

7th Commandment

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[0 : 0 0] I saw a billboard in the United States on one occasion when I was visiting that caught my eye.

In big, bold letters were inscribed the words of the seventh commandment, you shall not commit adultery. Just underneath, in smaller texts, there was a question posed that was being attributed to God. And the question was, what part of this don't you understand?

Now, there may be different responses to the seventh commandment, you shall not commit adultery. Some may approve of the prohibition, others may be dismissive of it, others may treat it with great hypocrisy, but one thing is surely certain, it's not difficult to understand. You shall not commit adultery. And so much so, the clarity of it, that one wonders what there is to say on the subject, other than to simply echo the words and the wisdom of God on this matter. Just don't do it.

Very seriously, don't do it. So, we'll leave it there, shall we? Well, you wish. I think there is some merit in exploring a little deeper what the commandment means and what it involves. And very importantly, and I hope practically, what we can do to help us keep the commandment. While the commandment is very simple and very clear, it can be considered from different angles, I suppose.

And even what we say this evening will be limited in its scope. But we'll proceed, and hopefully some of what we say will be helpful as we consider where God is coming from, if you wish, in commanding us in this manner. A first question that we could pose and answer concerning the commandment is, what is being prohibited by the commandment? You shall not commit adultery. The Hebrew word translated in our Bibles, adultery, is a word that always refers to the violation, specifically the sexual violation of a marriage, as we understand the word. That is what it's about. It's where there is a violation of that marriage bond, of that marriage covenant, a sexual violation of it primarily.

[2 : 4 7] Now, for us to understand what that involves, the violation of the marriage covenant, we do need to have a clear and a biblical definition of what marriage is. Now, perhaps in the past that would have been unnecessary to even clarify. There was a consensus, if you wish, and it was a biblically grounded consensus in our own nation as to what marriage is. But that is no longer the case.

And so, it is necessary, even if perhaps most here, perhaps all here would share that view, it is necessary just to remind ourselves of what marriage is, because it's only then that we could understand what it is to violate marriage. Well, the Bible is very clear, and that biblical clarity is echoed or reflected in what has become a very famous legal definition of marriage given back in the 19th century in 1866 by Lord Penzance. And he made this definition in the context of a legal case concerning polygamy. And this is a brief summary. What he said was broader, but this, what I'm going to say now, is in essence what he said in defining marriage. And I quote, I conceive that marriage, as understood in Christendom, may be defined as the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. And those of us who are familiar with the biblical material can say, well, that is a faithful reflection of what the Bible teaches concerning the nature of marriage.

Now, anybody who has watched the news or seen documentaries just in the past month or years will know that that definition is vigorously challenged by many in our society, very particularly the idea of one man and one woman. Well, so be it that others may seek to challenge.

But the Bible is clear. That is indeed marriage as designed and as given to us by God. The voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. Now, adultery is the inclusion of others. Marriage involves the exclusion of others, and adultery breaks that by including others. Adultery is the act of breaking out of a marriage or indeed breaking into a marriage. Any sexual activity outwith marriage as established and defined by God is forbidden by this commandment. This broad understanding of all that is forbidden is confirmed as we consider how the New Testament writers broach the subject, something that they do very precisely and in great detail.

They do so because in the New Testament, in the historical setting in which the New Testament was written, there was a culture that was largely characterized, obviously with regional variations, but largely characterized by widespread promiscuity and sexual perversion. And that is reflected in the language used by the New Testament writers, especially Paul and indeed Jesus Himself in broaching this subject.

[6 : 34] So, just to illustrate that a little, in the New Testament, in addition to a Greek word for adultery that corresponds directly with the Hebrew word that we find in Exodus chapter 20 and verse 14, you shall not commit adultery. In addition to the exact parallel, if you wish, for that word, there is a second Greek word that is also translated on occasion by the word adultery, or in the NIV it tends to be the word or the phrase marital unfaithfulness that has a far wider meaning. And the word in question is one you've maybe heard mentioned on other occasions, and you'll recognize it because of its connection with an English word. It's a Greek word pornea. And as I say, it will be recognizable because obviously from that root you have derived the English word that we recognize, pornography.

As I say, that word is on occasion, certainly in the authorized version translated adultery, in the NIV somewhat more broadly reflecting the fact that the word does have a broader meaning as marital unfaithfulness. It's the word that's used just as an example for you to have a feel for the word. It's the word that's used in Matthew chapter 5 and verse 32, and we'll just remind ourselves of what it says there. Matthew 5 and verse 32, or we'll read from verse 31. It's Jesus teaching on the subject of divorce, and He said, It has been said, anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness, there we have this Greek word pornea, causes her to become an adulteress. And anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Now, we're not going to enter into the very important, but we have to recognize complex area of divorce, and the Bible's teaching on divorce, that's not our concern this evening or this afternoon. But there we have that word pornea. And this word pornea can refer to any form, really, of sexual misconduct, or indeed to use very politically incorrect language, any form of sexual perversion. Perversion is simply understood anything that does not conform to what God has designed as being the purpose and the manner in which sex is to be practiced. Anything that is out with that is literally a perversion of God's order and of God's design.

So, pornea would include heterosexual sex with somebody who is not your husband or wife. It would include prostitution. It would include homosexual practice and indeed others that for reasons of decency I won't enumerate. But the Bible on occasion is prepared to identify by name.

So, in summary, in answer to this question, what is being prohibited by this commandment, you shall not commit adultery, we can say that there is under the umbrella of this prohibition, a banning of all sexual diversions and perversions that fall outside the relationship of one man and one woman in the lifelong bond of marriage. You shall not commit adultery.

[10:11] Now, moving on to another question, and one that we'll deal with very briefly, and in a sense we'll be repeating ourselves in terms of what has been said concerning the other commandments, but I think the importance of it allows for repetition. The question is this, why this prohibition? Why does God forbid all sexual practice outside the bond of marriage as designed and defined by God? Well, this prohibition of God reflects certainly two fundamental realities. One is that it is an echo of and it reflects and is consistent with God's established order as revealed at creation. This is the way that God has determined that things should be. He is the Creator. He has the authority. He has the responsibility to determine these things, and He has done so. He has done so very clearly. In Genesis chapter 2 and in verse 24, we're familiar with what we find there concerning marriage for this reason. A man will leave his father and mother and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. So, God forbids adultery.

Why? Because adultery would be a breaking of the order that He Himself has established concerning marriage. But another reason why He forbids adultery is because He loves us. Now, this is something we've, I hope, stressed on other occasions, and that is that the commandments that we have, this moral law of God, has been given to us because God loves us. He doesn't give us commandments because He wants to make our life miserable. He doesn't give us commandments because He's some kind of cosmic party pooper. He gives us commandments because He loves us, and He wants the very best for us. His desire for us, His people, and indeed for all, but very especially for His people, is that we should enjoy shalom, that integral well-being and happiness that is the fruit of obeying His commandments and of being loyal to Him.

When we are loyal to God, when we obey His commandments, then we experience this well-being, this shalom that is His purpose for us. That is why He forbids us, in this case, from committing adultery, because He knows very well that sexual sin messes us up, and it messes others up also. It's by no means a victimless sin. Often it's argued that if two consenting adults do what they wish to do behind closed doors, well, it's victimless. Well, that is nonsense. There are many victims of adultery very particularly. It all ends in tears. Adultery, as many, perhaps even here, have painfully experienced, leaves in its wake many tears, and many wounded victims. And God loves us. He loves you. He doesn't want you to suffer in that way. And so, He commands in these clear, unequivocal terms, you shall not commit adultery. Moving on to another question that I want to pose and deal with, at least in some measure. And that is, how can we break this commandment? In what different ways can we break this commandment? Now, in a measure, we've answered the question as we've explored the meaning of the word adultery. But I want to develop the question of how we can break the commandment more carefully in the specific context of marriage. And I want to suggest three ways in which we can be guilty of breaking this commandment. Now, the first way is very obvious, and that is in the physical act of adultery. A sexual encounter between two people where one of them is married and the other is not his or her spouse. In that way, clearly, we can be guilty of breaking this commandment. Now, again, we pose the question because many would pose the question, is that such a serious matter?

Well, we are clear that it is a serious matter, and it is a serious matter for a number of reasons. In the first instance, it is a serious matter because it is an offense against God. Now, many would see that as of trivial importance if, indeed, they would accept the premise at all. But we are very clear that it is an offense against God and, as we've noted already, His established order. We are saying, well, God may think that way. God may have established it that way, but I know better.

I know better, and I'll do things as I see fit. Ultimately, like all sin, it is grounded in pride. I know best. I'll do what I want to do with my life, with my body, with my time. I'll have fun as I see fit.

[15 : 31] And who is God or who is anybody else to stick their nose into my life? And to think in that way, and to act in that way, is profoundly offensive to God. And so, it is a serious matter. And of course, adultery is an offense against the husband or wife to whom solemn promises have been made.

I stood here yesterday morning, and before me were Liz and Andrew, and they promised to each other. They promised before God, before family and friends, that they would be faithful to each other until death parts them. That was a solemn promise. Many of us here have made that same promise.

And of course, adultery is to trod underfoot that promise. It is to break the promise. It is to consider it of no importance. And that is a serious matter. The seriousness of the sin of adultery is made clear in the Bible in different ways. One way where it is made very clear, and quite brutally clear, you could say, is in the Old Testament, in God's law, given through Moses, concerning the punishment for adultery, which was the death penalty. Now, for us, that seems so brutal almost. And we've read in the New Testament, we've read the passage concerning how Jesus dealt with a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. Presumably, a man must also have been present for that to have happened, but it's only the poor woman who is identified as the great sinner.

But we see there, we've read there how Jesus dealt with that. Does anybody condemn you? No, nobody's condemned me. Well, I don't condemn you either. Go and sin no more. And there, it has generally been understood, and I think legitimately, that Jesus is establishing that the penalty that had been established for this sin in the Old Testament is no longer to be applied in the New. But though that is true, that doesn't in any way diminish the gravity of the offense. How blinded we often are, and how subtle the guiles of the devil himself in presenting this sin, sexual sin in its many forms and shapes as attractive, as alluring, as exciting, as liberating, as innocent, as natural. Do not be deceived. Do not be deceived. I think many of us have been deceived. Let us not continue being deceived.

So, in the physical act of adultery, we can break this commandment. But there is also, as we bring into consideration how Jesus teaches on this matter, there is what we could call mental adultery. We've seen in previous commandments how Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, radicalizes the application of the commandments. And this commandment does not escape this treatment on the part of our Lord. And we'll read verses that I know are familiar to us, where Jesus deals with this matter. Again, in Matthew's Gospel, and chapter 5, and verses 27 and 28. You have heard that it was said, do not commit adultery. So, very explicitly, Jesus is dealing with this commandment that is our concern this evening. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. And clearly, that sin is also committed by a woman looking lustfully at a man.

[19 : 32] Though it's a matter of fact that men are more prone to the visual temptation of adultery than women. It's just the way we're made. But both can be guilty of this sin. Mental adultery. Jesus is not prohibiting the appreciation of beauty. He has made all things beautiful. And the human form is also a beautiful thing. But He is prohibiting a lustful look. He is prohibiting mentally undressing a woman, fantasizing or imagining a forbidden encounter, even when there is no intention to proceed further.

Sometimes we might think, well, I have no intention of taking this any further than simply a mental fantasy. And what harm is there in that? The consequences of taking it further are so appalling that I wouldn't even consider it. But, you know, a little daydreaming, what's the harm in that?

Well, Jesus is clear that this is also forbidden by this commandment. And in this, who can acclaim to be innocent? Mental adultery. Is it less serious than physical adultery, than the physical act of adultery? If we recognize, as I think we can in the light of God's Word, that there is what we might call a hierarchy of gravity and sin, then we could say yes, perhaps in a measure it is less serious.

And yet, listen to what Jesus says concerning this matter of mental adultery. What does He go on to say in that very passage that we've read in verse 29? If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. And so, it's very clear that Jesus' opinion concerning the gravity, the seriousness of what we might describe as mental adultery. And perhaps one of the reasons why Jesus condemns this so harshly, I suppose you might say, is that mental adultery is invariably the doorway to physical adultery. That is the door that we go through. It's inconceivable, really, to imagine somebody being guilty of physical adultery who hasn't first prepared for it or been led to it by mental adultery, by thinking unworthy and sinful thoughts.

And so, there is a need, and Jesus here stresses the need to discipline and to dominate our minds and our imaginations. Far better to slam on the brakes when the car is parrying along at 20 miles an hour than wait until we're racing at 100 miles an hour. We all know that to do a U-turn at 100 miles an hour is well nigh impossible and will lead to a horrible road crash. And so, Jesus is very concerned for our welfare. And so, He says, don't even think about it, for that will lead, sadly and tragically, to hardship and to pain and to suffering and to guilt. Indeed, in the very thinking there is guilt upon us.

[23 : 12] So, we have this second way, if you wish, in which we can break this commandment, very explicitly presented to us by Jesus. So, we have physical adultery, mental adultery. I would also want to suggest one other way, and you can consider for yourselves where you think this is a legitimate application of the commandment or comes under the prohibition of the commandment. It's what I will call emotional adultery. Now, this is different to mental adultery in that there may be no obvious sexual element to it. I'm thinking about a situation where an inappropriate emotional or sentimental attachment is developed with a man or a woman that is not our spouse. And without going into detail of what that might look like, I think it's, I hope it's clear the kind of relationship I'm suggesting.

Now, you might say, well, is this explicitly forbidden? Perhaps not explicitly, but I think it is implicitly forbidden by the biblical presentation of marriage where God provides us with a suitable helper.

You remember in the garden, and Adam was alone, and we're told the biblical text tells us that God provided for Adam a suitable helper. And that suitable helper, clearly it was suitable in a wide range of ways, not only in providing for our sexual needs, but also for our emotional, for our effective needs. And so, to leave aside our suitable helper and to develop an emotional friendship where our intimate lives are discussed and considered to the exclusion of our wife or husband, I think is one way in which we break.

We break God's order, and we are guilty indeed of, in a fashion, breaking this very commandment, you shall not commit adultery. I want to close by considering one further matter, and that is how can we protect ourselves from breaking this commandment? And that we would be very clear that we do need protection.

I think this is maybe one of the commandments where some of us make the mistake of thinking, well, that would never happen to me. You know, that's just way beyond anything I would do. It's way beyond anything that could happen to my marriage. Perhaps some of us have had the privilege, and indeed it is the privilege, of being brought up in a home where our parents enjoyed a very solid marriage relationship. That is what we have seen. That is what they have modeled to us. That is what we have experienced. And it's difficult for us to imagine that the marriages that we are part of would be attacked or would be the victims of adultery. But let us be very careful in thinking in that way.

[26 : 22] By all means, let's be grateful for the privileges that we have enjoyed and continue to enjoy. But we are all vulnerable. I think very particularly in the society in which we live, where all has become so sexualized, where sex is presented as a recreational activity, where all around us, many are guilty of this sin, of breaking this commandment, and Christian marriages are by no means immune. That, I think, is very clear and obvious to us. And so, we do need to seek protection that we would not be guilty of breaking this commandment. What can we do? The first thing I want to suggest is that we must cultivate an intense loyalty to God. And I say that taking as my cue, the classic, the eloquent example of Joseph in this matter. Now, we don't have time to consider the whole story of Joseph, but I think we're familiar with his story, where there in Potiphar's household, he was seduced and tempted by Potiphar's wife. And we know how persistent and how intense that temptation was. And we know, of course, that he resisted. But the question that I want to pose is, why did he resist? How was he able to resist? And let's just notice what it says there in the passage in question in Genesis chapter 39 and reading from verse 6. We'll just read three or four verses that will take us to the point where we discover what it was that enabled Joseph to not fall into temptation, that enabled Joseph to resist this very intense temptation that was presented before him of a sexual encounter with this woman. We read, now, Joseph was well-built and handsome. And after a while, his master's wife took notice of Joseph. She lusted after him in her mind. And she said, "'Come to bed with me.' But he refused. With me in charge, he told her, "'My master does not concern himself with anything in the house. Everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife.

How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against my master?' Does it say that? It doesn't say that. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God? See, the whole logic of what he's been saying would seem to conclude in him saying, how could I do this and sin against my master?

Now, clearly, Joseph was aware that it would have been a sin against his master. But what does he focus on? What does he consume by? He's consumed by his loyalty to God. To do this would be to sin against my God. And that I cannot and will not do. His loyalty to God, his commitment to God acted as a protection against his sin. May it be so for us, when we are tempted as we are, that our concern would be, how could I do such a thing and sin against my God? So, how can we protect ourselves? Well, we can do so by cultivating an intense loyalty to our God. But a second manner is by cultivating a deep and loving relationship with our wife or husband. Adultery is almost invariably the fruit of a marriage that is not working as it should. That is in no way to justify it, simply to recognize a reality. And I suppose we could put it this way. Why go for fast food outside the house when a feast awaits at home? It makes no sense.

You see, if we cultivate a loving and a deep and an intense relationship at home, then that which is offered outside will not even appear as so attractive. But if we take our marriage for granted, something I think we often are guilty of, then we are in danger of sowing the seeds of adultery. And yes, even in the best homes. This is not some kind of impossible scenario. It happens all the time. And we are painfully aware of that, perhaps, in our own circle and among family and friends. So, how can we protect ourselves against breaking the commandment? By cultivating an intense loyalty to God, by cultivating a deep and loving relationship in our own marriage. And then one final thing I would say, by not playing with fire. And of course, this applies to all who are married or unmarried. Let's not play with fire.

This ties in, of course, with Jesus' prohibition of what we've called mental adultery. Joseph, again, is our example. What does Joseph do in the face of temptation? What does he do? Well, we're told he does two things. One, he avoids this woman. This woman who is pursuing him. This woman who is offering herself to him. What does the text tell us? It tells us that he sought, in as much as he was able, to not be with her, to not be around her. See, in that way, he avoided the temptation. He was in a difficult situation. He was a slave in the household. He couldn't avoid her completely. But in as much as he was able, he avoided the fire. He set himself apart from it. But he does another thing. When things get as hot as they possibly could, when she's practically throwing herself on him, what does he do?

[32 : 31] We're well told what he does. He runs. He runs. He runs away. He flees from the temptation. He doesn't stand there and say, well, I love God and I'll be okay. No, he turns around and he runs away.

Better to run than to burn. And so let us be very careful of that friendship that is becoming inappropriate. Maybe nobody else would consider it inappropriate. But if you're honest with yourself, you know that some of the emotions, some of the sentiments that are going through your mind are crossing a line. And you're entering into dangerous territory. Be careful with flirtatious conversations.

Those little one-liners, those little jokes, those little comments that, again, may appear innocent to others. But if you're honest with yourself, you recognize are beginning to cross a line. Don't go down that road. That growing attraction to a colleague. Be very careful. A little soft porn on the web.

No great harm done to anybody. Be very careful. Run. Run. Run. Don't play with fire. So there are ways in which we can protect ourselves from breaking this commandment. But as we close, what can we do if we are guilty? Or maybe more accurately, we should say, what do we do as we are guilty? Is there hope for the adulterer? Well, we return to Jesus. And we can't do justice to all that we have read there in John's Gospel. But we return to what Jesus says there to this woman caught in the very act of adultery. I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more. Repent of your sin.

Leave it aside. Turn around and head in another direction. That is what you can do. That is what you must do. But there is more that we can say. There is more of a hopeful message of good news for those of us guilty of this sin. And it is this, that this same Jesus, this same Jesus who did not condemn the woman, this same Jesus who sent her on her way, exhorting her to sin no more, this same Jesus, then went to the cross and died for sinners, died for adulterers. And he paid the price in full, yes, of our adultery as well. And so there is forgiveness. There is a new start at Calvary.

[35 : 16] And so for those of us who are guilty of this sin, let us turn to Jesus Christ, the one who is ready and willing to forgive us and to cleanse us and to command us, yes, firmly, go and sin no more.

You shall not commit adultery. What part of this don't you understand? Let us pray. Verse 28, the whole of the psalm, we'll stand to sing.