

“You Shall Not Commit Adultery” (An Exposition of Exodus 20:14)¹

Introduction

There might not be a more needful commandment for us to study in our day than the *seventh* commandment – the commandment against the sin of *adultery*. This commandment, rooted in God's creation ordinance of marriage and procreation from the very beginning of creation, has *wide-ranging implications and applications* for our lives as believers and for society in general.

Many of the societal ills that we are seeing in our day can be traced directly in one way or another to *the abandonment or transgression of God's created order of marriage and family*. The divorce of sex from the confines of marriage, and from marriage to procreation has had devastating effects on our society. The sexual revolution has been the bloodiest and costliest war in our nation's history.

The holocaust of *abortion*, with over 60 million babies murdered in our nation over the past 50 years; fornication, cohabitation, and divorce, leading to *fatherless homes* (which is the number one predictor of crime and incarceration in the US, among other things); *homosexuality* and the so-called *trans-gender movement*, including all of the irreversible damage that is being done to our nation's children by that cult; all of these things are in some way involve transgressions of the seventh commandment.

The biblical, God-ordained view of marriage and family is under constant attack. Sexual immorality & perversion are rampant to say the least, and that even among professing Christians.

Our culture is seemingly in the midst of an *all-out rebellion* against God's law regarding marriage, family, and sexuality in general. Kevin DeYoung writes:

“Is there any command more ridiculed in our culture than the Seventh Commandment? Adultery is a joke; homosexuality is a right; sex before marriage is the norm; no-fault divorce and remarriage is assumed; bestiality is increasingly considered avant garde. This is the world we live in. Sex has always been a leading vote-getter in the most popular sin contest, but never before in this country has so much sexual deviance been made to look so normal and God's standards made to look so obscene.” (*The Good News We Almost Forgot*, p.193)

Sadly, the seventh commandment is also disregarded, redefined, and transgressed among many *professing Christians*, and that to such a degree that at times there no longer seems to be much of a difference between the church and the unbelieving world around us. This simply should not be so.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3 Paul told the believers in Thessalonica, **“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.”** He said that, not because sexual morality is the end-all, be-all of the Christian life, but because in a debauched culture, abstaining from sexual immorality is *one of the primary distinguishing marks* that set believers apart from the world around us.

That was certainly true in the utterly dark, pagan cultures in which Paul ministered the gospel, and sadly it is becoming more and more true in our day as well. And many in the church today seem bent on seeking to blur or erase even that distinction, with the result that the church is more and more conformed to the world, and the salt of the world has lost its savor.

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

Addressing the Seventh Commandment from the Pulpit

This is a topic that tends to make many of us rather uncomfortable, and so we often avoid dealing with it, *especially from the pulpit*. But that would be a mistake, wouldn't it? Does the Bible not address this subject a multitude of times in both the Old and New Testaments? Do we dare remain silent about a subject that is so commonly addressed in the Scriptures? *Are we wiser than God?*

To be sure there is a *right* way and a *wrong* way to do most things, and that is certainly true when it comes to addressing this subject in the preaching and teaching of the church. It must *not* be done in an unnecessarily provocation or offensive way; and it should *not* be done in such a way that causes any of Christ's little ones to stumble.

But consider this: How often do the subjects of marriage and sexual morality come up in the epistles of the New Testament? In other words, when Paul or Peter or John (for example) wrote their letters to the churches – letters which were commonly expected to be *read publicly before the congregations* on the Lord's day, and *explained or taught* to the gathered church in that setting – how often would these things have come up?

Marriage, husbands and wives, parents and children, faithfulness and adultery, sexual immorality of all kinds – these things are *clearly and explicitly addressed* in one way or another *throughout the New Testament epistles*, so much so that it would actually be much easier to list which books *omit* these subjects than the ones which *include* them.

These things were addressed *commonly and repeatedly*, because these things affect the vast majority of believers. These things involve our real, everyday lives in very practical ways. And so the apostles, being the good pastors and under-shepherds that they were, did not leave the flock without sure counsel and instruction in matters as important as this. And so in the church today must do likewise, if we are to be faithful to the Word of God.

What Is Required in the Seventh Commandment

We will treat this as *an introductory sermon* on this subject, with the hope that we will be able to look at it in a little more depth from another text of Scripture on a future Sunday(s). And so for the sake of clarity and simplicity, we will stick with the basic outline of this commandment given by the *Shorter Catechism*:

“Q.71. What is required in the seventh commandment? A. The seventh commandment requires the preservation of our own and our neighbor's chastity, in heart, speech, and behavior.”

As always, the commandments of God include both a positive and negative aspect. Each commandment both *requires* something of us as well as *forbids* something. Where the requirement is explicitly stated, the opposite sin is forbidden; and where a sin is expressly forbidden, the opposite duty is required of us.

For example (as we have seen previously), in Ephesians 4:25 the Apostle Paul writes:

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”

Falsehood or dishonesty is forbidden. This is addressed in the 9th commandment, which forbids us from *bearing false witness* against our neighbor (Exodus 20:16). But notice that it is *not* enough to simply refrain from lying or deception – we must also “**speak the truth**” with each other.

Similarly, in v.28 Paul says, “**Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.**” The opposite of *theft* is *not* just refraining from theft, but is actually *hard work and charity!*

And so what is *required* of us in the seventh commandment? Q/A 71 tells us that it is “the preservation of our own and our neighbor's chastity, in heart, speech, and behavior.” First, notice that (as with all of the commandments!) we are not only to be concerned with the preservation of *our own* “chastity” or purity, but also with that of *our neighbor* as well!

Now first things first. We must start with *ourselves*, with *our own* chastity or purity, before overly concerning ourselves with that of our neighbors. Our own houses must be in order first. But, having said that, the chastity of *our neighbors* “in heart, speech, and behavior” is to be of concern to us as well. It is really just part of what it means to *love your neighbor*.

If we are unconcerned about our neighbor's chastity, then we do not truly love them or care for their well-being. After all, God's will is what is best for our lives – it is God's will (and *not* necessarily our own) which is “**good and acceptable and perfect**” (Romans 12:2).

Sin, on the other hand, leads to nothing but *misery and death*, and so there is really nothing *loving or kind* about being unconcerned or careless about your neighbor (and society as a whole) in this regard.

Notice that the catechism speaks of “the preservation of our own and our neighbor's chastity, *in heart, speech, and behavior.*” Thought, word, and deed. God's commandments always reach deeper than just our outward actions. In fact, our heart or thoughts is where our sins find their root, and so we must be mindful of our hearts. As Proverbs 4:23 teaches us:

**“Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.”**

We must guard our *hearts*, our *words* (for, as Christ says in Matthew 12:34, “**out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.**”), as well as our *actions*. We must learn to positively think, speak, and act in such a way that tends toward the preservation of our chastity or purity, and this surely begins with *the renewing of our minds* according to God's Word (Romans 12:1-2).

What Is Forbidden in the Seventh Commandment

Secondly, what is forbidden in the seventh commandment? Shorter Catechism Q/A 72 tells us, “The seventh commandment forbids all unchaste thoughts, words and actions.”

This commandment (like the rest of the ten commandments) is what I like to call an “umbrella category.” What I mean by that term is that this commandment represents a particular category of sins or transgressions, and so there are many different ways that a person can break it. The seventh commandment, simply put, *forbids sexual immorality of all kinds*.

And the commandment also deals with more than just our outward actions. In Matthew 5:27–28 (part of the sermon on the mount – Matthew 5-7) the Lord Jesus put it this way:

“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.” (Italics added)

Here Jesus teaches us *the proper understanding of the seventh commandment*. And in doing so He makes it clear that this commandment forbids *not* just sinful *actions*, but also *sinful thoughts, desires, and even inclinations* as well! A person can be outwardly chaste, and yet inwardly still be guilty of adultery. And so it is *not* just sexually immoral *actions* that are to be avoided and repented of, but also sexually immoral words and even *thoughts and inclinations* as well.

This commandment against sexual immorality is worded in terms of the particular form of sexual sin that in some ways is *the most heinous and serious form* of it – adultery. What makes adultery so serious a sin before God? Adultery, properly-speaking, is *not* just sexual immorality (as serious as that is), but is also *theft* (and so a transgression of the 8th commandment as well). Thomas Watson writes,

“It [adultery] is a thievish sin. It is the highest form of theft. The adulterer steals from his neighbor that which is more than his goods and estate; he steals away his wife from him, who is flesh of his flesh.” (*The Ten Commandments*, p.155)

It is also *a violation of the marriage covenant*, and so the breaking of one’s vows, and bearing false witness before God and man (and so also a violation of the 9th commandment). Clearly there is a great deal of overlap between the commandments, and in breaking one of them, we often tend to break others as well.

The Importance of Marriage

God’s commandment against adultery shows us something about *the importance and sanctity of marriage*. Back in the garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 2, there in paradise, *before* the Fall of mankind into sin when Adam ate the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3), God saw that everything that He had made was *good* . . .except one thing. Man was alone.

In Genesis 2:18 God said, **“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”** Eve, his wife, was this **“helper”** suitable for Adam that God made. In Genesis 2:24 we read of God instituting the creation ordinance of marriage, saying, **“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”**

And in Genesis 1:28 it says,

“And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

That is God’s purpose and design for marriage. *Leaving & cleaving, being fruitful & multiplying*. One of God's primary purposes for marriage is that His people would raise **“godly offspring”** (Malachi 2:15). *And the seventh commandment is given in order to safeguard that.*

Why does God take marriage so seriously? Any number of things could be said in answer to that question. One could point to the many societal ills and the damage that is done by sexual immorality and divorce. The breakdown of the family has taken a staggering toll on our society.

But there is also another answer to that question: *Marriage is a picture of the gospel of Christ!* In Ephesians 5:21-33 the Apostle Paul has a lot to say about God's design for marriage. And he bases everything that he has to say about marriage on Genesis chapter 2 (i.e. God's original instituting of marriage).

But in v.32 he says something remarkable – he sums up everything that he says about husbands and wives by saying, “**This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.**” (Italics added) James Montgomery Boice writes,

“When God created marriage it was not simply that God considered marriage to be a good idea, though it certainly is that, or even because God thought it would be a good way to have and rear children. God created marriage to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church.”²

Simply put, marriage between a husband and wife is a picture of the relationship between the Lord Jesus Christ and His church (i.e. His redeemed people). No wonder God takes marriage (and the sin of adultery which violates it) so seriously. And no wonder we should do so as well.

May God preserve and strengthen our marriages and our families, so that He might be glorified in us, and so that our marriages, however imperfect they may be, might be in some way a reflection of Christ and the church. - Amen