

Text: Genesis 38

Title: "God's Work of Providence Calls for Moral Purity in the Bonds of Marriage"

Time: Sunday, June 14, 2009 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: The topic we have before us is not an easy one to talk about. In his classic commentary on Genesis, H. C. Leupold provides what he calls "Homiletical Suggestions" at the end of each chapter. His suggestions for Genesis 38 simply say, "Entirely unsuited to homiletical use, much as the devout Bible student may glean from the chapter." We can understand why Leupold would say that as we have read through the chapter.

We have said that the theme of Genesis 37-50 is God's work of providence, His ability to work His unstoppable plan as the One who can see before, the One who is eternal and knows the end from the beginning. While we do not understand how He does this, we do know from chapter 37 that God's plan requires that we surrender to it and that we submit to it if we are going to be blessed by it.

So now we confront a topic involving powerful forces that can keep us from enjoying the blessings of God's plan for our lives and our homes. Chapter 38 is introduced by the last verse of chapter 37, which readies us for the story of Joseph's commitment to moral purity in the house of Potipher in chapter 39. Before we get there, however, we find in Judah a tragic contrast to Joseph's commitment to God's plan for his life in this area. God's work of providence calls us to moral purity, and the temptations we face to fail in this important area threaten to make God's plan a bane rather than a blessing to us. Judah understood the pain and shame of this failure.

The Bible never defines moral purity in terms of celibacy, but rather always in terms of holy matrimony. We are living in a

day that has lost its sense of the meaning of marriage and the need for moral purity in the bonds of matrimony. Marriage is a God-designed and God-witnessed permanent covenant that unites a man and a woman as one in God's eyes so as to form a home. Today, we think it is something else. New Hampshire law legalizing homosexual marriage is a consequence of the loss of this biblical truth. Half of all heterosexual marriages end in divorce today. More than one third of all newborns are born in homes that fail to honor the covenant of matrimony.

God wants us to know the blessings of His plan, but we must understand that God's work of providence calls for moral purity in the bonds of marriage. Moral purity will be the focus of our study for the next two weeks, and this morning we begin with the negative example of Judah.

I. The nature of the threats to moral purity in the bonds of marriage (vv. 1-11).

Illustration: One of the first things our president did after taking office was sign an executive order that in one year's time the detention center for terrorists at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba would be closed. His actions launched a debate that today finds even Democrats in Congress on the other side of the issue. Last week a poll was conducted by *USA Today* and Gallup, which showed that Americans by a 2-1 margin do not want the terrorist prison closed. Americans are concerned that our president does not fully appreciate the nature of the threat posed by terrorism.

Application: If you do not understand the nature of the threat of something that can destroy you, you are more vulnerable to be destroyed. Our passage discloses some threats to the moral purity of the bonds of marriage that I want us to understand.

A. Spiritual disunity is a threat to moral purity within the bonds of marriage (v. 2). Shua was a Canaanite. Our study of

Genesis has taught us what this means for the prospects of a godly home (Gen. 24:3, 27:46-28:1, 28:6-9). What is the problem with a son of Abraham marrying a Canaanite woman? In Genesis this kind of marriage always creates a Canaanite home. Spiritual disunity between a couple creates the tension of a choice between peace with God and peace at home. God never intended that his children experience a tension between peace with Him and peace at home. We need to encourage our young people to choose spouses with whom they can enjoy spiritual unity in Christ.

B. A lack of friendship is a threat to moral purity within the bonds of marriage (vv. 2-5). There is an extreme coldness in the description of the relationship between Judah and his wife here. We are told that there was procreation, but we do not read about much more. Our society likes to speak of human sexual relationships in animalistic terms. The idea is that we cannot expect young people to live pure lives because they are just like animals that go into heat at the right time of year. But humans are different than animals. God said of Adam not merely that it is not good for him to have no offspring. God said that it is not good for him to be alone. A lot of married couples live as though they are alone. The companionship and friendship of marriage is something that we need to cultivate and protect. We need to make our spouse our best friend.

C. Selfish immaturity is a threat to moral purity within the bonds of marriage (vv. 6-11). The chapters that describe the births of the patriarchs indicate that Judah and Joseph were anywhere from seven to ten children apart. Judah must have been ten to fifteen years older than Joseph.

We are told back in 37:2 that Joseph is 17 years old, and that in 41:46, at the time of his promotion, he is 30 years old. That is 13 years. Then we have seven years of plenty in Egypt and two years of famine before Judah's family moves down to Egypt to join Joseph. That is a total of 22 years available for

the events of this chapter, during which Judah would have been likely between 27 and 45 years old, and this means that the sons whom Judah gave to Tamar must have been very young and inexperienced men when they married her.

Whatever their age, we do know for sure that these sons were too morally immature to handle the responsibilities of the marriage commitment. Er was evil in the eyes of the Lord, Onan was displeasing in the eyes of the Lord, and Judah comes to fear whom the Lord may see and kill next. This is what life is like when we are at odds with God's plan for us.

There is another way to live, and it is called finding favor in the eyes of the Lord (6:8; "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord"). Notice, however, that not being seen by the eyes of the Lord is never an option. As the God of providence, He sees all, and He will either bless because he sees with favor, or He will judge because He sees with displeasure.

II. The nature of the alternatives to moral purity in the bonds of marriage (vv. 12-19).

Illustration: Aesop told a story about two frogs who "lived together in a marsh. But one hot summer the marsh dried up, and they left it to look for another place to live in, for frogs like damp places if they can get them. By and by they came to a deep well, and one of them looked down into it, and said to the other, 'This looks like a nice cool place. Let us jump in and settle here.' But the other, who had a wiser head on his shoulders, replied, 'Not so fast, my friend. Supposing this well dried up like the marsh, how should we get out again?'" [*Book of Virtues*, 30-31]. The frog asks a good question. He wanted to make sure that he understood the nature of an alternative before jumping into it. The verses we just read give us a picture of what the alternative to moral purity in the bonds of marriage is like. We need to understand the dried up and barren nature of this alternative, lest we be tempted to jump in.

A. Moral impurity involves distrust rather than the covenantal security of love (vv. 14b, 17-18). Proverbs 31 is the Bible's description of the virtuous woman, and the first thing we are told about her, in support of the proposition that her worth is far above jewels, is the truth that "the heart of her husband trusts in her." God has designed the relationship between a man and a woman to be such that in marriage they can enjoy the security of mutual trust. The ability to enjoy trust, however, requires the existence of a promise that is kept, not broken. It is our loving allegiance to that covenant promise that develops the trust we enjoy. Without a covenant promise to keep, there is nothing with which to demonstrate the loving allegiance that develops trust.

B. Moral impurity involves the selfish manipulation of attraction rather than the sacrificial giving of love (vv. 12-14a; 16). The covenant of marriage is a promise to give, not take. When I got married, Pastor Ashbrook asked me a few questions, and they were all about what I was promising to give, nothing about what I was promising to take:

Declaration of Intent: "Kevin, will you have this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, and will you pledge yourself to her in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to live with her, cherish her, and provide for her according to the ordinance of God in the holy bond of marriage. Will you?" "I will."

Then it was my wife's turn: "Maureen, will you have this man to be your lawful wedded husband, and will you pledge yourself to him in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to live with him, cherish him, and obey him according to the ordinance of God in the holy bond of marriage. Will you?" "I will."

Then came an exchange of vows: "Kevin, will you repeat after me these vows: 'I Kevin, take you Maureen, to be my wedded

wife, and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful husband, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.'

"Maureen, will you repeat after me these vows: 'I Maureen, take you Kevin, to be my wedded wife, and I do promise and covenant, before God and these witnesses, to be thy loving and faithful wife, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.'"

What is the alternative to the giving love of marriage? The selfish manipulation of attraction. What we read of the relationship between Judah and Tamar is a selfish and manipulative substitute for the giving love that God intends for us to experience with moral purity in the bonds of marriage.

III. The nature of the consequences of the moral impurity that violates the bonds of marriage (vv. 20-26).

Illustration: Failure to understand the true nature of the consequences of our actions brings us all kinds of trouble. A heroine addict has a certain belief about the nature of the consequences of his actions — a great time, a great feeling, popularity with others, a sense of relief. Yet because he has miscalculated the nature of the consequences, he is in reality in grave danger. The path of moral impurity seems to promise us good things, but our passage makes clear that there are some negative consequences that we need to understand well.

A. The consequence of hidden shame (vv. 20-23). Judah sends the goat by the hand of his Adulamite friend, and he does not want Hirah looking around too long for her in spite of the loss of his valuables, because he felt shame over what he had done.

Nearly every letter that Paul wrote in the New Testament exhorts the believers of the early church to flee fornication. This

is especially true of 1 Corinthians. In chapter 6 of that Epistle, Paul puts the consequence of fornication in a special class of its own (vv. 15-20). What is Paul's point in v. 18? Clearly there is a sense in which the sin of fornication is more severe than any other sin. Other sins are outside the body; fornication is against the body. I believe that what Paul is saying here is that other sins are outside of the central design and purpose of the body, whereas fornication strikes at the very heart of one of the central purposes of the design of the body.

This is what makes pornography so very addictive. We are designed to enjoy this activity as a rich blessing in a way that is not true of any other activity that God calls sin. Other sins are all outside of the teleological design of what we are made to do, but fornication is a sin directly against a key purpose behind that design. We need to flee immorality and avoid the consequence of severe hidden shame.

B. The consequence of open hypocrisy (vv. 24-25). Judah loses his ability to think rationally about right and wrong, one of the foundational underpinnings of a just and civil society, because he suffers from the consequences of moral impurity. The solution he needs is to be confronted with the nature of his own sin, and God graciously grants him this blessing. The blessing begins with confession, and it only grows from there.

IV. Scarlet and the purification of moral impurity (vv. 26-30).

Application: Scarlet appears here and in Jericho outside of the window of Rahab the harlot. Rahab's was the only home delivered from God's judgment on Jericho. Isaiah's prophecies about scarlet, undoubtedly echoing the import of these passages about scarlet threads in 1:18, calls us to the purification of moral impurity: "Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

Jesus Christ died so that the impurity of immorality can be purified. Has your moral impurity been washed by His blood?

Conclusion: Tamar and Rahab have the scarlet cord in common, but they also have in common the privilege of being two of the four ladies mentioned by Matthew in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:3, 5, 6). The other two are Bathsheba and Ruth. Three of the four were guilty of the sin of moral impurity, and each of these came to know what it is like to be washed white as snow. No longer scarlet, their story is highlighted in Matthew's Gospel as a testimony to God's saving grace. We can have that same testimony. Though our sins be as scarlet, they can be white as snow.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*