

God's Standard for Marriage & Courtship

A topical sermon

Dt 22:13-21; 1 Cor 6:12-7:16, 36-38.

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 9 August 2020, 10:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Yesterday we rejoiced in the wedding of a young couple from our church. And, seeing that we have quite a number of young people (and upcoming youth) in our congregation, I thought it timely to preach upon this topic! Now, we did study this topic four years ago in an evening service when, unfortunately, there was a lower-than-expected turnout.

Well, here's the topic: *God's Standard for Marriage & Courtship!*

What an enormous and ever-valid topic to be talking about – a topic that interests (and impacts) us all, and deeply so!

And I will endeavour to go about it with great reverence and awe, using words that are rather discreet – and sometimes I'll be leaving blanks for you & me to fill in the obvious. Dear young people, please, I don't want you to think, when you hear this sermon, that I am that 66-year old man who has grown out of touch with reality – a hoary old fellow who comes out of the age of dinosaurs, and who probably never experienced the normal desires of a man. If you think that of me, let me assure of the contrary!

And, yes, just over forty-two years ago, I was not yet married – state just as some of you are now.

And because I was a perfectly normal young man – and Annette (who was then my girlfriend and fiancée) a perfectly normal young lady – we felt in ourselves very strongly, as you will too, those God-given desires that any normal young man & woman need for marriage.

Also: when you, in this sermon, perhaps hear the tone of my voice rising high, or if you hear me getting emotional, and it seems to you as if I am angry or taking an accusing stance towards people who live very far from the Bible's standards for marriage & courtship, please don't conclude that I am condemning them to the state of "forever lost & beyond salvation."

Rather, if you see me getting worked up, then see this as a frustration & sadness in me for the state in which the world out there is – yes the world out there which is trying its best to influence our church youth (and also on my own three adult children – one of whom is still single)!

Now, you might also, as the sermon progresses, start to wonder, "But where is Christ in this sermon?"

Well, just bear with me right through this sermon. At least on two major points you will hear where Christ comes through strongly.

Well, if one wants to learn about God's high standards for courtship, then one should first see what God's standards are for marriage, because that will no doubt set the standard for what a God-honouring courtship should be.

So, here are this sermon's three main points...

- God's Standards for Marriage

- God's Standards for Courtship
- My Life-Arrangements in Response

God's Standard for Marriage

My brother & sister, young person, God has set a very high *moral* standard for marriage. Of course, marriage is not *just* about *morality*, for husband & wife are united not just in a *physical* way, but also in many other ways, e.g. in *spiritual, intellectual, emotional, psychological* and *financial* ways – all based upon a deep mutual trust!

However, seeing that the *physical* part of their union is one which, because of sin, often suffers greatly, God has set a very high *moral* standard for marriage!

Well, Dt 22 gives us a clear – yes, almost shockingly clear – picture of the high moral standard God expects of marriage.

You see, in God's sovereignty and wisdom, He has designed things in such a way that a woman who has never belonged to a man will carry the evidence of that.

On such a woman's wedding night it will become evident that she has been chaste.

And if she's found not to have been chaste, then God's Old-Testament Word instructs that she should be stoned to death!¹

Now, although the sins of extra-marital intimacy are no longer punishable by death in this present New-Covenant era in which you & I live, God's restriction of intimacy to marriage only, still remains in the New Covenant Era – yes, the era to which also you & I belong.²

We see this in the account of Mary's pregnancy with baby Jesus – particularly in her fiancé, Joseph's, first shocked reaction to the news that she was expecting a baby.

So, what does the Deut 22 law then boil down to?

My brother & sister, does it not boil down to one clear thing: i.e. that the Maker of man & woman has meant intimacy strictly & only for *marriage* – yes marriage between one man and one woman?

Furthermore, does this same law not also imply that, once married, the two shall never separate!?

So, the two will be together in a lifelong bond!

This is totally in sync with Gn 2:24 and Mt 19:6, which say, "***Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh...***" "***...So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.***"³

That means, neither the husband nor his wife – nor anyone else – shall end their marriage!

My brother & sister, in the Apostle Paul's teaching on marriage (1 Cor 7:1-16), he answers several questions re marriage – all questions which the congregation in Corinth had asked him to clarify for them.

First, he replies to the matter of celibacy, i.e. of never getting married.

¹ cf. Dt 22:21-22 ***But if the thing is true, that evidence of virginity was not found in the young woman, ²¹ then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done an outrageous thing in Israel by whoring in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.***

² My rephrasing of the words of ZORN, R.O. 1982. (*In*: Hoving, H. L. *convenor*. Elders and deacons at work: guidelines for office-bearers in the Reformed Churches. Geelong : List Print Nominees. p.112)

³ ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο ἀλλὰ σὰρξ μία. ὁ οὖν ὁ θεὸς συνέζευξεν ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωριζέτω. (συνέζευξεν is an Aorist Active Indicative 3rd person singular of **συζεύγνυμι** "to join together in marriage;" and χωριζέτω is a Present Active Imperative 3rd person singular of **χωρίζω** "to separate objects by introducing considerable space or isolation—"to separate, to isolate one from another" (Louw & Nida).

You see, the Corinthian church had asked Paul whether *it is good for a man never to touch a woman* (7:1).

To this, Paul answers effectively: “yes, it would be good if that could be the case, i.e. if everyone could be like the Apostle Paul – staying single and yet not falling into immorality.”⁴ “**But,**” says Paul (in 1 Cor 7:2), “*because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman should have her own husband.*”

Then Paul continues, “*The husband should give to his wife her conjugal (marital) rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.* ⁴ *For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.* ⁵ *Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control*” (7:3-5).

Then Paul repeats his desire that it would be good if all could be like him – single, and yet not falling into temptation. Says Paul: “*To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.* ⁹ *But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion*” (7:8-9).

Next, look how the Apostle Paul sets the same high standard for marriage as did Jesus, our Lord, v.10-11, “*To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹ (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.”*

Yes, Paul is referring here to Christ’s teaching of Mt 19.⁵

Lastly, so high is the standard which the Bible sets for marriage that Paul says (that) even when an *unbelieving* wife becomes a Christian but her husband *remains* an unbeliever, she should not for that reason leave him. The same if *he* becomes a believer while *she* still remains an unbeliever!⁶

Well, that’s the high moral standard God has set for marriage:

- marriage is between one man and one woman
- no separation until death do us part, and...
- no intimacy *outside* of marriage – which obviously includes no intimacy *before* marriage.

Now, if that’s so, then what are the implications for *Christian courtship*, which is our point 2?

God’s Standard for Courtship

⁴ cf. 1 Cor 7:6-7, “*Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.* ⁷ *I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.*”

⁵ cf. Mt 19:4-9 *He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” ⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (ESV).*

⁶ Qualifier: that does not give the green light for a believer to go marry an unbeliever, because Paul is talking of *unbelievers who had already been married* but one of them has *now* received Christ as Saviour of his/her life.

Well, seeing that God in Dt 22 has given a young man every right to expect that his bride would be a virgin when he married her, it means that, “neither he nor any other of the young men of that society was expected to “play around” with the girls...”⁷ And no girl should allow – within her will & power – for any man to do that, for it’s clear: intimacy is only proper within in the confines of marriage.

Young people, here are a few fallacies of reasoning – yes misconceptions/delusions – all coming out of the so-called, “modern ‘Me generation.’”⁸

Fallacy 1:

I have often heard a young couple say, “Aw, but we know we will get married one day, so why can’t we first live together!?”

The answer to such reasoning is: “*Who says* you will in fact get married?”

I have seen many people cohabiting (living together) with the sincerest intention to *stay* together and to one day get married – then they never got married but split up and went their own ways!

Next, they bring up the following flawed argument: “But we have seen many people who did get married and yet divorced anyway!”

My answer is “Yes, that may sadly be true, but such argument is a second fallacy of reasoning, for it is trying to make one wrong right by pointing at another wrong! This is the typical “But-Johnny-did-that” fallacy by which one sinner compares himself with another sinner instead of with God’s law!

A third fallacy of reasoning which I’ve heard since my army days is: “Aw, but we want to live together before marriage, because we first want to see whether we fit together.” “If we see that we do, *then* we’ll get married!”

Well, if that’s a couple’s reasoning right up front, then they’re already starting their relationship on an unbiblical (weak & wrong) note, because the Bible says (that) when you commit to one another, you commit for life. You don’t even think of a back door – of an escape route out of marriage!

You see, if you’re not committed to tie yourself unconditionally to another person, then don’t even start with intimacy – don’t even start cohabiting (living together), for if you do, then you’re bound to become guilty of transgressing God’s law of Dt 22!

Well, it’s at this point in the sermon that someone might want to shout out, “But preacher, where is Christ coming in in what you’re saying?”

Here: Christ comes in in one word – a word often repeated in 1 Cor 7 – the word *self-control*: ***Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” ... “But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.***⁹

⁷ Zorn (ibid)

⁸ cf. DOUMA, J. translated by Kloosterman, N.D. 1996. The Ten Commandments: manual for Christian life. Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. p.265.

⁹ cf. 1 Cor 7:5 “***Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control***” (ἀκρασία, *ac f*: to fail to exercise self- control—‘lack of self-control, failure to control oneself’). Also cf. 7:9 “***But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion***” (ἐγκρατεύονται Present Deponent Indicative 3rd person plural of ἐγκρατεύομαι “to exercise complete control over one’s desires and actions—‘to control oneself, to exercise self- control, self-control’).

My brother & sister, right through Jesus' life – but especially on the cross of pain – what did He exercise?

Is it not self-control?

Why did Christ not prevent the hammering of the nails right through His hands & feet?

Is it not because of His self-control?

Why did Christ not fly from the cross and instantly cause those Roman soldiers & Jewish leaders to drop dead?

Self-control!

But why did He exercise self-control?

Because He loved His Father and you & me! Yes, He knew that His staying on the cross was showing obedience & *reverent submission*¹⁰ to His Father. Yes, He exercised self-control because He loved you & me!

Well, what does such love demand from you & me?

My brother & sister (young people), what is the least we who love Christ can do? Is it not to obey Christ's commands – and exercising self-control as we obey?

Self-control! Christ-like self-control out of a heartfelt love & reverence for my Lord!

“My Lord, You once said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments!”¹¹ “Lord, I do love & reverence You, and therefore I will put everything in place to exercise self-control!” “Lord, You did that for me; I will do that for You!”¹²

My brother & sister, young person, here is a bonus from exercising self-control in your pre-marital relationship...

You see, self-control in the pre-marital relationship is an excellent training ground for faithfulness in marriage!

Well, here is another Biblical reason why cohabitation (mere living together) is wrong: there are no vows – vows before God and people!

You see, according to the Bible, marrying someone involves duties toward God and man that have to be sanctioned *before* intimacy can occur!

The account of Boaz & Ruth is a classic example of how the village community witnessed Boaz & Ruth's marriage!¹³

So, also today, God's standard for a couple is that the community – family & church family & friends – will stand up when promises & obligations are not fulfilled!

See? Because of our sinfulness, there *must* be a contract! Human beings must be able to hold him & her to account!

But so too will *God* hold him & her to account!

¹⁰ cf. Heb 5:7 **εὐλάβεια, ας f:** “reverence.”

¹¹ Jn 14:15

¹² If someone finds it hard to exercise this self-control, then – gauging by the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Cor 7:36-38 (alternative translation – ESV, and other) – such a person should marry his/her fiancé(e).

¹³ cf. Ruth 4:7-13 **Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel.** ⁸ So when the redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it for yourself,” he drew off his sandal. ⁹ Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon. ¹⁰ Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day.” ¹¹ Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, “We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, ¹² and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman” (Emphasis mine).

And the Mal 2 incident is a good example of that, when God served as witness against certain older Jewish men who had abandoned the wives of their youth to chase after young, pagan, pretty girls!¹⁴

Marriage, in God's eyes, is a lifelong bond,¹⁵ and for that reason, it needs to be sealed with a contract before God and man!

Couples who are just living together without a marriage contract, can so easily leave each other without a divorce document!¹⁶

My brother & sister, if even no government official is installed into his/her office unless he/she promises, in the presence of the citizenry,¹⁷ to stay faithful to the country's constitution, why will a Christian young couple not make their vows before God and people!?

Well, seeing that God's Word is clearly against mere living together, because it violates the Dt 22 law; also because it shows lack of self-control, and ignores the life-long commitment sworn by oath and signed in contract before God & man, then how should the Christian arrange his/her days of courtship?

That brings us to the 3rd point...

My Responsive Arrangement

Dear young person, a Christian who chooses a life partner may not marry an unbeliever. You see, marriage is a contract (covenant) which is designed to mirror the relationship between Jesus and His loved ones.¹⁸

So, how could the Christian then be unevenly yoked with an unbeliever?

After all, as the Apostle Paul says, "...*we are the temple of the living God*"¹⁹ because the Holy Spirit lives in the believer!

¹⁴ cf. Mal. 2:13-16 *And this second thing you do. You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. ¹⁴ But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."*

Also cf. Mal 2: 11 *Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god.*

¹⁵ Also cf. Eph 5 for the lifelong bond between Christ and His bride – illustration of every godly earthly marriage!

¹⁶ Bernardus Smytegelt (Smytegeld), the old Dutch minister of the Reformed Church in the 17th & 18th Century said it so well: "Casually they come together and casually they split apart" (apud Douma, *ibid*:264-5).

¹⁷ The citizens of a place regarded collectively

(http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/citizenry)

¹⁸ My brother & sister, and young person, although our young people are free to choose their own life partner, that does not mean that their choice can be arbitrary.

As one Reformed Theologian says, there's always a risk in courting someone who is widely divergent in age, or cultural background or in education (My rendering of the words of Douma, *ibid*:264).

And, although *you* will be the one who's going to marry the other person, it can be (under normal circumstances, *should* be) very helpful to have your parents' input in your choosing – even though parents cannot compel their children to follow their advice!

So, “*What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?*”²⁰

See? You & your life partner want to agree on the basics of life and on the upbringing/education of your children.

So far re the even yoke in courtship!²¹

How long should a courtship be? Well, long enough to get to know your fiancé (or fiancée) well enough – to make sure that you get to know one another deeply, and that you learn to understand and accept one another. You must learn that two “I’s” must become “we.” If you don’t learn that, then the one whose ego takes centre stage will demand too much of the other! So, your courtship should be long enough.

However, your courtship should also not be “too long, especially in our society where unmarried couples are severely tempted if they wish to remain chaste together.”²²

But during your courtship, your serving hearts for one another, as well as your self-control, must be *seen* to happen!

Now, if your relationship develops properly, then the two of you will become spiritually, psychologically, and physically more intimate – yes also physically; that’s quite normal!

So, here’s the question: How far should physical caressing go?

Well, suffice to say that God has given both him & her an inborn “alarm system.” They should listen to that!²³

This “alarm system” has told many a godly couple that intimate forms of contact, like petting,²⁴ have no place in courtship or engagement.

And in this, the trusted saying still applies: “The partner with the most tender conscience must help the other. The single, absolutely safe contraceptive is the little word ‘No!’”²⁵

Conclusion

Dear young people, I feel for you!

Why?

Well, because some forty years ago, when I was courting her who is now my precious/kind/humble wife, we were helped by our community.

¹⁹ 2 Cor 6:16b

²⁰ 2 Cor 6:16a.

Of course, it’s a different scenario, if two unbelievers had already been married when one of them then, by God’s grace, becomes a Christian. But the Christian who is still choosing a life partner may not marry an unbeliever. “Courtship and engagement require a common church basis and a shared religious foundation, so that spiritual unity may be experienced in marriage, too” (Douma, *ibid*:264)

²¹ Now, re the length of courtship...

Well, marriage requires a period of preparation!

And indeed, marriage is best preceded by a rather lengthy – yet not too long – courtship to allow for getting to know one another well.

This courtship will include dating and engagement.

Of course, to be engaged is to promise faithfulness to one’s fiancée – a pledge which should be taken seriously, especially so because, through engagement, the couple’s promises to one another have been made public!

Having said that, if during engagement it becomes clear that the two are incompatible, it would still be better to stop the relationship at this stage, rather than go astray later, after years of marriage!

²² Well-said by Douma (*ibid*:264). Also cf. 1 Cor 7:36-38 in the NIV or ESV.

²³ Douma (*ibid*:265) gives the well-known quote from Walter Trobisch, 1977 (*Liefde moet je leren*. Kampen. p.27): *The point where it becomes impossible to stop is usually reached when you begin to lie down together and start undressing each other.*

²⁴ i.e. mutual sexual stimulation

²⁵ cf. Douma (*ibid*:265) referring to Trobisch again.

You see, our narrow-circle community (i.e. her family and my family), and also our wider-circle community (i.e. our church family and friends at school, university and work) – they all still, by and largely, adhered to God’s moral standards for marriage and courtship!

Thus, because of the reverence that Annette & I had for God – and the unselfish love we had for one another, together with the high expectation of our community – the two of us would never want to bring shame upon one another; would never want to endanger our relationship by going further than what’s Biblically allowed for those who are not yet married!

Thus, the two of us were able to steal a kiss or two (or even ten), but that was where our caressing would stop!

Was it hard for us?

At times, yes! But we were upheld by our God-given faith and a very loving & caring family & community!

But, today – and in the permissive Western culture – our young people (including my own) don’t have the strong community support *we* used to have.

So, I pray every day for my children – also remembering our church youth!

And I exhort and encourage you to remember your Lord who, with great self-control and unselfish love, gave His life for you.

Also, make use of your family & church community to hold you to account!

Question: What if some of our Wainui Church members have *not* been able to walk according to God’s high standard for marriage and courtship? Are they doomed?

Well, here again is where we praise God for our Lord Jesus Christ!

You see, God’s Word invites God’s loved ones who have sinned – all sorts of sins – to come on the strength of the blood of Jesus, which purifies from sin; to ***confess our sins***, for God is ***faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness***.

Remember the woman caught in adultery (John 8)?

Remember what Christ said to her?

Seeing her absolute sorrow, Christ told her, “...*I don’t condemn you...*”²⁶

My brother & sister, young person, if anyone here is in need of God’s forgiveness in the matters mentioned in this sermon, then Christ says, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and I will give you rest...”

But then, may we also take heed of Christ’s words as He sent that forgiven woman away: “...***go, and from now on sin no more.***”

Yes, go, and for the sake of the one who exercised great self-control *exactly because He loved you* – go and, in love for Him, sin no more!

AMEN (3,196 words excluding footnotes)

²⁶ John 8:11 “... ***Neither do I condemn you;...***”