

MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY

I Corinthians 7:1-9

In the previous chapters of this epistle Paul dealt with the problems of church unity and social purity. The Corinthian Christians had written to the Apostle and asked his advice with reference to the state of things in their church. From this chapter we learn that one of the subjects over which they were having some difficulties, and respecting which they were seeking instruction and guidance, was marriage. It is evident that there was a diversity of opinion among them on the subject of marriage.

Corinth was one of the most cultivated and highly civilized cities on the face of the earth, and yet the moral conditions which prevailed there were very low. In fact, it seemed that the marriage contract was disregarded entirely.

Let us remember that Paul is dealing with problems created by a new order of life. Here were people who were emerging from paganism. Numerous mistakes were made. Questions were arising constantly. Problems had to be faced and solved. It was a state of transition from a pagan social life to a Christian social life; so, it is not surprising that difficulties were encountered.

On the basis of their particular and peculiar problems, the Corinthian Christians had written Paul and asked him for instruction with reference to the relative desirability of single and married life. In Corinth there were extreme opinions on this subject. Some regarded marriage as obligatory, and others looked upon it as an evil. Some insisted that all should marry and that celibacy, or failure to do so, was a sin. Others insisted that none should marry, because, as they contended, marriage was unspiritual and carnal. There was a strong tendency toward celibacy among the Gentiles, but at the same time the reputation of Corinth for wantonness and uncleanness was unenviable. In the light of these facts, there was a great need for explicit instruction.

Here we find the Apostle Paul steering a course midway between these extremes in which he defends celibacy for some and marriage for others. Paul declares that each state is lawful. He teaches that it is not a sin to marry or to remain unmarried. Both conditions are honorable. We are permitted to choose between the two. In either case it is to be a matter of personal conscience and in respect to circumstances and prevailing conditions.

I. Celibacy Is Honorable. I Corinthians 7:1.

Paul was not an advocate of celibacy. He did not claim any moral superiority for those who were in the unmarried state, but simply recognized the fact that it had some advantages in certain circumstances. He declared that the state of celibacy is worthy and has in it nothing that is contrary to the moral ideal. He asserted that there is nothing unbecoming in a man's living in celibacy, provided that he live a clean moral life. He knew that an unmarried person is not necessarily holier just because he is in the single state.

Paul's desire was that all might be granted the same power of continence which was bestowed upon him, so that though unmarried they might not be endangered thereby. Of course, he recognized differences of constitution. It was no snare to Paul to remain unmarried; he was free to go anywhere and be happy in the service of his Lord. There were others who could not do this, being constituted differently. Paul recognized these natural differences and allowed plenty of liberty for each to occupy his proper sphere.

Some may believe that celibacy is best for them, then let them remain single; whereas, others may think that marriage is the most desirable state, then let them enter into that relationship. A single life is honorable and in some cases expedient. In his

declaration that the unmarried state is good, Paul refuted the idea that those who do not marry are committing sin. There are even cases where celibacy is advantageous in the furtherance of the gospel and the progress of the kingdom. The unmarried have more time to attend to the things of the Lord. The married must concern themselves more about things temporal, and this distraction often proves injurious to higher duties. However, celibacy does not improve the spiritual life. Think of the evils that have grown out of the system in which the clergy have been forbidden to marry.

It does strike one as something marvelous that this condition of life on which the very continuation of the human race depends should remain open and optional. If every individual determined to live a moral, single life and celibacy became the actual practice, in about a century the human race would be extinct.

II. Marriage Is Desirable. I Corinthians 7:2.

Good as celibacy is, it was not advisable in such a place as Corinth, which abounded in temptations to immorality. Because of the notorious immoralities there, and especially in connection with the worship of Aphrodite, it was better for each man to have his own wife and each woman to have her proper husband. Let us remember that this relatively low justification of marriage, as a safe-guard against immorality, is explained by the fact that Paul was writing to the inhabitants of a notoriously immoral city.

Lest somebody think that Paul regarded marriage only as a makeshift intended to avert a greater evil, it must be said that the Apostle is not here framing a theory of marriage in general, but he is answering precise questions which had been put to him. He was not attempting to state the Christian doctrine of marriage in its fulness, but he was trying to keep strictly within the limits traced out for him by the questions of the Corinthians on the subject.

Marriage is desirable provided it is of the right kind. The right kind of marriage is monogamous, that is one husband for one wife. Any type of marriage which does not measure to this standard results in social corruption.

III. Marriage Entails Mutual Obligations. I Corinthians 7:3-5.

The first two verses in this chapter appropriately lead to some very timely advice to those who are married. As Paul penned these lines to those who had entered the marriage relationship, he laid upon their hearts the message of the Lord, and not just his personal opinion. He showed that within the marriage relationship there are mutual responsibilities, of the husband to the wife, and the wife to the husband.

When a couple marries, both husband and wife have tremendous responsibilities resting upon them. Their obligations are mutual. They are not to be recognized by one party and ignored by the other. Marriage is a mutual relationship. It is not a one-sided arrangement provided for the benefit of an overlording husband or an overbearing wife. All its relations, privileges, duties and obligations are mutual. The equal rights of man and woman are to be maintained.

In giving this wonderful advice to Christian couples, Paul admonished them to pay due regard to the conjugal rights of each other. Their recognition of the conjugal rights is to be regulated by mutual consideration. The word which is translated "render" does not signify the granting of a favor, but the discharge of an obligation resting upon husband and wife. It may be suspended for a limited time, by mutual consent, for special purposes such as spiritual meditation, but with the definite intention of a speedy resumption in a manner worthy of Christians. There is no command for this temporary arrangement, but it is permitted. Moreover, it is not even recommended. The obligation of the parties to the marriage covenant is mutual. Neither party has the right to desert the other.

IV. Marriage Is Expedient. I Corinthians 7:6-9.

Paul was fully aware of the fact that all did not have the splendid self-restraint which he enjoyed, and wished that they did. If, like Paul, the unmarried could be continent, that was fine. If not, said he, it is better to marry than to be consumed continually by the flames of passion. Paul suggested that in some cases remaining unmarried is expedient and desirable, but in others it is expedient and desirable to marry. Each case is to be governed by conscience and conditions. To have insisted that all remain unmarried would have been as unscriptural and wrong as for him to have insisted that all marry.