

PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

The image shows two wedding rings resting on the pages of an open Bible. One ring is gold with a large diamond and smaller side stones, while the other is a plain silver band. The Bible's pages are visible, with some text like 'THE BIBLE' and 'CONCORDANCE' faintly visible in the background.

Biblical Guidance
from the Puritans

JAMES A. LA BELLE AND
JOEL R. BEEKE

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PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

We have seen that marriage is a divine ordinance which God has honored in several ways. We have also seen that God ordained marriage with several purposes in mind and is therefore pleased to bless it with several benefits.¹ Why, then, do so many marriages neither manifest this honor nor enjoy these benefits? The cause can most often be traced to those who marry without regard to the Lord of marriage. If we rush into marriage rashly, foolishly, and without seeking the Lord's blessing, then we cannot expect to find it the delightful experience it was intended to be.

Our entrance into marriage is the root and foundation of it. If the foundation is faulty, then the house cannot be stable; if the root is rotten, then the branches and fruit will be also. To procure the honor that the Lord has placed upon marriage and enjoy its benefits, we must approach the married state with due preparation and choose our spouses wisely.

1. Due Preparation

Most everyone understands the value of preparation. When we have an important task before us such as a test at school, a job interview, or a visit to the job site from a supervisor, we do whatever is necessary to prepare for it and not be caught off guard. But if we choose to “wing it,” one failure or embarrassment is usually enough to cure such indifference and teach us a valuable lesson.

Other factors can make preparation an absolute necessity. For example, the need for preparation increases in proportion to the effect the outcome will have on us and others. Some things that we do are relatively insignificant in comparison to others that have a rippling effect on us and those around us. Also, a limited opportunity may also determine how important preparation is. The incentive to prepare increases exponentially if we know we only have one shot at something.

Scudder argued for the value of preparation, saying, “Mariners learn their skill before they launch into the deeps; all artists study the theory before the practice; wise men are long in contemplation before they adventure upon action. It's a known rule, deliberation must be long where determination can be but once; and where there is no admission of second thoughts to reverse a former error, the first thoughts must be careful, that error be prevented.”²

¹ **We have seen...** – References are to chapters one and two in *Living in a Godly Marriage*.

² Henry Scudder (c. 1585-1652), *The Godly Man's Choice: or A Direction how single godly persons, who intend marriage, may make choice of a fit and meet yoak-fellow* (London: by Mathew Simmons for Henry Overton, 1644), iii-iv.

Marriage *warrants* preparation. It is “the tying of such a knot, that nothing but death can unloose.”³ It has a determinative effect on the joy or woe of our lives; and it is an institution upon which God has been pleased to bestow many precious blessings. Furthermore, marriage warrants *proportional* preparation. Without preparation for marriage, said Whately, we might as well try to fly without wings, walk without legs, and see without an eye.⁴ The right way of entering into the honorable state of marriage is “a matter of greatest consequence concerning man’s weal⁵ or woe in this life, according as it is well or ill done.”⁶

What kind of preparation, then, is necessary to secure a happy and godly marriage? Two things are absolutely necessary to lay the foundation for a comfortable enjoyment of marriage all your days. First, by God’s grace, you must choose God for yourself; and second, you must seek your spouse from God.

a. Choose God for Yourself

The blessings and honor of marriage depend upon honoring and glorifying God in it. The primary concern of a person entering marriage is to see that he, by grace, chooses God before choosing his spouse. “The personal covenant with Christ should precede the marriage covenant,” said den Ouden.⁷ “We must be married to Christ,” said Manton, “before married to one another; the marriage covenant should be begun and concluded between Christ and you.”⁸

What marriage requires of us is far beyond our natural abilities and strength. Husbands and wives need divine help and grace to fulfill their duties to each other. Furthermore, every blessing and comfort that marriage yields demands a response of praise and thankfulness to God. Therefore the first stone to be laid in the foundation for a good marriage is trusting in Christ as our Savior. In the dedicatory epistle to Henry Scudder’s treatise *A Godly Man’s Choice*, Jeremiah Whittaker wrote, “Before the Lord incline your heart to think of any choice [of a spouse] on earth, be entreated to make your choice in heaven, that the Lord Jesus may be the guide of your youth and so the God of your [old] age.”⁹

How can a man be a faithful husband to his wife if he lacks the example of Christ’s headship towards him (1Co 12:12-13, 27; Eph 5:25-27)? How can a man be a good father to his children if he fails to understand the example of God’s fatherhood? To lay the foundation for his faithfulness as a husband and father in marriage, a man must surrender himself to the love, care, and headship of Christ before he seeks a spouse. In the same way, how can a woman be a submissive and supportive wife to her husband if she is a stranger to submitting to and honoring Christ (Eph 5:22-23)? How can a woman be a faithful mother to her children if she is a stranger to the care, love, and nurturing that God gives to His children? To lay the founda-

³ William Secker (d. 1660), “The Wedding Ring,” in *The Nonsuch Professor* (Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1997), 265. See also *The Consistent Christian* by Secker, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁴ William Whately (1583-1639), *A Care-Cloth: or, A Treatise of the Cumbers and Troubles of Marriage* (London: Imprinted by Felix Kynngston for Thomas Man, 1624), i.

⁵ **weal** – happiness; prosperity.

⁶ Scudder, xiv.

⁷ P. den Ouden, *Liefde en Trouw bij de Puriteinen*, 3rd ed. (Houten, the Netherlands: Den Hertog, 2010), 22.

⁸ Thomas Manton (1620-1677), *The Works of Thomas Manton* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 2:165.

⁹ Scudder, iv.

tion for her own faithfulness as a wife and mother in marriage, she must surrender herself to the love, care, and nurturing of God before she seeks to be married.

Furthermore, though marriage offers incomparable benefits and comforts, it can also bring troubles and cares on a couple that are absent in the single life. How can a person be ready for the self-denial, service, sacrifice, and love required in marriage unless he is already accustomed to such conduct as a disciple of Christ (Mar 8:34)? How can a person exercise the forgiveness required in marriage unless he first experiences the forgiveness of God (Eph 5:32)? How can a person have the patience, kindness, and faithfulness required of a spouse and a parent unless he first possesses the Spirit of God (Gal 5:22-23)? How can a person exercise chastity and purity in the marriage bed unless the lusts of his heart are subdued by the beauty and kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ (Job 31:1-4)? How can a man or a woman venture into marriage without salvation, which both equips them for their duties and arms them against its troubles (Phi 4:13)?

It is therefore indispensable that we be married to Christ in salvation prior to marrying an earthly spouse. Our love for Him and our marriage to Him will not only guide our choices in pursuing a spouse but will serve as the root and ground of our marriages, causing them to bear fruit that honors God, to please our spouses, and to be witnesses to the world, all the while giving our marriages stability amidst all the storms and trials of life. “As touching your faith in Jesus Christ,” wrote Greenham, “understand that marriage is holy unto them only whose hearts are sanctified by faith in His name. And although God will always approve His own ordinance [of marriage], yet it must need prove hurtful in the end unto them who call not for His blessing.”¹⁰

b. Seek Your Spouse from God

The second thing necessary for a godly marriage is to seek your spouse from God. For if, as James 1:17 declares, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights,” and as Proverbs 19:14 testifies, “a prudent wife is from the LORD,” then good and fit spouses are held in God’s hand and must be sought from Him. God is, Scudder said, “the great Patron, in whose family are all the prudent, wise, virtuous, religious persons that are to be desired; and if thou wouldst have one of these, apply thyself to obtain His favor [and] so shalt thou find a good wife (Pro 18:22).”¹¹

Every goal has a way that leads to it. But, as Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” There are many crooked and indirect ways that may fulfill a man’s goal, but they include much trouble, regret, and unnecessary labor. Alternatively, there is also a way that will bring a man comfort and pleasure to his desired end (Pro 11:8; 21:23).¹²

What is the sure way that leads to a godly spouse and a happy marriage? Scudder advised: “Now if to marry, and to marry in the Lord, a wife and a good wife, one with whom thou may-

¹⁰ Richard Greenham (c. 1535 - c. 1594), “A Treatise of a Contract before Marriage” in *The Works of the Reverend and Faithful Servant of Jesus Christ M. Richard Greenham*, Second ed. (London: by Felix Kingston for Ralph Jacson, 1599), 281.

¹¹ Scudder, 3.

¹² Scudder, 1-2.

est begin thy days with joy, continue them in quiet, and end them with comfort. If this be the end of thy thoughts, then surely the most direct and straight way to obtain it will be to seek her of God.”¹³ Reyner said this “making God the beginning of our marriages” involves several considerations: “Seeking earnestly to God for counsel and direction therein; for guidance of our affection to a right object; for the choice of a fit yoke-fellow; for making the woman a comfortable help and the man a suitable head; expecting to receive one another as a special gift and token of favor from the hand of God.”¹⁴ A good and fit spouse is therefore the Lord’s gift to you and the Lord’s choice for you, not the fruit of your diligent search.

To encourage you to seek your spouse from God’s hand, consider the following truths. First, consider that God, the Searcher of all hearts (1Ch 28:9), is best able to guide and direct you to a good and fit spouse. Because our choices can only be made on the basis of appearance, which so often is not a true representation of the heart (e.g., 1Sa 16:6-7), it is necessary to seek the help of the One Who sees and knows the heart. As Scudder said, a good and fit spouse is “a flower that grows not in every garden, an herb that is not in every field; [one that] is not to be found in every house. You may seek long enough ere you find, and finding be deceived, unless God direct you.”¹⁵

Second, the Lord best knows you and your needs. A good marriage joins together two complementary people. And who knows what kind of a person will best complement you better than the Lord? Humbly submit yourself to the wisdom of the all-wise and all-knowing God (Job 36:5; Psa 147:5).

Third, seeking a spouse from the Lord is the easiest way to find one. How easily Adam found Eve! Not only did he sleep while she was in the making, but God Himself brought her to him (Gen 2:21-23). When we seek a spouse from the Lord we can leave the matter in His hands and, with confidence, peace, and patience, wait upon His leading. He will not disappoint those who wait upon Him (Pro 3:5-6; Psa 27:14). He will not lead astray those who seek Him, but will order their steps and establish their ways (Psa 37:23-24). Indeed, He will first make our match in heaven and then, without fail, lead us to our spouses and our spouses to us. “No marriages are consummated on earth, that were not first concluded and made up in heaven; and none are blessed here, that were not in mercy made there,” noted Gataker.¹⁶

Fourth, consider that no one has found a good and fit spouse in a better way than from the Lord’s hands. Many have found a rich spouse, a spouse of high social standing, a beautiful or handsome spouse, and a civil or kind spouse; but without the goodness and fitness which the Lord provides in a spouse, the other qualities soon prove vain and fade. Consider the anxiety, discontent, disappointment, and even shock that fill those who seek a spouse apart from God. Only those who seek a spouse from the Lord “enjoy much pleasure and quiet in seeking, contentment in finding, and comfort in the possessing.”¹⁷

¹³ Scudder, 2.

¹⁴ Edward Reyner (1600 - c. 1668), *Considerations Concerning Marriage: the Honor, Duties, Benefits, Troubles of It* (London: by J. T. for Thomas Newbery, 1657), 7.

¹⁵ Scudder, 2-3.

¹⁶ Thomas Gataker (1574-1654), *Certaine Sermons, First Preached, and After Published at several times, by M. Thomas Gataker* (London: by John Haviland for Phylemon Stephens and Christopher Meredith, 1637), 137-38.

¹⁷ Scudder, 8.

Fifth, acknowledge God's supreme governance over all things and submit to His guidance and direction in a matter that affects not only our happiness and obedience to Him (Eph 5:22, 25) but also the children we are to raise in His name (Mal 2:15). Scudder said, "If we rush into such weighty business and venture ourselves upon things of so great concernment without acquainting [God] with it, or seeking to Him for it, or imploring His aid and assistance for the accomplishing of it, what is it but to pluck our necks from His yoke, casting off all obedience and subjection to Him, as if we had no dependence upon Him; and therefore would [fly in] all directions from Him?"¹⁸

Sixth, however a marriage turns out, the only way we can take comfort in our choices is if we can say with all peace of conscience that our husbands or our wives were sought and received *from the Lord* (Pro 16:9; Pro 3:5-6). If your wife turns out to be the virtuous and godly woman that you sought, then "comfort will flow in on every side; great comfort will redound to you, that God was graciously pleased to bend His ear unto you and give you so favorable a pledge of His lovingkindness. Every time you cast your eye upon her, you may with rejoicing cast up your eyes to God, and say, 'Lo, this is the wife that Thou hast given me,' and bless Him in that you have so goodly an heritage."¹⁹

But if your wife turns out to be a troublesome and difficult woman, you still may find comfort, Scudder said, *if* you have "the inward testimony of your conscience, bearing you witness, that you did sincerely commit your way unto the Lord, and roll yourself upon Him for direction in it. Lo, here you may assuredly take comfort that all shall be for your good. He Who brought you to this condition, shall support you in it. He will either lighten the weight of your burden or strengthen the weakness of your shoulders."²⁰ On the contrary, continued Scudder, if this marriage was "a web of your own weaving," then you brought this cross upon yourself and must "lay your hand upon your mouth [and] patiently submit; repentance is fitter for your comfort."²¹

Seventh, if you sought your spouse from the Lord and can acknowledge His hand in your marriage, you will be enabled to be thankful to Him for your spouse and armed against the temptation to regret your choice. As Scudder wrote, "It will keep you from repenting of your match, from wishing that you had not married this person, and from wishing that you had married such and such. You cannot now say unto, or taunt one another with this, that I might have had such an one so beautiful, so personable, so rich, so well qualified. No, now you see you could have had none other; this is the man, this is the woman, that God has given me. You must say, 'I will therefore thankfully and contentedly satisfy myself in this my lot and portion.'"²²

Finally, consider the benefits of receiving a spouse from God's hands.²³ *First*, it will encourage you to give God all the glory for the comfort and delight you find in your spouse. We often forget that the hand behind all our blessings is the Lord's (Psa 103:2-5), and we do not sufficiently praise Him for His mercies. But when you receive your spouse from God's hands,

¹⁸ Scudder, 8-9.

¹⁹ Scudder, 9-10.

²⁰ Scudder, 10.

²¹ Scudder, 11.

²² Scudder, 70-71.

²³ Manton, 2:166-68.

your heart will be stirred to praise Him throughout marriage. *Second*, you have a greater obligation to glorify God in your marriage when you realize that your spouse is from Him, for it makes your marriage a stewardship from Him. Marriage is a “talent” that we must invest for His glory. *Third*, the crosses and trials of marriage will be lightened by knowing that you did not rush into this relationship blindly and passionately, but rather received your spouse from the Lord. He Who gave you a spouse will also support you in your marriage that it may work the good He intended for it. *Fourth*, it enables you to pray for the needs of your spouse, temporal or spiritual, as the one whom God gave to you. *Fifth*, it will help you part from each other at death more willingly when you acknowledge the Lord’s hand in your marriage. What He freely gives He is free to take away, and we may be comforted knowing that both the giving and taking are acts of His wisdom and His love.

In summary, the happiness of our marriages has much to do with whom we marry. If we are careless or sinful in our choices, we no doubt will regret them, for the Lord’s blessings will fly from us. Therefore we must seek our spouses from God if we wish to be thankful and content in marriage.

2. How to Seek a Spouse

How does one go about seeking a spouse from God? By the same means by which all other mercies are sought from God: prayer. “If Abraham’s servant prayed unto the Lord to prosper his business (Gen 24:12), when he went about to choose a wife for another,” wrote Smith, then “how should you pray when you go about [choosing] a wife for yourself, that you may say after, ‘My lot is fallen in a pleasant ground?’”²⁴

A spouse must be obtained from the hands of the Lord in response to fervent and directed supplication. As Chrysostom said, “When you are in search of a wife, flee to God; for He is not ashamed to act as your bridesman...When you are anxiously employed in seeking a husband, pray to God, and say, ‘Lord, bestow me as Thou wilt, and [me] on whom Thou wilt.’”²⁵ Ambrose put it this way: “Let [a man] ply the throne of grace with fervency of prayer; a good wife is a more immediate gift of God...Such a rare and precious jewel [as a godly wife] is to be sued and sought for at God’s mercy-seat with extraordinary importunity and zeal; and if she be procured at God’s hand by prayer, he shall find a thousand times more sweetness and comfort [in her], than if she be cast on him by an ordinary providence.”²⁶

What exactly should one ask of the Lord? Scudder suggested the following:²⁷

First, ask that God would give you wisdom and understanding so that when you meet a prospective spouse, your heart might not be distracted either by beauty, riches, or natural endowments, and thereby neglect what should be your main concern, namely, grace in the heart.

²⁴ Henry Smith (c. 1560- c. 1591), “A Preparative to Marriage,” in *The Works of Henry Smith* (Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker Publications, 2002), 1:13.

²⁵ *Puritan Sermons 1659-1689* (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts Publishers, 6 vols., 1981), 2:300n; quoted from Chrysostom (c. 349-407).

²⁶ Isaac Ambrose (1604-1664), “Family Duties,” in *Media: the Middle Things, in reference to the First and Last Things*, in *The Works of Isaac Ambrose* (London: Rowland Reynolds, 1674), 228.

²⁷ Scudder, 12-26.

“Do not first love, and then consider; but first consider, and then love. Chiefly fix your observation on the soul of the party,” Steele wrote.²⁸

Second, ask the Lord not to knit your affections to someone whose affections are not already knit to Him and that your love may not be given to one whose love is not given to Him. Since we may be deceived by a fair appearance, we must ask the Lord that He search and try our hearts and not allow our affections to be led astray by a “painted fire.”

Third, if after your affections go out toward another you discover that the truth of grace is not in his or her heart, then you must earnestly beg of God for grace to withdraw your affections from that person, lest you sinfully keep your affections upon one who will draw you away from the Lord. “Beg of God,” Scudder said, “that He Who subdues all things to Himself would subdue your affections and bring them into subjection to His will, that they might be like the Captain’s servant, to go and come at His pleasure.”²⁹

How can anyone hope to find a spouse from whom to expect pleasure and comfort and with whom to glorify God unless he or she first consults the Lord in much prayer? God is still the great and wise Matchmaker (Gen 2:22). Why would we even attempt to seek a spouse without His help and guidance (Pro 18:22)? Steele urged, “When you find that you are called to [marriage], be sure to recommend it earnestly to God by prayer, as Abraham’s servant did (Gen 24:12). In this way, you ‘acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths’ (Pro 3:6). No business [is] so critical, none so weighty; and therefore no business so calls for solemn and earnest prayer.”³⁰

Let us therefore go to God, Who gives to all men liberally and upbraids not (Jam 1:5), and ask Him not only to grant us a spouse but to match us to one who is fit for us. Let us go to God and ask Him that He would knit us to a spouse not merely by the ordinance of marriage but by the hand of His good, wise, and loving providence.³¹ For, as Manton wrote, “God will order things for the best, when we do not lead, but follow Him...and dare not undertake anything but what is agreeable to His will.”³² “It is a blessed thing,” he continued, “to be under God’s conduct, to be led on or led off by so wise, and powerful, and all-sufficient a guide; for such He delights to do them good, and takes pleasure in His resolutions to prosper them.”³³

3. How to Find an Appropriate Spouse

We must seek our spouses from the Lord by prayer, but we must also examine those whom He brings across our path to see if they are fit for us. That is to say, it is not enough to seek a spouse by prayer; we must also prayerfully seek a spouse. Our primary concern must be that God leads and guides us in our choices; but under the protection of His providence, we must look for the qualities in a person which make someone a fit companion.

²⁸ Richard Steele (1629-1692), “What are the duties of husbands and wives towards each other?” in *Puritan Sermons 1659-1689*, 2:300. Available from CHAPEL LIBRARY as *Duties of Husbands and Wives*.

²⁹ Scudder, 16. Cf. Matthew 8:8-9.

³⁰ Steele, *Puritan Sermons*, 2:300.

³¹ Gataker, 143. See *God’s Providence* by C. H. Spurgeon, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

³² Manton, 2:168.

³³ Manton, 2:168.

Two things must now occupy our concern. First, what distinguishes a *good* spouse? Second, what are the marks of an *agreeable* spouse? The Puritans were concerned that neither of those considerations be overlooked and that the former take precedence over the latter, since a person must first be qualified as a good spouse before considering agreeableness. Smith wrote, “When these [two considerations] are warily observed, they may join together and say, as Laban and Bethuel said (Gen 24:50), ‘The thing proceedeth from the Lord,’ and therefore we will not speak against it (Gen 24:50). How happy are those in whom faith, love, and godliness are married together, before they marry themselves!”³⁴

Many people bring trouble upon themselves because they reverse this order. They set their affections upon one who is unqualified to be a good spouse in hopes that love will right every wrong, but no amount of love can qualify someone who is unqualified. That is to say, no amount of love from us can turn their hearts towards God so that we might lawfully consider them.

a. The Mark of a Good Spouse

The mark of a good spouse is the presence of true saving grace or godliness, that is, a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. Those who lack this mark, no matter how amiable, beautiful, or lovely, are wrong for us, for we who belong to the Lord Jesus simply have no business courting, dating, or marrying them. Can He in Whom there is “no darkness at all” (1Jo 1:5) give us a spouse in whom is nothing but darkness and no light at all? Why, then, would we entertain a romantic relationship with such a person? According to the Apostle Paul, oneness with Christ is *the* criterion of a good spouse. We are, Paul says to the church in Corinth, “at liberty to be married to whom [we] will; only in the Lord” (1Co 7:39).

It is a sin for a believer to marry an unbeliever, for Scripture urges us to marry “only in the Lord.” The importance of this mark is reinforced by the following advice from several Puritans. To marry in the Lord, wrote Daniel Rogers, “is to use our uttermost discreet diligence to seek out such companions as (in charity and likelihood) are either already espoused to the Lord Jesus their husband by faith, and in token thereof, sit close to Him in obedience; or [are] an endeavorer thereto.” “But beware,” he continued, “lest you attempt any marriage in which neither of these can be perceived.”³⁵

When Robert Bolton advised how to secure a good entrance into marriage, he began with this mark as the first and foremost point of consideration. He wrote,

For the first point: let your choice be in the Lord, according to blessed St. Paul’s rule, “only in the Lord” (1Co 7:39). Let piety be the first mover of your affection, the prime and principal consideration in this greatest affair; and then conceive of personage, parentage, and portion, and such outward things and worldly additions, as a comfortable accessory, considerable only in a second place. Let the world say what it will; to a mind truly generous and ennobled with grace, the most absolute concurrence and greatest exquisiteness of beauty, gold, birth, wit, or what else besides may be found most remarkable and matchless in that sex, should be nothing, nor hold scale with the lightest feather upon any lady’s head, compared with a gracious disposition and godly heart. Religion, or the fear of God, as

³⁴ Smith, 1:18.

³⁵ Daniel Rogers, *Matrimonial Honor* (Virginia: Edification Press, 2010), 19.

it is generally the foundation of all human felicity, so must it specially be accounted the ground of all comfort and bliss which man and wife desire to find in the enjoying of each other. There was never any gold, or great friends, any beauty, or outward bravery, which tied truly fast and comfortably any marriage knot. It is only the golden link and noble tie of Christianity and grace, which has the power and privilege to make so dear a bond lovely and everlasting, which can season and strengthen that nearest inseparable society with true sweetness and immortality.³⁶

Immanuel Bourne proposed “twenty golden links of love” to preserve strong love between a husband and wife. At the head of these links, making the rest dependent on it, was that *special care* be taken to be certain that one marries a fellow believer, that is, not one who merely professes to be a Christian but one who lives religiously and in the fear of God. “For thus,” Bourne wrote, “marriages are contracted more prosperously and a blessing may be expected when the married parties both fear God. Such being pronounced blessed by the Holy Ghost (Psa 112:1-3)...But on the contrary...without the fear of God...a curse may rather be expected than a blessing.”³⁷

Jeremy Taylor gave similar directives: “Begin therefore with God. Christ is the President of marriage and the Holy Ghost is the Fountain of purities and chaste loves, and He joins the hearts. And therefore let our first suit be in the court of heaven and with designs of piety, or safety, or charity. Let no impure spirit defile...let all such contracts begin with religious affections.” Taylor continued, “We sometimes beg of God for a wife...and He alone knows what the wife shall prove, and by what dispositions and manners...but we shall not need to fear concerning the event of it if religion, fair intentions, and prudence manage and conduct it all the way.”³⁸

The anonymous author of *The New Whole Duty of Man* taught that the salvation of the prospective spouse must be the chief consideration in marriage because it will not only make the marriage happy but will also best suit one’s own relationship with Christ. “Whoever intends to marry, should not so much regard the outward shape or beauty, wealth, etc. as [much as] the spiritual qualifications of the person to whom they desire to be joined; which will make that state of life truly holy, and serve to the great end of the soul’s salvation. Although a competency for the ease of life is to be regarded, yet a virtuous man or woman is of more value than all the wealth and honors the world can afford.”³⁹

William Whately wrote rather candidly of the troubles and challenges in a marriage; but he counseled his readers that since many of marriage’s troubles stem from sin, many can be cut off at the beginning if we take care to marry in the Lord. Consequently, he directed the unmarried man to “enter discreetly and religiously upon marriage, observing such due care therein, that he may in his very entrance cut off the root and stop the fountain of very many troubles...The most important matter in building is to lay a good foundation. Doubtless it is so in this matter of marriage, whereinto he that makes a godly and wise entrance shall find his

³⁶ Robert Bolton (1572-1631), *General Directions for a Comfortable Walking with God* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 262-63.

³⁷ Immanuel Bourne (1590-1672), *A Golden Chain of Directions, with Twenty Gold-links of love, to preserve love firm between Husband and Wife* (London: Printed by J. Streater for George Sanbridge, 1669), 3-5.

³⁸ Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667), *The Marriage Ring* (1673; repr., New York: John Lane Company, 1907), 12.

³⁹ *The New Whole Duty of Man* (believed to have originated in the 1600s), 231.

proceeding to be much more easeful and comfortable than any after care could make it, without this first care.”⁴⁰

Whately later wrote, “To have a fit yoke-fellow will prevent many matrimonial troubles and will make all easier. Now, in a yoke-fellow, the main matter to be desired is virtue and godliness; and he that in choosing, vouchsafes that the first place, shall surely be blessed in his choice; but whosoever sets other and baser things before that, does deal preposterously and foolishly, and setting the cart before the horse...can never drive comfortably in the way that he would go.”⁴¹ He warned, “Young men and women, destroy not yourselves by seeking a good outside, but let both parents and children judge as God judges, and follow His counsel that says, Not the rich, not the fair, but ‘the righteous is more excellent than his neighbour’ (Pro 12:26). He takes the best course to gain [happiness] in marriage that chooses not the finest body, the sweetest face, the greatest state, [or] the largest portion, but the holiest heart, the richest soul, the beautifulest spirit, and the most virtuous man or woman. This is the foundation of [happiness] in marriage. Lay this at first, [for] you can never else rear up a comfortable building.”⁴²

Richard Steele offered several ways to help a person be faithful to his or her marital duties. When charging his listeners to be most considerate in the choice of a spouse, Steele urged, “Chiefly fix your observation on the soul of the party. Many marry to lay hands to lands, or money to money; but see that his or her *soul* lie well for yours. For no beauty, friends, or portion will settle upon you a comfortable life, if pride, passion, or any other lust predominate in the soul. And why will you espouse a perpetual cross for some present profit or delight? It concerns therefore the man, and especially the woman, to endeavor to marry a member of Christ, a religious person; [from whom] they may most rationally expect the conscionable⁴³ discharge of their respective duties. If such be not the best husbands and wives, it is not by reason of their piety, but their defect of it.”⁴⁴

Charging his hearers to resign themselves wholly unto God so they might themselves *be* good spouses, Steele said,

Until you be savingly regenerated and sanctified, you cannot please God, nor be entire blessings to one another. You may indeed live together like civil pagans; but what is this to the life of Christians? Religion will most firmly bind you to God; religion will most firmly bind you to one another. A good temper may do much; but a new nature superadded to it will do more.⁴⁵

Henry Smith offered this advice in choosing a wife (which of course applies equally to choosing a husband). The first advice was that she be godly,

because our spouse must be like Christ’s spouse, that is, graced with gifts and embroidered with virtues, *as if we married holiness herself*. The marriage of a man and woman is resembled [by] the apostle to the marriage of Christ and the church (Eph 5:29). Now, the church is called holy...undefiled...fair within...So our spouse should be holy, undefiled,

⁴⁰ Whately, 68-69.

⁴¹ Whately, 71-72.

⁴² Whately, 73.

⁴³ **conscionable** – conscientious; principled.

⁴⁴ Steele, *Puritan Sermons*, 2:300.

⁴⁵ Steele, *Puritan Sermons*, 2:301.

and fair within. As God respects the heart (1Sa 16:7), so we must respect the heart, because that [we] must love, and not the face.⁴⁶

Later Smith observed,

Though heresy and irreligion be not a cause of divorce, as Paul teaches, yet it is a cause of restraint... Christ says [in] Matthew 19:6 and Mark 10:9, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder"; so I may say, Let no man join whom God separates. For if our father must be pleased with our marriage, much more should we please that Father which ordained marriage.⁴⁷

William Secker said a wife (again, equally applicable to a husband) must be holy, belonging to the Lord as a Christian. "If adultery may separate a marriage contracted, idolatry may hinder a marriage not perfected. Cattle of diverse kinds were not to engender: 'Be not unequally yoked' (2Co 6:14), etc. It is dangerous taking her for a wife, who will not take God for a husband. It is not meet⁴⁸ that one flesh should be of two spirits. Is there [not] a tree you like in the garden, but that which bears forbidden fruit?"⁴⁹

Finally, Richard Baxter wrote, "Do not let carnal motives persuade you to join yourself to an ungodly person. Rather, let the holy fear of God be preferred in your choice before all worldly excellence whatsoever. Do not marry a swine for a golden trough, or an ugly soul for a beautiful body."⁵⁰

If there is such great benefit to marrying only in the Lord, then there must also be great *danger* in marrying apart from the Lord. To avoid this danger, Secker warned against three things which commonly lead suitors astray:

Choose not for beauty; choose not for riches; and choose not for dignity. Because he that looks for beauty buys a picture; he that loves for riches makes a purchase; and he that leaps for dignity matches with a multitude at once.⁵¹

Concerning beauty he warned:

If a woman's flesh has more of beauty than her spirit has of *Christianity*, it is like poison in sweetmeats, most dangerous (Gen 6:2)... Take heed of sinning at the fairest signs.⁵²

Concerning riches he warned:

Some are so degenerate as to think any good enough who have but goods enough. Take heed, for sometimes the bag and baggage go together... When Themistocles⁵³ was to marry his daughter, two suitors courted her together; the one rich, and a fool, the other wise, but poor. And being demanded which of the two he had rather his daughter should have, he

⁴⁶ Smith, 1:13. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Smith, 1:20.

⁴⁸ **meet** – fit; suitable; appropriate.

⁴⁹ Secker, 265.

⁵⁰ Richard Baxter (1615-1691), *The Godly Home*, ed. Randall J. Pederson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 41-42. See also *Directions for Profitable Hearing and Reading* and "Self-Losing," both by Baxter and available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

⁵¹ Secker, 266.

⁵² Secker, 266.

⁵³ **Themistocles** (c. 524-459 BC) – Athenian politician and military general.

answered...I had rather she should have a man without money, than money without a man.⁵⁴

Concerning the dignity of birth or social standing he warned:

A good old stock may nourish a fruitless branch. There are many children who are not the blessings, but the blemishes of their parents. They are nobly descended, but ignobly minded...Piety is a greater honor than parentage. *She is the best gentlewoman that is heir of her own deserts, and not the degenerated offspring of another's virtue.*⁵⁵

Baxter cited several problems that befall those who marry outside the Lord.⁵⁶ First, he said, you will cause great suspicion that you are ungodly since Christians who know both the misery of an unbelieving soul, and the excellence of a soul in which the image of God can be clearly seen, can never be indifferent whether they are joined to the godly or the ungodly. Therefore, "He who deliberately prefers riches and beauty in another before the image and fear of God gives a very dangerous sign of a graceless heart and will. If you value beauty and riches more than godliness, you have the surest mark that you are ungodly...Does this not show that you either do not believe the Word of God, or else that you do not love and regard His interest? Otherwise, you would take His friends as your friends and His enemies as your enemies...Can you so easily marry an enemy of God?"⁵⁷

Second, those who fear God desire a spouse who will be a helper to the soul and further them in the way to heaven as well as pray with them and stir them up to love God and be heavenly minded. If you marry an ungodly person, either you have no such desire or else you must know that you have not chosen anything wiser for yourself, than if you chose water to kindle a fire or a bed of snow to keep yourself warm.⁵⁸ The fruits of an unequal match will be nothing but hardship, for the two will try to pull the same yoke in different directions. As one Puritan wrote, "where the match is unmeet,⁵⁹ the conjunction unequal, the united in body disunited in spirit; of contrary affections, hearts, and religions; duties unperformed, each crossing [the] other, or any of the twain [so] unwise that [they] will not be admonished—what are the fruits there but wrath, bitterness, contention, controlling, contradiction; taking all things in the evil part; jealousy, upbraiding, discontentment, false dealing, secret juggling, conspiring; wants⁶⁰ without pitying each other, toil without helping each other; seeking each one his [own] credit with discredit unto both, with many other [fruits] as grievous to be spoken of as any [aforementioned]."⁶¹

Third, if you marry an unbeliever, you will have no helper on the way to heaven, but you may have a hinderer. An unbelieving spouse will call you back from your prayers with worldly diversions, cast worldly thoughts into your meditations, and stifle your heavenly conversation with worldly talk. "One such hindrance so near you in your bosom," Baxter warned, "will be

⁵⁴ Secker, 267.

⁵⁵ Secker, 267.

⁵⁶ Baxter, 42-43.

⁵⁷ Baxter, 42.

⁵⁸ Baxter, 42.

⁵⁹ **unmeet** – unfit; unsuitable.

⁶⁰ **wants** – lacks; needs.

⁶¹ Ste. B., *Counsel to the Husband; to the Wife Instruction* (London: by Felix Kyngston, for Richard Boyle, 1605), 3-4.

worse than a thousand further off. As an ungodly heart that is next to us is our greatest hindrance [Rom 7:21-24], so an ungodly husband or wife is worse to us than many ungodly neighbors.”⁶²

Fourth, an ungodly companion will be a continual temptation to sin.

Fifth, such a spouse will be a continual grief to you when you think of how you must be separated at death and in what torment he or she will be while you rest in heaven.

Sixth, an ungodly spouse will be incapable of the principal part of your love. You may love such a husband or wife, but you will be prevented from ever loving him or her as a brother or sister in Christ.

b. The Marks of an Agreeable Spouse

1). Importance of being agreeable

A spouse must not only be good, but also be *agreeable*, that is, well suited to you as a companion. “For as you may not make choice of any who is not godly,” Scudder cautioned, “so neither may you choose of every one that is. She may be good, yet not good for you; she may be a fit wife, yet not fit for you. Further therefore enlarge your requests, that God would provide for you not only a good wife, but a meet wife, meet in every respect.”⁶³

If godliness is the first rule of choosing a wife, then fitness is the second. “It is not enough to be virtuous,” wrote Smith, “but to be suitable; for divers⁶⁴ women have many virtues, and yet do not fit to some men; and divers men have many virtues, and yet do not fit to some women; and therefore we see many times even the godly couples jar when they are married, because there is some unfitness between them...They which are alike strive not; but they which are unlike, are fire and water. Therefore one observes that concord is nothing but likeness; and that all strife is for unfitness, as in things when they do not fit together.”⁶⁵

To be married is to be yoked together; but how will a couple pull the yoke of marriage harmoniously if they are incompatibly yoked? “Take therefore,” Whately said, “a yoke-fellow meet for thee; for the agreement of the married folk is the best help against all troubles, and this is the surest way to procure agreement.”⁶⁶ Marriage itself cannot make two people compatible. It is naive, if not foolish, to imagine that two people who find themselves incompatible before marriage will be compatible after marriage, as if marriage was a sort of cure-all that washed away all blemishes in one’s character and behavior, and reconciled two persons that beforehand were as ill-suited to one another as night and day. On the contrary, marriage exposes one’s true character and behavior. Whatever causes friction before the marriage will only cause more friction during marriage.

It is critical therefore that we consider the fitness of a person *before* marrying him or her. We must observe a person in different contexts, judging fitness by taking several different measurements. Those who jump into marriage without judging a partner’s fitness soon regret

⁶² Baxter, 42-43.

⁶³ Scudder, 19.

⁶⁴ **divers** – different, various.

⁶⁵ Smith, 1:14.

⁶⁶ Whately, 74.

their choices and find the daily grind of their relationships to be painful, cumbersome, and grievous. Such marriages are seldom happy and often lead to divorce as the only way to correct an unwise choice.⁶⁷

2). *Six marks of fitness*

So, what are the marks of fitness? What should a person look for in discerning compatibility? Isaac Ambrose offered the following: “Let him observe and mark these six points in his choice: the report, the looks, the speech, the apparel, the companions, [and] the education. These are like the pulses that show the fitness and godliness of any party with whom he ought to marry.”⁶⁸ Let us consider how these marks might help determine the fitness of another, whether man or woman.

1. *The Report.* What kind of reputation does he have? How do people speak of him in his absence? What kind of credit does he have in the community, workplace, or school? Proverbs 22:1 tells us that “a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.” Look for those who are highly spoken of, have a good report among men, and cannot be accused of living in sin. If he is well spoken of by the world, is it because he is of the world or because the world is attracted to his goodness? If he is godly, the church’s report of him should bear that out. It was said of Zacharias and Elizabeth, “They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luk 1:6). A good report is far from infallible, but it is a wise place to start and we must beware of those who do not have a good report among God’s people.
2. *The Looks.* Reflecting upon Ecclesiastes 8:1, Smith said, “Godliness is in the face of a man, and folly is in the face of a man, and wickedness is in the face of a man.”⁶⁹ Thus a person’s countenance reveals much of his character. Does he have the proud look we read of in Proverbs 6:17? Does she have the haughty look that the Lord rebukes in Isaiah 3:16? Does his countenance reveal an angry and discontent heart? Do his eyes reveal a wanton and lustful heart? We must beware of faces that reveal a proud, angry, lustful, or discontented heart, and look for godliness that springs from a godly heart.
3. *The Speech.* Christ declared in Matthew 12:34 that the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart. Speech is a trustworthy measure of a person. The “fruit of the lips” will either condemn or commend him (Mat 12:37; Pro 16:23; 18:7). Is there uncleanness in the speech? Then there is uncleanness in the heart. Is there self-love in the speech? Then there is self-love in the heart. Is there flirtation in the speech? Then there is lust in the heart. On the contrary, is there tenderness and compassion in the speech? Then there is mercy and love in the heart. Is there gentleness and contentment in the speech? Then there is a quiet and contented spirit within. Those who cannot bridle their tongues have a vain or worthless religion (Jam 1:26), and therefore we must beware of those whose speech is not the language of Canaan which we love.

⁶⁷ Though divorce based on incompatibility is sadly common in our day, it is not biblically defensible (Mat 19:4-9).

⁶⁸ Ambrose, 228.

⁶⁹ Smith, 1:16.

4. *The Apparel.* How a person dresses reveals how he sees himself and how he wants others to see him. Is he dressing so others will think better of him than he is? “Look not for better within than you see without,” Smith wrote, “for everyone seems better than [he] is; if the face be vanity, the heart is pride.”⁷⁰ Is he dressing for men or for the Lord? Is a woman dressing to attract the eyes of men? If she enjoys enticing men’s eyes, what does this reveal of her heart’s desires? Or is she dressing modestly to reflect her humility before the Lord, so that her beauty, which is a gift from the Lord for her husband, does not prove a stumbling block to others? Apparel is often a sure window into the heart’s desires and inclinations. Therefore beware of those who dress to be seen as servants of men and not as the servants of God (Isa 3:16).
5. *The Companions.* Smith said, “Birds of a feather will fly together, and fellows in sin will be fellows in league, as young Rehoboam chose young companions (1Ki 7:8). The tame beasts will not keep with the wild, nor the clean dwell with the leprous. If a man can be known by nothing else, then he may be known by his companions; for like will [stick] to like...So when David left iniquity, he said, ‘Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity’ (Psa 6:8); showing, that a man never abandons evil until he abandons evil company...Therefore choose such a companion of your life as has chosen company like you before.”⁷¹ What kind of friends does a potential spouse keep? With whom does he spend his spare time? Take notice not only of his friends, but how he behaves in their presence. Do you recognize him as the same man that you saw at church last Lord’s Day? Or does he behave differently with his friends during the week? Is she the same in all company, or do her friends bring out another side of her that is unpleasant to you? Beware of a person who delights in wicked friends and who changes like a chameleon⁷² to suit present company.
6. *The Education.* The importance of this mark is the effect a person’s education has on his thinking and behavior. “Nurture and education put a stamp on someone’s personality. Great disparities in habits, culture, and development can eventually form a source of irritations and misunderstandings, which have a negative effect on the marriage.”⁷³ Knowing the manner in which a person was educated can alert us to the factors that shaped his character and can help us know whether someone may be fit for us or not.

These are the common marks by which fitness can be measured. It takes time and much observation to make these various measurements, but it will prove worthwhile when we can marry (or refrain from marrying) a person with confidence and peace in our choice. “All these properties are not spied at three or four comings,” noted Smith, “for hypocrisy is spun with a fine thread, and none are deceived so often as lovers. He which will know all his wife’s qualities before he be married to her, must see her eating, and walking, and working, and playing, and

⁷⁰ Smith, 1:17.

⁷¹ Smith, 1:17.

⁷² **chameleon** – lizard that can change the color of its skin to blend with its surroundings, in order to avoid predators.

⁷³ den Ouden, 24.

talking, and laughing, and chiding, or else he shall have less with her than he looked for, or more than he wished for.”⁷⁴

When we are sure of a person’s sincere *godliness* and have measured a person’s *fitness*, we will be able to enter marriage with our hearts completely taken up with each other. The husband will be able to love his wife and settle his affections upon her as the fittest woman that the world can offer; the wife will be able to love her husband as the best fit for her over any other in all the earth. And with such contentment in the choice, the husband will be to his wife as a shield over her eyes and a seal upon her heart (Song 8:6), that she might not lay her eyes on any other man or let another steal his way into her heart; and the wife will be so pleasing to her husband’s eyes and so near to his heart, that he might look upon her to her dying day as the delight of his eyes and the love of his heart and therefore not be enticed by another woman.

3). *Consent of parents*

One more mark of fitness the Puritans offered was the consent of parents. This requirement is nearly lost in our culture where every man does what is right in his own eyes (Jdg 21:25) and the commandments of God are largely disregarded; but it was a necessary precondition in the minds of the Puritans and should be recovered because of the godliness, wisdom, and motive that undergirds it.

Based on the fifth commandment, the Puritans said a child is obligated to ask the permission of his parents to marry so a couple might have their blessing and support in marriage. Also, the parents are obligated to help their son or daughter make a good and a fit choice, that their child might not be deceived in his or her choice, miss his or her way, and thereby bring hardship into the next generation. Thus Abraham provided a wife for his son Isaac (Gen 24:2-3); Isaac provided a wife for his son Jacob (Gen 28:2); and Hagar provided a wife for her son Ishmael (Gen 21:21). Moreover, Caleb consented to his daughter’s marriage (Jos 15:17); Saul consented to his daughter’s marriage (1Sa 18:27); and Naomi provided a husband for Ruth (Ru 3:1). Based on such examples in Scripture, the Puritans said part of a child’s godliness is to submit to his parents’ guidance in the matter of marriage, since that honors the Lord and His commandment (Exo 20:12). In so doing, the blessing promised in the fifth commandment will come upon the marriage as well as the couple’s relationship with their parents. While the Puritans agreed that there *may* be some exceptions in which a spouse may lawfully be taken in marriage without the parents’ consent, it should be the exception which proves the rule.

We should make every effort to secure the consent of our parents and refrain from marrying anyone whom they cannot commend, because our parents do not represent God in vain. Additionally, our submission to them may overcome and soften their hearts so that they may eventually consent to the one we love, while our willful opposition to them will risk ruining both our relationship with them and our peace of conscience before the Lord.⁷⁵ Moreover, we should make every effort to secure their consent because where else will we go when trials come but to our parents? If we married without their consent, how can we go to them later for help? Also, we should make every effort to ensure that when our marriage falls into trouble we

⁷⁴ Smith, 1:18.

⁷⁵ Rogers, 79-80.

will not find ourselves plagued with thoughts, as Joseph's brothers were (Gen 42:21), that such a trial has come upon us because of our sin against our parents.

What if our parents are unreasonable or selfish in resisting our marriage? What if, as far as we can see, there are no grounds for their denial? We must remember that we are called to honor and obey our parents in the Lord (Eph 6:1-3), which is something that the Lord will surely take notice of and honor. When we feel that our choices are of the Lord and yet our parents disagree, we must normally submit to them in godly submission, and prevail with God by prayer that He may soften their hearts by the same Spirit Who has knit our hearts to our choices. For if God is in the choice, then God must likewise be in our parents; so, after praying, seek your parents' consent since God declares that you must have it (Exo 20:12) and they must give it (Deu 7:3; Jer 29:6).

In addition, fly to the throne of grace and beg of God that He will grant us children with submissive and content hearts, and parents who are wise and godly; that He will grant children with loving and trusting spirits, and parents with tender and thoughtful counsel; and that He will grant children and parents alike with obedience to His Law (Exo 20:12). For while children should submit to their parents, parents should not compel their children to marry an unbeliever or someone in whom they see no compatibility and whom they cannot love entirely. Furthermore, while parents should not advise their children to marry someone for their beauty, riches, or high station, neither should children ask their parents to approve their marriages to someone with whom they are merely infatuated. For a marriage quickly made is often grounded on a faulty foundation and soon regretted. Parents must therefore help their children choose, with discernment and wisdom, someone they can love entirely and constantly from the day of their wedding until the day of their parting.

Therefore let parents begin in their children's youth to win their hearts and prove to them that they work for their good, discipline for their good, and pray for their good, so that when their children look for guidance in choosing a spouse and for consent to marry, their parents may not meet with rebellion and obstinacy if they must disagree. Yet, let parents beware of neglecting their duty to their children by failing to provide guidance for them or abusing their authority and position by withholding their consent without biblical grounds. Let them rather walk, as they expect of their children, in the way of duty—remembering that the Lord has charged them to be faithful in this.

4. A Final Exhortation

We cannot end this chapter without a final exhortation to marry only in the Lord. One who marries outside the Lord will have no peace. Marriage has the potential to secure the greatest blessings as well as to bring on the greatest hardships and crosses, depending on one's entrance into it. Why, then, would anyone venture upon a marriage without the Lord and His blessing? Consider the following counsel from Daniel Rogers.⁷⁶

First, deny yourself by renouncing the wisdom of your own will as if you needed no advice and were able to make an unerring choice in marriage. Instead, submit yourself to the Lord by prayer and patience, and do not rush into marriage at the first inclination or opportunity. It

⁷⁶ Rogers, 43-54.

may be that the Lord has called you to a single life or that He has called you to marriage but just not at the present time. Seek the Lord's will in the matter and use all means to devote yourself wholeheartedly to the Lord in undistracted devotion until He makes it clear that He is calling you to marry.

Second, if you find that the Lord has called you to marriage, prepare yourself for it. Pray for the Lord to teach you self-denial, humility, wisdom, and chastity. Marriage puts a person outside of himself and calls him to love, serve, stand by, wait upon, prefer, and submit to another. If you are accustomed to serving yourself, preferring yourself, and loving yourself, then marriage will prove a very hard yoke to draw.

Third, be warned against the common disease which has so blurred the eyes of men that they can see nothing but the outward appearance of things. Do not allow beauty, riches, station, or education to deceive you by bribing your judgment and leading your affections to thrust godliness from the criteria. Beware also of covetousness, pride, and ambitious thoughts that lead so many to think themselves the catch of a thousand and therefore too good for any but those in whom beauty, riches, and intelligence rate higher than in most.

As Rogers said to men seeking a wife, "Think not too highly of yourselves when there is little worth in you to equal the lowliest women...but moderate your spirits and marry in the Lord. [If] nothing hinders, but the Lord and outward means may concur...then the question is ended. But if it is so, that a match of five hundred pounds⁷⁷ is offered with the Lord, and another of seven or eight hundred without Him...what then shall be done? I answer: Other conditions being concurrent in any tolerable proportion, despise the greater offer, and take the lesser, counting the loss of your gain happy, and the gain of her grace with that loss, happier."⁷⁸ Think therefore not only of what you would give, but what you would forego for a good and fit companion, because marriage is honorable and you must procure its honor by a good entrance into it at all costs, lest you forfeit its honor and therefore its blessing.

Fourth, ask the Lord fervently for the blessing of a good marriage. Let the Lord see by your fervency and frequency at His throne that you are deeply concerned for a good marriage and seek to honor Him in it, and He will not deny you. Either God will hear you and answer you, or He will give you a reason for His denial, which will otherwise satisfy you. Only remember that a good spouse is a precious gift from the Lord; and that He is not accustomed to let His prized gifts go easily, but likes to be importunately⁷⁹ entreated for them (Mat 15:22-28). In addition, add a vow to your prayers that if the Lord would be so gracious as to provide a wife for you of His choosing and giving, then you would choose her over a thousand who stood beside her from the world.

Fifth, seek the advice of the most judicious, impartial, and godly friends, lest you be deceived by either your own wisdom or by the advice of a flatterer. God has promised that He will lead you in your choice, but He has also provided the brethren for your encouragement and support.

⁷⁷ **match of five hundred pounds...with the Lord** – someone who knows the Lord with a dowry amount or income of 500 British pounds.

⁷⁸ Rogers, 47.

⁷⁹ **importunately** – persistently; insistently.

Sixth, be observant and careful in your mutual conversations with one whom you think may be a good and fit spouse, that you may learn not only the speech of a person but the soul. Talk not only about religion but about the power of religion upon the soul. Talk about the work of God upon the heart, the subduing power of Christ over your sin, the enabling power of the Spirit over your flesh, and the working grace of God in your soul. Look not only for gifts but for graces. Look for the fruits of the Spirit and especially for humility and modesty. Slight defects in each other will soon be made up by religion where love is genuine, but the lack of religion cannot be made up with any amount of outward gifts and talents.

Finally, if any object that waiting for a spouse of the Lord's choosing may cause some to miss out on marriage altogether, we repeat our counsel: wait upon the Lord, commit your way unto Him, for He knows best what you need (Psa 27:14; 37:5-6). Those who wait will fare far better than those who do not, for the former wait upon Him Who cannot fail them, while the latter presume to be wiser than their Creator and Lord. And if any object that a good and fit spouse cannot be found in our day, we remind you that the Lord Who calls you to wait for such a spouse knows very well who and where that person is, and will not fail to bring such a spouse to you.

Do not be tempted to follow the stream and fashion of the world; for He makes none a son of Abraham, if He calls him to marry, for whom He will not also make a daughter of Abraham so that he might marry in the Lord. "Use means to find [a good and fit spouse], and having so done, prefer pearls before pebbles, and the Lord shall bring the good to the good, for He is a God of order, not of confusion."⁸⁰

Study Questions

1. Why is it important, by God's grace, to "choose God for yourself" before seeking a spouse?
2. What are some Scriptures showing us why we should seek a spouse *from God*?
3. How should we pray for the affections of our hearts when we seek a spouse? Why?
4. List several reasons why a believer must choose another godly person for a spouse.
5. Henry Scudder said, "She may be good, yet not good for you; she may be a fit wife, yet not fit for you." What does this mean? Give some examples.
6. What six points did Isaac Ambrose offer for evaluating a potential spouse? Can you enlarge upon these points?
7. How might a potential spouse's reputation among godly Christians confirm or correct our opinion of him or her?
8. What role should parents play in evaluating a potential spouse?
9. How crucial is parental approval to getting married? Why?
10. Why is self-denial important to cultivate when seeking a spouse?

⁸⁰ Rogers, 53.