

MARRYING A NON-CHRISTIAN

(marriage; dating)

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She was attractive and energetic. She laughed easily and people seemed to be naturally drawn to her.

They met at a volleyball game - they worked for the same company but he hadn't even seen her before they started playing in the league.

He introduced himself and it wasn't but a couple of weeks before he asked her to have dinner with him after a game.

Within two months he felt a growing affection that she seemed to share. She was so easy to be with, their interests so similar, so many values in common.

But one thing bothered him - it had to do with religion.

Oh, she attended church all right but there was no indication that she had a personal relationship with Jesus. Discussing faith in Christ seemed to make her uncomfortable.

She said she believed in God but he could tell her religion was academic and cultural not personal and alive.

Something inside of him said he should break the relationship.

During his growing up years he had been taught not to date anyone who wasn't committed to Christ.

By that time however he knew he loved her and he decided he would just show her what it meant to be a true follower of Jesus - Just give her time, she'd become a real Christian.

For the next two months he tried talking to her about Christ but because it seemed to upset her and caused her to withdraw from him he stopped bringing it up.

By this time the struggle inside was intense, he loved her and felt a strong emotional attachment, a need for her, and he knew that he wanted to marry her. But he also knew what he had been taught - don't marry a non-Christian.

At that point he looked for any evidence that would suggest she was maybe a true Christian but was just different in the way she expressed it.

He also began to question the wisdom of making such a big deal out of whether she was a Christian or not - after all she was a fine, moral, high values person who acted more like a Christian than lots of Christians he knew.

Eleven months later, over the objections of his parents and his pastor, they were married.

In the first year after their wedding, the novelty of marriage and the busyness of life combined to make it an apparently successful union of two people.

He did notice, however, that though she attended church with him it was with reluctance and certainly without interest.

After about a year he grew tired of "forcing" her to go and found it was easier to just not bring it up. Though he felt a little guilty, Sunday mornings became their time.

It was after their son was born that he felt the new need to get back to church and to God.

But by this time in their marriage she not only resisted it she outright rejected it. She said she had always felt uncomfortable around his church and his church friends - they were holier-than-thou and hypocritical.

Furthermore she was tired of his reluctance to join in enthusiastically with her friends and their parties and entertainment.

And most of all it irritated her greatly that he insisted on giving money to the church when there were things they couldn't afford.

Within four years of their wedding he felt he had made a great mistake.

The more involved she became with her work friends the more involved he became at church.

At church there was a woman who seemed to understand fully what he was going through.

She too had an unbelieving spouse and the two of them spent hours over coffee talking about the impossibility of their situations.

Within a year he had convinced himself that God couldn't possibly want anyone to be so miserable as he was in his marriage.

He further convinced himself that his son would be better off if he and his wife stopped their constant bickering by him moving out.

And most of all he convinced himself that he had the right to be married to someone who understood him and believed as he did.

And certainly God would look with favor on the union of two people who loved God so much.

Five years and one child after what seemed so good - a marriage ended.

Though the account I have just given is intentionally fictional, its story with varying

details could be told over and over again by people within this congregation not to mention the many who have just walked away from any relationship to God.

I told the story to illustrate the breaking of two major covenants.

A covenant with God broken when he emotionally tied himself to and married a person not committed to following Jesus.

And a covenant with his wife broken when he divorced her.

In the second chapter of Malachi, God addresses these two covenants.

In the middle of April we began this study of the last book of the Old Testament. God began this book by reiterating his unconditional love for his children.

He wanted to stress his grace and love, I think, because he had some very hard things to say to them.

In the latter part of chapter one he challenges his people with their sloppy, unholy, thoughtless worship.

In the beginning of chapter two he calls them back to wholehearted devotion to God instead of the lackadaisical, careless, and self-centered lives many of them were living.

Now in this, the latter part of Chapter two, God addresses the issues I have introduced this morning.

Malachi 2:10 READ

Speaking for God, Malachi is writing to those who call themselves God's people.

He emphasizes that, by asking the rhetorical questions: "Don't we have the same father? Don't we have the same creator?"

The obvious answer is "yes!", those who are trusting in God are part of the same family - God's family. We belong to God and to one another - we have obligations as a result of being part of the same family.

Malachi then asks, "Then why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?"

A covenant is an agreement. An agreement between two parties wherein they both commit to certain obligations.

Years earlier the Israelites had entered into a covenant with God. God would guide them, bless them, and keep them if they would walk in His ways, believe in his word and trust in his promises.

But, Malachi writes, you have treated that covenant-agreement as if it is worthless by the way you break your agreement with God and with each other.

Some of you may be looking at a KJV or NASB translation. There you will see the words "deal treacherously".

This is a person who makes an agreement with someone leading them to believe they can be counted on but then doesn't keep the agreement thus setting the other person up and then violating the relationship. That is treachery.

The NIV translates it "break faith". They trusted you but you broke faith.

There is the basic charge God makes against the people: They are covenant breakers - they deal treacherously, they break faith with God and each other.

In these verses Malachi points out two of the ways in which they are doing this. The first is in verses 11 and 12 and the second in verses 13-16.

Today we will look at the first in verses 11 and 12 (next week we will look at the second):

God says it is a detestable, abominable, loathsome thing you do.

Those are strong words.

What? What is so despicable in God's eyes?

Wouldn't you expect God to say it is murder or blasphemy or something truly horrible? But what is it?

You treat my sanctuary, my dwelling place as if it is worthless - you profane it.

HOW? Oh, God what is it we do that causes you to say that we think your dwelling place is worthless?

"You marry the daughter of a foreign god."

Followers of God were marrying people who weren't followers of God.

In Exodus 34, and repeated several times elsewhere in the Bible, God tells his people that He has made a covenant with them and part of that covenant is that they are not to marry people who are not faithful followers of God.

God says if you do marry them they will turn your hearts away from God.

Several times in the Scriptures Solomon is used as an example of a man whose spiritual life is compromised by his marriage to women who did not love his God.

In the New Testament in II Corinthians 6 as elsewhere God's commands his people to never bind themselves to unbelievers.

Don't engage in covenants or agreements that will compromise your relationship to God.

One clear application of that is given I Corinthians where God instructs a believer to marry only another believer.

Jesus said a person cannot serve two masters.

When you make a covenant you bind yourself, you obligate yourself, you commit yourself to that relationship.

When you committed your life to Christ you responded to the covenant which he offered - a covenant of grace and obedience to Christ.

When you marry someone you bind yourself, you obligate yourself and commit yourself to that relationship.

In the 11th verse Malachi says these who marry unbelievers are desecrating the sanctuary the Lord loves.

The Apostle Paul made the same point in I Corinthians 6:

We belong to Christ, we are his dwelling place -
God has chosen by His Spirit to take up residence in us.

Would we then join ourselves to someone who doesn't desire to follow God, someone who doesn't belong to Him and thereby force God to be joined to such a person?

You have said you are committed to God, set apart for His use and then you join yourself to someone who is not committed to God or set apart for his use.

If that person has no relationship to Christ then you have committed yourself in mutually exclusive directions.

Christ and that unbelieving dating partner or spouse are moving in opposite directions.

God says when you marry a non-Christian you violate the covenant you have made with God - you break faith, you deal treacherously with God - you made an agreement you now don't intend to keep.

There are three kinds of people who have the most need to respond to this teaching from the Scriptures:

1. There are those who are not now dating. God's instruction is very clear - don't marry a person who isn't a follower of Jesus Christ.

It is not that Christ-followers are better than others but that they are so different.

If you have covenanted with God by trusting in Christ and committing to following Him then you are moving in a very different direction than one who doesn't know Jesus.

And it is fraudulent to pretend you are compatible when you know you have different masters.

I have often said to those who are honest enough to admit they do not want to be a Christ-follower, "You don't want to marry someone who is fully committed to Jesus because they will not be the spouse you thought you were getting."

And it seems equally obvious that if you aren't to marry such a person then you shouldn't date such a person.

In this culture casual recreational dating is the way most serious relationships begin. Don't start what before God you cannot conclude.

Dating or marrying a non-Christian is expressly forbidden by God in his Word.

Students, decide now who your master will be - if Jesus, then obey his command and don't link yourself emotionally or in marriage to someone who isn't following Him.

Parents teach it as a family value from early in your child's life and hold to it tenaciously when your children begin building opposite-sex friendships and dating.

Early in their high school years I asked each of my daughters to write out a dating covenant - an agreement with God on what they would and would not do in dating. I asked to see that agreement so I could hopefully appropriately remind them of it from time to time.

Dads and moms, build friendships with Christian families with children your children's age.

Let them meet and know godly adult men and women whose marriages are healthy and God-honoring - give them role models.

Encourage, don't discourage, your children to be involved in the activities of an evangelical church with children their own age.

I know of parents who actually discourage their children from being involved in Christian activities by encouraging them to be involved in sports or hobbies that conflict with their church activities.

While not every child or high school student attending a church is necessarily a Christian there certainly is a greater likelihood that in a church they will have the opportunity to build same-sex and opposite-sex friendships with other children and young adults who know and love the Lord.

I again say to you who are not yet dating and to your parents, God's word is abundantly clear, "Don't marry (and by inference don't date) someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ.

2. The second kind of person who needs to respond to this teaching from the Bible is

the person who is now dating someone who is not a follower of Christ.

Maybe you have just begun a relationship.

Maybe you have already become emotionally and romantically involved.

Maybe you are engaged to be married.

This is one of the most difficult things to ask a person to do: break an engagement or break off a serious relationship with a non-Christian.

What many Christians are tempted to do is what the person in my opening illustration did - rationalize continuing the relationship by saying they will help them become Christians. We call it "missionary dating".

And it seems that most Christians who are dating non-Christians convince themselves this is why they are together - to lead that person to Christ.

And while there are examples of where it apparently succeeded I could parade before you many examples where it ended in unequally yoked marriages. Christians violating the explicit command of their God and paying the price in their marriages.

As difficult as this may be, how strongly does God feel about a Christian marrying a non-Christian?

Look at verse 12 READ

To understand this metaphor imagine the people of Israel traveling by foot across the Sinai desert as they escape from Egypt.

They are a large group of people, hundreds of thousands.

They travel by tribe, or by clan and when they stop at night they set up tents over a huge area of land.

To stay alive it was imperative they stay together. Traveling through enemy territory and through inhospitable terrain if they were separated from the larger group they would be lost.

To be cut off from the tents of Jacob was to be put out of the community, to be treated as an unbeliever.

My belief is that when someone openly defies God's command, whatever that command is, the person is to be challenged by their Christian friends and eventually the church.

And according to Matthew 18 if they do not repent, change their minds, they are to be treated as an unbeliever.

They have evidenced by their flagrant disregard for the teaching of the Word of God and their unwillingness to repent, that they are not a Christian.

It is for that reason that we on staff here at SGC are unwilling to perform the marriage of someone who professes to be a follower of Christ marrying someone who is not.

I suspect that if we take this teaching seriously we would go further than that - and even exercise church discipline if they persist in proceeding with the wedding.

It will probably be one of the most difficult things you will ever do but God's word is clear, break it off. Be done with it. Decide today whom you will serve.

I said it would be one of the most difficult things you have ever done but not the most difficult - the most difficult would be to care about following your God and be married to someone who doesn't.

I beg you parents and friends of those who are engaged to unbelievers, don't let it pass. Don't say your friendship is more important. Is what they think of you more important than their obedience to God?

3. The third kind of person who needs to respond to this teaching from God's word is the person who is now married to someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ.

Several years ago I preached a message on this very topic.

From I Peter I spoke on how to live with the spiritually unresponsive.

The Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 7 deals specifically with this subject:
READ 7:12-14

Don't divorce your unbelieving spouse just because he or she is an unbeliever.

In fact God desires that your presence be a positive spiritual influence on them and on your children.

The Apostle Peter went on to say, "if your spouse does not believe the Word of God, live in such a way that they may be won over without words by your pure and reverent behavior."

Someone could hear these words and say, "there, isn't that reason to marry that non-Christian? I will marry them and then win them to Christ."

In both the instruction from Paul and from Peter, the counsel is to those husbands or wives who became Christians after they were married but their spouses were not yet believers.

There is no support in this text to disobey God and knowingly marry someone who is not a follower of Christ.

But what about those who did disobey God and married someone who was not and is not a believer?

Upon confession of sin there is forgiveness from our gracious God.

I am so thankful for that.

When we acknowledge our sin and turn to God he forgives and gives us grace to press on in obedience.

Even the obedience of being a faithful, loving spouse to an unbeliever.

Again I say to you who are dating a non-Christian or planning to marry someone who is not a believer, don't attempt to circumvent the clear teaching of God by saying you will go ahead and marry them and if it doesn't work out you'll just ask God's forgiveness.

I once had a person ask me, "I know I shouldn't get a divorce but if I do it anyway will God forgive me later when I ask for it?"

I think it is dangerous to trifle with the mercy of God.

Obey God today. Don't presume upon his grace.

Let me say a word to those of you who today would acknowledge that you are not a follower of Jesus Christ but you are married to someone who is.

You are a very fortunate person.

You are married to a person who takes his or her commitment to you very seriously - because they believe God is witness to your marriage.

Further they care about you not only here and now, they care about your eternal destiny.

You could not be married to someone who would care for you more deeply than they do.

And furthermore their prayers for you are powerfully effective.

I urge you to not only delight in them but respond to their God -

In Him alone is forgiveness of sins,
lasting purpose in life,
a sense of true belonging
and security about the life to come.

Again, hear the teaching of God's word: A detestable thing has been committed in Israel: They have desecrated the dwelling place of God by marrying the daughter of a foreign god.

If you date and marry, date and marry only in the Lord.