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**ADULTERY
IS IMPRACTICAL**

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DENOMINATIONAL BROADCAST
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ADULTERY IS IMPRACTICAL

The adulteress... has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God.
Proverbs 2:17 (NIV)

It was Hester Prynne who wore the big "A" in Nathaniel Hawthorne's book *The Scarlet Letter*; the "A" was a symbol of her shame, and it marked her like a burning brand; she was despised and rejected of men. The supreme irony of this bitter novel was the fact that, whereas Hester's rejection was supposedly rooted deeply in the great religious sensitivities of the close-knit community in which she lived, it was the parson himself who had caused her downfall. The guilty clergyman participated in the grand hypocrisy that shrouded Hester's life in gloom. It was like Judah and Tamar: Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, seduced him, and when she became pregnant, he was about to destroy her—he would have done so except for her own shrewd strategy. The story of Judah and Tamar is found in the Bible—Genesis 38.

The Bible is full of reports on adultery; even as I say that it seems strange to me to have to do so. But it is the truth. And the reason the Bible is full of this subject is that the Bible is about people. It is entirely realistic about them, and because it is, this subject keeps coming up again and again. People, apparently, are adulterous, and if they are described honestly the subject of adultery necessarily comes up.

But there is a major difference between the way the Bible talks about adultery and the way it is presented in our day. Today neither Hester Prynne nor her preacher partner in sin would have been ostracized for their indiscretion. To be sure, there are still communities where there would be shock, but there are also many in which adultery is no longer an especially evil falling. When community leaders contaminate their lives with public adulteries, they are often excused, as people nod their heads and spread an expression of great compassion over their faces and say, "Well, after all, they are human, too." Just because a man is a preacher or a senator or a physician does not

mean he is not human, and one of the marks of being human is a proneness to adultery.

That is certainly true, isn't it? Being human involves a tendency toward adultery. That has always been true, from the days of Judah and Tamar to the present. And if this was always true, its truth comes pounding in upon us these days as never before. There are places in the Bible where a whole people is called adulterous, and that meant that the entire structure of the nation's culture had become defiled with unfaithfulness and filth. Today the same adjective can be applied to our generation. There is a massive assault on purity and on the sacredness of marriage.

We see this in the pervasive presentation of things sexual. The newspaper is full of it, and television ads assault us with innuendo and suggestion that relate to the way we are sexually. The plots of books and movies and television soap operas are heavy with this theme. If an individual is guilty of adultery when he violates marriage, then it is certainly true that our entire society is guilty of this evil, for our society as a whole violates marriage with its ignorant stupidities directed against marriage and faithfulness within it. Today many of the jokes are about adultery, but adultery, alas, is not a joke.

I have no idea how my comments strike you, but I have to assume that a good percentage of those who read this material are themselves entangled in the web of adultery. The web of adultery, I say, and with this idea I refer to the way this evil has sent out its filmy, wispy tendrils and has laid itself across the relationships of our lives. You may be involved in this in several ways that fall short of committing some ultimate act, but you may be involved in it nevertheless.

For example, your adultery could still be in its fantasy stage. We are encouraged nowadays to nurture fantasies like precious plants, and it is possible, without discipline, to let one's fantasies drift along to include specific people, "thy neighbor's wife" or "thy neighbor's husband," whatever the case may be. Jesus, who knew human nature perfectly, talked about this once when He said, "Every one who

looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart' " (Matthew 5:28). Such lustful fantasy is a precondition for the actual act. Just as there are precancerous cells, there are preadulterous minds.

Or you could be involved in adultery through a looseness that has crept into your behavior. You don't have an ongoing affair with someone special, a somewhat continuous relationship with someone, but you view all of those of the opposite sex as fair game. You enjoy yourself. You enjoy the pats, the hugs and squeezes, the drowsy euphoria that goes along with four martinis and the woman who works in your office... this is your way of life. And sometimes you travel and you and... well, you work a little excitement into these trips of yours. You are not a prude about things like these. And you suspect your wife knows about these things, but why make a fuss about it. This is normal. It is natural.

So this is the age we live in now, and it influences us all. There are some of us, of course, who have been raised in an environment in which it was actually considered normal to play around—some of us have never been told that such shenanigans can be hazardous to one's life in the deepest level. But there are others of us who have been told from little on that adultery is wrong. Some of us have heard it in church over and over again, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." So what? How long can the repetition of statements like these continue to make a person hold the line in an environment in which all the pressures are in the other direction? That's a very good question.

I wonder if you would be willing to examine some of the statements about adultery that we find in the Bible, if for no other reason than to see the contrast between the way we evaluate adultery and the way the Bible does. As I said, the Bible is full of discourse on adultery. For now, though, I would just like to underscore some of the fascinating material dealing with it found in the intriguing book, *The Proverbs*. Here is the material that is as up-to-date as *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and "The Edge of Night."

When I read it, I can hardly believe it was written somewhere around 2800 years ago. Things haven't changed much.

The book of Proverbs talks about adultery in a way we can all understand; it personalizes it, it talks about the people involved. And for now, I'll focus on what is found in the first chapters of the book, where attention is turned to an adulteress; she is described, and the damage she can do is described, as well. I must apologize, I suppose, for the fact that this ancient Bible book talks about an adulteress only, for what is said about her in this instance can also be applied to the adulterer, with some changes at certain points. With my apology, then, please consider the interesting material this book has about adultery, specifically about an adulteress. (I might just say too that the material I am using is from the newest translation of the Bible, *The New International Version*, which uses language we can easily understand.)

In the first place, the book of Proverbs indicates what an adulteress really is when it says she is a person who has left the partner of her youth and has ignored the covenant she made before God (2:16,17). There are two things in this description, the one somewhat sentimental actually, the other, very, very solemn. "The partner of youth" idea is one that occurs occasionally in the Bible, sometimes in the form "the wife of one's youth." But the Bible does give the strong impression that the relationship between a man and a woman begun in "youth" is exceptionally precious and worthy of preservation. This does not mean that the Bible views marriages of older people less important. Certainly not. But the marriage to the partner of one's youth has a special sweetness about it—at least it should have.

The fifth chapter of the book of Proverbs speaks about this marriage specifically when it says:

Drink water from your own cistern,
running water from your own well.
Should your springs overflow in the streets,
your streams of water in the public squares?
Let them be yours alone,
never to be shared with strangers.
May your fountain be blessed,

and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer . . .
may you ever be captivated by her love.

(vv. 15-19).

This material, directed strongly against the stupidity of adultery, thus elevates the goodness of marriage. The adulteress has despised and defiled that relationship.

But the sentence from Proverbs we have looked at also talks about what the adulteress has done to marriage on the deepest level—she has violated the covenant she made before God. This is a very important insight into marriage, and it is significant that it comes from such an early time. With it we see that the biblical view of marriage was not simply a natural relationship, an agreement between a man and a woman, but it was even then an agreement, a covenant, between a man and a woman and God. God was in the picture. Marriage, you see, is not simply a private matter; it is a divine institution, and those who enter it not only pledge their faithfulness to one another, but to God as well. The adulteress, according to Proverbs 2, not only has forsaken the partner of her youth, but she has ignored the covenant she made before God.

The description of the adulteress in Proverbs is extremely contemporary and open. And with each description there comes a word of solemn warning. It is worth looking at some of these. First of all, there is a description in Proverbs 7 of the way an adulteress operates. This is what we read:

At the window of my house
I looked out through the lattice.
I saw among the simple,
I noticed among the young men,
a youth who lacked judgment.
He was going down the street near her corner,
walking along in the direction of her house
at twilight, as the day was fading,
as the dark of night set in.
Then out came a woman to meet him,
dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.
(She is loud and defiant,
her feet never stay at home;

now in the street, now in the squares,
at every corner she lurks.)

She took hold of him and kissed him
and with a brazen face she said:
"I have peace offerings at home;
today I fulfilled my vows.

So I came out to meet you;

I looked for you and have found you!

I have covered my bed

with colored linens from Egypt.

I have perfumed my bed with myrrh,
aloes and cinnamon.

Come, let's drink deep of love till morning;
let's enjoy ourselves with love!

My husband is not at home;

he has gone on a long journey.

He took his purse filled with money

and will not be home till full moon."

With persuasive words she led him astray;
she seduced him with her smooth talk.

All at once he followed her

like an ox going to the slaughter,

like a deer stepping into a noose

till an arrow pierces his liver,

like a bird darting into a snare,

little knowing it will cost him his life

(Proverbs 7:6-23).

Reading this material in our time nearly takes one's breath away, for there is a quality of modernity about it that seems unreal. How could it be that circumstances existing then were so much like those which exist today? It is simply because human nature does not change. It is constant, and the same desires, longings, and lusts that bent human life into grotesque forms then does the same today. Man doesn't change, the male and the female of the species do not change. What was true nearly 3,000 years ago, is true today. Adultery is part of human society. We have it now; they had it years ago. It was impractical then, and it is today.

Yes, this is the great impression that comes to meet anyone who reads Proverbs' message concerning adultery: It is impractical. This is a very simple message really, yet it bears repeating not only, but it must be

leave home again and again. For unfortunately, though adultery is impractical, it remains very popular even today, as you know. Though mankind has progressed a great deal since the day Proverbs was written there has been virtually no progress so far as this matter is concerned. When the proverbs were collected into a book, human beings delighted in being very impractical when it came to adultery, and they still do.

So the book of Proverbs comes at the problem from several directions. In the fifth chapter those who might be inclined to succumb to the seduction of an adulteress are told that surrender leads to destruction. There is destruction even though at the moment the possibilities that the adulteress describes seem very sweet. We read:

For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave (Proverbs 5:3-5).

In the sixth chapter of this insightful book, the social chaos that results from adulteries is described so that there can be no mistake: Those who commit adultery are asking for trouble. Speaking of "the immoral woman" and "the wayward wife," the writer says:

Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life. Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished (Proverbs 6:25-29).

Yes, the adulterer and the adulteress together are, to put it simply, playing with fire; that is their folly. And the book of Proverbs in this same instance continues to describe the foolishness of surrender to the invitation of an adulteress, using terms that are as up-to-date as tomorrow's newspaper:

A man who commits adultery lacks judg-

ment; whoever does so destroys himself. Blows and disgrace are his lot, and his shame will never be wiped away; for jealousy arouses a husband's fury, and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge (Proverbs 6:32-34).

In a sense, it is nearly surprising that so much of the Bible, this sacred book, is devoted to talking about such mundane, even sordid, and basically simple issues as these we encounter in the book of Proverbs. Why must the Bible spend so much time on matters such as these? Well, the reason the Bible spends time on this very simple subject is that we human beings often sin in very simple ways. One of the elements of our depravity is that we do not sin grandly, we sin in terms of very elemental characteristics of our makeup. It is, very often, merely our glands that cause us our problems; the foolish arousals that set us off on escapades of undifferentiated lust are often caused by stupid wanderings into areas where we know we are going to lose control of ourselves. Human beings have a very, very disappointing record when it comes to self-control in connection with sexual matters.

And the Bible must spend so much time talking with us in a very straightforward way about this subject because in connection with it we are capable of the most preposterous rationalizations. And this is especially true of those who have a strong religious streak. Those who have bought into the totally secular world view so dominant these days indulge themselves in whatever they please, and if adultery is one of their pleasures, they make the most of it. But religious people too can fabricate the most idiotic rationalizations for their adulterous adventures.

The cults, almost invariably, manage to introduce ideas about marriage and sexuality that allow for great liberty, if not for the rank and file, then at least for the leader or leaders. One of the most distressing developments occurs when people who had been living according to the will of God in their lives are led astray by some sweet-talking guru or self-styled prophet, and they end up doing ruinous things in connection with their sexual lives. But it happens, and it happens all the time. Not only the young are

victims, but older people can fall for this, too.

So the message comes to you and me, and it is not hard to understand: Adultery is impractical. There is no way that anyone can weasel from under the impact of the great rule that governs human relationships. This is the truth, even though today it seems as if the entire society has taken on the sweet talk of the seductive adulteress. Even so—adultery is impractical. But we are impractical people. That is our problem. Is there any way that we can become practical with respect to this widespread problem? Well, there certainly is, and the book of Proverbs, which speaks so forthrightly about our problem, speaks very directly about the solution to our problem, too.

The solution is just this: Wisdom. Wise people do not commit adultery. All of the material that we have looked at in the book of Proverbs is presented in contrast to the way of life that is found among those who know wisdom. In the first chapter of this enlightening book, we read:

Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: "How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?" (Proverbs 1:20-22).

It is wisdom, knowledge and understanding, that will save a person from the enticements of the adulteress. Proverbs 2 says:

Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men. . . . It will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words, who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God (vv. 12,16,17).

And as one reads the book of Proverbs he learns that Wisdom is spelled with a capital "W"—actually Wisdom is a person. The seventh chapter talks about wisdom and understanding as if they are people; no, as if they are one person. We read:

Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call understanding your kinsman; they will keep you from an adulteress, from the wayward

wife with her seductive words (Proverbs 7:4,5).

Yes, wisdom is a person, and the eighth chapter of this book describes this person in terms that make it possible for us to identify Him with great precision. In this chapter Wisdom speaks, and Wisdom says:

"The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began. . . . I was there when he set the heavens in place when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the foundations of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in His presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind" (Proverbs 8:22,23, 27-31).

Anyone who knows the Bible at all will recognize who wisdom is at once. This is the Lord Jesus Christ. There are sentences in the New Testament that make absolutely clear that Wisdom found in the book of Proverbs is Jesus Christ of the New Testament. And that wisdom and this Jesus say to you and me in Proverbs 8:

"Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death" (vv. 33-36).

In a world that is full of adultery, full of adulterers and adulteresses, impractical people who are so inclined to do foolish things with their sexuality need Jesus so very much.

I know there is a great complexity about our sexual relationships, and there are many explanations for why people fail. I know too that there are many people who would benefit greatly from special counseling

and professional help. What I am saying now is not meant to deny that for a moment. But the basic analysis of Proverbs still stands for us today, and it must be accepted and acted upon. Adultery is impractical for so many reasons. It destroys the emotional life of the people involved, it brings down the vengeance of the wronged party, and it makes those who commit it liable to God's judgment. There is nothing good to be said for it. Nothing. It is impractical. But we are impractical people. And this is why we need the wisdom that only God can give. We need Jesus. We need Jesus.

If you are an adulteress, God is speaking to you today. If you are an adulterer, God is speaking to you today. Confess your sin and hang your head in embarrassment and shame. Come, stand at the foot of Calvary's cross. There is plenty of room, and there are plenty more people standing right here who are no different from you. And then start living with Jesus. This means you must learn to pray. It means you must live out of His great good book, the Bible—there you will be fortified with His Wisdom. And it means that you must begin to live with people who have begun to live holy and pure lives. You must be part of His church. I know everyone in the church is not perfect either, not by any means. But in church we are exposed to the wisdom of God over and over and over again. It is God's wisdom that turns people like us into practical people.

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