are getting married, divorce is keeping pace. America has the highest divorce rate in the world.

Today, half as many are divorced every year as are married. People seem to feel their need for a deep and lasting love relationship more strongly than ever, but at the same time they are further than ever from success.

Single Christians, on the other hand, are in an excellent position to build successful marriages. As Christians we have the basis and

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the power to do so, but first we must decisively reject the secular approach to marriage choices and build instead on a solid scriptural foundation.

In the past, the evangelical Christian community was largely immune to the heavy divorce trend in society, but today this is no longer true. Recent studies show that people in the Christian community are also beginning to fail at marriage.¹ Two factors have contributed strongly to this disturbing trend.

Media Bombardment

The *unprecedented multimedia attack on the biblical view of sexuality* has contributed to marriage failure during the past three decades. People now reaching marrying age have been raised under the influence of TV, cinema, music and literature; that, with rare exceptions, deny the biblical role of sex. In its place, these sources advance a casual, self-centered view of sex. They usually promote self-gratification as the primary goal in a sexual relationship. According to the media consensus of our day, anyone who gives up any possible pleasure has made a foolish compromise.

Even young children sustain a daily barrage of claims that the key to happiness is a selfish sexual relationship. This media bombardment, which usually includes no Christian alternative, affects children who lack the critical faculty to evaluate such claims. Christian parents face a challenge today as they try to impart to their children the ability to think critically and biblically about the material on TV and other media.

Emotional and Relational Poverty

The second factor contributing to the increasing failure in marriage is the *emotional and relational poverty* fostered in existing modern Western families. Materialistic priorities in family life lead to extended work hours and two-income families, even when the family could make it on one income. The result is reduced parental availability to children and a corresponding rise in later adjustment problems. At UCLA in 1992, in a disturbing study of over 400 infants, toddlers and preschoolers, researchers found that "young children feel less secure with a teacher in a daycare center than with their own mother." Contrary to what many would expect, they found no correlation between the length of time children were with a teacher and their security scores. They

concluded that even long-term, stable daycare is not a fully adequate substitute for a mother.²

The rising divorce rate also tends to perpetuate itself because children of divorce are less likely to form, or even to seek, lasting marriages. In a study of 11,000 adults conducted at Albany N.Y. State University in 1992, researchers found that, compared to those who had lived with only one parent, adults who had lived with both parents were more likely to agree that it is better to marry, that marriage is for life, and that kids are better off living with their parents. Adults who had never lived with their father were particularly likely to reject traditional social norms.³ Another recent study of 340 freshmen at Auburn found that students from divorced families had lower scores on a "Favorableness of Attitude Toward Marriage Scale" questionnaire than did peers from intact families.⁴ Both of these studies suggest the same thing: Broken marriages not only decrease children's *ability* to build good families, but also reduce their *desire* to do so.

Absentee parents and illegitimacy are growing problems in America. Decreased nurture and guidance at home often lead to insecurity and lack of self-control in adolescents and young adults. Recent studies have shown that teens missing a parent at home are more likely to get involved in sexual activity and substance abuse.⁵ This lack of self-discipline can be a serious hindrance in establishing sacrificial relationships, which require consistent effort, often without immediate reward. Young people with low frustration tolerance find it difficult to succeed in marriage where disciplined, self-giving love is the only lasting foundation.

Even though these problems are severe, they are not hopeless. God's power is great, and he can change even the most damaged lives. But it isn't easy, and it won't happen without our active cooperation.

Preparation Is Critical

For all of these reasons, greater preparation is essential before attempting marriage today. Because of the intense pressure against marriage in the modern world, insufficient maturity can be disastrous. In an environment of near starvation, only the strong survive. Today, unfortunately, only the spiritually and emotionally strong marriages survive.

Maybe in earlier eras, people could simply find someone they felt love for and get married. Today, succeeding at marriage is less like walking next door and more like climbing a mountain. You wouldn't set out to climb a mountain without any planning or preparation, and if you did, you would probably get a nasty surprise. This isn't to say mountain climbing is bad. Actually it can be a great experience, but the ill-prepared and ill-equipped usually don't enjoy it much. They can, in fact, freeze to death on the mountainside. So, too, marriage success requires preparation in advance.

Some marriages, of course, flourish without any consciously biblical underpinnings. But these are the exceptions. Today, the number of failures is so high that undertaking marriage based on the belief that "We'll be different" is like playing Russian roulette. Few of us would be willing to play such a dangerous game. The chances of dying are one in six—far too high for any responsible person! But have you considered that the risks involved in a secular marriage are even worse? Based on today's trends, couples lunging into marriage without a strong spiritual basis have not one, but as many as three of the gun's six chambers loaded with deadly bullets. Non-Christians who marry today are more likely than not to encounter the worst experience of their lives—an experience so terrible they may never fully escape its consequences in this life.

God's Will and Your Choices

Some young Christians think that just because they are Christians, God won't allow them to get into serious trouble in marriage. This simply is not true. As Christians, we are responsible for the use of our free will, even when we may not realize how important our choices are.

When Christians experience the negative consequences of their poor choices, they sometimes ask, "Why does God allow me to suffer in this situation instead of changing it for the better?" As pastors and counselors, we hear this plea more often in connection with miserable marriages than anything else. The pain that people, including Christians, experience from marital disappointment can be one of the most intense and lasting types of suffering. Those in despair feel as though God has abandoned them.

But if God always changed the situation we chose, our choices would have no significance at all, would they? We could choose

anything knowing that—right or wrong—God would always straighten out the results for us. This amounts to a separation of free choice from responsibility. Is it reasonable to say that whatever we choose, God is responsible for the outcome? The Bible denies this idea.

Hebrews 12:16-17 reminds us of a shocking incident from the Old Testament, the story of Esau's free choice. In this story Esau, Isaac's firstborn son, had the legal right to inherit his father's estate. His father not only owned some property, but also the rights to a special covenant with God: namely, the privilege to be used by God in a unique way as his chosen family.

Esau came home from an unsuccessful hunting trip one day and found his younger brother Jacob cooking some soup. Esau was so hungry he was willing to do anything to get some. Seizing this opportunity, Jacob offered him the soup in exchange for his inheritance rights. In a moment, Esau agreed and sold his inheritance for a single meal. (See Genesis 25:27-34.)

Years later, Esau realized this was a mistake and tried to reverse the decision (or "repent" as Hebrews 12:17 says). But we read: "... afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears." Esau could still receive God's forgiveness for his wrong choice, but his birthright was forever lost—even though he begged his father with tears to restore it to him.

Does it seem cruel that Esau's life was forever affected by a bad decision he made on an impulse? After all, he was extremely hungry when he made the decision. Yet, this is the nature of free choice. The decisions we make are important—even to the extent that they can permanently change our lives. This is true even if we, like Esau, do not realize the importance of the decision at the time we make it.

The story also stands as a warning: There is no such thing as a hunger so severe that it justifies trading away God's will in order to satisfy it.

Both of these lessons apply directly to dating and marriage. Christians sometimes feel that their need for romantic love is so strong they cannot put up with the time and preparation required for a biblically based relationship. Some respond by engaging in sexual immorality as a quick pathway to love. Others insist on getting married even though they lack the maturity necessary for success. Of course, we can err and still be accepted by God. But we cannot assume that God will later step

in and remove the consequences of our actions.

Sometimes God, in his grace, does change the bitter outcomes of our bad choices, as he did for Kim and Jay. As a result, some very painful marriages eventually become quite satisfying. But God will not do so without our cooperation and a willingness to learn. A bad marriage can recover when a couple learns to stop making poor decisions. Although the couple realizes they're in trouble, they stick with each other, trying to learn and practice God's will. Eventually, they find themselves entering into a rewarding relationship.

This is not to say that God is in favor of our making wrong choices so that he can step in later and "fix" them. He does not give us a blank check to do what we want without danger. There is a difference between God's ability to bring good out of disaster—his redemptive power—and God's moral will. It is so much easier and more productive to do his will in the first place than to have to learn through our mistakes. Many people, including Christians, who have been through deep suffering in their marriages report that the pain they endure in marriage can be even worse than that in single life. Most wish they had taken additional time to prepare for their marriages. Couples who have struggled through a painful marriage to the point of success are usually the strongest voices warning against careless and godless marriage choices.

Informed Free Choice

Jean Paul Sartre, an atheist, laments that man is totally responsible for his decisions, even though he has no way of knowing what the consequences of those decisions will be. One doesn't have to be an existentialist philosopher to feel that our moral choices are stabs in the dark. But, as Christians, we reject this viewpoint.⁶ There are, of course, some decisions we have to make with no way of knowing what the outcome will be. For instance, we don't know what will happen when we decide to have children. Some may be born with serious birth defects. Some may

fall in with the wrong crowd. In these cases, we trust God to give us grace to overcome adversity and pain. Marriage choices, however, do not fall entirely into the category of the unknowable. As we shall see, we do have some concrete ways of knowing whether a marriage will work.

When suffering occurs in marriage, many Christians are tempted, like their non-Christian peers, to avoid their responsibility through divorce. But the emotional scars resulting from divorce can create equally permanent suffering. No one knows this better than divorcees and those who grew up in broken homes. Even though there may be some situations where divorce is the lesser evil, no Christian should enter marriage entertaining divorce as an option.

Christians seeking to avoid responsibility for bad decisions often plead that they were ignorant when they made the decision. "I was practically a child!" cries the unhappy wife or husband. "God should let me off the hook!" But ignorance of God's will doesn't remove responsibility. Even when we make mistakes based on ignorance, we usually bear the consequences because this is how God teaches us not to be ignorant. Otherwise, ignorance would be the ideal state. Instead, the apostle Paul adjures us, "So then, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:17).

Because of the real dangers in choosing the right time and person to marry, a healthy respect for the importance of the decision is only reasonable. We may lightly decide what clothes to wear in the morning, but only a fool ignores the awesome implications of the choice to marry. By the same token, the satisfaction we can experience in a solid Christian marriage is difficult to imagine. You can earn a dollar by shining someone's shoes, but if you want to earn \$10,000, you have to do much more than that. Marriage is worth far more than \$10,000, and it may take still more work and self-sacrifice if we want complete success.

If you get married, you will either enter a cauldron of pain and confusion you never imagined possible, or you will use the relational and spiritual tools you gained before marriage to grow out of your problems by drawing on the power of God. Even if you're already married, it's not

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too late. You will have to learn now, within marriage, the things you should have learned before marriage. It may be harder this way, but it's possible, and God will help you. Why not resolve now to give God a chance to help you, by reading and praying through the rest of this short book? You'll be glad you did.

It's exciting to realize that by taking some down-to-earth measures, you can be confident that your marriage will work. A strong Christian marriage, in turn, will become a solid base for your emotional and spiritual life. God will use your marriage to fashion your character as nothing else can. In the end, marriage, like other challenges in your life, will help to conform you to the image of Christ. (See Romans 8:29-30.)

Notes

1. William M. Kinard, "Divorce and Remarriage: Ministers in the Middle," and Jim Smoke, "Pastoring the Divorced: Caring Without Condoning," both in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 24 (June 6, 1980).
2. Howes and Hamilton, "Children's Relationships With Caregivers: Mothers and Child Care Teachers," *Child Development*, Vol. 63 (1992), pp. 859-866.
3. Katherine Trent and Scott J. South, "Sociodemographic Status, Parental Background, Childhood Family Structure, and Attitudes Toward Family Formation," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 54 (1992), pp. 427-439.
4. Jennings, Salts, and Smith, "Attitudes Toward Marriage: Effects of Parental Conflict, Family Structure, and Gender," *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, Vol. 17 (1992), pp. 57, 78.
5. A major study of 1500 adolescents conducted by the University of Arkansas and the University of Maryland in 1991 demonstrated a higher likelihood of fornication among teens who were missing one parent at home. See Benda and Blasio, "Comparison of Four Theories of Adolescent Sexual Exploration," *Deviant Behavior*, Vol. 12 (1991), pp. 235-257. In another study of over 80,000 high school students nationwide, the researchers found a striking correlation between family structures and abuse of marijuana, cocaine, alcohol, and other drugs. Specifically, children missing one parent were far more likely to abuse drugs. This correlation held true even when the researchers controlled for economic, educational, regional, and urban-rural variables. See John M. Wallace, Jr. and Jerald G. Buchanan, "Explaining Racial/Ethnic Differences in Adolescent Drug Use: The Impact of Background and Lifestyle," *Social Problems*, Vol. 38 (1991), pp. 333-352. In another study conducted by Columbia University and the New York Psychiatric

Institute in 1992, the researchers found that "The incidence of substance abuse in offspring was associated with parental divorce." They found that children of divorce had "seven times the risk for developing substance abuse disorder" than did children of intact families. See Myrna Weissman et al., "Incidence of Psychiatric Disorder in Offspring at High and Low Risk for Depression," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Vol. 31 (1992), pp. 640-648. Similar results have been noted with problem drinking. See David R. Foxcroft and Geoff Lowe, "Adolescent Drinking Behavior and Family Socialization Factors: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Adolescence*, Vol. 14 (1991), pp. 255-273.

6. For a discussion of the existentialist perspective, see Jean Paul Sartre, trans. by Bernard Frechtman, *Existentialism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), pp. 11-34.