

**You shall not commit adultery**  
Men's Bible Study at Park View  
November 29, 2005

**Scriptures:** Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10; Matthew 5:27-32; Matthew 12:39; I Corinthians 7:2-5

Our lesson today is focused on the seventh commandment. It was most likely addressed to Hebrew males for the purpose of protecting the property of one man from infringement by another, since wives were considered the property of their husbands in ancient Israel. Even in this sense, it provided a legal safeguard for the dignity and respect of women above that of surrounding cultures. But Jesus re-interpreted this commandment, introducing an even greater level of dignity for women. Jesus lifted the standards for marriage and sexuality far above that of the Mosaic law code.

Scholars have noted that the original use of the Hebrew word "naaph" (translated adultery) was to describe our human tendency to serve more than one God, or a God other than Jehovah. So the adulteration of the spiritual relationship between God and humankind became a metaphor for the adulteration of the sexual relationship between husband and wife. We still use the term "adulteration" to describe the mixing of a base substance with a pure substance. The pure substance is weakened or rendered impotent by this adulteration. That is a description of what happens when one of the partners in a marriage commits adultery.

The seventh commandment is one of several that are reinterpreted by Jesus. Jesus moved from mere physical measures of adultery to emotional and spiritual measures. (See Matthew 5:27-32). Elton Trueblood commented that "it is interesting to note that there is some progress in the Bible in regard to divorce, but that the movement is not, as we might suppose, toward greater looseness; it is a movement toward greater strictness" (*Foundations for Reconstruction*, p. 78).

Jesus not only reinterpreted the Mosaic law regarding adultery but also on divorce as an expression of adultery. The "exception clause" in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 likely refers to fornication committed by a fiancé during the engagement period (see Matthew 1:18). Jewish laws required a divorce to break an engagement. Jesus sought to restore things to the way they were "in the beginning," (see Genesis 2:24). Therefore he taught that humans must not separate or adulterate what God has joined together. This speaks to the issue of polygamy as well as divorce.

Martin Luther commented that the murder commandment had to do with the next door neighbor; this commandment has to do with the neighbor next to us in bed. Adultery is an act that can kill at least the non-physical parts of the human being. And acts of adultery have often led to physical killing.

The seventh commandment singles out adultery. However, other passages in Old Testament law condemn premarital sexual intercourse, homosexuality, rape, incest, and

bestiality. Many New Testament passages warn against sexual immorality. See, for example, Romans 1:24-27 and Ephesians 5:3-7.

Adultery usually involves the breaking of other commandments, such as the prohibitions against lying and stealing. At the least, adultery involves the breaking of a vow. This seriously undermines the trust in a marriage relationship. Thus, “marriage, its promises, and the manner of life it entails, are the God-given means to avoid the self-deceit and violence that seem inherent to sex without promise” (Hauerwas and Willimon, *The Truth about God*, p. 96).

“When a relationship is thought to be fragile, lying seems necessary to sustain it. When our conversation as men and women is upheld by the promise of marriage, we can risk telling the truth to one another, which is one reason why many experience marriage as liberating rather than restricting, because it may be their first experience of being truthful with another human being in a society full of lies” (Hauerwas and Willimon, p. 99).

“We live in an adulterous age. We live in an age when promises and faithfulness, the hard work of fidelity, to values, to the moral life, seem secondary to the drive to attain fleeting scraps of pleasure” (Chris Hedges, *Losing Moses on the Freeway*, p. 116). One of the reasons that adulterous sex has become epidemic in our society is because capitalism has found a way to sell it in many forms. “Having sex” is a relatively recent term that expresses a sort of commercial exchange between individuals by consent. It may involve no commitment beyond the moment of “transaction.”

In contrast, sexual expression within marriage is symbolic of a much broader commitment. As Weatherly has said, “Marriage is a job at which we must work from the first “I do” until “death do us part,” and in direct proportion to the industry with which we apply ourselves to the task” (*The Ten Commandments in Modern Perspective*, p. 106)

In an age that values free expression of sexual urges, Elton Trueblood’s words ring true -- the beauty of sexual life “comes neither by repression nor by unlimited expression, but by *discipline*” (p. 72). William Barclay expressed this truth in similar words, “The hallmark of a real man is self-control and self-discipline.” “To allow our sexual passions to master us is to allow the animal part of us to be supreme, and to allow the part of us that is true manhood to be defeated” (*The Old Law and the New Law*, p. 33).

**In sum:** Christians can say with certainty on the basis of both Old and New Testaments that married men and women are called to be faithful to each other in marriage. Jesus taught that men and women must not indulge in lustful thoughts, sexual acts or other behaviors that weaken or defile their marriages. To do so is to commit adultery. Beyond the scope of this commandment, we know that Christians must not engage in sexual immorality or sexual activity outside of marriage.

**Questions to ponder:** What makes adultery so destructive in marriages? What is the best way to protect a marriage against adultery?