

Observations and Experiences Regarding Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage (2)

For a decade or more years in our country, the divorce rate has been about fifty to fifty-two percent, i.e., about fifty to fifty-two out of every one hundred marriages end in divorce. This is a sad and sobering moral and spiritual problem to those of us who are Christians and believers in God's will and laws regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and who were born into and reared in families where marriage was held in honor, where our parents lived in faithfulness and devotion to each other, and maintained the marriage ties in love and respect until death separated them one from the other (Heb. 13:4; Gen. 2:18-25; Matt. 19:3-9; Rom. 7:1-4). Divorces in such numbers (fifty percent; one-half of all marriages) are an amazing and staggering social, political, legal, and spiritual phenomenon and problem, with all the attendant ills of hatred, violence, illegitimacy, adultery, abortion, alcohol, drugs, public welfare, crime, and the deteriorating spiritual and moral climate of common decency and acceptable behavioral standards.

All faithful preachers and elders of age and experience have taught God's will to many people for many years regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. We have all observed the heartaches, the traumas, the sadnesses, the emotional distresses, the tears, the loneliness, the perplexities, the anxieties and fears of children as they witness their parents misbehaving and separating, and all the wounds inflicted when "breaking up and starting over" is a stark, unwanted reality and necessity, after one has invested so many years of life, labor, love, and legacy in another person. There is nothing nice or pretty about separations and divorces. It is a heart-rending, soul-damning experience in most cases. Fortunate and blessed, indeed, are the marriage partners who will keep their vows of faithfulness and commitment to each other and to our Father in heaven and to our Saviour, Jesus the Christ. Fortunate and blessed, indeed, are the parents who are spared and who escape the terrible tragedy of seeing their children marry and then divorce, the parents being helpless to intervene and to salvage the marriage which may have begun with such fanfare, hopes, promises, and prospects.

Through all these years of preaching and twice serving as one of the elders where I preached, I have had many, many occasions to teach, preach to, talk with, and discuss many marital questions and problems of people. Any preacher of my age and experience could "write a book" relating the stories, incidents, events, and circumstances of the many, many marriage problems that we have encountered in working with, observing, and listening to people. There are the basic essentials that we always teach and insist upon, that marriage is a lifetime covenant and commitment, that death itself is the only honorable and truly godly way that a marriage is ever dissolved, and that the only *cause* and *reason* ever for a divorce is because of *adultery* committed by a husband or wife, and that only the *innocent, guiltless, moral* companion, who has kept his/her vows, has the permission and concession from the Lord to reject and repudiate the immoral companion and marry someone else. I have always stressed two other matters: (1) that the guilty, immoral, adulterous husband/wife has no permission and concession from Jesus our Lord to ever remarry, and (2) that the innocent, moral, guiltless companion in a divorce, where adultery has been involved and is the *cause* of the divorce, must be *absolutely sure* that he/she did not contribute to (by words, attitudes, deeds, failures to do his/her duties and meet the needs of the immoral companion) the delinquency and unfaithfulness of the guilty companion. Sometimes the innocent is not so innocent, and sometimes the guilty is more guilty than has ever been made known, except to God Almighty! I have refused to baptize a person, in a few cases, because I knew beyond any doubt that the person was an impenitent adulterer. Sometimes, as an elder, I, along with fellow-elders, have refused fellowship in a local church to someone who was obviously and clearly "living in adultery." Possibly there were times when fellowship should have been extended to a person who was denied fellowship, and possibly there were times when fellowship in a congregation ought not to have been granted when it was. There can never be one hundred percent accuracy in dealing with human problems. There are no "Solomons" when it comes to dealing with marriage problems, even though you might conclude, by reading some of the writings of some of the brethren, that there are present day, self-anointed "Solomons" among us, with all the answers. The real and only "Solomon" in the Scriptures made a "mess" (as brother W.R. Jones used to say) of his life and his heart was turned away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-13). Through the years I've noticed that some folks who have had the most difficult and disastrous marriage

problems are the hardest and most adamant in dealing with the problems of others. Our Father in heaven tells us not to do that (Matt. 7:3-5; Gal. 6:1-5).

Moral and marriage problems of people are the most difficult of all human problems that we have to deal with in life: in our own personal, individual lives, in our relationship with our own husband/wife and learning to live with our companion as we are taught (Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; Col. 3:18-21), in the courtships and marriages of our children, in the marriages of brethren, friends, and neighbors, whom we may have occasion to teach and/or discuss their difficulties with them. There is no man who has all the answers to everyone's marital difficulties. Some may think they do, especially preachers, but they do not, the reason being that we cannot know the hearts and motives of people, their deeds and attitudes, their words and conduct in their marriages. All we can do is listen and take someone's word for what they say, understanding that even the person with the problem(s) may be, and probably is, biased and does not know, remember, and realize *all* that has been said and done to create the problems in their marriage.

In these fifty-seven years of preaching and working with people, I have only known three married couples who separated because they came to sincerely believe they were living in unscriptural, God-forbidden marriages. One couple separated, never divorced in a court of law, but continued to live in the same house, sleeping in separate bedrooms, refusing further co-habitation (so they avowed; I had no reason to doubt them, as only God and that couple really knew, and I didn't have to know), because they had to complete the rearing of two children still at home. One man and wife separated, never divorced in a court of law, lived in the same city, worshipped with the same congregation, remained friends, enjoyed their family, did not live in the same house, and said they never co-habited again. One man and wife divorced each other in a court of law, moved to different parts of the state, visited occasionally and remained friends, but never co-habited again, they said. Five of these six people are now dead. Only by teaching the word of the Lord ahead of time to people, to our children, to our young people, will we inoculate and immunize some (but not many) to the dangers and pitfalls involved in immorality and unfaithfulness to our marriage vows, and to the tragic consequences, for time and for eternity, of disobeying God and ignoring Jesus. Serving God and obeying his holy will is *always* from the heart, the *mind* of man. Teaching ahead of time, preventive instruction before courtship and marriage, is the only real and effective way to save souls from disastrous relationships and marriages. After the errors are made and the sins are committed, and the marriage counselors, lawyers, and judges are involved, then in one hundred out of ninety-nine cases (as brother N.B. Hardeman used to say) it is too late!

I grew up in a time, in the thirties, in which divorce was almost unheard of. In the little town of my early years, I can only remember two cases of divorce. I heard my parents, my maternal grandmother, and neighbors who would visit, talk about these folks in the community who had the problems. Everyone knew everyone else's business in that village, due to comparatively few people in the area; neighbors would visit neighbors on spring and summer evenings as there were no automobiles, no radios or televisions for sure, no electricity; plus the eight and ten parties to a telephone line (there were no "private lines" and folks could easily "listen in" on their neighbor's conversations); plus the two barber shops and the one "beauty shop" in the town were hotbeds of town news and gossip. It is interesting, to me at least, that the two cases of divorce were with couples named "Williams" (no relation), one of them being my mother's oldest sister.

My maternal grandmother was Frances Sherman Parker. She was born at Saltillo, Tennessee, a village on the banks of the Tennessee River, down the river (for here the river flows north) a short distance from Shiloh Battleground. She was born in 1865, shortly after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865. She was named after General William Tecumseh Sherman, the Union general who laid waste the state of Georgia and burned the path of destruction from Atlanta through the Carolinas to the sea. The Parkers, for the most part, were Republicans, very anti-slavery, and devout Methodists. In the war there were Parkers, of that family, who fought for the Union and for the Confederacy, uncles and cousins of my grandmother, a house divided against itself. When I was a little boy she would tell me stories of the war, of the Yankees coming, of the destruction to the countryside, of the stealing of the food and livestock, and the suffering of the people at the hands of the Yankees during the war and by the "carpetbaggers" who came later. She had heard some of these sad stories from her parents and some she remembered from her own childhood experiences.

When she was eighteen years old, she married John Henry Parrott of Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, born in Dalton, Georgia. They had five daughters, Ida Ann being the oldest and my mother being the youngest, born in October 1898. Some years later Ida Ann was married to Joe Williams. They had two daughters. In the early thirties Joe “took up with” another woman in that little town where we lived. He was openly “shacking up” with her. He wanted a divorce but “Aunt Ida” would not divorce him, as all that Methodist family did not believe in “the disgrace of a divorce.” Joe persisted in his adultery. He would not repent. He had rejected Ida, his lawful wife, and wanted to marry his “sweetie.” After some time Ida said he could have a divorce, provided he got the divorce “for adultery,” admitting his guilt. He did. He got the divorce on the grounds of his own adultery. He soon married his paramour. Ida was an innocent, put away, divorced woman. Jesus gave her the right to remarry. Soon afterwards she moved to Knoxville with her two girls, had a good job with the Tennessee Valley Authority, but never remarried. Her two daughters never married. Death has long-since called upon each person involved in that human tragedy and taken them away.

Jim Williams was the owner of one of the barber shops in the town. Jim’s wife was Minnie. She had a “beauty shop” in the back of the barber shop, the only “beauty parlor” in town. Jim “began courting” another woman. He was committing adultery with her. Jim wanted a divorce from Minnie. Minnie would not divorce him. She loved her sorry husband and wanted him to stop his philandering. He didn’t. Everyone in town was “on Minnie’s side.” “Old Jim Williams” was the most disliked, despised, and disfellowshipped man in town. His barber business suffered. “If Jim can’t see who his wife is, how can he see to cut a man’s hair?” Jim and Minnie continued to work in the same building, saw one another throughout every day, and spoke, but he “shacked up with” his woman-friend. Finally Minnie divorced him for adultery. Jim died within the year after the divorce in the court of men, but Jim had already long-since divorced Minnie in his mind and affection, “mental divorce” you could call it, I suppose. Minnie never remarried. She was one of the town’s best known, respected women. She could give the best “boy’s bob” haircut to a woman than any other “beauty operator” in those regions ‘round about in the nineteen thirties!

Back then, if you got a divorce, it had to be “for adultery.” The divorce papers and decree of the courts had to say, “For Adultery.” The Baptists and Methodists in that town, and area of Tennessee, were “as strong as horse radish” (or “as strong as Aunt Mary’s breath” [as W.R. Jones would have said it]) on that point. I didn’t know anything about the “Church of Christ” at that point in my life, except what I heard from my Methodist grandmother. She never cut her hair. It was long and beautiful, brushed every day, and “done up” into an attractive “bun” on her head. She was an elegant-looking, stately lady. She read her Bible every day. She would sit on our big, wide and long front porch, read the Bible, fuss about her girls, their husbands and her grandchildren, how some of them played with those “old spot cards,” and she often said that the “Campbellites and Johnson grass are taking the country,” and “that Church of Christ is bad.” When I obeyed the gospel in February 1946, “Granny” had been deceased for several months. When I first began hearing sermons and reading papers of the brethren, I learned they said the same things about divorce as I had heard in the Methodist Church, that divorce had “to be for adultery” and the divorce papers had to say so! I don’t ever hear that anymore. Now the divorce decree will say “irreconcilable differences” or “incompatibility” or “no fault” and my brethren say nothing about it! They are as silent as the tomb. What happened? What changed our minds and our preaching? Now it is popularly said that “one must know in his heart that adultery has been committed” (“mental divorce,” I suppose) for the divorce to be scriptural and it doesn’t really make any difference what the legal, divorce papers say. (To Be Continued)