

Why can't priests get married?

The short answer to this question is because Jesus and St. Paul said some of those within the Church aren't supposed to get married.

The celibate calling doesn't make any sense unless we really believe that the purpose of our life is to follow Jesus Christ, and that we have a real hope of living forever in Heaven. If the meaning of life is anything besides fully committing ourselves to following Jesus Christ, and if we don't have the hope that God will give us something that is better than anything we could ever experience in this world, than the practice of priestly celibacy makes no sense. If the sacrifices involved in celibacy weren't part of serving a loving God who wants us to be with him forever in Heaven then a priest, or a nun, would have to be crazy to give up marriage and all that goes along with that.

The roots of the practice of celibacy go back to some very important passages in the New Testament. In referring to his own celibacy St. Paul wrote:

I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. 1 Corinthians 7:7-9

So St. Paul believed that some people in the church should refrain from marriage and be celibate, just as he was. He went on to explain that the reason for this was so that these people could be as free as possible to serve the Lord:

I would like you to be free from concern. ***An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord.*** But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife, and his interests are divided. ***An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs:*** Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman

is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. 1 Corinthians 7:32-:35

This echoes what Jesus himself said.

Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?" He said in reply, "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate." They said to him, "Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss (her)?" He said to them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. I say to you, ⁷whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery." [His] disciples said to him, "If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." He answered, "Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted. Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, *because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it." Matthew 19:3-:12

Jesus is making the point that some people were called upon to make the very difficult decision to give up marriage “for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven”. Some people are called to dedicate themselves so fully to God and the service of his Church that they are called to renounce marriage. This is a sign of Heaven where all those who make it there (and God willing that’s a group we’ll be part of) will “neither marry nor” nor “be given in marriage”, but will be “like angels in heaven.” (Matthew 22:30) Our ultimate happiness isn’t in marriage, it isn’t in being a parent, it’s in God. Now of course being married and being a parent is the life that God calls most people to. This is how most people are supposed to follow him. But celibacy in this world, and the fact that in the next world the bond with God will be so much greater than the bond of marriage, shows that our ultimate joy is in God, not in marriage itself.

Marriage is a good thing. God wants most people to be married. But we can't put marriage, sex, and family ahead of God. We live these things out in the way he wants us to. We don't set standards when it comes to these things, and then ask God to meet our expectations.

Taken out of context these passages could lead people to have a negative view of marriage, but in numerous places Jesus and St. Paul speak very highly of marriage. Both celibacy and marriage are, and should be, respected calls within the Church. Anyone who has one of these calls, and looks down up others who are called to something else, is a fool. A celibate who doesn't value marriage is disobeying God. A married person who doesn't value celibacy would be disobeying God as well. God calls all people to follow him completely and dedicate themselves to him absolutely, whether they do this through answering a call to celibacy or through living out the vocation of marriage.