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Proverbs 5:1-23

Sixth Message

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THE WISDOM OF LOVING YOUR SPOUSE

Recently our pastoral staff were exchanging wedding stories, and I shared an experience from one of my first wedding ceremonies. Rick and Heather were strong Christians and were active in the youth group I was shepherding in Pleasanton. On their wedding day, the church was filled with families and friends, and when it was time for the exchange of vows and rings, I said: "Rick, will you receive this ring from Heather, as a token of her affection, sincerity, and fidelity toward you; and will you wear it as a symbol of your own affection, sincerity, and fidelity toward her?" He said: "I will." Then I said: "Heather, will you receive this ring from Rick, as a token of his *infection*, sincerity, and fidelity toward you, and will you wear it as a symbol of your own affection, sincerity, and fidelity toward him?" Can you believe I actually said *infection*? That term brings to mind so many images you don't want to think about at a wedding. I tried to cover my mistake, but there was an audible gasp from the congregation, and then snickering was heard throughout the church. Of course, after the wedding ceremony I apologized profusely and we all had a good chuckle.

In pre-marital counseling I tell couples that I'm not in the business of performing weddings. What I want is to help them build a strong foundation for a fulfilling and lasting marriage, because that is what they will need to stand against the host of things that threaten marriage today. It's safe to say that Rick and Heather didn't expect the first threat to come from their pastor!

In today's world, many people enter marriage with sexual baggage that must be addressed. Sexual diseases and infections, for one thing, are often associated with a deadly virus that can destroy our bodies. In today's passage from the book of Proverbs we will see how sexual sin can bring death to more than just our bodies, however. But this passage deals with more than the negatives. We will also discover the joy and fulfillment to be found in the intimate relationship between a husband and wife.

In Proverbs chapter 5 the father instructs his son how to express his sexuality in a righteous way. He warns him about the danger and stupidity of entering into lustful habits and sexual sin; and by means of an allegory tells him that the place he can enjoy the pleasure of sex and intimacy to the greatest degree is not with a loose and easy woman, but with a loving and faithful wife.

This passage is for all of us, whether single or married, male or female, young or old. The issue is sexual temptation, and that includes every one of us. Those who think they are immune to this kind of temptation are the most likely to fall. Not only will this Scripture guide us in our own life, it reveals truth that we can share with others and live out before a watching world.

I approach this subject with humility and sensitivity, knowing that no one is immune to sin in this area. Many in this congregation have felt the deep pain that results from having sex outside of marriage. It is not my desire to bring further pain or condemnation, but to reveal truths from this passage to help us avoid sexual sin.

Here then are the words of the father to his son. Proverbs 5:

**My son, give attention to my wisdom,
Incline your ear to my understanding;
That you may observe discretion,
And your lips may reserve knowledge.**

**For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,
And smoother than oil is her speech;
But in the end she is bitter as wormwood,
Sharp as a two-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death,
Her steps lay hold of Sheol.
She does not ponder the path of life;
Her ways are unstable, she does not know it.
Now then, my sons, listen to me,
And do not depart from the words of my mouth.
Keep your way far from her,
And do not go near the door of her house,
Lest you give your vigor to others,
And your years to the cruel one;
Lest strangers be filled with your strength,
And your hard-earned goods go to the house of an alien;
And you groan at your latter end,
When your flesh and your body are consumed;
And you say, "How I have hated instruction!
And my heart spurned reproof!"
And "I have not listened to the voice of my teachers,
Nor inclined my ear to my instructors!
I was almost in utter ruin
In the midst of the assembly and congregation."
Drink water from you own cistern,
And fresh water from you own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
Streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone,
And not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
Be exhilarated always with her love.
For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress,
And embrace the bosom of a foreigner?
For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord,
And He watches all his paths.
His own iniquities will capture the wicked,
And he will be held with the cords of his sin.
He will die for lack of instruction,
And in the greatness of his folly he will go astray. (Prov 5:1-23
NASB)**

The word translated "adulteress" here is literally "female stranger," or "strange woman," as it is sometimes translated. She is a stranger, because her way of life is outside the framework of the covenant community. She is a loose and dangerous woman who has broken her covenant with her husband and her God, looking to sexually prey on unsuspecting men. Her life is unstable because she seeks to assuage her sexual appetite without regard to the consequences. She is a fool who lives in a way that is in direct contrast to the righteous ways of the wise. She and her

companions may seem to be living the good life, but their ultimate fate is darkness, ruin, and death.

It is not clear whether the son is married at the time this instruction is given. But it doesn't really matter. The bottom line is, this woman is totally off limits to the young man because she is not his wife. This text reminds us that we are not to be naive or gullible. We must have the wisdom of Scripture in our hearts and on our lips to help protect us from those who would seduce us with their enticing words and actions.

Proverbs 7:6-23 sets out in greater detail the alluring words of the cunning temptress:

For at the window of my house I looked out through my lattice, And I saw among the naive, I discerned among the youths, a young man lacking sense. Passing through the street near her corner; and he takes the way to her house, In the twilight, in the evening, in the middle of the night in the darkness. And behold, a woman comes to meet him, dressed as a harlot and cunning of heart. She is boisterous and rebellious; her feet do not remain at home; She is now in the streets, now in the squares, and lurks by every corner. So she seizes him and kisses him, and with a brazen face she says to him: "I was due to offer peace offerings; today I have paid my vows. Therefore I have come out to meet you, to seek your presence earnestly, and I have found you. I have spread my couch with coverings, with colored linens of Egypt. I have sprinkled my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon. Come let us drink our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with caresses. For the man is not at home, he has gone on a long journey; He has taken a bag of money with him, at full moon he will come home." With her many persuasions she entices him; with her flattering lips she seduces him. Suddenly he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as one in fetter to the discipline of a fool, Until an arrow pierces through his liver; as a bird hastens to the snare, so he does not know that it will cost him his life. (Prov 7:6-23)

The adulteress offers something without any commitment or hard work in return; there are no strings attached. Her words are persuasive and flattering as she appeals to the man's sensual desires, assuring him there will be no price to pay. Everything about her seems attractive and inviting. What she is offering is pleasure, plain and simple. But such pleasure is temporary and shallow, and the consequences are severe.

She is not the only one to blame, however. The young man also contributes to the deadly outcome. Notice the progression as he draws ever closer to temptation. He is out strolling around at the most tempting and vulnerable time of the day (the evening); he passes near her street corner; he decides to go down her street; eventually he is within arm's reach of her; and ultimately he enters into her house.

Sexual temptation is a slippery slope. That is why we are implored to stay far away from it. The closer we get, the more attractive it seems. It is only when we are close to it that can we hear the enticing words, smell the inviting aromas, and feel the sensuous embrace.

Our actions follow closely on the heels of our desires and thoughts. Many who have fallen say they sinned sexually because they were suddenly overwhelmed with temptation. But sexual sin is the culmination of a progression of small and deliberate choices and indulgences. Instead of guarding our hearts and judging our thoughts, we entertain fantasies that often yield to actions.

If someone enters our presence and we become sexually aroused, that is not a sin; we ought to be thankful for a healthy sex drive. But if someone other than our spouse enters into our presence and we become sexually aroused, and cultivate that arousal into a fantasy about having sex with them, then we are sinfully lusting after them.

C. S. Lewis reminds us:

Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point

from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or in anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.

The warning is loud and clear: We are to diligently avoid situations that draw us near to the slippery slope of sexual immorality. For some, that means not being alone with a certain someone in a secluded or private place. It may mean not going out with your boss, your secretary or co-worker to that out-of-the-way restaurant. It means not promoting emotional intimacy with someone you are counseling. It may mean not seeking and encouraging attention by dressing for work or a date in sexually suggestive clothes. It may mean not flirting with someone other than your spouse.

For some it may mean not reading a particular kind of magazine or romance novel, or viewing certain television shows or movies. It may mean we have to avoid visiting certain web-sites on the Internet. Any situation that arouses in us a romantic or sexual fantasy for someone other than our spouse is to be avoided at all costs.

Sexual fantasy and action are closely tied together. Faithfulness to a spouse is a matter of the heart and body. That is why Jesus made no distinction between lust and adultery, when he said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt 5:27). We must be ruthless in guarding our hearts, minds, eyes and ears from the myriad of sexual stimuli that surround us.

Sexual temptation is strong, and it is also very deadly. A sexual relationship outside of marriage is more than it appears to be. What may seem to be simply a single night of pleasure often results in a lifetime of pain and regret.

This text reminds us that what is attractive to our eyes and ears, and can bring temporary pleasure to our body, can also in the end result in tremendous internal and eternal damage. The words and actions that entice us to sexual sin may at first appear as attractive and sweet as honey, but they end up being as repulsive and bitter as wormwood. The speech and behavior that seemingly offer to heal and soothe our sexual drives are ultimately as painful and destructive as a two-edged sword.

Extramarital sex is deceiving. Though initially it might be sweet, exciting and easy, in the end it brings only bitterness, destruction and death.

Verses 9-14 set out in greater detail just how bitter, destructive and deadly sexual immorality can be. I will begin reading at verse 8:

**Keep your way far from her,
And do not go near the door of her house,
Lest you give your vigor to others,
And your years to the cruel one;
Lest strangers be filled with your strength,
And your hard-earned goods go to the house of an alien;
And you groan at your latter end,
When your flesh and your body are consumed;
And you say, "How I have hated instruction!
And my heart spurned reproof!"
And "I have not listened to the voice of my teachers,
Nor inclined my ear to my instructors!"
I was almost in utter ruin
In the midst of the assembly and congregation." (5:8-14)**

Sexual immorality can lead to financial, emotional and social ruin.

We will get a better understanding of this from a similar account in Proverbs 6:25-35, where a more detailed description of this financial, social and personal ruin is given:

Do not desire her beauty in your heart, nor let her catch you with her eyelids. For on account of a harlot one is reduced to a loaf of bread, and an adulteress hunts for the precious life. Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk

on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched? So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife; whoever touches her will not go unpunished. Men do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy himself when he is hungry; but when he is found, he must repay sevenfold; he must give all the substance of his house. The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; he who would destroy himself does it. Wounds and disgrace he will find, and his reproach will not be blotted out. For jealousy enrages a man, and he will not spare in the day of vengeance. He will not accept any ransom, nor will he be content though you give him many gifts. (Prov 6:25-35)

Both of these passages describe the consequences that will result if this young man commits sexual immorality. First, he will, in effect, become an indentured slave. All his present and future wages and goods will go to the husband of the woman whom he took sexually. Second, he will cry out in anguish to his dying days in regret for his pride in not having obeyed the wisdom of his teachers. And third, he and his family will face public denunciation for his sin.

Sexual immorality has a very high price tag. It can lead to the loss of position, power, prosperity and peace of mind. In our modern culture it may not lead to indentured slavery and public disgrace, but it still can lead to a loss of respect, loneliness, jealousy, venereal disease, alimony and child support.

As this contribution to a recent issue of a Christian youth magazine attests, shame and years of regret are also part of the price of sex outside of marriage. One teenage girl writes:

Last year, I had a Christian boyfriend who meant the world to me. When we broke up, I was miserable. But what was worse than losing my boyfriend was the horrible realization that a big part of me went with him. We had been sexually active. I was left with shame, guilt and a broken heart. I still can't get through a day without thinking about the things we did and feeling horrible about them. I won't forget the pain for a long time. The few minutes of pleasure were definitely not worth a lifetime of guilt. I wish somehow I had been aware of the consequences of my actions before I let my hormones take over. Because sex is glamorized in our society, I ignored the teachings of the Bible. As a result, I caused grief to myself and God. I want to tell other teenagers it's just not worth it. Pregnancy and STD's aren't the only risks. I'm left longing for real love, but I fear I'll never find it. I'm writing in hope that others won't make the mistakes I did. I got a lot more than I bargained for.

Extramarital sex can be pleasurable, but the pleasure is fleeting, shallow, and deadly.

God has designed a far better way. The father now illustrates by way of an allegory a blessed marriage that brings true and lasting pleasure. Verses 15-20:

**Drink water from you own cistern,
And fresh water from you own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
Streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone,
And not for strangers with you.
Let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
Be exhilarated always with her love.
For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress,
And embrace the bosom of a foreigner? (5:15-20)**

The predominant image here is water. Actually, this passage almost exhausts the Hebrew vocabulary for sources of water, using terms like cistern, well, springs, and streams. Water is a very precious commodity in parched Canaan. It is a source of satisfaction, refreshment and life that should not be wasted. The key to interpreting the image in the

allegory is found in verse 18: "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth." These sources of water are used here, as they are in the Song of Solomon, to describe the source of sexual satisfaction experienced by husband and wife. The father says: "rejoice in the wife of your youth." We are to rejoice not in our youthful spouse, but in the spouse we have had since our youth. A lifetime of marriage can lead to deep intimacy.

Erma Bombeck in her book *A Marriage Made In Heaven... Or Too Tired For An Affair* shares a funny story that illustrates deep love and life-long commitment:

We looked a little ridiculous—two forty-seven-year-old adults sitting alone around a card table in the back yard with pointed party hats strapped under our chins. It wasn't the way I had imagined our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary gala. When I fantasized about it, I visualized a large white tent housing a six-piece orchestra. The inside would be decorated with flowers and several hundred guests would be milling around. My husband and I would exchange matching diamond-studded tennis bracelets. He would romantically feed me blueberries out of season, and the orchestra would play our favorite song, "Our love Is Here to Stay," while we swayed together on the dance floor.

The reality was our kids had thrown a couple of hamburgers and a few hot dogs on the grill, scarfed them down and split, leaving us to clean up. The pool table nearby held our bounty: matching one-size-fits-all bathrobes. I knew it would only be a matter of time before Bill's beard was bits of white fuzz and I grew a mustache. No one would be able to tell us apart.

I looked at him as he returned the folding chairs to the original boxes. We had gone through three wars, two miscarriages, five houses, three children, nine cars, twenty-three funerals, seven camping trips, twelve jobs, and nineteen banks. I had cut his hair and cleaned up his toenail clippings, and turned 33,488 pieces of his underwear right side out. He had washed my feet when I was pregnant, bought feminine products for me when I could not get out of the house, and put his car seat back to its original position after I had used it 18,675 times.

We had shared toothpaste, debts, closets, and relatives. We had given one another honesty and trust. He came over to where I was seated and said, "I've got a present for you." "What is it?" I asked excitedly. "Something you like. Close your eyes." When I opened them, he was holding a cauliflower that comes packed in a pickle jar. "I hid it from the kids," he said, "because I know you like the cauliflower."

That kind of intimacy can only be cultivated in a lasting and loving marriage.

Let us enjoy the spouse of our youth. Water from our private garden is much better than water from a public source. Rainwater from our own cistern and well water fed by fresh streams are of a much higher quality than water found in the streets. These verses emphasize that the best source for quenching our sexual thirst is not found in the individual off the street, but from the spouse who dwells within our own home.

Today, many people say that monogamy, not marital fidelity, is important to develop deep intimacy and a healthy sex life. But the text does not say that we are to rejoice in our lover or partner or significant other. It says we are to rejoice in our spouse and only our spouse.

The term "rejoice" here has the idea of spontaneous and unrestrained outward expressions of joy. It is used for stamping the feet, clapping the hands, dancing and shouting. Marriage is a blessing from God, and sexual delight is a God-given thing. He desires the sexual relationship between a husband and wife to be exciting and satisfying. The connotation here is that this is not just a one-time joyous experience, but one that is renewed on a continual basis.

In our fast-paced, stressful world we tend not to invest our best energies in our marriages. We rejoice in our job, our children and our achievements, but how often do we rejoice in our spouses? Do we give

public praise to them? Do we surround ourselves with mementos, pictures and reminders of our marriages that give public testimony of our love for them?

What kind of speech do we use when we address them? And what tone of voice do we use? Are our words attractive, healing, gentle, productive, sensitive and loving, or are they demanding, negative, nagging and offensive? The alluring words of the sexually immoral become more attractive if there is no loving speech at home.

The second image used in this allegory intensifies just how much joy and pleasure we are to find in our spouse: "As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love." The imagery for intimate love in marriage is drawn from the animal world. Like the hind and the doe, our physical affection for our spouse is to be loving and graceful, energetic and playful. We are to be intoxicated with each other's tender and affectionate love. The sexual expression between husband and wife is not to be technique-oriented or boringly routine, but exciting, lively and sensual.

After a long day at the office or at home with screaming children, of course, it can be difficult to be energetic and playful. That is why it is important to get away for romantic weekends, or set the mood at home with soft words, back rubs, foot rubs, music, poetry, dancing, candlelight, etc.

Both of the images in this allegory praise the wonderful physical and sensual pleasure to be found within the marriage relationship. But even more is hinted at here, because physical and sensual pleasure can also be found in having sex outside of marriage. Great satisfaction and enjoyment come not only from sharing sex with someone, but in sharing the intimacy that sex within marriage cultivates.

Cultivating this kind of intimacy with our spouses, rekindling the love, romance and passion of our marriages, is mutual protection against infidelity. What is described here is a deep, generous love, not a selfish, shallow, temporary love. Why waste our sexual energies on dead-end, shallow relationships? Why not use them to develop loving, lasting and intimate relationships with our spouses? Even common sense tells us that brief liaisons with strangers offer no time for intimacy. True and deep intimacy, trust and joy require the protection and security that can only be found in the life-long commitment of marriage.

Verses 15-20 exhort us not to waste our sexual expression on shallow and short-lived relationships. Let us instead enjoy the deeply satisfying and intoxicating love of our own spouses. The best defense against sexual temptation is a healthy, generous, growing, intimate and joyous marriage.

There is a close relationship between human sexuality and human spirituality. For those who are single, cultivating faithfulness and intimacy with God and allowing him to meet your deepest longings is good protection against seeking fulfillment in counterfeit physical pleasures. I agree with David Roper when he writes:

Sexual passion is in some inexplicable way a small representation of our more profound, spiritual passion for God—our "urge to merge" with him. He alone can gratify that desire. Devotion to Christ serves to satisfy our deepest longings and quell our other lusts. But when our love for Christ is on the wane, we get restless for something more, and our resolve in every area weakens.

Experiencing the deep love of God promotes in us a desire to love and relate to others in the same way. Instead of seeing them as sex-objects to selfishly satisfy our desires, we view one another as men and women created in the image of God who need love, prayer and support.

In verses 21-23 the father gives his son one more reason not to engage in sexual immorality:

For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord,

And He watches all his paths.

His own iniquities will capture the wicked,

And he will be held with the cords of his sin.

He will die for lack of instruction,

And in the greatness of his folly he will go astray. (5:21-23)

Sin is always discovered. We may think no one will know and that we will get away with it unscathed. Our best friends may not know, our parents or spouse may not know, but God knows. No matter how hard we may try to conceal our sin, we cannot conceal it from God. He sees it all.

As a fool wraps around a strange woman, he in turn is wrapped in the consequences of his sexual sin. Neither money, power nor secrecy will free us from the bondage of our sin. Sin is a cruel master. We enjoy its pleasures, but we become its slave. Sexual expression outside of marriage brings pleasure, but not satisfaction and fulfillment. So we seek more and more pleasure, but never find what we are looking for. Sexual immorality only arouses more desire and more longing for intimacy that immorality will never fulfill.

When God warns us against this, he is not trying to limit us or hold out on us. He is trying to free us. He has our best interests in mind. His intent is not to cramp our style, keep us from having fun or inhibit us, but to satisfy and fulfill us. Sexual freedom is not found in finicky and shallow encounters, but in a committed marriage where each partner is free to express his or her sexuality without the fear of abandonment.

Some might say: "We are two adults consenting to sex. No one will get hurt." But sex outside of marriage is sin—and sin always destroys. As Gary Vanderet says: "Something is not evil because God calls it sin. God calls it sin because it is evil. It really will destroy us." Sexual sin is not freeing; it leads to narrowness and obsession.

For those who are strangled in the chords of sexual sin, or those whose marriages are dull and lifeless, my word to you is, get help. Help is available if you want it. And not only help from a pastor or counselor, but help from God himself. If you are involved in sexual sin and your marriage is in the dumpster, all hope is not lost. David, the king of Israel, who committed adultery with Bathsheba, was the father of Solomon, the author of Proverbs. When David was confronted with his sin, he confessed and repented, and God restored and healed him.

God wants to do the same for us. The cross of Christ reminds us that God paid a terrible price to extend to us his forgiveness and grace. Restoration and healing is possible if we repent of our sin, if we hate what we have done and turn from it in disgust. Then God is able to lift us up high. Let us remember the words of John: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). And the wonderfully encouraging words of Paul to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:9-11).

God's forgiveness, grace, restoration and healing are ours if we come to him. By his blood, Jesus canceled the debt of our sins and our failures. United with Christ, we can boldly enter into the warm and loving embrace of our Heavenly Father. May we enter into his love, and love others in the same way!

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