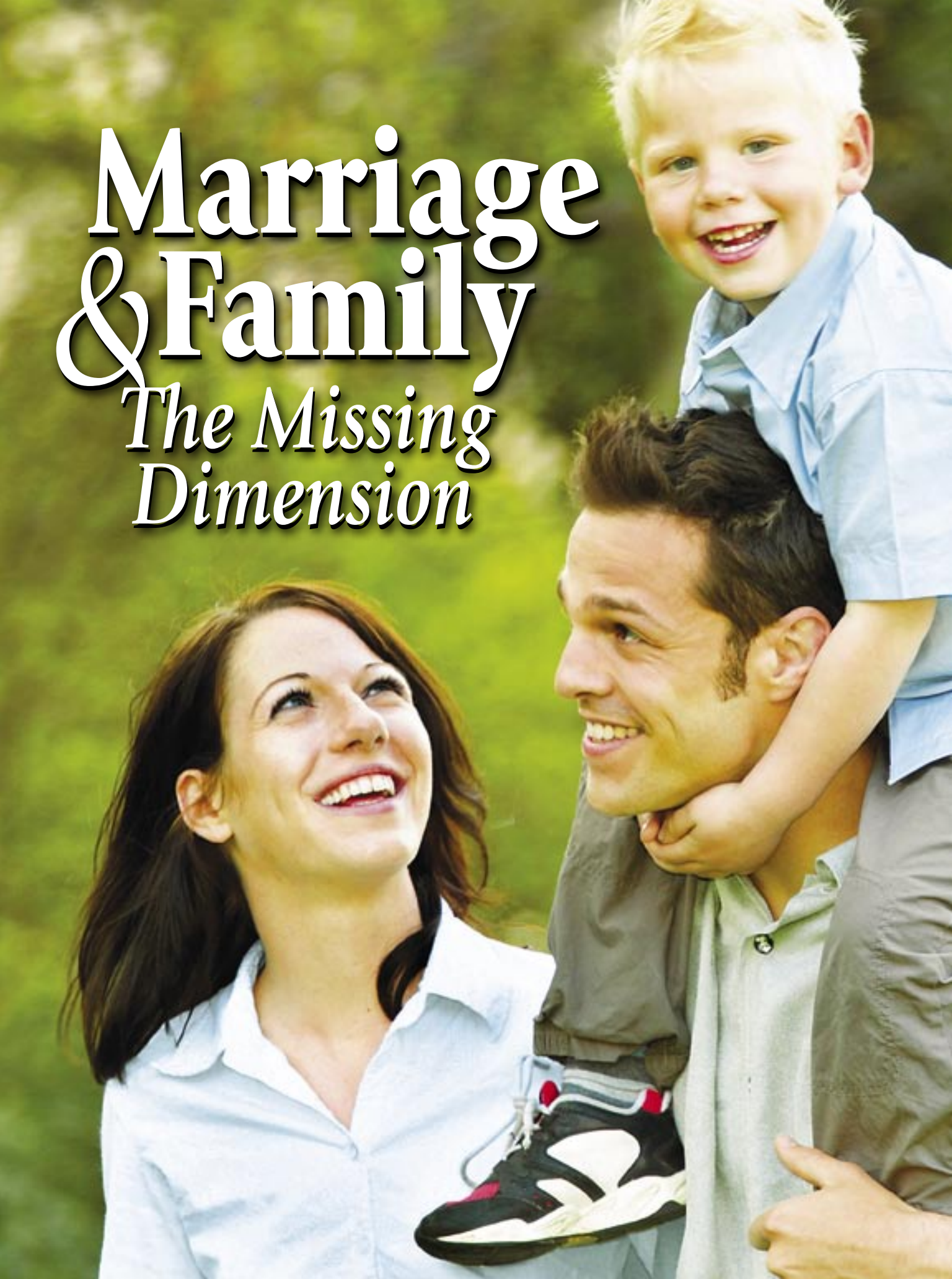
Marriage & Family

The Missing Dimension



Introduction

"Didn't the LORD make you one with your wife? In body and spirit you are his. And what does he want? Godly children from your union" (Malachi 2:15, New Living Translation).

The joy of a happy marriage blessed with loving, respectful children who easily transition from childhood into responsible adults is a dream of most men and women. Found in almost every nation and culture, this desire seems to be hard-wired into our minds and genetic makeup.

Traditionally, marriage has been an exclusive bond between a man and a woman that includes that most intimate of acts, the sexual union.

Yet in recent years this pattern has been changing. Some are choosing to have children apart from marriage and others are opting for same-sex relationships. Nevertheless, it seems everyone wants the joy and blessings of family.

Even many of those who deviate from tradition still want their relationships to be called "marriages" and their social units "families." Homosexual couples, unable to reproduce, struggle to adopt children or make other arrangements so they, too, can have progeny.

Isn't it ironic that the social experimenters want the terminology and fruits of traditional marriage but don't want to follow the traditional recipe? Why is it that we human beings are so attracted to the terms *marriage* and *family?*

Marriage: Will it survive?

Looking at the state of marriage today leaves no doubt that the institution is under serious attack. In Western nations, including the United States, Canada and Europe, close to half of all first-time marriages end in divorce. People who willingly say, "I do," increasingly end up changing their words to "I won't anymore."

Based on the failure rate of today's marriages, some sociologists have predicted that marriage will soon become obsolete. But despite the high odds against a happy, lifelong relationship, couples still get married and still hope to spend a lifetime together.

Why do we continue to pursue this ideal? And where does God fit in the picture? Did He have anything to do with the institution of marriage and, if so, did He give us any instructions? When all else fails, maybe we should read the directions!

Of course, the problems encountered in marriages are not limited to just husbands and wives when children are involved. For when *they* enter the mix, they also experience the consequences of their parents' relationship—whether sound and strong or troubled and broken.



Did God have anything to do with the institution of marriage and, if so, did He give us any instructions?

Child rearing in crisis

A crisis in child rearing has developed in part because of the crisis in marriages. Reflecting the consequences of divorce and parents who don't know how to parent, children arrive on the doorsteps of schools unprepared to learn. Schools are now burdened with teaching children basic principles such as civility and respect that used to be universally taught by parents and that helped prepare children to learn.

Now schools must teach children these fundamental concepts before they can hope to educate them. In conjunction with the added job of preparing children to learn, schools today are being heavily criticized by demanding parents for not doing a better job of teaching their children.

Psychologist Robert Evans argues that in the United States educational system the crisis isn't one of schooling (as the news media, parents and governmental leaders often complain) but rather one of *child rearing.*

According to Evans, "The symptoms of this crisis—an accelerating deterioration in the civility, values, work ethic, and academic achievement of many youth—appear most vividly at school, and so the crisis is often seen as educational, but it begins well before school and extends well beyond it . . . Its immediate cause lies at home with parents, who are suffering a widespread loss of confidence and competence" (*Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope With the Crisis in Childrearing,* 2004, p. xi).

Where can you find answers?

So what are the keys to a happy, successful marriage and family? Recognizing the unique value marriages provide for individuals and communities alike, many churches now offer (or in some cases *require*) premarital counseling for couples before performing their marriages.

Some couples are choosing a new type of marriage called "covenant marriage"—a relationship more difficult to end—in an effort to "divorce-proof" their marriages.

Many organizations and programs have been established to strengthen marriages and families. Marriage retreats, seminars, enrichment programs and parenting classes abound. Counselors specialize in helping couples repair broken relationships and in helping parents work with their children. But the results are limited and not overly encouraging. Marriages still end in divorce and the crisis in child rearing continues.

What can we offer in this sea of knowledge that can help you experience a better marriage and contented, respectful, responsible children who will be successful in school and life? The answer is a *clear understanding* of God's purpose for marriage and family, the primary reasons people experience problems in these areas and practical things you can do to strengthen your marriage and family.

Join us as we explore the path God reveals and steps you can take to enjoy the universal dream of a happy, successful marriage and family.

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Marriage and Family: The Spiritual Significance

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God . . ." (John 1:12).

The hope for a happy, fulfilling marriage to the person we most deeply love is one of the most entrenched desires of men and women. Happily sharing our hopes, dreams, fortune and the breadth of life's experiences in the most intimate way is one of the most fulfilling endeavors of all.

A good marriage further blessed with happy, respectful, successful children who provide the same kind of grandchildren is the crowning touch of a good life.



Experience has shown time and again that these biblical guidelines for relationships and parenting are the ones that work best.

And what a life this is! What success! If possible, we'd all love to have this story be *our* story. This idealistic picture is a universal dream. Everyone wants the results. But not everyone wants to live the life that produces them.

From the beginning God revealed that marriage was a special union between a man and woman because, to put it bluntly, that was the way to have children. Sexual intercourse between a male and female united in marriage produced children within that family. Yet the benefits of traditional marriage extend beyond reproduction.

Studies continue to show that men and women generally live longer and happier lives when they are married to someone of the opposite sex. In these traditional unions, children likewise generally grow up more socially adept and financially successful than children who grow up in alternative arrangements.

There is definitely a strong social case to be made for traditional monogamous marriage between one man and one woman. Through the pages of this publication we will also see that there is an incontrovertible biblical case for traditional unions. Experience has shown time and again that these biblical guidelines for relationships and parenting are the ones that work best.

Are there any rules?

But before we get to these biblical instructions we must acknowledge that many people aren't sure whether God really exists or whether His instructions are relevant today.

Some believe that human beings came into existence by evolutionary forces, following blind natural selection and the survival of the fittest. This theory postulates that people are simply higher-level animals and that there are no spiritual laws to guide human conduct, no requirement that sexual relations be solely within marriage.

Experimenting from this perspective, or because they simply didn't want to follow the biblical instructions, men and women through the ages have tried many different sexual relationships including premarital sex, adultery, polygamy (one man with multiple wives), polyandry (one woman with multiple husbands), homosexuality and group marriages.

Today premarital sex, adultery and homosexual relationships have all gained greater acceptance—challenging and undermining traditional marriage. The assumption among many, including governments and judges legislating acceptance of all views and people regardless of their practices and lifestyles, is that all choices are equal—so people can do whatever they want. Sadly, this approach is presumed to be morally superior to all others.

Were we designed for marriage and family?

Yet with all the sexual experimentation, almost everyone wants the same good life, including children. It seems as though people were all psychologically wired to desire marriage and family.

But why are we like this? Is it possible that we were designed this way from the beginning by a Creator? What would have happened to the human race had men and women not been created with a desire for sexual activity that would ensure procreation, a longing for intimacy both emotionally and physically with another

person and a desire for offspring?

Was it pure chance that things worked out this way? Are we simply lucky? For those who have eyes to see, these inborn traits are simply additional indicators among many that all point to the inescapable fact that humanity was designed and crafted by God. The Bible explains that we were made in God's own image (Genesis 1:27)—meaning in our general appearance as well as with minds to think.

An important principle is also revealed here that is continued in marriage and family—that human life is patterned after spiritual, nonphysical, unseen realities. Just as human beings were made in the image of God, marriage and family are patterned after spiritual concepts. (To learn more about mankind's origin, request our free booklets *Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?* and *Life's Ultimate Question: Does God Exist?*)

God, the Designer of marriage and family

To understand the spiritual significance of marriage and family, we must turn to God, our Creator, to learn what He had in mind in making the human race.

While we could go to the first book of the Bible, Genesis, to learn about marriage and *how* God created the first human beings (something we will cover in greater detail later), we must go to other sections of God's Word to learn *why* He created us as we are.

When we turn to these passages, we learn of a plan that God had not only for Adam and Eve, the first human beings, but for all of humanity—every person who has lived or will yet live. We also find that human marriage and family reflect this plan, which was determined before the foundation of the world.

Shortly after Jesus Christ came to earth and lived as God in the flesh, one of His followers, John, wrote a book to prove to his contemporaries and humanity today that Jesus was indeed God.

In this work, John says of Jesus: "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become *children of God,* to those who believe in His name" (John 1:10-12, emphasis added throughout).

The phrase *"children* of God" tells us that God is creating *His own* family. Additional passages reveal this same astounding truth. In Hebrews 2:10 we find that Jesus was and continues to be involved in God's plan and purpose of "bringing many sons to glory."

Paul, another first-century writer of portions of the New Testament of the Bible, noted that human beings are indeed "the offspring of God" (Acts 17:28-29). This same author also wrote of "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole *family* in heaven and earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14-15).



Just as human families have children born to them who are part of their families, God initially created Adam and Eve and their progeny—all of us—to become part of His family.

God designed us to be part of His family

Paul also encouraged God's people at Corinth with His specific promise: "Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.' 'I will be a Father to you, and *you shall be My sons and daughters,* says the Lord Almighty'" (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).

Just as human families have children born to them who are part of their families, God initially created Adam and Eve and their progeny—all of us—*to become part of His family.* Physical families are thus a type of *God's own spiritual family.*

Continuing this theme, Revelation 21:7 adds, "He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and *he shall be My son."* These scriptures and others tell us that God's plan from the beginning was to first create people as temporary flesh and blood beings, subject to death, and then give us the opportunity to live forever as spirit beings in His eternal family. If we will respond to God in love and obedience, God offers us this great promise.

God eventually is going to make this offer to become part of His family to every human being. Explaining God's love for all His children, another follower, Peter, wrote: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, *not willing that any should perish* but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God doesn't want anyone to lose out on this opportunity of a lifetime—the opportunity for an eternal lifetime!

This is God's overall, transcendent purpose for creating humanity—to offer us the opportunity to become part of His eternal family, His own children. If we will repent and be baptized, we can receive this marvelous gift. When baptized, we receive God's Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)—something that sets us apart as His children. Paul, in Romans 8:14, explains that "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are *sons of God."*

Becoming children of the Father

God's great purpose of producing

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literal sons and daughters in His family has been in effect since before the foundation of the world. God is reproducing Himself, creating children who will possess His holy and righteous character and, in time, share eternal life with Him as spirit beings with His divine nature!

Of course, when we respond to God's command to repent and be baptized, we still live as physical human beings, not yet changed into spirit. To reassure newly baptized Christians, Paul likened this process of becoming children of God to the manner in the Roman world of his day by which one came to receive all the rights and privileges as a son and heir within a family.

In verse 15 Paul continues, "The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery leading you back into a life of fear, but a Spirit that makes us sons, enabling us to cry 'Abba! Father!'" (New English Bible). In addition to the promise of becoming God's sons, this verse shows that our relationship to God can become so close and personal that we refer to Him as our "Daddy! Father!"—the meaning of "Abba! Father!"

Paul goes on to explain in verse 17 that "since we are his children, we will share his treasures—for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too" (NLT).

In the Roman world of Paul's day, a father would declare his son to be fully his son and heir when the son reached a certain age of maturity in young adulthood. Before that declaration, the son was held in a very inferior position to his father. But when this coming of age was declared, the son would be legally invested with all the rights, powers and privileges of a son and heir of his father.

Paul refers to this process in Romans 8 (and Galatians 4, where he uses very similar language to make the same point). The process wasn't complete until the son reached this coming of age and received full rights and privileges.

Continuing this theme, Paul wrote in verse 23: "And even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us" (NLT).

Paul explains that our status now is like that of children who haven't reached that point of having all the full rights of sonship yet—though we will attain that status in the resurrection to immortality at Christ's return (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

God's inspiration of Paul to use this analogy underscores the reality and absolute guarantee God makes that we can indeed become His children, ultimately living forever in His family. God's promise of full rights of sonship will be bestowed at the resurrection or change from mortality to immortality, at which time we will be invested with all the powers and privileges of a divine son.

Echoing these same thoughts, John writes in 1 John 3:1-3: "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called *children of God!* Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, *now we are children of God;* and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him,* for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself."

The astounding truth revealed in this verse is that we, like Christ, will have life eternal in unimaginable power and glory! To get a glimpse of what our glorified appearance will be like, read Revelation 1:12-16, where Christ's glorified appearance is described. (To learn more about what it means to purify oneself to become a child of God, request our free booklets *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* and *The Road to Eternal Life.*)

Simply put, God's plan for humanity is a *family* plan. Now what about marriage?

Similar to the way a human family reflects God's plan to have a family, human marriage also reflects a spiritual relationship. Human marriage is modeled after the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church.

The spiritual implication of marriage

Similar to the way a human family reflects God's plan to have a family, human marriage also reflects a *spiritual* relationship. Human marriage is modeled after the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church.

Notice how Paul explains this concept. After discussing the responsibilities of husbands and wives and the relationship between them, Paul says: "This is a great mystery, *but I speak concerning Christ and the church.* Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband" (Ephesians 5:32-33).

What a beautiful example the relationship between Christ and the Church is! Paul explains that Christ loved the Church so much that He gave His life for her (verse 25). How could those of us in the Church ever doubt His love for us? How could we not respond to the things He asks us to do?

The understanding that marriage between a man and a woman is a type of the relationship between Christ and the Church is further understood by a vision Jesus Christ revealed to John at the end of the first century. John recorded this vision in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation.

After Jesus returns to take over the kingdoms of this earth and establish the Kingdom of God, He reveals that He is going to be involved in a very special marriage.

Here is how John recorded the vision: "'Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, 'Write: "Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!"'" (Revelation 19:7-9).

The faithful saints who have been part of the Church founded by Jesus Christ will become the Bride of Christ. Their righteous behavior is likened to fine, costly linen.

A happy human marriage thus gives us insight into a greater marriage—one that will truly last forever because both parties will be spirit. Similar and closely related to family, marriage also gives us a window of insight into God's love and plan for humanity. Because human marriages are patterned after this spiritual relationship, they can help us comprehend this present and future God-plane relationship.

Now that we have an understanding of God's view of what marriage and family represent, we can more closely examine the instructions He gave for marriage.

God's Instruction Manual for Marriage

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

When we buy a new appliance or tool, it's common to see on the outside of the box: "Some assembly required. Instructions inside." Of course, many of us don't bother with the instructions. We just put together the item as best we can. And sometimes that works. But if it doesn't, we have to go back and read the directions to find out what we did wrong. As the old saying goes, "If all else fails, read the directions."

When it comes to putting together a marriage, many couples have used the same approach. They do it without bothering to read the instructions. Sadly, the result is that many marriages aren't working. Husbands and wives find that they can't live together in peace. Because couples don't read or heed the instructions, marriages are failing at abysmally high rates.

During the latter part of the last century, divorce rates skyrocketed in many countries. The tragic result is that more and more children are being raised in single-parent homes.

In the United States, psychologist Robert Evans says: "Unprecedented numbers of people now delay marriage until their late twenties or their thirties or cohabit without marrying. When they do wed, the chances of their first marriage breaking up are between 40 percent and 50 percent; their second marriage, between 50 percent and 60 percent (barely more than half of American adults are currently married); when they cohabit, their chances of breaking up are even higher.

"More than one-quarter of all families with children are headed by single parents, overwhelmingly mothers. More than 40 percent of American children do not currently live with their biological fathers" (Evans, p. 61).

In Canada, it's currently expected that 37.7 percent of all marriages will end in divorce before the 30th anniversary (Behrendt Law Chambers Divorce and Family Law, Ottawa).

In Great Britain, reporters David Taylor and Lucy McDonald wrote: "More than one third of adults in Britain are destined never to marry, according to an official study of family life in the 21st century. The report, called *The Family,* predicts that by 2011, 39 per cent of men and 31 per cent of women in the population will never marry.

"However, the number of people living together will double in the next 20 years from the current figure of 12 per cent. So it is likely that within the next decade most children will be born outside marriage" ("Wave Goodbye to Marriage," *Daily Express,* Nov. 2, 2000).

We could bury ourselves in the statistics concerning the failure rates of marriages from around the world, but the overall picture would remain the same: Divorce, or the dissolution of marriage as some prefer to term it, plagues humanity in most every nation.

When it comes to putting together a marriage, many couples do it without bothering to read the instructions. Sadly, the result is that many marriages aren't working.

Faced with these numbing reports, many, particularly in Sweden and Denmark, are choosing to forego marriage and simply live together. Under these conditions, because there are no marriages, there are no divorces to report when couples break up. But these same broken relationships bring heartache to the adults and children alike—with the children especially suffering when they are separated from one of their biological parents.

Instructions for marriage

Recognizing the failure rate of so many marriages today, a logical person will examine the causes for the failures to see what might be done to save his or her relationship from a similar fate.

When we make the decision to examine the instructions, we also face the critical matter of *where to turn* for such instruction. If man is simply an animal and there is no God, then there are no divine directions! If there are no divine directions, logically, we'd want to get the best statistical information available from research so we could make decisions based on the greatest likelihood of happiness and success.

Yet some people don't want to know what works either. Apparently, they'd rather take their chances (and poor chances they are) on their own without any guidance whatsoever. Does that make sense?

We can be grateful, however, that the Bible does provide instruction on marriage. And not only that, the validity of this instruction is continually being backed up by sociological research. Do you want to know what these instructions are? Will you be willing to live by the guidelines? Or are you committed to the path of least resistance and willing to suffer the sure consequences of broken laws?

We each must choose what we will do. Remember, *no* choice is also a choice—usually a poor one. So what does God say? Where can we find His directions?

Background to the first marriage

When God created human beings, He made two "models"—one male, one female. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Reflecting on His creation, including making us male and female, Genesis 1:31 says, "Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was *very good*."

Sexuality in human beings was not

designed to just be okay; it was designed to be extremely good! And it is great and wonderful when we use this special gift of God in the way He intended. Sadly, many people do not respect their sexuality (or others') as they should. Through immoral sexual behavior they belittle what God intended to be a very special experience.

The account of the first marriage is recorded in Genesis 2. Here we read that God initially created Adam as the only human being. In mankind's earliest beginning, no Eve was to be found. "But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him" (verse 20). At this time Adam was single, isolated, the only human being anywhere.



An important aspect of marriage is leaving "father and mother," as God instructed, to establish a new family unit.

The Bible reveals that something was wrong with this scene. After God created Adam, He "put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it" (verse 15). So Adam had a responsibility, a job that surely proved to be fascinating for him. Adam explored and learned all about the world—animals, plants, the beautiful and intricate variations of God's creation. Not only was he learning, but God gave him the privilege of naming all the birds and animals and other living creatures (verse 19).

Whether Adam realized it or not, God knew something about him was incomplete. "And the LORD God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him'" (verse 18). Let's think for a moment about why it was not good for Adam to be alone. He, of all the physical living creation, was without a helper on his own level (verse 20).

Imagine how Adam must have felt when he observed that animals had their mates. Through his observations of the animal kingdom, in its maleness and femaleness, he was reminded that he was the lone human being on the planet. He was a male with no corresponding female.

God creates Eve

Single people often find themselves in lonely circumstances. They want friendships and feel the isolation of being alone. Because of situations all too common in our world, even married people can experience loneliness. God recognized that Adam had a problem and provided him the perfect solution—a woman to be his wife. God, as the source of every perfect gift (James 1:17), knew just how to form the woman.

God had made Adam from the ground. "Adam" is related to the Hebrew word *adamah,* which means "ground." But, instead of using more soil to make Eve, God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep and made Eve out of one of Adam's ribs (Genesis 2:21-22). The Hebrew word translated "made" is *banah,* usually translated as "build." God literally built Eve. Ever loving, kind and merciful, God took great delight in forming her, physically and mentally, to be the perfect complement for Adam.

Scripture emphasizes another aspect of the first marital relationship. Because God made Eve from one of Adam's ribs, an undeniable bond existed between Adam and Eve. This point was undoubtedly significant to Adam. His first recorded words regarding Eve were, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman [Hebrew *ishah*] because she was taken out of Man [Hebrew *ish*]" (verse 23). Adam recognized his link to this wondrous creature named Eve. She was part of him, and he was part of her.

The first marriage

This account does not tell us what Adam and Eve were thinking or how they felt while they got to know each other. But in the next two verses we learn the outline of marriage as established by God.

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (verses 24-25). Let's examine this outline more closely.

Leave one's father and mother

An important aspect of marriage is leaving "father and mother," as God instructed, to establish a new family unit. Adam and Eve did not have physical parents to leave, but future generations would need to apply this instruction. Honoring parents and seeking their advice is advisable, but newlyweds need to remember that they are a new family unit. Just because things were done a particular way in your family does not mean your spouse will want to do things the same way.

Two people must learn to work together in marriage, showing respect and love to each other. Such an approach follows the biblical principles of wives submitting to their husbands and husbands loving and honoring their wives (Ephesians 5:22, 25; 1 Peter 3:1, 7). Establishing family guidelines and traditions in an atmosphere of love and respect gives the newly married couple a foundation on which to build their lives.

Be joined together

Another principle from Genesis 2:24 is that a husband should be "joined" to his wife. Other translations say he should "cling" or "cleave" to her. Today we would say he should *bond* with her. Other than God, *she should be his highest commitment.*

The biblical text is clear that a man should build this special, close relationship with his wife. The idea of clinging to multiple partners is foreign to this account.

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Even though God allowed some men in the Old Testament to have several wives at the same time, such arrangements were not God's intent from the beginning. In listing the qualifications of bishops, or overseers, of the Church, 1 Timothy 3:2 makes it clear that such a man must follow God's instructions and "be blameless, the husband of one wife."

How can husbands and wives "join" with each other and make their relationships loving and lasting? Simple actions like hugs, kisses and pledges of love build and strengthen the bond God intended for marital partners. When husbands and wives constantly work at building their relationship, they find it easier to agree on workable options in settling family disagreements.

Some people think love is a magical, mysterious emotion that two people fall into or out of for no apparent reason. The truth is different: Loving relationships must be *nurtured.* They *require effort.* Love is care and consideration directed toward another person, not just an ethereal emotion over which we have no control.

However, the work involved in building and preserving the marital bond is well worth the time and effort. Husbands and wives who are committed to this process often describe their marriage partner as their best friend. This is simply another way of describing the kind of bond God desires for every marriage.

A marriage exhibiting this godly bond is characterized by two people who are willing to listen and talk about their differences or problems in a spirit of humility. If they cannot solve their problems on their own, they seek counsel because they value their relationship and don't want to lose it.

Studies confirm that measuring the level of conflict in a relationship can accurately predict whether a marriage will survive. People whose marriages are failing often say they have lost the desire for a special relationship with their mate.

Some marriage partners have rekindled this desire by asking God for a loving, humble attitude and doing things to show love to their mate, even when they don't feel like it. Many married people have found that the feelings they long for *return* when they start doing the things that bind two people together.

Become one flesh

The next principle from Genesis 2 says that a husband and wife shall *become one flesh;* that is, to enjoy an intimate sexual relationship with one another (verse 24; compare 1 Corinthians 6:16).

The steps that lead to a loving sexual relationship are vital to a successful marriage. While God wants those planning to marry to develop a deep and lasting friendship, He also teaches us that we should not indulge in sex until after the marriage ceremony. Regrettably, many people today fail to follow God's instructions in this matter. "Dating" someone now has often come to mean sleeping with him or her.

In Western societies the majority of young adults of both sexes engage in sexual intercourse before marriage. They take the supposedly enlightened view that sex is not part of a sacred, loving relationship but simply a biological function to be indulged in whenever both parties want. Many couples believe they should do this before marriage to know whether they are "sexually compatible," thinking this will improve the odds of their marriage succeeding.

However, studies have conclusively shown that when people live together and have sex before marriage, this action *increases* the likelihood that when they do get married, their marriage will fail.

God intended sex to be part of the marriage relationship and that it not take place outside of marriage. Only in the married state does God permit sexual relations (Hebrews 13:4; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 18; 7:2-5). His instructions for us to refrain from any kind of sexual activity before or outside of marriage are safeguards for the marriage relationship.

God intended sex to be an intimate experience that binds a husband and wife together. In marriage it certainly is, and following these instructions helps marriages survive and flourish.

But disregarding God's instruction carries a price. As we'll see in the next chapter, engaging in this intimate act with multiple partners before marriage dramatically lessens one's ability to form that kind of close and lasting bond after marriage. Since so many men and women engage in sex before marriage, it's no wonder so many find it difficult to build and maintain that kind of closeness after marriage.



Loving relationships must be nurtured. They require effort. Love is care and consideration directed toward another person, not just an ethereal emotion over which we have no control.

Also, since about a third of married men and a fourth of married women in the United States admit to having indulged in adulterous affairs, we shouldn't be surprised that approximately half of American marriages end in divorce. These are all part of the vicious and destructive cycle that ensues when we ignore God's direction regarding sex and marriage.

The way to reverse the trend of broken marriages and safeguard one's own relationship is simple: Accept and practice God's instruction to restrict sex to marriage. Such an approach shows honor and respect for the sexuality God has given us.

In this approach, sex is not cheapened or lowered to a common animal behavior. Instead it is an honorable act reserved for

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the most intimate human relationship of all, entered into with the most honorable intentions.

Not ashamed

The last principle from God's first guidelines for marriage reveals that Adam and Eve were naked but not embarrassed by their nakedness (Genesis 2:25). Since they were the only two people on the planet, privacy was not an issue. Sexuality was not and is not intrinsically dirty or shameful.

Within marriage a husband and wife should feel comfortable with each other's masculinity or femininity. But revealing too much of one's body to other members of the opposite sex outside of marriage invites the breaking of God's commands against lust and unlawful sexual relations.

Jesus warned that "whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Men and women alike need to control their minds and dress modestly to discourage sexual arousal and temptation outside of marriage.

Again, these actions show respect for our sexuality, respect for others and respect for God—the Author of these instructions. People who live by these guidelines are not prudish nor so mentally constricted that they do not enjoy sex when they *are* married.

Counselor Pam Stenzel, in her book *Sex Has a Price Tag,* writes: "Several years ago, researchers did a study on who was having the best sex. Conventional wisdom says that the people who are having the best sex are those who've had a lot of experience with a variety of partners, and who feel free from rules and regulations about sexual activity—in other words, the people who have sex whenever they want with whomever they want.

"Guess what? Conventional wisdom is wrong. According to the studies, married Christian women are having the best sex. That's right. Church women are the most satisfied group of sexually active people. I'm betting their husbands are pretty happy, too" (2003, p. 34). Put simply, those who follow God's instructions are the people enjoying sex the most and receiving the greatest satisfaction!

Godly leadership within marriage

In Paul's explanation that marriage is similar to the relationship between Christ and the Church, he also teaches us about leadership within the husband-wife relationship. Just as Jesus is the head of the Church, husbands are to be the leaders within their marriages: "For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church . . ." (Ephesians 5:23).

The way Jesus leads the Church is the way husbands should lead their wives. Jesus was and is ". . . the Savior of the body"—the Church (verse 23). He literally gave His life in love for the Church.

With this thought in mind, Paul instructed husbands in the way they should lead: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

"So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church" (verses 25-29).

When a leader exhibits the kind of love and commitment that Jesus showed the Church, it's easy to follow such a person. We know that this kind of leader always has our best interests at heart. Paul's teaching to husbands was that they needed to be the kind of leaders who would also be easy for their wives to follow.

Based on this expectation of husbands, Paul taught wives to "submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything" (verses 22-24).

Mutual submission in love

Not understanding the beautiful context and loving leadership these instructions are built on, some wives have refused to say that they will submit to their husbands. Sometimes men and women alike have mistakenly assumed these instructions were sexist and demeaning to women. But in the context of Paul's explanation, this instruction is most respectful of both sexes and represents an important key for happy marriages.

Husbands and wives who are continually fighting each other over authority and control experience a level of conflict and misery that often leads to divorce. Husbands and wives who fully and mutually submit themselves to the pattern Paul reveals usually find happiness and peace.

When genuine love and respect prevail in a marriage, the husband and wife learn much from each other. Each brings strengths into the relationship. For example, wives often excel in relationship-related needs. Husbands often have a strong orientation toward problem solving.

Husbands and wives who become aware early in their marriage that each brings strengths to some aspects of their relationship and discuss how they together can use those strengths to their mutual advantage gain the most from His instructions.

But mates who "beat each other over the head" with scriptures intended to *benefit* their relationship miss the point. Some abusive husbands, with little or no respect for their wives' feelings or contributions, will command them to submit, and some hotheaded wives retort that they'll submit only when their husbands start acting the way they should. The key here is that each person must do his or her part.

Each must apply the instruction given him or her. Although individuals can positively influence their mates by their unilateral actions, it is far better when both the husband and wife accept and live by God's instructions for their respective roles in marriage.

As one might expect, God's instructions for marriage have proven to be the best way to experience peace and happiness.

Studies show that couples who do not live together before marriage handle conflict more easily, communicate better and are less likely to divorce. They also show that a majority of men and women (60 percent) believe that the sexual relationship is more satisfying within the marriage union.

Considering known statistics (for example, that one of every four Americans will contract a sexually transmitted disease, a disorder preventable by practicing godly guidelines), it becomes obvious that God's teachings are superior to anything devised by man. God's way protects us and offers us the greatest opportunity for happiness.

Marriage is one of God's most wonderful gifts to mankind. It is a treasure worth working on, cherishing and sustaining. His instructions are as valid today as ever. To follow them is to make the honorable, godly choice. No shame comes from following God's instructions—only beneficial and lasting rewards. In the next two chapters we'll see what these principles look like in dating and marriage.

Dating Dos and Don'ts

"He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD" (Proverbs 18:22).

Everyone knows that in most cultures dating is a prelude to marriage. But what many don't know is that *how* we date greatly influences the kind of marriage we will have. The way we conduct ourselves while dating is an excellent indicator of the commitment we will have to a future relationship and an indicator of the level of happiness we will enjoy.

In this chapter we're going to look at the godly way to find a husband or wife. We'll contrast the modern dating culture with godly dating practices. We'll share with you some frank answers about the consequences of premarital sex and popular myths about sex. And finally, we'll share some advice given by people who have committed their lives to godly dating.

God said, "It is not good that man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18) and that finding a wife is "a good thing" (Proverbs 18:22). The same principle holds true for women who find loving and responsible husbands. Marriage is *good* for us!

Marriages are not only a basis for happiness, they offer us longer and better-quality lives. They are also the building blocks of communities, societies and, ultimately, civilizations. A society is only as strong as its marriages and families.

The foundation for a good marriage is laid long before the wedding ceremony. It is established when two people begin dating.

Dating: Preparation for marriage

As we grow up, "When can I begin dating?" is a question we commonly ask our parents. Though the Bible gives no specific age when dating is appropriate, wise parents will teach their maturing children sound biblical principles that will help them follow God's standards of behavior.

Parents should determine when their children are ready to date based on their maturity and readiness to accept responsibility for their actions. Before parents allow dating, they should teach and encourage their children to follow biblical standards rather than turning them loose to do whatever comes naturally.

When we first begin dating, it should be for the purpose of social development—that is, learning about the opposite sex and the many differences in human personality, values and temperament. When we have our educations and an established career, we are ready to date more seriously toward marriage.

Of course, even dating for marriage often begins on a social basis of getting to know another person. It then may proceed to the next level if both individuals are prepared and willing. Let's begin with young people who are ready to start dating socially.

Teaching young people God's standards before allowing them to date may sound terribly old-fashioned and restrictive. But look at it this way: Most governments do not allow people to drive automobiles until they demonstrate the knowledge and ability to do so in a safe manner. No responsible parent would put his or her adolescent child in an automobile in the middle of a busy highway without having given that child instruction on how to drive.

Dating in our world is not without its dangers either. Without proper instruction, too many youth become promiscuous, contract sexually transmissible diseases, experience unwanted pregnancies and choose wrong paths that seem enjoyable and okay at the time but lead to untold anguish (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). Youth need instruction early as to why and how biblical values can protect them from such suffering.

Without this instruction, many young people make mistakes that hinder their potential for having a happy marriage.

Choose Your Love Story

God's beautiful picture of sexuality is for us to refrain from having sex until we are married and then to only enjoy sex with the person to whom we are married (1 Corinthians 6:18; Exodus 20:14). Sex was designed by God to be a special pleasure bond shared between a husband and wife. By following God's instruction, this act would help husbands and wives grow closer together in an intimate bond, allowing them to have the most fulfilling sex possible and helping them avoid potential dissolution of their marriages in divorce.

It is a beautiful love story for two people to grow up as virgins—not having engaged in any kind of sexual gratification—and then on their wedding night present their bodies to each other saying, "I loved you so much I saved myself for you and you alone. I respected you before I ever met you. I respected God and His instructions. Now I'm ready to give myself completely and exclusively to you."

This is true love! This is the most beautiful love story of all! And it is the kind of start that can help a couple live happily ever after in a joyous marriage instead of ending in a heartbreaking divorce as so many do today.

But how often do modern songs and movies tell us this story of sexuality? Not often, if at all. Instead, sex today is cheapened and degraded into a casual act for people to experience prior to marriage—and even during marriage—with whomever they wish. It's assumed that to fully enjoy life, people should have sex with anyone they happen to like at the moment.

The modern "love story" of unrestrained sexual activity has people on their wedding night saying, "I have loved so many different people before I met you that I know we can have sex without any problem at all. After all, we've been doing it already. So tonight isn't really that special. And did I remember to tell you? I have a few STDs I'll be sharing with you. They are painful and impossible to cure. They'll be with us for life. But Baby, I really love you. At least right now I think I do and I'm willing to stay with you until someone better comes along."

Which love story would you rather experience? You aren't helpless. You do get to choose. The modern approach of so many is disrespectful of others, disrespectful of self, disrespectful of sex and disrespectful of God. With all this disrespect surrounding sex, it's no surprise that people are getting sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies and marriages that soon dissolve in failure.

Loving parents would never wish misery on their children, but leaving them ignorant is a sure path to heartache. A thorough understanding of God's standards for dating and marriage is one of the greatest blessings children can receive from their parents.

Some people, however, are far past that point, having already reached adulthood, married and divorced. Teaching young people proper behavior for dating is obviously ideal. But what about adults? Do the principles change? Because adults are older, does that give them license for more liberties than adolescents may take? Are all things appropriate for consenting adults?



The way we conduct ourselves while dating is an excellent indicator of the commitment we will have to a future relationship and an indicator of the level of happiness we will enjoy.

The Bible teaches that God's standards for dating apply to people of all ages. He does not have two sets of guidelines, one for adults and one for youth. Following the biblical laws is important regardless of one's age. And breaking God's laws is disastrous for people of all ages.

Modern standards of dating

To understand the difference between God's way and the world's, consider the dating practices common in Western countries.

Many assume that when people are dating, sexual intercourse is an appropriate demonstration of affection and a way to determine whether they are compatible. They believe that sex is simply a natural expression of love between two people and therefore the normal thing to do when individuals are "going together" or living together in an exclusive relationship. If the couple breaks up and the two start dating others, the common assumption is that they are then free to have sexual relations with their new partners.

This practice of serial monogamy—being sexually active with only one other person at a time—is widely considered to be a suitable way to date and find a future spouse.

In the United States, by the mid-1990s about two thirds of married women in their 20s had lived with their future spouses before getting married (Robert Moeller, "America's Morality Report Card," *Christian Reader,* November-December 1995, pp. 97-100). This dubious practice is followed by all too many young adults in the Western world. Sadly, most don't know the price they will pay for such conduct.

One of the first penalties of serial monogamy is emotional suffering. The sexual act creates an emotional bond between a man and a woman. When a couple breaks up after having had sexual relations, there is inevitable pain because of the severing of this bond. To ease that pain, the young man and woman typically move quickly to establish a similar relationship with a new partner—repeating the same mistake.

As people move on to one sexual relationship after another, not only do they have to deal with the pain of these broken bonds, they establish the habit of short-term sexual relationships—a way of thinking that is more often than not carried over into marriage. No wonder those who have sex prior to marriage have more divorces than those who don't.

Of course, most of those who have sex prior to marriage say their partners should disclose any sexually transmissible diseases (STDs) before intercourse so appropriate protection can be employed. By using contraceptives to help avoid disease and unwanted pregnancies (something that doesn't always work), couples believe that they are practicing "safe sex." These practices are so widely accepted that many educational systems, from middle school through university level, provide free contraceptives to students, no questions asked.

Although this approach may appear to be logical, it doesn't measure up to God's standards—which when practiced are *always* safe. The truth is that these so-called "safe sex" practices are not working very well at all.

Even though young people are receiving much education about sex, this education is not producing "safe sex." Instead many young people are contracting STDs, some of which will be with them for the rest of their lives. The epidemic is so bad that in the United States, one in four sexually active teens contracts an STD every year (Stenzel, p. 67).

Paying the price for passion

When we fail to follow God's laws regarding sexual activity, we always pay a penalty. The physical penalties are well documented.

Today more than 25 sexually transmissible diseases afflict people around the world, a number that is steadily growing. Some STDs are caused by bacteria and can be treated with antibiotics—*if* they are detected. Others, like AIDS, are caused by viruses—meaning there is no cure for the disease.

Those who contract a viral STD such as human papillomavirus (HPV), commonly known as genital warts, will have it for life. This is the most common STD

Stockbyte

in America. Over *a third* of all sexually active unmarried people are infected with it, many of them unaware that they carry the virus.

Sadly, most Americans don't take the threat of STDs seriously. The Centers for Disease Control reports: "Despite the fact that a great deal of progress has been made in STD prevention over the past four decades, the United States has the highest rates of STDs in the industrialized world. The rates of STDs are 50-100 times higher in the US than in other industrial nations, even though rates of gonorrhea and syphilis have recently been brought to historic lows.

"In the United States alone, an estimated 15.3 million new cases of STDs are reported each year. Despite the fact that STDs are extremely widespread and add billions of dollars to the nation's healthcare costs each year, most people in the United States remain unaware of the risk and consequences of all but the most prominent STD—HIV, the virus that causes AIDS" (CDC National Prevention Information Network).

To help people understand just how likely it is to get an STD in the United States, Pam Stenzel writes: "Have you ever heard of Russian Roulette? It's a 'game' where one bullet is loaded into a multi-chambered gun. One holds the gun to one's head, pulls the trigger, and hopes to walk away alive.

"Compare playing Russian Roulette with a six-shooter to having sex. You're more likely to contract an STD from sexual contact than you would be to kill yourself with the gun. If someone said to you, 'Hey, how about joining us for a round of Russian Roulette?' I bet you'd say, 'Are you crazy!? Not even an idiot would do something that stupid.' And yet teens continue to have sex, thinking that if they can avoid pregnancy and AIDS, they'll be fine" (Stenzel, p. 68).

Bad decisions not limited to teens

Of course, it's not just teens that are making stupid decisions. Adults are too.

While some do beat the odds in the sense that they have sex outside of marriage and don't contract an STD, these people can still suffer emotional pain for doing so. People who have had premarital or extramarital sex report a host of conse-

Handling Those Touchy Situations

To help you establish godly standards, consider the following advice given by a panel of young Christians between the ages of 20 and 30. Some are married and some aren't. While the names are changed to preserve each person's privacy, the comments are genuine.

Should you hold hands?

Bill, 28 and married to Sue, said he didn't have a rule about holding hands before he was married but realized that "those first thrilling physical touches when one is young can often open the door to premature intimacy and big life mistakes."

Continuing, he remarked: "If I could do it all over again, I would refrain from hand-holding until becoming engaged (and then make sure the engagement was brief enough so as to minimize any potential problems). Individual tolerances to holding hands or other touching may vary, so there's no hard-and-fast rule. But I would have done better erring on the side of strict conservatism in this area."



Kate, 28, who is married to Luke, wrote: "We didn't hold hands till almost a year after we started dating. We started dating a year or more after we had known each other as friends with the understanding that we were potentially interested in marriage and wanted to spend time together to find out.

"When it came time, Luke actually *asked* me if he could hold my hand. Looking back, holding hands at that point was a good thing, even though I questioned it at one point because it became a distraction for me for a short time—either wanting him to hold my hand, or having a difficult time reigning in my thoughts when he did. However, he explained to me that he felt like it was important that there be a physical means of communicating with each other and expressing the closeness that we felt. I think that he was right.

"One thing that both of us learned was that in the lead-up to marrying a person, anything has the potential to be physically exciting and distracting. In the midst of the excitement, you have to take your thoughts captive and make decisions about enjoying emotional closeness and small amounts of physical contact based on whether the relationship is deep and solid enough to benefit from these added dimensions, or whether it will only serve to cover up a lack of real communication. For Luke and me, holding hands was a positive thing that physically manifested some of the feelings and ideas that we had already verbalized."

What about hugs?

Once you become good friends with someone, it seems as though hugs become part of the way many people say good-bye before long intervals apart or hello when they reunite. While the majority of this panel felt these kinds of short hugs were appropriate, they did offer a few cautions about regular and lengthy hugging with the opposite sex.

Sarah said: "I think the thing is, the longer two people of the opposite sex hug, the more tendency there would be to kiss. So if that sort of thing is affecting your mind, where it's like you've been hugging this person and all of a sudden you just have to kiss them, then uh-oh! You'd better rethink your actions, because the godly way is to go in the direction of 'flee immorality,' not see how close you can come to it!"

Bill agreed with Sarah, saying: "Hugs between two people who know they are attracted to one another should be brief. Hugs involve even more physical contact and can be misused if one is not careful or has a weakness in this area."

Kate said of the time prior to her engagement to Luke: "We got into the habit of giving each other a brief hug coming and going sometime during the first year of dating. It was good to acknowledge the way we cared for each other with something warmer than a 'Hi.'

"It felt a bit stiff to us both as we grew to care for each other more, but anytime you are holding back feelings for the right time, things can feel awkward. We liked to sit close to each other, but it was not until a few months before we were engaged that we sat together with his arm around me. At first, we only did this in my parents' home when they were near. A little later we also sat like this when we were alone as well—often in the context of a conversation that was on a deep emotional level, and especially after we were engaged and began talking through more personal things. We didn't 'bear hug' until a month before we were engaged, and we were careful with that."

Photos (from left): Photos.com, PhotoDisc

quences including worry that they will be caught, worry that they will get an STD, worry that pregnancy will result and guilt.

In addition to these things, there is always that first sexual experience when one ceases to be a virgin. Who better to have this first experience with than one's husband or wife for life?

One's virginity can only be given away once. Once given, it can't be taken back. After marriage, limiting all sexual activity to one's spouse also helps a husband and wife cherish each other. Sex outside of marriage destroys or badly hurts the relationship.

These consequences are the modern fulfillment of the scripture that says: "Avoid immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body,

What to Say When Things Are Going Too Far

- "I don't want to do that. I don't think that's a good idea."
- "I don't believe in doing this before marriage. Why do you?"
- "Whoa—We need to slow it down."
- "Stop that!"
- "I gotta go. Excuse me." (Then leave the room immediately.)
- Back away and say, "That is too much."
- "I'm flattered that you feel that way, but I think if you and I both take a step back, we will see that this is not a good idea and is against God's law."
- "I'm not ready for that yet, but I may be one day. Let's take it easy on that stuff until then, okay?"



And kissing?

Kissing, according to our panel, is definitely more intimate than holding hands or hugging and should be avoided prior to engagement. After you are engaged, a brief kiss seems appropriate.

As Sarah put it: "I know it is hard to resist kissing someone, especially if they mean a lot to you, or are very attractive. But you have to remember, if God hasn't picked this person for you, your lips are on another person's mate. If you were married already and someone kissed your wife or husband, you'd be pretty mad!"

"One can argue that holding hands and hugging can be shared in a more casual and 'harmless' way," said Bill. "However, mouth-to-mouth kissing is actually one of the beginning stages of sexual intimacy and is an easy way to fast-forward to more explicit sexual contact. Young, single people should avoid mouth-to-mouth kissing at all costs except maybe just prior to marriage (even then they must be careful to avoid lustful behavior)."

Explaining how they first kissed, Kate said: "I had told Luke what a kiss meant to me as we started to grow closer. He honored that understanding and never took advantage of any vulnerable moment. I respected him deeply for that and still do, even as I sometimes wanted him to kiss me. To me, a kiss meant, 'I love you. I want to be your husband.'"

Continuing, she recalled: "I had asked my mother when I was young if it was all right to kiss before you were married. She said that it was as long as you both understood what that kiss meant. As I thought about that, I began to feel that I didn't want the memory of any man's kiss except my husband's, and that for me a kiss was a seal of love and possession. Holding hands is like that to an extent—it implies exclusivity and mutual ownership to a degree.

"To me, a kiss on the lips between a man and a woman implies this ownership in a sexual way that is beautiful and powerful. Luke asked if he could kiss me a month before we were engaged. Because I knew his character and because he was aware of what that meant to me, I knew that he wanted to marry me. We did have to limit our kisses, because it is fun and intoxicating—meant to lead to more. We limited our kisses to coming and going so that they did not take over our time together, or prevent our growth in communication. This was a good decision. It did get harder and harder to finish our good-byes!"

More?

Physical contact that is more intimate than the above is often described as petting. According to our panel, this category of conduct clearly exceeded the safe boundaries Christians should maintain.

As for petting before marriage, Kate wrote: "With exceptions only of his hands on my hair or face and vice versa, we didn't go here. I think that the temptations would not have been fair to either of us. As well, we had resolved that we did not want to feel guilt for anything that we did with or to each other in this area, so we kept away."

Concluding advice

Summarizing her thoughts, Sarah said: "The decision to stay totally pure before marriage is hard because of all the feelings we have, but try to look at it in a larger sense. Do you want to be guilty of defiling someone else's special person? Do you want to feel guilty that you are defiled? Do you want your mate to have been close to sex with lots of others before you? The Golden Rule is 'do unto others as you'd have them do unto you.' So put it into practice, and not only will you be happier for it, but God will bless you!"

Sometimes being godly is the most challenging when you meet the person you plan to marry. According to Cheryl: "When I did find the person that I felt I could marry someday, it was then that I had to be very careful. Small things can turn into big things very quickly. Comfort zones are quickly reached and expanded when you are with someone you love and trust. My best advice is not to date exclusively until you find that person. Group dates with trusted friends can be a very fun way to get to know and spend time with someone you are interested in but with less pressure or temptation."

Continuing, she said: "When you are on a date with someone alone, it really helps to be careful not to put yourself in a situation where you are alone and unseen for a long period of time. If you stick to lighter environments, you don't have to come up with reasons to be uncomfortable if your determined limits don't match up with his."

Offering concluding advice to singles about dating relationships, Bill said: "Don't allow yourself to be alone, or at least alone in situations where sexual contact is possible and the privacy necessary to engage in it exists—like parked cars, in a house or secluded room alone, in the woods or a wooded park and so on. The temptation may just be too great. Think of physical contact the same way you might think about virginity. Once the line is crossed, whether having held hands, kissed or slept together, there's no going back. You cannot reverse what is already done." (You can of course stop what you're doing if you've already gone too far, but it is always harder to turn back from such things once you've started.)

Kate put it this way: "Know yourselves and set limits wisely with this knowledge. Don't let physical contact take over or lead in communication—it can feel good, and when this happens you may not know what it meant to either of you in the end. Use common sense. Don't let feelings control your actions. Acknowledge feelings without serving them, or you will make miserable mistakes. Don't set too long of an engagement period—as it gets harder to refrain from premarital intimacy after you are more committed. But take enough time to talk about things that were too personal before. Physical contact is powerful. God made it so. Respectfully use it in the way He intended."

Popular Sexual Myths

Given all the confusion that exists today regarding sex, it's important for us to understand some of the most common but mistaken ideas about this subject. Here are a few of today's myths:



- ***"People can't help falling in love."*** We may be attracted to someone at first sight but true biblical love is something that grows. It isn't selfish and is based on respect and admiration for another person's character and godly attributes (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).
- ***"People have to engage in sex."*** No one ever died from *not* having sex. Waiting to awaken sexual activity at the right time (after marriage) is important (Song of Solomon 3:5).
- ***"If you've already had sex, your life is ruined."*** God always offers us the opportunity to repent, to admit that we've sinned and to then live properly. The advice we are given under these circumstances is the same Jesus gave the woman caught in the act of adultery: "Go and sin no more" (John 8:11).
- ***"Everybody's doing it."*** According to songs and movies one would think this is true. But it isn't. Even in the United States more young people graduate from high school today not having had sex than those who have. And the number of those abstaining is increasing.

At What Age Should We Marry?

The Bible does not indicate that there is a specific age at which it suddenly becomes appropriate for us to marry. Just as everyone matures at a different rate, determining the best time for marriage will vary according to each individual.

Some important things to consider before marriage include whether one's education is complete and whether one has job skills or a career to support a family, and whether one is sufficiently mature to handle the responsibilities that come with marriage. Factors including one's overall maturity, culture, education and employment must all be considered. Young people today are generally in their mid-20s before they are ready for marriage.

but *the immoral person sins against his own body"* (1 Corinthians 6:18, New American Bible).

What people seem to forget is that there is no need for anyone to experience these consequences! The way we can be absolutely guaranteed to not contract an STD or suffer emotional anguish is for marriage partners to have avoided all sex before marriage and, once married, to have sex with only each other—no one else. This formula works perfectly—every time!

History repeats itself

Historical records from the ancient city of Corinth reveal that in the heart of the Roman Empire, the most technologically advanced civilization of its day, the sexual values of the first century were similar to modern concepts of dating today. Standards were so skewed that sexual relations with temple prostitutes were not looked upon as scandalous but considered an appropriate form of worship.

Through the apostle Paul, God taught the Corinthians a much better way. After saying that sexual immorality is a sin against our own bodies, Paul said: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit . . . and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

How could Paul dare to address others' private behavior? He was bold because

Is Homosexuality Acceptable to God?

The acceptance of homosexuality as an equally valid lifestyle is rapidly growing in Western culture. Yet God tells us that sex was designed for only one relationship—within marriage, exclusively between a man and a woman. Because homosexual activity, premarital sex and adultery are all outside of marriage, all are violations of God's instructions. These things are all sins, and those who commit these sins must repent of them.

The Bible condemns homosexual practices in several places such as Genesis 19:1-25, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, and Judges 19:1-25. These scriptures refer to homosexual acts as something that should not be done and as evil in the eyes of God.

In the New Testament, Romans 1:24-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 refer to homosexuality in the same way. The passage in Romans includes a specific prohibition of both male and female homosexual involvement. The Bible nowhere makes positive or approving statements about homosexuality. The only two options affirmed for adult Christians are heterosexual marriage or abstinence.

The vast majority of academic and biblical scholars agree that the Bible prohibits homosexual activities. Nearly all of today's translations of the Bible are also in agreement that God prohibits homosexual practice.

Contesting God's instructions, some homosexuals argue that God made them the way they are and that He therefore must approve of homosexuality. Such reasoning is inherently flawed for several reasons.

First, God made all of us with free moral agency; we choose what we will think, believe and do. We are not robots incapable of making our own choices or governing our own behavior. Second, one's environment has been proven to have a great impact on a person's developing sexuality. Moreover, studies of identical twins where one twin is homosexual and the other isn't prove that homosexuality isn't governed by genetic makeup. These factors show that homosexuals are made, not born.

Third, regardless of any conditions that may predispose a person to homosexuality, we are all expected to make moral decisions regardless of our circumstances. When we determine to follow God's instructions, we must live up to all His standards. God doesn't permit us to rewrite His rules simply because we are naturally inclined to premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality or any other sin.

And speaking of the way we human beings are made, the Bible reveals that we all (regardless of our sexual orientation) have a predisposition to sin. We have minds that from childhood are set against God and His ways (Jeremiah 17:9). As a result, we all sin (Romans 3:23). The challenge for each of us in responding to God is to repent of our sins—to change our lives, with His help, in conforming to His standards (Romans 12:1-2). When we commit our lives to God, we can change our lives.

It's encouraging to understand that there is clear biblical evidence that God

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he understood that God approves sexual relations only within the marriage relationship (Genesis 2:24; Hebrews 13:4). Sexual relations in any other situation were and are immoral.

Writing to Church members in Thessalonica, Paul addressed relationships between members of the opposite sex even more directly. Urging the brethren to live their lives in a way pleasing to God (1 Thessalonians 4:1), he wrote: ". . . This is the will of God, that you should be holy: you must abstain from fornication; each one of you must learn to gain mastery over his body, to hallow and honour it, not giving way to lust like the pagans who know nothing of God; no one must do his fellow-Christian wrong in this matter, or infringe his rights.

"As we impressed on you before, the Lord punishes all such offences. For God called us to holiness, not to impurity. Anyone therefore who flouts these rules is flouting not man but the God who bestows on you his Holy Spirit" (verses 3-8, Revised English Bible).

The custom and practice of dating —which leads to marriage—should be conducted with honor. It should not be devalued into an excuse for sexual gratification. God expects us to enter marriage as virgins. This approach shows respect for God, our bodies, our future spouse and the divine institution of marriage.

God's way is the best for making marriage work. Sociologists have found that God's standard for dating is the one that produces marriages that last.

According to the *Journal of Marriage and the Family:* "After analyzing cohabitation and marriage patterns among some 13,000 adults, . . . sociologists have concluded that couples who live together before marriage experience higher levels of marital conflict and do not communicate as well. Such couples were less committed to marriage and saw divorce as more likely than those who had not cohabited prior to marriage" (Vol. 54, 1992).

Dating for sociability

How can concerned parents counteract pressure on their children to take part in immoral dating practices?

The first step, as noted earlier, is to teach them godly principles of dating and friendship. When their teens are ready, many families have found group dating (three or more people attending an activity together) to be a good way for youths to enter this stage of life.

Since teenagers are generally not ready for marriage—because of immaturity and the need for educational and occupational training—some of the pressures and temptations of one-on-one dating can be avoided through group dates. Social development and learning to have fun in the company of the opposite sex in a safe environment can be healthy experiences for teens.

Dating for marriage

When two mature people begin dating each other with an eye toward marriage, they must consider many things. What values does the other person hold? Does he believe in God? Does she obey God? What is this person's background, personal standards and values? What are his preferences, dislikes, character and personality? Will this person be a complementary match? Can I love and respect her?

Often in modern dating little thought is given to a potential partner for life—other than whether the two enjoy their sexual activity. Yet when two people refrain from the emotionally charged arena of sexual relations as God instructs, they can much more rationally consider the values and traits of a potential mate.

Finding a mate with similar religious values is an especially important consideration. The ancient nation of Israel repeatedly lost its spiritual moorings when its citizens intermarried with people with different religious convictions and practices (Numbers 25:1-3; Nehemiah 13:23-26). Marrying within one's faith is still just as important.

Ideally children should have two parents who believe, practice and teach the same religious principles. When children have parents with different values, they are confused. Even if children are not involved, clashes between two competing value systems can be painful.

Through bitter experience, many wish that when they were dating they had followed the apostle Paul's advice

can change the life of a person involved in homosexual behavior. In 1 Corinthians 6, the apostle Paul is addressing men and women in the church at Corinth. He lists many forms of behavior—including homosexual acts—that will keep a person from being in God's Kingdom (verses 9-10). Then Paul makes this statement: "And that is what *some of you were.* But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (verse 11, New International Version).

Paul apparently knew former homosexuals in the church at Corinth. So the message that homosexuality can be changed is not new. Homosexuals have been experiencing change since the Bible was written. God's Word takes the approach of hating the sin but loving the sinner (compare John 3:16).

What is the responsibility of one who wants to be a Christian but struggles with a deeply ingrained attraction to members of his or her own sex? The Scriptures say that person is obligated to control his sexual desires in the same way that heterosexual single adults must exercise self-control. In other words, he or she must refrain from giving in to his or her lusts.

The Bible instructs us to repent and come out of sin. Homosexual practices, like any other sin, need to be repented of and overcome. A practicing homosexual would do so by acknowledging that homosexuality is wrong and by ceasing to live a homosexual lifestyle or place himself in a situation where he or she might be tempted to engage in such behavior.

Recognizing that sin begins in the mind (James 1:13-15), a person struggling with this or other sexual sins must strive to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5, NIV). Such an individual can be a true Christian even though he or she may be engaged in a lifelong struggle to resist returning to homosexual practices.

It is also important to understand the difference between homosexual orientation and homosexual lust and behavior. The orientation is not a sin but the lust and behavior is. While there are many people in our society today who reject God's instruction on this subject, there are many others with homosexual orientations who are coming out of this lifestyle to live in accordance with God's instruction.

As resources for those wishing to overcome homosexuality and obey God, we recommend reading *Reparative Therapy of Male Homosexuality* by Dr. Joseph Nicolosi and *Anchor* magazine (www.anchorhelp.com), a publication dedicated to helping Christians struggling with homosexuality.

A book entitled *Love Won Out* by John and Anne Paulk can also be encouraging. It is the true story of how, with God's help, two people were able to leave homosexuality and find each other. For those seeking help in leaving the homosexual lifestyle, several organizations can be contacted:

Exodus International
P.O. Box 540119
Orlando, FL 32854
(407) 599-6872
www.exodus-international.org

Desert Stream
P.O. Box 17635
Anaheim Hills, CA 92817
(714) 779-6899
www.desertstream.org

His Heart Ministries
12162 E. Mississippi
P.O. Box 12321
Aurora, CO 80011
(303) 369-2961

against being "unequally yoked together" with an unbeliever or someone of different religious beliefs (2 Corinthians 6:14; compare 1 Corinthians 7:39). There is wisdom in selecting a mate who is compatible in the religious, philosophical and ethnic dimensions, among others.

Men's and Women's Vulnerabilities

When it comes to temptations to have sex, men and women, in general, face different challenges. Speaking for men, Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker write: "We have a visual ignition switch when it comes to viewing the female anatomy" (*Every Man's Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time,* 2000, p. 57).

The godly answer for men is to control what they view. Recognizing this male trait, Jesus taught that "whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

To guard against this vulnerability, Job said, "I made a solemn pact with myself never to undress a girl with my eyes" (Job 31:1, The Message). Godly men need to avoid pornography and looking at women with sexual desire.

Writing to women, Shannon Ethridge explains: "While a man's battle begins with what he takes in through his eyes, a woman's begins with her heart and her thoughts. A man must guard his eyes to maintain sexual integrity, but because God made women to be emotionally and mentally stimulated, we must closely guard our hearts and minds as well as our bodies if we want to experience God's plan for sexual and emotional fulfillment" (*Every Woman's Battle: Discovering God's Plan for Sexual and Emotional Fulfillment,* 2003, p. 13).

Continuing, Ethridge says that these differences explain "why it's said that men give love to get sex and women give sex to get love." Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (NIV). Godly women must refrain from giving away their hearts until it is appropriate for them to do so in marriage.

Of course, God is always pleased to give us the wisdom we need when we ask (James 1:5).

As two people consider marriage, if they are wise they will also seek premarital counseling. Such counsel can help couples understand their strengths, weaknesses and differences *before* marriage. In addition to an objective review, they can learn communication and relationship skills that will help them in the future.

Although the decision to marry is a personal one, this kind of information can help couples make wiser choices about whom they marry. For those who choose to proceed with marriage, insights gained through premarital counseling can lay a foundation for a relationship that will last.

Physical contact before marriage

Biologically, God created us to respond to skin-to-skin contact with someone to whom we are attracted. Holding hands, hugging, kissing or other similar contact can be exciting.

But is such contact good, upright and moral? Is it in our best interest to engage in these practices before marriage?

How does one decide? For those who have adopted the standards of behavior endorsed by so much of today's popular culture, these are stupid questions. In fact, they are nonquestions—meaning they just aren't asked. When people believe it is okay to have any kind of sex with any other person before or outside of marriage, a little (or a lot of) touching doesn't really mean anything.

Consider the blockbuster movie *Titanic.* In this movie, two young people meet, fall in love and then slip away to a private place to have sex—ignoring the uncomfortable fact that one of them is engaged to someone else.

Even though current statistics from the Centers for Disease Control show that the majority of high school students in the United States don't have sex, many movies present scenes like this as the norm for young people. The way it unfolds is true to life. It all starts with physical contact—touching, hugging and kissing. And then comes full sexual intercourse. But this goes against what the Bible teaches.

As we've already seen in Genesis 2:24, God explains how and when a sexual union between a man and a woman should take place: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

"One flesh" means to have sexual intercourse (see 1 Corinthians 6:16) and, according to God's instructions, this is to take place after a man and woman have been joined together in marriage. Having sex prior to marriage is immoral, and according to God's Word, we are supposed to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18). *Flee* means to run away from or avoid. So we're supposed to run away from premarital sex and things that could entice us to be immoral.

An important point to note in God's instruction is that abstinence doesn't have to be forever. We simply must wait until we are married. Then, God says, sex is good (Hebrews 13:4). Because abstinence has been described in such negative terms, some educators are now choosing to use the word *postponement* to describe the process of delaying sex until marriage.

How to decide

Many of you reading this have already decided to wait to have sex until you are married. Some have also decided that they are going to stop having sex prior to marriage. That's great! These are good decisions. But what about touching? Are you going to hug, kiss, hold hands or more?

While the Bible doesn't specifically address these areas, it does clearly say that we aren't to have sex before marriage (1 Corinthians 6:18) or to even lust after another person (Matthew 5:28). Love should not be stirred up or awakened until the appropriate time (Song of Solomon 2:7, New Revised Standard Version).

Years of human experience show that these types of touch often lead to lustful desire and sex. Regrettably, many young people have engaged in these forms of physical contact and then lost their virginity because their emotions overwhelmed their sense of judgment. They just couldn't stop because it felt too good. Of course, adults are similarly affected by physical contact.

So how can we decide what we will do? Some have asked, "Just how far can a Christian go without sinning?" The time to make decisions about physical contact is before we get in a touchy situation. Making a decision on the fly with no forethought is a recipe for going too far. (For more information, see "Handling Those Touchy Situations," beginning on page 12.)

Planning for sexual happiness

As individuals, we choose whether we will live sexually pure lives or whether we will ignore the instructions that lead to happiness and satisfaction. Making a commitment to parents, friends and God to be sexually pure in word, thought and deed is an important first step in living a full, complete, sexually happy life.

We can determine that we will not use filthy language of any kind—including the type that degrades sex. We can also

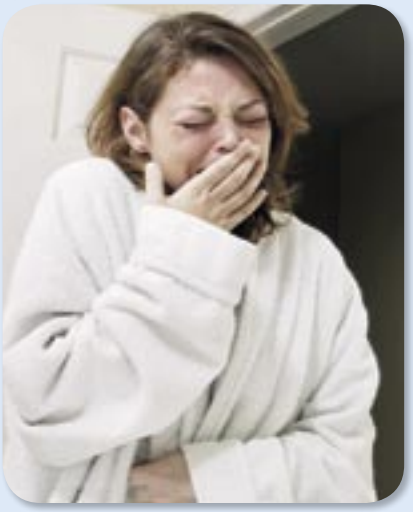
determine that we will not watch movies with inappropriate sexual content or listen to songs with sexually explicit lyrics (because they can and do influence us).

We can determine that we won't bow to peer pressure to go along with those who disrespect sex. We can determine that we are willing to be mocked for our beliefs and that we won't succumb. We can choose to associate primarily with friends who share our convictions. And we can make it our daily practice to pray to God for strength to honor Him in the way we live our lives. All of these things will help us live an abundant life (John 10:10).

As we've seen, God intends for dating and marriage to be high-class, honorable experiences. Treat sex as God's honorable gift to be awakened only in marriage, and you can reap the sweet reward of a happy, godly life.

What If You've Made a Mistake?

When it comes to sex, people make mistakes—both premarital and extramarital. Sometimes after making a sexual mistake, people will reason that since they've already committed the sin, they may as well continue doing so. This is faulty thinking because continuing to practice premarital sex or adultery perpetuates one's sin and can lead to a seared, unresponsive conscience. The biblical way to cleanse one's conscience is to *repent*—that is, stop breaking God's law.



Because sex is enjoyable and because an emotional bond is created between two people through this act, breaking off an unlawful sexual relationship can be difficult. Here are a few points to keep in mind if you need to end or have recently ended a sinful relationship:

Repent. To repent means to stop what we are doing wrong and to change direction. It also includes admitting our sin to God and asking for His forgiveness. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Repentance is mandatory for being forgiven.

Have courage to do what is right. God respects people of courage who do what He says, and He promises us strength when we do. Psalm 31:24 says, "Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all you who hope in the LORD." Ask God for the courage you need as you cease your wrong conduct. Strive to do what is right and ask for God's help at the same time because "whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:22).

Accept God's forgiveness. When we repent, God not only removes our sin from us, He no longer thinks of us as having committed it (Psalm 103:12; Hebrews 8:12). While penalties may remain (loss of virginity, an STD, or a temporarily broken heart), God forgives us completely when we repent. Believe God—not your unstable emotions!

"Sin no more." This is what Christ told both a man and a woman who had committed sins (John 5:14; 8:11). To follow this instruction, one may need to change habits and, in some cases, even friends. Being accountable to God through daily prayer and Bible study as well as attending worship services every Sabbath are excellent means to fulfilling Christ's command. Hearing God's Word regularly at Sabbath services will also increase your faith (Romans 10:17).

Though it is always hard to leave sinful conduct because of the temporary pleasure associated with it (Hebrews 11:25), doing so is well worth the effort. Remember God's promise in Proverbs 11:18: "He who sows righteousness will have a sure reward."

Is Abortion the Answer to Unwanted Pregnancy?

Many people today consider abortion to be a woman's right to control her body—specifically her reproductive rights. Reflecting this perspective, many countries around the world permit abortion. Yet there is also much dissent over this supposedly enlightened practice.

In the United States, the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision sparked a huge controversy. No issue since slavery has so divided the people of the United States. The two opposing views on this issue are generally called "pro-life," meaning those who support the rights of the unborn, and "pro-choice," for those who say a woman should have control over her own body, even if it means terminating the life of the unborn.

Many who favor allowing abortion have argued that abortions should be safe, legal and rare. Yet statistics show they are anything but rare. In the United States alone, some 3,700 babies are aborted every day, amounting to over 1.3 million per year and more than 45 million since the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision. Statistics also say that 93 percent of abortions occur *not* because of serious potential health problems or rape or incest (a primary reason "pro-choice" advocates give for abortion), but because of social factors. The child is either unwanted or inconvenient.

The biggest area of debate in the abortion question hinges on when life begins. Those who favor abortion argue that it doesn't begin until birth or sometime near then, when the child could be viable on his or her own. Others point out that at the moment of conception a unique genetic package comes into existence that contains everything that person will become—from height, size of feet and color of eyes, to intelligence and basic personality.

While the Bible does not mention the word abortion, there are indications that God views the unborn as individuals. He told the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). God indicates He knew Jeremiah as a person and designated him for a special job extremely early in the gestation period. This passage certainly implies personhood for the unborn, and God expressly forbids murder in the Sixth Commandment.

Additionally, Job said this about other people: "Did not He who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same One fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:15). Job understood God to be at work in the process of human development in the womb.

God views human life as very valuable and the verses above indicate He views life as beginning at conception. So while He doesn't mention the modern issue of abortion in the Bible by name, these and other passages indicate that God would label abortion as a sin.

If you'd like to read more on the subject, request or download our *Good News* magazine article reprints "The Abortion Quagmire" and "America's Child Sacrifice" at www.gnmagazine.org/reprints. A teen Bible study guide on this topic is available online at www.ucg.org/teenstudy/abortion.htm.

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Divorce-Proof Your Marriage

". . . Let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband" (Ephesians 5:33).

Because so many marriages—particularly in modern Western countries—end in failure, couples trying to live godly lives and make their relationships last will look for ways to protect and preserve their marriages.

God tells us that He "hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16), and He gives us specific instructions that can produce peace and happiness. Regardless of whether one has followed God's instructions when it comes to dating, these principles will help any marriage.

Although the best course of action is to always follow all of God's instructions, God also allows and encourages everyone to turn from past sins and to begin obeying Him (Acts 2:38; 3:19). So even if you have made mistakes in dating or in your marriage, you can change if you commit your life to God and ask for His help in reforming your life. (If you'd like to know more about the purpose of human life and how to commit your life to God, request our free booklets *What Is Your Destiny?* and *The Road to Eternal Life.*)

Although solid, secure relationships are built more quickly when both husband and wife accept and practice God's laws, God expects each of us to respond to Him regardless of the circumstances of our marriage (James 4:17). Even when only one spouse commits his or her life to God and His standards, God can bless both partners (1 Corinthians 7:13-14). A positive, loving example of obedience to God by a husband or wife may influence the other to want to please God (1 Peter 3:1-4). One person can make a difference.

Now let's consider some biblical principles that make marriages more enjoyable—and, therefore, longer lasting.

A lifelong commitment

Early in the book of Genesis, God tells us that it is appropriate for a man to "leave his father and his mother" and "cleave unto his wife" (Genesis 2:24, King James Version). The Hebrew word translated "cleave" is *dabaq,* meaning "to cling, cleave, keep close."

"Used in modern Hebrew in the sense of 'to stick to, adhere to,' *dabaq* yields the noun form for 'glue' and also the more abstract ideas of 'loyalty, devotion'" (*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, 1985, "To Cleave, Cling").

When a husband and wife obey the biblical command to cleave to each other, they will literally join together. Having sexual relations, becoming "one flesh," is part of the commitment to each other in marriage. Commitment also includes fidelity, trust and the character to act properly when under pressure or temptation. Yet too often people engage in sex *without* commitment—a contradiction of this foundational principle for successful marriages.

When two people exchange wedding vows, they make a lifelong commitment. Biblically speaking, this is a covenant (Malachi 2:14)—a solemn promise to God and one's spouse to be faithful.

This commitment should not be taken lightly or maintained only when we feel like it. We need to understand that our feelings can mislead us. God does not advocate only occasional bursts of loyalty and obedience to Him whenever it is convenient for us. Similarly, people who desire good marriages do not look for people who will stay committed to them only *most* of the time.



When two people exchange wedding vows, they make a lifelong commitment. Biblically speaking, this is a covenant—a solemn promise to God and one's spouse to be faithful.

Remaining faithful to one's commitment is a character issue. Good relationships stand on long-term, trustworthy commitments—even under trying circumstances. When two people commit to follow God and His instructions within their marriage, they take the first steps toward a happy, lasting relationship.

What is love?

To love and be loved is one of the most exhilarating experiences any of us can enjoy. Writers and poets, ancient and modern, speak of the power and emotion of romantic love. Yet the Bible reveals

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that love, in its broadest sense, is *a choice.* Love is something we *choose* to do.

God tells husbands to *love* their wives (Ephesians 5:25, 28; Colossians 3:19)—and not just if they feel like it. Lacking a foundational understanding, many couples have tragically assumed they have no control over their feelings. Concluding that love just magically appears or disappears, too many have suffered and even dissolved relationships over difficulties that could have been resolved.

In a beautiful explanation of the love God expects of us, the apostle Paul describes the nature and qualities of genuine love: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NIV).

Love is much more than a vague emotion or physical attraction, something we "fall" into or out of. Falling is an accident, something we have little control over. Genuine love as described in the Bible is very different.

Practicing real love requires conscious choice and determination. Genuine love resolves to show kindness and patience in the face of suffering. It does not return evil for evil (Romans 12:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:15). People who exemplify this kind of love follow the example of God Himself, who "is kind to the unthankful and evil" (Luke 6:35).

Leadership based on love

Full, complete love is the love God expects husbands to show their wives. It is the foundation of godly leadership. Without it husbands cannot properly fulfill the leadership God expects from them within marriage (Ephesians 5:23). When a husband demonstrates godly love, his whole family benefits. His wife and children feel secure. When they know they are honored and loved, it is much easier for them to respect him as the leader of the family.

A husband must understand that even though God has given him responsibility within the family, his position of leadership is to be used only for the good of the family. It should never be used for selfish reasons. This kind of leadership flows from the understanding that first and foremost the husband, too, is under authority—God's authority (1 Corinthians 11:3).

Because husbands historically have not lived up to God's expectations for them, some have concluded that a husband's leadership position within the family is oppressive and outdated. The real problem, however, is with husbands who neglect or reject the character traits of godliness—not with God's model for families. If we accept God's instructions, we must accept *all* of His teaching on marriage.

God places on a husband's shoulders immense responsibility for leading his wife and children in gentleness and love. God gives him no mandate to use his position harshly or selfishly, nor the right to neglect his family's well-being. Humility, the opposite of pride and arrogance, is essential in godly leadership.

When a husband demonstrates godly love, his whole family benefits. His wife and children feel secure.

In his poignant letter to Titus, Paul explained that God's structure for families is a fundamental biblical teaching: "But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior . . . that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed" (Titus 2:1-5).

God set husbands in a leadership role in the family, but He expects men and women alike to practice biblical love and respect (Ephesians 5:21).

Respect: Key to a successful marriage

Besides detailing for husbands how they should love their wives (Ephesians 5:25-33), Paul gives specific instructions to wives: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything" (verses 22-24).

This passage teaches us that a wife's willing acknowledgment of her husband's leadership role is a vital ingredient in godly marriages. This doesn't mean the husband must make every decision.

Many couples successfully divide household responsibilities, working together according to their respective strengths and interests. In a loving marriage, both partners should discuss major decisions and priorities. Then, according to the biblical model, if the husband chooses to make the final judgment, all family members should honor it unless it forces them to disobey God (see Acts 5:29).

Of course, there are often times when a husband should wisely defer to the preferences of his wife and children. Just because he has the right to make family decisions does not mean it is always best that he does. Many decisions are a matter of preference, and preference is an individual matter. A loving husband and father should be sensitive to the desires and preferences of every family member as long as they don't violate godly standards.

No husband can successfully be the head of his household unless his wife cooperatively respects the leadership position God has given him. Without her conscious decision to obey God's instruction, she will usurp his leadership role in the family and invite strife. Paul urges wives to respect their husbands (Ephesians 5:33). *Attitude*—of husbands and wives—is the key to making the biblical model of marriage a joyful, fulfilling experience.

Like love, respect also implies making a choice. We can choose to respect people for their positive qualities or despise them for the traits we dislike. The best time for critical evaluation is before marriage. Afterwards husbands and wives need to focus on mutual respect. Deal kindly with imperfections and abundantly praise good qualities. Benjamin Franklin wisely and humorously put it this way: "Keep your eyes wide open before marriage and half shut afterwards."

Conflict and communication

Researchers have found that the way two people communicate mirrors the state of their relationship. Positive, encouraging communication indicates a good relationship, and excessive criticism indicates a poor relationship. Depending on the circumstances, the two little words "I'm sorry" can be as effective as "I love you"—and perhaps more so.

Some marriage counselors claim

The Different Kinds of Love Mentioned in the Bible

The Greek language in which the New Testament was written uses several words translated "love." The first two listed below are found in the New Testament. Understanding their meanings helps us better comprehend God's expectations of us.

Agapao (verb) is a special word representing the divine love of God toward His Son, human beings in general and believers. It is also used to depict the outwardly focused love God expects believers to have for one another. *Agapao* (including its noun form, *agape*) is "the characteristic word of Christianity, and since the Spirit of revelation has used it to express ideas previously unknown, inquiry into its use, whether in Greek literature or in the Septuagint, throws but little light upon its distinctive meaning in the N[ew] T[estament] . . ."

This special type of Christian love, "whether exercised toward the brethren, or toward men generally, is not an impulse from the feelings, it does not always run with the natural inclinations, nor does it spend itself only upon those for whom some affinity is discovered" (*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words,* "Love").

Reflecting the fact that human marriage is modeled after the divine relationship between Christ and the Church, husbands are told to love their wives with this kind of outgoing, selfless love (Ephesians 5:25, 31-32).

This kind of love is perhaps best expressed in Jesus Christ's statement in John 15:13, "Greater love [*agape*] has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." Jesus Himself perfectly exemplified this kind of love throughout His lifetime, continually giving of Himself and His time and energies to serve others and ultimately offering up His life as a sacrifice for all of humanity. This is the kind of love God wants each of us to exemplify in our lives and particularly in our marriages.

Phileo (verb) means "'to have ardent affection and feeling'—a type of impulsive love" (*Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary,* 1995, "Love"). This is the natural, human type of love and affection that we have for a friend and is often defined as "brotherly love."

In John 21:15-16, Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him with the *agapao* type of love and Peter responded that he had the normal human *phileo* type of love for Him. Later, after receiving the Holy Spirit, Peter would be able to genuinely demonstrate *agapao*-type godly love, serving others throughout his lifetime and making the ultimate sacrifice in martyrdom.

Eros (noun) refers to sexual, erotic love or desire.

True love, as explained in the Bible, isn't focused on oneself and one's feelings or emotions, but is instead *outwardly focused on others*—wanting to best serve and care for them. True love is beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (NIV).

couples should learn to fight fairly and not worry about the number of arguments. "Get it off your chest and get it all out in the open," they advise.

Although candor can be healthy, fighting and arguing over every disagreement has proven to not be so wise. A study of 691 couples indicated that the more partners argue, regardless of their style of quarreling, the more likely they will eventually divorce (Richard Morin, "What's Fair in Love and Fights?," *Washington Post Weekly,* June 7, 1993, p. 37). Conflicts lower respect and can build resentment. An argument can turn into the catalyst for a divorce.

How much conflict can a relationship stand? One method of measurement, which claims 90 percent accuracy in predicting which marriages will last and which will fail, is based on the percentage of positive comments versus negative comments between spouses.

Among newlyweds, researchers found that spouses who ended up staying together made five or fewer critical comments out of each 100 comments about each other. Newlyweds who later divorced had made 10 or more critical comments out of each 100 (Joanni Schrof, "A Lens on Matrimony," *U.S. News & World Report,* Feb. 21, 1994, pp. 66-69).

Since all men and women, even in happily married couples, sometimes have differences of opinion, learning how to peacefully resolve differences is an important part of maintaining respect. Here are a few principles couples should follow:

Speak up. Take turns expressing your beliefs and concerns in a kind way, without raising your voices (Proverbs 15:1). Refusing to talk about difficulties does not resolve problems. Learn to express your opinions in a nonjudgmental way. Your spouse is not always a very good mind reader. Let him or her know what you think, feel and like. Use "I" statements —such as "I feel like you don't appreciate me when you do that"—rather than accusative "You always . . ." or "You never . . ." statements.

Listen carefully. When your spouse is speaking, concentrate on what he or she is saying. Many husbands and wives don't listen respectfully to each other, butting into the conversation before the other is finished or planning their response without really paying attention to what is being said.

To help our spouses realize that we have truly heard them, some counselors recommend that we verbally acknowledge what he or she said before we move on to another thought. This assures your partner that he or she was heard, fostering trust and respect.

Respect differences in your husband or wife. Since God created human beings with a broad range of personalities, we need to appreciate those different perspectives. Even the steps we take to fulfill God's instructions can vary from person to person. We see this principle in Peter's instruction to husbands to dwell with their wives "with understanding" (1 Peter 3:7).

Seek a win-win solution. Whenever possible, look for solutions to problems that are acceptable to both parties (Philippians 2:4). If possible, have two winners rather than a winner and loser. We must at times be willing to yield as long as a choice or action isn't in conflict with God's instruction (Matthew 5:9; 1 Corinthians 6:7).

Paul beautifully explained this principle: "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:4-5).

Forgive. Everyone makes mistakes. Forgive so that God and your spouse will be inclined to forgive you (Matthew 6:15; Luke 6:37). Put your best foot forward. Action often follows thought. Approach your marriage partner in a spirit of love and forgiveness and ask God to restore you to a right attitude (see Psalm 51:10). Instead of letting your negative emotions rule you, determine to treat your husband or wife with respect. Often your emotions will change to match your actions.

Seek help. If you have applied everything you know to do and are still struggling, look for competent professional help. Both you and your spouse may be making mistakes. Healthy, mature people are not afraid to seek help when

they need it (Proverbs 4:7; 11:14).

The importance of romance

Before two people get married, they generally spend much time together. They may go to great lengths to plan special occasions. As they court one another, the two sense the romance that is enveloping them. Romance is an intoxicating feeling that is so delightful but difficult to explain.

Proverbs 30:18-19 says of romance: "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden" (NIV).

The flush of romance is so powerful that it often acts as a force driving couples to marriage. Once a couple is married, however, it seems that romance fades. Husbands and wives spend less and less time thinking about what they can do to please each other.

It is common for a husband or wife to become selfish—thinking only about his or her needs and how the other isn't meeting expectations. When a "what's-in-it-for-me?" attitude becomes predominant, relationships flounder. Husbands find themselves wondering why women are so hard to understand, and wives want to know why their husbands don't pay more attention to them. Such marriages are in need of renewed romance.

In Proverbs 5:18-19 we find this directive: "Let your fountain [marital relationship] be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be *intoxicated always* by her love" (New Revised Standard Version). To be intoxicated or "enraptured" (New King James Version) by a marriage partner's love is something God wants us to enjoy throughout our marriages.

When romance begins to fade, some couples find it hard to retain the close feelings they previously had for each other. But rekindling romance is not that difficult when we understand what to do and commit ourselves to the task. In fact, men and women respond easily to romantic overtures from their spouses when a knowledgeable mate goes about trying to restore romance to a relationship. So what are the keys to keeping romance alive in a marriage?

One of the first keys is to give ourselves to our mate. In a world in which it is so easy to be selfish, consumed with our personal expectations, we must do the opposite.

We must first give in order to receive. When we apply the principles of love and respect as found in Ephesians 5:33, our husband or wife will be strongly influenced to love and respect us in return. Illustrating this principle to husbands, Paul wrote: "So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; *he who loves his wife loves himself*" (Ephesians 5:28).

When a husband treats his wife and family in a loving and kind way, putting their needs and wishes ahead of his own, a wife is strongly influenced to respond with affection and physical intimacy.

Similarly, when a wife respects her husband, freely extends love and intimacy, and praises him for the good things he does, he practically becomes putty in her hands. He becomes much more receptive to what this beautiful creature, his wife who makes him so very happy, has to say. Selfishness, on the other hand, does just the opposite. It strains the marital relationship.

Husbands and wives who preserve romance by giving themselves to each other find that their mates aren't difficult to influence at all. To them, marriage is the wonderful, delightful, energizing relationship God intended.

The value of teamwork

God intends couples to work, live and grow in harmony. Instead of waging a war of the sexes, which modern philosophies often fuel, God teaches husbands and wives to *work together as a team.* "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being *heirs together* of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Peter 3:7).

Working together, husbands and wives can accomplish much more than they can working independently. Aquila and Priscilla, a first-century Christian couple, set a wonderful example as a husband-and-wife team dedicated to God and serving His people. Together they worked as tentmakers with the apostle Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:2-3), traveled with him to Syria (verse 18), helped the gifted speaker and teacher Apollos understand "the way of God more accurately" when he was new to Christianity (verses 24-26) and provided a meeting place for a local congregation of the Church in their home (1 Corinthians 16:19).

Priscilla and Aquila were loved and respected. Notice Paul's commendation of them: "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles" (Romans 16:3-4). This couple undoubtedly saw a bigger purpose for their lives than arguing over inconsequential matters. They were living examples of "heirs together of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7).

When husbands and wives lovingly submit to the roles God has established in marriage, they learn how to submit to God. Intimate, loving relationships between husbands and wives teach us much about the relationship of Christ to the Church (Ephesians 5:32). Applying God's principles for marriage not only produces happy relationships in this life, but doing so helps us understand God's spiritual plan for humanity.

Was Sex Intended Solely for Procreation?

Although children are a natural result of sexual intercourse between a husband and wife and are called "a gift of the LORD" (Psalm 127:3, New American Standard Bible), the Bible does not prohibit sexual relations within marriage purely for pleasure. Indeed, it encourages such union.

The idea that sex was dirty and evil was an idea that crept into Christianity from early Catholic teachers. Their compromise with the obvious reality that sexual activity was necessary to have children resulted in their teaching that sex should only be engaged in by married couples when they wanted to have children. Yet there is no such instruction in the Bible.

Genesis 2:24 says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh [have sex]." Proverbs 5:15-19 encourages couples to enjoy sexual pleasure together within marriage. Paul says that husbands and wives should render the sexual affection due each other—refraining only during times set aside for prayer and fasting (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

No passage in the Bible forbids husbands and wives from having sex for pleasure when not trying to conceive children. There is nothing wrong with couples using contraceptive methods, provided they are not physically harmful, to postpone having children until the time of their choosing.

Our Children: Gifts of God in a Hostile Environment

"Behold, children are a gift of the LORD; the fruit of the womb is a reward" (Psalm 127:3, NASB).

The Bible tells us that children are a blessing from God, and most couples readily welcome them into their families. Human reproduction is one of life's most treasured and memorable experiences. Consider how God intended for this beautiful event to transpire.

United in marriage, a husband and wife determine that they would like to have a child. Similar to God's preparation for His family, which was done prior to the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20), this couple prepares for their child through education and establishing a means of supporting the new life they want to bring into the world. They are now ready to conceive a baby.

With tender words and affection the two embrace each other in love, culminating in sexual climax. The father's sperm starts to make its way into the mother's ovum and a new life begins. At this moment of conception a unique genetic package comes into existence that contains everything this person will become—from gender, height, foot size and eye color to health factors he or she is predisposed to experience.

Growth and development after conception are rapid. Within 18 days a new heartbeat begins. At around three weeks, eyes, a spinal cord and a digestive system are forming. After a month and a half, brain waves are detectable. By about two months, fingers and toes are beginning to show, and by the 18th week the fetus is moving and kicking.

Approximately nine months after conception the child is ready to be born. The baby moves into position to enter the birth canal as the mother's body undergoes changes that will allow the child to exit her womb. The mother then labors in childbirth and a new life comes into the world.

Realizing all the tender love, preparation, doctor's visits, healthy eating and physical effort expended in the process, a husband and wife triumphantly glow with happiness at the healthy arrival of their child. This joyous occasion can also signal the beginning of a new generation as children become parents, parents become grandparents, and grandparents become great-grandparents.

And with all the special attention we place on the birth of a child—something understandably appropriate—do we realize the significance to God? From His perspective, a new life that began at conception has now entered the world with the potential to become part of His eternal family (John 1:12).



Children need training and instruction from parents in how to live in harmony with God's laws of love.

This child will need training and instruction from his or her parents in how to live in harmony with God's laws of love. God knows it is best that this child grow up with both biological parents. God also knows that it will take time and effort for parents to fulfill this crucial responsibility.

Will parents rise to the task? This is the purpose for this portion of the booklet—to encourage you and help you understand how you can fulfill God's expectation of you as a parent. In this chapter we'll also consider the state of parenting in the Western world.

Innocent victims

As children grow up, they are heavily influenced by the things they see and the conditions in which they live. Their values are shaped by their experiences and the perspectives of their parents. Regrettably, children do not get to pick their parents, nor do they have control over where they are born. They don't know whether they will be taught God's eternal values or whether they will struggle to get by with what they learn on their own.

Sadly, the world today is a hostile, toxic environment for children—even in nations where there is greater economic prosperity.

In the United States, in a report dated Oct. 26, 2004, the Barna Group found that most adults agree that "the nation's children are not being adequately prepared for life." Fewer than one out of five of the more than 1,000 adults surveyed "believes that children under the age of 13 are being 'superbly' or 'pretty well' prepared for life emotionally, physically, spiritually, intellectually or physically." The study further reported that "fewer than one out of every twenty adults believe that America's youngsters are receiving above average preparation in all five of those areas of life."

The subjective perspective of adults in the above survey is proven true when children enter school. Psychologist Robert Evans, who also worked as a teacher, notes in his book that "more and more children arrive at school less ready to learn—not less intelligent; less ready to be students. Teachers in all sorts of schools face a decline in fundamentals they used to take for granted: attendance, attention, courtesy, industry, motivation, responsibility . . .

"Students are more difficult to reach and teach, their concentration and perseverance more fragile, their language and behavior more provocative" (*Family*

Photos.com

Matters: How Schools Can Cope With the Crisis in Childrearing, 2004, pp. xiii-xiv).

Teachers report that children today often arrive at school seemingly incapable of following directions, of listening while someone else speaks, of sharing toys. Some can't tolerate not being the center of attention.

Many adults perceive teens as disrespectful of adults. "In survey after survey, two-thirds of Americans, when asked what comes to mind when they think about teenagers, choose adjectives like *rude, irresponsible,* and *wild;* for younger children they choose *lacking discipline* and *spoiled*. Forty-one percent complain that teenagers have poor work habits; nearly 90 percent feel that it is rare for youth to treat people with respect" (Evans, p. 5).

As students leave school, the social problems they had there often turn into problems for society at large. Societies are unlikely to thrive for long in conditions where people do not have the skills to cooperate and respectfully work together.

The problem, of course, is not with the children themselves. They are not less intelligent or less capable of learning than were children a decade or two ago. The problem lies with the *parents* who deliver their children to the doorsteps of the school.

According to Evans, the cause for today's crisis in child rearing "lies at home with parents, who are suffering a widespread loss of confidence and competence. Its deeper causes are economic and *cultural—changes in the way we work and in our national values* that undermine the developmental mission of families and schools alike" (p. xi, emphasis added).

Cultural choices affecting children

Sexual immorality and economic concerns are perhaps the two greatest factors affecting the outcomes of child rearing in Western nations. The results of these two factors have wreaked considerable damage on children.

As we saw in previous chapters, disobedience to God's instructions regarding sexual conduct has led to the destruction of many marriages. In the wake of destroyed marriages, children also suffer emotionally and economically.

The tragic consequences of poor choices and decisions are being reaped by adults, children and our societies at large. This principle of cause and effect cannot be broken or avoided. As the proverb says, "A curse without cause shall not alight" (Proverbs 26:2). And there most definitely is a reason for today's suffering that is related to STDs, broken marriages and children not being properly trained.

Dissecting the mountain of data that is available regarding social trends, we come to the inescapable conclusion that breaking God's laws leads to misery and unhappiness. Couples who live together prior to marriage—presumably to try it out to see if they are "sexually compatible"—don't find the secure relationships they are looking for in marriage.

Reporting on the modern phenomenon of living together prior to marriage, also called cohabiting, David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead of the National Marriage Project wrote: "Cohabitation does not reduce the likelihood of eventual divorce; in fact, it may lead to a higher divorce risk. Although the association was stronger a decade or two ago and has diminished in the younger generations, virtually all research on the topic has determined that the chances of divorce ending a marriage preceded by cohabitation are significantly greater than for a marriage not preceded by cohabitation" (January 1999, www.smartmarriages.com/cohabit.html).

The reason living together undermines marriage is obvious—there is no firm commitment to the relationship. Living together cheapens sex and the institution for which it was uniquely and solely designed—marriage.

Yet the number of people doing it is staggering. Professor Popenoe and Dr. Whitehead report: "It is estimated that about a quarter of unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 39 are currently living with a partner and about half have lived at some time with an unmarried partner (the data are typically reported for women but not for men). Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by cohabitation, compared to virtually none earlier in the century" (ibid.).

But ignorance is not bliss. Ignorance of these effects and God's instructions is hurting all of us!

The importance of both parents

When couples dissolve their marriages, they often justify their divorces with the reasoning that it is better for their children to see them happy rather than fighting with each other. Yet except in rare cases such as abuse or immoral behavior, the better decision is usually for couples to work out their differences, live in accordance with God's instructions for marriage and remain together for the sake of their children.

When marriages dissolve, children are deprived, at least for a significant amount of time, of one of their biological parents. And this deprivation exacts a penalty. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), and so do children.

Children need both of their parents because each parent helps a child understand masculinity and femininity. Husbands can model honorable behavior from the male perspective. Wives can do so from the female perspective. Yet within the United States, "more than one-quarter of all families with children are headed by single parents, overwhelmingly mothers. More than 40 percent of American children do not currently live with their biological fathers" (Evans, p. 61).

Although it has been generally assumed that fathers weren't really needed as parenting figures (the presumption being that mothers could raise children just as well without a father in the home), research continues to show that the presence of fathers is crucial.

"As a statistical matter, the active presence of a father is a significant factor in helping girls avoid premature sex and pregnancy and develop a sense of independence and self-assertion . . . A twenty-six year longitudinal study of the relationship between parenting in early childhood and the capacity of children to experience sympathy and compassion for others as adults astonished the researchers.

"They found that the most important factor of all the ones they surveyed was paternal involvement in child care. Not maternal, *paternal*. A fascinating study of young adults found that those who were emotionally close to their fathers lived, on the whole, happier and more satisfied lives, *regardless* of their feelings toward their mothers" (Evans, p. 48).

Of course, the Fifth Commandment teaches us that we are to honor both our father and our mother (Exodus 20:12). God never intended for children, parents or courts to have to decide between the two. One of the best gifts parents can give their children is to be happily married to each other.

Dual-career families

Today in many modern nations it has become common for both a husband and wife to work outside the home. The reasons for doing so often include the perceived need for greater income and the

The Epidemic of Missing Fathers

Dr. Wade Horn, assistant secretary for children and families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, addressed the connections between fatherlessness and criminal behavior in a 2002 speech. He noted that in the United States, "both fatherlessness and our prison population are at all-time highs." Following is an excerpt from his speech:

"The most consequential social trend of our time is the dramatic increase in the number of children growing up in father-absent families. In 1960, this number stood at less than 10 million. Today it's 24 million. This means that tonight, one out of every three children in America will go to bed in a home absent their father. And it's not just that these kids are going to bed without their fathers tonight, 40 percent of children who don't live with their fathers haven't seen their father during the past year. And one-half have never set foot in their father's home.

"Studies find that children who live apart from their biological fathers are on average five to six times as likely to be poor. They are twice as likely to suffer physical or emotional neglect; to manifest emotional or behavioral disorders, including suicidal behavior; to abuse alcohol or illegal drugs; to be suspended or expelled from school or to drop out; and at least twice as likely to end up in jail. A few findings from the research:

"According to a Princeton University study, 'each year spent without a dad in the home increased the odds of future incarceration by 5 percent.'

"According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 70 percent of juveniles in state reform institutions grew up in single-parent or no-parent situations, and 53 percent of state prison inmates grew up apart from their fathers. Indeed, the National Center on Fathers and Families reports that the typical male prison inmate grew up in a single-parent, mother-headed home and has at least one close relative who has been incarcerated.

"We hear a lot about that last factor—the father or other close relative who was in prison. But we don't hear nearly enough about the other, interrelated factor—growing up without a dad" ("Responsible Fatherhood and the Role of the Family," plenary remarks at the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative Grantee Conference, Sept. 30, 2002, Washington, D.C.).

mistaken assumption that having a career outside the home is more important than rearing children.

While citizens of European countries have in general chosen to work fewer hours and have more time to spend with their families, Americans have tended toward working more and more hours with less time off to spend with family.

In the United States, "roughly 75 percent of mothers with children under eighteen now work outside the home and those with very young children work every bit as long as other parents . . . When mothers join the workforce, the time they spend in primary child care drops from an average of twelve hours per week to fewer than six" (Evans, p. 72).

The average time a working parent spends with preadolescent children is barely half an hour a day (Evans, p. 78). "By the time children reach adolescence, this meager amount dwindles further; the typical father and teenager may spend no more than three minutes per day alone together" (ibid.).

It's impossible for parents to properly train and influence their children if they don't spend time with them. Time is a precious and necessary ingredient for successful parenting.

The daycare dilemma

As dual-career parents head off to work, they commonly drop off their preschool-age children at daycare facilities—places where employees are among the lowest-paid and least-trained in all industries. Yet parents trust these facilities to take care of their most precious resource—their children.

The problems with most daycare facilities are well known. While studies show that *high-quality daycare* does not seem to harm children, other studies have found a correlation between the amount of time a child spends in daycare with his or her later aggression and disobedience in school.

Health is another problem for children in daycare. Parents often bring sick children to daycare—where they infect others—because they can't or don't want to take a day off work. Further, when mothers work outside the home, their children often measure less ready for school—in other words, they are developmentally delayed.

Daycare studies are always done with the assumption that what is being provided is high-quality daycare. But all daycare is not high quality. Why? Poor pay and demanding conditions are two of the major problems. Who would take care of screaming, demanding children when he or she could take any other job for the same amount of pay and less grief?

Childcare facilities with large numbers of children are simply unable to provide the sustained, personal, one-on-one attention that is so necessary for the healthy development of children.

Why have Americans embraced such changes that harm children? According to Dr. Evans, it is because of rampant individualism. We think of "the individual as the basic unit rather than the family itself" (p. 128).

"Rampant individualism" is a nicer way of describing the human perspective than what Paul wrote regarding the outlook people would have in the last days. Of this time, Paul wrote that "men will be lovers of themselves . . ." (2 Timothy 3:2). Rather than focusing on what is best for our children and best for society, Paul said people would focus on their own perceived needs and wants.

"What's missing from too many American households is, as journalist Caitlin Flanagan puts it, 'the one thing you can't buy—the presence of someone who cares deeply and principally about that home and the people who live in it; who is willing to spend [time] thinking about what those people are going to eat and what clothes they will need for which occasions'" (Evans, p. 137).

Economic needs are commonly cited as the reason children are placed in daycare facilities. The reality, however, is that many times most of the money earned ends up being spent on the daycare itself and eating out because no one has been at home to prepare a meal.

Even though true financial gains can sometimes be obtained, a commendable number of parents have now given their children's needs the highest priority and are choosing a lower standard of living so they can have a higher standard of family. While some mothers remain at home with their children to accomplish this, others are finding work when their husband is at home with the children or doing work that can be done from home.

The suffering being experienced by so many today is reversible. We and our children do not have to be victims. Being a good parent means putting our children's needs ahead of our own desires. If you have children, why not give them what they want and need—a positive, encouraging home where they are taught God's standards by both of their biological parents living together in peace?

In the next chapter, we'll consider how parents can effectively teach their children God's timeless truths.

Bringing Up a Moral Child

"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children . . ." (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

We saw in the previous chapter that the two societal trends of increasing divorce and placing children in daycare so parents can work have made it more difficult for parents to rear moral children. Both trends have had a significant impact on children.

Marriages today seem to be much more fragile than in previous generations. Fewer people are getting married, and when they do, they are older than previous generations were at their first marriage. Couples are also having fewer children and are divorcing more.

The breadwinner-and-homemaker couple with several children of previous generations has been replaced by today's postmodern family—often characterized by single parents, blended families, unmarried or remarried parents and two-career households.

With the deconstruction of stable family units of previous generations, more single parents have been economically pressured into placing their children in daycare so they can have more freedom to earn a living. The result is that children are not receiving the training they so desperately need from their parents—the adults who can have the most profound influence on them. Devoid of moral instruction, many children create problems for their parents, teachers, themselves and society at large.

In spite of these negative trends, many parents, including single parents, are raising well-adjusted, moral children who successfully enter adulthood. Why are these families successful when so many others are not? What do they do that others don't? More importantly, how can you successfully help your children in this often-perilous journey to adulthood?

A good foundation

A somewhat humorous definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while hoping for a different result. Applying this principle to families today, many couples continue to divorce and/or place their children in daycare facilities while hoping that they and their children won't suffer the penalties that so often accompany these actions.

Two of the simple and yet most effective things we can do to successfully rear responsible, moral children are to stay married to the person with whom we had the children and to take care of our own children rather than letting others watch them while we go to work.

While doing these two things lays the best foundation for child rearing, many families will not have these advantages. It is estimated that of the 20 million children under the age of five in America today, only half have mothers who are at home full time.

Why is it that having both biological parents is so important for children? God reveals that He intended for husbands and wives to remain married to each other for life, and many studies confirm that children of such unions are far better off than those growing up in homes with a single parent.

It has been discovered, for example, that fathers, by their own actions, teach their sons how to be a man and how to treat women. Fathers are also most influential for daughters in helping them have self-confidence and avoid premarital sex. Mothers are generally best at teaching children to get along and respect the feelings of others.

In contrast to children growing up with both of their biological parents, "children from divorced homes are 70 percent more likely than those living with biological parents to be expelled or suspended from school. Those living with never-married mothers are twice as likely to be expelled or suspended.

"Also, children who do not live with

Proverbs and Proper Training

One verse we should consider in dealing with our children is Proverbs 22:6. It appears in the New King James Version as: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." We can draw an obvious, direct conclusion from this translation—that proper training will pay off in the long run. This is certainly valid.

It is normal for most children to grow up with, and ultimately adopt, values and standards similar to their parents'—that is, if the parents do a reasonable job of bringing them up. Sometimes, especially when their children are teenagers, parents feel as if they're not getting through. They may wonder whether all their efforts are wasted. But experience shows that if they stick with a good game plan, they will eventually realize the desired results.

Some Bible scholars offer an alternate explanation for the intent of this verse—that "the way he should go" refers to each child's ability and potential. The root word for "way," they note, also has to do with the inclination of a tree, which can break if one tries to rebend it. They also note that the original Hebrew wording refers to *"his* way"—the child's way—rather than *"the* way."

With this in mind some would translate the verse, "Train up a child according to his bent, and when he is old, he will not depart from it." In other words, wise parents should recognize the aptitudes and interests of each child and train him to best use his abilities to reach his potential.

Whether this is the intended meaning, it represents another valid approach. Parents should enable their children to develop their natural talents and abilities. Too often a father or mother will attempt to force children to do the same things they do or to be what they are.

Sometimes parents want to live vicariously through their children as they push them to achieve what they wanted to do but couldn't. We need to recognize our children's distinct God-given abilities, then work to help them fulfill their potential.

Still others understand the latter translation to mean that if we train up a child in his own way—that is, through continually allowing him to do whatever he wants and to always get his own way—that he will be stuck in that wrong way of thinking and living for the rest of his life. The verse would then be a warning to parents against coddling and failing to discipline. This concept, too, is certainly valid.

Measuring Influence on Our Children

While parents have the opportunity to be the greatest influence on their children's lives, this doesn't always happen. Consider the following:

When mothers take a job outside the home, "the time they spend in primary child care drops from an average of 12 hours per week to fewer than six" (Robert Evans, *Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope with the Crisis in Childrearing,* 2004, p. 72).

Pediatrician Berry Brazelton says that "for parents raising young children a combined total of three hours per day is the minimum" amount of time a child needs from his or her parents (ibid., p. 78).

The typical amount of time a working parent spends with his or her young children is about 30 minutes per day (ibid.).

A typical father will spend less than three minutes per day alone with a child who has reached his or her teenage years (ibid.).

On average, American youth watch 1,500 hours of television per year. They spend 900 hours per year in class at school and less than a hundred hours per year in one-on-one activity with a parent. They see 20,000 commercials per year (Norman Herr, Ph.D., *The Sourcebook for Teaching Science: Strategies, Activities, and Internet Resources,* 2001, "Television & Health").

"When our kids are exposed to the same influences, without much supervision, and are generally not guided to interpret their circumstances and opportunities in light of biblical principles, it's no wonder that they grow up to be just as involved in gambling, adultery, divorce, cohabitation, excessive drinking and other unbiblical behaviors as everyone else. What we build into a child's life prior to the age of 13 represents the moral and spiritual foundation that defines them as individuals and directs their choices for the remainder of their life" (George Barna, "Parents Describe How They Raise Their Children," Feb. 28, 2005).

To have more influence on your children, look for ways to spend more time with them. Consider eating dinner together every evening and discussing the day's activities. Preparing the meal and cleaning up afterwards also provide opportunities for conversation. If you are going to watch television, do it together so you can verbally challenge and discuss ungodly thinking or actions.

both biological parents are 45 to 95 percent more likely to require parent/teacher meetings to deal with performance or behavior problems than those who live with married parents" (Deborah Dawson, "Family Structure and Children's Health and Well-Being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health," *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* 1991, pp. 573-584). They are also more likely to have poorer health, smoke and experience accidents and injuries.

If you have children, are single and work outside your home, don't become discouraged. You, too, can raise happy, healthy, moral children; you'll just have to work a little harder and smarter (something we'll deal with later in this chapter). And if you are a dual-career family, consider having one spouse quit his or her job to stay home, or arrange your schedules so one of you is always at home with your young children.

The perils of peer pressure

Most everyone today understands the powerful influence of peer pressure. What other people think and do subtly coerces us to do the same. And as teens and young adults are especially susceptible to peer pressure, there are several important aspects about influence that wise parents need to understand.

First, parents can take great comfort from the fact that "peers do not begin to have a significant effect on a child until the age of seven or eight, by which time most basic traits, such as sociability, introversion, perseverance, and responsiveness to authority, have already been well established" (Evans, p. 53). The message here is that wise parents realize a critical window of opportunity exists for training their children before peer pressure begins to affect them.

When children are taught proper moral values at an early age, they are likely to maintain those character traits for the remainder of their lives. While young people can be more easily influenced regarding things such as dress, language and music after age 8, their underlying character traits, established in their early years, will most likely remain. Wise parents will teach their children God's laws, including those that explain how to get along with others and to respect authority, during this critical time period.

Another important principle for parents to understand is that *they*—not the schools or their children's peers—can have the greatest influence on their offspring if they so choose. Sadly, the trend among many parents today is to focus on their own needs while overlooking the needs of their children. Yet training and preparing the next generation is arguably the most important work parents can do.

Being a parent means being a loving authority figure in children's lives all the way through their maturing process until they are ready to live on their own. Sadly, some parents foolishly try to become their young children's buddy or friend, foregoing discipline and instruction. This doesn't work well for either parents or children. There is a friendship stage of life between parents and children, but it comes much later—after children have been trained and are fully grown.

Continuing to provide guidance for children through their teenage years is also an important factor in helping them resist negative peer pressure. According to Evans, "the most significant thing that parents can do about peer pressure—it is truly significant—is to be authoritative throughout childhood, to provide sufficient levels of nurture, structure, and latitude . . .

"Authoritative parents who are both responsive and demanding raise children who tend to be less susceptible to dangerous peer influence (drugs and alcohol, for example) and to perform better in school than the children of parents who are permissive or authoritarian [overly strict]" (pp. 54-55). (For more details regarding peer pressure, see "Measuring Influence on Our Children.")

God's command to teach

From the beginning God instructed parents to teach their children religious values. Speaking to the ancient Israelites, God said: "And these words which I command you today [the Ten Commandments in the preceding chapter and the great commandment of the preceding verse to love God with all one's heart, soul and strength] shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

God's instruction begins with the expectation that parents will accept and fully live by His laws themselves, the meaning of "these words . . . shall be in your heart." They would first and foremost teach them *by example*—the most powerful teaching method of all. But

that's not all. God not only told parents to teach their children His ways, but He instructed them to do it *diligently.* He said to do it throughout the day when they were sitting, walking, going to bed or getting up in the morning.

This does not mean just formal, classroom-style teaching, although such teaching is appropriate. It also entails practical, down-to-earth learning and application of God's way of life while the family went about its daily activities.

This kind of teaching requires much more than a once-a-week session at church services. It must be a *regular* practice, all week long, so that it becomes a way of life.

Abraham, called the friend of God in James 2:23, was given high praise by God for teaching his children and household God's way of life. In Genesis 18:19 God says of Abraham, "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

Abraham was conscientious in obeying God, and his descendants—Isaac, Jacob and Joseph—also diligently followed God's ways.

King Solomon understood that when we reach maturity, we reflect the training we have received as children (Proverbs 22:6, see also "Proverbs and Proper Training" on page 25). This also includes religious training. History clearly shows that when Israel neglected teaching and obeying God's laws as they were told to do in Deuteronomy 6, they suffered tragic results.

In Ephesians 6:4 the apostle Paul wrote, "And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." This statement is simply a continuation of the same principle God gave the Israelite families in the Old Testament.

Today we need to likewise teach our children God's laws. These laws, when applied, provide a moral compass to guide their conduct for the rest of their lives.

Consider the Ten Commandments that God revealed from Mt. Sinai. These instructions teach us how to love God and respectfully interact with and show love to others. They contain injunctions against murder, adultery, stealing, lying and materialism while supporting marriage and special respect for parents. People who live in accordance with these commands are moral people—the kind of people we can trust and enjoy being with.

When children are properly taught God's moral values, they become moral people. When they go to school, they understand that moral people live by a code of conduct that requires them to act honorably and show respect to others.

They know how to share their toys and follow directions. They do not have to be the center of attention. These children are delightful to teach and are generally very successful in school and in their lives that follow. (If you'd like to know more about God's laws, request or download our free booklet *The Ten Commandments* from our Web site at www.ucg.org/booklets or request it from our office nearest you listed on page 32.)

How to teach

Biblical passages on parenting show that God wants us to use love, patience, dignity and respect in working with our children—just as He does with us. Love is the foundational principle for all Christian relationships (Matthew 22:37-40; John 13:34-35). Paul said obeying the Ten Commandments expresses love toward God and love toward our neighbor (Romans 13:9-10).

Just as God gives us laws because He loves us, we must give our children "laws"—rules—if we love them (Hebrews 12:7). Loving our children does include discipline. Establishing fair rules and consequences for breaking those rules has been described as setting up boundaries. The purpose for boundaries is that our children learn appropriate behavior and feel secure.

Proverbs 29:17 says, "Discipline your son, and he will give you peace; he will bring delight to your soul" (NIV). Verse 15 adds that "a child left to himself brings shame to his mother."

Our *attitude* toward our children is perhaps the single most important consideration in proper child rearing. Our words and actions show our children whether we love them. Are you willing to sacrifice for them? Without a child's assurance of our love, it is unlikely that our child-rearing efforts will produce the favorable results we want to see—moral, mature, responsible and caring young men and women.

Dealing with frustration

All parents at times become frustrated with their children's behavior. When this happens, it's easy for a father or mother to convey the impression that he or she

Discipline With Encouragement

Discipline with encouragement may seem like an oxymoron. How could discipline possibly be encouraging? Isn't it always painful and depressing? The answer is no, discipline need not always be that way. Here's why.

Punishment and discipline are not synonyms, as many assume. Discipline is simply training that corrects, shapes or perfects one's moral character or mental faculties. While discipline *includes* punishment, punishment is only one of several disciplinary tools that parents may use in training their children. Further, discipline can include both encouraging and corrective elements. Here are some encouraging things parents can do to discipline their younger children:

Preactivity reminders. Before an event, talk to your child about the behavior you expect. For example, say, "When we go to visit Mrs. Smith, I want you to say, 'Hi, Mrs. Smith. Thank you for inviting me to your home.'"

Preactivity affirmation. After explaining the behavior you expect, have your child say, "Yes, Mommy," or "Okay, Daddy." Verbal affirmations help your child solidify in his or her mind the actions he or she will display.

Preactivity modeling. Have your child practice what he or she will say or do before the activity. Again, this helps prepare a child for the behavior expected.

Postactivity praise. We all appreciate praise when we do a good job. Our children generally also respond well to praise and are influenced to future obedience when they receive this kind of encouragement.

Appropriate touch. Praise coupled with an affectionate pat or hug is also highly motivating to our children.

Reward skill development. Occasionally rewarding children when they have mastered a new skill promotes maturity. Be careful, however, not to get into the reward trap where every time a child behaves properly, he or she expects a reward. This can deteriorate into bribery. Proper behavior is something we are all supposed to do all the time (Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, *Let the Children Come Along the Virtuous Way*, Leader's Guide, pp. 188-190).

Sometimes corrective discipline will also be required to help children properly mature. Use of encouraging discipline as described above can lessen the need for correction and strengthen the relationship between a parent and child.

doesn't love the child. Some parents, by means of angry, frustrated reactions and comments, make their children feel they are worthless or that their parents despise them.

This, of course, is a serious mistake. They may be upset about only one negative trait or action but make the child feel as if he or she is an altogether bad person. It is essential that parents control their anger when correcting a child and that they make clear the specific behavior, action or attitude for which the child is being punished.

To raise a moral child parents should clearly explain the biblical principle involved. There is a huge difference between parents telling children to do something "because I say so" versus "because *God* says so." Explaining to children that *we* do this because God tells *us* to do so teaches a child moral values and respect for authority.

The apostle Paul offers this instruction to parents: "Fathers, do not irritate and provoke your children to anger—do not exasperate them to resentment—but rear them [tenderly] in the training and discipline and the counsel and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4, Amplified Bible).

In other words, parents should be sure their children know, even when they are being corrected, that they are loved. This is not to say that parents should never display anger, but it must be obviously directed toward the child's misbehavior. It should always be controlled and brief. God Himself becomes angry at times, but He doesn't lose His temper—and He always has a righteous purpose for His indignation and resulting actions.

When children know that they are deeply cared for and that correction comes because of their parents' love for them, such correction will not provoke the children to anger and rebellion. On the other hand, statements that a child perceives as painting him and his character and attitude as worthless may make him feel rejected and can eventually lead to rebellious behavior and dangerous activities.

If a parent tells a child he or she is no good, the child may believe it and live up to that appraisal. To show active rather than passive love for our kids, we must extend sincere compliments and praise when they're due. This reassures our children they are loved and appreciated.

Also, positive reinforcement of good behavior—done through praise and compliments for a specific action—is a very valuable and influential method of teaching. Sadly, too many parents ignore opportunities to reinforce good behavior and only talk to their children when they have misbehaved.

Authority not to be abused

Because human beings have a tendency to abuse authority, some have mistakenly concluded that all authority is bad. This is not true. God intended for authority to be used for good (Romans 13:1-4).

Jesus commanded His disciples not to "lord it over" others in the Church (Matthew 20:25-28). In similar fashion, Colossians 3:21 says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."

Ephesians 6:4 also tells parents not to use forms of authority that intimidate, bully or make children angry. God expressly forbids physical and emotional abuse of children. To those who foolishly reject God's direction on this issue, Proverbs 11:29 declares, "He who troubles his own house will inherit the wind . . ."

An inclusive, relational approach

Jesus Christ's attitude toward children is instructive to parents. Several passages in the New Testament record Jesus rebuking His disciples for trying to keep little children away from Him (Matthew 19:13-14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16). Jesus had a positive attitude toward children and showed them personal attention by picking them up in His arms, praying for them and using them as teaching examples for adults. Christ was not too important or too busy to give them some of His time. We, too, must be willing to do the same.

In Deuteronomy 6:20-25, which tells the families of ancient Israel how to teach their children, the instruction for parents to use the pronouns *we, us* and *our* is significant. For instance, in verse 25 they are told to say: "Then it will be righteousness for *us,* if *we* are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD *our* God, as He has commanded *us.*" These pronouns indicate that parents should use an inclusive, relational approach in teaching their children God's ways. Obeying God is supposed to be a shared family experience.

In one of the most passionate pleas to influence behavior, God, as our Heavenly Father, straightforwardly instructed ancient Israel in His laws and the consequences for obeying or disobeying them. God concludes His plea, recorded in Deuteronomy 28 to 30, with this: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore *choose life,* that both you and your descendants may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Did you notice? God emphatically said, *"choose life"* for your own good. We, too, must be loving and passionate about our desire for our children to adopt God's standards as their own. We must work to help them do so and strive to influence them to make that free moral choice.

The importance of personal example

Our own example is paramount in properly influencing our children. Children are quick to notice discrepancies between

Sibling Rivalry

Rivalry between children has been around since Cain killed his brother Abel (see Genesis 4). Dr. James Dobson, founder and chairman of Focus on the Family, describes sibling rivalry as "the most irritating feature of childrearing." Continuing, he writes, "The underlying source of this conflict is old-fashioned jealousy and competition between children" (*The New Strong-Willed Child,* 2004, p. 139).



To minimize the conflict, he makes three recommendations for parents:

"1. *Don't inflame the natural jealousy of children* by making continual comments that describe one child as superior to another. Beauty, intelligence, and physical abilities such as athleticism are especially sensitive topics.

"2. *Establish a workable system of justice at home.* Children need to know that they can count on their parents to demand and enforce rules of the home for all children.

"3. *Recognize that the hidden 'target' of sibling rivalry is you.* Conflict is often a method of manipulating parents and a way to get their attention" (ibid., pp. 142-147, emphasis added).

what adults ask them not to do and what they do themselves. In some cases those differences are logically defensible. For instance, children should not drive cars if they are not of the legal age and do not have the skills necessary for safely operating a vehicle. It is a different story, however, when children see a double standard on moral issues.

Paul pointed out this principle to Jews who were trying to influence gentiles (non-Jews) yet were hypocritical: "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written" (Romans 2:21-24).

Parents cannot expect a "do as I say and not as I do" approach to bring success. Nothing is more ineffective than for a parent who uses foul language to try to correct his child for using the same. How can a parent teach responsibility if his own actions are irresponsible, if they bring needless hardship on the family?

Regardless of what parents say, most young people will adopt their parents' standards and lifestyles by the time they reach 25 to 35 years of age. In this case, actions do speak louder than words!

Quality time

The concept of quality time has become a popular notion for busy parents who have little time to spend with their children. They salve their consciences by telling themselves they will make up the missed time with their children by spending some quality time with them on a future occasion. Regrettably, such action doesn't always work as well as parents hope. To children, *all* time with their parents is valuable and one can't always expect every occasion spent together to be of similar or equal value.

There is no substitute for time spent with our children. Our time *is* our life, and giving some of it to our children reassures them that they are loved. A parent who provides his children with plenty of material possessions but little personal time is missing a vital point. Children do not equate the parent's time on the job working to provide for the family with love for them. They think it means Dad doesn't like to spend time with them.

Single-Parenting Success

Through mistakes and sometimes no fault of their own, many adults have to bring up children on their own without a spouse's help. They are single parents. While this is not the state God intended for them or their children, wise individuals in this situation will strive to teach their children the same godly principles that are applicable to all. Here are a few additional principles to keep in mind if you are a divorced or never-married single parent:



When your child asks why his father (or mother) doesn't also live in the home, explain that you and the other parent made a mistake. Make clear that the child isn't a mistake or at fault but that you and the child's other parent made a mistake. Tell your child that God says a husband and wife should remain married for life. Tell him that if God blesses you with another spouse, that is what you plan to do next time. Assure the child that you love him and that you will be there for him.

Don't speak evil of your former spouse. You don't need to create extra anger and resentment in your children. As they mature, they will form their own opinions of both parents. Modeling godly conduct is always your best course of action.

Remember that you are the parent, the loving authority figure responsible for providing stability for your children. Don't make your child or children your confidants with whom you discuss your intimate feelings, dreams and fears. Once they are grown and fully mature, then you can enter the friendship stage of life.

If you are contemplating a new marriage, make sure your children love and respect your future spouse. If they don't, weigh their feelings and concerns heavily. If you develop a close, loving, respectful relationship with your children and they feel secure, they shouldn't feel threatened when another adult enters their lives.

Let your children know that you expect them to have a happy marriage and expect that they will remain married when they grow up. Teach them God's principles for achieving this important goal.

While there are undoubtedly many more helpful points that could be made, perhaps the most important of all is having a positive attitude and teaching your children that they can have happy, successful marriages in the future.

The Value of Consequences

To spare their children hurt feelings and disappointment, some parents try to rescue them from bad choices and decisions. While such parents may think they are being kind to their children, such actions often hurt their children by delaying their maturity and understanding of responsibility.

For example, assume a little boy throws a ball and breaks a neighbor's window. Hopefully, it was an accident rather than a deliberate act of vandalism. Either way, the boy should be held responsible for his actions.

Rather than excusing the child from the restoration process by saying that it was just an accident and taking care of the repairs themselves, wise parents will use this situation as a teaching opportunity. They will teach their son that he is responsible, that he will need to pay for (or at least help pay for or repair) the window and offer a sincere apology to the neighbor for the damage.

By having to work to earn money for the repair of the window and offering an apology, the boy learns moral behavior—to take responsibility for his actions. Children who never have these learning opportunities grow up with a sense of entitlement—that everyone else is there to serve *them* and that they have no responsibilities to others. Removing all consequences throughout a child's life is a great way to prepare him or her for civil disobedience and going to jail. It's also a sure recipe for parental heartache.

Important keys to allowing children to benefit through experiencing consequences include making sure the children are old enough to make decisions before they are given choices (another mistake often made by parents), making sure they are physically safe and then letting them know that making a mistake is not the end of the world. It's something that everyone does and handling it responsibly is the important lesson.

Photos (from left): Stockbyte, Photos.com

Creating Quality Time

To increase the opportunities for quality communication—the kind where a parent and child can truly share heartfelt emotions and concerns in a trusting relationship—consider the following ideas:

For a young child who is going to bed at night, spend some time quietly whispering in his or her ear about the importance of godly, moral actions. Praise the child for his or her good behavior that day. The time before children go to sleep is often a reflective period when they will reveal their thoughts and ask important questions.

Even teens and young adults will sometimes want to talk about the important issues in their lives just before going to bed. While whispering in their ears is no longer necessary, having the talk is. Wise parents won't forgo this opportunity when it comes.

For older children, it may be necessary to first spend some time doing an activity the child enjoys. This is a case of priming the pump; parents spend the time with their children showing them that they love them, and then, once assured of their parents' love, children share what they are thinking.

Parents have to be careful to respect older children's privacy. It doesn't generally work very well for parents to demand that a child reveal his or her emotions and thoughts. And sometimes children have no great secret thoughts about life to share. Quality time is natural and occurs because of trust and respect.

The Seasons of Parenting

Based on Ecclesiastes 3:1, which says, "To everything there is a season," psychologist John Rosemond observes: "There are three seasons in raising children, and one final season that is our goal. Each season is a phase where a child needs a certain type of parenting.

- **"SEASON 1 is from age 0-2.** During this season, the child is the center of the universe around which the parent orbits and the mother is the child's servant. The father generally stays on the sidelines.
- **"SEASON 2 is from age 3 to 13.** The child will be less the center of the universe. [The] parent is in the role of authority and leadership. It is a period of discipleship, where you lead where [the] child will follow you.
- **"SEASON 3 is from age 14 on.** This is the mentoring phase which prepares the child for becoming an adult. It is a [rite] of passage. The goal is for the child to self lead and the parent to be the mentor.
- **"SEASON 4 is adulthood for the child.** You are no longer parenting but [are] your child's friend" (Parents Council of Washington Lecture, Oct. 25, 2004).

In explaining the seasons, Rosemond advises parents to focus on the proper season. Regrettably, many parents stay mired in season one (being a servant) when they should be teaching their children to take responsibility themselves. Another mistake is trying to be your children's friend before the appropriate season.

Personality Differences and Temperment

Because each child is a unique human being in terms of the way he or she thinks and acts, parents often wonder whether these differences should affect their parenting. According to Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, "Personality differences and temperaments affect parenting in that they help parents identify areas which require special effort to raise children up to the same standard of moral training.

"However, the standards of training and the goals do not change with personality differences. Temperament differences are not an acceptable excuse for sin . . . The training of children should be characterized by the same standard of moral excellence regardless of their personality, temperament, or gender" (*Let the Children Come Along the Virtuous Way,* Leader's Guide, pp. 47-48).

One of the ways people differ is in how we express and receive love. Gary Chapman, in his *Five Love Languages* book series, describes these ways as (1) encouraging words, (2) acts of service, (3) gift giving, (4) quality time and (5) physical touch and closeness. Although all of these forms should be used, parents can most effectively love their child by identifying and using his or her primary love language.

Our time is the most valuable gift we can give to our children.

Sociologist Mark Warr of the University of Texas explained that recent studies "raise serious questions about the emphasis on quality time so prevalent today. Although quality time is surely desirable, the quantity of time spent with the family is not irrelevant. Contemporary arguments notwithstanding, small amounts of quality time may not be sufficient to offset the criminogenic aspects of peer culture to which adolescents are commonly exposed" (*Family in America,* February 1994).

While spending quality time with children is a noble goal, many parents don't really understand what makes this type of time different. Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo in their *Let the Children Come Along the Virtuous Way* parenting program define quality time as "an activity that promotes communicating and sharing" (Leader's Guide, p. 79).

According to this definition, many activities such as going to a movie or playing games are not really quality time. In fact, the Ezzos "challenge the contemporary notion of quality time and quantity time with the view that time is not the best measurement, but the caliber of relationship is. This can be gauged by how often children turn to Dad for advice and counseling" (Leader's Guide, p. 91).

Real quality time is time when children open up to their parents, revealing what they are thinking and asking for their advice. These special times can't just be ordered up on demand. They often occur as unscheduled events and can come at inopportune times. But wise parents will do all they can to listen and respond to their children with the utmost love and respect when these special times do occur.

Of course, regular time spent with parents can also be valuable. Ideally, children should spend enough time with their parents to see them working around the home as well as enjoying special occasions. By working with their parents, youth learn how to work. By doing a good deed for someone with their parents, they learn how to give to others. When kids see Dad give Mom a kiss and observe both parents treating each other with respect, they learn how a loving marriage works.

While some adults may not rate these things as quality time, the reality is that they are essential for the healthy development of socially mature children. (For some ideas on how parents can create quality time with their children, see

"Creating Quality Time," page 30.)

The role of discipline

An important part of teaching is discipline, which involves guidance, training, molding one's character and punishment. Punishment by paddling or spanking is a controversial subject in many societies. Some parents believe in it; others are adamantly against it.

The educational system is a major factor in this ongoing debate. Corporal punishment has virtually disappeared from many public schools. In some countries, governments have outlawed it completely.

The Bible speaks on this issue (Proverbs 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14), but it does not sanction abuse, as some would argue. Nor should the passages cited here be understood to imply that this is the only effective means of discipline.

An important point to remember is that there are other ways to administer punishment. Verbal correction, removal of privileges, restricting freedoms and adding extra chores are a few. Sometimes such methods work well, and some may be more effective with one child than another. Some children are more sensitive and respond to scolding. Others require bolder steps to teach the lesson. The *result* is the important thing. A godly principle is to use only as much punishment as is required to achieve the needed result.

God's discipline

Consider that God chastises Christians out of love for them. Notice Hebrews 12:5-11: "And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children —'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.'

"Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live?

"For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:5-11, NRSV).

The preceding passage from Hebrews quotes Proverbs 3:11-12, comparing God's correction of us as His children to human parents disciplining their children out of love and concern for them.

These verses teach us several vital principles regarding discipline. From them we learn:
(1) God disciplines in love.
(2) Discipline is not rejection but part of our maturing and growth.
(3) Discipline produces respect.
(4) Discipline produces good fruit and righteousness.

The Greek word for "discipline" in the passage in Hebrews includes the concepts of education and training, corrective guidance and corrective punishment. Proper child rearing involves all of these elements of training and focuses on the long-term benefits to the child.

Another biblical principle that parents should consider when evaluating methods of discipline is expressed by the apostle Paul: "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves" (Romans 13:1-2). That being so, parents should understand that some disciplinary practices recommended in Scriptures may be restricted by local, state or national laws.

What about hurting their feelings?

Some parents are opposed to corrective discipline because it hurts their children's feelings. Yet this is what discipline is supposed to do. Hebrews 12:11 explains that there is a "painful" aspect to discipline.

Family psychologist John Rosemond affirms this principle, saying, ". . . Discipline does not have to hurt a child physically in order to 'leave its mark,' but it must always hurt the child's feelings, otherwise it is worthless." Continuing, he adds, "Without that pain, a conscience will never form" (ParentingbyTheBook.com/essay_4.htm). (For additional understanding regarding children's feelings and discipline, see "Discipline With Encouragement" on page 27 and "The Value of Consequences" on page 29.)

Blessing of responsibility

The Bible tells us that children are wonderful gifts, truly blessings from God (Psalm 127:3). Yet they need guidance and instruction. They each need the special one-on-one care and teaching that only parents can give.

Bringing up children from helpless babes to responsible, moral adults is perhaps the greatest responsibility we can have in this life, and it can bring great rewards. The blessing for doing so is twofold. First, children derive all the benefits from living in a godly home and being taught God's ways. Second, we parents become spiritually mature as we struggle with ourselves and the challenges of raising godly children in an ungodly world.

Being a wise and loving parent is a challenging responsibility that helps us prepare for being part of God's eternal family. May we and our children fulfill the wonderful destiny God has in store for each of us!

Family Resources for You and Your Children

To encourage you as a parent, be sure to subscribe to *The Good News* magazine (www.gnmagazine.org), which regularly features biblically based articles about marriage and family life.

In addition, *Vertical Thought* (www.verticalthought.org), a magazine for those aged 12 to 22, is published quarterly to help young people think on godly thoughts from above as they further their education and develop life skills. The online version of the magazine has additional articles and answers to questions relevant to this age group.



The United Church of God, which produces this publication and the other resources listed in this box, also has Sabbath School lessons for younger children and Teen Bible Study Guides available for parents and teachers. These lessons are available at www.ucgyouth.org. Subscriptions to the magazines may be requested online or from our office nearest you.

A Foretaste of Tomorrow

"... The marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

The desire for a happy, lasting marriage blessed with children who grow up to be successful, morally responsible adults is truly the universal dream. Of course, we come by this dream quite naturally. As part of God's creation, we are reflecting the very plan God Himself is fulfilling as He builds His own family.

Jesus Christ came to do His part in helping us "become children of God" (John 1:12). Reflecting on our wonderful destiny, the Bible speaks of us as coheirs with Christ of the coming Kingdom of God (Romans 8:17; James 2:5). This transition from human flesh and blood to immortal spirit begins with the return of Jesus Christ to earth and the establishment of the Kingdom of God over all nations (Revelation 11:15).

The next step will be for Jesus to marry His Bride. "And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints" (Revelation 19:6-8).



The happiness and training God offers us through marriage and family is best experienced in harmony with God's instructions.

To help us prepare for this magnificent future, God has allowed us to experience, through marriage and family, a foretaste of this wonderful time. God's desire is that we live abundant lives filled with happiness and success (John 10:10).

Yet the happiness and training God offers us through marriage and family is best experienced in harmony with God's instructions and guidance. If you want happiness and success now as well as in the life to come, *choose God's way.*

Get in sync with His laws and directions. As you yield your life to Him, you will experience the richness of God's way and some of the greatest human joy possible. Here's to your marriage and family as well as your being part of the coming family of God!

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