

February 21, 2010
First Things First ... Strong Relationships
Deuteronomy 5:18

We can think about each of the Ten Commandments negatively ("*You shall not ...*") or positively ("*You shall ...*"). For instance, last week we considered the command, "*You shall not murder.*" That can be understood as a positive command - "*Protect life!*"

Paul captures this positive twist in a passage we read last week: "*Pay all your debts,*" says Paul, "*except the debt of love for others. You can never finish paying that! If you love your neighbour, you will fulfill all the requirements of God's law. For the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting - and any other commandment - are all summed up in this one commandment: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'*" (Romans 13:8-9). "*The whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'*" (Galatians 5:14).

This week's command, "*You shall not commit adultery,*" is one aspect of loving our neighbour. Adultery is defined as "*voluntary sexual intercourse of a married person with one who is not his or her lawful spouse.*" It's about loving your neighbour: in this case your spouse, your friends and their spouses, and anyone else of the opposite gender you meet. This command is specifically about relationships within marriage, but it reflects a much deeper concern in the Bible for sexual morality. Any sexual activity outside of marriage is not acceptable in God's eyes. God repeatedly warns against sexual sin (Deuteronomy 22-25, 1 Corinthians 6:9-13, Galatians 5:19, Ephesians 5:3, Colossians 3:5), and emphasizes the blessings of faithfulness (1 Corinthians 7, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8, Hebrews 13:4).

Why? The basic biblical understanding of human sexuality is that physical intimacy is beautiful and good, designed to express the emotional and spiritual commitment that comes through the covenant of marriage. With the emotional and spiritual commitment and intimacy of marriage comes the appropriate expression of physical - sexual - intimacy. Our sexuality is one of God's good gifts in marriage (Proverbs 5:15-20). Sexual activity outside of marriage, then, is physical intimacy without emotional and spiritual commitment. It is never be truly fulfilling. And physical intimacy outside of marriage can actually leave scars that make it harder for us to develop healthy relationships with a person later on in life.

God doesn't do this to make the lives of single people miserable! He does it to protect us from settling for something less than the best for us. Our sexuality is a great gift ... when expressed in marriage. But it can actually do us more harm than good when we express it outside of the context for which God created it. The book of Proverbs, mostly written by Solomon (who certainly knew about sexuality!), contains long sections about the dangers of sex outside of marriage (Proverbs 5-7). Significantly, Solomon also wrote one of the most powerful poems about the beauty of sex in marriage ever written (Song of Songs).

So let's consider this command positively: honour marriage, treasure marriage, and protect marriage - then you will love your neighbour. God is also saying: honour your sexuality and personhood and the sexuality and personhood of people around you by keeping physical intimacy for the commitment of marriage. You love your neighbour by maintaining those ethical standards. We might broaden this command even further to say that we should honour and strengthen all healthy relationships -including good friendships - treasure them, and protect them. The best marriages are really best friendships. Those friendships give us the strength we need through tough times, people to celebrate with in good times, and the wise counsel we need when life is challenging. So this command emphasizes the importance of building healthy, strong relationships - particularly in marriage, but in all of life.

Strong relationships - be they marriages or good friendships - are a gift from God. They provide us with the support we need - and the support others need. Building great relationships is a key way to love other people by investing our time, energy and love into their lives.

Love is a Matter of the Mind (and heart and soul, and body)

Jesus says, *"You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust in his eye has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So if your eye - even if it is your good eye - causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand - even if it is your stronger hand - causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell"* (Matthew 5:27-30). Strong talk!

Notice the progression ... sin, Jesus warns, begins in the mind. It starts with a look, then a thought, and then may move into action. He gives an interesting solution! At times in history, people have taken this advice literally, and crippled their bodies. But I suspect Jesus is using the literary device of *hyperbole* - exaggerating to make a point. He's talking about self-control! If you struggle with lust - turn off the TV, avoid the adult magazine section, don't buy Harlequin romance novels, put a filter on your internet service, perhaps even don't go to the beach! Be careful what you watch and think!

We do have powerful drives - that's the way we are. The media knows that; that's how they choose to sell all sorts of things - from beer to cars, from magazines to movies. The media plays to our sexual curiosity by pushing the limits of morality, intriguing us with the myth that promiscuity is really the norm, and so much more satisfying than marriage, faithfulness, or abstinence.

Jesus challenges us to be honest about our urges. They're part of being human! But that's no license for sin! We need to express them in a healthy way! Martin Luther once observed, *"You can't stop birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them nesting in your hair."* We may be tempted to sexual sin ... the challenge is, will we turn away, or will allow ourselves to begin to think ...? Because when we begin to think, we can begin to act ... Just ask David ...

One of the key issues in adultery (and with murder/anger/stealing/lying/ coveting and the other commandments is a challenge to look into our hearts and recognize what is there. Part of our struggle with sin is a struggle with our own self-centeredness: we want what we want so we rationalize and justify behaviour that we know is wrong ... but we want it.

God sees the heart and its fluctuations. He knows what is going on inside, and He invites us to be honest with ourselves and with Him. *"In the evening of life,"* Frank Doyle writes, *"God will see not just what we did, but the heart of goodness by which we lived."* A practical way of dealing with our own self-centeredness and desire for things we don't have is to be grateful. When you are feeling like you really want something or someone you don't have, think of something to be thankful for. There is always something to be thankful for.

Cultivating Love - Stronger Marriages and Friendships

The best preventions for adultery are healthy marriage and healthy friendships! God's command is *"Guard yourself; always remain loyal to your wife"* (Malachi 2:16). Building strong marriages obviously helps prevent spouses wandering where they should not be! But strong friendships for all of us - with men and women - help us get to know people as people whom we respect as glorious creations of God. And when we see people that way, we honour them by treating them with respect and dignity ... that includes honouring their sexuality by following God's commands.

How do we build strong marriages? The same way we build all strong relationships:

a. *Communicate! Communicate! Communicate!*

One of the best books on marriage is by Norman Wright, *Communication: Key to Your Marriage*. His premise is that if we communicate with our spouses about our joys and frustrations, our hopes and our fears, our successes and our disappointments ... then we won't go looking for emotional or sexual intimacy elsewhere. My experience concurs: lack of communication is one of the #1 problems in struggling marriages! It's also one of the key elements that people who struggle to build friendships wrestle with. If we cannot communicate we cannot build good friendships either.

How well do you and your spouse (or your close friends) communicate? Gary Chapman in his book, *The Five Love Languages*, notes that we may communicate our love in different ways: words of affirmation, quality time, giving and receiving gifts, acts of service, or physical touch. How well we communicate may depend upon how well we know our spouse's (and or own) "love language."

b. *Take Time Together*

In our culture it is easy for spouses to be like "two ships passing in the night." And when we never see each other, problems can result! Communication - in whatever form - only

happens when we spend time together ... go for a walk, go shopping, go on a date, do the dishes ... It's easy for friends to never take time for one another. Make sure you invest time in the people you care about.

c. *Make Jesus the Centre of your Relationship*

What part does Jesus play in your marriage? When we *choose* to make Him central in our marriage, amazing things can happen! Make opportunity to pray together, read Scripture together, talk about your faith together. It may be hard at first if it has not been part of your experience. But you will discover that things begin to change. Even if only one spouse makes the commitment to grow spiritually, great things can happen as you pray for your spouse, forgive your spouse, and experience God at work in your life.

In your friendships, make Jesus a core part. Talk about your relationship with Him. Encourage one another in your spiritual growth.

A Self-check ...

1 Corinthians 13 is a passage we often think of when we think of marriage. But it is actually NOT about romantic love. This is about relationships in the church - Chapter 12 describes the church as a body with many parts, all of whom need to work together in harmony; both Chapters 12 and 14 also talk about spiritual gifts and how they are to be used to build up the church. But it is a helpful check up for us in all of our relationships - with our spouse, kids, parents, friends, and people at church, too ... Think about how you are doing at loving as God would have you love ...

"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.

"Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end. Love never dies."

May God help us to love like that!

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