

Does Sex Equal Marriage in God's Eyes?

QUESTION

When a couple has sex, aren't they essentially married in God's eyes? It seems to me that if the younger generation understood this and believed it, things would change fast. Dating as we know it would cease. Virgin women wouldn't dream of putting themselves in a compromising position with a man. A young man would be far more careful if he knew that the moment he crossed the line he was committed. Wouldn't you agree that this is the message we need to be communicating?

ANSWER

Technically speaking, you're right on target in suggesting that, in God's eyes, marriage has more to do with the sex act than it does with church ceremonies or legal documents. According to Scripture, marriage is fundamentally a matter of a man and a woman becoming one flesh (Genesis 2:24). Sexual intercourse is central to that process. Modern culture may treat sex as a toy, but in actuality it's a terribly powerful thing. It creates a bond between two people which is not easily broken. This is consistent with the apostle Paul's warning in I Corinthians 6:16: "Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh'" (I Corinthians 6:16). As regards this detail of biblical theology, then, we're in complete agreement with you.

Where we may see things differently is in the area of practical application. What are the implications of this theological truth for couples living in the cultural context of 21st century America? And how do we persuade contemporary people to take those implications seriously and to order their personal behavior accordingly? How do we get them to care about the fact that sexual activity equals marriage in the eyes of God? That's the real question. It's a crucial question inasmuch as the one flesh union that is genuine biblical marriage is supposed to embrace every aspect of human existence. It includes the mental, the emotional, the moral, the spiritual, and the economic as well as the physical and sexual. Yes, the physical bond undoubtedly plays a crucial role in bringing all these ingredients together. In a certain sense, it cements them into a whole. And yet one could easily argue that it is not, in and of itself, the "one flesh" relationship described in Genesis 2:24. In practical terms, it is not necessarily a sufficient basis for establishing an ongoing commitment of the will and intellect between partners. If you doubt this, just take a look around. That's why most human cultures have found it necessary to devise ways of solemnizing the sexual/marital relationship so as to make it socially and legally binding.

You've suggested that if young men and women understood the connection between sex and marriage and really believed in it, the problems we're facing in western culture today would automatically disappear. "Dating as we know it would cease," you say.

"Virgin women wouldn't dream of putting themselves in a compromising position with a man. A young man would be far more careful if he knew that the moment he crossed that line he was committed." We think these assumptions deserve to be challenged.

Knowing and doing are not necessarily the same thing. This is especially true when we're talking about passions as powerful as those associated with sex. Somehow or other individuals need to be held accountable to act according to the truths they claim to know and believe. That's where social sanctions and the authority of the larger community come into play.

From the biblical viewpoint, there is a distinctly communal aspect to marriage. This is implied first of all in a couple's decision to "leave" their parents and "cleave" to one another (Genesis 2:24). In taking this step, they initiate a new family unit as a part of general human society. The implication is that marriage, including the sexual act that results in "becoming one flesh," is anything but a purely private affair. It involves a couple's public commitment to build a strong and lasting relationship. This relationship is not merely a foundation for the nurturing of their own children. It's also as a building block of social stability and a contribution to the wellbeing of the broader community. This is why we maintain that rings, vows, ceremonies, and marriage licenses fulfill a crucial function within the cultural "economy" of marriage. Each has vital part to play in holding marriage partners accountable to the mutual promises they make when they engage in physical intimacy. Without that public accountability, commitments can be easily forgotten.

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