

## 6. *Marriage and Faithfulness*

I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Matthew 5:27-31

### *Matrimony is original*

Marriage as a life-long commitment of a man and a woman appears to have become outmoded to the Western mind. In practice many still choose it but they are forbidden to view this as exclusive or even the most preferable kind of life-style. The only thing original and creative is the love relationship. Marriage is supposed to be an artificial, super-imposed form. This vision gnaws away at marriages within our society by undermining their very foundation: the characteristics of marriage, physical union and living together, are easily cut loose from one another. Life-long faithfulness which is essential for married couples goes up in smoke in countless divorces. Statistically the preference for marriage may be increasing again, but in many cases such marriages are simply a shell of what they are supposed to be. Nevertheless, there is nothing in this world so original and genuine as marriage. The history of mankind began with the wedding of Adam and Eve. The law of marriage was formulated at that time: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." The word "united" points to a permanent commitment: man and woman become one flesh within a life-long covenant. Neither before nor outside of it. God has placed man far above the animals in this. Animals experience casual relationships and only in special cases does a relationship last a long time. Men, on the other hand, are allowed to surround their desires and feelings with will and understanding. This forms a protection. The pitcher of love can be filled until it bursts, but marital faithfulness keeps even a broken pitcher watertight.

Marriage as a communion of love and faithfulness, self-denial and patience, is very original: it reflects some of the love which is in God. In Christ he continuously loves a church of sinners.

This love endures, suffers, and bears, always and forever. We are allowed to catch a glimpse of these reflections in human marriage whenever it really is a marriage: a life-long commitment to fidelity in love.

In Paradise the Seventh Commandment remained superfluous. Marriage certainly existed but unfaithfulness never even reached the horizons of the heart. After we had fallen away from God it was necessary to call man to order, now unfaithful to his fellow-man as well: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus repeats this prohibition and He points to three things threatening marriage: infidelity, dishonesty and negligence.

### *Infidelity*

Infidelity to one's spouse is commonplace in this world. The novel development in our time is the attempt to expunge the appropriate word out of man's consciousness. All kinds of neutral-sounding expressions have come to take its place: open-marriage, wife-swapping, plurality of life-styles and so on. But there is only one appropriate word when a man is not faithful to his wife or a wife to her husband: infidelity! Moving or liberating experiences are irrelevant: the real question is what has been shattered or broken in the meantime. A husband or wife has been sacrificed to adultery. This breaks the marriage's back, and God forbids it without exception. He chooses sides for the other party: you may not break open either your own marriage or the marriage of another!

The Old Testament contains instructions for a ceremony to be held in the Temple when a husband suspects his wife of adultery (Numbers 5). At issue here is the suspicion and not the reality of infidelity. Nevertheless, the ceremony which follows is gripping. It looks like a funeral service: the wife appears with hair undone, the husband comes with a food offering of barley flour, a drink containing dust from the temple is mixed, and a throw-away clay jar is employed instead of a copper pitcher. The temple mourns when even the suspicion of adultery casts a shadow over a marriage, and that temple shows us God's countenance. Great sorrow follows the loss of beautiful things!

### *Dishonesty*

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus upholds the Seventh Com-

mandment: Thou shalt not commit adultery. He goes even further by forbidding adultery in our thoughts and even the suggestion of it in our behavior. "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Here He is thinking of eye contact. A man trying to catch the attention of another man's woman. Life is full of dubious glances, gestures with double meanings, and sexually loaded words or contacts. The feminist complaint about the way in which women are molested in the work-place is not without foundation. At the same time these complaints are not taken very seriously because most people see a big difference between rape reported in the newspapers and passes made at the water fountain. Humanly speaking there is a great deal of difference between the two. Interestingly enough, Jesus places them both on one line. Both are condemned as adultery.

The essence of adultery, of course, is a lack of faithfulness. This comes from the heart. For that reason it is just as bad when this kind of infidelity remains inside the heart and a person succeeds in controlling his unfaithfulness by confining himself to dishonest gazes or contacts. The marriage remains intact, but pureness and uprightness are missing, and that has consequences. A marriage is written with the heart: the script fades when the heart is dishonest. The real question is not what can be experienced in terms of adventure and pleasure, but what is broken down in terms of honesty and quality in the relationship of husband and wife.

### *Negligence*

Negligence represents a third threat to marriage. Jesus points to this by discussing the Jewish practice of sending a wife away with a letter of divorce in certain situations. Proponents appealed to the Law of Moses for support. Deuteronomy 24 does speak about a letter of divorce. Nevertheless, the Jews employed this chapter very selfishly. Moses really says no more than that a man may not take his first wife back after he has sent her away and remarried. In the meantime she has become the wife of another. Moses did not institute the letter of divorce, but he tolerated it and also gave rules limiting its use. The language of these limited rules seemed to escape the Jews: They began to treat the letter of divorce as a normal transaction. Jesus shocked them by bringing an end to the right of the letter of

divorce as well. What Moses tolerated, Jesus abolishes. Its time is over.

Why does Jesus as Law-giver go further than Moses? Because He wants love and fidelity to increase on the eve of the kingdom of heaven, and anyone who gives his wife a letter of divorce without adultery as the cause insures that she will commit adultery. Jesus' argumentation is quite striking. Until that time no one gave much thought to what happened to the other party after the divorce. Just as long as your *own* reputation remained unsoiled! But Jesus knows that a divorced wife, and certainly in a time without social welfare, is almost forced to marry another. Is that her fault? Or did her husband's actions give her no other choice?

Jesus' words presuppose a marriage's insolubility. No one is allowed to shirk his responsibility to the other. Not only is marriage threatened by infidelity, but by negligence as well. This needs to be stressed in a time when couples "go their separate ways" without the marriage having been pulled apart by adultery. No one appears to get hurt and each person is only responsible for the way in which he or she goes on to fill in life after the separation. This chain of thought exists only by the grace of marital negligence. Whoever lets go of someone else, is not home free if the other person later stumbles. Weren't they both called to help, support and protect one another until death separated them?

Over and against negligence stands responsibility. Loving in faithfulness knows no end to responsibility. Taking up the task of protecting a husband or wife, regardless of the cost, is preparation for the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom is ours because Christ was responsible for us unto death.

### *Marriage and the kingdom of heaven*

Although appearing to be quite severe, Jesus' commandments for marriage are in reality filled with hope. If the world only knew infidelity and meanness, there would be little point in pursuing love and faithfulness. But if a world characterized by love and faithfulness exists, then it is worth the effort to aim at that world. Jesus can press for strong marriages because the reality which they foreshadow is fast approaching. The kingdom of heaven is the never-ending marriage feast of the Lamb!

For this reason Jesus also gives serious commandments to

all those who believe in that kingdom. Not because every marriage is equally easy for those who believe, but because God's judgment touches our marriage and everything which preceded it. The crossroads leading to heaven or hell are certainly bound up with the acceptance of God's commandments concerning marital fidelity. In verses 29 and 30 Jesus mentions the possibility that our whole body may be thrown into hell. The physical lives of men receive a lot of attention these days. But this is short-sighted attention. Anyone who truly loves his body does well to submit it to God's commandments. Only in this way will our physical existence be saved from the fire and be spared for full blossoming in God's kingdom.

### *Self-discipline*

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls self-discipline a weapon in the struggle against infidelity, dishonesty and negligence. He assumes that His disciples have not yet reached perfection. Their eye or their hand could lead them into sin today. Weak is our will and fickle our desire. But now the question remains whether we have resigned ourselves to that or whether we try to struggle with ourselves for Jesus' sake. This demands self-discipline: "If your right eye causes you to sin, 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." Jesus' statement could not have been meant literally. How does plucking out an eye help us? The other one could just as easily lead us into sin, couldn't it? The point here is to keep every part of our bodies under control. That we turn our eyes away when it's necessary, and that we restrain our hands in order to remain honest and pure in our actions. The expressions which Jesus employs remind us of cruel punishments sometimes imposed upon criminals (gouging out an eye, cutting off a hand). Who would ever do such a thing to himself? Keeping yourself in check and denying yourself things on account of fidelity to someone else seems totally absurd in an age in which man is taught to experience everything. Jesus, in fact, teaches us that we can only hold on to the other person when we are willing to let go of ourselves. That we can only live with God when we rid ourselves of many things we love. Not because we are ascetics or because we flee from the world, but because taking part in a great expedition means leaving a lot of baggage at home.

We can see many beautiful things with our eyes and there is much we would like to reach out and hold, but entrance into God's new world demands self-denial and self-control. A Christian appreciation of film, literature or dance today increasingly involves a conscious distancing from all kinds of movies, books and styles of dance because they directly or indirectly aim at sexual infidelity. Abstention may be unpopular. But the person who does not know when to cut into his own flesh, will not blossom soon either. The marriage feast after the last judgment is worth more than a few parties before death. Better to stand aside for awhile today, than to be cut out of things for good tomorrow.