

“ADVICE ABOUT MARRIAGE”

I Corinthians 7:25-35 (Common English Bible)

1) Have you ever given advice on a matter that proved to be (how do we say it politely) as wrong as it could be? We all strike out at times with the role of advice columnist, and sometimes taking the advice others so freely give us is not the thing to do either. In the face of their “I told you so’s” we choose to dismiss their advice and may even prove they were wrong. You know some couples who married when they were 17 & 18 years old—even with parents telling them it couldn’t last—only to make it to their 70th anniversary! Others were encouraged to find a husband or wife and get married. Some disregarded the advice while others wished they had after the marriage ended in divorce. Often the advice doesn’t come with how-to instructions as illustrated by the fable about a hippo who fell in love with a butterfly. He sought the advice of the wise old owl. ‘You must become a butter-fly,’ the owl told the hippo, ‘and do it right now.’ The hippo was delighted. He plunged back into the jungle, but returned shortly. ‘How do I become a butterfly?’ the hippo inquired of the owl. The bird of great wisdom responded, ‘That’s up to you. I only set the policy. I don’t implement.’

2) In his letter to the Corinthians Paul tries to give advice about marriage, most likely in response to questions that had been addressed to him. We hear his advice and think, “No wonder Paul never married!” To his credit he doesn’t claim this to be a “word from the Lord” but only his opinion. Still he does more to confuse the situation than offer any practical advice. To summarize Paul: “Married—stay that way. Unmarried—stay that way. Not that marriage is a sin—he just doesn’t recommend it.” I guess that could be construed to mean that couples might as well just live together instead of marrying, but I don’t think that’s what he meant. Paul thought that Jesus would return any day and his advice was given so that people could focus on that reality instead of the trivial matters of daily life. Since that didn’t happen, his advice doesn’t get much acceptance. Suffice it to say that couples getting married will choose passages like the love chapter (also from Paul), words from Genesis about males and females being created for each other, or even some of the love poetry of Song of Solomon before the passage you heard read this morning.

3) Even if Paul had possessed a more wholistic concept of marriage—something other than a diversion from the Lord’s work—his advice would still have to be taken in the context of his day. Marriage during most Biblical times was something one did for survival. Women couldn’t own property or make a living in most cases, so they needed a man to marry them and give them children to watch over them in their later years. Marriages were often arranged rather than the partners choosing each other, and love and happiness were not assumed benefits of a marriage. Socrates, the classical Greek philosopher was once asked whether it was better to marry or remain single. His reply: “Take which course you will, you will repent of it.” Eventually, he coined this sage advice: “By all means marry. If you get a good spouse, you will become very happy; and if you get a bad one you will become a philosopher--and that is good for everyone.”

4) Our views of marriage have changed in many ways. In a US News and World Report study of 351 marriages which had lasted a minimum of 15 years, both husbands and wives consistently listed seven statements in the identical order as their priorities for marriage: 1. My spouse is my best friend. 2. I like my spouse as a person. 3. Marriage is a long-term commitment. 4. Marriage is sacred. 5. We agree on aims and goals. 6. My spouse has grown more interesting. 7. I want the relationship to succeed. Nothing is said of providing financial security or children. Nowhere is it implied that a spouse is responsible for the happiness of the other. Perhaps we are actually getting closer to Paul’s advice about love in chapter 13 of I Corinthians: “Love is patient, love is kind, it isn’t jealous, it doesn’t brag, it isn’t arrogant, it isn’t rude, it doesn’t seek its own

advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints..." This may be what a respondent to a complaining letter to Ann Landers was trying to say in her own way. She wrote: *"Dear Ann, I cannot believe people still write to you and say they are STUCK in a relationship. Those people should grow up. When you choose to marry, you accept the obligation to do everything in your power to make the relationship work. If there is abuse, that is a legitimate reason to get out. Otherwise, marriage is a commitment to stay and work out whatever problems exist. We are a spoiled society, and spend too much time focusing on what others are NOT doing for us. My husband and I have been married 15 years. I don't expect flowers and romance. He's not the type, and I knew this early on. I know he loves me, because he works hard every day to provide for his family. In return, I try to make him feel special. Cherish the small things in marriage, it just might lead to a fulfilling relationship."*

5) One year on Valentine's Day, a woman answered the doorbell and found two neighborhood children, a 4-year-old girl and a 3-year-old boy, decked out in their parents' clothes, standing at the door. The little girl said, "My husband and I have come to visit." The woman invited them into the living room where she served them cookies and lemonade. When she asked if they wanted more, the little girl replied very politely, No, thank you. We must be going now. My husband just wet his pants. There are no perfect marriages. We speak of marriages being made in heaven, but the reality is that marriages have to be maintained on earth. Financial worries, problems with parents or in-laws, difficulties raising children, aging and health situations can take their toll on a marriage. Putting our faith in Jesus Christ doesn't exempt us from the difficulties of marriage or of life in general, but it does give us tools with which to face these situations. Respect, forgiveness, true concern, a supportive community and communication with God can and will help us. A pastor whose marriage has just ended in separation with his wife moving out was feeling himself to be a failure. To make matters worse, he had to meet a couple for pre-marriage counseling first thing in the morning. What advice could he give this young couple that would enable them to prepare for a holy marriage? Nothing, he no longer felt qualified or able to give advice! All he had left was God and that realization became a momentous turning point because he could completely put his dependence upon God.

6) A final love story: Maria von Wedemeyer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer fell in love when she was 18. He was 36, a world-famous theologian, a prisoner of the Nazis. While he was in prison, they wrote letters to each other, which Maria locked away until after he was hanged on April 8, 1945, just a month before the end of the war. A year earlier he had written: *"A blessing is the visible, perceptible, effective proximity of God. A blessing demands to be passed on -- it communicates itself to other people. That someone should be a blessing is the greatest thing of all, isn't it? Not just a helpmate, or a companion or a friend, but a blessing. May that be how it is in our marriage."* That marriage never took place, but the blessing did. Today, whether you are married, single, divorced, widowed, or in some non-marriage relationship—may you experience the blessing of God which comes through partners, family and friends. I'm convinced that's what God wants for each of us.