

Spiritual Marriage

There is a riddle in Romans seven, the difficulty of which has permitted a wide range of interpretations, and has made it a theological bone of contention which will not likely disappear through my efforts. However, as in most hard-shelled nuts, once it is cracked, rich rewards are forth-coming. Let us take the opening illustration.

- 1 *Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth?*
- 2 *For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.*
- 3 *So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.*
- 4 *Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.*
- 5 *For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death.*
- 6 *But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter (Romans 7:1-6).*

The apostle is continuing in his orderly progression of presenting the gospel which first speaks of the righteous wrath of God toward the godless depravity of man, the futility of justification by Judaism or by works, to the glorious free justification in the substitutionary death and resurrection of Christ. In Romans six, without leaving the theme of justification by faith, he has destroyed the arguments of those who would wish to use their freedom as a license to sin. Now in Romans seven he shows the way of victory to those who have truly be justified, but have not found that Christ not only delivers us from the penalty of sin, but from its power as well.

His illustration takes two very ordinary figures with which all men should be familiar. The first is the figure of law. Law is a term that crops up often in Paul's writings, and we are likely to ask, "What law?" Is he speaking of Mosaic law, civil law, natural law, or some other law? In this case I think we can safely say that he is speaking of any and all law. For he tells us that law has dominion over all living men as long as they are alive. Law is the one thing no one can escape, no matter how hard he struggles.

And struggle we do. We rebel against our parents, yet when we escape their law, we find ourselves under the law of employers, schools, civil governments, marriage. We cannot escape the laws of science, mathematics, the moral restraints of the conscience, the unwritten code of the community, the laws that demand certain behaviour and care for our bodies.

Law assesses and exacts penalties for breaking it. It can punish to the point of death, but can go no further than that.

Because the law makes one personally responsible for his behaviour, it demands self struggle. We are required to diligently work and strive to stay within its confines. And however righteous and reasonable the law may be, it knows nothing of mercy and leniency. It is rigid and inflexible, bound by its own letter.

Only death can release one from law's obligations. Nothing else on earth can hide us from its jurisdiction. Naught but the grave can shield us from its curses. But death *does* effectually set us free from all law. It has no more power or influence over one who has ceased to live within its realm.

The second figure Paul puts before us is marriage. This is a figure that is often used in the Scriptures to portray the relationship between God and His people, between Christ and His church. It is imminently suitable for such a picture for a number of reasons, which reasons also make it suitable for Paul's purposes now.

Marriage speaks of union. A man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife and the two become one flesh. There is no higher expression known of the unity of two persons than that of marriage. The two mutually share all things pertaining to this present life. They share all its rewards, all its penalties, all its blessings with all its curses. And all their works and undertakings are the works and undertakings of one. Whatever the husband does that is good, the wife reaps benefits from. Whatever he does that is not good, she shares in his disgrace and loss. Also the husband shares both the glories and the reproaches of his wife.

Marriage also speaks of subjection, of authority, of obedience and responsibility. When two minds must meet in one activity, if both are not in total agreement, one must exercise authority and the other must submit. But when one person takes the responsibility of overseeing in an authoritative sense, he also incurs the responsibility for the personal welfare of his charge.

Marriage speaks of salvation, protection, provision. The husband is the wife's protector and provider, and though he is not her saviour in the spiritual sense, he is certainly the saviour of her body as the Scriptures bear witness (Ephesians 5:23).

Marriage speaks of fidelity, faithfulness. There must be commitment one to the other. And if the marriage is to be right, there must be absolute trust and confidence.

Marriage speaks of fruitfulness. "Fruitful" is the second of the recorded words of God to the newly created man and woman. "Be fruitful." The marriage does not exist that does not bear some kind of fruit. Even if the couple are childless, there is an outgoing consequence of the union which is a direct result of the combining of the personalities of the two people.

Finally, we note that marriage, like law, is utterly canceled by death. The resurrection-denying Saducees failed to comprehend this, questioning the Lord about who a remarried widow should belong to in the resurrection. The Lord made it clear that

marriage commitments do not survive the grave. Whatever union or claims or responsibilities may have existed in a marriage, when death removes one partner, the survivor is free without any encumbrances whatsoever. This is a most important point in the Apostle's illustration.

Now, how are we to apply the truths of law and marriage to the spiritual concepts that are being sought? Who is married to whom? Who dies? Who is the old husband and who is the new one? Who is the wife?

Because we are repeatedly being told of the impotence of the law to save, regardless of how good and just it is, and that the law can do nothing but condemn us and bring us down to death, we are likely to think that it is the law to which we are married and the law which dies in order that we might be free from death.

But that is not the case at all. We are not married to the law. Nor does the law die. It abides forever. Law can no more be abolished than the person of God, since all law exists because He exists. It is law that keeps us married while both parties are alive. Law has married the two persons, and therefore law demands everything that marriage calls for.

We should take a moment here to note that when Christ and the church are pictured in the analogy of marriage, the Lord is always the man and the church the woman. So we are obliged to speak of the redeemed in the feminine sense, man as well as woman.

There is one fact that we can count on as certain. Christ is the new Husband. And we can be sure that the wife who has come to this new Husband is the believer, the person who has been justified by faith.

Then who is the old husband who has died? It cannot be the totality of the person of the redeemed, since she must survive to marry Christ. The old husband is the "old man", flesh, the offspring of Adam. No one else can fit the picture, and no one else fits it so perfectly. It is the natural man, the person who has lived and reigned in your life all your existence prior to your new birth.

This old husband is solid liability with no assets at all. He is a confirmed sinner, unable to do anything acceptable in God's sight. He is totally bent on evil and wholly adverse to righteousness.

He comes from a family that has been sold into Satanic bondage. The devil has free access to his will and affections keeping him a slave to sin.

What, then, can the wife expect from this marriage? She is in union with a hopeless, intractable rebel. She, therefore, is bound to all that he is, and must share in all consequences of such. The penalties and curses for his sins are hers. His evil works and shemings are hers also. This impotent wretch is all her hope of salvation, protection and provision, so she shall have none. All he will provide for her is failure and misery. Yet she is bound to be faithful to him. She cannot be married to Christ as long as he lives.

What is she to do? She cannot improve him, and the law will not allow her to divorce him. She cannot kill him herself, since she is sworn to cherish and obey him. She can do nothing contrary to his will and desire, since he rules her.

Since both the marriage and the law of marriage can be annulled only by death, if the wife is ever to be free to marry Christ, her hope is only in the death of the first husband. This is accomplished by Christ, Who took the old man to the Cross in His body and brought him to judgment and death, leaving him in the grave when He rose to claim His bride.

This is the clear and plain meaning of the illustration. Notice the comparison of the two deaths in Romans 7, verses 3 and 4: *"but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead."*

We are told in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 *"For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again."* When one person dies as a judicial substitute for the other's crimes, then the other is legally dead. His debt to justice is satisfied and the law has no claim upon him. That is our justification in Christ. Now, when the One Who dies in our place for our sin takes us to Himself as His Bride, and shares with us all that He IS as a living Husband, that is sanctification by union with Christ.

What, then, can the wife expect from this marriage? She is now in union with absolute righteousness, boundless love and mercy, eternal Deity, the Prince of Life in Whom is all power and authority. All His riches are hers. The rewards and honour for His obedience to the Father are imparted and reckoned to her account also. His glory is hers also. She needs none of her own. She is in absolute and loving subjection and obedience to this Husband. And why should she not be? He has assumed full responsibility for her temporal and eternal welfare. He is her Saviour in all things. He is able. He is her provider and protector and she shall never want for anything. He is the Faithful One, and she will safely trust in Him.

The two marriage situations are a picture of the two covenants, the one under grace and the other under law. The old husband, Flesh, Adam, is in irresistible union with you as long as you abide in unbelief. As long as you are in vital union with Adam, you are helplessly vulnerable to all that he is; and he has sold himself with his posterity to the devil. The powers of darkness have unhindered access to you through the flesh. Strive and struggle as you may, you will only bring forth failure, misery and death. A more complete list of the works of the flesh are given in Galatians 5:19-20. All of this keeps us under the condemnation of the law.

Under grace, Christ is our new husband. We are brought into vital union with Him by faith because we BELIEVE the truth of the death of our Old Man in His body on the Cross. Through Christ, by faith in Him, the Holy Spirit and His fruits flow freely to us so that instead of fruit unto death, we bring forth the fruits of the Spirit unto life (Galatians 5:22-23).

This is our true position under grace. But the problem comes when we realize that we are not bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit as indicated. In fact, to our dismay and horror, we discover that we are producing those wicked works of the flesh, even though we have sound reason to believe that we are under grace. What is wrong?

As in all marriages, adultery is always, always a possibility. Adultery is called marriage *infidelity*. One partner in the marriage is no longer *faith*-full. He has ceased to live in the faith he pledged. It is precisely such spiritual adultery that James addresses in Chapter 4:4, *"Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that friendship of the world is enmity with God?"* Such

language cannot be applied to those not in marriage union with Christ, for then there could be no adultery. Read Hosea 6:10 and 9:11-16 and see again the reality of spiritual adultery and its fruits unto destruction. When we cease to trust on Christ and reckon on our death with Him, we believe and trust on the arm of flesh again. We are experimentally living as if we were still under law and in the flesh. Consequently, we can do nothing but bring forth the adulterous fruits of fleshy union. When we *do* bring forth such fruits, we can be certain, to the extent of such fruits, we are living in unfaithful union to Christ and trusting the old husband.

Our justification is wholly by faith. But too often we regard our sanctification to be wholly of works. Works are involved, but if the works are to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit, they must spring forth from the same faith that brought us into vital justifying union with Jesus Christ. He Who is our righteousness is also our sanctification. We can no more trust the flesh for sanctification than we can justification. The Lord is our Enabler only as we believe the truth of the gospel. He IS all that we are willing to *believe* that He is.