

# THE ETHICS OF MARRIAGE

## Prof. Adler's Conclusions from His Study of the Subject.

### CAUSES FOR INCREASE IN DIVORCES

#### Principal One that a Higher Type of the Marriage Relation Is Being Evolved, Based on Equality.

Prof. Felix Adler delivered a discourse on "The Ethics of Marriage" to the Society for Ethical Culture in Carnegie Hall yesterday morning. Prof. Adler said:

"Modern society is passing through a period of transition and transformation. The most settled traditions, the most sacred institutions, cannot entirely resist the influences that make for change.

"The institution of marriage, too, is subject to these influences. I refer here chiefly to two: The restrictions placed by society or the State upon the freedom of individuals in concluding the marriage contract have been almost entirely removed. Second, the great equality of women with men has made mutual adjustment in wedlock more difficult.

"In former times marriage was an affair of the families rather than of the individual. In Rome the father had the right even to divorce his married son against the latter's wish. In feudal times marriage was to a considerable extent subject to the control of the Over-lord. According to the so-called assizes of Jerusalem, the lord had the right of proposing to his female vassal three candidates, one of whom she was bound to accept as her husband.

"In modern times these limitations upon freedom have almost entirely disappeared. The State still forbids plural marriages and the marriage of minors, but in other respects men and women are at liberty to form alliances according to their pleasure—even the old with the young, the sick with the healthy, the contaminated with the innocent. The State does not inquire. No legal checks whatever remain. A return to coercive measures is of course impossible, but it seems as if the Church and all associations that are interested in moral progress have here a duty to perform. If legal restrictions are no longer possible, the checks of moral influence are all the more imperatively called for, because it is not true that marriage concerns only individuals that enter into it. The welfare of society, the interests of future generations, are at stake, and these wider considerations should be presented more earnestly and forcibly than they commonly are presented.

"A second change is due to the increasing recognition of woman's equality with man. This is a great gain, but, like every other gain, is attended with corresponding loss. The problem of marriage is how two minds often different in texture and quality and contents shall become one mind; how two wills shall be made one will.

"The solution of this problem was far easier at a time when it was believed that, according to the decrees of nature and the commands of God, one of the parties ought to be subordinate to the other; when it was believed 'that the man was the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church.'

"Under such conditions it was not doubtful which of the two parties ought to yield to the other, but when two equal and independent wills are pitted one against the other there must be deep sympathy if there is to be unity.

"The almost incredible headway which the divorce movement is making in this and other countries shows that this sympathy is wanting. A famous French statistician exclaims: 'I know not what breath of discord is passing over the households of the world.' And he declares that the number of divorces is increasing irrespective of nationality or country or religion. In 1867 there were annually less than 10,000 divorces in the United States; in 1886 these had increased to 25,000. In 1870 there was one divorce to every 3,517 marriages. Ten years later there was one to 2,051.

"It does not seem that the laxity or strictness of laws is a principal cause. The number of divorces has increased in States whose laws are strict as well as in those whose laws are lax. It does not seem that the inharmonious character of the laws of the different States is the principal cause, so that a Federal divorce law would remedy the evil. The Government's statistics seem to show that in a majority of cases investigated the divorce was granted in the same State where the parties were married.

"The migratory habits of our population account for the loosening of the marriage tie to some extent, for we find that in the United States desertion is an important ground of divorce, while elsewhere it is a minor ground.

"But I am persuaded that the principal cause after all is that a new and higher type of the marriage relations is being evolved, based on equality instead of subordination, and that in many cases the moral perceptions are still lacking. The moral strength is still inadequate to realize this type, and to win from it all the fine results which it prophesied for the future.

"If I speak of the new type of the marriage relations, I do not agree with those who think that monogamic marriage is to be replaced by something better. I know of nothing better than monogamy, rightly understood. When I refer to a higher type I mean a type in which the essential principle of marriage, as we know it, shall be still further intensified, purified, and elevated; in which the polygamous relations that actually exist at the present day in the midst of a society which professes the contrary principle shall be more and more done away with; in which the lifelong companionship of one man with one woman, wedded in mind as well as in heart, shall be more and more brought to be honored and recognized as what it is—the fountain of earth's purest happiness, the deep well-spring of civilization and of all the humanities."