

## Protecting Marriage

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Brian W. Keith

"From true conjugal love there is power and protection against the hells ... for the reason that through conjugal love a person has conjunction with the Lord, and the Lord alone has power over all the hells." (*Apocalypse Explained* 999:2)

Marriage is precious. That most intimate of human relationships has the potential to provide 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 a stronger bond than one that will last forever.

Think of the love that Isaac and Rebekah had. Although it was an arranged marriage, each willingly accepted the other and cared for the other. And it is expressed so simply: "and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her." (Genesis 24:67) Such love is different from every other affection that we might feel. It leads us to enjoy the presence of our spouse. It leads us to think of that person as our closest friend. But it also leads us to become one with our partner. It leads to a union that is special, unique. It leads to a human life that is full. This is so important, so essential to our lives that it is worth protecting. It is worth taking care of and preserving that it might be realized.

For the person who is not yet married, the ideal of conjugal love is to be held high. Although there may have been disappointments, marriage is not just of this world. The person who asks the Lord for a conjugal partner may not receive one here, but the Lord will be able to provide one in the spiritual world for those who have cherished the concept of conjugal love. Protecting the conjugal for the single person is maintaining the dream, the promise, of what the Lord intends. For the person who has experienced loss in marriage, or who has deeply hurt feelings from a bad experience, there is also a need to protect the concept of marriage. Although the ideal of two people spending a lifetime together, drawing ever more close, may not have been realized, the ideal is never lost, merely postponed. Marriage cannot be destroyed unless a person wills to destroy it by rejecting the ideal and living as if a happy marriage were impossible. Avoiding the poisons of

disillusionment and bitterness may be enough to protect and preserve the hope of conjugal love.

For the person who is married, that relationship is to be treasured above all other human relationships. No other human being is as important or worthy of respect and attention as one's spouse. Any step taken to enhance the marriage, any effort made to strengthen the love, protects this precious jewel of human life. One critical way to protect conjugal love 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 it 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 lust (see Matthew 5:27, 28).

It is also important to point out that adultery rarely occurs between complete strangers. Where a person is forming a close relationship with someone other than one's spouse, where 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 Diaries* 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 would diminish 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 will we have more love for our spouse and a stronger bond of marriage.

For just fleeing from what is opposed to marriage is not enough. We cannot spend our entire lives constantly on the lookout for anything that might threaten our marriage. If we attempt to be on the alert at all times, we will soon assume that enemies lurk in every corner, in every conversation our spouse has with another, in every look of passing strangers.

Lasting protection for our marriages can come only from the Lord from receiving His love. Yes, we have to guard against what might harm marriage, but that is only so that a genuine conjugal love might grow. It is like gardening. We have to pull up weeds and prevent the rabbits from getting in, but we cannot neglect to plant the seeds and harvest the crops. A strong marriage--one that is based upon common beliefs, similar loves, and willingness to grow--is the only sure protection against the hells. Or as the Heavenly Doctrines state: "from true conjugal love there is power and protection against the hells." (*Apocalypse Explained* 999:2)

Strengthening a marriage is the process of two becoming one. Some of this miraculously and secretly occurs just by living with another in marriage. For the wife's innate love directs the potential conceit of the husband to be focused on her, "neither the man nor the wife being conscious of it." (*Conjugal Love* 193:2, 123, 171) The Lord wonderfully draws the two souls together as they talk, as they sit quietly, as they share all the little things that add up to a marriage.

Marriage is also protected by the 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 Conj* 81). If conjugal love is seen as a heavenly love descending from Him, there can be a humility and reverence toward what has been given. When we realize that we do not have to make ourselves happy, that we do not have to create love, then we can relax and accept the Lord's direction.

And one final attitude is vital if we believe that marriage is eternal: that what is begun on earth is continued in heaven, then a stronger commitment can be made and all the little problems of living with

another person can be put in perspective (see *Conjugal Love* 216). These beliefs and attitudes enable a couple to constructively work on their relationship. As their goals and values are one, so they can strive in the same direction.

But much of the visible work of the marriage is found in emphasizing the couple's similarities and harmonizing the differences (see *Conjugal Love* 228, 176). The similar loves and values of two people are what draw them together. These similar loves and values are a continuing source of delight to them. From superficial to core facets of life, what is held in common is the basis for the growth of love. But how differences are handled also can promote the growth of marriage. Often a young couple will think that becoming one means becoming the same. Different ways of thinking or doing things can be threatening, so each may try to be exactly like the other, or force the other to be like him- or herself. A false oneness or forceful dominion is the result. As marriages develop, couples do become more similar, but they also become more clearly define and appreciate their unique qualities.

And 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, and 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.

With a developing relationship there is a growing protection of marriage. For the tender love they share then surrounds itself with jealousy (see *Conjugal Love* 371) not the green-eyed monster which is suspicious of all, but the recognition of what would be lost if the marriage were harmed. It is a type of fear, a fear that something precious might be damaged. It is not selfish, for with genuine conjugal love the marriage becomes more important than the temporary delights either person experiences. The fear for marriage is the fear lest the other person suffer, lest the eternal promise of happiness be lost.

Jealousy is a protective covering for marriage. It is the flame of a genuine love defending what is precious, what is heavenly. It may show itself in hostility toward others who may be forming inappropriate

relationships with one's spouse. It may show itself in resentments toward excessive work or play that draws one's spouse away from the home and marriage. From the depth and strength of conjugal love, a just and sane jealousy emerges, protecting what is good that it might remain the source of eternal happiness for husband and wife.

The heavenly union of one man with one woman is the priceless pearl of human life. The wholehearted giving of two people to each other can bring delight and joy that is beyond imagination. It begins as the Lord leads two to discover each other, sensing that they were made for each other. Their love then develops and grows and a marriage of spirits occurs. Love truly conjugal gradually descends into their relationship, and the two become one.

Protecting and guarding this relationship lest anything harm it is vital. One form of protection is resisting hellish loves opposed to marriage. Adultery and its loves found in lust are to be rejected. Turning away from the false sirens of temporary delight enables the tender love in marriage to grow.

But lasting protection against the enemies of marriage can be found only in love truly conjugal. It is that love itself, or rather the Lord's presence in that love, which affords us protection. 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, protection so that heaven may be created even within our lives, within our marriages.

Amen.

*Lessons: Genesis 24, Matthew 5:27-32, Conjugal Love 371*