

The 7th Commandment: Sex

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, the most recent Scottish government statistics reveal that the divorce rate is up, and data from the Office of National Statistics for England and Wales suggest that over the past 50 years, one-third of marriages have ended in divorce.

And one of the most common, if not the most common reason cited for marriages ending is adultery. So statistically speaking, adultery has a massive impact on our personal lives, on our family lives, and on our society as a whole.

And yet, culturally speaking, adultery doesn't seem to be that big of a deal in the UK. Just take Matt Hancock, for example, the former Health Secretary for the British government.

For the COVID pandemic, Hancock preached a message of hands, face, and space. But he was also caught on CCTV kissing one of his aides, Gina Collard Angelo.

Hancock had brought her onto his staff, and they'd been having a secret affair. Both of them are married, and both of them had three young children. And Hancock resigned from his post, and he ended his marriage.

[1 : 1 6] But a bizarre moral outcry seemed to sweep the UK. Because this was not so much because Hancock betrayed his wife and committed adultery, but because he didn't do it in a socially distant manner.

Rather strange. There seemed to be more anger at his hypocrisy in breaking COVID guidance than there was at his adultery in breaking his marriage vows.

And that was certainly the perspective of the Bishop of Manchester, who said this in a television interview. He said, I think I'm more worried about the fact that he failed to keep the social distancing than I am about the fact that here is a middle-aged bloke having a bit of a fling.

A bishop calling adultery a bit of a fling. On the back of this, an article was published in the Times newspaper, and it was entitled, Dangerous Liaisons to Eight Reasons People Have Affairs.

And it had the stories of five people and their experiences of infidelity. And then a psychotherapist explained the reasons why people stray.

[2 : 2 3] And the article essentially assumed that adultery is a perfectly normal choice. If you're married and the circumstances are right, then it is fine.

And so it's in this area of sex and relationships that our culture is probably most opposed to Christianity. Where traditional Christian beliefs are not seen as being restrictive only, but they're also seen as being dangerous.

Because they are against the basic human rights that people have. And yet the commandment, you shall not commit adultery, could not be more relevant and could not be more needed for us if we are to flourish as human beings.

And so let's think about this commandment and our three headings. They're up on the screen, why it matters. God is for sex. What it means. Sex is for marriage.

And thirdly, how we obey. We obey from the heart. And I'm conscious that this is a tough subject.

And so if you have got any questions about anything that's said, or any questions about how to understand the Bible passages that we refer to, then you can text in any questions.

[3 : 3 6] The number is up on the screen. So first of all, why it matters. It matters because God is for sex. So this commandment, you notice, comes in the negative. You shall not commit adultery.

And so we'll get to what it means, but we need to grasp the positive story that God gives of sex and marriage in the Bible. And then we'll understand why the commandment matters.

First of all, sex is a precious gift from our creator, God. And we see this in Genesis, which is the first book in the Bible, where we get the foundations for sex and marriage.

God created man and woman as complementary. They were made for each other. And God's first command was basically have sex.

So Genesis 1, 28 says this, God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it. So sex was part of God's good design, of God's good purpose from the very beginning.

[4 : 40] Now, of course, there are restrictions. And that's why we've got the commandment. But we need to be clear that God is not some kind of spoil sport. Sex was God's idea.

He designed it to unite a man and a woman within the lifelong commitment of marriage. And so God's definition of marriage also comes from those early chapters in Genesis, in the Bible, in chapter 2, where Genesis chapter 2, verse 24 says, this is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

In other words, marriage is meant to be an exclusive and permanent relationship between one man and one woman, where husband and wife are bound together as one.

In fact, the word for united is the word for stick in Genesis chapter 2. So this one flesh union is meant to express the strongest commitment between a man and a woman.

And so sex is part of that process. It's a bit like relational superglue, and it's meant to keep a marriage secure. It is a powerful force. So God designed sex to take place only in the context of a marriage between a man and a woman.

[5 : 57] And when you get to the New Testament and the passage we read, Jesus also grounds his teaching on this foundation, all through the Gospels, on the foundation of Genesis. And so does Paul in his letters.

And so the seventh commandment matters because sex is powerful, and therefore it shouldn't be misused. Let me just try and illustrate. In our home, we've got a log-burning stove in the lounge. And it's great. I mean, it was so cold last week, I did consider putting it on for the first time, even though it's still August. But within a few minutes, you can light the stove, and it gives us this powerful fire that not only heats the room, but gives a nice warmth throughout the whole house. And yet the log-burning stove is the only place in our house that you're allowed to start a fire. Because if you start one anywhere else, it won't give off a nice warm glow. It won't give off an enjoyable heat. It will be deadly and dangerous, and it will cause all sorts of damage to the house. And so can you see how fire, when it's used within the right setting, is delightful?

[7 : 07] But fire in the wrong setting may be good for a moment, but it is ultimately destructive. And that's how we should understand sex. It is a powerful force that can be both delightful, if it's used as the way God intended it to be used, or it can be destructive if it is misused.

And so God gives sex to be used in the context of marriage, to unite and to deepen love. And yet outside of marriage, it causes great pain and great hurt.

Because sex expresses a union that takes place at a much deeper level than the physical level, because we are more than just physical people. We are whole people, souls, bodies, emotions. And so in the covenant of marriage, we are promising to give ourselves fully and exclusively and permanently to one another. And so sex is God's way for a man and a woman to express this total commitment and to strengthen it.

But there's also another reason why this commandment matters. Because the story of our lives and the story of our relationships in this world form part of the greater love story of God.

[8 : 24] Where human marriage is really meant to be a window onto the marriage between God and his people. In the Old Testament, this is expressed by God's covenant relationship with Israel, his people, where God is fully, exclusively, and permanently committed to them.

So much so that God even says, I was a husband to them. It talks in marriage terms. And so when God's people broke covenant, and when they were unfaithful to God, they were guilty of committing adultery, spiritual adultery.

So the Bible uses marriage in these terms. And then in the New Testament, when Jesus came, he identified himself as the bridegroom. Because he is the fulfillment of God's promises to make a people for himself.

To be to them a husband. And they are the bride. And Paul explicitly expresses this in Ephesians chapter 5. When he's talking to the church, and he's talking about husbands and wives, and how they should behave and relate to one another.

He then says, For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife. Again, using the foundation way back in Genesis. And the two will become one flesh.

[9 : 39] And then Paul says, This is a profound mystery. But I am talking about Christ and the church. And so this one flesh union is an image of the ultimate union between God and his people, between Christ and his church.

Where Jesus gave himself sacrificially for his bride. And his bride is to yield herself back gratefully to him. And so the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is the story of God's great love for his people.

It's a romantic love story that begins in Genesis with the marriage of two people. And then it ends in Revelation with the marriage between Christ and his bride, the church.

So the whole story of the Bible is a story of God's committed, faithful love. And that's when we come to the seventh commandment, You shall not commit adultery.

And we should read it in that context. We are to obey the commandment because of who God is and how God reveals himself to us. He is a faithful, committed, covenant God who loves his people.

[10 : 53] Okay, this of course is completely counter-cultural in today's world. What I'm saying to you this afternoon in church, you won't hear anywhere else in society. Whether in school, primary school, if you're a young person, if you're a teenager in high school, or on TV, or in songs, you won't hear any of this.

This is completely counter-cultural to the world that we live in. And that is why Christianity is viewed as having a low view of sex, seen as restricting sexual freedom.

Whereas the culture is viewed as having a high view of sex because it promotes sexual freedom.

And yet the reality is really very different. And you'll be struck by this if you've read the historian Tom Holland's book, Dominion.

Because he highlights how Christianity revolutionized sex and marriage in the ancient world. So into the cruel ancient world where the bodies of women and of slaves and of children were abused for physical pleasure by men, Christianity gave a far better way of how people should relate to one another.

So in confining sex to marriage between a man and a woman, Christianity demanded in the ancient world that men control themselves. And so it prohibited every form of rape.

[12 : 18] In other words, the Christian sexual ethic in elevating women has been the great civilizing influence in our world. We live in a civilized world because of Christianity, because of God's standards for how men and women should relate to one another.

Holland notes the irony that the values of Christianity that made the world a better place are now derided today and seen as making the world a worse place.

Holland also argues that the hashtag Me Too movement was a recapitulation of the original Christian sexual revolution that demanded no double standards for men, but demanded sex only within marriage.

And so God's good design has always enabled far better human flourishing for people than all the changing attitudes to sex in our culture, whatever that culture has been.

So that's why this commandment matters. It matters because God is for sex within the right context. So secondly, then, what does it mean?

[13 : 30] What it means is that sex is for marriage. God says you shall not commit adultery. So what is adultery? Adultery is sex between a married person and someone who isn't their spouse.

And so the seventh commandment specifically forbids this. Adultery breaks the marriage covenant, which promises faithfulness before God with your spouse.

And that's why sexual intimacy outside of marriage is a terrible act of unfaithfulness. In the Old Testament, it was such a heinous offense that it was punishable by death.

So in Leviticus chapter 20, verse 10, we read, If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death.

So it's clear that God takes adultery very seriously. Our little girl was once asked to describe what God intended when he made Adam and Eve.

[14 : 30] And her response was God made them for each other and told them to stay married together for life. This is called monogamy. Now, this might be a common view of marriage, but monogamy is what God requires.

And so the positive implication of you shall not commit adultery is faithfulness in marriage. Husbands and wives must be faithful to one another as long as they both shall live, as the marriage vow puts it.

So the commandment is kept not merely by not committing adultery with someone, but it's kept by being faithful to your marriage vows, by being a loving, faithful spouse, by guarding your affections and keeping them only for your wife or for your husband.

Because marriage is this covenant relationship that is intended to put a barrier around husband and wife and then destroy all the barriers between them.

And that's what makes a marriage because it is what enables true freedom and intimate love. And yet, because our society is so obsessed by sex, many refuse to believe freedom and love can be found by restricting sex to within the bounds of marriage.

[15:48] And this, of course, began back in the 1960s with the so-called sexual revolution, where pretty much these days anything goes as long as it's consensual.

And yet, has this revolution, has it actually delivered on its promises of greater freedom and more love? Has severing the link between sex and marriage really been better for us as human beings and for us as a society?

Well, not according to the statistics or even the lived experience of people today. So turning away from God's purposes for how we relate to one another has ultimately been destructive.

That is the outcome of the sexual revolution. Sexual liberalization has only succeeded in leaving far more casualties in its wake. Those whose lives have been devastated and ruined by divorce or disease or unwanted pregnancies, broken families, and so on.

Just take the sex industry, as it's called, as an example. Pornography is big business. And yet, it is pornography that fuels slavery in our world, modern-day slavery, because it perpetuates the subjugation and the abuse of women.

[17:08] And so while in our Western culture, we may have more sexual freedom than ever before, but it has produced devastating consequences, causing more pain and more hurt and less freedom and less happiness.

And for those of us in the church, we should not think, and we shouldn't be tempted to think, that the culture is the main problem. Because sadly, the misuse and abuse of God's good gift of sex is a problem in the church.

This past year has seen so many Christian leaders get caught up in all kinds of sexual sin because they've broken the seventh commandment, you shall not commit adultery. I could give, sadly, a long list of names who have been named and shamed in the public eye because of their adultery.

But one of the most devastating for me, I think, was the late Ravi Zacharias. He was a Christian apologist. And on the outside, he had a successful global ministry traveling all over the world.

And yet he was secretly involved in gross sexual misconduct with multiple women. And so God's commandment couldn't be more relevant today.

[18:23] And the reason is, it's because it goes further than just those who are married. This commandment is for everyone. So we shouldn't think, because I'm not married, I'm off the hook with the seventh commandment.

Just remember how Jesus picks up on this commandment in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus applies this commandment far wider and in a much deeper way than merely our outward actions.

So in Matthew chapter five, we read this earlier. Jesus said, you have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery, but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

So Jesus is far stricter in his interpretation of the commandment. The Greek word for lustfully in Matthew chapter five means to long for, to desire, or to covet.

And so it's not the looking that's sinful, according to Jesus, because God made men and women to be attracted to one another. And so we will notice people of the opposite sex, whether their looks or their character or their abilities.

[19:35] But the sin is when the looking becomes lust and the person becomes an object of desire for us. Because whenever we look and imagine the possibilities, then we commit adultery in our hearts.

And so Jesus is saying that God's commandments should govern our inward thoughts and our hearts as well as our outward actions. And so it is all very easy to point the finger at somebody like

Matt Hancock for his adultery or anyone else for that matter.

But what about the three fingers that are pointing back at our own hearts? What Jesus does here is he drills home the meaning of this commandment.

Okay, so why it matters? God is for sex. What it means? Sex is for marriage. Thirdly, finally, how do we obey? Well, we obey from the heart, according to Jesus.

Jesus raises the bar to the highest possible level when it comes to obeying this commandment. He says we commit adultery in our heart when we look lustfully with our eyes.

[20 : 45] So at the surface level, the seventh commandment clearly forbids every sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage. But at a deeper level, it also forbids lust.

And so we are to obey not just by our actions, by what we do or by what we don't do, but we are to obey in our hearts. Because adultery and sexual immorality, whatever it may be, comes from the heart.

Which makes all of us sexual sinners, according to Jesus. Which one of us has never looked lustfully? And that's why the seventh commandment is for everybody, whether we are married or single, whether we are an older person or whether we are a teenager.

None of us can escape the deeply convicting words of Jesus Christ. And we will all feel guilt and shame because we've all fallen short of God's ideal and God's good design and purpose for sex and relationships.

And perhaps for some, it's because of what's happened in the past. Or maybe for some, it's because of what is going on in the present that we know we need to stop. Well, we'll always be tempted by sexual sin.

[22 : 05] David mentioned Psalm 51 and David and Bathsheba. Bathsheba was just having a bath and David looked and it was a lustful look and then David acted.

And so when it comes to obeying this commandment, if we are to obey, we need to guard our hearts hearts to stop us committing sin. Because Jesus also says in the passage we read that all sin leads to hell unless it is confessed and forgiven.

So Jesus said, Matthew 5, 29, if your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body and for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

So Jesus tells us to act quickly, to act decisively, even if it causes pain, to deal with sin in our lives. And in particular, Jesus mentions how our eyes can cause us to sin.

And with all the sexual images everywhere in our world today, everywhere you look, our eyes can easily lead us astray and lead us to lust.

[23 : 15] So for example, porn, pornography is accessible on a TV, a computer, a smartphone. And so the obvious application of Jesus' words here is to protect ourselves by taking action against it.

Because unless we search our hearts and unless we own up to our own weakness and our own failure, we haven't yet grasped what God actually requires of us in this commandment. but we're not going to end our talk today in despair because the good news is that we don't need to be defeated by sexual sin.

Every sin, including all sexual sin, can be forgiven. And that's why Christianity gives hope to everybody, whether you call yourself a Christian or not.

Because the reality is that all of us have failed to keep this commandment, just like we fail to keep every other commandment. And that's why our hope is Jesus.

[24 : 15] Because he's the only one who kept this commandment perfectly. Jesus never committed adultery. Jesus never looked at a woman lustfully. And Jesus lived with perfect purity.

Jesus lived a life that we can never live, a life without sin. And Jesus died the death that we deserve to die. Death for our sins, including sexual sins.

And so Jesus Christ fulfills the seventh commandment for us. And the good news is that for every single one of us, our broken lives and our sinful hearts can find forgiveness and can find a new start.

You know, there's a great story in John's Gospel, chapter 8, where a woman was once caught in adultery and she was dragged to Jesus. And all the religious leaders, they said that the law demands that this woman, because she had broken God's law, she demanded, sorry, the law demanded that she must be stoned because of her sexual sin.

And Jesus said, let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. Jesus used the woman's adultery to get the religious leaders to check their own hearts, to convict them of their own sin.

[25 : 39] And then when none of the religious leaders was left to condemn the woman, Jesus said to her, neither do I condemn you. And then he declared, go now and leave your life of sin.

So his words to the woman caught in adultery are also his words to us. Jesus doesn't condemn us when our faith is in him because he has been condemned in our place on the cross, which means our sins, even our sexual sins, need not condemn us.

Jesus has come to forgive us, but not to stay as we are, but in order to transform us by his grace and his love. And that's why we must never give in or give up, whether we're single or married.

But we should continually seek to honour God with our hearts and with our bodies, confident that God knows what is best for our flourishing as human beings.

He knows better than we do what is best for us and our sexuality and our relationships. And so as we set our lives on obeying him, then he will satisfy our deepest desires.

[26 : 52] And so in our hook-up, shack-up, break-up culture, God's way will always be counter-cultural. But it will always prove best for individuals, for marriages, for families, and for society.

Because the gospel of Jesus Christ gives us a far better story for sex and for marriage than anything this world can offer. It gives us a far better story that no experience in this world can ever compete with.

Because in Jesus Christ, we receive one who is so committed to us with faithful love that he will never, ever leave us.