

Treasuring Marriage

Excerpts from a sermon on "Protecting Marriage" by Rt. Rev. Brian W. Keith

Marriage is precious. This most intimate of human relationships has the potential to provide a happiness that can hardly be described. Nowhere else can we share as much. Nowhere else can we receive as much from another human being. Nowhere else can we develop as strong a bond—one that will last forever.

Such love is different from every other affection that we might feel. It leads us to enjoy the presence of our spouse and to think of that person as our closest friend. It also leads us to become one with our partner in a union that is special, unique. This is so important, so essential to our lives, that it is worth protecting. It is worth taking care of and preserving so that it might be realized.

One critical way to protect true marriage love (called conjugal love in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church) is to face and deal with anything that might harm the marriage. The most extreme attack upon the relationship comes from adultery. We should avoid this at all costs. As we see how opposed to marriage adultery is, and how destructive it is, we should flee from extramarital entrapments.

In some ways this may seem easy, for most people are not openly enticed by others. But the Lord noted that the love of adultery, a love that will eventually lead into open adultery, is present in any lust (see Matthew 5:27-28). It is also important to point out that adultery rarely occurs between complete strangers. When a person forms a close relationship with someone other than his or her spouse, when a special trust or confidence grows up, the normal barriers against adultery are lowered. Lust does not always take the form of an animal desire for sexual relations. It can initially hide itself under the guise of a desire for communication and intimacy apart from marriage. When relationships outside of marriage become very appealing or satisfying, warning bells should be sounding. For marriage requires protection by resisting the lures of anything that would become more important than one's spouse. Shunning adultery as a sin enables a love for one's spouse to grow—in fact, to increase daily (see *Spiritual Experiences* 6110:7).

But to protect marriage we need to do more than just fight against the allure of adultery. For one evil cannot be resisted in isolation. Anything that would encourage our selfishness, anything that would encourage an over-emphasis upon worldly things, must be fought against (see *Conjugal Love* 356). Anything that diminishes our humanity also harms our marriages. For the quality of our marriages will be determined by the quality of love within our hearts. As we progress in all aspects of our spiritual life, so we will have more love for our spouse and a stronger bond of marriage.

Marriage is also protected by a couple's attitudes. If marriage is seen as important, as sacred and holy, then a special bond can exist between them (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2733). They can then view their relationship not just as a convenient way to live together, not

just as a legality, but as a foundation upon which all happiness can rest. It is also important for a couple to recognize the role of the Lord (see *De Conjugio* 81). If conjugal love or true marriage love is seen as a heavenly love, descending from Him, there can be a humility and reverence toward what has been given. And, finally, if we believe that marriage is eternal, that what is begun on earth continues in heaven, then we can make a stronger commitment. All the problems of living with another person can be put in perspective (see *Conjugial Love* 216).

There is no secret method for how a couple should improve their marriage. The simple principles of charity, taught so clearly in the Sermon on the Mount, form the ground rules for a happy marriage: be helpful, do not attack with words or deeds, turn the other cheek and forgive, seek the Lord's help in prayer, don't be too critical, see the good of the other person. These and all other aspects of acting charitably enable the Lord to unite hearts and minds, producing the joys of love truly conjugal.

As we work at our marriages, the investment of time and energy, caring and self-sacrifice will strengthen our hearts. And with such strength comes Divine protection so that heavenly love may be received and treasured within our lives and within our marriages.