

Adultery's Depths Exodus 20:14

A couple of years back, Carl Trueman wrote a helpful piece laying out how the current ideas of sexuality have taken shape. For the past half-century those ideas have twisted in directions that certainly go beyond the bounds of God's Word. We've even witnessed those ideas morphing into the odd and fantastical. On what basis these ideas find footing is the concern in this Trueman piece. Many of his summations square well with what we can see in our own day and in our own country.

To begin, he states that the current climate regarding sexuality rests on the idea that fulfillment in life is a matter of personal happiness. Anything which blocks said happiness—including traditional sexual codes and rules—is, by definition, oppressive. In the last century, we've moved from the idea of marriage being a covenant to marriage being consumeristic.¹ What personal fulfillment can I gain from this marriage? And if it doesn't work out, oh well. Trueman's second observation is that we've reached a place where one-man, one-woman marriage is considered a vice rather than a virtue. "Married to one person? For life? What a dreary and antiquated construct keeping me from the pleasure I deserve and from truly being *my best self*." And a related third observation: we live in a culture increasingly eager to cast aside sexual boundaries and restrictions.² Cohabitation, reinterpretations of gender identity, and the general acceptance of sex outside the marriage covenant mark our times and our neighbors, who fail to blink or blush at these disfigurations.³ And perhaps I blink or blush far too infrequently as well.

With any semblance of a discerning eye, however, we can see that the root issues of these ideas lie snug inside a rejection of authority, the gross abuse of personal freedoms, and the insistence on defining one's identity apart from reality. Further, those roots aren't simply wet from recent developments, though we sometimes talk and act like these things are unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We might be tempted to believe that the five news flashes each day about sexual misconduct are a sign of the times. Yet our contemporary sensibilities will frighten us a bit less if we really believe that this command, given around 1400 BC, addressed a real problem then as well.⁴ And Corinth of the first century is also easy pickings as it pertains to sexual improprieties.

So here we are, living in such a world, seeking as believers to walk in the steps of Christ Jesus and for the glory of God, while influences, both seen and unseen, pull us in the opposite direction. And perhaps the greater dangers related to this command are closer than we realize. In that vein, this commandment will never fall out of relevance. Sensual perspectives and practices are atop the list of ways our minds can become wrongly contorted and our affections held in one of the worst forms of bondage.

And if such things are pressing in on us—and they surely are in relentless ways—then important questions surface. "Is there mercy for me in my failures?" "Where and to whom do I look for help?" "Are there guards that I can put in place to help me fight such ideas and practices?" "Am I

¹ Jim Newheiser, God's Design For Marriage, podcast, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/player/sermon/5722041215200/?quality=audio&t=132>

² <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-sexual-revolution/?srsltid=AU7gw4XxQuehZTEuxyObl2gL7a2RGGObd5wEwv5E0ZTbgEQhNtQsUmCL>

³ Jeremiah 6:15, "Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush."

⁴ Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain*, 90. Further, one might think that the dramatic rescue from an enslaving world power and divine deliverance from collapsing walls of water would keep Israel in moral check. But God's pattern with His people is to package the foundation of deliverance with clarity of direction.

really committed to thinking and acting in ways that are upright, having the resolve expressed in Psalm 101?” “I will walk with integrity of heart within my house; [3] I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless...[4] A perverse heart shall be far from me...” “Is that kind of life even possible?” we might wonder.

I. The Command’s Foundation

As we approach this subject of adultery we should start by making sure that we’re all on the same page. This command is addressing the husband-wife relationship. Other stipulations down the Exodus-road associated with marriage will appear, but here we’re speaking of the prohibition of marital unfaithfulness. Adultery is an incongruous, sinful, sexual expression with someone other than the person to whom one is married. It is a breach of the marriage covenant. It is the highest form of human-to-human relational treason on earth. Its beginnings are small, often out of sight. Its effects are massive. Its dangers are undersold. Its promises, overstated. And these are true partly because of the realities which ground the marriage covenant.

Indeed, behind command seven there is a boatload of truth about us all and the LORD. One, the LORD knows that human desire continues in corruption. And in part, what these commands are conveying to Israel and the world is a kind of indictment from Him. Here is what lives in you and here is what can come out of you—disloyalty, dishonesty, and deceitfulness toward the very person whom you’ve pledged allegiance, trustworthiness, and transparency. If we view this foundation in pie-slices, this is a slice: God knows hearts and foresees the struggles inside married life down through the ages. And so, with much mercy He tells them aloud, later carves it in stone and writes it with His finger—***You shall not commit adultery.***

But a second underlying truth might be understood through considering the questions, “When a society turns a blind eye to marital unfaithfulness, might that signal a cheapening of all other relationships in that society? Does resolute faithfulness in any other relationship really matter at all?”⁵ The seriousness of marital unfaithfulness becomes even more apparent when we discover how God Himself speaks about covenant betrayal. Throughout the Scriptures, the LORD describes Israel’s unfaithfulness to Him in the language of adultery. Why? Because adultery is not merely the breaking of His law. It is the betrayal of a covenant. And the God who establishes covenants takes faithfulness seriously. As Moses was nearing death, the LORD told him in Deuteronomy 31:16, “...*this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land...and will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them.*”

Now, when we consider the Bible in terms of its didactic structure, that is, how its teachings are woven together carefully by the providence and purposes of God, one point of such care is that so much of our understanding begins in the beginning, the book of Genesis. It was said beautiful and helpfully by Dr. Sliger some weeks back, and to some degree last week, that Genesis is the background material for the book of Exodus.⁶ They are indeed significantly interdependent.⁷

⁵ T. Desmond Alexander, *AOTC: Exodus*, 420.

⁶ <https://southwoodsbcc.org/media/83pkmcj/an-overview-of-exodus>

⁷ As are the whole of the scriptures. In fact, I’ve thought about it poetically: The **Genesis** of our **Exodus** is foreshadowed in **Leviticus** in the **Numbers** of sacrifices demanded because of the breaking of **Deuteronomy**.

When we flip back a few pages in our Bibles, we see that marriage is a creation ordinance rooted in the image of God. Moses makes the point in the first couple of verses in Genesis 5, which is a genealogy of sorts. We read, “*This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. [2] Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.*”

But what is it about God’s image that can be understood in the creation of Adam and Eve? We know that God’s image means that we can exert creativity; that eternity is written on our hearts; it means that we are self-aware, possess complex emotions—weeping, laughing, longing, etc.; that we communicate with nuance and language; and that we have “never-dying souls.” But perhaps most fundamentally it means that we were made for relationship. The divine surgery on Adam and its result of finally witnessing another living being that corresponded to him caused a poetical outburst, “*This is at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.*”⁸ “Yes, another one like me, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.” But God goes on to express something even more profound than these similarities. Genesis 2:24 states that “*they shall become one flesh.*” They were made to be a unit—two into one. But this union didn’t come out of right field! Indeed, the root reality of this relationship is God’s infinitely harmonious and loving union within Himself as Father, Son, and Spirit.

In fact, this loving union among the members of the Godhead is the foundation flowing downhill into this second table of the law summed up by Jesus Himself as the second greatest commandment, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Such selfless love has always surged freely in heaven between the Father, Son, and Spirit, and now the expectation is that such love might pass with liberality between the members of this covenant community in the wilderness. Love your parents that He gifted you. Love your neighbor’s life by seeing to his/her welfare. Now, love the spouse God has given. You see, there’s not a hard line between Godward love and manward love. In obeying these commands, love for God Himself is expressed. In disobeying any of these, the image of God in parent, neighbor, or spouse is disregarded and love for both God and others compromised. In God’s image, we were made to love another. And in this seventh command, loyal, covenant, steadfast love is called for between husband and wife.

II. The Command’s Fulfillment

As we seek to keep one eye on Israel receiving these commands being vocalized by God Himself, our other eye would do well to get our bearings under the Lordship of Jesus. As we’ve said and will keep saying, He fulfills every command by obeying them and deepening their meaning down to the very heart of each of us.⁹ He widens the scope of each because Jesus is not only the law-giving LORD over our actions, yes. But He is also LORD over our inmost thoughts, affections, and motivations.

So, in Matthew 5 Jesus takes out the scalpel to show us adultery’s depths. He quotes this very verse from Exodus 20, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” Whereas the religious leaders flattened or shallowed-out the meaning of what

⁸ Genesis 2:23

⁹ Edmund Clowney, *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments*, 92.

adultery entailed (such as permitting a married man to have relations with an unmarried woman), Jesus expanded a fuller understanding of it. By doing this, He showed just how exceedingly deep sin runs. He taught that adultery is not merely deed-based but that it's a matter of evil intentions and shaded hungers stirring within. And frankly, this is a truth that these religious heads should have known and taught from their own scriptures.¹⁰

Again, the purpose of the law is to expose the true nature of who we are at root. Those hearing Jesus, especially the law experts, weren't accustomed to having such blinding light of truth shining upon them and exposing what stirred deep within. This is why they eventually sought an occasion to kill Him. He touched nerves. He knew the heart of man and they didn't like it.¹¹ The religious leaders before Jesus were what they claimed they weren't. They did what they told others they shouldn't do. Deep down they were true law breakers. And deep down, if we're honest, so are we. Martin Lloyd-Jones expressed, "It is not so much that I do the thing; it is what makes me do it, what urges me to do it, that matters."¹²

But Jesus is not just revealing sin's deep roots; He's showing how this sin can get its start and gain traction. He says, *everyone who looks with lustful intent*. Jewish rabbis would have taught that not committing adultery was a matter of simply avoiding the physical act. But like David on the rooftop, this kind of lawlessness can begin simply with a look.

In fact, we all have two kinds of eyes—a physical set, and the eyes of the imagination. And sometimes they partner up. They are experts at serving one another. The physical eyes can set off the twisted and dark imagination, and our perverted imaginations can lead us on roads to see the things we shouldn't see. Whenever any gains have been made in our lives concerning this kind of self-control, it's usually because we've first learned to control both sets of eyes—the eyes of our flesh and the eyes of our hearts.

All that could be said about the current environment in which we find ourselves! In many of our lifetimes, the growth in the accessibility of foul images has exploded, and because of this, many marriage commitments have also imploded. Forty years ago, sexually explicit material certainly existed, but accessing it ordinarily required a degree of determination and intentionality. Search engines weren't a thing, at least in the world of the commoner. But in 2026, without strategically putting up digital defenses, one can enter unspeakable realms of darkness in a matter of seconds. And a sad reality has taken shape today in far too many marriages—what was cultivated over decades has been destroyed with a mouse click.

But where we have failed in the deepest places of the heart, Another has succeeded in every way. For, Jesus did what we could not do. He took up the Law of God with its thundering warnings and promises, climbed Mt. Sinai and achieved all that the Law required. Hebrews 7:26, "*For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.*" His purity, in fact, is a matter of whether we live or die.

¹⁰ For two examples, Proverbs 4:23, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

¹¹ Mark 7:21, "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery..."

¹² Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in The Sermon on the Mount*, 210.

In a few months, we'll begin making our way through the construction of the tabernacle. In Exodus 30, God commanded Israel to make a bronze basin and to fill it with water so that the sinful priests would wash before entering the tent of meeting. And that is significant because that was the place where God chose to dwell. Further, to wash or not wash was a matter of life or death.¹³ Jesus, our great high priest, *"has entered, not into holy places made with hands, [like a tent of meeting] which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."* No basin needed for Jesus. His purity became the basis for our pardon. Through Jesus we discover the reach of this command and that He is the refuge for those who have broken it.

III. The Command's Fruit

The Holy Spirit turns on the spigots of sanctification inside of all human relationships. I'm convinced that the New Testament's teaching in this particular area reached its hearers with a certain amount of healthy jolting. In Ephesians 5, Paul is not only very clear, but concerning all the goings-on we know about, culturally speaking, in Ephesus, Corinth, and Philippi, his teaching which touched all forms of sexual misconduct had a certain punch about it. In Ephesians 5:3 we read, *"But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints...[5] For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure...has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."* Not even be named among you—meaning that when people see our lives, and related to our text, our marriages, we leave no room for suspicion in the realm of purity and faithfulness.

In fact, right after Jesus speaks of adultery in Matthew 5, he says, *"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...[30] And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."* Go to great lengths to root out the sin of our hearts which lead to sinful actions. It might mean strict boundaries around every device, cutting off past relationships, and being diligent and humble enough to always have accountability on the left side of your life, and on the right. The stakes couldn't be higher. Hell is reserved for those who take no care to rein in their dark desires and govern their actions concerning loose and lewd living.¹⁴

But now we're going to turn over the coin of the seventh command. On one side we've considered not committing adultery and what that signifies on the deepest level according to Jesus and the apostle Paul. But now we turn to the positive angle—instead of guarding what I have with my spouse, putting to death the misdeeds of the flesh, how might I live to honor, to love richly, sacrificially, and faithfully in that relationship? And for that matter, it's not a hard leap to say that all of God's people inside and *outside* of the marriage covenant are called to honor Him through harnessing our passions by His Spirit's power.

And for that, we shouldn't move away from fixing our eyes on the Perfector of our faith. One scholar wrote, "Christ's holiness is the basin in which we wash in order to be pure in our thoughts and lives."¹⁵ This is precisely the line of thinking Paul offers to the church at Ephesus when speaking of the careful and thoughtful movements within the marriage covenant. Again,

¹³ Exodus 30:20

¹⁴ Hebrews 13:4, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous."

¹⁵ Clowney, 96.

Ephesians. Chapter 5:22–26, “*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives [on what basis?] as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, [26] that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word...*” Husbands, we don’t gaze at her nice-looking eyes to remain faithful and sacrificial, or measure her worth by any other metric. We gaze on and assess our Savior to love her well, to love her over a lifetime, and to love her better than we love any other. Wives, you don’t come up under the leadership of your husband or lovingly respect him based on how skillfully or how poorly he is at it. You do so because you’re doing so as “*unto the Lord.*”

But the Bible’s vision for marriage began before these words to the Ephesian congregation. Wisdom literature, appropriately enough, has a few things to say about it. Proverbs 5:15–21 offers us metaphorical beauty concerning the bonds of marriage. And Solomon wants his sons to see it and to live in it. “*Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well...Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth...be intoxicated always in her love. [20]...[not] with a forbidden woman...[the] adulteress. [21] For a man’s ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths.*” God testifies in His Word that marriage matters and what happens in marriage matters. The “don’t do it” of adultery is incredibly important, but cultivating the presence of a faithful and vibrant love is on equal footing. This one-flesh union called marriage, established by God, was given to show itself as a haven of affectionate faithfulness.

Conclusion

God’s purpose peppered throughout the book of Exodus is maintained in these Ten Words. He delivered the enslaved and worked wonders against the oppressors to make His name known to both Israel and Egypt. Now, the expectation arising out of these commandments is that God would also make His Name known *through* the community of the redeemed. Just before Jesus’ teaching on adultery referenced earlier, the images illustrating this are clear enough, “*You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*” Included inside those good works? Marriages trademarked with enduring, covenant love.

Perhaps some of you hear this commandment today and are weighed down by it. You know what you’ve done, what you’ve entertained in the secret places, the promises you’ve broken, the desires you’ve fed, the boundaries you’ve crossed. So, hear this: Our only hope in coming face-to-face with “***You shall not commit adultery,***” is the gospel of the grace of God for us. Our only assurance that we can live in this command faithfully is the presence of the Spirit of God in us. Without Him, there is no progress. Like watering every part of a tree except the roots and expecting it to grow is a life without these two rich realities.¹⁶ But if there is pardon declared over us and power placed inside of us, then there is a path to doing the will of God, including obedience to the seventh command.

¹⁶ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 227 (As quoted by Dane Ortlund in his book *Deeper*, 90).