Back home in West Virginia there’s a television preacher that has generated a popular following. He has a line he repeats often. Apparently, he and his wife have a shared agreement. It really is quite simple. If either of them come home and discover the other in the act of cheating, they’ve given one another permission to go directly to the gun cabinet, and lay down justice. Aside from all joking, the pastor speaks often of the importance of marital loyalty. He says it actually scares him to consider what he might do if he discovered his wife cheating on him. He said he’s not at all astonished over how the court system has a special category for “crimes of passion.” What exactly is this? A crime of passion occurs when there is a sudden, strong impulse of rage. The person acting in such ways is consumed in the moment.

Others have called the crime of passion “temporary insanity.” I got curious and wondered when this was first used in court. The plea was first used in 1859 by a US Congressman from NY named Daniel Sickles after he murdered his wife’s lover, a man named Philip Key. These are the kind of crimes that only exist between lovers, especially those who have taken marital vows. How strange it seems that the same courts which supervise the license of a marriage are the same courts that establish exceptions when marriage partners kill each other during crimes of passion! There’s an old saying, “I’ll be your best friend or your worst enemy.” It makes one rethink the vows which refer to better or worse. There are some lines we’d better not cross.
Someone may ask, “Well, who can blame a person for going berserk over something like that?” Some years ago I attended the most lavish wedding I’ve ever personally witnessed. The occasion was held at Mountain Lake in Virginia. This is where the film *Dirty Dancing* was made. It’s a gorgeous location. The catering for the reception was fit for royalty. There was an orchestra hired from Virginia Tech University. The bride’s parents covered the entire tab. On top of paying for the wedding, the bride’s father pulled strings and got the groom a promising job with a lucrative salary. Perhaps best of all, the bride’s parents gave their daughter and her new husband property for their first home. The bride’s father was formerly involved with home building, so he pulled additional strings, and they moved into a fabulous home, constructed at a substantial discount. Her husband was the object of envy. How many people walk into these advantages, all of it provided as gift in marriage?

As the years have rolled by, one would think all these benefits would remain at the forefront of the groom’s mind. This hasn’t been the case. It’s enough to drive any bride over the edge and commit a crime of passion. We could imagine someone losing it over much less. Here’s a person who has received nearly every possession to his name as a gift. Would any court in the land convict this bride if she committed a crime of passion? After all the cost her family has absorbed, would anyone blame her for temporary insanity? How could he forget that beautiful resort, that university orchestra, that high paying job, that plush estate the home sits upon? Shouldn’t any of these things alone been enough to keep him loyal for the rest of his living years?
There was once a line included in the marriage ceremony that has faded out in recent years. It’s no longer in the United Methodist liturgy. “If there is anyone here who believes for any reason that these two should not be wed speak now or forever hold your peace.” Picture someone accepting that offer. “That man is a lazy bum totally unfit to be anyone’s husband and I should know because I’m his mother!”

Originally, the line was included to protect the naïve from entering into vows he or she was unqualified to keep. The hope was that friends or family in attendance could intervene when the unaware didn’t know any better. This is why some people eloped. They would run away and get married in private for fear of someone intervening. It wouldn’t matter how much money was spent and how much trouble was gone through to design the occasion. The act of exchanging promises was viewed as too large a responsibility for anyone to take lightly. Preventing disaster was too critical.

Funny, talk to some of the family members who were at Mountain Lake all those years ago, and they say now that they knew the guy was a bum even then. But, all the trouble that was gone through, all the money that was spent, who is courageous enough to stand up in the middle of all that and announce, “I think this is all an enormous mistake! Someone stop this train wreck from happening!” I offer this backdrop as a thought picture, because the Bible insists we are in a marriage with God. Much is made of God as Father, but the more dominant image in Scripture is God as spouse and we as the beloved partner. We may begin as children, but the ultimate call of God is to grow into people walking with God in covenant partnership.
I suppose that line was taken out of the liturgy because if we’re all honest, we’d have to admit that anyone taking vows at an altar could have their occasion interrupted. Keeping vows and living up to promises is easier said than done. If your wedding day was anything like mine, it’s the day we look our best, behave our best, smell our best. How effortless it is to gaze across at the person before me and affirm I will accept them as they are. I love the story Jon Weece tells of the strangest wedding he ever officiated. It was a lavish occasion like the one I attended in Mountain Lake. Before the ceremony began, the bride was especially hungry, so she started eating shrimp scampi from the reception table. Once the ceremony began, her nerves got the best of her. As she made her way down the aisle, she was already starting to feel queasy. By the time she arrived at the altar, the room was starting to spin. Right in the middle of her vows, the bride lost her lunch in front of everyone.

Pastor Jon Weece noted that never before or since in his ministry did the line, “In sickness and in health” really seem to mean something. I was at a wedding where a similar catastrophe occurred. There was a spiral staircase and the bride wanted to make her grand entrance by coming down that staircase with all of her bride’s maids. The bride’s maids came down with no problem, but the bride lost her footing and down she came, tumbling and bumbling all the way. Fortunately, she wasn’t injured. I have never been a part of a ceremony when the line “for better or for worse” seemed more pertinent. That line seems serious, but the same courts that officiate the vows are the same courts that affirm laws permitting crimes of passion when it’s broken.
Some years ago my mother was called to testify in divorce court. We had a
neighbor who was having some problems. Her husband’s car had been seen
numerous times outside a motel with his co-worker’s car also outside the same motel.
The wife was thoroughly humiliated. Word had circulated all over the community.
My mother was brought in to testify for the wife. This woman had integrity.
Everyone who knew her told her to get the best attorney in Bluefield. Make your
husband pay. On the day the court started, this man made no attempt to hide
anything. In fact, he brought his girlfriend with him to court. This is blatant
disloyalty and what compounded the humiliation for the wife was the complete lack
of recognition any wrong was done. How could this be? The neighborhood looked
upon this as utter disregard. Imagine the satisfaction the wife received when only a
few months later her husband’s girlfriend dumped him and he was begging to return.

When the Bible describes our sinful condition this is the picture it offers. The
entire human race has played the part of the cheater. God has provided the lavish
reception, provided for our needs, bestowed abundance upon us, and yet, despite all
those gifts, disloyalty prevails. To add insult to injury, the human race operates with
no recognition of any wrong done. Only when there is loss, is there any desire to turn
back and then plead for admission back into a place we can call home. When the
neighborhood saw this happen, they pleaded with the wife to keep her dignity. The
only thing cheaters have to look forward to is the poor house. That seems logical, but
Paul proclaims a different message, “When we are faithless, God remains faithful.”
Consider the experience of Peter in John’s Gospel. At the Last Supper, Peter professes undying commitment. Jesus then informs Peter of the disloyalty that would follow. But Jesus promises that despite the disloyalty, Jesus is fiercely loyal. Almost every wedding I’ve officiated and nearly every wedding I’ve attended will read from Paul’s I Corinthians 13. “Love is patient. Love is kind. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. It always protects. It always hopes. It always perseveres.” That doesn’t describe what comes easy to natural human motivations. Such words do not describe human hearts, but it does describe God’s heart. Hebrews 13 announces, “God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” The first truth Scripture calls us to recognize is that we’ve all played the role of the cheater. Those who are most guilty are the ones who feel the least culpable. There are two things I most underestimate, my own disloyalty, and God’s fierce faithfulness.

God makes promises to His people, and in those promises, He assures us He is for us, for better and for worse. Our assumption is that God loves and cares for us when we are at our best. As we gather at the altar in our finest tuxedo, God accepts us, but when we’ve played the cheater, God abandons us. Suddenly it dawns on us what a spectacle we’ve been. We think of the lavish gifts, we think of the provisions, we think of the place to call home. Acting in disregard against all that crosses too many lines. In the human world, even the law makes allowances for crimes of passion. Even the law makes allowances for the cheater to reap the folly of one’s ways. Those are faithless and disloyal will experience the consequences of promises disrespected.
Scripture offers a vivid picture. The prophet Hosea had given his wife Gomer a lavish celebration. He had gone out of his way to provide for her. He had established a place to call home for her. Not only was she disloyal, but she disrespected promises in the worst way. She left the family and took a job in the red light district. Everyone knew about it. As time went by, Gomer lost her looks. She lost her hourglass figure. All of her suitors abandoned her. She had nothing left and no fall back options. All the neighborhood was watching when she expressed the desire to come back on her hands and knees. Of course she did and who wouldn’t? God called the prophet Hosea to express before the picture a visual sermon. Hosea was to not only buy Gomer back from her pimp handlers, but he was to pay top price. The celebration party for when she returned was to be even more extravagant than the original wedding. Hosea was confused, but God insisted, this is the picture of heavenly grace.

I can remember the first time I was jilted. The world was a decent place before that night. It was homecoming night and I had a date. I showed up in some rented suit with a bow tie about 3 sizes too big. I bought a corsage flower for my companion that was even bigger. As I stood waiting at the gymnasium door, the girl shows up, but with another date. Apparently she had gotten a better offer. I found out about it right then and there. I ran into the girl some years back. We’re all grown up now and we can look back on those follies of youth with some amusement. I must admit though there are times my mind takes me back and it’s like the scene is just as vivid as it was then. We humans are better at giving disloyalty than receiving it.
Surely Jesus must be like the WV pastor running to the cabinet for the shot gun. I can handle many things. You cook a bad meal and I’ll look over it. You leave your dirty clothes scattered all over the place and I’ll look over it. You spend too much of the family income and I’ll look over it. There’s a certain line though that you don’t pass because there’s no coming back. You’re history. You’re written off. You’re dead to me. The human world sees this as possibility. The highest court in the land makes allowances for it. We have as legal definition that there are crimes of passion for lines like this that get crossed. Somebody played too close to the fire. Scripture shows we’ve all played the part of the cheater. Not only that, the human condition, shows up at court, arm in arm with our dishonest loves. If there was ever moment when the heavenly courts could justify a crime of passion, then this is it. Jesus offers Peter the assurance that even after Peter remains faithless, grace will remain faithful.

Last fall we went through Gary Chapman’s “The Five Love Languages.” This book has been incredibly popular through the years. It was on the NY Times bestseller list and sold millions of copies. Chapman has publicly expressed astonishment at how many who are self described as secular find his book helpful. Ultimately the book appeals to thoroughly Christian ideas in order to get the point across. “Love is patient. Love is kind. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. It always protects. It always hopes. It always perseveres.” Who in the secular world could ever expect to achieve such a high ideal? Anyone who has been on the receiving end of disloyalty knows. This doesn’t describe us. It describes God.
A person close to our family returned home after she was released from work earlier than expected. She was a registered nurse and worked late nights at the local hospital. When she returned home, her husband obviously was not expecting her so soon. She noticed a strange car in the driveway. She made her way in and discovered in her own home that her husband was with another woman. It didn’t take long before the news of the incident made its way around the community. At work everyone knew her as the woman who had caught her husband. There was something about that which was especially devastating. This past Christmas everyone was shocked when she showed up at her family Christmas party with her husband. These past several months they’ve been in counseling and they are attempting to make things work. When the story was told there was no one in the room more shocked than me. I’ve spent the last 20 years preaching about Hosea but do I really believe it?

Gary Chapman wrote his book because he honestly believes with God’s help, it’s possible for us to learn to love the way Jesus loves. He’s really convinced that I Corinthians 13 is not just words that are meant to sound good when read at a wedding, but even better, they are meant to look good when embodied in every day life. Everyone behind the scenes wonders if this woman has no dignity. Is she a glutton for punishment? Does she think she can’t find anyone else? When love looks this radical, the person who is expressing it must have problems. The least possible explanation is that perhaps this is nothing less than a miracle. Jesus loves us in this kind of way. When He redeems us, He calls us to love others the way He loves us.
I underestimate two things in my life. First, I underestimate how I’ve played the role of cheater. I underestimate how I’ve been disloyal to the expectations God has called me to. Second, I underestimate how radical God’s grace can be. My instincts are to think there are some things God will forgive, but there’s something which represents the point where I’m written off. I commit something worthy of the crime of passion. I commit something worthy of nothing less than the shotgun cabinet. As one person puts it, “Grace is free, it is sure, it is unconditional.” Just where I think grace ends, God’s work is just beginning. It’s the person who comes to realize this that can embody the promises which to unbelieving ears sound like childish fantasy. Sure I Corinthians sounds nice at the lavish occasion when we’re all dressed nice and everyone smells good, but how does it play out when we come home at midnight and there’s a strange car in my driveway? Either it’s really true or the words are useless.

Sometime ago my little 5 year old was acting beneath her age. During one of her moments she insisted that I put her shoes on for her. We mentioned the incident to her pediatrician and she said something amazing. She said, “Surely You didn’t acknowledge that stuff because it’s the worst thing you can do.” Maturity is a privilege and growing up is a high honor. Those who catch the vision of God’s redeeming love have only a single option. To move forward as the partners God has called us to be. We may begin as children with a heavenly Father, but this is only the starting point. The intent is to bring us into a partnership where we walk hand in hand. Once the vision is captured, there’s only one way to move, upward in maturity.