

Marriage, Divorce, and the Bible

Setting the record straight for today's firefighters

In conversations at firehouses everywhere the topic of marriage is brought up almost every day. As I sat in the firehouse today, I read an article from the Washington Post about the definition of marriage. "The hundreds of Sunday congregants came to their feet as Rev. Mark Becton, of Grove Avenue Baptist Church outside Richmond, finished his sermon. Believing that God ordained marriage as the institution between one woman and one man... I'm voting 'yes' for the marriage amendment, he exhorted, referring to the state constitutional amendment that will be on the Nov. 7 ballot." The article goes on to state how a "gay-rights activist is helping to lead the fight against the ballot question". Marriage today is under attack from every possible direction, and firefighters are not exempt.

Earlier in the day the conversation came up several times of firefighters who are either going through a rough time with their marriage, or who are getting a divorce. Divorce, although common for many Americans, is becoming an epidemic in the fire service. Many officers and chiefs have to deal with the problems associated with firefighters and marital stress, and have never been properly trained on how to help. You don't have to be in the fire service long before you discover the effects of a strained relationship on firefighters. Loss days of work, lack of focus on calls, poor customer service, and even obvious problems with alcohol and drugs begin to show themselves at the fire house. Other firefighters can see huge changes in mood and attitude as once good firefighters have been turned into problematic members.

Dr James Dobson writes, "I do not recall a time since the beginnings of Focus on the Family, 27 years ago, when the institution of marriage faced such peril, or when the forces arrayed against it were more formidable or determined. Barring a miracle, the family as it has been known for more than five millennia will crumble, presaging the fall of Western civilization itself." Just as firefighters are willing to rescue someone from a burning building, Christian firefighters must be willing to come to the aid of hurting firefighters before their marriages end in divorce.

Both paid and volunteer firefighters have admitted to fellow firefighters that they struggle with their marriage. According to Degryse, "9 out of 12 firefighters have either been divorced, or are going through it." Divorce among America's firefighters is at epidemic proportions, and little help is available that is specific to the problems that firefighters face. Although it is difficult to find an exact number of divorces within the fire service, the most widely expected number is approximately 75%. Some cities like New York, San Francisco, and Washington DC have even higher divorce rates, most likely due to the higher stress levels they face. "Firefighters have one of the highest divorce rates when compared to other occupations. Across the nation, chief officers and station commanders find themselves trying to manage department personnel who are coping with the aftermath of divorce." – Portia Rawles, Psy.D. With all of this discussion around the sitting room about marital problems, advice is easy to come by. Unfortunately the advice that is

being offered by fellow firefighters, while sympathetic to the situation, is mostly unbiblical and is usually centered on divorce and not reconciliation.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have also affected firefighter's marriages. "Five years later we are finding out that marital and family problems have soared for rescue workers in New York and Washington DC" writes, McLoughlin for the Journal News.com. New York City Firefighters have been hit especially hard as the stress from losing so many firefighters added to the stress of the tragic events is almost too much for anyone to bear. Firefighter spouses are untrained to help their loved ones, and unfortunately will commonly only add to the stress that firefighters are under, causing strain in the relationship. Many a modern day hero has been brought to tears when dealing with trouble in the marriage.

Since the days of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, firefighters have been viewed as rough and tough heroes. Possessing almost superhuman qualities, firefighters are willing to do anything for those in need. Under that thick skin is a person who is just like anyone else. "Researchers found that the stress of working 24-hour shifts -- while constantly facing life or death situations -- is causing firefighters to get heart disease, diabetes and other diseases at an early age. The study found that the heart rate of a firefighter during an intense situation is above 200 beats per minute -- a rate that is higher than that of most Olympic athletes when they are competing -- Barry Brown". This stress is undoubtedly leading to problems within marriages as well, as husbands and wives are unable to turn for help that is specific to the stress firefighters face. Within firehouses all across America there seems to be fewer and fewer firefighters who are willing to champion the cause of healthy and strong marriages.

The Bible has a lot to say about marriage and divorce. The writer of the book Hebrews says that "Marriage is honorable among all". Firefighters can take comfort in following Biblical principals that have been tested since the beginning of time, and they have worked for untold millions of couples around the world. Readers of the book of Mark see just how important marriage is to God. "But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"; Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate (Mark 10: 6-9)." God has always intended that a marriage should be between a man and a woman, and it should last a lifetime. I believe if you were to talk to most firefighters about marriage they would say that when they were first married, they intended for it to last forever.

With all of this bad news for the state of marriages in the fire service, what can be done to improve firefighter's marriages? The most important thing we have to offer is a call to prayer. James tells us in chapter 5 and verse 16 -- "... The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Whether we pray for the fire service in general, or for a specific brother or sister firefighter our prayers can change the direction of the fire service. James goes on to tell us how "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours", and was able to change the very course of nature. We should never assume that our prayers can do little for marriages; we need to diligently pray for our fellow firefighters. If Christian

firefighters were to get on our knees before God and pray, I am convinced the we could change the current course of marriage and divorce in the fire service.

I believe we are in need of firefighters that are willing and capable of being a Godly example to others. I Timothy 4:12 says – “Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.” Just as Timothy exhorted leaders in the church to model Christianity to fellow believers, Christian firefighters can model what God intends for marriages. Showing others how a Godly marriage should work takes a commitment of time and energy. The best way to do this is to befriend those with struggling marriages outside of the firehouse setting. This can be done by doing fun things as couples, such as going out to dinner, going to the movies, or just having coffee together. On these dates the struggling couple can begin to see how God truly intends their marriage to be, and just how much others care for the success of their marriage.

Firefighters in need of help with their marriage must receive Godly counsel. Far too many times misguided advice is given by firefighters, which in turn leads to poor decisions being made and inevitably marriages ending in divorce. Proverbs 11:14 says – “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” When the talk around the sitting room goes negative on spouses that are at home, we should be able to steer the conversation in a more appropriate direction. If the marriage is in need of professional counsel, we should be able to point them in the direction of a trained pastor, or a trained Godly marriage counselor. Most folks truly have never been given the proper tools necessary to help make their marriages succeed.

As Christian firefighters we should not be afraid to help brother or sister firefighters in need, pointing them to the One person who can truly help. Most of the problems in the fire service can be traced back to the age old problem of sin, and how to deal with the consequences of those sins. Firefighters must begin to understand that we are all sinners (Romans 3:23), and that there is a penalty for that sin (Romans 6:23). Romans 6:23 goes on to tell us of Gods free gift, the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. When we truly believe that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God (John 3:16), and we confess His name (10:9) we will be saved. I believe that if more firefighters would turn to God, a lot of our problems, including divorce, would begin to go away.

Finally, I believe there is a lot of good Godly help available today on the topic of marriage. One only needs to visit a Christian book store to view all of the self help books that are available. Organizations such as Focus on the Family, Family Life Today, and others are ready to assist marriages with books, articles, and conferences. The Fellowship of Christian Firefighters is also coming to the aid of families as they will be offering a fall marriage conference that is available to all firefighters. Members can invite and encourage fellow firefighters to attend this conference, which will help firefighters and their spouses deal with issues that are specific to the fire service. When Christian firefighters begin to understand some of the problems associated with marriages in the fire service, and how we can help struggling marriages, I believe we will start to

see a decline in divorces within our fire departments. Fire Departments can then fully concentrate on the task we have been assigned, saving lives.