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The Ties That Bind — James Q. Wilson on Marriage

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Sociologist James Q. Wilson — one of the most influential public policy analysts of our times — considers our culture's conflicted state of mind on the issue of marriage. As always, his ideas are worthy of serious attention. Wilson's article, "[The Ties that Bind: The Decline of Marriage and Loyalty](#)" is found at *In Character*.

*The problem our society, and indeed any society, faces today is to reconcile character and freedom. The Western world is the proud beneficiary of the Enlightenment, that cultural and intellectual movement that espoused freedom, endorsed scientific inquiry, and facilitated trade. But for a good life, mere freedom is not sufficient. It must work with and support commitment, for out of commitment arises the human character that will guide the footsteps of people navigating the tantalizing opportunities that freedom offers. Freedom and character are not incompatible, but keeping them in balance is a profound challenge for any culture. One aspect of character that appears connected with marriage — and is even included in the marriage vows of many religious traditions — is loyalty. But what sort of loyalty is meant here? The word comes from the French *loyauté*, which in turn derives from the Latin *legalis*. In feudal times, it meant fidelity to one's oath to a master. The nineteenth-century American philosopher Josiah Royce said that loyalty was the supreme moral good, but surely that cannot be right. As critics have pointed out, a Nazi is not regarded as a moral person because he is loyal to Nazism. Even being loyal to the state in which one lives can be destructive if the state is headed by an evil ruler or is constitutionally illegitimate.*

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