

## **CAN YOU TRUST YOUR SPOUSE?**

**Today's Text: Matt. 1: 18-25**

### **Extracts:**

**Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. After His mother *Mary* was betrothed to *Joseph*, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then *Joseph* her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you *Mary* your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit..." Then, *Joseph*, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn son. And he called His name Jesus [Matt. 1: 18- 20, 24-25]**

*In a recently published study on why men stray,<sup>1</sup> an American marriage counselor, M. Gary Neuman, interviewed hundreds of faithful and cheating husbands and came out with some interesting findings. For example, he found that one in 2.7 men (37%) cheated on their wives but only 7% of cheating men would tell their wives without being asked. 92% of men admitted that sex was not the primary reason for straying and 88% admitted that the other women were no better looking than their wives! What then were such men looking for? In most traditional societies, there are more taboos against wives than their husbands when it comes to infidelity. However, with increasing modernization, a growing number of wives are also cheating on their husbands. What are they also looking for that they cannot get from their husbands at home?*

*The traditional family is now constantly under attack, and Christian husbands and wives are under worse pressure. Adultery is breaking up family harmony, and the divorce rate has gone up. So, if as the new study suggests, sex and beauty are not the main attractions out there, why are married people straying? Can you trust your spouse? Can your spouse trust you? What can you do to rebuild or reinforce your marriage?*

*In today's study, we shall use the marriage of Joseph and Mary to understand what trust in marriage is all about.*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on the following sources: M. Gary Neuman, *The Truth about Cheating: Why Men Stray and What You Can Do to Prevent It* [Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008] and 'Besides sex-other reasons men cheat,' from *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, OPRAH.com – see article at <http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/wayoflife/10/03/o.why.men.cheat/index.html?iref=mpstoryview>

## 1. Trust- by proof or by faith?

Fidelity is deeply rooted in the marital vows that you have exchanged with your spouse. On your wedding day and in the presence of witnesses (the officiating priest, family and well-wishers), you both agreed to be faithful to each other for better for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do you part. The word of God says, “When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for the Lord your God will surely require it of you, *and it would be sin to you*” [Deut. 23: 21]. In practice, however, that is easier said than done! Some spouses assume that their partners can *never* be faithful, even when they have no proof to back it up. Some others have a pathological fear that their spouses as human beings will cheat but they do not want to know about it. So, do you trust your spouse by faith or by proof?

When we talk of cheating or infidelity, our minds immediately go to situations where married couples have sexual relations with people other than their spouses. That is called adultery. But that is the small and easy part of cheating. Many of us are only *technically* faithful to their spouses. For example, they may not have had physical relations with others but their minds are always filled with dirty thoughts towards people other than their spouses. They may be into pornography or practise masturbation or oral sex. But in the words of Jesus Christ, adultery begins in the heart, and “whoever looks at a woman to lust for her *has already committed adultery with her* in his heart” [Matt. 5: 28]. That also applies to a woman who looks lustfully at a man other than her husband! Therefore, by God’s definition, we are all cheats! That is why we have to have an open, not a judgmental mind as we examine this important subject.

Trust in marriage is a two-way street. On your part, you expect your spouse to accept the position that you are faithful to your marital vows and your spouse should continue to relate to you that way. In like manner, you have extended the same expectation to your spouse. The reality may be a different story. Let us examine a few real life cases:

a) *Both partners are unfaithful to each other and both of them know it!*

This can come about in different ways. For example, one partner may have caught the other cheating and has decided to retaliate. Or, one partner may suspect (with or without proof) that the other is having an affair and jump on that excuse to get even by also going out with others. No matter how it comes about, it is a *roller coaster* case.

Can you imagine the falsehood in that kind of marriage? There is no emotional investment by either party and there is no respect for the marriage. The couple are living a lie because they have no moral foundation for raising their children (if any) or correcting their conduct. They may live under the same roof (perhaps out of economic or social

imperatives) and wear loud wedding rings but they cannot be happy. No matter how much they may hide their exploits, people close to them will know because there are many things that others know about us that we can never know about ourselves. Sooner than later, the marriage will break down and both parties will go their separate ways.

b) *Only one party is promoting fidelity*

In this case, one party endeavours to be faithful but the other party keeps straying and the faithful partner knows it. A well-known case of this kind of infidelity in Scripture was when God asked the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute who did not give up her trade even after marriage [**Hos. 1: 2**]. Although that case was to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness to God, the forgiving disposition of her husband is worth noting.

In general, wives are more faithful than husbands but the number of unfaithful wives is growing as glamourized in an American TV series, *Desperate Housewives*. The reasons for straying may vary. For example, the majority of the straying men in Gary Neuman's study did not do so because they were looking for sex or for women prettier than their wives. The men referred to an emotional disconnection, that is, a sense of not being appreciated by their wives at home.

Frequent physical absence of one partner could tempt the lonely spouse to be unfaithful. For example, the wife who played the harlot to lure a young man to bed said, "Come, let us take our fill of love until morning... for my husband is not at home. He has gone on a long journey ... and will come home on the appointed day" [**Prov. 7: 6-20**]. Some people take to infidelity as an economic activity, such as commercial sex workers who are married or people who use their endowments to promote their careers or their positions to obtain undue sexual favours. If the offended party is not in spirit or patient, a marriage in this kind of crisis can easily break down and lead to divorce.

c) *A spouse cannot believe the other is faithful even when it is true!*

Both parties are faithful to each other but one of them can never believe that the other is faithful. The accuser has no proof of guilt but does not believe any human being can ever be faithful, even when the accuser has no problem believing his or her own innocence!

This kind of marriage faces *a crisis of confidence*, arising from lack of self-confidence by the accuser. It could also be a way to arm against failure in the future, which may never happen. Unfortunately, unless the accused party is patient or God-fearing, s(he) could get frustrated and do what is inimical to the harmony or future of that marriage.

In all the three cases examined above, trust is missing, or where it exists, it is based on human standards. Human beings are always looking for evidence that can be verified. That is why they can only be technically faithful. I can trust you as long as I have no evidence to do otherwise. Most of us obey what I call the “Eleventh Commandment” which is, “Thou shalt not be caught!” But God looks at the heart of man, not his outward appearance [1 Sam. 16: 7]. Sooner than later, your sin will surely find you out [Num. 32: 23]! Therefore, we cannot understand trust outside of our faith in God. In that sense, *trust is the heart of faith*. This week’s study of Joseph and his wife Mary will make this clearer.

## 2. Joseph trusted his wife, Mary

Mary was a teenage virgin girl who had been betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter in Nazareth in the region of Galilee. However, before he could relate to her in the manner of a man and wife, he found her pregnant [Matt. 1: 18]. By human standards, that would be a case of infidelity! Under the Law of Moses, here would be the option open to Joseph [Deut. 22: 23-24]:

*If a young woman who is a virgin is betrothed to a husband, and a man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones; the young woman because she did not cry out in the city, and the man because he humbled his neighbour’s wife; you shall put away the evil from among you.*

Joseph did not want to make his wife “a public example” but made up his mind “to put her away secretly.” In other words, he was not going to expose his wife and subject her to be stoned to death in the public square. His wife might have told him of her innocence but would you yourself believe that? How many women do you know that get pregnant without knowing a man carnally or by artificial insemination? But we are told that Joseph did what he did because he was “a just man” [Matt. 1: 19]. Who is a just man?

Speaking through the prophet Habakkuk, God has said, “The just shall live by his faith” [Hab. 2: 4]. Scripture defines faith as “the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen” [Heb. 11: 1]. A just man shall live by his faith. Abraham believed and God imputed it to him for righteousness [Gen. 15: 6]. Joseph could not explain Mary’s innocence because her pregnancy was proof beyond reasonable doubt of her ‘guilt’! But he accepted it by faith. He protected his wife from public harm and disgrace *before* he could receive any plausible explanation for her situation.

As he thought of how best to protect his wife, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit, and she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His

people from their sins” [Matt. 1: 20-21]. Out of faith came the facts. What the angel said agreed with what his wife might have told him but which would not have been believable to an unjust man. That reinforced his trust for his wife. So, we learn the following first principles of fidelity in marriage:

- *trust comes by faith in God*
- *trust in God begets trust in your spouse*

When you stand by your spouse, no matter what, that may make even an unfaithful partner change for the better.

When Joseph awoke, he did as God had instructed him and brought Mary home as his wife. Much more, he “did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son” [vv. 21-22]. Joseph abstained from sexual relations with his wife for almost nine months and yet they lived under the same roof and might have slept on the same bed! He was able to do so because he was a just man who did not want to violate the sanctity of Mary’s holy pregnancy. We learn another set of principles from Joseph and Mary, as follows:

- *fidelity is owed to God*
- *only the Spirit of God can sustain fidelity*

After the birth of Jesus, Joseph and his wife went on to raise their own human family [Acts 1: 14]. Scripture lists their sons (and thus Jesus’ half-brothers) as James, Joses, Simon and Judas (or Jude) and unnamed daughters [Matt. 13: 55-56; Mk 6: 3]. James and Jude became Christ’s followers after His resurrection and ascension, and wrote the two epistles bearing their respective names. James (along with Peter and John) was one of the pillars of the church at Jerusalem [Gal. 2: 9].

### **3. Conclusion: You too can do it!**

A happy marriage does not come of itself. You have to work for it. Therefore, no matter the state of your relationship with your spouse right now, it is never too late to begin again. You can always reset the clock. The following steps will be helpful:

#### a) *Audit your circumstances*

Every case of infidelity has pull and push aspects. Out there, there will always be wayward men or women who have no qualms about having affairs with your spouse. They may be in your church or club or neighbourhood. Whether your spouse will fall for the bait depends on the push from your home. So, begin by examining the circumstances in your home that can push your spouse out to the wolves outside. Gary Neuman’s study suggests that emotional disconnection at home can push spouses out.

Is your home an enabling environment for love? What is the state of communication between you and your spouse? Have you transferred your love to your children and reduced your spouse to an unfeeling part of your furniture? Have you neglected your physical looks to the extent that you are no longer the young bride/groom that your spouse married some years back? What do you share together? Do you pray together? Do you study the word of God together? Are you friends and confidants or mere room mates? Be honest with yourself and accept responsibility where you are contributing to your spouse's straying.

b) *Begin again!*

Since you trust in God, go to Him for help to turn things around for you and your spouse because with God, nothing is impossible [Lk 1: 37]. Discuss with your spouse and get a commitment for improved relations. Agree with your spouse that your fidelity is to God, not to each other. You can cheat each other but you cannot cheat God. Once you realize that God sees you wherever you go, you will not want to sin against Him. In no time, your faithfulness to God manifests as faithfulness to your spouse.

c) *Practise trust*

Start trusting your spouse even when there is no empirical basis for it. This is possible because you and your spouse are now accountable to God, not just to each other. The soul that sins shall die [Ezek. 18: 4]. Trust begets trust. Sooner than later, your spouse will begin to respond to your cues.

There is no royal or easy road to success. You must work at it. In no time, you will find that you can trust your spouse!

**For Further Reading**

1. **Adultery is a killer not a thriller! - Vol. 5, No. 33: 21 Nov. 2004**
2. **Happily married everyday for life! – Vol. 2, No. 15: 24 June 2001**