

HONOR YOUR MARRIAGE VOWS

10 [Jesus] left that place and went to the region of Judea and across the Jordan [River]. Again crowds of people gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he again taught them. ²Then there came to him some Pharisees, who asked him, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? [They asked him this in order] to test him. ³He responded by saying to them, What did Moses command you? ⁴They replied, Moses permitted a certificate of divorce to be written and to divorce her. ⁵But Jesus said to them, Because of your hardness of heart he wrote for you this commandment. ⁶But from the beginning of the creation, "He made them male and female; ⁷for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be bound to his wife; ⁸and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate. ¹⁰When they were in the house, the disciples asked him more about this matter. ¹¹He said to them, Whoever shall divorce his wife, and marry another, is committing adultery against her; ¹²and if she divorces her husband, and marries another, she is committing adultery. (Mk. 10:1-12)

A note on the Scripture text that accompanies each individual message: The *American Standard Version* and the *New International Version*, along with the original Greek and Hebrew, have been used in an effort to achieve the greatest degree of accuracy and clarity. Where words or phrases have been added to the original text in an effort to better express its meaning, those words or phrases have usually been indicated by means of [brackets].

Introduction

A Christian writer wrote a column about what he described as a really "scary movie." The title of the movie was *Indecent Proposal*. The movie centered around an offer made by a millionaire to a young married couple: the millionaire offers to pay them a million dollars for the opportunity of spending one night with the young man's wife.

For some time after its debut, the theme of the movie became the subject for T.V. talk shows and news features. On these shows two questions were posed: Husbands, would you let your wife spend a night with another man for a million dollars? Wives, would you spend a night with another man for a million dollars?

According to one national survey in which these questions were asked, 50% of the husbands polled answered "Yes." And 52% of married women answered "Yes." A common rationale given for accepting such an indecent proposal were it offered was this: With the money we would get we would be set for the rest of our lives. So why not? One woman who was interviewed said she would not do it for a million dollars, but might consider it if the price were set at \$10 million. A man said he needed the money and would accept the proposal for a mere \$10,000. As the Christian writer watched the talk show and listened to the interviewees' responses and their reasonings, it occurred to him that a nation's virtue was being placed on the auction block. (*POWER*, 5/29/94)

We are living in a day when the sacred marriage vows mean little or nothing to many people. But what does God say about our marriage vows? As Christians, can we approach marriage with the same attitude as the world? Some day God is going to hold the whole world accountable for the way they have abused His sacred institution of marriage. As Christians, we are also accountable for our conduct with regard to our marriage vows: We are to honor those sacred marriage vows.

I. You Must Honor Your Marriage Vows, Because They are Sacred (Mk. 10:2-9)

When Jesus returns to the region of Judea and resumes His teaching ministry, He is immediately confronted by the Pharisees who descend upon Him like a pack of wolves. They confront Him with a question on the subject of marriage and divorce: *"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"*

In response, Jesus asks them, *"What did Moses command you?"* They are quick to quote Deuteronomy 24:1,

If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he has found some indecent thing about her, he shall write her a certificate of divorce, place it in her hand, and send her out of his house. (Deut. 24:1)

In this passage Moses granted the option of divorce if the husband has found *"some indecent thing"* with regard to his wife. Rabbi Shammai had interpreted this to be a reference to unchastity or adultery. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, had interpreted this to mean anything that the husband may find to be offensive to him. The Hebrew term used here (עֲרֻוֹתָא) comes from the root word עָרַו, which has the meaning 1) to uncover, to make naked; or, 2) to spread out; indicating that some type of immoral conduct, perhaps something short of the actual act of adultery itself, was in view.

Jesus acknowledges that Deuteronomy 24:1 was a concession provided by God through Moses *"because of the hardness of your heart."* That is to say, because of the sinful propensity toward marital unfaithfulness and even adultery, God had provided recourse for the offended party. Consider Matthew 5:31-32 as the New Testament version of this provision:

It was also said, Whoever shall divorce his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. ³²But I say to you, Everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of fornication, makes her an adulteress; and whoever shall marry her after she has been divorced is committing adultery. (Matt. 5:31-32)

Note that Jesus uses the term *"fornication,"* a term that covered many forms of sexual impurity, rather than the word *"adultery."*

But in verses 6-9 of Mark chapter ten Jesus goes on to point out that what He really had in mind was the foundational commandment of Moses (indeed, the commandment of God) found in Genesis 1 and 2. Thus Jesus directs the Pharisees and us back to the divine institution of marriage as first established by God in the Garden of Eden:

But from the beginning of the creation, "He made them male and female; ⁷for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall be bound to his wife; ⁸and the two shall become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one flesh. ⁹Therefore, what God has joined together, let not man separate. (Mk. 10:6-9)

Alluding to Genesis 1:27, Jesus reminds the Pharisees, "*from the beginning of the creation, "He made them male and female."* God's original design—which is still His intention: *from the beginning of the creation and continuing ...* is Jesus' point)—was for one man and one woman to be joined together in an indissoluble bond of marriage. God did not call into being herds of men and women as He had done with the creation of the animals (note Gen. 1:24,) with the intent that they should mate like the animals. On the contrary, He created the man and the woman in a unique way for a unique relationship.

Jesus continues, "*for this reason*—i.e.; to fulfill God's design for the man and woman—*a man shall leave his father and mother;*" that is to say, the man must physically and emotionally leave his position of dependence and subordination to his parents. The man "*shall be bound to his wife*"—the man commits himself to his wife and together they form a new and independent family unit. Upon entering into the estate of marriage, "*the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh.*" The Husband and his wife enter into a physical and spiritual union in which they leave behind their former independent existence. Note: they each retain their own unique personality and identity, but they no longer have a separate and independent existence

"Therefore," Jesus concludes, "*what God has joined together, let man not separate.*" The institution of marriage is ordained by God, and it is personally established by God—it is God Himself who joins the two together. Therefore no man—be it an individual or the State—has the right or the authority to undo what God has done.

We must honor our marriage vows because they are sacred. When we enter into marriage, we are entering into a profoundly deep and unique relationship: not only leaving our parents, but becoming united to our spouse. Marriage is not comparable to a business contract; it is a spiritual relationship that is sacred and involves the commitment of the whole man to the woman and vice versa before God.

In Ephesians 5:31-32 the Apostle Paul acknowledges marriage to be a great mystery and identifies it with the spiritual union that exists between Christ and His church:

*“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”*³²*This is a profound mystery, now I am speaking about Christ and the church.* (Eph. 5:31-32)

The marriage relationship is ordained by God: it is His design for a man and woman, it is the sacred institution He has created. Our marriage relationships have been personally established by God, as indicated in Proverbs 2:17, *“[She] forsakes the friend of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God.”* Referring here to the adulteress, Proverbs declares that she *“forgets the covenant of her God;”* i.e., by her act of adultery she is forgetting the marriage covenant that is made in the presence of God and is made with God. Therefore, no man has the right or the authority to sever this sacred marital bond. In Malachi 2:16 the LORD declares, *“I hate divorce.”*

Note the counsel the LORD gives as a means of safeguarding our marriages: *“Guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth”* (Mal. 2:15b.) The husband, (and the wife as well,) is to guard his spirit, for as the Lord Jesus informs us, *“out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander”* (Matt. 15:19.) The eventual act of marital unfaithfulness originates in the heart. Since the heart is the source from which flows the actions of life, Scripture counsels us, *“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life”* (Prov. 4:23.) Then the LORD issues the command, *“do not break faith with the wife of your youth.”* The LORD requires that we, in our various relationships, and especially the marriage relationship, reflect His own holy trait of integrity, whole-hearted commitment to our vows and promises. The Psalmist asks the question, *“Jehovah, who may dwell in your sanctuary?”* Part of the answer he gives is, *“[He] who keeps his oath even when it hurts”* (Psl. 15:1,4.)

II. You Must Honor Your Marriage Vows, By Fulfilling Your Marital Obligations (Mk. 10:10-12)

When alone with Jesus in private, the disciples inquire further about this subject of marriage and divorce. In response to their inquiries, the Lord provides them and us with this instruction: *“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman is guilty of committing an act of adultery* [against his former wife.]” Note that Matthew 5:32 elaborates on this directive by adding, *“who divorces his wife, except for the cause of fornication.”* Mark presents an abbreviated version of Jesus’ directive in order to emphasize the divine prohibition against divorce, while Matthew presents the full exposition of the directive, indicating that there are some legitimate grounds for divorce that have the divine sanction. But a

State-granted divorce on State-sanctioned grounds (such as marital incompatibility,) is not recognized as a legitimate divorce in the sight of God.

In verse 12 Jesus clearly spells out that what holds true with regard to the man also applies to the woman: *“if she divorces her husband, and marries another, she is committing adultery.”* There is equal responsibility and accountability within the marriage. Rather than sever or suspend our marital relationship, we are to be faithful to fulfill our marital obligations.

What are some of the fundamental marital obligations of the husband? First, the husband has the obligation to provide Christ-like leadership in the home: *“the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church”* (Eph. 5:23.) Second, the husband has the obligation to provide for the physical well-being of his wife and children, he may not abandon or neglect his family: *“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (1 Tim. 5:8.) Third, the husband has the obligation to provide for the nurture and training of his children: *“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the LORD”* (Eph. 6:4.) Fourth, the husband has the obligation to provide for the sexual needs of his wife:

But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. ³The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴The wife’s body does not belong to her [alone] but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband’s body does not belong to him [alone] but also to his wife. (1 Cor. 7:2-4)

Fifth, the husband has the obligation to promote the spiritual and emotional well-being of his wife: *“may the husbands live with [their wives] in an understanding way: showing respect to the wife as a weaker partner and as a co-heir of the grace of life. [Conduct yourselves in this way] so that your prayers are not hindered”* (1 Pet. 3:7.) In sum, the husband has the obligation to love his wife as Christ loved the church: *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”* (Eph. 5:25.)

What are some of the fundamental marital obligations of the wife? First, the wife has the obligation to acknowledge and accept the God-given authority of her husband:

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, ²³for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything [i.e.; with regard to all areas of their marital relationship] (Eph. 5:22-24)

Second, the wife has the obligation to be a faithful companion and helper: *"Jehovah God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'"* (Gen. 2:18.) In referring to her husband, the bride declares, *"he is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this my friend"* (Song of Solomon 5:16.) Again, according to Proverbs 2:17, the unfaithful wife *"forsakes the friend of her youth."* Third, the wife has the reciprocal obligation to provide for the sexual needs of her husband:

But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. ³The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴The wife's body does not belong to her [alone] but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him [alone] but also to his wife. (1 Cor. 7:2-4)

Fourth, the wife has the obligation to build up her family by making her home her first priority: *"Every wise woman builds her house"* (Prov. 14:1.) Consider the description given of the worthy woman:

A worthy woman who can find? Her value is far greater than rubies. ¹¹Her husband's heart trusts in her ... ¹²She does him good and not evil all the days of her life ... ²⁷She diligently watches over the affairs of her household and does not idly sit by indulging herself. ²⁸Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her. (Prov. 31:10-12,27-28)

We must honor our marriage vows, and do so by fulfilling our marital obligations.

Conclusion

We must appreciate the fact that marriage is the most intimate and sacred covenant we can enter into with another person before God. We must also realize that although that covenant is extremely intimate, it is not private: it is not a personal contract between you and your spouse, one that can be exited at will. It is, rather, a sacred covenant being made before God and with God, in which you are entering into the sacred institution He has created and you are pledging yourself to be faithful to your spouse and to your marital obligations. What is involved here is not only your own sacred oath, but also the sacred institution of marriage, and the honor of Christ's name that you bear, as well as the well-being of Christ's church.

Let us take seriously the fact that to each one of us comes the admonition: You are responsible and accountable to honor your marriage vows.