

Love and Marriage
Matthew 5:27-32

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.” When the Pharisees of Jesus’ time heard this, it is likely that they smugly checked it off their list – surely they wouldn’t do anything so lowdown as cheat on their wives! And it wasn’t too long ago that most Christians would have had a similar reaction. Having intimate relations before marriage just wasn’t done, infidelity was scandalous, and divorce was rare. But it was also considered in poor taste to talk about marital problems, especially around the children. So, we really don’t know what all went on behind those very properly closed doors in previous generations.

But today, nothing is left to the imagination. Moreover, there’s very little regarding love and marriage that is scandalous anymore – Federal judges have mandated that two men or two women can marry, and there’s increasing political pressure to allow marriages to consist of more than two people. And statistics demonstrate that a smaller percentage of Americans are committed to any sort of marriage than ever before. In 1949, almost 80 percent of all households included a married couple. Today, only 48 percent do.

So why are there so many singles? Some people are waiting longer to get married, wanting to finish their education or get a good start on a career before tying the knot. Others have gone through a divorce, or their spouse has died. Still other couples have given up on the possibility of a lifelong commitment, deciding instead to live together without getting married. But whatever the reason, the shocking fact is that marriage is no longer statistically the norm for American families.

And it is hard to deny that the collapse of marriage has removed an essential pillar of society, undermining so much of the cultural stability we desperately need. For study after study has shown that children do better when they are reared by both of their parents, and that without such support, they tend to suffer relationally, educationally, and even vocationally. In fact, it is increasingly the case that the “haves” and “have nots” in society are determined more by family structure than by race, socioeconomic status or gender.

So, what happened? Why did such a useful and essential institution, one that is thousands of years old, suddenly fall out of fashion? Well, in verse 28, Jesus gives us a clue. And just like He did in His discussion of the Sixth Commandment in the previous few verses, Jesus indicates that the real problem is not in our actions but in our motivations, our deepest feelings and our most secret thoughts. For Jesus makes it clear that just as anger lies at the root of all murder, so lust lies at the root of adultery.

Now, at this point, many of us might breathe a sigh of relief. After all, “lusty” is not an adjective usually applied to Presbyterians, given our well-earned reputation as the “chosen frozen.” But the Greek word translated here as “lust” can also mean “long for” or “desire.” In fact, Jesus applied the same word to Himself at the Last Supper, when He spoke of His desire to eat the Passover meal with His disciples before He was crucified.

So, if that’s all lust means, who among us hasn’t, at one time or another, longed to be in a relationship with someone? In fact, didn’t all you married folk start out with a deep desire to be with that special someone who made your life complete? What could be wrong with that sort of desire? In fact, isn’t such desire the essence of romance?

That’s certainly what the songwriters tell us. For what did Mississippi’s most famous son, Elvis Presley, sing in 1956? “I want you, I need you, I love you with all my heart.” And then in 1961, “Take my hand, take my whole life too, for I can’t help falling in love with you.” Or think about “Fly Me to the

Moon,” famously sung by Frank Sinatra a few years later: “Fill my heart with song, and let me sing forever more. You are all I long for, all I worship and adore.”

All I long for? All I worship? All I adore? There’s a danger here, a reminder that the God-given gift of human love can become an all-consuming passion, supplanting our desire for a relationship with God, and thus becoming an idol. And it is that sort of unhealthy desire, a hunger for another person to satisfy all the desires of the self, that can turn anyone into a “hunk of burning love,” as Elvis testified in his last top-ten hit in 1972. That seems to be the lust that Jesus is condemning in verse 28.

And can we doubt that such unrealistic expectations, the fervent belief that another mere mortal can actually fulfill all our desires, puts too much of a strain on any marriage, on any relationship? After all, the songwriters of “I’ll Remember April” remind us that the fires of burning love often dwindle into glowing ashes, and that the intense passion of initial attraction lives such a little while. But when the flames fade, all too many Romantics assume that they must have “fallen out of love.” And so instead of moving forward into a more mature relationship, they say goodbye with a highball – that’s what intelligent people do. No tears, no fuss. Hooray for us. Thanks for the memories.

Or as Reba McEntire sang in 1985, “I read a book, you watch TV as our love dies quietly. Somebody should leave, but we hate to give in. We keep hoping somehow we might need each other again.” Putting your faith in your feelings, as the Romantics encourage us to do, can lead to some awfully sad times.

So, how can we move beyond this rollercoaster of emotion, beyond these essentially self-centered Romantic notions of what love is supposed to be? How can we recover a more Biblical view of love and marriage which, as Frank Sinatra observed, are supposed to go together like a horse and carriage – even though when he first recorded those lyrics in 1955, he had already left his wife Nancy for Ava Gardner, only later to marry Mia Farrow, and finally Barbara Marx?

Well, Jesus doesn’t make it easy for us. Instead, He explains that we must be willing to let go of all of our Romantic idolatries, no matter how precious they may be to us. After all, in verses 29 and 30, He rather graphically urges us to cut out and reject anything in our lives that is sinful, anything we see with our eyes, anything we do with our hands that is more important to us than God.

Now, of course that means closing our eyes to internet pornography, which is soaring in popularity even among those who consider themselves to be Christians. Of course it means averting our glance from people or situations that tend to kindle lustful thoughts. Of course it means refraining from acting on any impure desires that come our way. Of course it means Christians must reject the animalistic creed of Woodstock – “If it feels good, do it” simply has no place in Christian thought or practice.

But it might also mean giving up some of those seemingly more elevated Romantic aspirations, some of those unrealistic expectations of our husbands or wives or sweethearts, some of those longings for personal happiness, some of those cravings for personal fulfillment. For how can we go on living in such a self-centered way and at the same time claim to follow Christ?

No, it seems that the Romantics have not only done us a disservice by suggesting that the purpose of love is to fulfill the self. They’ve also cheapened love, lowering it to mere feelings of attraction or passion. But true love is much higher, much deeper, much broader than the Romantics could possibly imagine. For the best example of true love is, of course, the cross of Christ.

Now, when we look at the cross, we cannot possibly doubt God’s love for His people. After all, the most famous verse in the Bible insists that it was because of God’s love for the world that He gave

up His Son to save all who would trust in Him. And our responsive reading goes even further, insisting that Christ loves His people in the same way that a husband is supposed to love his wife.

But don't those verses from Ephesians challenge so many of our Romantic notions of marriage? For if we, the Church, the people of God, have been cast in the role of the bride of Christ, have we fulfilled our vows to Him? Have we treated Him with the respect and the love He deserves? Have we devoted ourselves completely to Him, being faithful to Him alone?

Or have we turned our backs on Him, giving our devotion and our attention to all sorts of other people, putting a higher priority on all sorts of other relationships? In our worries and fears, have we doubted His bountiful providence? In deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong, have we neglected His counsel? In our lust for personal happiness and fulfillment, haven't we been unfaithful to Him?

No, if we take an honest look at ourselves, our priorities, and our desires, we know we've done Jesus wrong. Through our unfaithfulness, we've broken His heart, time and time again. So surely, if anyone ever had good reason to sing "Somebody Should Leave," it would have been Jesus.

But Jesus didn't sing that song. He didn't say, "Cheerio, toodle-oo, thanks for the memories." He didn't give us the divorce that a world full of sinners wanted, sending us away from Him forever. No, instead of focusing on Himself and His own feelings, instead of insisting that His own needs be met, He kept on loving us. And because of His great love, He gave Himself away completely, choosing the pain and the shame of the cross, even though all of His followers had abandoned Him, even though none of those who insisted that they loved Him chose to die with Him.

But why would Jesus love us like that? Because even though we crave happiness, we need holiness. Even though we crave independence, we need to belong to God. So Jesus met our greatest need, dying in our place so that we might not only be justified – declared not-guilty in the sight of God – but so that we might be sanctified, so that we might be washed clean of all our infidelity to Him. On the cross, Jesus thus revealed what true love really is – a desire for the beloved that is expressed in unconditional, self-sacrificial devotion, a desire to bless the beloved regardless of the cost to the self.

And so we can see that this love is actually the opposite of what the Romantics call love. For true love is focused on the beloved, while Romantic love, which is what the Bible calls lust, focuses on the self. True love gives the self away for the good of others, while lust tries to possess others for the gratification of the self. When lust is unsatisfied, it all too often seeks out another object. When love is unrequited, it remains faithful. Or as Paul put it in I Corinthians 13, "Charity never faileth." True love never fails.

No, Jesus didn't sing, "Somebody Should Leave." No, His love for us is a lot more like that which is expressed in the Oak Ridge Boys' first number one song, which they released in 1978: "I'll be true to you, Even though you don't want me to. And I'll be blue for you, Even though you've asked me not to."

So, sure. We can go on pretending that all Jesus wants from us is outward obedience to His Law. We can content ourselves with merely physical fidelity to our marriage vows, with greater strivings to avoid falling into lustful thoughts and actions. We can go on seeking happiness instead of holiness, passion instead of purity. We can keep our focus on ourselves and our feelings. We can remain devoted to the lies of Romanticism, to the pleasures of lust.

Or we can seek a greater faith in Christ. We can seek a deeper fidelity to Christ. We can ask for a fresh in-filling of the Holy Spirit of Christ, so that we might give ourselves ever more completely to the One Who gave Himself up for us. For it is only as we draw closer to Christ that we will be able to express our love for Him by giving ourselves ever more completely, ever more unconditionally, ever more self-

sacrificially to our husbands and wives and sweethearts. It is only greater love for Christ that will enable us truly to love one another.