

Adulterating Marriage

The concept of *adultery* or *adulteration* is not just related to religion. In common usage, to adulterate means to corrupt, debase, or make impure by the addition of a foreign or inferior substance. We have federal agencies to protect the public against the adulteration of our food and drugs. The scriptures give us guidelines to prevent adulteration of marriages.

While it is true that the person may become the adulterer and sexual relations outside the marriage by a married person may be the adulterant, the thing that is adulterated is the marriage itself. Our invented term “living in adultery” is not found in the scriptures. Only the Lord knows, however, how many persons are unknowingly in an adulterated marriage because of the secret affairs of their spouses. Who will contend that such an innocent mate would be condemned because of it?

Even if a woman knows her husband has adulterated their marriage, there is no law or reason demanding that she divorce him. If he repents, asks for forgiveness, and is forgiven, he is no longer an adulterer and their marriage is pure again (Consider 1 Cor. 6:9-11).

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous” (Heb.13:4). While we recognize that marriage without love and trust is defective, we also know that without sexuality there would be no marriage. It is the nature God put within us to bring about the propagation of the race and to help hold the family unit together for the nurturing and protection of the offspring. So sexual activity by a marriage partner outside the marriage corrupts and destroys the purity of God’s happy arrangement.

Paul certainly emphasized the love that should exist between husband and wife, but he also recognized their sexual needs. *“But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband”* but he did not add “and each homosexual person should have his/her own same-sex partner” (1 Cor. 7:2). Then he further advises husbands and wives to respect conjugal rights.

Although homosexual activity is condemned in the scriptures, same-sex partners do not commit adultery for there is no marriage to adulterate. Their sexual activities are not for procreation or for the maintaining of the nurturing situation for their offspring, hence there can be no valid marriage. The same can be said of heterosexual persons living together out of wedlock.

Adulterine children are those born of adultery, though it is not “politically correct” to use any descriptive distinction of them in our licentious society. Paul corrected an evident misconception among some Corinthian disciples, explaining, *“For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy”* (7:14). For a believer to have children with an unbelieving spouse was not adultery, nor did it produce adulterine children. Both the marriage and the children were consecrated / holy.

Throughout the centuries, the sincerest of scholars have wrestled with some of Jesus’ statements regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Who can claim to have deciphered everything correctly? In one of the more difficult passages Jesus states,

“everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt. 5:31f). We must question the possibility that the action of a husband can make his wife a sinner. Jesus was commenting on Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which specifically allowed a divorced woman to be remarried, but she could not later return to her first husband because she had been *defiled* by his action. Her marriage with the first husband had been adulterated but not so with the second. It seems that she had been made the victim of adulteration rather than bearing the guilt of it. But that demands scholarly textual criticism and interpretation for which I have no qualification.

There is a more feasible approach to understanding Jesus’ statements, however, in my less enlightened judgment. Jesus was dealing with their legal code of law, the Law of Moses, and their Talmudic interpretations. In this very setting, Jesus declared that he was not changing the Law of Moses (Matt. 5:17-20). We are not under that legal code for justification or for continued sanctification, for we are under a Covenant of Grace rather than the Covenant of Law. Yet, we have consistently tried to regulate marriage relationships under the covenant of grace by precepts of a code of law!

We have been known to argue properly that we are not under the Law of Moses and then proceed to judge our marriages by it. To those who would bind the Law upon disciples, Peter asked, *“Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”* (Acts 15:10). Why bind that yoke when Jesus promised, *“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matt. 11:30)?

This realization becomes stronger when we consider that none of the writers of the Epistles quote Jesus’ pronouncements when they write about marriage. We look to 1 Corinthians 7 for the most comprehensive apostolic discussion of the subject, and there Paul neither mentions Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels nor uses the term “adultery!” He does not lay down the same restrictions and stipulations taught by Jesus and the Law.

Our marriage relationships are not governed by a legal code of requirements but by higher principles of love, moral ethics, honor, trust, and commitment. Abandonment of either of these in the marriage relationship spoils the purity and sanctity of a marriage. Consider the “deadbeat dad” who abandons his family. *“If any does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (1 Tim. 5:8). Is a sexual infraction of the husband a greater sin than denial of the faith? Has not the absentee father destroyed his marriage even as adultery would? Is the man who habitually beats his wife or constantly demeans her on better terms than the adulterer? Are those marital relations devoid of love, morality, and commitment -- the elements that constitute marriage -- still sanctified marriages? There can be unions that fulfill none of the purposes of marriage. Does not grace offer a key to unlock the dungeon of hopeless marriages, or is a wife compelled for a lifetime to “love, honor, and submit” to the man who gave her all the promises but turned out to be a ruthless tyrant?

Adultery may take on a different character in such cases. A breach of spiritual relationship with God is referred to as adultery (See Jas. 4:4; Ezek. 16:15; Matt. 15:19; 16:4; Mark 8:38; 2 Pet. 2:14). Since our marriage is based on love and commitment

instead of legal statute, it is well to ponder if the concept of adultery is wider than just sexual infractions.

Loopholes are sought in law. Our president demonstrated the hypocrisy of seeking loopholes in legal definitions. Although it is not given as a just cause for divorce, Jesus indicated that adultery can be in the heart without accompanying action. “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*” (Matt. 5:27). The adulterant is in the man’s intention though not yet acted upon.

While we are here, let us look at this abused passage more closely. These words have been used to induce guilt where Jesus did not intend it. Because lust is defined as a strong desire, and every normal youth and man is attracted strongly to females, sincere men of all ages have been made to feel unavoidable guilt. Without strong sexual attraction, a man is not likely ever to marry. But let us look at Jesus’ words and meaning.

Lust and **covet** are translated from the same word. It means a strong desire of any kind, either good or bad. According to the judgment of translators, the word **aner** is rendered **man** or **husband**, and **gune** is rendered **woman** or **wife**. These are the words Jesus used.

He says there is adultery, not fornication, in the heart. Married people commit adultery whereas sexual activity by two unmarried persons is generally called fornication. So, either the man who is lusting or the woman he is looking at, or both, are married. Jesus was actually only reinforcing the Tenth Commandment, “*You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife*” (Exo.20:17). That had nothing to do with a youth looking over the prospective dates or finding one to be sexually appealing. Jesus was saying that in coveting / lusting for another man’s wife / woman, the plans for adulterating one or two marriages were in his mind already. The man and woman involved could adulterate two marriages in one act. However, since the Seventh Commandment had already stated, “*You shall not commit adultery*” (20:14), the Tenth probably anticipates marriage of the two involved.

Luke records Jesus’ words, “*Every one who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery*” (Luke 16:18). How could he say that when he had already given the permissive “except for fornication” clause? It is commonly understood in our speaking, that when a second action is coupled with a former one, the second action indicates the purpose of the first. To illustrate: “I went to the bank and deposited my check.” *And* couples two actions with the second action stating the purpose of the first one. So we understand it as “I went to the bank *in order to* deposit my check.” That is a very common usage, and evidently it was used by Jesus in the above quotation. It should be understood, “Every one who divorces his wife *in order to* marry another.” His looking was more than a gawking or fantasizing but evidently it was a developed intention to take the woman. So he divorces his wife to marry the coveted woman.

Don’t try to outline this piece for I have followed none. Don’t accept my thoughts as dogmatic expressions. I mean to encourage further study. I would like to relieve some of the doubts, uncertainties, and paralyzing fears while remaining true to the Word. I want you to consider that the holiness / sanctity of marriage is based on the higher principles of love, honor, and commitment rather than upon a legal contract.

For those who may have been sentenced to doom and hopelessness by well-meaning brethren, I point to the hope Paul offered those formerly mired in adulterous relationships, “*And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God*” (1 Cor. 6:11).

(For more on the subject see *Freedom’s Ring*, #21 and #22.) []