

Mutual Debts in Marriage

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‘Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife to the husband’
(1 Corinthians 7.3).

The apostle Paul is responding to questions that had been asked him by the church of Corinth. We see this in his words: ‘Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.’

One of the questions evidently was, ‘Is it best not to marry?’ Perhaps another was, ‘Should there be sexual abstinence by married Christians?’ We cannot tell what the exact questions were, but Paul’s replies suggest they were along these lines.

When he says that it is good for a man not to touch a woman, we realise that he refers to marriage. He does not say it is better not to marry, or that to remain unmarried is a superior state, but only that it is good and acceptable in the sight of God. He will later show that the single state can have many advantages for the Lord’s service. It is good and wholesome and often a necessary and wonderful situation, and certainly was for someone like the apostle Paul.

As an apostle, living in difficult times, he travelled from place to place constantly. He was never anywhere for more than about three years, and then would move on. More often his stay in any place was much shorter. He constantly faced opposition and persecution. Can we imagine the state of mind of his wife, had he been married? She would have been constantly anxious, and her poor heart torn almost apart as the apostle endured all the rigours of his work. Why, when he returned home, what an alarming condition he would sometimes be in after ruthless beatings and savage treatment.

What are we saying – ‘when he returned home’? He did not have a home. The one whose words have been cherished by billions of believers throughout the Christian era did not have anywhere to call his own. He depended upon hospitality wherever he went, sometimes even living in the open. When we consider the hardships of Paul’s distinctive life, we see that being unmarried was for him a necessary act of commitment to the Lord.

If we are unmarried, the Lord will sustain us, and the Lord will mightily bless. So the apostle declares by the inspiration of God that the unmarried state is a noble one, which is blessed of the Lord.

But then Paul proceeds: ‘Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.’ Of course, the more normal condition is to be married. Don’t ever forbid marriage, the apostle says in *1 Timothy*. He warns that in the last days people will arise who will forbid marriage. They are false teachers, who get their ideas from seducing spirits, and teach doctrines of devils. They speak lies in hypocrisy. Paul says these fierce things about people who discourage or forbid marriage.

While it may sound as though the apostle makes the single state superior to marriage, he quite plainly does not. Marriage is ordained of God, and is the general condition of men and women, and Paul teaches so. But he emphasises that both single and married states are blessed by God.

We note that Paul says marriage is in order to avoid fornication, but elsewhere he gives much grander reasons for it. Here he only states an obvious moral purpose, but he does so in a curiously expanded and very beautiful way.

This is a case where we need not only to read but to ‘hear’ his words: ‘Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.’ The last

two phrases employ all the same words with the exception of two, and by this, Paul draws attention to a central feature of marriage. Think of it! – ‘his own wife’, ‘her own husband’, to possess. She belongs to him, and he belongs to her. Each is for the other a precious possession, one to be held closely to, one to be valued, esteemed, appreciated and loved. ‘His own...her own’ to guard. My only one.

In *Genesis 2* we read how Eve was made from Adam’s side, and he uttered the words, ‘This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.’ Do we think he was speaking only biologically, and making an obvious physical observation? Or do we realise that while he uses the language of a literal biological fact, he is actually expressing his deepest feelings? This is what he thinks of Eve, and not merely a biological observation.

And while it is not literally true for us today, husbands and wives should be able to say of each other, ‘She is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.’ These words express the closeness of the possession. ‘Her concerns and her pains are mine, just as though they were really mine.’ ‘His concerns and his pains are mine, just as though they were really mine.’

Before proceeding to mutual debts in marriage, we must comment on the words, ‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman.’ Although this is a euphemism for marriage, at the same time it contains literally true wisdom. Be careful of modern ‘culture’. Young people particularly should be aware that the excessive degree of touching in present-day society is a new thing. It was never like this before.

Until recent days a man did not touch a woman, except to shake her hand. But the increasingly debased physical, fleshly culture of recent years has introduced considerable touching across the sexes, outside marriage. Hugging, feeling and kissing is now a normal feature of our society. No longer only the affectation of show-business people, it now extends to politicians and everyone else in the public eye. However, traditional respect for the opposite sex regards all this touching as indelicate, impolite, and even bordering on the coarse. It is both overfamiliar and extremely unwise. We believe that many people touch across the sex divide innocently, assuming they are only showing friendly behaviour, but many people do so to gain carnal excitement. We assert that Paul’s statement contains literal wisdom.

Our culture used to frown upon familiar touching across the sex divide as disrespectful, impertinent, and improper, and we should still do so today. If people behave too freely in these matters, many will (and do) soon fall into the sin of making unclean assessments.

We move now to another intentionally over-worded statement of the apostle, the great words – ‘Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.’ What precisely is due benevolence? This is the translation of the martyr William Tyndale, which, like much of the New Testament, was adopted by the King James translators.

The word ‘due’ literally refers to a debt due for payment, or a duty. What is owed is benevolence, a word missing from some ancient manuscripts, but firmly included in the Majority Text, and the Received Text of the Greek New Testament. Some modern versions of the Bible hasten to omit the word, with their tendency to ‘dumb down’ their rendering. By doing so they can make the entire passage speak about sex and sexual relationships. The world (and the tabloids) when it talks about marriage, tends to talk only about sex, but the Bible talks about more profound matters also. It is so in this seventh chapter of 1 Corinthians, where the apostle does not come to sexual relationships until after he has spoken about husband and wife possessing each other, and paying a mutual debt of benevolence. The inspired Word puts these important and precious things right at the beginning, because marriage is far more than a sexual relationship, important as that may be.

Due benevolence is a debt of goodwill, or kindness in action. The New King James Version keeps the idea of benevolence, except that it weakens the word a little, substituting ‘affection’. That is not quite strong enough, because affection can be only an emotion, but benevolence is emotion actively expressed in kind deeds.

We have a debt of kind attitudes and deeds and we must pay it. Our biblical debt or duty is at least sevenfold, and if any of us are not paying it, then we sin against the Lord.

Exclusive Commitment

The first element of this sevenfold obligation is very obvious: it is exclusive commitment. Marriage is a covenant involving promises that have to be kept. We have made vows and pledges of absolute security in exclusive commitment, and there must be no betrayal under any circumstances, however small. All temptations to disrespect or dislike each other have to be expelled instantly, and bad thoughts replaced with good thoughts. To consider anyone else as a more suitable or desirable spouse would be scandalous and evil, not to be entertained in the mind for a moment. We have a binding debt and duty before God to keep faith with each other throughout life, the only reasons for the discontinuation of this debt being those named in the Scriptures.

Part of keeping faith is deep respect for each other and our union, and this means that we never talk about each other to a third party concerning personal, private matters or criticisms. We never betray or embarrass one another. Some people do this, but they are very foolish, behaving like superficial worldlings. They make complaints about their husband or their wife, about even quite intimate things, and things that should ever be kept strictly between them. They speak so lightly to third parties. This is a form of betrayal that greatly weakens the God-given bond, and is a dereliction of faithfulness.

The Duty of Care

The second obligation in our sevenfold debt is the biblical duty of care. We are to care for each other. Sometimes good people, when they have been married for a number of years, forget to care for each other, especially if they are both fairly strong and capable people. They leave the other to stand on his or her own feet, and they get on with their lives, just keeping half-an-eye on the other. This is not enough, because we have a duty of loving and thoughtful care. We have a debt to protect, encourage and comfort each other whenever necessary, helping each other in our different tasks. Often there may be far too little help flowing toward the other. There may be insufficient observation, awareness, understanding, and assistance.

This duty of care includes effort to potentiate the gifts of the other for the Lord's service, and this we have included later in this article.

The Duty to Love

The third obligation in this sevenfold debt is the duty to love. We must do all that is needed to keep the flame of love alive. Love is not an automatic emotion that survives by itself, but one that has to be exercised and expressed. If neglected, it soon grows cold.

'Husbands, love your wives,' says the apostle repeatedly in Ephesians 5. Do we fail to express love and to communicate it? If so, we are not paying our debt, and we are offenders before God. In the world people may say, 'I no longer love him,' as if it cannot be helped, and their marriage is all over. But love is to a very great extent a choice, and unless some great sin intervenes, love should never be allowed to fall and fail.

Love begins with appreciation and never-failing courtesy. It proceeds to great fondness and acts of kindness. It then values, treasures and reflects on its object, so that the sacred bond of possession may be forged. It must never cease to be expressed in these same terms.

Husbands are commanded to love their wives as Christ loved the Church, which is with sacrificial love; a love that never ceases to actively bless.

To keep love alive, certain sins must be particularly avoided, such as self-indulgence. If we

think much about our own woes and problems, or hobbies and delights, or pursuits and objectives, we will not have much emotional energy left to love wife or husband. Similarly, self-pity drains all reserves of real feeling for another person. It may be that someone has had a hard time in life with many misfortunes, but if such a person does not firmly ration reflection, and instead falls into constant regret, love will be unable to prosper for another person.

Pride also spoils love, because it places a person centre-stage in his or her life, so that no one else matters very much. All available emotion is spent on the fortunes, accomplishments or setbacks of number one. To mis-spend the currency of emotion is to be incapable of real love. (Readers will appreciate we are using language poetically not scientifically.)

The Duty of Spiritual Care

Our fourth obligation in this sevenfold debt is that of spiritual care. God will hold us responsible for the level of spiritual care we give. This begins with prayer for each other, and prayer begins with praise. If we sincerely praise and thank God for our husband or wife, we will be unlikely to fall into foolish, selfish feelings of bitterness against one another. As far as possible we should perceive the good in each other, and pray for each other's well-being, spiritual blessing, health, happiness and success in work, parenting and service for the Lord. Thank God for first love, and every major blessing experienced together along the journey of life. Then read the Word together and speak of spiritual things.

Husbands, wives, do you talk about spiritual things? It can so easily happen between husbands and wives, after a few years, that they come to know each other's views so well that they have nothing left to say to each other. Accordingly, conversation becomes restricted to earthly needs. Nevertheless, we have a debt, a duty to stir up good spiritual interest and discussion. This may range across specific topics and doctrines, or the needs of God's cause either in our own church, or nationally, or overseas, or it may be about trends which must be prayerfully responded to, or our own efforts to reach and intercede for certain people. Supremely, we are to encourage each other in dedication and devotion to Christ, and appreciation of his power and purposes.

The Other's Service

Our fifth obligation in the sevenfold debt is to enable or potentiate the spiritual service of the other. A husband must say, 'I have to facilitate spiritual service for us both.' Paul says, 'Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men,' and he is addressing both free citizens and slaves. Clearly he does not mean that slaves should abandon the masters who owned them, but that as willing bondslaves of Christ, their highest priority, whatever their situation, is to be of service to him.

We 'serve' employers, our families, our homes, but for both husband and wife our highest priority is the service of Christ. Often a husband is engaged in the Lord's service, and is very occupied, blessed, greatly appreciated and fulfilled. But what about his wife? What has he done to enable her to be useful to the Lord beyond the care of the family? We have a debt to assist each other in this, and not to deny the other the full purpose of their salvation.

Sometimes neither husband nor wife are useful to God, because they have wanted too much from the material world, perhaps too expensive a car or home, or too high a station in life, so that all their strength and effort goes into business, advancement and accumulation. They have done very well financially, but neither is really serving the Lord, or maybe only one is, because they have not aimed at the right goal. If they had not been so ambitious, or drawn into worldly advancement, they would have been able to dedicate more time to seek avenues of Christian service in the church. How much happier they would have been! Far better not to have quite such a dizzy position in life, and to be in the service of Christ.

Husbands should say, 'My great aim is to facilitate Christian service for us both, not just to please myself.' While the Lord has ordained headship in the family, both husband and wife are equal in his sight, and one should not discount and be indifferent to the calling of the other.

A Duty to Give Pleasure

Our sixth obligation in the sevenfold debt is to give pleasure to each other. 'Do I make my wife or my husband happy?' This is an essential part of the benevolence which is due. 'Do I make life agreeable? Do I give companionship and friendship, saying good things, bringing good news and speaking of heartwarming matters?

'Or am I at the other extreme, so busy that I do not give him or her a second's thought or a minute's time? We seldom talk substantially or lift each other's feelings and hopes.' This would be a terrible situation! Let us ask ourselves, 'Do I give friendship, or do I inflict heavy moods on my wife or husband?'

Couples do, of course, share burdens, this being one of the blessings and privileges of marriage. But they must not do this all the time, for that would be intolerably selfish. If a husband off-loaded his troubles and fears perpetually, always grumbling and groaning, or if his wife did so, life would never be happy, and one would never be a welcome person to the other. The sharing of troubles has to be rationed. Think of something good for a change; something nice. Never rehearse aches and pains at length. Shoulder the burden if you can with the Lord's help, and do not unfairly expect the other to have to bear the burden. Remember we have a mutual duty of encouragement, to lift each other up, as a debt due in marriage.

A Duty to Shape

Our seventh obligation in the sevenfold mutual debt due in marriage is the duty to shape each other. Please note, it is a duty to shape each other. If the shaping is in one direction only, then it is an imposition, a heavy load and a painful experience. If he is always putting her straight, or she is always putting him straight, and it is not a sensitive mutual activity, it is likely to produce arrogance in the one and bitterness in the other. We are to influence each other's behaviour with courtesy, kindness and gentleness, meekly taking the shaping as well as imparting it.

Martin Luther famously called marriage the school for character, and so it is. Are we too proud to accept advice and help from our spouse? Or do we complain of the behaviour of husband or wife out of ill temper, or unreasonable impatience? Shaping must be effected with patience, because many of the complaints people have against each other should never be raised, but covered with love and forgetfulness.

There is usually a wide gap between every husband and wife in terms of their gifts as well as the way they think. They have their strengths in different areas, and they have different personalities. We obviously need great affection and also great patience with each other. If one is constantly irritated by the other it is probably due to pride; an ugly and intolerant pride which fails to recognise the other's gifts, capabilities, sensitivities and discernment, and which cannot adjust to reasonable human variations. Let us pray to get rid of this pride in marriage, for it is a deadly spoiler, and let us learn to love even perceived innocent imperfections of manner and thought.

Our Incentive

Debts, duties, and obligations are the essence of due benevolence. Notice again the deliberately cumbersome form of words used by Paul – 'Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.' It is a two-way debt.

We conclude with a further reference to *1 Corinthians 7.23* – 'Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men.' Here is the great incentive for paying our mutual debts, so that our

marriage union may be deep and beautiful, and instrumental in the service of Christ. We were slaves to condemnation and to hell, and to increasing inward corruption, and to twisted, false ideas. We were slaves to ultimate tragedy and loss, and yet we were purchased out of it all.

Suppose you ran a business, which was not a limited liability company, and so you were unable to escape from your debts. You owned it wholly, but the business failed and sank into serious debt. You were about to be made bankrupt and lose your business, your home, and everything else. But then someone came along (it would never happen in real life) and just because they felt sorry for you, they said, 'I will buy your business.' Your business was worthless, you owed so much, but your benefactor said, 'I will buy it for the value of the debt, however great, so that your record is clean. I know I am paying vastly over the odds for the business, but not only will I buy it, I will buy you much better premises and set you up again, no matter what the cost.'

'But I failed,' you would reply, 'I was a failure in my business.' 'Nevertheless,' insisted the benefactor, 'I will rescue you.'

Christ has purchased us out of eternal debt. We have been freed from condemnation, and given an altogether better life, and a glorious eternal home, by the precious blood of Christ. How readily we should now pay our due debts to the one God has given us for the journey of life – our very own wife or our very own husband. Are we meeting our obligations? May the Lord bless and enable us to do so.