

Husband of One Wife

*Detailed Outline
Part 1 of 3*

Introduction

- A. The Bible requires an elder to be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2, Titus 1:6).
- B. This same requirement is also set down for deacons (1 Tim. 3:12).
- C. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this standard, particularly in a day when divorce is common, not only in the world, but also in the church, and not just among the members of the church, but also its leaders.

I. Definitions

A. “One wife at a time”

- 1. Some see this requirement for elders as legislation against polygamy.
- 2. A. T. Robertson thinks it means, “One at a time, obviously” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*). This may imply there could be a sequence of wives.
- 3. However, polygamy was really not an issue in the time Paul was writing.
- 4. Technically, the expression literally may be translated “a one woman-man.” The question is, “What does this mean?” (See below.)

B. “One wife in a lifetime”

- 1. A second wife would not be allowed after a divorce or even after the death of the first wife.
- 2. I have known of a man whose wife died and he resigned as an elder when he remarried.
- 3. It is helpful to note a very similar requirement in 1 Timothy 5:9:

No widow should be put on the list unless she is at least sixty years old, was the wife of one husband . . . (1 Tim. 5:9 NET Bible, emphasis mine)

- 4. The inference is quite clear here that this woman was married only once, her husband died, and she has chosen to remain single thereafter. She had but one “man” in her lifetime. She was a “one-man woman.”
- 5. The same inference is found regarding Anna in Luke 2:
³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old, having been married to her husband for seven years until his death. ³⁷ She had lived as a widow since then for eighty-four years. She never left the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. (Luke 2:36-37)
- 6. Those who understand Paul to mean an elder must have but one woman in a lifetime certainly have some solid evidence in support of their position.

C. “A one-woman kind of man”

1. I would like to suggest that Paul may be setting down an even more demanding requirement in our texts. My concern is that merely staying married to one woman is not as high a standard as it ought to be.
2. He might remain married to his wife and yet fail in his faithfulness to her in many ways (in his thought life, and in his relationships with other women). Remember, Jesus taught that a man could commit adultery with another woman in his mind (Matt. 5:26-27).
3. Thus, I believe that a “one-woman man” is a man who is characterized by his exclusive affection for and devotion to his wife for their entire life. It sets the bar very high regarding the nature of his devotion and loyalty to his wife. And this elder’s marriage thus sets a high standard for all the marriages in the church.
4. From Ephesians 5 we see that marriage is a picture of the relationship of Christ and His church. If our Lord says to His bride, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb. 13:5), then surely a husband should strive to manifest that same love and fidelity to his wife. If a Christian husband is to manifest the love of Christ for His bride, then surely the standard for his marriage to his wife must be exceedingly high.
5. In many ways an elder’s character and his conduct sets the standard for the entire church. Whatever standard you set for the elder becomes the standard for the whole church.

II. Two Critical Texts

A. Matthew 5:27-32

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; ²⁸ but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt 5:27–28 NASB)

1. Jesus makes adultery a matter of the heart, as well as a physical act (as previously noted).
2. But now note the degree to which our Lord goes to convince us how serious adultery is, and how severely we should therefore deal with it as sin.

²⁹ “If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹ It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; ³² but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matt. 5:29–32)

3. Do you see that our Lord takes marital infidelity seriously, so seriously that He speaks of dealing with it by plucking out one’s eye or cutting off one’s hand? When we take marital sin as seriously as our Lord does, we will do whatever it takes to prevent it. Will cutting of a hand or plucking out an eye prevent adultery? No, but if it could we would see marital infidelity as so evil that we would embrace a radical cure to deal with it.

B. Matthew 19:9-12

⁹ *“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”* ¹⁰ *The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.”* ¹¹ *But He said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given.”* ¹² *For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.”* (Matt. 19:9-12)

1. Once again Jesus takes a very hard line regarding divorce, a harder line than that of the conservative Jewish religious leaders, and a harder line than that drawn by any of His disciples. Marital infidelity is very serious business and so is its cure.
2. Jesus is saying in the strongest possible words: Avoid adultery at all costs. Jesus now underscores this by using eunuchs as a powerful illustration of how serious we should be in seeking to prevent marital infidelity. Some eunuchs were born that way; some were rendered eunuchs by others. But some went so far as to make themselves eunuchs. That is serious business indeed. And it is how serious our Lord wants us to be about marital fidelity. No wonder the standard is set so high in the Bible.

III. Application

- A. The standard we set for elders is the standard that we set for the whole church.
- B. Jesus sets the standard higher than anyone would have done in His day.
- C. This is a standard which must be met in order to become an elder; but surely it is also the standard which persists for existing elders. It is a standard that must be maintained to remain an elder. Otherwise, it becomes the standard that reveals that an elder should step down or be removed from office.

For more on this subject, continue on to watch/listen to the following two-part “roundtable” discussion on “The Husband of One Wife.” There we will deal with many of the challenging applications involved with this elder qualification.