

MERIT AND MARRIAGE

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23).

As you know, “merit” is a key concept in life. We teach our children that they can earn, or “merit” good grades. In the same way they can earn a diploma, earn good wages and earn respect. Merit is not only a key concept in secular life, but also in religion. Virtually all religions are based on merit. Millions believe that at the end of life our good deeds are weighed against our bad deeds and rewards are meted out on the basis of “merit”.

In this regard Christianity is unique. Salvation in Christ is not based on merit, it is a gift. Nothing could be more clear! The “wages” of sin is death but the “gift” of God is eternal life. While there are many things in the Bible that teach and illustrate this truth, none is perhaps more clear in this regard than the institution of marriage. The marriage commitment is not made at the end of life after we discover the merits of our mate, the marriage commitment comes first.

Adam did not have a choice. He did not have the option of dating many women and choosing the one who pleased him most. In this regard he is like much of the world today. Many marriages, as you know, are arranged by parents. Nevertheless, Adam loved and was faithful to his wife. She was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. He recognized that marriage was such a commitment that it involved “leaving” father and mother and “cleaving” to your mate (Gen. 2:24). Some speculate that Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the same selfless frame of mind that Christ had as He loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Eph. 5:25). Whether you agree with this or not, the Scriptures are crystal clear that “Adam was not deceived” (1 Tim. 2:14).

Adam lived to be 930 years old. He was 130 when Seth was born and after that lived 800 years and begat sons and daughters (Gen. 5:3 - 5). Obviously “cleaving” to his wife over all these years involved “commitment”. That “commitment” however was not based upon merit. The love of the husband for his wife is a great mystery and provides profound insight into the relationship that Christ has with His church (Eph. 5:22 - 33).

The Law of Moses describes two types of slaves, the law slave, and the love slave (Ex. 21:1 - 6). The law slave served his master for 6 years and was then set free. The love slave served his master for life. He did not want to go free. It is significant that this life time commitment, like the commitment of marriage, began with a public ceremony. It is important for those who come to the marriage altar to remember that true love is more binding than law.

The Bible word describing the “love” of Christ for the church and the “love” of a husband for his wife is “agape”. This kind of love does not depend upon merit. God loves us in spite of the fact that we are unlovely. We need to do the same! In fact, we are even commanded to “love our enemies” (Matt. 5:44). Yes! Marriage is based on faith, hope, and love, not merit.

Certainly we “must” believe that God is, and that He “rewards” those who “diligently” seek Him (Heb. 11:6). Even though God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), we still cannot deny that He gave Israel a bill of divorce (Jer. 3:8). These Biblical truths emphasize that there is no excuse for believers to be lazy or married people to be unfaithful. These facts, however, need not detract from the wonderful way that the love and commitment of marriage helps us to understand the beautiful bond between Christ and the church. There was a time in history when an edict sealed with the ring of King Xerxes ordered every Jew on earth to be killed on a single day. This included young and old, women and little children (Esther 3:13). Even though no such law could be revoked (Esther 8:8), it still didn’t happen. No, the Jews did not “merit” their salvation, it came because King Xerxes loved his wife. Our salvation is also based upon love, not merit!