

## Maintaining faithfulness

### Proverbs 5

Last week I shared how during our recent Holiday I made the wonderful discovery that our time away fell during the Rio Games. Jas and I were able to watch quite a lot of the Olympics, but the games weren't the only thing filling our screens. We also watched a film, the 2012 adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. If you find the idea of reading a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russian novel intimidating, then can I suggest watching it on film; it's much quicker and easier to follow!

Anna Karenina is the story's main character; she is a beautiful and charming woman married to a high-ranking Government official. Her husband is a good man but perhaps we could say he is a bit boring, and so Anna finds herself attracted to another man, a young army officer. They start an affair despite the scandal that they are causing, and so her marriage ends while she takes up with her new lover.

Has Anna found true happiness? Well, at the start she feels as if she has, but things start to fall apart. The reality of life as a mistress begins to hit home: she finds herself scorned by other members of society, she fears that her new lover is being unfaithful to her, and the story reaches its climax with Anna taking her own life.

Critics argue about the exact message that Tolstoy is telling in this story, but the main arc, I think, is pretty clear. Adultery has a high price and while it may seem to be an attractive course of action, it's a very destructive path to follow. One of the thoughts I had when watching the film is that Anna's pattern of thinking is a constant human temptation. The temptation to break the rules and find fulfillment with someone other than your spouse or with someone else's spouse is as old as marriage itself.

One thing that's perhaps a bit different today is that our society is more accepting of these actions. From time to time you will hear of some psychologist advocating how we should revisit our outdated ideas of faithfulness in marriage; that an affair on the side can be a positive experience, that for some couples enjoyable sex will only happen with a new partner.

One such voice is that of a New York therapist named Esther Perel. She said in an interview in *Slate* magazine that "We have this idea that there is one person who will fulfill all our needs, which is really an extraordinary idea!" She's very careful to not explicitly recommend that people have an affair, but as a therapist she works very hard to see the benefits of such a decision, and she speaks about the possibility of non-monogamous marriage as a means to address issues of boredom and sexual fulfillment.

The values that Tolstoy expressed in his writing are being challenged in a new way, challenged by 'experts' who are *affirming* the temptations we can experience. So

who's wisdom do we follow? That of the old Russian writer or that of the modern day New York Therapist?

Well, in a sense the answer is *neither*. When thinking through this aspect of human life the advice we follow as Christian people is that of the Bible. The book of Proverbs addresses this issue in a very straight forward manner, And the chapter we are looking at today speaks directly to someone who is faced with this temptation. Reading through Chapter 5 we'll see that Tolstoy was closer to the mark, but we'll also see that the Bible addresses the same problems that someone like Esther Perel is trying to address (with the solution being very different, of course).

So Proverbs 5 is where we are at this morning, and the chapter opens with a voice that's desperately pleading. My son, pay attention to my wisdom, turn your ear to my words of insight. It's the sound of an elder pleading with a younger man to tread carefully. This voice knows what young people can do to themselves, and he sees this moment as an opportunity to save a life, but only if the younger bloke is willing to listen. And yes, the original audience appears to be young men, but that doesn't mean that what we read can't be applied to both genders, nor does it mean it's of no use to people who are older. What we are about to hear is applicable wherever temptation is found.

And in this first half of the chapter the main point is simply that adultery monumentally stupid. First of all it's stupid because it's based on a lie, its origin lies in some sort of deception: verse 3 For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; <sup>4</sup>but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.

Adultery always starts with the promise of something satisfying. Here the adulterous woman is described with the finer things of ancient life; Honey that's sweet to taste, oil that is soothing and fragrant. The temptation is that we look at another person and we think to ourselves "Being with them is going to be so good! So satisfying! I look at my life and I feel like I'm drinking bread and water, but honey and oil is what's on offer here! That's living! That's what I want!" But Solomon knows that it's a lie. Take up that offer and you find that the fruit is bitter, and you could well get punctured by a sword. You see, the soothing, smooth-as-oil speech that seems so attractive at first turns into a damaging weapon, a double edged sword.

The lie here is found on the lips of a seductress. And sometimes that's the way this temptation comes to us—sometimes someone might set out to seduce us. But there's also an element of deceiving ourselves. We convince ourselves that what we have is not good enough or that we'll benefit somehow by seeking the comfort of another person. The therapist I spoke of just a few moments ago, Esther Perel, she says that many adulterers report back a feeling of being alive, that the affair has re-awoken something within them. But verse 5 sees this too as a kind of mirage: Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. The truth is that infidelity is a sure way to destroy yourself.

One lie we might hear or even tell ourselves is that our lover really cares about us, that if we risk all on this relationship we'll be risking it with someone safe. Well, our passage warns us that not all adulterers are a sure bet. Verse 6: She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths wander aimlessly, but she does not know it. Have an affair and there's every chance you'll be hooking up with someone with no plan apart from feels good in the moment. They might assure you that everything is going to be great, but they have no way of knowing exactly how this is going to pan out.

So the seed of adultery is always found in some kind of lie, either a lie we get told or a lie we tell ourselves. Anna Karenina has been remade this year in a modern setting by the ABC. Its new name? *The Beautiful Lie*. They've nailed it.

And as we've seen, it's a lie which destroys. Verse 7: Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, lest you lose your honor to others and your dignity to one who is cruel, lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich the house of another.

What's interesting about these verses is that we're shown a variety of ways in which adultery is destructive. Verse 9 speaks about the general disrespect that comes your way when you're exposed as a cheater, and then there's a hint of the possibility of some really harsh treatment; your lover could turn cruel and bring you into disgrace. One commentator says that v9 could be referring to blackmail; in order for you to keep your secret people will take advantage of you.

Then there is the financial cost in verse 10. You have an affair, your spouse leaves you and takes half your money. Money you've worked hard for but then it goes to another household. When a household breaks up there is a huge financial price tag. You have to start again in all sorts of different ways, not to mention legal fees. When marriages are in trouble sometimes people can avoid counseling because of the cost. But when you compare it to what a divorce might cost you, then I think counseling is a no-brainer.

Are you starting to see the folly of making this type of life decision? What seems like a good idea in the heat of the moment never pays dividends. This foolishness is summed up by the moaning of an old man full of regret. From verse 11 Solomon is showing his young student a scary picture of what old age might look like for those who fall: At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent (possibly a reference to the physical toll that promiscuity can take on people). You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! <sup>13</sup> I would not obey my teachers or turn my ear to my instructors. <sup>14</sup> And I was soon in serious trouble in the assembly of God's people."

What's tragic about this scene is that the regret of old age can be avoided with discipline; with a decision to maintain control over your sex life. Listen to verse 7 again: Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house. A key discipline expressed here is one of avoidance, of not playing with fire, of turning your back on

whoever it is that's causing you to feel tempted. This could be a person you know at work, a person you know at church, I even know someone who had an affair with their hairdresser. There is a temptation to find yourself lurking in the wrong spot: near the office door of that person you know you're attracted to, on that messenger service where you know you'll have a chance to speak privately with that person you're excited by. Proverbs says, "don't go near there, or soon you'll be in serious trouble".

Another door to steer well clear of is the door of pornography. I should probably say *doors* rather than door, because it is so prevalent and so easy to find. But once you open this door it is very hard to close, because pornography is addictive, and it is often the beginning of a path leading to physical affairs and perhaps even things like sexual assault. Porn is often the first step down into this cycle of destruction. Please, leave that door closed, and if you have opened it, do whatever it takes to close it again. Even if it means giving up your smart phone, or only having the internet at work, or getting outside help from a psychologist. Porn will destroy you and those you love, so get it sorted.

So there we have the folly of having an affair. Adulterers are fools because they are gullible (they believe lies), because they end up destroying themselves, and because they'll end up burdened by regret when a little discipline could have meant a very different outcome.

That different outcome is what Solomon describes in the second half of the chapter. After warning his young friend about the mess that adultery leaves behind, Solomon then describes the beauty of a marriage marked by faithfulness. Verse 15: 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. Solomon is using quite erotic language here—these are sexual metaphors that he is using—and the point is that physical intimacy is something kept within the marriage, never to be shared with strangers.

The use of water as an image for sex has greater impact when you consider the middle-eastern setting. Water is a precious resource; what a waste to have it poured out onto the street. Sex is a precious act that requires great vulnerability. It's a great honour to have someone give themselves to you in that way, and so it's not fitting to treat sexual intimacy as a disposable item, as something that you can use wastefully with no care. Let that intimacy be yours alone, never to be shared with randoms.

Solomon then imparts a blessing on his young friend—this is what he wishes his young pupil to experience. Verse 18: May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love. What he wishes is that his young friend remains with the one woman for life. That he always finds sexual fulfillment with the one woman for life. Remember, this is Solomon handing down this blessing, Solomon who was renowned for his many wives and mistresses, Solomon who knew all about

searching out pleasure, and so what is his conclusion about what's best? May you rejoice in the wife of your youth he says. He says it's better to find love and fulfillment with the one partner.

Now I think it's interesting that this outcome—a faithful, fulfilling marriage—, This outcome is described as a *blessing*. What is a blessing? When you are blessed with something you're being granted something that's to your advantage. (eg "I've been blessed with a great boss and good paying job") So being faithful in marriage is something that is good for you.

But a blessing is also something that you shouldn't take for granted; a blessing isn't something that is necessarily automatic. And so it is with a faithful marriage; it's not necessarily something that comes naturally, you have to seek it out. You have to seek out God's help in achieving this blessing; you have to take steps yourself to safeguard your marriage, to make sure that you are working on your relationship, building up affection for each other, investing in the time needed to deepen your love for one another.

When Esther Perel, the New York therapist, declares that it's "extraordinary" that one person might fulfill our needs, in a sense all she's doing is stating an observable fact: many people do find it hard to find lifelong happiness, and this is something that the Bible recognizes. But the Bible's answer is not to go off and have a fling, the answer is to get working so that the one relationship *becomes* satisfying. The answer is for us to apply some discipline, discipline which will save us from the grief of being caught in an affair. Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man's wife? Hear the pleading in v 20. Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman? Why Indeed. It's not worth the trouble.

Friends, sadly I think more and more Solomon's pleading is falling on deaf ears. Affairs are much more likely to be accepted today than in times past; we just don't judge people in the same way and so it's easier to buy the lie that adultery can be a good thing. But even though society's viewpoint has changed, God's point of view has not. A final warning in verse 21 For your ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all your paths. We can all imagine the secrecy that must go into having an affair. The secret email accounts, the hidden phone, the private meeting place. All a bit pathetic really when you realize that God is seeing all of it, that our ways are in full view of him. If the consideration of where an affair will lead you isn't enough of a deterrent, then please remember that God is seeing everything and that he does have a standard for the way marriages out to be conducted. His standard is one of faithfulness: one man and one woman, enjoying each other for life!

Why is this his standard? Well, remember that this standard is a blessing. God isn't about destroying our fun, he's about showing us the best way to enjoy his gifts. But most significantly the pattern of faithfulness is a pattern that echoes something of his own character. We heard in our NT reading that part of marriage's design

is that it's an echo of God's relationship with us, in particular of *Christ's* relationship with us. Christ's commitment to us was resolute, so much so that he was willing to die for us as our savior so that our sins might be forgiven, so that we might be a part of God's family forever. That's faithfulness, sticking with us through the very worst.

And so he calls us to imitate his example within the world of marriage. Even if we have failed in this area in the past. Yes, God sees everything, but he can also *forgive* everything, even adultery. Read through the Bible and you will see all sorts of sinners, adulterers included, welcomed by Jesus and given a fresh start. And it's a fresh start worth taking, because it's the way of blessing, and not foolishness.