

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue No. 27

“Ye have heard” ... Adultery

Matthew 5:27

by Maurice Barratt

Jesus is bringing us six examples from the law — or rather, from what people thought the law said. He is doing this in order to expose our hearts and our motives, so that none of us may have any excuse, and we may all see and understand that we are all guilty of all these things. The same principles apply to each of the examples. Jesus takes a similar approach to each one, prefacing them by the words, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time” (Matthew 5:27). By saying this, he implies that even the disciples didn’t really know what the law meant. They knew the words, but they didn’t understand what God meant. It had become only a tradition, not the truth.

What Is Adultery?

Firstly we need to know what adultery means in the bible. In fact, it’s not mentioned very often — only 33 times in the whole bible. In Exodus 20:14, in the Ten Commandments, we read the words Jesus refers to “Thou shalt not commit adultery”. It is explained further in Leviticus 20:10 — “And the man that committeth adultery with another man’s wife ... the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death”. Adultery is a man taking another man’s wife. It is not a single man taking an unmarried woman outside of marriage (what we call fornication). That had far less severe penalties associated with it. A man was under obligation, if he did this, to then keep the woman as his wife, and to pay the woman’s father a certain price; but there was no death penalty for this. This was so even if the woman was taken by force (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). The same was true of a married man taking a single woman, for polygamy was lawful under God in Israel, if the man had enough financial means to support his wives.

Today in the west we have come to understand adultery as differing from fornication only in the technicality that in fornication both partners are unmarried, but in adultery one of the partners is married. Both are, in our view, primarily sexual sins. But in the law of God, adultery is actually a sin of stealing. An adulterous man is stealing another man’s wife, another man’s property. We baulk at the idea of a wife as property today, because we associate it with chauvinism, exploitation and abuse, but that’s only our modern thinking. In God’s law the man owns the wife and is responsible before God for her welfare. It is because adultery is stealing, and stealing something very valuable and precious, that it carries the death penalty. God judged David severely for taking Bathsheba, not because of the sexual sin (David already had many wives, and God never chastised him for this, it was quite lawful), but because Bathsheba was another man’s wife (see 2 Samuel 12:7-10). Only God’s mercy prevented David from suffering the consequences of the law — the death penalty.

The New Testament

In Jesus' day it was the same. The woman caught in the act of adultery by the Pharisees was brought before Jesus, and the Pharisees demanded that she should be stoned, according to the law (John 8:3-5).

Against this background, Jesus says, "But I say unto you ..." Now perfection is speaking, truth is speaking. This is what Jesus says, revealing the meaning and the spirit of the law. "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Whoever just looks at a woman, married or not, with a lustful heart, has committed adultery in his heart. Today, that includes women you see on the television. You may be holding your wife's hand and at the same time committing adultery in your heart with a woman on the TV.

The Church's Problem

Church leaders have a problem. They always seem to want to deal with outward actions. In trying to keep the church pure, they come down hard on the people who commit the physical act of adultery, banning them from church membership or forcing them to undergo a probationary period if they repent before they are accepted again into full membership. They feel they have to do this; they can't deal with the heart, so they have to bring the law in. If they only taught the principles Jesus taught, they could deal with the heart, and the church would become pure, and they would have dealt with the root, the inward desires, the heart. But always the emphasis is on the shame of the outward sexual scandal, and the "sinners" become the scapegoat for our own hidden sins. How moral and justified we feel, how shocked we are, when we hear of some new Christian scandal! But we forget what lies in our own hearts.

Jesus is not interested in our laws. He is always interested in the heart. All sin starts in the heart; that is, in our subconscious thinking. From there, sin moves out to our conscious mind and becomes a conscious thought, and from there it moves out to our flesh and becomes an action. We can see how this happened with Eve, in the very first sin. First she saw the tree that had been forbidden, and the desire entered her heart, her subconscious. She became covetous of that fruit. Then the thought became conscious — she saw that it was "to be desired to make one wise" — and then finally the action; she took the fruit and ate. Adultery works in exactly the same way. Adultery is also covetousness — coveting another man's possession.

Jesus Deals With Adultery

In the gospel incident of the woman taken in the act of adultery, look how Jesus deals with the roots. The roots of the problem were actually in the Pharisees, not the woman, so Jesus doesn't talk to the woman, doesn't even talk about the woman to them, until he's challenged them. The root of the problem was that, although they, being good Pharisees, very religious men, had never committed the physical act of adultery, they had committed adultery in their hearts. We know this is true by their response to Jesus' challenge: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at

her" (John 8:7). They must have all been convicted in their hearts that they had committed adultery in secret, lusted in their hearts and minds.

Only then does Jesus deal with the woman, and even then he does not deal with her according to the flesh. "You judge after the flesh," said Jesus after this incident, "I judge no man" (John 8:15). If Jesus acted this way, surely we ought to do the same? Please note, I am not suggesting that we condone sin. Jesus didn't condone it. He didn't say it was all right to commit adultery. He told the woman to "go, and sin no more" (verse 11). He, and the woman, and the Pharisees, all knew it was sin. Neither did he tell the Pharisees not to stone her. If they'd wanted to, they would have been within their rights; that was the law. But Jesus was not challenging the law; he was challenging the Pharisees' hearts.

The Roots

Now if we return to the Sermon on the Mount, we see how Jesus deals with the roots of adultery. Adultery in the heart isn't as bad as the physical act of adultery in the flesh; but it's the root. Adultery happens the same way as all sins, the same way as Eve's sin. First we see, and the desire enters our subconscious thoughts, our heart. Sometimes it gets no further than this. It's just covetousness in our heart. But if you let it dwell there, you start thinking, consciously, about it. You fantasize. You consider the options, the possibilities. It may stop there. But if not, it eventually results in physical contact — not yet adultery, just the start of a relationship and physical contact. This is why Jesus says, "If your right hand offend you, cut it off" (Matthew 5:29). If your eye, the first link in the chain, the beginning of the sin, offends you, you can deal with it right there — pluck it out. Then the sin can never be repeated. If it gets as far as physical contact, cut off the offending hand.

Is this just an illustration, not to be taken literally? Most people would say yes. Of course Jesus doesn't intend us to cut off our hands and pluck out our eyes! Or does he? I believe Jesus means what he says, literally. Let me explain by asking you a question. Is it literally true that it would be better, or "profitable", to enter heaven with one eye than to enter hell with two? Think about it. Yes, it would be better, it would be profitable — it would be a good deal. If I was forced to take the choice, I'd rather have heaven and one eye than hell with two eyes! So it is literally true, it's not just an illustration or parable. But we don't have to go to those extremes. If your eye offends you, pluck it out. But why resort to such drastic measures if it's the TV your eye is looking at? Kick the TV out instead. Or cancel the newspaper if that's the cause of seeing scandal and things that will cause you problems. Or change your job if your workplace or your workmates are such a problem to you that you need to be that drastic. It's worth it; eternal life is worth anything. Nothing is too drastic; but if you catch the problem early on enough, you won't need to be drastic. And if you follow Jesus' advice in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, you may solve the problem entirely at it's very root. If we can "walk in the Spirit" as Paul says, we "shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). That is a real and radical answer!

So all of this passage in verses 29 to 30 is specifically to do with adultery. Because adultery is a physical sin, it needs physical action to stop it. But where it begins, in the heart, needs a change of heart attitude to stop it.

Spiritual Adultery

The bible not only talks about physical adultery; it talks about something more serious still: spiritual adultery. What is spiritual adultery? It is when we say we love God, and then we go lusting after something or someone else as well. James explains that when we claim to belong to God and then become the friend of the world, that is spiritual adultery. “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (James 4:4). Spiritual adultery makes you the enemy of God. Can the enemies of God go to heaven? This is where the Pharisees fell down. They were so outwardly disciplined, so outwardly righteous; yet they were inwardly covetous, they loved the world, they were actually children of the devil (John 8:44) and enemies of God.

The Seduction Of Eve

Paul draws a parallel between Eve and the Church. Both were seduced by the serpent, the devil. The seduction is the temptation to commit spiritual adultery. “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2-3). The danger today is the same. People in the church are being offered covetousness — in fact, often it is the church itself which is offering people covetousness in the name of Christianity! What they are being told is that they can love the world and be Christians. This is spiritual adultery, and it is a terrible danger to the church today. The root of the danger, once again, is in our minds. Paul feared that “your minds should be corrupted” .Spiritual adultery starts, like physical adultery, in the heart, in the subconscious mind. Physical adultery is a scandal to the church. If spiritual adultery was also looked upon as scandalous, as even worse, then the church would be in a far healthier position. If that is God’s viewpoint, surely it ought to be ours.

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Watch Your Step!

A number of years ago a good friend of Maurice's and mine went through a traumatic experience. The young boy who had left school and come to work for him, and whom our friend had personally trained for some years to become a very competent studio sound recording engineer, had in fact run off with our friend's wife. Our friend had been devastated by what had happened as he hadn't foreseen the situation occurring. It seemed that Maurice and I were there at the right time to help this man in his distress and we gave him as much comfort and support as possible, which resulted in our friend becoming a Christian. It's so easy to point fingers, isn't it? The wife was obviously the guilty party, she had been flattered by the attentions of a man 14 years her junior and it had completely gone to her head. But was she really the guilty party? As our friend poured out his story

it seemed very apparent that he had been completely absorbed in his work and had been arriving home late every evening. His heavy drinking had made his manner obnoxious and he had been without consideration for anybody else's feelings on any matter at all. Although his wife was working in partnership with him she always made sure she was there to take care of her children when they returned home from school. When this young employee began to take notice of her and treat her as a woman, it completely bowled her over.

Romantic Notions

As a single person my romantic notions were that you met somebody, fell in love, got married, and then lived happily ever after. Personal experience has shown me that life is not like this. So many people find the first few months of marriage, known as the "adjustment period", just too much to handle, and unless much effort is applied here, lovers can soon become enemies and part company. On finding out I was pregnant for the first time, life seemed to take on a whole new meaning. It was so exciting to view the future as a family rather than a couple and I felt as though this child would be the fulfilment of all my dreams. Stark reality soon brought me down to earth. Before I was married, although I'd been extremely busy with my various activities, I'd always managed to have plenty of time for myself. I had lived a very disciplined life and had spent at least two hours in prayer before going out to work each morning. I was totally unprepared for the effect one single child could have on my life.

Devastated Life

Initially, I had been grateful that my child had taken so easily to breast feeding, as many mothers experience difficulties in this area, but I must confess that being woken up six or seven times each night became very wearing, and a simple thing like a shopping trip became a major ordeal as without fail I would have to nip to the supermarket loo to feed my very hungry baby. Because Nathan demanded so much milk, my body produced abundantly, which I found extremely embarrassing as invariably my clothing would become very wet and sodden no matter how many precautions I had taken. Because feeding, winding, and changing Nathan took up so much of my day I had to learn to turn a blind eye to many things which at one time I had felt were very important. Meals were often late or burned, and I was constantly tired. As I was "bonding" with my child I became aware of a distance creeping between myself and my husband. Before Nathan was born Maurice and I had worked very closely in the ministry, we had travelled the world together in our capacity as ministers and had spent many hours sharing the revelation that God had given to us individually. I found it unbelievable that one child could almost ruin our communication, and yet that's what happened. So many times we would begin to get engrossed in conversation, and then the baby would cry and demand attention, and because my mind had been diverted, Maurice would withdraw himself and get back to his work. As the child grew the problem seemed to become worse because then instead of crying for attention he would come with his perpetual chatter and not give us a minute's peace (and the more children God gives you the rowdier your house becomes!).

The Strain Of Change

Quite apart from all this change in the household, there is also a dramatic change taking place in the mother. From the very outset of pregnancy the hormones go crazy. Often women have unreasonable cravings for certain foods at unreasonable times, and they can become very emotional. Not only is there turmoil inside, there are also external changes which have to be coped with. I was very often amazed and amused at the way my body swelled as the weeks went by, but I must confess I wasn't so amused at the way my body slowly contracted afterwards. My bulges and curves had now been totally redistributed, which left me feeling very self-conscious and undesirable. This too can place a terrible strain on a marriage.

God has been very good to us at Barratt Ministries and for a number of years Alex and Sally have both had living quarters at our premises. This meant that Alex was always there with a ready listening ear whenever Maurice couldn't get through to me. In this way Maurice was still able to share his revelation and get godly feedback in the process. Not many men are blessed with such a godly fallback, and because of this Christian men can sometimes seek companionship with other women because their need for friendship is so great, and this can often lead to an unhealthy relationship and ultimately marriage break-up. At first I felt very put out that Maurice had found an alternative and would continually nag him for not spending more time with me. The upheavals that had gone on in my life caused me to indulge in real self-pity. These children whom I had once looked upon as fulfilments of dreams were now, in some measure, resented because they had ruined so many areas of my life. I no longer had freedom, personal time or companionship with my husband, but even through all my anxiety God began to speak to me and tell me to have patience because it was only a matter of time before both my children would be at school and then it would be time for me to pick up the call again. Once this revelation from God had sunk into my spirit I began to realise how good God had been to me by providing Alex to be a fallback for Maurice. Many men are not so fortunate.

Different Attitudes

Two and a half years after Isaac's birth my hormones finally righted themselves and I could see definite physical changes. I also noted a difference in my mental and emotional attitudes and I became more aware of myself as a woman rather than a milk-producing machine. And this, I believe, is the point when women are at their most vulnerable. Just after finding this new awareness of myself I was paying for my goods at the local supermarket when the cashier told me that the security guard behind me (and she pointed to a man who at this point began to blush) thought I was very beautiful, and would really appreciate it if I said "hello" to him. In my amazed confusion I turned and said "hello", and then rushed out of the shop as quickly as I could, feeling very embarrassed but also very flattered. On later visits I was asked for telephone numbers etc. After my initial feeling of flattery I soon realised how hideous Satan was in the way he preys upon unsuspecting females. After all, I walked around with two small children and wore rings on my wedding finger. No sooner do you reach the state of mind where you can resume your relationships with your husband, but the devil steps in with counterfeit alternatives. It's pretty reasonable he should do this, as one of his priority jobs in society is breaking up marriages and families.

God Steps In

But, Hallelujah, God had already stepped in first, and at the beginning of this very year God had asked me what I wanted to do with my future. He'd reminded me first of all of what He'd said to me during the struggles of my first year of motherhood which were, "The circumstances are not important, but the call is". And the challenge He gave with my first child was repeated with the second as He asked if I was prepared to pick up the "Call" again, I had already made my decision. To me there was no alternative, and I knew deep down in my heart that if God wanted me to fulfil His purposes in my life then He would make a way for me. I'd already discussed my decision with Maurice and this unity of purpose made a tremendous difference to our relationship. A few months ago Maurice arranged for us to have a holiday together and prayed that God would provide for our two children to be looked after, which He did.

Adam's Gift

When God made Adam, He Himself thought that it wasn't good for man to be alone. First He brought the animals to him, but Adam couldn't form the relationship he wanted with these, so God created Eve. She was a gift to Adam. She was specially designed to be a companion, a help. Don't be kidded, nothing should get in the way of this marital relationship, be it children, family or work. Scripture says that if the unity is not as it should be between husband and wife, then your prayers are hindered. You leave yourself vulnerable to the devil's wicked snares. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul says that the married man cares for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife, and that the married women cares for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. I, for one, am absolutely certain that if we're not prepared to do this for our partner then the devil will make sure that somebody else will, with or without our consent!