



Preparing for marriage

A sure sign of spring and summer in church life is an increase in the number of marriages that take place. These are happy events. The very thought of a man and woman leaving their parents and becoming one causes us to stand in awe of God who in his providential care has led them to this point in their lives. How thankful we may be that in a time when marriage is not held in such high esteem by our society, Christian couples long to be married and to see their marriage as a gift from God. Of course the happiest people at a wedding are the bride and groom. They are obviously ecstatic and devoted to one another.

They make clear to the family that their love and devotion another is for a lifetime. At the time, their family and friends also very excited for the married couple and they offer up prayer to the Lord to give his continued blessing on this marriage. The reason for such hope and prayer is more than sentimental. There is so much at stake in a marriage. When God first created man as his image, He said in Genesis 2: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." God's purpose in marriage is for husband and wife to help each other rejoice in the blessings of God and to offer their lives as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God. Moreover, when God gives them children, raise their children to appreciate the covenant promises and demands and so walk in the ways of the Lord. Good marriages and families where God and his Word are central are basic to a flourishing church life as well. For these reasons, marriage is to be held in high estimation and to be taken seriously by all.

However, a happy and flourishing marriage is not something that happens by chance. When a man and woman get married, they do not say to each other: let us hope for the best and see what comes of this marriage. They pray to the Lord for his blessings on their marriage and they trust on the basis of what God has said in his Word that their marriage will be successful. As the Lord promises in Psalm 128:

"Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD."

Marriage is not a hit or miss proposition no matter what the statistics of our society suggest. A good and lasting marriage is guaranteed when a couple place complete trust in the Lord.

Of course certain preparations have to be made by husband and wife which will ensure a happy and blessed marriage. Typically, some months before the marriage, a couple attends a preparation for marriage class led by their minister. It is gratifying to note that ministers are establishing marriage classes which require an engaged couple to attend several classes with the minister. In these classes lectures are given about the purpose of marriage, the roles of husband and wife in a Christian marriage, communication skills, problem solving and financial stewardship. Couples are often given questionnaires which are reviewed between minister and the couple. Certain books and articles on marriage are also distributed. These classes provide a couple with good biblical insights into what constitutes a marriage in the Lord. Couples who attend these classes are very enthusiastic about what they have learned and they are saying that it is helping them to approach married life with insights and skills that will be a real blessing to their marriage. Of course, a marriage course can never give a couple all the insight and skills which are required for a lifetime of marriage together. There is also the possibility that the enthusiastic discussions of such a course can wear off and be forgotten in only a few weeks. Realistically, preparation for marriage is more

than taking a course or reading some good literature. It has to be reinforced by a lifetime of learning and preparation for marriage.

There are many important things to consider in connection with preparation for marriage. However for the purposes of this article there are two that are most essential and therefore need to be mentioned. One key element in preparation for marriage is the example that children receive in their parents' marriage relationship. It is a fact of life that children learn patterns of behaviour from their home life. It is not for nothing that Scripture commands parents to teach their children well and to set a good example of a godly walk of life for their children. Children learn from their parents how to pray and read Scripture, how to communicate with others, how to love and respect, how to forgive, and so on. Children also learn a pattern for marriage from the example of their parents. Boys will learn from their father how to treat a wife. Girls will learn from their mother how to treat a husband and they will learn from their father how they may be expected to be treated by their husband. How important it is that in the light of what we are taught in Ephesians 5 that a Christian father acts as the head of his wife and children even as Christ is head of the church. That means providing proper leadership and seeing to it that his wife blossoms under his loving care so that she may rejoice in her God and in the husband that God has given her. It is equally important that a Christian mother acts as a godly wife who submits to her husband even as the church submits to Christ. By means of their example and teaching, parents are preparing their children for marriage. It is of critical importance that parents create a home environment where their children see firsthand the beauty and blessing of a marriage where father and mother love each other and help each other walk in the ways of the Lord. Parents should pray to God for this and strive to set a good example for their children.

Another key element in the preparation for marriage, in fact the most important element for a happy marriage, is that a man and woman who wish to get married must first have a living faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. They must rejoice in the gift of God's grace which causes them to be washed in Christ's blood and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. Why is this so important to a marriage relationship? Again we need to consider the basic purpose of marriage which is for husband and wife to help each other rejoice in their relationship with the Lord and to live for his praise and glory. They are to love and respect each other, read the Word of God and pray together, attend the worship services and participate in the communion of saints. They are to forgive each other when a wrong has been done and they are to esteem each other highly. How can a husband and wife fulfill this purpose of marriage and have a fruitful relationship together unless they both love the Lord and walk in his ways? Even when we speak of the ability to love one another as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13, it should be clear that to love another person, one must first know what it is to be loved by God. Think of what John writes in his first epistle: "this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." John expands on this in the third and fourth chapters. When a person has experienced the incomparable love of the Father who gave his Son to die for our sins, then a person's life becomes a window by which the love of God shines through and starts to effect relationships with other people. This is also true for a marriage relationship. A husband and wife who experience the riches of God's love in Jesus Christ, will turn in love to each other and will flourish in that love. In a good marriage, husband and wife will assist each other in rejoicing in God's love and they will more and more reflect in their marriage the unity of Christ and his church. Therefore when considering marriage, the most basic requirement that needs to be met is that a prospective marriage partner shares faith in Jesus Christ. A marriage in the Lord is a marriage that receives God's sure promise that husband and wife shall be happy and shall be blessed by the Lord.

A well prepared marriage is one where the happy bridegroom and bride may start on their wedding day to walk hand in hand through life, together with the children whom God may give them, towards the New Jerusalem and the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb.

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