

God's Plan for Marriage

by Howard R. Killion, Ph.D., March 2019

Jesus gives the Bible's basic teaching on marriage in Matthew 19:1-12, especially verses 4-6. Some Jewish religious leaders asked Him about divorce:

"Haven't you read, he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'? So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate." (New International Version)

In His answer, Jesus presents God's design for the most basic unit of society, the family; it is a unique, faithful, intimate relationship between one man and one woman.

In teaching this, Jesus emphasizes the difference in gender in the two marriage partners. He joins a quotation from Genesis 1:27, *"made them male and female,"* with a second Genesis quotation (2:24), *"for this reason a man will leave his father and mother, etc."* Jesus uses the phrase *"for this reason"* to point back to the fact that the Creator made the humans *"male and female."* Yet the phrase *"for this reason"* actually points back to Genesis 2:23, which records lonely Adam's reaction to his first look at Eve: *"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."* In other words, Adam enthusiastically celebrates both what Eve has in common with him but also the differences. Therefore, Jesus teaches that these gender differences are essential to marriage.

While other verses in the book of Genesis record God's command to male and female couples to *"be fruitful and multiply"* (1:28; 9:1)—which is an obvious purpose of marriage--the Genesis 2:24 passage recognizes three additional aspects to a marriage. The three aspects are a) leaving parents, that is, public recognition by society; b) forming a unique union, that is, establishing a particularly intimate friendship; and c) enjoying the sexual expression of this special companionship.

The Bible teaches that a man and a woman may enter into marriage through an arrangement made by their parents (public recognition) or through friendship. But entering through the third aspect, sexual intimacy outside of marriage, is forbidden. (1 Corinthians 6:16-19) For more on these aspects of marriage, see Walter Trobisch's book, *I Married You*.

When Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24, He also emphasizes another important point: God created Eve and gave her to Adam to be his co-equal. She is made from Adam's rib, and she is referred to as Adam's *"ezer,"* that is, *"helper."* Indeed, she is his *"suitable helper"* (Genesis 2:20), or as the classic English Bible translation, the King James Version, puts it, *"helpmate."* We should notice that the Bible also refers to God as His people's *"ezer"* or *"helper."* (Deuteronomy 33:29; Psalm 115:9-11; Hosea 13:9) This means that Eve is not Adam's servant, but his unique partner in life.

The Bible likewise gives instructions about sexual obligations of husbands and wives in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5: *"The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband....Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come back together again...."*

Finally, biblical instructions for all followers of Jesus give especially practical guidance to how husbands and wives should treat each another: *"...Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." (Colossians 3:12-14)*