

(An open pastoral letter to a young Christian woman considering marriage to an unbeliever)

Dear Mary,

Last Sunday at church your parents told me of your wedding plans. Being in love and looking forward to marriage is an exciting time in life. I can imagine your hopes as you look to the future.

Your parents told me that your fiancé is a considerate, well-mannered gentleman with a promising career ahead of him. Knowing you, I am sure that he must have many fine qualities. I am concerned, however, because your parents also mentioned that he has not trusted Christ as his Savior. You know that I care deeply about you. I'm taking the time to write because I want you to experience God's fullest blessing in your life.

Since you profess to know Christ as your Savior, you know how much He loves us as His people. He has given us His Word to tell us how to live in this evil world so as to experience the abundant life that Christ came to provide. His commandments are always for our good, never for our harm. They are like the rules of the road; if we break them—ignoring stop signs and driving on the wrong side of the road—we and others will get hurt.

Perhaps you have never considered what the Scriptures say about a believer marrying an unbeliever. Please look up the Bible passages I refer to below so that you can study them for yourself. Ask God for an obedient heart. There is much at stake here.

It was through wrongful marriages that Satan corrupted the human race, leading to the awful judgment of the flood (Gen. 6:1-7). Abraham, of whom God promised to make a great nation through Isaac, made his servant swear by the Lord that he would not take a wife for Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites (Gen. 24:1-4). Isaac's son, Esau, married two unbelieving wives. These women brought much grief to Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 26:34-35; 27:46; 28:8). Later Dinah, daughter of Jacob, got involved with a Canaanite man. There was the danger that God's fledgling people would intermarry with the Canaanites (Gen. 34:9; 38).

Because of this, God sovereignly (Gen. 50:20) had Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt, resulting in the whole family of Jacob moving there. Eventually they became slaves for 400 years. This solidified the people and hindered them from intermarriage with the Canaanites, which would have thwarted God's plan to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants.

Later, through Moses God plainly told His people not to intermarry with the people of the land (Exod. 34:12-16; Deut. 7:1-5). One of the most formidable enemies Moses had to face was Balaam. God prevented Balaam from cursing Israel. So Balaam counseled Balak, king of Moab, with an insidious plan: Corrupt the people you cannot curse. Lure them with your Moabite women. Israel fell for it. For this sin, God sent a terrible plague on Israel, killing 24,000 (Num. 25:1-13).

Throughout Israel's history, intermarriage to heathen women created problems. Samson's ministry was nullified through his involvement with Philistine women (Judges 16:4-22). Solomon's idolatrous wives turned his heart away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-8). The wicked Jezebel established Baal worship during the reign of her weak Jewish husband, Ahab (1 Kings 16:29-22:40). Jehoshaphat, who was otherwise a godly king, nearly ruined the nation by joining his son, Jehoram, in marriage with Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Chron. 18:1). The terrible effects of this sin did not come to the surface during Jehoshaphat's lifetime. (Sin often has delayed consequences.) But later Jehoram slaughtered all of his brothers and turned the nation to idolatry. God struck him and he died after eight years in office. His son Ahaziah became king, but was murdered after one year. Then Athaliah slaughtered all her own grandsons (except one, who was hidden) and ruled the land

in wickedness for six years. The Davidic line, from which Christ would be born, was almost extinguished, all because of Jehoshaphat's marrying his son to an unbelieving woman (1 Chronicles 17:1-23:15)!

Years later, when the godly Ezra heard that some of the returned remnant had married women of the land, he tore his garment, pulled some of the hair from his head and beard, and sat down appalled (Ezra 9:1-4). This was followed by a time of national mourning and repentance (Ezra 9:4-10:44). When Nehemiah discovered that some Jews had married Canaanite women, he contended with them, pronounced a curse on them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, calling their actions "a great evil" (Neh. 13:23-29)! Malachi also condemned the men of Israel for marrying the daughters of foreign gods, praying that they would be cut off from Israel (Mal. 2:10-12).

The New Testament is equally clear: "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor. 6:14-16a). When Paul gives instructions for those who are married to unbelieving mates (1 Cor. 7:12-16), he is not endorsing entering such a marriage. Rather he is giving counsel to those who have become believers since marriage, but whose spouses have not. Concerning entering a new marriage, Paul states clearly that it must be "... *only in the Lord*" (1 Cor. 7:39, emphasis mine).

Perhaps you would agree that marrying a non-Christian is not God's best, but you may think that it isn't a serious sin. But in Malachi 2:11, God calls it an "abomination." The same Hebrew word is used elsewhere to describe homosexuality, sacrificing children to pagan gods, witchcraft, and idolatry. In God's sight, it is *not* a gray area!

My point in going through all these Scriptures is to show you that there is a principle that runs throughout the Bible: God wants His people to be holy, separate from unbelievers in life's important relationships. It is *never* His will for His people to marry unbelievers.

I know that your emotions run strong at this point. God gives us the feelings of romantic love to enjoy. But if you marry someone who does not love God, you will dishonor God and bring much trouble upon yourself and, someday, upon your children.

I have written strongly because I care so deeply. After all, this is the second most important decision of your life, after receiving Christ. A shepherd who saw a sheep heading toward a cliff would not be a good shepherd if he did not do everything in his power to stop the sheep from its course of self-destruction.

Remember, God loves you. My heart's concern is that you will consider the Word of God and obey Him. Although it will be difficult in the short run, obeying God is the only course of blessing for your life.

Sincerely in Christ's love,

Pastor Steve Cole