

THE AFTERTASTE OF ADULTERY

Scriptures: Proverbs 5:1-14, 15-23

I will read our second scripture lesson in a moment. First I want to talk about the verses we just heard in our first scripture lesson.

During my 9 years as a pastor in Potlatch, Idaho, I visited two people from Potlatch in the county jail. Both were there for shooting someone. In one case a man from Potlatch shot another man who was having an affair with his wife. In the other case a young woman, who was actually a member of our church, shot her husband. Fortunately she did not kill him, but she shot him when she found in bed with another woman, actually two women ... at the same time.

Without in any way condoning that kind of violence, the book of Proverbs issues a firm warning: adultery is not just immoral, it is dangerous. It is destructive. The consequences of adultery are spelled out graphically in our first scripture lesson. Look at verse 9: “You will give your honor to others, and your years to the merciless.” You may remember that early in the 1988 presidential campaign, the front runner for the Democratic nomination was a Colorado senator named Gary Hart. He was forced to withdraw when he was photographed on a yacht with a young model named Donna Rice taking an overnight cruise to Bimini. The name on the yacht was “Monkey Business.” Just last year the CEO of the Boeing Corporation, Harry Stonecipher, was forced to resign for having an affair with a subordinate. When Proverbs says about adultery, “You will give your honor to others,” it is not just blowing smoke.

Then there are the economic consequences described in verse 10: “Strangers will take their fill of your wealth, and your labors will go to the house of an alien.” I once visited a young family—a husband, wife, and two young children—who were forced into bankruptcy because of a paternity suit against the husband. He had a one night stand with a woman he met in a bar on a sales trip, and now his family was bound economically for the foreseeable future to a woman they did not even know in another part of the country.

Verse 11 may refer at least in part to disease: “At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are consumed.” I once read a statistical analysis of what are called “phantom sexual partners.” If a person has sexual relations with four different people at any point in his or her life, and if each of those people have had sex with four different people, each of whom have had sex with four different people, then microbiologically the original person has 64 “phantom sexual partners,” meaning that the person may have been exposed to the sexually transmitted microbes and viruses of 64 different people, most of whom he or she does not know. There are physical as well as moral and financial consequences to having multiple sexual partners.

In verses 12-14 the adulterer laments his or her folly:

Oh, how I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. Now I am at the point of utter ruin in the public assembly.

That is the case against adultery. But is there a case on the positive side for marital fidelity? Is there a reason to be faithful to your spouse? Now follow along as I read our second scripture lesson: Proverbs 5:15-23. You may want to cover the ears of your children.

(Read Proverbs 5:15-23)

You probably understood the metaphor in verses 15-18, but in case you didn't, let me explain it. In verse 15 when Proverbs says, "Drink water from your own cistern," it is not talking about a well. It means to enjoy and be satisfied with the love of your own husband or wife. In verse 16 it even gets a little risqué: "Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets?" If people understood it, the Bible would be rated R.

The idea is to appreciate what you've got. Verses 18-19: "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times: may you be intoxicated always by her love."

I know that marriage is not always an intoxication with love. The graceful doe can get a little lumpy. So can the young stag. And both can become hide-bound and gnarly and at times grumpy and infirm. Why should we stick with someone under those conditions?

A seminary professor named Lewis Smedes poses this question at the beginning of his book *Caring and Commitment: Learning to Live the Love that We Promise*. He asks the question: Why should we make and keep a lifetime commitment to another person when our needs and feelings toward that other person are likely to change over the course of a lifetime? Here is his reply:

What makes commitment keeping worth working at is this: it serves the long term good of people in relationship, people who want to live in a caring human community. That's the beginning and the end of it. We can create a good life together only out of trust. And trust, to make it last, needs commitment. We need to know that the people who promise to be with us are really going to be there. If we all lived as strictly free-floating, unfettered, self-enhancing individuals, we would all be left hanging in the vacuum of each other's undependability. We need something firmer. Commitments give it to us. They create small islands of security for us in our oceans of insecurity. They make enclaves of steadfastness in the jungles of change. They give us the only human basis for trusting each other. For counting on each other (p. 24).

In the late 1980s a representative national survey of 5,232 married adults found that 645 of these adults reported being unhappily married. Five years later these same 645 people were surveyed again. In the interval some had separated or divorced and some had stayed together. The follow-up survey five years later found that among those who had stayed together 2/3 (66%) reported feeling happier about their marriage than they had five years earlier. And they were still married to the same person! In contrast, among those who had separated or divorced, only 19%, about 1 in 5, reported being happier five years later (a study done by the Institute for American Values in New York, reported in the *Focus on the Family Newsletter*, September, 2002).

I think Proverbs would approve of looking at psychological and sociological studies as part of a sermon, because according to Proverbs faithfulness in marriage is not only moral, it is wise. It is smart. In the long run it pays off in a better life, both for the couple and for their children.

Of course, it takes two to maintain a marriage. You can control your own faithfulness to the marriage, but you cannot control the other person's. And sometimes the other person's actions can be so destructive to a marriage there is no way to save it. Jesus himself acknowledges that adultery may be such a circumstance. Physical or sexual abuse is another situation that requires at least separation for the safety of the abused spouse or children. There are other behaviors, I suspect, such as crime, drug use, or extreme financial irresponsibility that make it unsafe or untenable to maintain a marriage. However, the answer to these or any other problems in marriage is not adultery. The answer is wise counsel. Get help—help from a pastor, help from a counselor, maybe even help from an attorney or financial advisor when that is needed. Get wise, appropriate guidance from within the family of Christ about how to deal with your particular situation.

But here is the good news. You are not alone in this struggle. Verse 21 says, “For human ways are under the eyes of the Lord, and he examines all their paths.” That could be seen as a negative: big brother is always watching and listening, sort of like the National Security Administration. But in the case of God this is also good news. God is there. God sees. God knows what you are going through, and God wants to help.

It is possible that Proverbs 5 has two levels of meaning. In the Old Testament the image of adultery is often used to describe how Israel turned away from the Lord to worship other gods. Turning away from God is like committing adultery against God, because God wants to be our faithful lifelong companion. In fact God wants to be our eternal companion. Unlike a spouse who is there only until death do us part, God wants to be there with us forever. That is why God sent Jesus to give his life for us and why God raised him from the dead so that we could be raised up to be with him. God wants to give us eternal life and love. So if you turn your back on God, you are turning your back on the best and most lasting friend you will ever have. But if you commit your life to God, you can have a love in your life that nothing can destroy, from which no one can ever separate you. That is what God wants for you through his Son. It is the ultimate relationship, and it can make all your other relationships worth the effort.

- Ken Onstot