

Heritage Lectures

No. 804

Delivered September 25, 2003



Published by The Heritage Foundation

October 20, 2003

The Necessity of Marriage

The Honorable Rick Santorum

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today regarding an important institution that is increasingly threatened in our society—marriage. Several years ago, I addressed “The Necessity of Truth,” and today I will discuss “The Necessity of Marriage.”

Marriage is one of those truths that, as I articulated, is important for the foundation of any healthy society. There are two ways to approach it. One is from a utilitarian standpoint: Why is marriage a good thing for our society? Later on in my talk, I’m going to list statistics that prove its myriad benefits. However, first, I will approach the topic of marriage from a broader perspective: Why is it an intrinsic good?

When I talk to my colleagues about marriage and about the objective evidence that proves marriage is a good thing, it’s remarkable how little they know. When I assert that marriage is a good thing and is under assault, they all have a basic understanding that marriage is worth protecting.

However, it is so accepted and so natural that my colleagues fail to step back and consider why marriage is such a good thing. Why is it so important? Why is marriage so foundational? What is the necessity of marriage?

Marriage as a Countercultural Institution

To answer these questions, let me first address the culture in which we live and why marriage is an institution that is countercultural. In its essence, marriage is a selfless act. It is the act of giving oneself to somebody else and becoming one.

- Recent federal court rulings regarding the right to privacy threaten to further undermine marriage. Although privacy is not an enumerated right in our Constitution, some activist judges are reading that right into it in their decisions.
- The reason marriage is important is that it affirms what our Founding Fathers understood—that the purpose for this country is to use our freedoms for the promotion of the common good.
- Given the high stakes for society, it is important for public leaders to understand why marriage is important and to communicate that to the American public. But many politicians still do not understand what makes marriage worth defending.
- The evidence is overwhelming: We need to promote and protect marriage to secure a healthier society. Therefore, the public policy implications are clear: The government must promote marriage as a fundamental societal benefit.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/family/hl804.cfm

Produced by the Domestic Policy Studies Department

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 heritage.org

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Of course, it is impossible for two people to unite and remain separate. And since the essence of marriage is selflessness in a self-centered society, it faces opposition from today's popular culture.

All facets of our popular culture, from the entertainment industry to our universities, focus on "ME." My colleague Senator John Ensign of Nevada told me a story that epitomizes the selfishness of our culture: "When I was a teenager, I had a sticker in my car with a picture of a bear scratching himself on the tree, and under it was the saying, 'If it feels good, do it!'"

That was the motto of the '60s and the '70s, and certainly it is the motto today. The image of the bear scratching himself highlights a view of human beings as animals, and that people should do what pleases them at the moment without a thought to the broader long-term consequences of their actions.

Marriage and the "Right to Privacy." Marriage, on the other hand, is about selflessness, and it is under assault in the public sphere. Recent federal court rulings regarding the right to privacy threaten to further undermine marriage.

The problem is, although privacy is not an enumerated right in our Constitution, some activist judges are reading that right into it in their decisions. But rulings that expand privacy—a purely selfish right—do nothing to serve the common good.

Recently, I participated in an event at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia on the Preamble to the Constitution, the five principles that form the basis of our democracy: "establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." My address focused on "promote the general Welfare," the one principle that was fundamentally different from all the rest because responsibility to promote the common good rests not just with the government, but with all citizens. Indeed, our Founding Fathers established all the rights in the Constitution not for the individual's gain, but for the common good.

The notion of a right to privacy is not about the common good, but about "ME." Starting during the sexual revolution with contraception, it quickly

evolved to abortion, and now it has found its way into today's marriage debate. The reason marriage is important is that it affirms what our Founding Fathers understood—that the purpose for this country is to use our freedoms for the promotion of the common good.

Marriage and the Common Good. Marriage promotes the common good by building families and raising children. Those of you who have children know that every day that goes by is about selfless acts in nurturing children. But society is failing to affirm the vital institution of marriage on any level—legal, societal, any level—and for this reason, marriage is under assault, with high rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births pummeling the traditional family.

Given the high stakes for society, it is important for public leaders to understand why marriage is important and to communicate that to the American public. But many politicians still do not understand what makes marriage worth defending.

For example, Senator Max Baucus of Montana asserted during a recent Senate Finance Committee markup that the federal government should withhold funding from programs to promote healthy marriages in the welfare reform reauthorization bill because it is not the government's place to encourage people to get married—marriage is not for everyone.

How Marriage Benefits Society

But looking at marriage in general, from the utilitarian perspective, there is no question that marriage is good for society: Children, women, and men all benefit enormously.

Benefits for Children. Looking at the benefits for children, there is a wealth of evidence that children living in two-parent homes are better off than those in single-parent families. They are 44 percent less likely to be physically abused, 47 percent less likely to suffer physical neglect, 43 percent less likely to suffer emotional neglect, and 55 percent less likely to suffer some form of child abuse.

Those living with their two married parents through age 16 have higher grades, higher college aspirations, and better attendance records than children in one-parent families or who experience

family disruption. They also are half as likely to drop out of high school.

Furthermore, children in two-parent homes are less than half as likely as children in single-parent families to have emotional or behavioral problems. And children who live with biological or adoptive parents are about a third as likely as those living with single parents to use illegal drugs, tobacco, or alcohol. In addition, boys raised with two parents are about half as likely to commit a crime leading to incarceration by their early 30s.

Clearly, the research shows that marriage helps children do better on every level, and that is exactly why the government should encourage healthy marriages.

Benefits for Women. For women, despite a whole generation of a movement that has misled them into thinking that marriage is not necessarily in their interest, the evidence proves otherwise.

Studies show that wives are 30 percent more likely to rate their health excellent or good than single women of the same age. In addition, married women (and men) are less likely to suffer long-term chronic illness or disabilities than single women. And mortality rates are less than one-third as high among married women as among non-married women.

Women gain financially as well—marriage increases income by 50 percent for women (25 percent for men)—and domestic violence rates decrease substantially. Married women are far less likely to be victims of intimate-partner violence than divorced, separated, or never-married women. The rate per thousand for divorced or separated women is 31.9; never married women, 11.3; married women, just 2.6.

Benefits for Men. Finally, the evidence shows that marriage benefits men significantly and serves as a civilizing influence on them.

Notably, single men have almost six times the probability of being incarcerated as married men, and men who live with their biological children are more involved in the community and service organizations, more connected to their own siblings, adult children, and aging parents. Fathers living with their children invest more hours per week in work and careers than non-fathers.

Men's financial gains are substantial. Married men make 25 percent more money than single men, and two-parent families are five times less likely to be in poverty than single-parent families.

Their health and quality of life also improve with marriage. Mortality rates are two-thirds as high among married men as among single men. Married men (and women) are less than half as likely as their divorced counterparts to attempt suicide.

Conclusion

The evidence is overwhelming: We need to promote and protect marriage to secure a healthier society. Therefore, the public policy implications are clear: The government must promote marriage as a fundamental societal benefit.

President George W. Bush understands the necessity of marriage and has said he will support an amendment to the Constitution that defends marriage against the threats from the cultural breakdown. Marriage must remain the standard for family life in the society.

Both for its intrinsic good and for its benefits for society, we need marriage. And just as important, we need public leaders to communicate to the American public why it is necessary.

—*The Honorable Rick Santorum is a United States Senator from Pennsylvania.*