

The Necessity and Importance of Christian Marriage

Hebrews 13:4

“Marriage *is* honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” (NKJ)

The New Testament book of Hebrews contains only one verse regarding marriage, but it conveys a profound truth regarding the purpose and gigantic importance of marriage. The marriage of one man and one woman is an institution ordained by God. The primary purpose of marriage is to provide pure love and lasting companionship to mankind. Today’s society has lost sight of the purpose and importance of marriage, having added rules and conditions and taken away its importance and necessity. A close study of this passage from Hebrews should help you to rethink why God ordained marriage and how God’s teachings regarding marriage apply to us today.

John Calvin’s Commentary on Hebrews 13:4¹

Some think this is an exhortation to the married to conduct themselves modestly and in a becoming manner, that the husband should live with his wife temperately and chastely, and not defile the conjugal bed by unbeseeming wantonness. Thus a verb is to be understood in the sense of exhorting, “Let marriage be honorable.”

And yet the indicative *is* would not be unsuitable; for when we hear that marriage is honorable, it ought to come immediately to our minds that we are to conduct ourselves in it honorably and becomingly. Others take the sentence by way of concession in this way, “Though marriage is honorable, it is yet unlawful to commit fornication”; but this sense, as all must see, is rigid. I am inclined to think that the Apostle sets marriage here in opposition to fornication as a remedy for that evil; and the context plainly shows that this was his meaning; for before he threatens that the Lord would punish fornicators, he first states what is the true way of escape, even if we live honorable in a state of marriage.

Let this then be the main point, that fornication will not be unpunished, for God will take vengeance on it. And doubtless as God has blessed the union of man and wife, instituted by Himself, it follows that every other union different from this is by Him condemned and accursed. He therefore denounces punishment not only on adulterers, but also on fornicators; for both depart from the holy institution of God; nay, they violate and subvert it by a promiscuous intercourse, since there is but one legitimate union, sanctioned by the authority and approval of God. But as promiscuous and vagrant lusts cannot be restrained without the remedy of marriage, he therefore commends it by calling it “honorable”.

What he adds, *and the bed undefiled*, has been stated, as it seems to me, for this end, that the married might know that everything is not lawful for them, but that the use of the legitimate bed should be moderate, lest anything contrary to modesty and chastity be

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 341-343.

allowed. [Two things are mentioned, “marriage” and “bed”—the conjugal bed. Two characters are afterwards mentioned, “fornicators” and “adulterers.” The first disregard marriage, and the second defile the conjugal bed. Then the first clause speaks of marriage as in itself honorable, in opposition to the dishonor put on it by fornicators, who, being unmarried, indulge in illicit intercourse with women; and the second speaks of the conjugal bed as being undefiled, when not contaminated by adultery. Editor, Rev. John Owen]

By saying *in all men*, I understand him to mean, that there is no order of men prohibited from marriage; for what God has allowed to mankind universally, is becoming in all without exception; I mean all who are fit for marriage and feel the need of it.

It was indeed necessary for this subject to have been distinctly and expressly stated, in order to obviate a superstition, the seeds of which Satan was probably even then secretly sowing, even this—that marriage is a profane thing, or at least far removed from Christian perfection; for those seducing spirits, forbidding marriage, who had been foretold by Paul, soon appeared. That none then might foolishly imagine that marriage is only permitted to the people in general, but that those who are eminent in the Church ought to abstain from it, the Apostle takes away every exception; and he does not teach us that it is conceded as an indulgence, as Jerome sophistically says, but that it is honorable. It is very strange indeed that those who introduced the prohibition of marriage into the world, were not terrified by this so express a declaration; but it was necessary then to give loose reins to Satan, in order to punish the ingratitude of those who refused to hear God.

Modern Exposition and Application

The institution of marriage, as a God-ordained covenantal union between one man and one woman, should be esteemed as honorable.² Since marriage is honorable, husbands and

² The **Westminster Confession of Faith** states,

24.1 Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband at the same time.(1) (1)Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5,6; Prov. 2:17

24.2 Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife,(1) for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed;(2) and for preventing of uncleanness.(3) (1)Gen. 2:18 (2)Mal. 2:15 (3)1 Cor. 7:2,9

24.3 It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent.(1) Yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord.(2) And therefore such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels, papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies.(3) (1)Heb. 13:4; 1 Tim. 4:3; 1 Cor. 7:36,37,38; Gen. 24:57,58 (2)1 Cor. 7:39 (3)Gen. 34:14; Exod. 34:16; Deut. 7:3,4; 1 Kings 11:4; Neh. 13:25,26,27; Mal. 2:11,12; 2 Cor. 6:14

The **Westminster Larger Catechism** states,

WLC 138 What are the duties required in the seventh commandment? A. The duties required in the seventh commandment are, chastity in body, mind, affections,(1) words,(2) and behavior;(3) and the preservation of it in ourselves and others;(4) watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses;(5) temperance,(6) keeping of chaste company,(7) modesty in apparel;(8) marriage by those that have not the gift of continency [celibacy];(9) conjugal love,(10) and cohabitation;(11) diligent labor in our callings;(12) shunning all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations thereunto.(13) (1)1 Thess.

wives ought to conduct themselves in an honorable and appropriate manner, lest they bring dishonor and reproach on the sacred union of marriage.

The Bible teaches that marriage serves three primary purposes—(1) procreation—to have children; (2) to grow the kingdom of God by raising believing children; and (3) to provide a pure, loving relationship between a man and a woman, marked by companionship, mutual help, and sexual fulfillment.

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we find God's command, which is sometimes referred to as the Cultural Mandate: "Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."" (Genesis 1:28; cf. Gen. 1:22; Gen. 8:17; 9:1, 7; 28:3; 35:11). In a time in which very few people inhabited the earth, it was of the utmost importance for mankind to be fruitful and multiply. Children are a blessing from God. The Scripture says that "children *are* a heritage from the LORD, The fruit of the womb *is* a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So *are* the children of one's youth" (Ps. 127:3-4). Despite the blessing of children and the benefits to man and woman (1 Tim. 2:15) of having children, the New Testament does not emphasize bearing children so as to fill the earth with more people. In fact, the New Testament provides a new emphasis on the benefits of the childless state of celibacy (chaste singleness) for those who have the gift (Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7). Having children is a blessing and normal, and yet the Bible does not emphasize this as the primary purpose of marriage.

In the New Testament, we do find the second purpose of marriage, which is to raise a godly seed. While the other two purposes of marriage may apply to all people, this purpose only applies to Christians. The apostle Paul explains that "the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy" (1 Corinthians 7:14). This teaching shows us that the children of at least one believing parent are more likely to grow God's kingdom than the children of unbelievers. Thus, Christians having children is an important part of growing Christ's Church or at least maintaining its witness in the world. Nevertheless, it is not the primary purpose of marriage. And, in fact, God closes the wombs of some women so that they are unable to bear children due to infertility or other conditions. A couple who marries at a later age may be unable to have children, too. Likewise, an argument might be made that

4:4; Job. 31:1; 1 Cor. 7:34 (2)Col. 4:6 (3)1 Pet. 2:3 (4)1 Cor. 7:2,35,36 (5)Job. 31:1 (6)Acts 24:24,25 (7)Prov. 2:16-20 (8)1 Tim. 2:9 (9)1 Cor. 7:2,9 (10)Prov. 5:19,20 (11)1 Pet. 3:7 (12)Prov. 31:11,27,28 (13)Prov. 5:8; Gen. 39:8-10

WLC 139 What are the sins forbidden in the seventh commandment? A. The sins forbidden in the seventh commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required,(1) are adultery, fornication,(2) rape, incest,(3) sodomy, and all unnatural lusts;(4) all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections;(5) all corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto;(6) wanton looks,(7) impudent or light behavior, immodest apparel;(8) prohibiting of lawful,(9) and dispensing with unlawful marriages;(10) allowing, tolerating, keeping of brothels, and resorting to them;(11) entangling vows of single life,(12) undue delay of marriage;(13) having more wives or husbands than one at the same time;(14) unjust divorce,(15) or desertion;(16) idleness, gluttony, drunkenness,(17) unchaste company,(18) lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays;(19) and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others.(20) (1)Prov. 5:7 (2)Heb. 13:4; Gal. 5:19 (3)2 Sam. 13:14; 1 Cor. 5:1 (4)Rom. 1:24,27; Lev. 20:15,16 (5)Matt. 5:28; Matt. 15:19; Col. 3:5 (6)Eph. 5:3,4; Prov. 7:5,21,22 (7)Isa. 3:16; 2 Pet. 2:14 (8)Prov. 7:10,13 (9)1 Tim. 4:3 (10)Lev. 18:1-21; Mal. 2:11,12 (11)1 Kings 15:12; 2 Kings 23:7; Deut. 23:17,18; Lev. 19:29; Jer. 5:7; Prov. 7:24-27 (12)Matt. 19:10,11 (13)1 Cor. 7:7-9; Gen. 38:26 (14)Mal. 2:14,15; Matt. 19:5 (15)Mal. 2:16; Matt. 5:32 (16)1 Cor. 7:12,13 (17)Ezek. 16:49; Prov. 23:30-33 (18)Gen. 39:10 (19)Eph. 5:4; Ezek. 23:14-16; Isa. 23:15-17; Isa. 3:16; Mark 6:22; Rom. 13:13; 1 Pet. 4:3 (20)2 Kings 9:30 with Jer. 4:30 and Ezek. 23:40.

during times of extreme famine, plague, or persecution, a married couple may choose to forgo having children for a time or forever. If some forms of contraception are not forbidden by Scripture and are not abortive, then Christian couples may have the liberty to delay or forgo the bearing of children, if they are doing so for pious reasons and in good conscience (e.g., during a time of severe persecution or great famine). Due to health-related concerns or practical realities of life in modern times, some couples may also choose to limit how many children they have. While singleness may be preferable to marriage during such difficult times, since no one is forbidden from marrying, the question of childbearing should be subordinate to the question of marriage. If given the choice between lifelong singleness or marriage with few or no children, some people may choose marriage—even if such a marriage produces no offspring—because marriage is honorable among all, and it is better to marry than to burn with passion or suffer unnecessary loneliness. Others may choose to have many children or to adopt children, should circumstances allow. Despite the undeniable importance of children for the good of society and the Church, childbearing is not the primary purpose of marriage.

So if procreation and raising Christian children are not the primary purposes of marriage, what is the primary purpose? The primary purpose of marriage is to provide pure love and lasting companionship to mankind.

In the first book of the Bible we read that “the LORD God said, *“It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him”*” (Genesis 2:18). Husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25-28). Wives are called “to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed” (Titus 2:4-5). All of this speaks to loving companionship. The Bible teaches that men and women need each other: “Nevertheless, neither *is* man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman *came* from man, even so man also *comes* through woman; but all things are from God” (1 Corinthians 11:11-12).

Most men don’t want to be alone; they want companionship. Most women do not want to be alone; in fact, singleness often leads to depression and anxiety. In our day and age of widespread singleness and divorce, our society has record numbers of people on antidepressants. A bad marriage may cause much stress and anguish; but a good marriage can make one healthier and happier. Furthermore, men and women have different God-given gifts and abilities, which in marriage may be exercised for the benefit of their spouse. God created girls and women to be led by fathers and husbands who they can look up to, respect, and help. Husbands and wives ought to love one another sacrificially, obeying their God-given roles, and enjoying the blessing of companionship with the person whom God has given them to be their best friend for “as long as they both shall live,” in sickness and in health, whether rich or poor.

The pure, loving relationship between a man and a woman is not only marked by companionship and mutual help, but also it includes romance and intimacy. God ordained marriage to provide sexual fulfillment for the happiness of man and woman and as a remedy for the evil of fornication and sinful lust. The writer to the Hebrews focuses exclusively on this aspect of marriage. He contrasts the sexual purity of marriage as God ordained it, which is honorable, with the sexual impurity of the world, which only brings judgment.

When Jesus Christ spoke of marriage, echoing Moses, He likewise emphasized the lasting companionship and intimacy of the sacred marital union: “For this reason a man shall leave

his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:5-6; cf. Gen. 2:24).

In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul emphasizes that marriage was ordained to satisfy the sexual needs of man: "Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband" (1 Cor. 7:2-3).

God is our Creator, and He has given the vast majority of people sexual desires, which are to be rightly exercised within the holy confines of marriage. Marriage is most needful for the majority of men and women, as it is the answer God has given to man's deepest longing for companionship and the God-ordained remedy for promiscuous and unrestrained lusts. The writer to the Hebrews teaches us that marriage is the remedy that God has ordained to protect us from falling into the trap of sexual immorality (cf. 1 Cor. 7:2-5). God has given us a true way of escape from sexual sin, which is to live honorably with our husband or wife in the covenant of marriage.³

In our day and age, marriage has been redefined by our culture. Marriage is for those who are wealthy and have established careers. Marriage is for those who are pregnant or planning to get pregnant, so that they will not have illegitimate children. Marriage is a status symbol or a family or church tradition. Yet, God's definition of marriage is radically different.

As we consider what God teaches us regarding marriage, it becomes evident that our society and today's churches have added rules and conditions to marriage and taken away its importance and necessity. Very few children growing up today have any intention of getting married at 18, 19, or 21. The average age for marriage is now in the late 20s, for those who get married at all.

Much of American Christianity has embraced an abstinence education teaching that calls on young people to "abstain to attain" their goals. Yet, such a teaching is not in accordance with

³ Having said all this, we also affirm and in no way seek to minimize the importance of the spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, Christian fellowship, and meditation on the word of God day and night. These disciplines can sustain us while we wait for marriage, but they are not an alternative or permanent answer for those who lack the gift of celibacy. John Calvin warned that hardly 1 in 100 of those who took vows of lifelong celibacy had the gift of celibacy. Martin Luther found that despite his best attempts at the spiritual disciplines, forgoing (or forswearing) marriage may be to the peril of your soul and cause extreme physical, mental, and spiritual anguish. Likewise, the Christian today who lacks the gift of chaste singleness, is doing himself a disservice by delaying marriage unnecessarily. The Holy Spirit can indeed enable Christians to remain virgins until marriage. However, to forgo marriage or delay marriage unnecessarily, when you lack the gift of chaste singleness, is to play with fire ("to burn") and to test God. For the vast majority of people, God has appointed marriage as the remedy for mankind's sexual desires. When young men and women submit themselves to the yoke of marriage, they embrace God's appointed remedy. When they refuse a lawful marriage, they open themselves to Satan's devices, just as the married couple who abstain from sexual relations without just cause open themselves up to Satan's temptations (1 Cor. 7:5). Yet, at the same time, it is better to remain single, despite the risks, than to marry an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14-16). When a suitable spouse is lacking, a Christian should actively seek out a spouse and yet remain patient and reliant on God's providence, trusting in God's fatherly love and seeking by the power of the Holy Spirit to "flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:22).

the teaching of Hebrews 13:4. Indeed, it is true that God calls us to abstain from sex outside of marriage. However, one of the most important goals a young person should have is to get married, and no college degree, career, or other goal should stand in the way of getting married if a young person has the desire and need for companionship and a sexual relationship.

As many as 95% or more of those who marry in modern times have already lost their virginity prior to marriage. And yet young people are told to abstain from marriage so that they can attain their goals, which often include attaining multiple college degrees. Thus, those who desire to marry are encouraged to wait until age 21, 24, 28, or even 30 or later to marry.

Many other factors in modern western culture have contributed to the decline in marriage among younger generations. Traditionally, society believed that young men needed to be able to support a family by having a good job, purchasing a home, and so on, before committing to marriage. However, with skyrocketing home, education, and healthcare costs and high unemployment in recent years, along with ever-increasing demands for more education for nearly all jobs, our culture denies most young men the ability to be economically self-sufficient. Women now outnumber men in most universities, wages are stagnant, and unemployment is high throughout the Western world due in part to the rise of a female workforce, which has caused the demand for jobs to be greater than the supply of jobs⁴.

Traditionally, prior to the 1960s, young women were prepared for marriage and motherhood. Yet, by encouraging young women to pursue college degrees, live on their own, go into debt, travel, study abroad, and work long hours pursuing their careers, our culture discourages today's young women from pursuing marriage and motherhood at a young age.

By the time they complete college, a majority of young people lose their virginity. Sexual immorality runs rampant in college life. Yet, for the Christian, there is no excuse for following the ways of the world. God has spoken authoritatively in His Word, and God says that marriage comes first in importance. Unless He grants you the gift of chastity in singleness, God says to marry to attain His goals for your life. Any young person who desires companionship and a sexual relationship is called to commit to a lifelong covenant of marriage, as the God-ordained remedy for sexual burning and longing. Marriage is honorable among all—even among 18-year-olds, even among 20-year-olds.

God's word to young people is simple: If you desire an intimate relationship and have met the love of your life, then you need to marry. It is not forbidden. You don't have to have a college education or lots of money. You need to marry lest you fall into sexual immorality. What about having children? What if you can't afford a home? What if you will be looked down upon by the society around you?

⁴ Workforce participation by males in the western world (especially young males under 35) is now at historic lows. As females have entered the labor market in steadily higher numbers, especially since the 1960s, the total number of available jobs has not consistently kept pace. In some parts of Europe and North America 20-50% of young males are now unemployed, which is due in part to the fact that men and women are now competing for a limited supply of jobs, and women tend to be more qualified for the jobs of the new economy. Some of these unemployed men have turned to crime, drugs, and delinquency; others have assumed a new domestic role as stay-at-home dads or homemakers. Surely, all these factors raise serious questions regarding the expectations of young men and women in pursuing marriage at a young age.

Don't be worried that society will look down on you for doing the right thing. The Lord will provide what you need in life. If you suffer economic hardship, do not worry, for "He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you"" (Hebrews 13:5).

Common Questions Addressed

Should all young people marry by age 19 or 21?

No, not all young people are ready or able to marry at that young of an age. In fact, God in His providence may cause someone to remain single until 25 or 30 or 40 for various reasons. The patriarch Isaac, for example, did not marry Rebekah until he was 40 years old. Not all people can find another Christian with similar interests and beliefs. In much of the world, a Christian may have a difficult time finding another true believer that shares his or her beliefs. It is better to remain single and even to struggle with sinful lust than to marry the wrong person (e.g., an idolater, religious hypocrite, pagan, or false believer). However, growing up in a lust-saturated, sexually-immoral culture, it would be preferable to marry at as young an age as is possible and prudent. Since many young people lack maturity, wisdom, and discernment, marriages that are arranged between two godly Christian families would be helpful to prevent unwise decisions. If an arranged marriage does take place, it seems wise to have a period of courtship between the young man and woman, and they should have the liberty to have the final say as to whether they truly want to marry each other.

What type of counseling is required prior to marriage?

The Bible does not require any type of formal counseling before a couple can marry. Nevertheless, seeking counsel from parents and a trusted pastor is a prudent step to help ensure that feelings and emotions are not distorting right thinking and decision-making.⁵

How can a young couple get married if they have no money?

If a couple cannot afford to have a wedding, then they should marry without a wedding or at least forgo the modern American style of wedding. They can still have a wedding, but it may be a \$500 wedding instead of a \$5,000 or \$50,000 wedding. They can have a small wedding with 3, 5, 20, or 50 people. To postpone marriage in order to plan a two-year wedding or save enough money to afford a lavish one is sinful. If a couple is ready to be together, they should marry without a significant delay. They can always have a wedding later, if they so choose.

How long does an engagement need to last?

Based on the teachings of 1 Corinthians 7 and Hebrews 13:4, it would seem that for most couples an engagement should not usually last more than six months; yet, today it is not uncommon to hear of couples that have two year engagements. While not inherently wrong, such couples should remember God's exhortation to singles: "if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn *with passion*" (1 Corinthians 7:9).

⁵ Young people should always seek their parents' counsel and blessing prior to engagement and marriage. Children should not reject their parents' advice, except when their parents command them to sin.

For those who have the gift of singleness or possess a strong degree of self-control, they may choose to delay marriage (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:34-36). However, if they begin to burn with passion or sinful lust, they ought to marry, and such a marriage can take place within a week or two before a pastor or justice of the peace. The Bible does not set artificial waiting periods, so Christian liberty allows for such a speedy marriage. Yet, since marriage is a lifelong commitment, prudence and wisdom must be exercised, and no one should rush into marriage based merely on the feelings or desires of the moment.

Concluding Thoughts

God has blessed the union of one man with one woman. Marriage is important for the good of society (procreation) and the Church (to grow the kingdom of God by raising believing children). However, the primary purpose of marriage is to provide men and women with a pure, loving, enduring relationship, marked by companionship, mutual help, and sexual happiness. Marriage is a wonderful blessing of God, which shows us the goodness of God to the men and women whom He created. In its ideal state, marriage is a glorious picture of the blessed relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church.

Since God's law prohibits any sexual relationship that is outside the marriage bed, the infinitely just and holy Lord must punish fornicators and adulterers. Sexual immorality violates and subverts the holy institution of God. To have sexual relations outside of marriage casts dishonor on marriage by denying its necessity and importance. Those who commit adultery defile the marital bed by destroying the bond between a husband and wife who have been yoked together by the sacred bond of marriage.

While God grants a special gift of chaste singleness to many people for a period of time and to few people for a lifetime, marriage is honorable among all people. In teaching that holy men and women ought not to marry (e.g., the vows of perpetual chastity or celibacy among the clergy), the Roman Catholic Church and other churches have taken away from the importance of marriage. Not only is such a teaching not to be found in God's Word, but also the apostle Paul warned Timothy that "forbidding to marry" is a "doctrine of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1-3). The Bible teaches that God gives the gift of chaste singleness to some people for their entire lifetime and to many people for a period of time (1 Corinthians 7; Matthew 19:12). However, it would be sinful to make a vow that you will never marry, since marriage is honorable among *all* people.

God's word to the married from Hebrews 13 is simple: Do not defile the marriage bed. Be faithful to the wife or husband that God has given you for life. Never dishonor God by committing adultery. Thank God for your spouse, and praise Him for the blessing of marriage.

God's word to the single from Hebrews 13 is also simple: Flee sexual immorality. If you have the gift of chaste singleness, then use your singleness to serve the Lord with less distraction and encumbrances. If you lack this gift, then pursue a Christian marriage.

May we embrace what God has taught us regarding marriage, neither adding to nor taking away from it. Let us so conduct ourselves as to display the honor due to marriage and to the God who graciously gave marriage to us.

"Marriage *is* honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge."