

The Right Marriage Attire

The mystery author Agatha Christie was married to an archaeologist. She once observed "an archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have; the older she gets, the more interested he is in her."

That quote fits well with our study of the Song of Songs. In the seventh chapter we read from this morning, the man once more expresses his love for his beloved, which is then reciprocated. The cumulative effect of their words to one another over the previous six chapters, make it clear that here is a couple not tiring of one another. Quite the contrary, as the book progresses, their devotion to each other deepens.

Theirs is a relationship that knows how easily intimacy can be damaged. They tend to their relationship like you would a delicate plant with nurture and care. It is the biblical vision that as spouses lovingly live together over the years they will become more interested in each other, not less. But in order for this to happen I want to suggest that they need to reclothe their minds in the way they think about marriage so that in the words of the hymn we just sang those who are married may live reverently in relationship to one another and in relationship to God.

There are three ways I would suggest where this reclothing is needed:

1. In purity of thought. 2. In commitment and 3. In sexual expression.

1. Being reclothed in purity of thought: We need to be reclothed to understand that purity of thought is important. It is too easy for us to live in this culture in a semiadulterous condition, with the loyalty of heart and mind fragmented.

Jesus' words in Matthew 5:27 have particular application in our time: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

It will help us to better understand why Jesus sees lust as committing adultery in our hearts by understanding what the word lust means in New Testament Greek. The word in Greek is Epithymia. The root of this word is thymos which in English means "to boil up" When the prefix Epi is added to the word, as in Epithymia, the word then comes to mean the boiling up desire for a woman, not one's spouse.

Lust is like a pot filled with water and placed on a burner. Just as the water warms and comes to a boil, this is what happens when we entertain lustful thoughts towards another person. The imagination boils up and leads to desire in a man's thought life that is impure because the object of his desire is misdirected. If left unchecked it can come to control his thinking and his acting.

The culture we live in today is one that makes millions of dollars from enticing people to do this very thing. We are bombarded with images in magazines, on busboards, billboards, the internet, television, music and movies that encourage men, and yes even women, to engage in the lustful glare. When we look lustfully at others the images created are imprinted on the mind and they are very difficult to erase. Of course this is particularly the case with pornography. But such acts are a diminishing of sex to a raw physical experience, which as we have seen in the Song of Songs is far from God's purposes for sex, the bonding of a male and female in a life-long one flesh relationship.

The Song of Songs addresses the issue of lust at verse 6.13. There we read:

Return, return, O Shulammitte! Return, return, that we may look upon you.

Why should you look upon the Shulammitte, as upon a dance before two armies?

There are two different voices speaking here. The first part of the verse depicts a group of men who are addressing the woman of the Song. (They refer to her as a Shulammitte because she came from the town of Shunem) Their look is lustful. This is supported by the words that follow. Here her lover is speaking to these men and asks "Why should you look upon her as upon a dance before two armies." He is aware that these men are looking at his beloved for their pleasure and entertainment. The type of dance he is alluding to was called a Mahanaim. It was an erotic dance performed by a woman before a victorious army lined up opposite each other, with the dancer performing in between. The NIV phrases the question this way: "Why would you gaze on the Shulammitte as on the dance of Mahanaim?"

Lust is so damaging because those who practice it may find that while the physical act of love is with the spouse, the emotional and mental act is with someone else. If lust is left unchecked it may then play out in actual sexual encounters with those who are not our spouses, whether money changes hands or not. Lust and its related desires are

advantages for some people because they do not require any self-giving. They are entirely self-focused. Because of this they are destructive to ourselves and others. But unfortunately this is a truth not acknowledged by those who indulge in these activities.

Jesus understands lust's power and that is why he speaks so clearly against it.

If we are going to reject lustful thoughts we are in need of paying close attention to where we allow our eyes to gaze.

The man in the Song is challenging the other men about this very thing. He is objecting to the way the chorus of men is looking upon his beloved. He does not accept their desire to view his beloved in the same way he has thus far viewed her in this song. He is speaking out against the lust practiced by the crowd. This is because he knows what it is to train his eyes on no one but her. He has re clothed himself and understands that purity of imagination allows him to be thrilled by the one he truly loves.

2. Not only do we need to be re clothed in purity of thought we also need to be re clothed so that we understand that radical commitment is good, for we live in a world that knows little about commitment. As we have listened to the Song of Songs we have seen that these lovers relate to each other in ways that affirm their commitment. The way they use their words strengthens their love. How a husband and wife speak to each other says a great deal about how they view their commitment.

If you are married it might help you to ask the question: Do you and your spouse feed each other a steady diet of put-downs? If you do, your marriage commitment could be unstable.

When psychologists Cliff Nortarius and Howard Markman studied newlyweds over the first decade of marriage, they discovered that couples who stayed together uttered 5 or fewer put-downs in every 100 comments to each other. But couples who inflicted twice as many verbal wounds -- 10 or more putdowns out of every 100 comments -- later split up.

Watch what you say! Little, nit-picking comments are like a cancer in marriage, slowly draining the life out of a committed relationship.

This is why the language we see recorded in the Song of Songs is important. This is a couple who words build each other up. Marriages that use words to strengthen each other will allow for a deepening of commitment because each other know this relationship is a safe place. Such marriages are environments of deepening truth, security and love, three qualities needed for full- fledged commitment to flourish.

3. Purity of thinking and radical commitment allow for the reclothing of our minds when it comes to sexual expression in marriage. Some who are married may need to be re clothed in their mind, frankly, in order that they can with greater enthusiasm and joy get unclothed in their body. They have inhabited a world in which sexual expression is not entirely compatible with Christian virtue and where duty has been more important than joy.

But here in chapter seven of the Song are words that celebrate the joy of being naked together. As we read these words they are describing the consummation of their love.

How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!
7 You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
8 I say I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
and the scent of your breath like apples,
9 and your kisses like the best wine
that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth.
10 I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me.
11 Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages;
12 let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms
There I will give you my love.

13 The mandrakes give forth fragrance,
and over our doors are all choice fruits,
new as well as old, which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.

These are words laced with sexual imagery. His climbing the palm tree and laying hold of its branches is a reference to the man embracing his loved one as he then kisses her on the lips. His words are then responded to by her as she opens herself to him. Here is a woman who knows the purity of her man's thoughts. His desire is for her alone as verse 10 affirms and so she invites him to come with her to the vineyards where she will give him her love. The mandrakes of verse 13 are plants with aphrodisiac qualities. They are pictured growing in the locale where love making will take place. The "locale" is as much the woman herself as a place to which both lovers go. This is particularly clear in the remainder of 7:13 which speaks of a door giving access to "every delicacy" that has been stored up for the man.

The sexual love that is shared here is possible because theirs is a relationship where they have been reclothed in their rightful minds. Minds that take seriously purity of thought and radical commitment so that they are invited to experience each other in ways where things old and new will come together as they know each other sexually.

What a high view of marriage is presented to us here. One that if taken to heart will mean that it won't just be archaeologists who are more interested in their wives as they age but all men and woman who reclothe themselves

1. In purity of thought. 2. In commitment and 3. In sexual expression.

Let us pray:

For the joy of loving God our creator,
we thank you for your gift of sexual love
by which husband and wife
may delight in each other
and share with you the joy of creating new life.
By your grace may those here who are married remain lovers,
rejoicing in your goodness all their days.
All Amen.