

**"You Shall Not Commit Adultery"**

Marriage is a contract, a covenant. I imagine most of us here have been to a wedding and witnessed that. The bride and groom take a solemn oath before God and others to remain faithful lifelong to each other. And so marriage is a formal covenant between a man and a woman. And yet it's not held in very high esteem any more. Statistics range, but it seems that on average recently, that forty some percent of marriages end in divorce. That is a staggering figure. But that doesn't take away from the fact that marriage is a formal covenant. When people divorce, or commit adultery in any way, they are breaking that covenant.

Why do people commit adultery or marriages end in divorce? A psychologist named Jim Gottman offers research to support what he sees as the two most common reasons. One, high conflict, and two, loss of intimacy and connection. I'm sure those are reasons why people get divorced. And yet I think that those are more symptoms than the underlying reasons. And so today as we study this commandment about adultery, I want us to be thinking about why fundamentally people break their marriage covenants.

You see, that's what's really at the heart of this seventh commandment. The command to not commit adultery is ultimately about honoring the marriage covenant. The word adultery is a fairly specific word in Scripture. Generally speaking, it's about having sexual relations with someone who is married to someone other than yourself. The actions being forbidden here have to do with violating a marriage covenant. In both the Greek and Hebrew there is a separate word that deals with sexual immorality more generally. That more general word is often translated as fornication, or sometimes even harlotry. That more general word could include adultery, but more generally refers to all sorts of sexual activity outside of a marriage commitment.

Now that's not to mean that this commandment only forbids the narrow actions of adultery, as if all other forms of fornication and sexual immorality are okay. No, that would be taking this commandment out of context. And it'd also be to misuse the word here for adultery. You see, in scripture, though there's a distinction for the word adultery from the more general word for sexual immorality, they are sometimes used very closely. And so what's going on here in the seventh commandment is only a very brief summary of a subject that's then flushed out in much greater detail throughout God's laws in the old covenant. Issues of adultery and sexual immorality are spelled out, frankly, in great detail in the old covenant, with different punishments based on the nature of the sin. All these forms of sexual immorality are forbidden by this summary command here.

And yet, certainly the most specific focus is on the breaking of the marriage covenant. Adultery violates the solemn commitment two people made to each other. It is destructive and God abhors it. Under the old covenant, we see the seriousness of it by the punishment God stated for it: death. Both the adulterer and the adulteress were to be put to death under the old covenant.

But as I mentioned, this is just the tip of the iceberg in how the old covenant spells out sexual immorality in its laws. There are a number of laws that flush out the sort of sexual purity and marital fidelity that God wants for us. Fornication in general is flushed out in Deuteronomy 22, for example. There it says that if two people get caught being intimate outside of marriage, that the man had to pay the woman's father fifty shekels of silver and then marry the woman, and could never divorce here. Notice that this is a very different punishment than adultery under the old covenant. Adultery resulted in death. Fornication between an unmarried man and woman basically required that the couple enter into a marriage covenant. This obviously shows us God's heart on cohabitation, how it so common for people today to live together now before they get married. But the Bible says that's not right.

It's not good for people to engage in that sort of intimacy outside a marriage covenant. That's why Paul later says in 1 Corinthians 6:16 that union with a prostitute is akin to becoming physically married to the prostitute, though obviously in a bad way. That's why unmarried people who sleep together are supposed to get married under the old covenant. But that doesn't mean that's the right order. No, both the old covenant and the new covenant are saying it's the wrong order. But they are telling us that such physical intimacy is so powerful, you've in a sense unofficially married that person in your actions. People often abuse this, and think to themselves that they've then officially been married, just by the physical union. But again, that's not what the bible's saying. It's basically admonishing those who act like they're married when they really aren't. Instead, the right action is to actually get married, first. As I started out, marriage is a solemn covenant. Physical union, biblically, is to be expressed only in the bonds of marriage.

The old covenant goes on to legislate sexual purity with various other laws. Leviticus 18 forbids things like incest, homosexuality, and bestiality. Prostitution is forbidden in Deuteronomy 23:17. Deuteronomy 22:5 even forbids cross-dressing. In short, anything that violates the institution of marriage that God established at the beginning, anything that perverts our God-given sexuality, is not only a sin, but frankly it's not what is best for us. That pattern setup at the beginning is summarized in Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." This is a brief survey of some of the laws concerning our sexuality under the old covenant.

Of course, in the New Testament, it's not that Jesus makes these laws any less. Actually, he widens their application. For example, Jesus basically says that divorce is adultery. Jesus said in Matthew 19:9, "Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery." And so Jesus is saying that when you divorce someone for an unbiblical reason, you've broken the seventh commandment. That's because the seventh commandment is especially about the marriage covenant. Any breaking of that, in one way or another, is a form of adultery. Think about that in today's society. Today we have easy divorce. People can fairly easily get divorced and then remarry someone else. People might mistakenly think that by doing that, they are doing the moral thing, say instead of having some secret affair. And yet Jesus would disagree. You might get divorced today thinking you are doing things the right way. But Jesus says that you've got no reason to divorce your spouse apart from marital unfaithfulness. Of course, if they divorce you, and your every effort fails to restore the marriage, then the Scriptures say that you are in fact free to remarry at that point. But in the case where you are the one seeking the divorce, you are effectively committing adultery by severing that covenant, apart from infidelity.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. Jesus also says that lusting over someone else's spouse is adultery. Matthew 5:28, Jesus said, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Even our looks and thoughts can make us guilty of breaking this commandment. It's easy to pride ourselves in our marriage for our faithfulness. Oh, I've never committed adultery. I'm a good husband. I'm a good wife. But do your thoughts say otherwise? Have you ever had adulterous thoughts in your heart? Lust, yes is one of them. But if you have had thoughts of divorce in your heart, isn't that too adulterous thoughts, in light of Jesus' teaching?

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us we'll realize that in one way or another we've broken this commandment at some time in our life. Either outside of marriage in sexual immorality and fornication. Or within marriage through different forms of adultery. In thought, word, and deed, the seventh commandment calls us to sexual purity and marital faithfulness. That outside of marriage, we would treat our brothers and sisters in all purity, and that when you do get married that you would zealously guard that marriage bed.

But why do we struggle with this? Why are we so quick to want to find ways to pervert marriage and biblical sexuality? Well, Jesus tells us the answer in Mark 7. Mark 7:21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness." That's the reason. We have a heart problem. When you find that these sorts of sins come natural to you, well, you are right. Jesus said they come from our heart. He's not talking about the organ that pumps blood. A physical heart transplant wouldn't solve the problem. He's talking about our inner self; who we are deep inside. We are each sick; every one of us.

Jesus is telling us that our heart is the source of our problems. Something in our hearts produces unfaithfulness in our marriages, in our commitments, and even to our God. We all need a spiritual physician to work healing in our life. We can't change our hearts ourselves. But we rejoice in the gospel. That Christ heals and forgives our sins in these areas. When you repent of your sins and turn to Jesus, he says that you are forgiven. Right then and there. Of all these sorts of adulteries and sexual immoralities. That's good news for someone who has really tasted the destruction of some bad decisions in these areas. There is complete cleansing in Christ. That's what we call "justification." Christ freely justifies us when we turn in faith. That means we are no longer under the condemnation of the law, but we can have certain hope that we will go to heaven when we die. And yet, we know that our justification doesn't completely solve our heart problem at that very moment, does it? What I mean is that when we become Christian, we still find ourselves struggling this area, don't we? But when we become Christian, Christ comes into our hearts and begins a process of transformation. This is a process that's at work your entire life. It's not completed until the next life. It's a process that's removing those parts of our hearts that crave sin.

And amazingly Christ calls us to participate in this cleansing. Though he's the one who ultimately brings about the real change, he calls us to be all the more aware of these sins in our life and to struggle against them. It's that amazing mystery of the gospel that Christ works real change in our life, completely by his grace, while at the same time he calls us to faithfully strive against the sin.

So that leads us to some specific applications for us, then, doesn't it? Saints of God, whether you are single or married, these are threats to your godly living. Though God's grace extends even to the ways that we fall short in terms of our sexual purity, don't be fooled into taking these issues lightly. Paul calls us to *flee* sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6, and he gives us a reason. He says that other sins are outside the body, but that when we sin sexually that we are sinning against our own body. He then goes on to say that our bodies are a temple of God, and that our bodies were bought at a price; the saving blood of Jesus. All of these are reasons why we should look to flee sexual immorality. I think this is Paul's way of saying that there is something about sexual sins that are especially destructive. Just ask the woman at the local Pregnancy Resource Center who got accidentally pregnant, isn't married, and doesn't know what to do. Great good can come out of these situations, but that doesn't mean that we haven't heaped on all sorts of physical and emotional difficulties into our lives by the choices we've made. Saving ourselves for marriage today might seem prudish to many, but is it really that oppressive? Doesn't God know what's best for us?

To the single eligible men and women. You need to have your mind made up on this before you find yourself in a compromising situation. You need to really make a commitment to the Lord that you will pursue purity. That means that you won't place yourself in compromising situations. That means' that you won't try to push the boundaries on what you can get away with without technically breaking this commandment. Don't believe the lies that you tell yourself. Oh, it's okay, because we're going to get married anyways. Well, then get married first. If you're doing something with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or even fiancée, that would be considered infidelity if you were married to someone else, then you've already broken this

commandment. Even if it's the not going all the way. And so we need to be on our guard. Consider getting an accountability partner to help keep you accountable in this area. Beware of immodesty, in how you dress, in what message you send to others in that. Be aware of smooth talking men or seductive women who don't have marriage in mind.

And to the married. Beware of the adultery that seeks you out. Proverbs talks a lot about the destruction of that. And all of this is not a call to stay in a loveless marriage, to suffer through it. God is calling you to stay in your marriages, but he's calling you to make your marriage full of love, emotionally, physically, and in all ways. Love is a command, first and foremost. Husbands, love your wives, Ephesians 5:25. Wives, love your husbands, Titus 2:4. Honor the marriage covenant that you have made. Become renewed again today in your love for each other. Pray for the heart change needed to do this and then act accordingly.

I'd like to turn now the last point I'd like us to think about today, and it's a little bit of a different direction, but certainly related. I'd like to spend our remaining time thinking about spiritual adultery. In light of everything that we've talked about today, it's no wonder why God in the Old Testament so often described wayward Israel in terms of spiritual adultery.

So many of the prophets use this analogy to speak about God's relationship with Israel. God repeatedly through the prophets likens Israel to being engaged in spiritual adultery. Hosea, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, all speak in these terms at some point. God speaks through the prophets that his relationship with Israel had been like a marriage relationship, God as the groom, and Israel as the bride. And that analogy is true. The people had been united to God in covenant. They were to be faithful to God. God alone was to be there God. But they didn't keep that covenant. They broke faith with God and went after the other false gods around them. They committed spiritual adultery.

And so this analogy of spiritual adultery makes sense. If marriage is a covenant that heart-infected people break, so is our relationship with God. The problem again boils down to the heart. Our hearts have turned against God. We break faith. God told Israel how serious this was through the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 3:8, God says that he was issuing Israel a certificate of divorce because of their adultery. The old covenant was a covenant that the people broke. That was bad news. They had been rightly divorced from their good God. And we recognize that on our own merits, we each have rejected God as our husband and Lord. We each have turned away from our good God.

The prophets in the old covenant announced Israel's infidelity. The judgment was announced: Israel was guilty of adultery. The result: God divorced his people. But the story did not end there. What did God do next? Well, through the prophets he spoke of a wonderful promise. He spoke about a day when he would restore his adulterous wife. Listen to this from Hosea 2:16-20:

And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.

Saints of God, this promise from the prophet Hosea is speaking of the new covenant. That promise finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Under the new covenant, the church has become the bride of Christ. That's why Ephesians 5 speaks about how Christ loved the church and gave himself up for the church. God, in the person of

Jesus Christ, brought Hosea's promise to fulfillment. And this new covenant is far better than the old. In this new covenant, Hosea promised that we'd be with God forever, and that we'd be faithful to God. It is in Jesus that this comes to pass. This is why in Ephesians 5 it says that Christ is sanctifying and cleansing his bride to prepare her for the wedding day; that day of consummation when he comes back to this earth to gather up his glorious bride. One of the benefits of the new covenant is that Christ himself is working faithfulness in us. That's hard to fully take in and appreciate. We humans know how prone to wander we are. We see it in our earthly relationships with our spouses. We know how we are tempted to turn away from God in spiritual adultery.

But do you see the promise of the new covenant? In the new covenant, because of Jesus, we will not ultimately fall away in spiritual adultery. If we truly belong to Christ, then he will grow us and keep us. That's another amazing mystery of the gospel where we are called to persevere in faith, and yet when we do, we recognize that it is God who gets the credit.

Remember I asked at the beginning why people commit adultery or why marriages end in divorce? I mentioned Gottman's research that suggested high conflict and loss of intimacy and connection. Fundamentally the issue is simpler than that, I think. Certainly we could boil it down simply to sin. But more specifically, I think often it's an issue that we become no longer content with the other person or something in the relationship. It becomes an issue of contentment. The grass is always greener on the other side. We end up believing the lie that adultery or divorce will make you happier. Isn't that why people get divorced? They think they will be happier. That's despite the fact that a recent study makes a strong case that divorce doesn't usually lead to more happiness. We become discontent and we want out.

Well, apply that to the temptation to spiritual adultery. I think that too boils down to discontentment. We can lack contentment in God. We can be not happy with where God has placed us. We cannot like his laws; think they are too stifling. We can reject his plan for our life. Certainly this can be true for all sins. All disobedience from God can come from a lack of contentment in how God says we should be living. But I think this is especially true in this idea of spiritual adultery. The ways of the world can be enticing. Other religious, other lifestyles, can be seductive. They can lead us away from God and what he says is good. We can find ourselves no longer content with God and his ways and looking for something else.

We can find ourselves tempted to spiritual adultery. We can struggle with this sort of contentment. And so I'd like to remind you today of the joy of the Lord. That's what I'd like us to take away from this message today. Saints of God, be renewed in your first love today. God is the only real source of true contentment. The Bible is so full of examples on this. And if we are honest with ourselves, I think our own life is full of such examples as well. Examples of doing things God's way versus our way. We see that God's way repeatedly leads to more contentment, peace, and joy.

Now I'm not talking about fleeting happiness or momentary successes. That's what the world offers; the promises of money, sex, and power. Often the world is very good at delivering. But these are ultimately empty promises. I'm not talking about passing pleasures. I'm talking about the enduring joy of knowing that you have a God who has faithfully stood by us in our worst, to make us into our best - his glorious bride he had planned for all eternity.

I mean think about it, in the analogy of our marriage relationship with God. Think about our relationship with God in terms of those reasons why that psychologist Gottman said people typically get divorced: high conflict and loss of intimacy and connection. Well, in our relationship with God, there was certainly high conflict. We had rejected God as our maker and Lord. But God solved that high conflict at the cross. In our relationship with God, there was a loss of intimacy and connection - that was because of our rejection of God. We rejected God and so he forsook us. We couldn't approach God anymore. But Jesus became forsaken in our place on the cross,

to restore us to full sweet communion with God! So do you see the gospel again here? We deserved to be divorced forever from God, but he restored our relationship. And now he tells us that he will make sure that we never fall away again! And he says that this all a function of his love and grace for us. Our wayward faithfulness is met by the completely trustworthy faithfulness of God.

If you've ever been the victim of an affair, you'd surely feel the pain and loss of wanting a spouse who wouldn't let you down. Who wouldn't break his promise of faithfulness. You'd long for the joy of having a husband or wife that you could fully trust in, after you had been hurt so badly. So do you see why God's love for us is so great? Such a reason for true joy? For ultimate contentment?

Now, in Jesus Christ, what can separate us from God's love for us? We know the answer. It's *nothing*!. Nothing in this world can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, Romans 8:39. Saints of God, be renewed again today in the reality of God's love - his love that will not end; his faithfulness that will not falter; he will never leave you nor forsake you; he will not adulterate; he will not break trust. And his saving love is even working that same faithfulness in you. That you would not fall away ever again from his great love.

On Reformation Sunday, isn't this a great reminder? To return to your first love, our Lord Jesus, away from any influences that would lead you astray. To be reminded of God's unswerving faithfulness in the midst of our own struggles. Amen.

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