

Do not commit adultery

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 12th March 2006

“You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20.14).

Introduction

In our studies in the Ten Commandments we come now to the Seventh Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery”. I think it is hard to overstate the importance of this commandment for the present time, as it is probably true to say that of all the commandments this is the one about which attitudes in society at large have changed the most in recent years. There has been a complete revolution in views about what is right and wrong in the area of marriage and sex. Things which were taboo only a few years ago are now widely accepted. It is only too easy for us as Christians to be swept along with the tide of current opinion.

As we approach this subject I want us first to consider what this command forbids. Then I want us to think about why God forbids it. Then I want us to consider the consequences which follow from breaking the commandment. And then I want us to consider practical steps we can take to avoid falling into the sin of adultery.

1. What this commandment forbids

What is adultery? The strict definition is that it is where someone who is married has sex with someone apart from his or her own spouse, or when someone who is unmarried has sex with someone else who is married. If you are doing this, then you are committing adultery.

However, adultery is more than the physical act of sex between a married

person and someone to whom he or she is not married. Prior to that physical act almost always there is a relationship, an “affair”, between the man and the woman. Such a “love” relationship must be a breach of this commandment, even if to date if there has been no actual sexual contact between the couple. If you are married, and you are in a close “love” relationship with someone apart from your own husband or wife, even if you have not had sex together, you have already crossed over the line of what is right.

This commandment also prohibits divorce for any reason apart from the unfaithfulness of the other partner in a marriage. This is something that Jesus made clear when he was asked about divorce by the Pharisees, as recorded by in Matthew chapter 19. The Pharisees came to Jesus and asked him if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for “any and every reason”. Jesus said that God had allowed divorce in the Old Testament, because of men’s hardness of heart, but it “was not this way from the beginning.” Then he said, “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman, commits adultery” (verse 9). So for you to divorce your spouse for any reason other than his or her unfaithfulness, and then to marry another person, would be to commit adultery in God’s eyes.

Jesus also made it clear that if a man looks upon a woman with lust, this is equivalent to adultery in the heart. He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5.27 – 28). There is nothing wrong with sexual desire for one’s own marriage partner. That is something that God has given to help a man and his wife to love each other. But if sexual desire for someone to whom one is not married is indulged in, then this is adultery in the heart, Jesus says. This must mean that to look at pornography, or to go to strip clubs, or to look at others in a lustful way in other situations, or to indulge sexual fantasies, is to break this commandment.

If Jesus said that to have lust for another is to commit adultery in the heart, then clearly all other forms sexual activity outside of marriage must be also forbidden by this commandment. If neither party to such sexual activity is married, then strictly speaking the activity is not adultery. However, all such activity is an attack on the sanctity of marriage, and so is an indirect form of adultery. Examples of such sexual activity are:

- Fornication, which is sexual activity between two where neither party is married. When a boyfriend and girlfriend have a sexual relationship, even if

they say to each other that they love each other and are committed to each other, if they have not publicly entered into a covenant of marriage they are committing fornication.

– Incest, which is sexual activity between two closely related individuals, such as a father and his daughter, or a mother and her son. Such activity is exceedingly damaging to the children involved, and indeed to the whole family unit.

– Homosexuality, where men or women have sex with others of the same sex. Despite many attempts by those with influence in our society to make such activity appear to be “normal” and right, the Bible tells us that it is a perversion of God’s pattern for marriage.

– Bestiality, where a person has sex with an animal.

2. The reason for this commandment

Let us now consider the reason for this commandment. To find the basis for this commandment, as with the fourth and the sixth commandments, we have to go back to creation. God had made all of the physical world, and the animals, and the first man, but he said that it was not good for the man to be alone. So he made for him a woman out of the man’s flesh, and gave her to the man to be a helper for him. The man was delighted with the gift God had given him, and said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called ‘woman’, for she was taken out of man” (Genesis 2.23). This then leads to the classic text on marriage, which is quoted by Jesus and the apostle Paul: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they will be come one flesh” (Genesis 2.24). We see from this verse that there are three things which make a marriage: firstly a man must leave his parents, and clearly also a woman must leave her parents. Secondly, he joins to his wife, by entering into covenant with her. He publicly owns her as his wife, and promises to be faithful to her, and to her alone, as long as they both shall live, and she owns him as her husband and promises to be faithful to him. Thirdly, the two then go on to “become one flesh”. The two become one. They join together emotionally as they become one in their thoughts and physically as they enjoy a sexual relationship together.

We learn a number of things from this verse:

1. Marriage, and sex within marriage, are gifts from God which go back to creation, before the fall into sin.
2. Marriage involves a covenant made between one man and woman, whereby he takes her and owns her as his wife for as long as they both live.
3. Sex is given by God to join a man and wife together in the union that they have already made in a covenant before God. It is good, but only in the context of marriage. In any other context it is wrong.

When we understand this, we will immediately see why adultery is wrong. Not only is it a misuse of the gift of sex, but it also involves breaking the covenant that a man has made with his wife. By marrying his wife, a man promises that he will turn all his love and sexual desires towards his wife, and her alone, and the woman promises the same to her husband. If either of them commits adultery, the one who does so is breaking faith with his or her spouse. A solemn covenant is violated.

We understand something of how seriously God views adultery from what he says later through the prophet Malachi. He says that he will not listen to the prayers of the Israelites because many of them are committing adultery. He says,

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why? It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself [or his wife] with violence as well as with his garment," says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith (Malachi 2.13 - 16).

This passage teaches us that marriage is a covenant which is witnessed by God. If a man breaks faith with his wife by committing adultery, God will see what he does and take action against him. God is a faithful God who keeps his promises, and he expects us to be faithful and to keep our promises as well. This is why he

hates divorce, because divorce is a breach of trust, except where the innocent party divorces his or her marriage partner because of his or her their sexual sin.

This point is further reinforced by Hebrews 13.4: "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the sexually immoral and the adulterer."

A further reason why all sex outside of marriage, whether in the form of adultery or of other types of sexual immorality, is wrong is that, for the Christian, his or her body is part of the body of Christ, and a temple of the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul says,

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own, you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6.15 – 20)

3. The consequences of adultery, and related sins

I want us now to consider the consequences of adultery, and related sins. Adultery is a very damaging sin. If you commit adultery or sexual immorality and do not repent, it will result in your going to Hell. The apostle Paul says,

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6.9 – 10).

If you repeatedly commit the sin of adultery or sexual immorality, it is very doubtful that you are a real Christian. At the very least, your Christian life is going to be massively hindered if you commit this sin, not only while you commit it, but for many years afterwards.

There are also other consequences which follow from the sin. If you are a married person and you commit adultery, this does incalculable damage to your spouse. He or she has trusted you, and you have thrown that trust back in his or her face. It also causes untold suffering to any children that you have. They have looked up to you and trusted you as a parent, and you have broken that trust.

You also harm yourself by adultery and sexual immorality. An adulterer does massive damage to his reputation. For years afterwards, perhaps for the rest of his life, his reputation is stained. He will never have the same respect that he had before he committed the adultery. Adultery and sexual immorality also harm you emotionally. You are joining yourself physically with someone with whom there is no marriage covenant. You know at the back of your mind that sooner or later that relationship will come to an end, and when it does you are left alone and deeply scarred emotionally. Sexual immorality almost certainly will lead to serious health problems as well, in the form of sexually transmitted diseases. On top of this, adultery is ruinous financially. The book of Proverbs warns us:

The lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not. Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel, lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house. (Proverbs 5.3 – 10).

4. What should we do?

What then should we do in the light of what we have seen? The first thing to say is that you need the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome this sin. It is said that pornography is for some people more addictive than crack cocaine. Other forms of sexual sin can be very difficult to break free from. Once you are in a wrong sexual relationship it is very hard to disentangle yourself. If you are going to break free you will need to know God's power in you. Are you a Christian? Have you been born again? If not, or you are not sure, ask Christ to do the miracle in your life. If the answer is "yes", then ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit and to give you the power to overcome this sin in all its various forms.

In addition, there are some practical steps we can take, which I would be divide

into three categories: things definitely not to do, things to be very careful about, and things positively to do.

1) Things definitely not to do

Clearly we see from this that you must have no sexual relationship with anyone to whom you are not married. If you have been living with your girlfriend or boyfriend, then move out until you can get married, if at all possible at the practical level. If this is impossible practically, then at the very least sleep in a separate room and get married as a matter of urgency. If your friend will not marry you, or you do not in fact want to marry him or her, then you cannot remain in the relationship and you will have to move out.

We see also from what we have seen a private love relationship between someone who is married and someone who is not his or her spouse is wrong. If you are in such a relationship you must cut off all private contact with the person concerned immediately, and confess your sin to your spouse if you are the one who is married, and seek to rebuild your marriage.

Clearly also all looking at pornography, and all recollection of images previously seen, and all fantasies about sexual contact with those with to whom you are not married are wrong. If you have been indulging in such sins, destroy all material you may have, build barriers to prevent your obtaining more, and exercise mental discipline about what you think about. You may need to share this problem with a good Christian friend (of the same sex as yourself) and seek prayer support as you tackle it.

2) Things to be very careful about

As well as things that we definitely should not do, there are many things that we need to be careful about, and which we may do well to avoid, in order to lessen the risk of falling into this sin. This is such a damaging and addictive sin that it is worth putting up barriers for ourselves well back from the cliff edge. Think about such things, and take appropriate action: are there certain places in town where you should not go, because of the risk of enticement into sin? Are there certain beaches you should not go to when on holiday? Are there certain types of parties, discos or clubs that you need to avoid?

And what about television and movies? Certainly a Christian should not watch a

film where there is nudity, as this will almost inevitably lead him to look with lust upon the one who is portrayed. But many films and TV programs condition you to think that sexual immorality is OK, even if they do not physically portray it. Sometimes these things can come up quite unexpectedly in what you thought was going to be an innocent programme or film. Some Christians have made the decision, because of the risks, never to watch TV or films again. You may consider that to be too strict an approach, and that there are also benefits from watching some films and television. But if you do watch films or television you need to be very careful about what you watch, and what you allow your children to watch. As soon as there is even a hint of a wrong sexual reference switch off the programme or film, and destroy the DVD or video if it is on such media.

Then, if you do have a boyfriend or girlfriend, you need to be very careful how you conduct your relationship. Be careful when you are alone together, especially in the evening. If at all possible be in the company of others. If you are alone together in a room, have the door open. Avoid being entirely alone together in a house. You might think you are strong and that you would not fall into sin, but we should never underestimate the power of sexual attraction, especially for men. I would very strongly caution against staying overnight in the same room as your boyfriend or girlfriend, or in the same house if there is no one else in the house. You might say, "We don't do anything", and this might be true at the moment, but you are putting temptation in harm's way. It would be only too easy for you to slide into fornication. Moreover, you need to think of how it will be interpreted by your friends and family, non-Christian and Christian alike. They will draw one conclusion from your staying alone with your boyfriend or girlfriend.

3) Things to do

Then, positively, I would suggest some practical things to do. If you are unmarried and have sexual desires, seek to be married if possible. One reason for marriage is to give a legitimate and right outlet for sexual desire. Sometimes in God's providence it is not possible to find a marriage partner, and this can be difficult for the individual to bear, although there are also benefits from not being married. But if you do have desires in this area, do what you can practically to find someone who can be a good marriage partner. Do not set impossibly high standards for a prospective spouse which will prevent you marrying.

If you are married keep your marriage strong. At the heart of a good marriage is good communication. Tell your spouse all that is going on in your heart, and listen as your partner bares his or her heart. And focus all your sexual desires upon your spouse.

Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love (Proverbs 5.15 – 19).

Finally, if you are married but your marriage has broken down, seek to do all you can to restore the marriage. If the fault lies with you, make a proper and full apology to your spouse. Do not do anything which will further undermine your marriage. It may be that after a period of separation you may be able to be reconciled to your spouse and the marriage may be saved.

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