

WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS 3: MARRIAGE & THE FAMILY

(Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

A. THE FAMILY

Although He was not unmindful of His earthly family, Jesus had to put obedience to His Heavenly Father above that of His family duties. He expects His disciples to do the same (*read* Mark 10:28-30). He recognises a kinship with those who do God's will that is like the kinship of a human family: *For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.*¹

Jesus did not abrogate His responsibility to His mother. Even while He hung in agony on the cross, He asked His disciple, John, to take care of Her. He maintained that the fifth Commandment (*honour your father and mother*²) must not be ignored in favour of giving to God (*read* Mark 7:11-13).

B. WOMEN

Women generally had a poor status in the societies of the First Century AD. Though the Jewish society gave them greater recognition than many other societies, attitudes towards women were generally negative and they were not held in high regard. Jesus, however, brought a fresh and enlightened understanding of the worth of women. He restored their dignity and treated them as persons of equal status with men.

Jesus recognised qualities in women that He used as examples in His teaching:

- (i) Love (Luke 7:44-47).
- (ii) Generosity (Luke 21:1-4).
- (iii) Devotion to spiritual teaching (Luke 10:39-42).

C. MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Most of what Jesus taught about marriage arose from one of the attempts by the religious leaders to trap Him with questions on which opinion was divided, hoping He would come down on one side of the argument and alienate those who held the opposite view. In this case it was a matter of how to interpret the Mosaic Law on divorce, a subject of contention among the rabbis of the day.

¹ Mark 3:32-35

² Exodus 20:12.

1. Marriage

Jesus reminded them that God had ordained man and woman to be *one flesh* in marriage and that what God has joined no man has the right to separate (*read* Matt 19:4-6). The last few words of verse six are used today in the marriage service to 'cement' the union after the marriage vows have been said. A new union is formed in marriage which supersedes the former unions of son and daughter to their parents.

2. Divorce. Being *joined* as one (the Greek translated *joined* means to 'adhere') implies that both partners in a marriage act as if they were one. Herbert Lockyer refers to the dividing of *one-flesh* in divorce as 'To destroy a living organism.'³

The union of marriage is normally to be broken only at the death of one partner for, as Jesus revealed, there is no marriage in heaven (*read* Matt 22:30).

When faced with the Pharisees' argument that divorce was allowed under the Mosaic Law (which can be found in Deut 24 verses 1 to 4) Jesus pointed out that this was given as a concession because, with their hard hearts, not all would be able to live up to the ideal of indissoluble marriage (*read* Matt 19:8). J.B. Philips' paraphrase of this verse suggests in what way *hard hearts* cause the inability for some to stay in the marriage union: *It was because you knew so little of the meaning of love that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives!*⁴

Having emphasised the ideal, Jesus did recognise there would be occasions when divorce might be an option – when one partner has committed sexual immorality.⁵ In this case it might be said that the adulterer has broken the marriage union by forming a sexual union with another party.

3. Adultery. To some, it may seem that Jesus had a lenient attitude towards the sins of sexual immorality. He spoke alone and at some length with a promiscuous woman in Samaria, refused to condemn the adulteress brought to Him for judgment and forgave the woman known to be a sinner (probably a repentant prostitute) who bathed His feet with oil.⁶ However, His view on the sin of adultery was at a level far higher than that of others of His day. Adultery, He said, is committed not only by the sexual act but also by lustful desires to engage in such acts (*read* Matt 5:27-28). This makes His challenge to those who wanted to stone the woman taken in adultery – *He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first*⁷ – very pertinent, since some, if not all, of the woman's accusers may have been guilty of adultery in their hearts.

4. Re-marriage. One further comment by Jesus in His answer to the Pharisees regarding divorce concerns the marrying of a divorcee (*read* Matt 19:9). Several scenarios seem to be covered in this short passage:

³ Herbert Lockyer, "What Jesus Taught About ...," vol 4 page 46.

⁴ J.B. Philips, *The New Testament in Modern English*, Geoffrey Bles Ltd. 1959.

⁵ Matt 19:9a.

⁶ John, Chapter 4; John 8:11; Luke 7:48.

⁷ John 8:7.

- (i) One who divorces without the cause of sexual immorality.
- (ii) One who divorces because of sexual immorality.
- (iii) The former (i) remarrying.
- (iv) Someone marrying the one who has committed sexual immorality.

Thus Jesus regards the remarriage of those who have divorced for the wrong reason (i), and of those who have committed immorality (iv), as adultery; but He does not say anything is wrong with the remarriage of (ii), i.e. those who have divorced because of the immorality of the other partner.

It should be noted that Jesus talked only of a man divorcing his wife. Since Jesus took a high view of the status of women, we may assume that He setting out principles that applied to both sexes but was addressing the Pharisees in line with their limited understanding of sexual equality, rather than confusing the issue by introducing a concept that would be beyond their comprehension.

5. Singleness. The Jews saw Marriage not only as an ideal but as a necessity to fulfil God's command given to Adam and Eve, *Be fruitful and multiply*. However, Jesus recognised there is an even higher ideal, that only a few are given God's grace to achieve, which is to forgo marriage and remain single in order to devote themselves to promoting the Kingdom of Heaven (*read* Matt 19:11-12). To do this is to follow the example of Jesus Himself, since He remained unmarried and devoted Himself wholly to the work His Father had given Him to do.

Some who are single through being unable to find their life's partner, or through the death of a partner, rather than being single by choice, may not feel this is God's calling as such. However, if they will accept their current state as God's opportunity to give more of their time and energies to serving the Lord, they might find great fulfilment in this service and be able to give thanks to God for the opportunities their unattachment presents (albeit until the right person comes along!)*.

Activity 1: Read Gen 2:20-24 and Matt 19:4-5.

What does becoming *one-flesh* imply?

- (a) That men are of greater importance than women.
- (b) That women are of greater importance than men.
- (c) That neither is more important until they are married.
- (d) That both are of equal importance.

D. CHILDREN

* Single people, in particular, might like to read Paul's inspired thoughts on this in 1 Cor 7:25 to 35.

As we saw when we studied the Kingdom of God in Study 3, Jesus has a high regard for children, seeing them as ideal candidates for the Kingdom and wanting them to come to Him: *For of such is the Kingdom of God.*⁸ He uses them as examples of the humble spirit that is necessary to enter into and to be great in the Kingdom (*read* Matt 18:3-4).

Activity 2: Read Matt 18:5-6 and 10-14. Which verses tell us the following about children?

- (a) God wants them to be saved. _____
- (b) God has appointed angels, close to Himself, to watch over them. _____
- (c) Jesus regards one's attitude towards children as one's attitude towards Himself. _____
- (d) They are not to be despised. _____
- (e) It is serious sin to cause them to sin. _____

E. THE STATE

To the disappointment of those Jews who expected Jesus to deliver them from occupation by the Romans, Jesus said very little about the state and generally seemed to accept the status quo of the Romans being the rulers of the time.

In His skilful answer to the trick question put to Him by the Herodians (Jews who were sympathetic to the Roman rule.) about the lawfulness of tax, Jesus said plainly that taxes should be paid where due but that debts to God should also be paid where due: *Render ... to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.*⁹ Other duties demanded by the state, however onerous they may be, are to be carried out with a generous spirit: *Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.*¹⁰ This verse refers to the duty that a Roman soldier may lawfully demand of any citizen of an occupied land, to carry his baggage up to a distance of one mile.

If Jesus could urge such an attitude to the rulers in an occupied country, how much more should we who enjoy the privilege of living in a free country fulfil our obligations as citizens with a gracious spirit?

F. PERSONAL APPLICATION

Consider your relationships with family, fellow believers, colleagues, neighbours and others. Are they what they should be? Is there anything that you can do to improve them?

⁸ Luke 18:16.

⁹ Matt 22:16-22.

¹⁰ Matt 5:41.