

The Shape of Love: You Shall Not Commit Adultery

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 20:14

So, we come to the most infamous of all the commandments, the 7th commandment. The scarlet letter. “You shall not commit adultery.” Let us recognize right from the start that there are dangers and distractions when thinking about this commandment.

First of all, there is the danger of sensationalism. Adultery, especially other people’s adultery, is something that people love to talk about. Talk about the adulterous exploits of various stars and celebrities fills up entertainment talk shows and social media feeds. Society, it seems, can never get enough of the sexual infidelities of the rich and famous. And it’s not just the stars of course; adultery has the same powers of gossip creation when it happens closer to home. Sexual sins always create a lot of froth and a lot of talk. There is a sensational aspect to this, and it’s not always helpful.

Second, there is the danger of moral smugness - sanctimony. If I were to ask you to define adultery, most of us would define it something like this: adultery is a romantic physical encounter with someone other than your spouse. And by that definition, about one quarter of marriages are touched by this sin. Statistics are contentious here, but a general consensus suggests that 1 in 4 marriages are tainted by adultery. That means 75% of marriages do not experience adultery so-defined. You end up with a situation ripe for finger pointing and judgment. Three quarters of the people feel that they are free from this sin. One quarter feel hopelessly tainted. That’s a recipe for smugness on one side and despair on the other.

Jesus seems aware of this danger. His concern about moral smugness shows up in John 8 in that story in which some angry men bring Jesus a woman who’s been caught in the act of adultery. The men have either never been caught or have never committed physical adultery and they want to stone her to death. You have that 75%-25% dynamic. The men are smug; the woman is despairing. Without excusing what the woman has done, Jesus breaks the dynamic. He changes the 75%-25% into a 100%: “Let he who is without sin throw the first stone.” He wants people to look deeper than the physical surface of this commandment.

Jesus does a similar thing in Matthew 5 when he speaks to the self-righteous 75% and says, “If you even look at another woman with desire, you’ve already committed adultery in your heart!” In one sentence Jesus shatters the smugness of those who thought that keeping this command was as simple as not sleeping with someone.

Make no mistake, physical adultery is a terrible thing. I am not minimizing it. Our physical sexuality is the ultimate sign of trust and intimacy, and when that trust and intimacy is betrayed or misused, bad, bad things happen to families; bad, bad things happen to our souls. When he pardons the woman caught in adultery, Jesus is not saying that adultery isn’t that big a deal. It is a big deal. Jesus is saying the heart of this command is more than physical. Keeping this commandment is more than coming to the end of your married life and saying, ‘I never touched another person.’

So, what is the heart of this command? When I think of adultery, I always remember something my Pastoral Care professor Mel Huguen said in seminary. He wanted us to deepen our understanding of this sin by recognizing something called emotional adultery. Physical adultery involves betraying your spouse by sharing physical intimacy with another person. Emotional adultery involves betraying your spouse by inappropriately sharing emotional intimacies with someone else.

Here’s what it looks like: you’ve been feeling down lately. You’re tired out and frustrated with things at home and with things at work. But instead of going to talk to your wife about it, you have a female friend who is on a committee with you at church and you bare your soul to her. You talk with her at committee meetings. She sends you kind and supportive texts. She asks you how you’re doing whenever she sees you. You begin to depend on her emotional support. But you reveal none of your emotional need to your wife because you

know that her reaction to some of your complaints isn't as sympathetic. She's a little more likely to call you out when you're whining. She doesn't always tell you how sorry she feels for you; sometimes she tells you stop moping around and do something to change your circumstances. You are committing emotional adultery.

The Biblical model of marriage is leaving and cleaving. You leave all others and cleave to your spouse. That comes from Genesis 2 in the Old King James Version. God creates Eve and Adam sees her and says, "Here is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!" And the Bible says, "For that reason a man shall leave his Father and Mother and cleave to his wife." Your spouse should receive the first fruit of your intimacy and your relationship work. When you give up on maintaining that intimacy and go looking for it elsewhere, you are breaking your marriage vows, and this long before you lay a romantic finger on anyone!

Of course, emotional and physical adultery are related to each other. In most affairs, emotional adultery paves the way for the physical. But emotional adultery doesn't even have to be romantic at all. You can commit emotional adulteries with your poker buddies. You spill our complaints and concerns about your marriage and your job to your buddies at your weekly poker game, but when you come home to your wife you speak in grunts and sentence fragments. You are being unfaithful. You are neglecting the promises you made to your wife to forsake all others and cleave to her.

And here is where you begin to realize that the heart of this commandment goes beyond marriage. One of the problems with preaching this commandment is that it can feel as though you are speaking only to half of your congregation. Something like 40% of today's adults are single. And they might wonder, 'What on earth does the 7th commandment have to say to me?' All this husband and wife talk leaves me on the sidelines. Well, no it doesn't! I think this commandment calls us to faithful commitments not only in marriage, but in all the critical relationships of life. We are all called to be people who keep our promises. We are all called to be people who faithfully tend the garden of our relationships.

When he gives us a commandment, God is not just telling us what we have to do, he is also revealing something of his own character. The 10 commandments don't just tell us who we are supposed to be; they tell us who God is! So, when God says, 'Honor your Father and your Mother,' He's also saying, I value families, and I am like a Father to you. When God says, 'you shall not murder,' He also says, I am a God who loves and values life.

And today, when God says to us, do not commit adultery, he's saying, "I am a faithful God! I keep my commitments. I don't go back on my promises! Even when the relationship is hard, even when my covenant partner is whiny and inattentive, even when my people are a pain in the neck, even when they spit in my face, and hurl insults at me. I will keep my promises to my beloved, I will keep those promises even if it kills me. Which of course, in Jesus' case, it does.

You can make an argument that the whole story of the Bible is the story of God being a faithful partner to human beings even while we are unfaithful. The prophet Hosea and the prophet Ezekiel repeatedly use the image of adultery to describe Israel's sin. Jesus calls the people who refuse to accept his love, a "wicked and adulterous generation." The whole story of the Bible is God coming to people and loving us even when we are unfaithful, even when we go off and chase after trivial pursuits and momentary pleasures. Even though we are miserable partners, even though we cause him pain, even though we disappoint him, he keeps loving us. He is a faithful God. There is no shadow of turning with him.

As people who are made in God's image we are also called to faithfulness and promise keeping. This sermon series is called the shape of love. We all know that God has called us to love our neighbor. The six commandments in this series help make that call a little more specific. Love is a big and beautiful concept; these commandments zoom in and show you the shape of God's love in your day-to-day life. The seventh commandment shows all of us, regardless of marital status, that love looks like keeping your promises and your commitments in all your relationships.

Do you want to make a difference in this world? Do you want to bring change? You see a lot of people these days complaining about how powerless they feel in the face of the problems of the world. One of the best things you can do to bring hope to the world, one of the best things you can do to sow seeds of strength

and kindness in this world is to be a person who is faithful in your relationships. You keep your promises, and you keep your commitments and you do it the way God does it. You do it even when the person you're trying to love is a pain in the neck. You do it even when the person you love isn't always grateful. You do it even when the person on the other end of the relationship needs a lot of your energy and is kind of draining.

Just to get a sense of the power of promise-keeping and faithfulness let's do an exercise. I'm just going to stop for a moment and while I do, I want you to think of the people in your life who have loved you this way. They kept their promises to you even when you were flaky and they kept their commitments to you no matter what and no matter how much of a pain you were, they faithfully moved towards you. I'll give you 20 seconds... Do you have those people in your mind? Now, how significant are those people in your life? How much of who you are, how much of your strength comes from these people? Here's the truth: the people who love you in that faithful, committed, promise-keeping way are the people God uses to make you who you are.

This Wednesday at our Social Concerns meeting we had a visitor named Frank. Frank works at the Kent County Court system trying to help young offenders. Frank walks beside them during their probationary period; he engages with them and helps them get their lives turned around. He told us that one of the hardest things about the process is getting these young people to trust him. At the beginning of their relationship, he tells them, "I'm on your side, I'll be here every Thursday, and we are going to figure this out together," but they don't believe him. They don't believe him because, in the past, every time someone has promised to be there for them, they broke the promise. Adults would say, "I'm here for you! I'll be there Thursday!" and then they wouldn't show up. But when Frank does show up, when he does keep his promise, these kids cling to him. When he keeps his promise, it is water pouring over their thirsty lives. Promise keeping is so strong.

We have baptisms today. When I first saw that we were having baptisms on the day when I was preaching on the 7th commandment my first thought was, "Oh no!" Maybe you thought the same thing. But thinking about this more, I now think this commandment actually matches up pretty well with baptism. They're both about promises!

At some of the weddings I've done, we've added a new wrinkle to the typical wedding liturgy. Just before the bride and the groom make their vows to each other, just before they make those intimidating, 'till death do us part' promises, I walk over to the baptismal font and I take a pitcher of water and pour it into the font. And I say something like: "you are about to make some of the biggest and hardest promises two people can make to each other. You are going to promise to love this complicated person no matter what for the rest of your life. But remember, you do not make this promise on your own strength. You make your promises standing on the promises of God, because at this font God promised to love and support you, for better or worse, in sickness and in health as long as you shall live. You do not keep your promises in your own strength; you do it standing on the promises of God." And that's not just true for married people it's true for all of us who are doing the hard work of trying to be faithful, promise-keeping people.

People of God, as you do this hard, hard work of loving each other by keeping promises and keeping commitments, let me remind you of the strong promises that are under your feet and all around you. Jesus says to you: "I have called you by name, and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." Jesus says, "there is nothing in all creation that can take you from my hand." Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life, the person who believes in me will live, even though that person dies. These promises are unshakeable, and they are all around you. So don't be afraid.

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