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THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1983

Vol. 6, No. 3

\$2.00

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Meditations for Couples

Applying the Teachings of Christ to Build Stronger Marriage Relationships

by Edward "Chip" Anderson

I

"I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God."

Luke 9:61-62

Jesus' words seem so sharp, cold, and hard. After all, the person was willing to follow Christ and made a simple request: to say good-bye to his family. What could be wrong with such a request? Wouldn't it have been irresponsible if the person didn't say good-bye to his family? And yet, Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God."

The warning contained in this statement indicates that once you commit yourself to accomplishing a task, it is important to remain focused on that goal. Looking back distracts you from accomplishing your task. Looking back indicates a wavering in your commitment. And when you lose focus and concentration on your goal by reflecting on the past, you are less likely to accomplish it. Therefore, goal accomplishment involves:

1. deciding and committing yourself to a goal
2. taking action (putting your hand to the plow)
3. remaining focused on your goal and task rather than reflecting on the past or becoming distracted.

When we began our marriages, we brought with us goals and dreams—we made commitments to our spouse and to our marriage. We began with considerable effort, fully intending to realize our marital goals and dreams. But with the passing of time, distractions set in and our focus towards goals became unfocused. At times we even looked back and asked ourselves what might have been if we had married another or never married at all. But questions further distract us from our marital goals and commitments.

The good news which our faith in Jesus Christ brings is that of "new beginnings." Today can be a day of new beginnings for your marriage if you will refocus towards your goals, remain focused on those goals, work toward those goals, and not look back!

PRAYER: Dear Lord, I must admit that my relationship with you and with my mate has suffered each time I have looked back or become distracted. My past life seems like a zig-zag pattern of steps both towards and away from the things that mean so much to me. Today, please free me from my past inconsistencies and sins so that I have no reason to look back. I believe that you want me to have the marriage I desire. Help me to do the things that will make it so.

II

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"

Luke 9:23-25

The very same principles that apply to our relationship to Jesus Christ also apply in our marriage relationships!

Jesus knows our most basic desire—to be and feel alive—and he

knows that we all hate death. He said, "I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly." (John 10:10) And, oh how those times of feeling especially alive stand out in our minds. Times when we felt energized, focused, purposeful, aware, alert, and joyously filled with hope. Those are the times that we look back on with pleasure and look forward to with anticipation.

Many of Jesus' teachings are paradoxical, and yet true. In today's scripture he says, "If you want to save your life, lose it." In other words, if you want to have something, try giving it away!

In our marriage relationships, we know the paradoxes of living together:

1. If you want love, give love!
2. If you want closeness, give others the space to be themselves!
3. If you want security, give others freedom!
4. If you want happiness, give pleasure to someone else!

If you try to hold, cover or control a growing plant, you will end up crushing it, destroying its beauty.

Jesus is calling out to you for a relationship and saying: If you want a fulfilling life, then deny yourself to find yourself; give yourself to him and you will find life!

Your mate wants to have the love-filled relationship you both dreamed about, and the teachings of Christ apply there also: if you want love to come to you, set that desire aside and give love.

PRAYER: Lord, out of my insecurities, I keep wanting to hold on to what little I seem to have. My fear is that if I give what little love and compassion I have, I will be left with nothing, that the emptiness I feel in my soul will become a deadly desert. Nevertheless, by faith, I will experiment today with this great paradox of giving to receive. In fact, I will start with you, Lord Jesus, giving myself to you in order to find meaning and purpose. And I will go from this place and give my spouse all the love I have, by faith in you.

III

"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who loves little has been forgiven little."

Luke 7:42

Jesus made this statement at a dinner given for him by a Pharisee. While Jesus was reclining at the table, a woman who had "lived a sinful life" (Luke 7:37) brought perfume, and as she stood behind Christ at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped his feet with her hair, kissed his feet, and poured the perfume on them.

The Pharisees criticized Jesus for even allowing the "sinful" woman to touch him. However, Jesus quickly pointed out to his Pharisee host that when he came into the house, the Pharisee didn't even offer him water to wash himself, and yet the "sinful" woman washed his feet with her tears and dried his feet with her hair. Jesus said that it was because she loved much that her many sins had been forgiven.

This story raises some important questions. If the forgiving of your sins were a function of how much loving you are doing, would your sins be forgiven? If you totaled the number of sins you have committed and if you totaled the number of loving things you have done, which total would be larger? Or, if you added up the number of thoughtful things you have done and compared them to the number of inconsiderate things you have done, which would be greater?

In relationship to your mate, what would the totals be if you computed the times when you were thoughtful rather than inconsiderate, when you were accepting rather than judgmental, when you were appreciative rather than taking your spouse for granted, when you

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took your spouse's concerns seriously rather than ignoring them? For me, the totals would be greater on the inconsiderate, judgmental, taking for granted, and ignoring side of the ledger!

Christ's teachings provide hope in my desire to be a lover. He said, "He loves little who has been forgiven little." Accordingly, he loves much who has been forgiven much. I know there is much to be forgiven, and it is because of that knowledge and my request to be forgiven that I am able to love much.

In the movie, *Love Story*, one of the actors says, "Love is never having to say you're sorry." In real life, being sorry for wrongdoings and inconsiderate acts, asking for forgiveness, being forgiven, and loving are interrelated. Being aware of my need for forgiveness, asking for forgiveness, and being forgiven makes me a better lover!

PRAYER: Thank you dear God for not keeping score. Thank you for your son, Jesus, through whom my slate was cleansed when I asked you to forgive me. Help me Lord to not keep score in my marriage, especially since you have washed my sins away. How could I keep score on the mate you gave me, when you paid my debt?

IV

"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

Luke 2:14

Praising God in the sense of thanking him for his many blessings in our lives has great healing power for the pain, hurts and resentments which drag us down. This is particularly true in relationships. When we approach our mate with heartfelt thankfulness to God for that individual, the person he/she is, and what our mate does for us or what it does for us to have another person to belong to, a miraculous healing process begins.

If you want more peace and calm in your relationships, begin praising God for that person God has given to you, for what that person means to you. For example, thinking about your mate, reflect upon the following:

- The most enjoyable experience you have had with him/her.
- The time when you felt closest to your mate.
- The ways in which your life is better because of him/her.
- The things your mate has taught you.

After reflecting on these experiences and thanking God for what this person has meant to you, go to your mate and express to him/her what you are thankful for. Be specific. Reflect with your mate about experiences you've shared. Tell him/her specifically how it felt in those moments of greatest closeness. Be precise when you explain what you have learned from him/her and describe the things your mate does for you that you most appreciate.

PRAYER: Thank you dear God. Truly your favor does rest upon me. I see that favor in the form of the person with whom I have shared, learned and experienced many things to a fuller degree than if I were alone. Help me now to have the courage to go to the person *you have given me* in a thankful, praising manner. Just as the shepherds praised you for giving your Son, so also I will praise you for giving me a partner who makes my life richer and fuller.

V

"And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said, "A man who was going down from Jerusalem. . . ."

Luke 10

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus clarifies who our neighbor is and, thus, clarifies who it is that we are to love.

One evening I received a call from a business associate and then one from a client. At the time, my wife and I were arguing. After I finished speaking on the phone, my wife commented about how nice I had been to the people who called—particularly in comparison to our heated argument. She went on to point out that it seemed as if those people who are closest to me got worse treatment than those outside of our home. And it was true: I was nicer to the people on the phone than to my wife and son. It was as if the people who were further away were getting the best while those who were closest got leftovers.

I must admit that frequently those at work get better, more loving treatment than those with whom I live. Even worse, I sometimes ventilate the anger and frustration emanating from work on the people at home, instead of attacking the source.

The person whom the Good Samaritan helped and supported back to health was an individual whom he "came upon"—a person who was immediately before him. The point is that those who are immediately before us, whom we naturally come upon, are often skipped over as we rush through our daily chores and activities.

I have observed that many of my inconsiderate acts occur as I rush around trying to do good things. In my attempts to do good things and be a "good person," I often overlook the people closest to me. In the story of the Good Samaritan, it is easy to criticize the priest and levite who pass by without helping the man who had been robbed and beaten. But maybe they were "good people" on their way to do "good things." Maybe they were on their way to some important responsibilities. And yet, they missed the mark.

In my marriage, I am amazed at the number of times conflicts have started because I was trying to do what I thought was right, trying to be "good," and trying to be responsible. I have frequently forgotten that loving needs to be my goal, rather than trying to be something—even if that something I want to be is good.

PRAYER: Lord, I see it more clearly now. I have tried to be good, tried to be responsible, and tried to be a Christian! I will love rather than trying to be something. I love you, Lord Jesus. The process starts now.

VI

The parable of the Good Samaritan is probably the best known of all biblical parables. As a story used to illustrate a moral or ethical principle in practical terms, the parable of the Good Samaritan has both obvious and subtle implications.

One of the more subtle implications of this parable involves the Good Samaritan's racial, cultural, and ethnic origins. To Jews in Jesus' time, Samaritans were considered unclean and, thus, not to be associated with. Perhaps the Jews in Jesus' time felt the way some individuals in our culture feel about other races and ethnic groups. Perhaps some Jews had the same intense dislike for Samaritans we see between groups today. Who knows, maybe they even had insidious slogans in that period, e.g., the only good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan.

Since Jesus told this parable to a Jew who was, in fact, an expert in Jewish laws and traditions, it was not accidental that he used a story about a Samaritan to illustrate the nature of loving behavior. It was as if Jesus not only wanted to illustrate how to love but also to confront and shake up the "expert's" preconceptions and prejudices.

Preconceptions, prejudgments and other forms of prejudice are antithetical to loving. When we preconceive or prejudge, we constrain another to our expectations and, in a sense, restrain them from growing and developing.

When we are the recipient of another's preconceptions and prejudices, we feel discounted, devalued and restricted. Being closed in or closed out by others' preconceptions frustrates us and produces anger.

Husbands and wives often form preconceptions and prejudge each other. In preconceiving our mate, it is like Archie Bunker saying to his wife, "Edith, stifle yourself!"

I must admit that I often preconceive my wife's reactions, saying to myself that she's this way or that way. I have even used prejudging labels—thinking of her as compulsive and rigid—further restricting and devaluing her. As I preconceive and prejudge, I lose the relationship I desire, because I fail to see my wife as a person.

To have a loving relationship, I must see the person for who that person is, moment by moment—an ever changing, beautiful person, unique and separate from my preconceptions.

PRAYER: Whether they come from lazy thinking or my own desires to control and be safe, I don't know, but I do know that my preconceptions and prejudgments interfere with my desire for a loving marriage. Dear Lord, help me to see my mate with your eyes . . . a unique person created in your image.