

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 26 December 1999

No. T0090

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The Christian Family Today - The Christian family - Marriage

A young couple were invited to a diamond wedding celebration. During the course of the evening, the wife had the opportunity to speak to the elderly lady who had been married for 60 years. She said to the lady, "I can't get over how long you've been married. Sixty years is over twice my lifetime and I've been married for less than a year. Tell me, what do you have in common with your husband?" The old lady thought deeply for a while, then replied, "We were married on the same day!"

This morning I want to talk to you about a couple who had a long and successful marriage and, unlike our diamond wedding friends, also had an awful lot in common. Their names were Aquila and Priscilla and they provide us with an outstanding example of Christian marriage.

We first meet them in Acts 18:1-3. It is here we begin to learn how strong their relationship was and how the love it was based upon proved such a blessing to others. Today we hear a lot about marriage breakdown. It is even more disturbing that more and more Christian marriages are failing. In the Gospels, the Lord Jesus told the parable of the wise and foolish builders. One built his house on sand - a poor foundation! When the storm came it collapsed. The other builder founded his house on a rock and it withstood the storm. Marriage is like a building. It needs the right foundation and the right preparation.

Aquila and Priscilla's marriage had the right foundation. That is why the persecution which they had suffered in Rome had not damaged their marriage. They had experienced the hatred of Emperor Claudius for the Jews and it had cost them home and livelihood. Yet in Corinth we find them not only happily re-establishing a home and their tent making business but inviting the Apostle Paul to live and work with them. It was a friendship which would last until Paul's death.

So what were the foundations which made their marriage so robust and their care for others so outstanding? It was a marriage based upon knowledge. Not the most romantic fact you might think. But let us look a little closer. First, they knew God. Whenever we think about couples getting married, we tend to concentrate upon them knowing each other well enough to have the confidence take the greatest act of faith people ever demonstrate towards each another. But as Christians, before we enter into such a relationship, it is vital to have a right relationship with God. Adam, the very first man to get married, helps us to understand this. He had a living relationship with God in which he knew God as Creator, Friend and Guide. God had given Adam responsibility and authority in Eden. It was only after he had experienced this stable relationship with God that he entered into the unique relationship he had with his wife Eve. Knowing God's love and direction in his own life prepared him for his relationship with Eve.

Matthew Henry comments so beautifully on the creation of Eve. He writes, "The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected by him, and near his heart to be loved by him". Adam and Eve became one flesh. As well as describing the sexual union they would enjoy it also reminds us of the unity which should characterise every aspect of married life. In the course of time, as with many things, man changed God's model of marriage. Men often had several wives. King Solomon had hundreds. Women were also owned as property and abused. It is only when we come to Christianity that God's model is reaffirmed - a life-long union between one man and one woman. Paul in outlining the qualifications of a bishop in 1 Timothy 3:2 writes, "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife."

Today the idea of marriage as a life time commitment of a man to a woman is thought of as being unrealistic. Yet, when marriage fails, people continue to look for this ideal relationship and often remarry. The desire for this God appointed relationship is still widespread. Aquila and Priscilla had a marriage which was characterised by knowing God, then knowing each other.

Christian should always approach marriage under God's direction. For example, God has told us quite clearly that Christians should not be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers". In terms of marriage this means not marrying someone who is not a Christian. In the East, oxen were the most common animals that were yoked together. For this to work effectively, animals had to be chosen which complemented each other. A bad yoke of oxen was when one

pulled one way whilst the other resisted and wanted to go another way. It did not work. And it does not work in marriage. To go against the explicit commandment of God is to put one's Christian life in great difficulty. Love is a very powerful emotion and sometimes leads us to believe we know better than God. That is a great mistake which has proved costly for many Christians who have entered into marriages with unbelievers. Of course, God, in His grace, is always able to overrule. But that should never be an excuse for disobedience.

Some Christians were already married when they trusted Christ and still have husbands or wives who do not share the same faith. This can bring its own pressures and Christians in this situation need prayerful support and understanding. Christian witness in such marriages is very important and care should be taken so that Christian activities and family responsibilities do not come into conflict. A balanced approach needs to be taken.

Christian marriage should be prepared for by asking for God's guidance to be led to the right person with whom you will share your life. The relationships upon which a marriage is formed have to be completely open and based upon genuine love and trust. It is important to have proper help and guidance from spiritual and experienced Christian married couples as part of the preparation for marriage. It cannot be over emphasised how essential it is to approach marriage seriously and carefully. I should also say that if your marriage gets into serious difficulty, seek help earlier rather than later. Time is of the essence if breakdown is taking place.

The foundation of Aquila and Priscilla's marriage was knowing God and knowing each other. This gave them the resources to know how to work things out when trouble came along. Today we live in a throw away world. We no longer try very hard to repair things. If our television or washing machine breaks down, or our car becomes too unreliable what do we do? We change them. In today's world, it is often less expensive to change an appliance than to replace a part because labour charges are so high. We talk constantly about consumers. Consumers use up things then get replacements. This is reflected in our relationships. Relationships often only survive whilst things are going well. When difficulties arise, relationships are abandoned.

Aquila and Priscilla's marriage faced enormous difficulties. They lost their home and business and also became refugees. What enabled them to survive these pressures and for their marriage to remain so strong and be such a blessing to others? The resources they had came from the relationship they had with God and it brought strength to their relationship with each other. Trouble did not separate them but brought them nearer to God and to each other. When our marriages are affected by difficulties, how do we handle them? Do we bear them alone until they become unbearable? Do I as a husband fail to see the physical, emotional or spiritual struggles my wife has? Or do I personally take responsibility to understand and help her in such circumstances. Equally, a man needs the same response from his wife in times of stress and difficulty.

Communication is one of the key aspects of marriage. Each year my wife and I organise a weekend for married couples. We sometimes do an exercise together. Each person is given a piece of paper and asked to draw a personal graph of all the joyful and the traumatic things they have experienced during their married life. Then couples join together to compare their results. It is often amusing but always informative and provides an awareness of what their feelings were during these experiences. I remember one couple doing this exercise. The wife had a normal graph showing all the ups and downs of her feelings during their years together. The husband's graph was a straight line! I often use it as an example of God's constant unchanging love in all our circumstances but it is not a helpful illustration of shared experiences of marriage!

To share we need to communicate. This means three things. Explaining, listening and learning. We need to explain to each other the things which encourage us and the things which concern us. We also need to listen. Not only to the words that are being said but to recognise the emotions which are often hard to express. Listening can be so beneficial. Think of the times when a friend simply listened to you. Afterwards the circumstances had not changed but you felt better simply because someone listened. God is the best listener there is. His ear is never closed to us and neither should we be to each other. Do not make the mistake my wife reminds me of when she says, "Gordon you hear but you don't listen!" As well as explaining and listening, communication is about learning. In marriage, God wants us to learn from Him in all the experiences we pass through as man and wife. In this way we build up our relationship and we are better able to demonstrate His love and power in our marriages.

We next meet Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18:18 when they travelled with Paul to Ephesus. Their marriage was not a self centred one. In the Old Testament, if a man took a new wife he did not have to go out to war or be charged with any business but was free for one year to bring happiness to his wife (Deuteronomy 24:5). In other words, he had to concentrate on establishing a happy stable marriage. Once this was done they entered fully into community life. This is very relevant to marriage today. So many marriages breakdown in a very short period of time. This often has to do with couples carrying on as single people after they are married. Time is not given to developing the unity marriage needs to survive. There is also another, less common, problem which some couples fall into - self absorption. Couples become so absorbed with each other that there is no place or time for anyone else. This approach can also stifle a marriage and create problems. A strong marriage is a balanced marriage. Priscilla and Aquila had built their

marriage upon a love for God and each other. This love flowed out to others in friendship, service, and even sacrifice. They were amongst the closest friends Paul had and consistently supported him. Within marriage, we should not forget the responsibility we have to serve God together. There will always be those, within and outside of our families, who need us. It was a characteristic of Priscilla and Aquila to provide encouragement where it was needed.

Later on in Acts 18:24-26, Aquila and Priscilla meet an outstanding man of God called Apollos. He visited the synagogue at Ephesus where Aquila and Priscilla heard him preach. Although he was a remarkable preacher, he only knew about the teaching of John the Baptist. Aquila and Priscilla invited him into their home and helped him to understand the complete revelation of God. A recurring theme in the story of Aquila and Priscilla is the home. It is the place where others can see and benefit from the love which exists between two married people. We live in a world of broken relationships and consequently broken homes. The home is a place where love is expressed between husband and wife, parents and children, families and friends. Aquila and Priscilla's home was such a place. The word of God was at the centre of home. When I was a young Christian, I was taught about the "family altar". An altar was built to meet with God. I was taught that in every Christian home there should be a time when the family takes the opportunity to pray and read the Scriptures together. Preparing for each day in God's presence and reviewing it with Him at the end of the day is a good practice. Over the years, I have become more and more convinced that marriages and families are strengthened by this "time with God". Because Aquila and Priscilla had made the word of God central to their lives, they were able to help other believers. Notice that together they helped Apollos. The spiritual contribution of a man and wife are distinct but complementary. They were able to use their knowledge and experience of God's grace as a married couple to help Apollos spiritually. Later on in the New Testament, Paul reminds Timothy of the influence of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). From childhood Timothy had known the Scriptures which were able to make him wise unto salvation. This is a very interesting part of Timothy's story. His father was a Greek. He is not named. It is quite likely that there were spiritual tensions within Timothy's home. On the one hand, there were the influence of two Christian women from godly Jewish backgrounds; on the other hand were the pressures of a mixed marriage in a Greek culture. Yet in spite of these difficulties, Timothy is given a godly upbringing. This is a great encouragement in our own day. In spite of the tensions of living in homes where there may not be common belief, we can still trust God to bless our witness and faith in His word to our husbands, wives and children. God is able to bless in difficult circumstances. It is also wonderful to see the support of grandparents. Marriage is God's basis for family life and all the relationships it provides. In a society where old age is less and less respected, Christians are to value the role of the grandparent. Parents should not interfere in the marriages of their children. Their role is to be a support to their children and grandchildren. I have to speak out for grandparents now my wife and I have found ourselves in this situation and are learning to fulfil this finely balanced role.

Aquila and Priscilla had time for others. I remember, a few years ago, speaking at the wedding of a young couple. The subject I chose was time. Time for God, time for each other, for children, for family, friends, others. Developing relationships takes time and effort. Aquila and Priscilla had time for others because they had time for God and for each other. Paul reminded the Ephesians elders in Acts 20:28 to "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock". In other words, they could only help the people in proportion to how they themselves knew God's help. Investment of time in God's presence is never wasted but as He pours His grace into our hearts so it will overflow to others. Aquila and Priscilla had such a marriage.

In Romans 16:3-5, we learn more about the marriage of Priscilla and Aquila. Paul sends them his greetings and informs his readers that these dear friends risked their lives for him. The verse can be translated "who for my life staked their own neck". The neck conveys again the idea of being equally yoked together. This use of the neck (singular), rather than necks (plural), beautifully illustrates the unity of motive and action which characterised Priscilla and Aquila. Paul names lots of friends in the New Testament but never thinks of Priscilla without Aquila. These two people were never separated in the minds of those who knew them and had experienced their sacrificial love. Sacrificial love is at the basis of Christian marriage. On our wedding day we stand before God, our family, friends and many other witnesses to promise a lifelong faithfulness. By the way have you ever re-read your marriage vows? It is worth sitting down together and quietly and prayerfully going over the promises you made. For these promises to work properly we have to be prepared for sacrifice. I have to be prepared to sacrifice my interests for those of my wife. Equally she has to be prepared to respond. It is the most wonderful human experience to know that someone loves you so much that they are prepared to sacrifice for your good. The standard is Christ Himself. In the words of Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her." Husbands, take a moment to reflect on these words! It is striking that only once in the New Testament are wives encouraged to love their husbands and even then the verse is in relation to young wives at the start of their marriages in Titus 2:4. I think this is because women have a natural tendency to give themselves to others whereas men need encouragement to do this.

Romans 16:5 refers to the church which was in Priscilla and Aquila's house. The openness of their home to the people of God is a wonderful example. I remember very well the first time I went into the home of my Bible class teacher. He and his wife were devoted to each other and to serving the Lord. My sisters and I were very excited

about being invited out. The table had all sorts of savouries and cakes on it and all the plates and cutlery looked very special. But our hostess had forgotten to give me a knife for my side plate. When she noticed her mistake, she got one from the drawer and passed to me. In my ignorance of table manners and place settings, I said, "It's all right Mrs. Packer, I've already got a knife." I did not realise you needed two! But Mrs. Packer said, "Well you can have this one as well for your cake". As a young child it impressed me how this gracious woman did not highlight my ignorance, which was what I was used to people doing, but simply took me as I was and helped me understand new things. Whenever I think of Priscilla, I think of the Mrs. Packers in my life who taught me so much about the gentleness and kindness I have so seen in so many Christian homes.

In 1 Corinthians 16:19, the church which is in their house is mentioned again but just before Paul, who was with Aquila and Priscilla, writes, "Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily (or warmly) in the Lord". In the Bible, it is often the tiniest expression which conveys the greatest meaning. Aquila and Priscilla were a warm hearted and enthusiastic couple. Their faith was a living faith. It had been proved in all the crises of married life and it was expressed in the warmth of the love they had towards others. On our travels, we often get asked by friends to pass on regards to others. Sometimes these requests are said out of courtesy, but frequently we are impressed by friends who especially ask for their love to be given to someone. It demonstrates a genuine concern to encourage other Christians. A good Christian marriage should have a heart warming effect on others. It should demonstrate genuineness in a superficial world.

The final mention of Priscilla and Aquila in the Bible is in 2 Timothy 4:19. It simply says "Greet Prisca and Aquila". It is the shortest of Paul references to this remarkable couple and an unusual one. I say this because Paul uses a diminutive of Priscilla - Prisca. Some commentators have suggested this was a pet name for this godly woman. Pet names are terms of affection and perhaps that is what the verse expresses. These were some of the very last words Paul writes. As he comes to the end of his life and remembers some of his dearest friends, he thinks of this special couple. He did not have to expand upon their lives of devoted service. He just remembers them. In the New Testament they are mentioned six times. Each mention alternates between Aquila and Priscilla and Priscilla and Aquila - a pattern I have tried to sustain in this morning's talk. Three times the man is placed first and three times the woman is placed first. They were equally yoked together and to the Lord. When I think of how much Priscilla and Aquila had learned of Christ and shown Him to others in their outstanding marriage, I am reminded of the Lord's words in Matthew 11:29-30, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For yoke is easy and My burden is light." Paul remembered a wife and husband whose lives were in complete harmony and who had been such a blessing to him and so many others. I think we should ask ourselves, Will our marriages be remembered in the same way?

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