

HEBREWS 13:4

THE FORGOTTEN ELEMENT IN MODERN MARRIAGE

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”¹

Marriage is under assault in this day. I sincerely doubt that the assault is as successful as some might imagine; nevertheless, marriage is under a sustained and vigorous assault. The transformation of marriage in our western world is reflected in changes in family size and composition. Statistics Canada gives us some insight into the changes experienced within the typical Canadian family. In 1961, the average family comprised 3.9 people; by 2011, the average family comprised 2.9 people. In 2011, for the first time there were more people living alone in Canada than there were couples with children. In 2001, the most common type of family (almost 44 percent) was two parents and children under 24 years of age living together. By 2011, that figure had dropped to 40 percent; and more of those couples were not officially married. And in 2011, for the first time, StatsCan tracked step-families, people with children from a previous marriage living in the same home. They found that about ten percent of Canadian children were living in some variation of that particular situation.²

Between the years of 1961 and 2011, significant changes took place in the data collected. The first year in which data was available for common-law unions was 1981. In 2001, same-sex common-law couples were counted for the first time; and in 2006, same-sex “married” couples were counted for the first time.³ The transformation of the family has been significant during these five decades. During this same period, the share of married-couple families has decreased while the share of lone-parent families has increased. Not surprisingly, families and households have become smaller during these same decades.⁴

Throughout the past fifty years, and especially during the past two decades, marriage has been redefined through political fiat and in the popular understanding. This redefinition was inevitable when the purpose of marriage was no longer recognised. Tragically, those who should have spoken out to instruct the populace in the biblical basis for marriage were either unprepared or unwilling to risk their standing in the community. Consequently, through the silence of the pastorate, marriage is in danger of being lost to western culture. When that happens, we will enter into a new dark age from which we may well never recover.

LET MARRIAGE BE HELD IN HONOUR AMONG ALL — The verse gives two commands that are emphasised with a warning. We ignore divine commands at our peril, for they do come with warnings from which there is no appeal. God has graciously blessed the west for so long that we tend to forget that He is holy. Because He is holy, we trifle with His commands at our own peril. God cannot ignore arrogance toward His holy commands; He shall hold us accountable.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Joyce Grant, “The ‘Average Canadian Family’ Has Changed,” TeachingKidsNews.com, September 23, 2012, <http://teachingkidsnews.com/2012/09/23/1-the-average-canadian-family-has-changed-according-to-new-census-data/>, accessed 8 February 2017

³ “Fifty years of families in Canada: 1961 to 2011,” article, http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-312-x/98-312-x2011003_1-eng.cfm, accessed 8 February 2017

⁴ Cf. “Census families, number and average size,” <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/famil40-eng.htm>, accessed 8 February 2017

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It would be a mistake to say that marriage is held in honour among all. Even among the congregations of the faithful, it is impossible to say that marriage is held in honour by all. To a distressing degree, the churches of this day reflect society rather than providing direction within society. It is more truthful to say that the churches of this day are guided by culture rather than providing moral guidance within culture. Pastors are more sensitive to say what is popular than to speak the truth in love. Nowhere is this more evident than when speaking of marriage.

During the first century, when the New Testament was being written, churches existed in a culture without moral constraint. There were constraints, but it is difficult to speak of the constraints on human relationships as moral or ethical according to biblical standards. Christians stood out because of the demands for purity imposed by the Faith. The emphasis on moral and ethical standards is evident even from a casual reading of the New Testament. Consider just a few of the passages that provide guidance to any who would follow the Christ.

In Ephesians, Paul writes, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore, do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says,

‘Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.’

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is [EPHESIANS 5:1-17].

“Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” [COLOSSIANS 3:5-10].

A final passage cited is from one of Paul’s earliest letters. “This is God’s will: that you become holy, that you keep away from sexual immorality, that each of you know how to possess his own body in holiness and honor, not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God. In this matter, no one should violate the rights of his brother or take advantage of him, because the Lord is the avenger in all these cases, as we also told you earlier and warned you solemnly. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8 NET BIBLE].

Purity, and especially sexual purity, is expected of Christians; and such is increasingly difficult to maintain in a world that exalts sexual licence. For almost two millennia, sexual purity was expected within western societies. This expectation was primarily due to the influence of the Faith of Christ the Lord in society. However, things changed dramatically during the past five decades. How did licentious attitudes become pervasive throughout western culture in such a short time? Several major changes in social interaction occurred beginning in the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century. These developments included: birth control and contraception, divorce, advanced reproductive technologies and cohabitation.⁵

We haven't time to explore these issues in detail during the time allotted, but it should be evident that the changing social order has had a significant impact on cultural norms.

Historically, the churches of our Lord condemned birth control because the faithful understood that children are a divine gift. As Mohler states, "This affirmation was so central to Christianity throughout the centuries that the issues of birth control, abortion and infanticide were largely considered to be one and the same. The Christian church has always been concerned to promote the notion that children are to be welcomed and that any failure to welcome a child is itself an act of unfaithfulness."⁶

It is essential to point out that this is not a Catholic position—it is the historic Christian position that flows from the understanding that God gives children, and these children are a divine gift. This understanding is pointedly articulated in the 127TH PSALM, when Solomon writes,

“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.”

[PSALM 127:3]

It was not until the 1930s before a denomination openly dissented from this understanding. The 1930 Lambeth Conference first advanced arguments for the acceptance of birth control. The arguments supporting their decision were not theological in nature, but rather sociological and based on the challenges of overpopulation of British cities. Holding to Malthusian predictions of mass starvation resulting from overpopulation, the Anglicans became antinatalist committed to lowering the birthrate.

In the United States, Margaret Sanger advanced similar arguments. Sanger's commitment to birth control appear to be driven more by eugenics than by Malthusian concerns. This is evident from her motto, "More from the fit, less from the unfit."⁷ Eugenics is an openly racist worldview that was popularised during the 1930s and 1940s by the National Socialist movements in Germany and Italy. Such racist arguments were the basis for the demand that birth control be normalised and legalised in North America.

Development of "the pill" in the 1960s caught the evangelical world by surprise; the rapid acceptance of birth control was unopposed among most Protestants, with even evangelicals ignoring the transformation that was taking place in society. Catholics were stunned when Pope Paul VI published *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, because it closed the door on artificial birth control.

⁵ An excellent discussion of these social dynamics is presented by Albert Mohler, Jr., **We Cannot be Silent: Speaking truth to a culture redefining sex, marriage & the very meaning of right and wrong** (Thomas Nelson. Nashville, TN 2015)

⁶ Mohler, op. cit.

⁷ Margaret Sanger, **The Pivot of Civilization** (Brentano's, New York 1922; reprint ed., Echo Library, Teddington, Middlesex, UK 2006), cited in Mohler

Birth control separated sex and babies from the moral equation. This change became the basis for more radical changes that fueled the sexual revolution. Restrictions on birth control were challenged in the courts, and the courts found in favour of a new right of privacy. Many jurists concede that there is no “right to privacy” in the Constitution of the United States; nevertheless, Justice William O. Douglas, while acknowledging that no such right was to be found in any explicit form within the text of the Constitution, claimed to have found “the right to privacy” in what he defined as “penumbras” that were “formed by emanations from those guarantees that help give them life and substance.”⁸

This strange word salad helped fuel the sexual revolution and drove subsequent changes to sexual mores in the legal realm. The same wording has been employed to legalise distribution of contraceptive devices to unmarried couples,⁹ abortion on demand¹⁰ and same-sex marriage.¹¹ Cumulatively, this transformation of the moral landscape took place over a very short time. It is evident that contraception served as the key issue underlying the findings of the courts.

Simultaneous to this development, *restrictions on divorce were loosened*. Historically the churches had taught marriage fidelity and opposed divorce throughout the previous centuries. The courts in western nations had made divorce difficult in order to make a point about the value of marriage to the state and the disaster that a marital breakup represents. One writer has testified that “each divorce is the death of a small civilization.”¹² He is correct. However, with the transformation of the sexual landscape, it was probably inevitable that what has become known as “no-fault divorce” would be accepted; it was no longer necessary to seek a cause for divorce. One’s feelings prevailed in making the decision for dissolution of the marriage.

The churches still taught that God hates divorce,¹³ though with decreasing frequency, but the relaxation of sexual mores combined with the dearth of biblical teaching ensured that the churches would be infiltrated by attitudes reflecting those associated with the brave new world. An increasing number of pastors were confronted by the spectre of their own children suffering marital breakup, and they responded with what has become known as “Daddy’s Daughter Syndrome”—the tacit justification of divorce regardless of cause. Hence, the churches ceased teaching what the Bible said concerning divorce.

If birth control and contraception allowed sex without the prospect of babies, *advanced reproductive technologies permitted the birth of babies without sex*. Perhaps it was inevitable in a technologically advance era, but society was unprepared for the consequences of IVF, preimplantation diagnostic testing, embryo sorting, surrogate motherhood and other technologies. These changes in the field of embryology necessitated the redefinition of all relationships. Again, the churches were largely unprepared to provide moral guidance for the challenge presented. Though society held that these technologies held no moral significance whatsoever, they served to dissociate sex and children, allowing for another blow at marriage.

Throughout all these changes, *cohabitation was being popularised*. Prior to the present, living together without marriage was not only frowned upon, but was often illegal. Sex could easily result in children, and children without committed parents could readily become a drain upon society. Now, social changes had rendered the old ideas and ideals moot.

⁸ Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479 (1965)

⁹ Eisenstadt v. Baird, 405 U.S. 438 (1972)

¹⁰ Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973)

¹¹ Obergefell v. Hodges, No. 14-556 U.S. (June 26, 2015)

¹² Pat Conroy, “Anatomy of a Divorce,” Atlanta Magazine, November 1, 1978,

<http://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/anatomy-of-a-divorce/>, accessed 11 February 2017

¹³ See MALACHI 2:16, NASB

Effectively, marriage was now marginalised in western society; but at what cost? Families would be redefined, the roles of women and men in society would be transformed and children would be victimised by the changes taking place. We pastors had done a terrible job teaching what God had to say concerning marriage, sex and children. Perhaps it was the result of an exaggerated cultural prudishness, though more likely it was moral lassitude on our part, whatever the reason, we cannot justify the silence of the pulpit on these matters. The Word of God commands, “Let marriage be held in honour among all” [HEBREWS 13:4a]. It is almost impossible to believe marriage is honoured in this modern, brave new world.

We live in a world in which a woman who has been married for 22 years is prepared to quit her marriage because her husband voted for the wrong candidate for public office. Gayle McCormick, a 73-year-old woman, chose to leave her husband of 22 years because she felt betrayed by his support for a candidate for the office of the President of the United States.¹⁴ Perhaps the reason for her decision is unusual, but the action is not in the least unusual.

Long before Obergefell in the United States or *M v H*,¹⁵ or Bill C-23¹⁶ in Canada, the churches had largely ceased to teach the biblical doctrine concerning the necessity of honouring marriage. We knew that the purposes of marriage were procreation, purity and pleasure; but we had conceded the field to those who focused on pleasure alone. The transformation of western culture by new technologies placed pastors in the position of speaking about matters that had long before been viewed as private and of no concern to the faithful, despite multiple biblical passages addressing these very topics. The churches had ceased to be evangelistic in their service; they had become content to quietly function as a sort of civic providers of ceremony for life transitions. As one wag has noted, the church is to be available when we are hatched, matched and dispatched. Beyond that, society expects the churches will be silent; especially does our culture insist that the Bible is irrelevant when speaking of the social interface between the Faith and life. Religion was confined to ceremony for one hour on one day of each week.

I could speak of the biblical view of honouring marriage, and I do so on an ongoing basis during our services here at New Beginnings Baptist Church; however, I find it intriguing that a growing number of social scientists are touting the benefits of marital fidelity. As one example, consider the findings recently published by two associate professors at the University of Virginia and the University of Utah. Their conclusion, published in a recent study states: “Social science confirms that marriage confers enormous benefits for men’s wallets, for their sex life, and for their physical and mental health. Yet too many men still believe in the ball and chain myth, viewing marriage as an expensive encumbrance on their freedom and their sex lives. These views are ubiquitous in popular culture, and this has undoubtedly had adverse consequences for men’s aspirations to marriage. We believe these negative perceptions need to change. The first step is ensuring that the next generation knows the truth about marriage. Journalists, social scientists, and policy-makers bear a special responsibility for making the good news about marriage more widely known. This is a priority given some of the adverse consequences men, women, and children have suffered in the retreat from marriage.”¹⁷

¹⁴ John Whitesides, “From disputes to a breakup: wounds still raw after U.S. election,” Feb 7, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-relationships-insight-idUSKBN15M13L>, accessed 10 February 2017

¹⁵ *M v H* [1999] 2 S.C.R. 3 (S.C.C.)

¹⁶ An Act to modernize the Statutes of Canada in relation to benefits and obligations, 2nd Session, 36th Parliament, 48-49 Elizabeth II, 1999-2000

¹⁷ W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, “Men & Marriage: Debunking the Ball and Chain Myth,” <http://ifstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/IFSMenandMarriageResearchBrief2.pdf>, accessed 10 February 2017

When a society redefines what God has provided in His Word, and when that society marginalises what God has established as good, the price must inevitably be borne by all. Western culture must bear the cost of the transformation taking place; and the cost may be greater than anyone can imagine. The cost of this transformation may exceed what we are able to bear.

LET THE MARRIAGE BED BE UNDEFILED — Long before the decisions of the courts and well before Parliament's adjustment of long-established social norms, the churches had retreated from holding to the biblical standard of moral authority. The text calls for holding marriage in honour, and also demands that "the marriage bed be undefiled" [**HEBREWS 13:4b**]. The first injunction addressed the overarching attitude Christians are to have concerning marriage. The second injunction is more personal, challenging each Christian to check his or her sexual moral code.

Among professing Christians are two great errors that must be avoided in the realm of sexuality—asceticism and licentiousness. The Apostle to the Gentiles foresaw the advent of monasticism when he wrote, "The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" [**1 TIMOTHY 4:1-5**].

The Apostle foresaw a time when professing Christians would teach the necessity of avoiding marriage and engaging in extreme fasts. The basis for these teachings would appear to be a belief that these activities were evil in themselves. He continues by stating that foods were created by God and are "to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." I have no problem with those who wish to be vegan because they believe there are health benefits; however, there is no spiritual benefit from such discipline. If you enjoy a good beefsteak, you have not sinned. Neither dietary concept benefits the spirit of an individual.

We have freedom in the realm of diet, but our freedom must not be weaponised to injure another. This is the reason for the cautionary warning, "Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so, by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble" [**1 CORINTHIANS 8:8-13**].

Paul provides a similar warning in another letter, when he writes, "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" [**ROMANS 14:20-23**]. As with all aspects of life, it is possible for us to destroy God's good gift through either excess or rejection. Christians are to seek moderation in all things.

We have no difficulty understanding that when the Apostle speaks of God's good creation, he was speaking of food that is to be received with gratitude; but we often stumble when we think of sex as a gift. The text makes it clear that sex is part of God's good creation. The Apostle's statement is inclusive of all that God has made, but especially is he focused on food and sex. Just as one can permit his appetite for food to destroy him either by eating too much or by avoiding food to the point of creating a medical crisis (think anorexia and bulimia), so an individual can destroy himself or herself through misusing God's gift of sex.

When we read of the creation of Adam and Eve, it is confessedly a most sexual account. God had caused all the animals of creation to pass before Adam, and Adam gave names to all the animals. It seems obvious that God's rationale was not merely to permit Adam to give names to the animals, but also to enable the man to realise his uniqueness. This is evident when God says, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" [GENESIS 2:18]. After naming all the animals, the Bible observes, "But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him" [GENESIS 2:20b]. An animal may be a pet, but it can never be a companion making a man complete. Only a woman, created in the image of God, as was the man, can make a couple with wholeness and completeness—body, soul and spirit.

What follows makes it obvious that woman was created for man to make him complete. "The LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

‘This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.’

"Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" [GENESIS 2:21-25]. It is significant that the couple was comfortable in their nakedness with one another, a situation that prevails outside of marriage only in a distorted form. We accept one another and find comfort in one another in the marriage relationship.

"God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'

So, God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" [GENESIS 1:26-28]. Clearly, man and woman are sexual beings designed to procreate. Mankind can only be complete when both man and woman accept that they were created for one another! Therefore, asceticism finds no support in Scripture. Monasticism, forbidding marriage is not something that God commands or expects.

Just as man and woman were created for procreation, so they are to find purity and pleasure in their commitment to one another. That is apparent from what is written in the text: “Let the marriage bed be undefiled” [HEBREWS 13:4b]. Sex is intended for marriage, and a major emphasis is on sexual purity. This is the basis for the admonition to treat “younger women as sisters, in all purity” [1 TIMOTHY 5:2b]. Christians are taught to “abstain from sexual immorality” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:3b]; this is to be taught so that “each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour” and “not in the passion of lusts like [those] who do not know God” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:5].

Perhaps an individual has the gift of celibacy [see 1 CORINTHIANS 7:7]; if so, that individual realises that such a gift allows him or her to focus on serving Christ and His people. However, celibacy is the exception and not the rule in life. Celibacy does not negate the Apostolic rule: “Because sexual immorality is so common, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband” [1 CORINTHIANS 7:2 HCSB]. Sexual immorality was just as common in that ancient day as it is today. Therefore, the biblical admonition is to marry—uniting in lifelong commitment as husband and wife. This is not intended to be a temporary expedient such as Nikah mut’ah or Nikah Misyar, temporary marriage for the purpose of sexual intercourse, as practised in Islam. Marriage in the sight of God is commitment of one man to one woman for life. This is God’s ideal; and this is what must be practised among the faithful.

We live in an age when sexual excess is easy due to the pervasive nature of pornography via the Internet or salacious scenes on what should be otherwise innocuous shows on television or in the movies. Suggestive or sexually explicit songs have become rather commonplace today. Consequently, Christians are easily seduced by the ready availability of suggestive or explicit stories, movies and songs until they become inured to such pornography. Thus conditioned, they are as susceptible as anyone to stumbling. It is tragic enough when adults fall into such sin; however, we are raising a generation of youth that are stumbling blindly into acceptance of the most degrading situations as normal. This accounts in no small measure for the plague of sexting, casual sex and the growing push to accept paedophilia as normal. Shouldn’t the churches be instructing all to know and to fulfil God’s ideal and His best for us?

GOD WILL JUDGE THE SEXUALLY IMMORAL AND ADULTEROUS — Is it actually all that serious to be just a bit risqué? Does it really hurt to add a little excitement to life through viewing some pornography? Is harmless flirting at work really that serious? Perhaps extramarital romance shouldn’t really be that problematic? It is a serious matter to be unfaithful to one’s spouse, even in the virtual realm. We are warned, “God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” [HEBREWS 13:4c]. Earlier in this Letter to Hebrew Christians, the writer warned, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God” [HEBREWS 10:31].

There is no question but that God holds sinners to account. Ultimately, all the unsaved must stand before the Great White Throne. How awesome, how frightful the description of the judgement day. “I saw a great white throne and One seated on it. Earth and heaven fled from His presence, and no place was found for them. I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books.

“Then the sea gave up its dead, and Death and Hades gave up their dead; all were judged according to their works. Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And anyone not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” [REVELATION 20:11-15 HCSB].

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However, the text appears to suggest that divine judgement is not an event reserved for the far distant future; rather, judgement of the sexually immoral and the adulterous is immediate. Undoubtedly, the minds of many will turn to considering the danger that arises from disease, fatal or debilitating, that may be contracted through illicit sexual activity—and such disease is a genuine danger. I suggest, however, that the loss of intimacy with one's spouse, the loss of ability to love without reservation and the very real danger of destruction of one's own family stand as examples of divine judgement. Such devastating loss does assuredly arise from those who engage in illicit and extramarital sexual activities. While unsaved people may doubt that God holds them to account, Christians cannot deny that God holds His own to account now!

The serious warnings recorded in the Letter to Hebrew Christians should give Christians pause should they imagine they are able to play fast and loose with Him Whom we call Master. "Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?"

‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.’

"It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" [**HEBREWS 12:5-11**].

I have often pointed to the very real discipline the child of God faces when they choose to dishonour the Father. At first, it is the loss of intimacy, the inability to pray or to enjoy time alone with God. If that is insufficient to bring the child of God to repentance that would allow restoration to full fellowship, God is prepared to buffet the soul of the wayward child. Remember how Peter speaks of Lot who had pursued acceptance by the world at the expense of fellowship with the Living God. Peter says that the Lord "rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked," before adding this explanation, "for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard" [**2 PETER 2:7, 8**]. Lot was a righteous man, and his soul, declared righteous, was tormented by what he saw. The child of God is indeed tormented by the wickedness of this dying world, and the more so because that child silently tolerates such wickedness because the mouth is stopped through loss of fellowship.

Should such discipline fail to arrest the child of God in her mad flight from fellowship, God is prepared to remove that which she imagines most dear—perhaps some trifling bauble or a treasured relationship; God may send weakness and illness if that will restore fellowship. Paul warns the Corinthians, "If you give no thought (or worse, don't care) about the broken body of the Master when you eat and drink, you're running the risk of serious consequences. That's why so many of you even now are listless and sick, and others have gone to an early grave. If we get this straight now, we won't have to be straightened out later on. Better to be confronted by the Master now than to face a fiery confrontation later" [**1 CORINTHIANS 11:28-32, THE MESSAGE**].

Finally, God may simply call the wayward saint home, as Paul states in the aforementioned passage. That is clearly what is meant when the Apostle of Love warns, “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death” [1 JOHN 5:16, 17].

James addresses the same possibility when he writes, “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” [JAMES 5:19, 20].

Consider also what Jude has written. “Go easy on those who hesitate in the faith. Go after those who take the wrong way. Be tender with sinners, but not soft on sin. The sin itself stinks to high heaven” [JUDE 22, 23, THE MESSAGE].

Beloved saints, sin is terrible—it cost the life of the Master. We who are called by the Name of the Son of God must never imagine that we can flirt with the evil of this dying world without calling down on ourselves His discipline. Because He loves us, God will hold us to account. Because He has invested His very life in us, He cannot permit us to disgrace His Name or destroy our own lives.

And what of those who have not believed? What of those who are nice and even think of themselves as good, though they have no relationship with the Living God? Dear friends, let me warn you that you must not delude yourself by imagining that because you meet a standard that you have created in your own mind that God will accept you on that basis. God has set a perfect standard in His Son. Unless your goodness matches the perfect goodness of the Son of God, you are now condemned. God warns in the Word, “Whoever believes in [the Son of God] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the Name of the Only Son of God” [JOHN 3:18]. Your need is to receive the forgiveness of sin and the new life that is found only in the Living Son of God. He died because of your sin and was raised to life through the power of the Spirit so that you might live.

This is the faith to which God calls each person. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10]. Paul concludes that passage by citing the Prophet Joel, who has written, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:13]. That is our sincere plea to each one hearing this message—believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. Amen.