

**CHRISTIAN
MARRIAGE**

by

CALEB R. STETSON

Rector of the

**Parish of Trinity Church
in the City of New York**

**Trinity Church
Sunday, January 31, 1932**

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Christian Marriage

"Wherefore they are no more twain but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

St. Matthew XIX: 6.

THIS statement of our Lord gives us a definition of marriage which few people today take seriously. In the many articles recently written about the subject, in the books on marriage and divorce which are flooding our bookstalls, one rarely sees any reference to Christ's statement about what marriage should be. Christian marriage might be said to be the subject nobody knows anything about.

We have been informed about all other kinds of marriage until our minds are in a state of confusion: marriage as a contract, a convenience, an experiment, an enslavement of woman, or as a relic of an outworn civilization. We have been surfeited of late with frank and open discussions of the physical and psychological factors in marriage, and I am astonished sometimes to find that there are people of education and religious background who feel that the chief necessity in education for marriage is

sex education. I am therefore very glad that our Church has ordered that from now on instructions on christian marriage shall be given publicly. The whole subject has been complicated by the popular discussions of late years, and by the writings of those who are either ignorant of the christian religion, or who are in some cases distinctly hostile to it and to christian ethics. Bertrand Russell, whose brilliant writings are widely read, is of course definitely anti-christian and anti-religious and advocates a kind of life which no believer in the christian religion could tolerate. Many whose writings are most widely read, approach the subject from this secular standpoint. They regard christian ethics and ethical standards either as having failed and as therefore discredited or as belonging to social conditions which we have outgrown.

Marriage to many people has become merely a secular contract. The chief end to be considered is what is called the "happiness" of the individual, and the purpose of marriage is the gratification of what is called "love." This love of which so much is made turns out to be the transient passion of physical attraction. It is "erotic" love, quite distinct from permanent

affection. This kind of "love" with its sticky sentimentality and its exaggerated sex interest is urged by many writers on marriage to be the one so-called "moral ground for marriage." When one of the parties ceases to "love" the other in this way, they urge that the marriage should be dissolved.

I am not surprised that people are confused and puzzled, for the popular literature of our day is largely concerned with sex problems; with the glorifying of erotic love; with picturing the right of every individual to self-expression and sex-expression, and with the charms of free divorce and experimental marriages. Little is said on the christian side of the matter.

I do believe that some good has been done by our being set free from the prudery and false modesty of the last century. We are able to speak nowadays frankly, sensibly, and properly about the facts of life and the purposes of life. I plead, however, that in all these discussions about moral problems, we should take into consideration our religion, and consider ourselves as not only animals, but as spiritual beings, who have responsibility for life to God. We who are Christians must re-

fuse to consider marriage from the one-sided secular standpoint. It has a higher purpose than the possible happiness of the individual. It is an institution so fundamental, so hallowed, that we can well say that "Marriage was instituted of God in the time of man's innocency." It is God's way of perpetuating the race. It is God's way of producing some of the finest characteristics of which human beings are capable: self-sacrifice, enduring affection and a companionship so cemented and hallowed by mutual forbearance that two people become really complementary and necessary the one to the other. It is God's way of founding that most beautiful of all human institutions, a christian home.

It is the Christian's first duty to know what our Lord has said about marriage, and what the Church through the ages has ordered.

Our Lord's teaching is found in the Gospel of St. Mark, St. Matthew and St. Luke. In every case He spoke emphatically and definitely. He does not merely enunciate a principle as He does when He speaks of turning the other cheek when one is struck, or of selling all one's goods to feed the poor. When He speaks about the union of man and woman in marriage He gives

the very definite and particular decision that marriage, christian marriage, is indissoluble. Our Lord says that the old Mosaic law permitting a man to put away an unfaithful wife was to be done away. The Mosaic law permitting divorce and remarriage was a concession to a low condition of society. There is a higher law, an earlier law, which is of Divine origin and sanction. By this law of God, marriage is indissoluble. So that, according to Christ's words, christian marriage is the reassertion of God's original purpose. It is to be henceforth, for all Christians, a bond dissolved only by death. Those who have been joined together according to God's purpose and by his sanction, no man can put asunder.

Both St. Matthew and St. Mark record our Lord as saying "What God hath joined together let no man put asunder." And St. Luke, St. Matthew and St. Mark report that he said "Whosoever shall put away his wife and marry another committeth adultery." I shall not attempt to discuss the complicated question of the phrase in St. Matthew, which implies that a man may divorce an unfaithful wife and marry again, except to say that this has every appearance of being an interpolation by the

author or possibly by some later editor of the Gospel. This seems clear because this exception creates an absurdity. Our Lord has just said that he was setting aside the old Mosaic law, which permitted divorce for adultery, and freedom to marry again, to return to God's original purpose of the indissoluble marriage. It is manifestly absurd to think that he would, after making this statement, reaffirm the very thing which he had rejected. However, we have since 1868 put this exception into our Canon law. It must be removed before long, as it is without question contrary to Christ's teaching. It is unscholarly and harmful to the understanding of christian marriage. This provision in the Canon is peculiar to the Church in the United States.

That the Church understood our Lord's teaching concerning the marriage bond is abundantly clear. St. Paul says "Let not the wife depart from the husband, but and if she depart let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband." In one of the ancient authoritative documents of the early Church written about 150 A.D. it is stated that separation is permitted when two persons are unable to live together, but not remarriage, so that if

the erring person repents, reconciliation might be possible.

The possibility of reconciliation is one of the things the Church has in mind, when she forbids the remarriage of divorced persons. Our present practice in this country of granting divorce for trivial reasons and allowing remarriage as often as may be desired, does away forever with the possibility of reconciliation, of any effective regret and repentance for wrong doing, of any feeling of the need of restraint and patience. It does away with the permanence of the home, with the care and nurture of children, and works untold harm upon the young. Free divorce with the right to marry, does not and cannot solve our social problems. Wherever it has been tried it has failed, and the worst sufferers are the women and children. It means social and moral disintegration. At any rate, we as christian people cannot countenance such procedure and we must set ourselves afresh to the problem of educating people in the principles of christian ethics.

There can be no possible question as to Christ's statement concerning the permanence of the marriage bond. There can be no ques-

tion but that the Church through the ages has been faithful to His teaching in the stand against the remarriage of the divorced. It is clear that those who are married after being divorced have broken the law of Christ. It may be that they have done it in ignorance, but in any event they have grievously sinned.

Theodore Roosevelt has said that "Easy divorce is the curse of any nation, it is a curse to society and a menace to the home, an incitement to married unhappiness and an evil thing for man and a still more hideous evil for woman." Yet in spite of our Lord's definite teaching, in spite of the judgment of the wisest and best men, we continue to listen to those who promise happiness through free divorce and countenance the present shameful conditions as inevitable. That atheists, free thinkers, those in revolt against christianity should dream of a new social order where there is no right or wrong and every man may seek his own happiness in his own way, is understandable. That those who are ignorant of religion, and there are millions in this country, should live the unmoral life on the animal plane is also understandable. But that there should be such a breaking down of christian

standards in this country among people who profess even a nominal allegiance to the Church of Christ is difficult to understand except for the fact that the Church has been negligent in definite teaching about the permanence of the marriage bond and the social responsibility of those who are married by the Church.

One hopeful thing we must remember and make quite clear. It is that statistics show that divorce and remarriage among people who are definitely attached to the Church of Christ is comparatively rare. The great majority of divorces granted in this country are to those who do not profess any religion or allegiance to any christian communion.

It must be understood that marriage is a natural relation, one of the fundamental relations of human life. It is truly ordained of God. Marriage is essentially the physical and spiritual union of one man and one woman. The State makes this relationship legal by its sanction and permission. It also provides that wife and children shall have certain legal rights. It should be understood that a man and a woman marry each other. The State does not actually marry people, the State per-

mits and legalizes a marriage, the Church in turn recognizes the marriage relation and under certain conditions blesses the union. The Church does not marry people, she merely declares that there is no impediment existing to a marriage and that the union may have the blessing of God and that it is according to God's law. The Church further provides means of grace, the sacraments, to support the spiritual life, to help the married couple fulfill their vows, to give them patience and forbearance, and to teach them the beauty and the possibility of christian love. It has been amply proved that those who marry as Christians and avail themselves of the means of help provided by God in His Church have a much greater chance of happiness than those who marry outside the christian fellowship.

It is clear that whereas the Church does bless the union of certain people, it follows that she cannot recognize or bless the union of others. There are certain unions which cannot be consummated with her approval. These unions cannot be called proper marriages at all and though people live together under these conditions no marriage exists. When people have become united under such pro-

hibited conditions, the Church, after establishing the fact that such prohibited conditions existed before and at the time when the union was consummated, may declare that the union was not a marriage. That no marriage ever existed. This is what is called a decree of annulment. It is quite evident what such prohibited conditions must be. Brother and sister cannot marry. Insane persons cannot marry. Those afflicted with certain loathsome and communicable diseases cannot marry. The Canon now mentions nine such impediments which make marriage impossible.

The Church is wise in her stand on christian marriage. She is also merciful as she recognizes that there are unions which should not have taken place and are not marriages. She also recognizes the unsuccessful marriage and allows for separation.

But what now of the successful marriage, which is really the subject for us to consider. The unsuccessful and unhappy marriage is so talked about and joked about that some people are induced to think that marriage is always a failure.

I would assert emphatically that whereas marriage as a civil contract between care-

less and irreligious people may be, and often is, a failure, christian marriage is usually a happy marriage. The chances are all in favor of happiness and lasting content where two christian people who have thought about the responsibilities and duties of marriage and who are in earnest in trying to secure its joys and happiness, are married with the blessing of Christ through His Church. What then is christian marriage, as distinct from the transient and haphazard unions which are contracted by the thoughtless and the irreligious? Christian marriage is the lawful physical and spiritual union of a christian man and woman in an indissoluble bond. What is needed among us in order to restore marriage to its rightful dignity and sanctity is to consider marriage more seriously than we do, and to make every effort to let our people know the seriousness of the step in life which is taken when one chooses or accepts a partner for life. For marriage is an art and like all arts requires faithful study and preparation. It is absurd to expect two people who know each other slightly and who have seen each other only under the happiest and most care-free circumstances, to live together in the give

and take of the intimacies of daily life, without facing some very serious situations. That some such marriages succeed is a tribute to the innate good nature and common sense of some people. But the Church urges young people to give thought to marriage and to the person whom they are thinking of marrying, so that there may be a good chance of understanding, sympathy and companionship. The first thing then that the Church urges on her people is serious preparation. The present Canon sets forth a principle when it states that no persons may be married in our Church unless three days notice is given to the minister. The principle is that marriage must not be entered into "unadvisedly or lightly," but that thought must be given to the matter beforehand. In every home instruction should be given by parents to sons and daughters on the subject, with practical advice and counsel and frank and open discussions of father with son and mother with daughter. There are also many good books now to be had which can safely be placed in the hands of young people. The Church's instruction must necessarily confine itself to the religious and spiritual aspect, to what the Church requires and to the help

she gives, with such other good counsel as may be possible. The physical side of marriage instruction must be left to the parents and guardians and the family physician. Young people should be urged to learn of one another's tastes and characteristics, to see if good fellowship is possible and whether there is any basis for common likes and tastes so that there may be some hope of stable and fine comradeship and loving companionship.

The second requisite of a happy christian marriage is the intention and purpose to make marriage successful, happy and permanent. There must be no thought in the background of one's mind that there is always escape by means of divorce, and a chance to try again. Marriages entered into as experiments stand small chance of being happy because selfish interests rule both parties. They are seeking personal satisfaction, not a life shared in common.

The third requisite is a willingness to be disciplined. This may seem a hard condition and yet there must be self-discipline in every walk of life. Without it there can be no happiness,—most certainly not in the marriage bond. In marriage we take each other for

better or for worse, and we promise to care for one another in sickness as well as in health. The oft repeated excuse for unhappiness that there was "incompatibility of temper" means usually that there were ungoverned tempers on both sides, irritability, and quarrelsomeness, which could have been restrained if only one or the other had stopped to think for a moment, and exercised self-control. Catastrophe always follows where two people lose their tempers at the same time.

The fourth requisite is that true enduring love shall exist and that both shall strive to cultivate it. We must be aware that infatuation is not love and that it cannot last. And the twaddle that is written about "Twin Souls" and the illusion of the perfect bliss which follows when such soul mates are united in a life of complete selfishness without responsibilities or trials, is a fiction. Such a life exists only in novels and the movies. We mistake lust for love at our peril. Love longs to give, lust to get. Lust is selfish, love is selfless. Lust would satisfy only self—love thinks always of the other. Lust may soon turn to hate, while love finds its perfect work in lasting and joyous companionship through

lengthening years. Love is always close to God and partakes of God's spirit, for "God so loved that he gave his only begotten Son."

Lastly a most important requisite for a happy christian marriage is the practice of religion.

It is better that those who marry should be of the same religious faith. It is highly important that they should both be baptized so that they may practice their religious life together, and that this added bond and fellowship may strengthen and sanctify their lives.

Mixed marriages may be successful but there is always a greater risk. We should urge our people as much as possible to find a life companion of the same faith or, at any rate, willing to accept that faith. The best time to convert a person is before marriage, it is far easier then than later.

The practice of religion which two people hold in common is a tremendous factor in making for a complete and happy life. Prayer in common, the gathering at the Altar to partake of a common spiritual life, are the means of permanent joy. Those of us who remember homes where fathers and mothers went to

church regularly and to Holy Communion, who took for granted the practice of religious habits, who led their children naturally to church and confirmation, will recall with thanksgiving the happiness of such a home and the serene joy and sweet fellowship of mother and father. The influence of such a home is of untold value to character.

It is such homes that the christian religion seeks to found and to perpetuate. By no other means can they be established. It is of such a home that our Lord must have thought when He said that God had joined together such good people and that nothing could or should separate them.

Such homes are not only the blessing of the individuals privileged to be born into them; they are the foundation rocks of a stable and wholesome society.

Christian marriage is the one hope for the family and the State. It is the duty of christian people to stand firmly for the ideals of christian marriage and to let it be known that they are faithful to our Lord, whose word is truth.