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RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OPPOSITE SEX, SEX AND RELATED ISSUES

I will now consider with you a major problem area that many face while living in this fallen world. It is the area of relationship with the opposite sex, sex and related issues.

No one would dispute that the world is preoccupied with this area. It is a dominant theme in books and magazines, songs and movies, television programmes and advertisements. Advertisers often feature pictures of scantily clad women in their advertisements to boost sales although these women are totally unrelated to the products being marketed.

Scriptural warning

Indulgence in fleshly lusts is a very major problem in the world. This is a major thrust of 1 John 2:16, where the apostle John refers to the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes that is not from the Father but from the world.

The apostle Paul also cautions us concerning this same problem area, and in a more detailed manner, in Galatians 5:19-21 when he dwells on the subject of the deeds of the flesh.

Galatians 5:19-21

19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality,
20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions,
21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul puts it very strongly that such practices and manifestations of the flesh are inconsistent with the kingdom of God. He says, "I forewarn you" in verse 21 because he knows that such a direction of life is very dangerous.

Paul also puts it very emphatically in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 that fornicators, adulterers, effeminate and homosexuals have no place in God's kingdom.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor

adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,
10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor
swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

The basic issue

Relationship with the opposite sex, sex and related issues is a very major problem area in relation to wrongful indulgence in the lust of the flesh and manifestation of human weaknesses. In such a context, we often see a display of negative emotions and conduct such as jealousy, treachery and deceit. In the name of love, fights and murders and all kinds of terrible deeds have been committed. Many of the fleshly deeds and passions listed in Galatians 5:19-21 are reflected in this area of failure: immorality, impurity, sensuality, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, etc.

The love that is being promoted by the world in books, songs and movies often has a very distorted meaning. It is primarily emotional and sensuous, and often overpowering and contrary to the meaning of true love. Such a false understanding of love is not grounded in moral values and truth. True love, if properly understood, has a very rich and noble meaning in the Scriptures. It has to do with the supreme love of God for man, and the pure love of man for God and for one another.

It is a sobering thought that as fallen men living in a fallen world, we are very vulnerable and easily tempted and often fail in this area. The evil one actively seeks to manipulate and accentuate this particular aspect of the weakness of the flesh and he often succeeds. It is not only non-believers who are being targeted; believers are not exempt from it. And this problem is not confined to adults; more and more, we are seeing teenagers of opposite sexes relating with each other in ways that are highly inappropriate. Teenage pregnancies and abortions, not as much heard of in the past, are becoming commonplace especially in affluent countries.

The mass media has to take some blame for the powerful negative influence that it is exerting on the young. Through books and magazines, movies and television programmes, the spirit of the world is being transmitted. In recent years, the Internet, which the young can easily access, has also become a tool for the diffusion of undesirable materials and the perpetration of a decadent lifestyle.

There is also the element of peer pressure and peer influence. Some are drawn into this area because they are challenged and harassed by their peers and they fear being ostracised by them if they fail to toe the line.

There is also the problem of the despicable deeds perpetrated by paedophiles and purveyors of the sex trade. Preying on the fleshly desires of men, they exploit millions of women and children all over the world. Reports are rife about naive victims from rural areas, lured by the promise of decent jobs in the cities or in foreign countries, being forced into prostitution and ending up as sex slaves.

Sex, which has a meaningful place in the context of marriage and can enhance the relationship between the husband and wife, has become a "dirty word" that is associated with sensuality and fleshly lust. It has become commercialised, like a commodity that can be bought and sold. The scale of the sex industry and the flagrant exploitations associated with it is surely something that deeply grieves the heart of God and is an abomination to Him.

Many have suffered terribly – physically, emotionally and mentally – the guilty as well as the innocent. Many lives have been ruined and precious relationships and countless families have been destroyed. In recent years, the deadly AIDS has afflicted millions, including innocent spouses and children.

Subtlety of attack

Let us not suppose that we can easily detect the temptation of the evil one in this area. It may not come in dramatic or obvious forms. It is the subtlety of the evil one's approach that is most dangerous and devastating. It may creep in insidiously when our guards are down and when we least expect it.

It is indeed easy to falter in this area and there is a need for constant vigilance. Let us exercise care in the way we relate with the opposite sex and refrain from inappropriate conduct which facilitates the evil one taking advantage of this area of weakness and causing us or others to falter. One problem area in some contexts is the way some ladies dress – in a manner that makes it easier for the evil one to arouse their male counterparts and promote improper thoughts and feelings.

One of the evil one's approaches is to attack both the giving and the receiving end. On the one hand, he exploits the weakness of the flesh of men and women to influence them to conduct themselves in ways that become a source of temptation and a cause of stumbling to those of the opposite sex. On the other hand, the evil one is also actively at work in those at the receiving end. Again taking advantage of the weakness of the flesh, he works on them to succumb to the temptations. Often, both parties – those at the giving and receiving ends – are at fault. One common example is the practice of flirtation. Both men and women engage in it, and some do so without even being conscious of it.

Such practices can result in the forming of relationships that are improper, leading to entanglement with the wrong person and to sinful conduct.

Our thought life and emotions are easily adversely affected by this area as we live in this fallen world. We can be easily tempted by the evil one and become distracted or go astray.

Women's hold over men

In the matter of sexual exploitation, women and children are most often manipulated and abused. But we should not fail to realise that women can also manipulate and ensnare men. Some may even boast that they can easily "twist men around their little fingers".

Women, although generally physically weaker, have other ways of overcoming and manipulating men. A Chinese idiom aptly describes the approach that some women use to ensnare their hapless, clueless victims: "The hero has difficulty overcoming the trap or snare of the charming lady" (In Chinese, it is "*ying xiong nan guo mei ren guan*").

The charming lady in this idiom overcomes the hero not through her inward beauty, but her physical beauty. With an ulterior motive, she charms men. At times, the ploy she uses includes her cry for "help" and her display of "helplessness". The English equivalent is the "damsel in distress". In reality, it is the "hero" who needs help and who is helpless when he falls into the trap of the beautiful lady.

In Chinese sword-fighting stories, the hero is often portrayed as a very capable, talented and intelligent man armed with superior fighting skills. His opponents find it very difficult to overcome him, even when they try to tempt him with wealth and status. But often, we see him succumbing to the snare of the beautiful lady and he ends up being overcome and destroyed.

The above scenario exists not only in novels, but also in real life. There are glaring examples in history of the use of such a strategy. When one party is unable to defeat its opponents, it would resort to using the weapon of "the charming lady". Kingdoms have been lost, destroyed or overcome when this strategy was employed against them.

Some Christians may think that such a scenario does not apply to them since they do not have any earthly kingdom to lose. But they fail to realise that what is at stake for Christians is even more significant because it pertains to God's eternal kingdom.

Samson is a clear example of one who could not overcome this hurdle although he was victorious in his battles and skirmishes with the Philistines. Judges 15:15 gives an instance of Samson's exploits: he killed one thousand Philistines single-handedly with just the jawbone of a donkey. But Samson fell because of a woman, Delilah, which resulted in him being captured by the Philistines. The Philistines then gouged out his eyes and imprisoned him. More tragically, as a consequence of his failure in this area, the Lord departed from him (Judges 16:19-21). As Christians, we must bear in mind not only the physical, temporal pain and consequences, but also the moral and spiritual implications of failure in this area.

What we are considering of the dangers that men face could perhaps be summed up in the expression "femme fatale". "Femme" refers to "female" and "fatale" is the word "fatal". "Female fatal" refers to the lady who is attractive but deadly to the opposite sex. The dictionary defines this term in this way – a woman who is very attractive in a mysterious way, usually leading people into danger or causing their destruction.

Men's hold over women

It is also not uncommon for women to succumb to men. We see this not only in the world of spying and espionage, but also in daily life, especially in our modern society. In the past, women lived more sheltered lives, and in some societies, they could not even be seen outside of their family circles. Modern women, especially those in developed countries, are more exposed to society, to working life and to the corporate world. They can freely interact with their male counterparts at work and in their social life. They can also acquire money, status and power. In such an environment, we tend to see higher incidents of sexually related problems, including women succumbing to men's deceptive ways.

Women can be very vulnerable to men who know how to shower them with attention, flattery and gifts and who woo them with persistence. Men with questionable character and ulterior motives may portray themselves as being very understanding, very gentle and kind. They pepper their conversation with sweet-talk and compliments. Many women, loving the attention showered upon them, fall into this trap. They allow their emotions to get the better of them and end up relating with these men in ways that are neither appropriate nor helpful. Even those who think they are not susceptible to flattery may subconsciously crave for it and feel good when complimented, much to their detriment.

God's children also vulnerable

Flirtations and seductions by both sexes are common in society. As believers, we have to face up to these realities in this fallen world. We are not immune to the problems related to sex and relationship with the opposite sex that plague society in general. Although the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ has redeemed us, we are still fallen men and the weakness of the flesh is still present in us. We are still very susceptible to this area of failure.

We must be mindful that we are in the midst of spiritual warfare and that beyond all that is taking place in the realm of the visible and beyond the weakness of the flesh, the evil one is actively at work and going all out to destroy God's children. He knows how to manipulate people and situations and attack us in areas where we are most vulnerable, thus inflicting maximum losses on God's children.

Like the evil one's attack, failures in this area may not always be manifested in dramatic or obvious forms. We may already be giving ground and may be negatively

affected without realising it. If we do not take steps to deal with this problem area in our lives, we will become increasingly weaker and more vulnerable. Every failure results in increasing weakness and vulnerability in our lives, leading to bondage in this area.

Such failures not only harm our life and walk with God but they can also destroy precious relationships among family members and friends and those between spouses. Failures in this area can result in much heartache, with lives seriously damaged or ruined.

The Scriptures records several examples of people who failed in this area and these serve as lessons for us. Sadly, this is a problem that has also marred church history, and even prominent men and women who sought to serve God have succumbed and their ministry destroyed.

King Solomon, in spite of the unusual wisdom that God gave him, went far astray from God in this area. His unbridled passion for foreign women was displeasing to God and it led to his downfall. Samson, noted for his exceptional physical strength, was extremely weak in this area of relating with women. Even a godly man like King David faltered terribly in this area in the matter concerning Bathsheba. In a moment of carelessness, he succumbed to temptation, and it resulted in him committing adultery with Bathsheba and subsequently plotting the death of her husband, Uriah.

Failure in this area may be of different kinds and can have very far-reaching implications. Many have gone far astray and shipwrecked their faith on these very treacherous rocks. It can start in small ways, in subtle forms. Unless we are alert to it, we may not even realise that it is taking place and growing - until it is too late and too difficult to overcome. Once we falter in this area, it becomes easier to falter again.

Let us watch ourselves in this area at the personal level and also as we seek to work out together in church life. Let us also pray for one another and be wise in the way we conduct ourselves and relate with one another.

Keeping the right balance

However, we need to have a balanced perspective and not overreact. It is possible to overreact such that meaningful and proper relationships as well as fellowship amongst the brethren are hindered. Human relationship is important and precious. It is an important aspect of the outworking of God's purposes and church life, which does involve us coming in contact with and relating with those of the opposite sex.

Though it may be necessary for us, in some instances, to be more careful and to keep a distance from those of the opposite sex, we should not be over-imaginative and regard with suspicion every act of kindness that members of the opposite sex extend to us, thinking that dangers lurk at every turn. There are indeed those who

are sincerely and genuinely considerate and kind towards us. This can be true also of non-believers. We must not have the idea that the motives of non-believers are always negative. All men are created in the image of God and have a conscience. The Spirit of God is still at work in this world, encouraging both believers and non-believers alike to do what is good and right. Thus, even non-believers can be sincere and are capable of showing genuine acts of kindness.

Even though we face many dangers and problems living in this fallen world, let us not withdraw from society, thinking it would then solve our problems. If that were the solution, we would have to be taken out of this world or would have to live the life of a hermit. This is clearly not the way of God. The Lord Jesus, in His prayer to God the Father in John 17, wants us to be in the world even though we are not to be of the world. He prayed to God the Father to keep us from the evil one. He also cautions us to be prayerful. The Lord Jesus tells us, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Yes, although the flesh is weak and it is easy for us to succumb to temptations in this world, He did not instruct us to withdraw from this world. Rather He says, "Watch and pray."

Those who overreact and withdraw from society may render themselves even more vulnerable because they would then lack exposure to the opposite sex and would have no experience dealing with situations involving the opposite sex. When they finally come into contact with someone of the opposite sex who is worldly-wise and able to attract them in deceitful ways, they may fall terribly because they do not know the right way to respond.

God has placed us in this fallen world for a purpose. Despite pitfalls and temptations, He still wants us to remain in this world because it provides an opportunity for us to learn, to grow, to be His witnesses and to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. By withdrawing, we will not be able to accomplish His purposes for us on this earth.

Acknowledging our wrongdoing

All of us do fail in the face of pressures and temptations. Let us neither despair nor trivialise our failures. When we do fail, we must acknowledge it, repent, seek God's forgiveness, and strive to fare better by God's grace. The apostle Peter faltered from time to time but he made good progress and grew to be someone whom the Lord deeply appreciated and who contributed much to the advancement of God's kingdom.

However, we must not be presumptuous. Failure in the area of sex and relationship with the opposite sex can be very serious. The evil one will try to deceive us into thinking that it is all right to falter since we can always seek God's forgiveness and start afresh. If we swallow his bait, it can lead us in the path of destruction. The problem may start small, but it can grow and become very serious.

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