

August 30, 2015

THE THREAT OF HELL

Matthew 5:27-30

A few years back, Carol and I began watching the 1960, black-and-white movie *The Apartment* on the classic movie channel on a Saturday night. We didn't watch it for long. It was just too sleazy. It stars Jack Lemmon, and, Shirley McLain, Fred McMurray, and Ray Walston. Jack Lemmon is Bud Baxter, and works for a New York insurance company as just a little cog in a big wheel, making a modest living which pays for a cozy bachelor apartment on the Upper West Side. He falls into an arrangement with some of the married higher-ups in the firm who use the apartment for liaisons with secretaries or switchboard operators, or, girls they pick up in bars. Bud Baxter's payoff for arranging the use of his apartment is that he is going to advance "upstairs" and rise in the ranks. Meanwhile, he catches a cold because he can't stay around his apartment enough to stay warm, and, get the rest he needs. Supposedly, this is a funny movie. It won five Oscars, including Best Actor for Jack Lemmon. But, while Jack Lemmon is funny, the plot is not funny. It's all about adultery!

The 1995 movie, *The Bridges of Madison County*, is another popular film, where Meryl Streep was nominated for an Oscar. But again... it's about adultery!

Whether it is a vehicle for comedy or drama, adultery is so casually used as a plot or sub-plot by Hollywood and Broadway, that it's just sad. Watch most comedies, like *Friends*, or, *How I Met Your Mother*, or, *Two and a Half Men*, and you'll see it over and over so much that we have become numb to the sinfulness of adultery. We even have a more recent movie that came out several years ago, entitled *Friends With Benefits*, with Justin Timberlake and Mila Kunis. And, only days ago, an adultery website, Ashley Madison, had a security breach. Its motto is *Life is short, have an affair!*

Adultery, simply defined, is physical intimacy beyond the sanctions of marriage. That includes casual, consensual one-night stands, as well as seriously "romantic" love affairs. Beyond the bonds of marriage, sex is a sin. And though even within a marriage relationship, when that intimacy may become distorted, it becomes sinful. Do I sound old-fashioned? Is sin becoming passé?

Adultery actually used to be against the law! It was a crime! It was looked upon with shame. Just ask Hester Prynne who had to wear a scarlet letter 'A' because she had a child out of wedlock in 1666 puritan Massachusetts Bay colony. (*The Scarlet Letter* by Nathanael Hawthorne). Only at the end of the story is the identity of the child's biological father revealed: It was the Pastor!!!

After David's adulterous affair with Bathsheba (and its attempted cover-up in the arranged battle-death of her husband Uriah revealed by Nathan the prophet), David wrote Psalm 51, filled with remorse and shame. He cries out to God for mercy (v. 3), and asks God, "*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*" (v.4) In John 8:1-11, we find the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery, where the last words of Christ to her are, "*Go and sin no more!*"

Benjamin Franklin, who was supposedly polygamous, once said, "Where there is marriage without love, there will be love without marriage."

It's sad to think that the vows of commitment made at every wedding are often so easily forgotten and broken. But worse is the fact that we live in a culture that barely even blushes about sex anymore. We seem to favor the pleasure principle more than moral righteousness. "If it feels good, do it!" "If it's okay with you, it's okay with me." We humans have a tendency to make up our own moral standards and

say, "That may be okay for you, but it's not for me." And then we leave it at that. But... we forget about the consequences. Not only does it create negative reputations, but the diseases that can occur should we become promiscuous...!!! (Did you know that sexually transmitted Infections are skyrocketing among senior citizens these days???) Let alone the stigma that comes to close friends and relatives embarrassed by the "living arrangements!"

Here is something to think about – Girls, how will the man you marry years from now feel about the sexual activity of your youth and young adulthood? Guys, how will the woman you marry years from now feel about the sexual activity of your youth and young adulthood? Ladies, what would your husband and children think, should your adulterous affairs be exposed? Gentlemen, what will your wife and children think, should your adulterous affairs be exposed? What are we sacrificing when love and righteousness should be the principles by which we live, not pleasure? Why don't we even *want* to be pure? Why do we become more outraged when political leaders are revealed to have been adulterous? Or, when the head of the international Monetary Fund is exposed, who was supposedly sexually immoral? Or, religious leaders, like Jimmy Swaggert and Ted Hagstrom? One reason may be that they do suffer, at least, at a minimum, for a short while, embarrassment and shame. Maybe that's enough for most of us. But I think the real reasons are 1) because we're numb, 2) because we just don't care anymore, or, 3) because we know we can't throw the first stone, or, we don't want to be hypocritical. We shake our heads and scoff in disgust and just turn to some other business. Maybe we don't even think it should be our business. If not, then why is the sex business so prolific? Sex is everywhere, even in advertisements. So, it *is* our business. One thing I can say is that if I think your sexual morals are loose, I will keep my wife and daughter away from you. That's my business.

Listen carefully to what Jesus said: "*Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart!*" (5:28) First of all, this is not just about men. Don't think this doesn't imply that women who look at men lustfully are not committing adultery in their hearts, they are. Jesus is saying that lust is wrong. Period. Sinful thoughts are sinful! Just as anger is as sinful as murder because angry thoughts can become violent actions, so is lust as bad as adultery because lustful thoughts can become adulterous actions!

Now, when Jesus goes on to suggest plucking out your eye or cutting off your hand when they offend your conscience, there is again, a danger of taking these verses literally. We'd be a society of one-eyed and one-handed people! Sometimes lessons are taught by speaking in extremes. Such as: be careful when you cross the street... you might get run over by a truck!!! What we need to take literally is when Jesus says, "*It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell!*" Jesus is calling everyone to take sin seriously. The ultimate point is that *anything* is better than going to hell!

Most people will agree. But...do we even take the threat of hell seriously? Maybe we should! Even if you don't believe Hell exists...what if it does? Are you willing to bet your eternal soul on your best guess? We can deny its existence, but again, try to deny the reality of gravity. You don't see it, but it's still there. The good news is that when we become so well focused on heaven, we tend to not even think about hell. But...what about others...who need to know the threat of hell? Christians care, or, at least, should care about those who are lost, or, who are headed in the wrong direction, or who walk on a slippery slope. Wouldn't you want the threat of hell to scare them into more cautious behavior? Meanwhile, we also want to love them into heaven!

Now, lest we get hung up on pointing the finger at a particular sin, as if it is the worst sin of all, let's admit that adultery and lustful thoughts are no worse than anger and hateful thoughts. They are equally sinful. So is any kind of over-indulgence, like with food or gambling, or, wasting money!

Here's a way of understanding our purpose... Imagine that, down the road, the bridge is out. Imagine that you know the bridge is out and the danger is quite serious. The chasm it spans is quite deep. Imagine that this is a busy road and many people travel fairly quickly toward the bridge. What should we do? Shouldn't we do whatever we can to save them from certain death? Or, will we simply smile and wave as they go by? How about putting up a sign that says "Bridge Out!" or "Danger!" Or, better yet, go up the road a-ways and put out warning signs? You see, adultery, sin of every kind, is a sort of road, and that chasm is a sort of hell. Jesus has given us all a bold warning.