

## Courtship & Marriage article 11

Dear Young People,

My father devotes an entire chapter to the matter of engagement; Assuming that most of you, if not all, have read that chapter, I will devote only one short letter to this subject.

In a way, the engagement of a couple lies somewhere between courtship and marriage. The period of engagement can no longer be called courtship; but it is equally true that it cannot be called marriage.

Engagement is the natural result of a satisfactory courtship that has been blessed by God. It still is that period in the life of a young man and a young woman when the two are getting to know each other better.

But it is also that time in the pre-marriage life of a young couple when marriage is certain – unless something totally unforeseen should arise. This was true in Biblical times. If an engagement were broken, it was almost as serious as divorce.

In Matthew 1 we are told that Mary was engaged (“espoused” is the word in the KJV for “engaged”) to Joseph. But when Joseph found Mary pregnant by the Holy Spirit, he thought she had committed adultery. What else could he think? And so he determined to “put her away” (Matt. 18, 19). The alternative was that Joseph inform the legal authorities that Mary had been guilty of adultery and had, therefore, to be stoned to death. But “Joseph her husband (note that Joseph is called here “her husband”, even though they were not married, see verse 20, where Joseph is commanded by the angel to make Mary his wife), being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily” (verse 19).

The word that is used here for “put away” is the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 5:31, 32, in which passage it means “divorce.”

The conclusion of the matter is that for one to break an engagement was actually as serious as divorce after marriage. So an engagement comes very close to marriage. It does not include, however, the privilege of living with the one to whom one is engaged. Again, Joseph is our example. He was instructed by the angel to take Mary to be his wife – which she had not been before, and this marriage included the right and privilege of sexual intercourse (Matt. 1:20 and 1:25 – although the latter means, of course that Joseph and Mary had no sexual intercourse until after the Lord was born.)

Living together before marriage or, as it is called in this country, “shacking up,” is a deadly sin and hateful to God. Because it is a violation of God’s righteous commands, it also results in judgments swift and terrible. Many divorces can be blamed on the fact that couples, many of whom have previously lived together or one or the other having lived with others before “settling down,” have disobeyed God’s Word and now know His judgments.

But sexual impurity before marriage is equally hateful in God’s sight, even if a couple is engaged. We must reserve the privileges of marriage for marriage, whether we are engaged or not.

\* \* \* \*

I am hesitant to use the word “intimacy” for what I now need to say, but I can think of no better word to use. A couple is more intimate after they are engaged than they were before engagement. I am not speaking of greater intimacy in the physical sense of the word, but in the psychological and spiritual sense.

Before engagement a young couple is seeking to know each other better. By the time they are engaged, they have decided that it is the Lord’s will that they marry, and so they are now engaged to each other as a testimony to others, to the church and to their acquaintances, that it is their purpose, God willing, to become husband and wife.

It is quite obvious that this commitment affects their relationship. The couple is now looking forward to marriage and is making plans for the time when they are married.

They will be looking ahead to determine where they will live, what work they will be doing or what studying will be a part of their lives, if they are going to school. They will be examining the question of whether they will have sufficient to support them and still have money for the church and the poor. They will also remind each other that they must look to God for all things, be content with such things as they have, and live in the faith that all things necessary for them in their life will be added to them.

They will discuss and be clear on their commitment to the church and their determination to take an active part in the activities and life of the church. They will discuss what Bible Study Groups they will attend. They will seek the Lord’s guidance as to the role that each has in the church.

They will discuss the great need to have regular devotions together after their marriage: when these devotions will be held and what they will use in them other than the Scriptures. And they will discuss together their calling before God to bring forth the seed of the covenant according to God’s own will.

And so they will prepare themselves for marriage. In a way, this is not much more different than their discussions during courtship, especially as their courtship progresses, but the pressing need to be united in all these things now becomes urgent as they set down together goals for their life together – spiritual goals and not material ones; goals pleasing to the Lord.

Then when the time comes for marriage, they will be ready to take their vows. We wait with this till the next installment.

With warmest regards and love in the Lord,

Prof