

I want to read to you some snippets of articles that I found. These articles report that nearly half of unmarried young American women are engaged in sex outside of marriage. This rate is twice as much as the generation before. Young people are engaged in drug experimentation with cocaine becoming a real problem. One article I read complains of how the young people are going wild which is the fault of their parents.

Young women have lost a sense of modest dress, they are using profanity, they are overcome by the disease of materialism and they are disregarding their marriage vows. Modern parents are criminally negligent with the excess of freedom that they permit.

These articles that I read were from Good Housekeeping and Ladies Home Journal and were written in 1917. John Watson, a widely read child psychologist wrote in 1928 that in 50 years there would be no such thing as marriage. So yes, these articles described your parents, your grandparents, or your great-grandparents. They described a time when people were concerned that the young people were going to ruin marriage.

Today concludes our 8 part series of looking at Paul's letters to the Christian church in Corinth. Last week we focused on what Paul said concerning singleness and this week we will focus on what Paul says about marriage.

Our historical understanding of marriage is constantly changing. Last week we learned that in ancient Israel that Paul wrote this letter from, marriage was viewed as a vehicle to transfer property rights and pass along a family name. Marriage in ancient Israel was not about love and affection. Marriage had more to do with acquiring the right in-laws.

Throughout history, marriage has been used for economic and political reasons. In the 1500s King Henry VII of England had his 15 year old son Arthur to marry 18 year old Catherine of Aragon, daughter of the King of Spain.

When Arthur died just 5 months later, Catherine claimed that their marriage was never consummated. If Henry had sent Catherine back, he would have lost his alliance with Spain and the dowry of 200,000 ducats that came with her. So he decided to marry her to his second son, 12 year old Henry. The young Henry succeeded to the throne in 1509 and became King Henry VIII.

But Catherine experienced several stillbirths and their only surviving child was a daughter. Henry became infatuated with his wife's maid of honor, Anne Boleyn but she refused to become his mistress. He resolved to marry her to produce an heir. But there was one problem. He was already married to Catherine. The pope, who was also Catherine's nephew, refused to grant the divorce. So Henry decided to reject the authority of the pope, set up his own church with his own bishops, seized the Catholic Church's property and set up the Church of England.

The Church of England became, of course, the Anglican Church or here in the US, the Episcopal Church. So, yes, the Episcopal Church was started as a way for Henry VIII to divorce his current wife and marry his mistress.

I hear people today worry about the state of marriage and the changing definition of marriage. But concerns about the state of marriage are nothing new. Back in the 1700s, many people who described themselves as traditionalists decried how marriage was changing from being based on family arrangements to being based on the love of two people toward one another.

Traditionalists argued that if the choice of a marriage partner was a personal decision and not arranged by the family, what would prevent young people from choosing unwisely? These traditionalists feared that if people were encouraged to expect marriage to be the best and happiest experience of their lives, what would hold a marriage together if things went for worse rather than for better.

Chapter 7 of Corinthians is headlined "marriage" in the pew Bibles. But this section addresses very specific questions that the Corinthian Christians were asking. Paul had founded the church and they sought him out for guidance to answer the specific questions they had. They had questions about whether people should even get married. Paul responds by saying that it is better to be single than married.

Paul believed that Christ was going to come during his lifetime and he felt that people shouldn't be so focused on their human relationships but that they should instead be most focused on their relationship with God.

As I read through Paul's words in chapter 7 and also in chapter 13, I want to lift up what I see in these 2 chapters. But then I am going to ask you to share what you see. What I see in these chapters is that for a marriage to be successful, then what is principally needed is for both partners to be committed to establishing a mutual set of agreed upon principles. Marriage between two people is a partnership.

A partnership where each person agrees to the same set of guiding principles. And these principles have to be principles that help each partner grow into a healthier person. These principles have to be principles that help each partner grow into a stronger spiritual person.

I have always been intrigued by how marriage relationships can be very different but very successful. And how marriage relationships can be very similar but some are failures and others are successful.

For instance, I attended a wedding recently in which the presiding pastor told the bride and groom that she was not to make any major decisions. Major decisions were the role of the husband to make. He laid out a hierarchy and the wife was below the husband. This hierarchy was the belief held in ancient Israel. In many places in Scripture, he affirmed this hierarchy which existed in this particular place and particular time.

I know many very happy and successful marriages where the husband and wife have agreed that the husband is the head of the wife. From all I can tell, they both seem comfortable with this arrangement. They would not want it any other way. It is their place of greatest security and growth.

But I know of other Christian couples whose marriages operate this way and they do not work. The woman feels like she is an employee with no bargaining rights and the man feels stressed that he cannot provide for his family like he should. They operate under a set of principles which do not work and that lead to unhealthy and negative spiritual and emotional growth. And unhealthy emotional and spiritual growth can then lead to unhealthy physical lifestyles.

In the text we read, Paul argues for mutual submission in relationships between two people. He talks about how the husband has rights over the wife and how the wife has rights over her husband. A relationship where both husband and wife do not have greater authority than the other. And in a culture where the woman was treated as inferior, these declarations of equality were pretty radical statements.

There is no magical formula for marriages to be successful. What works for some marriages may not work for others. But in reading Paul's words, what I think is clear is that marriages as well as all relationships are not static events. Relationships like marriages are constantly changing.

And because relationships are dynamic and not static, then each partner must be in conversation with the other in talking through the changing dynamics in their relationships and what each one needs.

For instance, I have some friends who a few years ago, he owned his own business. She had resigned from her career to raise their children. Their children entered school so she resumed her professional career. With the economy, he had to declare bankruptcy and close his business. In two short years, their roles have reversed. The rules have changed. For their partnership to survive, they have had to make significant changes. But these are changes that both of them had to negotiate with the other and both of them had to agree upon to help each of them move forward emotionally and spiritually.

If both partners are not willing to recognize changes and adapt to help each other become stronger emotionally and spiritually, then their marriage partnership is not a healthy relationship. Both partners must be willing to recognize how they each need to change. Both partners must be willing to invest in the relationship or it will not grow. And lack of growth leads to failure.

Now I am going to turn it back to you. In your experience, what do you think are keys to successful marriage? (at this point, several suggestions were offered)

And what are good guiding principles for marriage partnerships? Let us listen to what Paul says.

I Corinthians 13:4-13

-Coontz, Stephanie, Marriage, a History: from Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage, Viking, 2005

-Text: I Corinthians 7 and 13

-Given: March 6, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)