

Proverbs and Sexual Sin

By Martin Pickup

“The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; he who would destroy himself does it” (Prov. 6:32). The book of Proverbs has much to say about the folly of sexual sin—specifically, the sin of adultery with another man’s wife. Before looking in detail at what this book of ancient wisdom has to say about the sin of adultery, let me first set its teaching in historical context by summarizing the sexual mores that the Law of Moses established for Israelite society.

Virginity, Paternity and Marital Fidelity

Under the Mosaic system, proper sexuality was predicated upon two foundational principles. The first principle was that sexual relations were restricted to the realm of matrimony. This meant that virginity was expected of an Israelite until the point of marriage. So strong was this maxim that a man and woman who engaged in premarital sex were expected to marry—*not just if a pregnancy occurred*, but simply if they had engaged in intercourse (Ex. 22:16-17; Deut. 22:28-29). An Israelite groom had the right to assume that his bride would be a virgin when they married. If she was not—a fact that would be indicated by the absence of bloodied bed coverings on their wedding night—then he had the legal right to have her executed for her premarital immorality and deception (Deut. 22:13-21). Since unmarried women who were not virgins were normally prostitutes, a maiden who lost her virginity was said to have “played the harlot” (Deut. 22:21).

The second foundational principle of sexuality in Israel was that it was repugnant for a woman to have multiple sexual partners. This is why prostitutes were always looked down

upon. It was also why polygamy—in the form of one man having a plurality of wives—was conceivable in Israel, but polyandry—a phenomenon of some societies wherein one woman has more than one husband—was unthinkable. The Mosaic system’s concept of male leadership demanded that there be only one man who was the head of a wife and a household. Moreover, if more than one husband shared a woman, the paternity of any children she bore could never be determined. (There was no DNA analysis in ancient Israel!) Such a woman was, in effect, no different than a harlot. For this reason, though the Law of Moses permitted a man to divorce a wife without penalty, it prohibited him from taking her back again if, in the interim, she had married another man (Deut. 24:1-4).

In light of the above, we can appreciate the importance of marital fidelity in Israelite society. A wife who committed adultery had violated the covenant she made with her husband before God. An adulterous wife not only “defiled” herself, but her wanton lifestyle made it impossible to be certain about the paternity of the children she bore. *Paternity and inheritance rights—the backbone of the entire Mosaic system—rested squarely upon the sexual fidelity of a wife.* Accordingly, the Law of Moses declared that a woman who committed adultery was to be executed (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). A husband who even suspected his wife of having an affair could bring her before the priests and force her to undergo the public ritual of drinking “the water of bitterness” (Num. 5:11-31). This ritual compelled her to swear before God that she had never been sexually unfaithful to her husband, and if she lied, God’s curse would come upon her female organs so that she would be unable to bear children. Only by undergoing such a procedure could a wife under

suspicion convince her husband and all of Israelite society that any children she bore were truly her husband's.

The Mosaic Law condemned a man who committed adultery with another man's wife (Ex. 20:14). The act was "defiling" and both the man and the woman were to be executed (Lev. 18:20; 20:10). The Law specified the form of execution: death by stoning (Deut. 22:22-27). Requiring capital punishment for the sin of adultery put it on the same level of criminality as the sins of homosexuality and bestiality (Lev. 20:13, 16)!

Proverbs and the Sin of Adultery

Despite the severe penalty for committing adultery, it appears from the book of Proverbs that adultery was not infrequent in ancient Israel. The first major section of Proverbs consists of a lengthy discourse that a father gives to his son as he embarks upon adult life (1:8 – 9:18). The father's most frequent admonitions are for his son to avoid the wiles of an adulteress (2:16-22; 5:1-23; 6:20-35; 7:6-27; 9:13-18). Her seductions will lead to ruin. She is called a "stranger" or "foreigner" because she belongs to another man (2:16). She is a woman who "leaves the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God ... None who go to her return again, nor do they reach the paths of life" (2:17-19). These warnings about death are not hyperbole. As we have seen, the Law of Moses decreed that a man who committed adultery with another man's wife should be executed. By succumbing to a moment of illicit sexual pleasure a man could lose his life, and all of the material goods he had worked to obtain for himself and his family would go to others (5:8-14).

Proverbs warns against thinking that a private act of adultery can be kept hidden so as to eliminate its bad consequences.

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 ... When he is found, he must repay sevenfold; he must give all the substance of his house. (6:27-31)

Perpetrators of such sin needed to understand that the Lord, who sees all things, will hold adulterers accountable (5:21-23; 9:16-18). Furthermore, a husband will eventually discover a wife's infidelity, and his jealous rage against the person who violated her is something that can never be placated by any amount of money or material bribe (6:34-35).

Proverbs repeatedly warns a man not to be seduced by the physical attractiveness of an adulterous woman or by the flattering words she speaks. She is nothing more than a harlot who has managed to ply her trade at a higher level of society (6:24-26). It is no accident that Proverbs routinely uses the image of this kind of seductive, adulterous woman as the figurative personification of the concept of folly (9:13-18). "Lady Folly" appears attractive and high class, but in reality she is only sin and destruction attired in fine clothing.

The Solution to Avoiding Sexual Sin

Just as Proverbs personifies the concept of foolishness as an adulteress, it personifies wisdom as a virtuous woman (1:20-33; 8:1-9:6). By allowing oneself to be attracted to "Lady Wisdom" and by joining oneself to her—that is, by allowing discretion to be one's constant companion—a man can more easily resist the temptations of adultery

and every other kind of folly (7:4-5). When one looks at the book of Proverbs as a whole, it is evident that one of the overarching purposes of the book is to urge young men to search diligently for a good and wise woman to marry (cf. 31:10-31). In effect, such a woman is the embodiment of Lady Wisdom. It is with this woman—one's own wife—that sexual passion is to be satisfied. In the opening discourse of Proverbs, the father counsels his son with these words:

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well ... Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? (5:15-20)

The imagery of these verses is graphic, and that is what gives them such impact. The Lord designed sexual pleasure as a wholesome part of earthly life, but He confined it to the realm of marriage. When the "intoxication" of sexual pleasure is removed from its proper domain because the two participants are not married to one another, it is a gross perversion of all that is good and right.

Proverbs' admonitions against adultery are sorely needed in our society today. Modern western culture has rejected the two principles of sexual conduct that the Law of Moses and the book of Proverbs presume—namely, that sex should be confined to marriage between a man and woman, and that it is a shameful thing for a woman to be sexually involved with more than this one man. Our society dismisses these principles as old-fashioned, and so people today engage in all kinds of illicit sexual behaviors without

shame or fear of consequence. May God help those of us who love His word to sound forth the warnings against sexual sin that we find in the book of Proverbs. “For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths” (5:21).