

The Seventh Commandment

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Genesis 39:1-10 ESV

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

To the matters you wrote about: It's good for a man not to touch a woman. But given the incidence of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband. The husband should fulfill his "obligation" to his wife, and the wife likewise to her husband. The wife is not in charge of her own body, but the husband is. And the husband likewise is not in charge of his own body, but the wife is. Do not deprive each another, except for an agreed upon period of time so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that satan may not tempt you through your lack of self-control. I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish everyone could be the way I am. Yet each one has a particular gift from God; for one it's this, for another it's that.

I say to the unmarried and to the widows that it's good for them to stay that way, as I do. But if they lack self-control, they should get married, because it's better to get married than to be on fire.

Children's Story

There's a song we grown-ups always like to teach little children to sing, a song all of you know: "Jesus Loves Me."

Jesus loves me, this I know,
for the Bible tells me so.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
The Bible tells me so.

But wait a minute. It was almost 2000 years ago when that part of the Bible was written! It was almost 2000 years ago when Jesus was loving little children! Does Jesus still love little children today? How do we know that? How do we know Jesus hasn't changed his mind?

Because Jesus' love is true love, and true love is forever. True love is faithful. True love never changes its mind. That's why we sing that song today, 2000 years later. Because we know that Jesus still loves little children, loves them with the truest love of all.

Sermon

Today we come to the Seventh Commandment, which brings us at last — after idols and names, after mom and dad and murder — to sex. Now, the Seventh Commandment is not about sex in general. It's not about how to do it, or when, or where. It's not about pregnancy or birth control. And it's not about "safe sex." The Seventh Commandment is about one kind of sex, adultery, and it's against it. Adultery: that's when two people who aren't married to each other are having sex, even though one of them — or both of them — is married to someone else. The Seventh Commandment has no room for adultery. Adultery, we learn in Leviticus 20, was punishable by death. Actually most people are against adultery. The exception would be the people who are busy doing it.

Adultery is hurtful and destructive. A married person who commits adultery damages his or her marriage, damages his or her spouse. People these days are fussing about what marriage really is. But marriage remains an exclusive and committed relationship, a relationship of two people bound together by promises, bound together not for a month, not for a year, not for seventeen years, bound together not for as long as it works, bound together not as long as no better options come along, but bound together for life. Marriage is by design a relationship you can count on. Unless death intervenes, you will have someone beside you, a partner, when you lose your job after nineteen years or when your granddaughter is baptized or when you're figuring out how to get around on a new knee. Adultery tears the fabric of commitment and trust that marriage is made of. At the least, adultery leaves a spouse feeling vulnerable. At the worst, adultery leaves a spouse rejected and discarded. Yes, accident or illness can end a marriage. Marriage is always only until death. But adultery is no accident. Adultery is a choice, a willful destructive act that kills something inside the spouse. In its own way, adultery is an act of murder.

Then there's the question of the other person's marriage. Commit adultery with someone who is married, and you damage that person's marriage, damage that person's spouse. One way of summing up the commandments is to "love your neighbor as yourself." There is no love for your neighbor, however, when you tear the fabric of your neighbor's marriage by having an adulterous relationship with your neighbor's spouse. Joseph, on the other hand, tempted again and again by Potiphar's wife, refused to give in. He would not violate Potiphar's marriage, or his trust. But how do you love your neighbor, if you erode the trust in your neighbor's marriage? How do you love your neighbor, if you leave your neighbor with no one to count on?

I said most people are against adultery, but that's not always the case. We know that no marriage is a perfect relationship of trust and commitment. We know that, before adultery happens, the marriage is already in trouble. With that in mind, we might somehow excuse the adultery, and contemporary storytellers often encourage us to do just that. But adultery is nothing less than a selfish response to a marriage in trouble. There is a better way. There is the way of patience and prayer.

Perhaps, though, the marriage is finished, is beyond hope. Perhaps divorce is the sad, but somehow unavoidable, choice — "hardness of heart" and all that (cf. Mark 10:5). Then divorce in order to end the marriage. Do not divorce, however, in order to marry someone else you've had your eye on. Do that, and the paperwork may all be in order, but Jesus said it's adultery nevertheless (cf. Mark 10:11-12).

Adultery is a sin against the neighbor, but it's more than that. **Adultery is a sin against God.** Adultery is a sin against the image of God. God is a maker and keeper of promises. Much of the Old Testament is a story of God's faithfulness to Israel. God took Israel as his bride. But Israel again and again proved faithless, committing adulteries by building relationships with other "gods" and offering herself to them. Yet God never let go of Israel. God always took his wayward, adulterous bride back. God never exchanged Israel for another people, never traded her in on a newer, flashier model with shinier hair, whiter teeth, and more sensual hips. God is a maker and keeper of promises. To be in the image of God is also to be a maker and keeper of promises. But to commit adultery is to break the promises of marriage. It is to violate the image of God and its promise-keeping character.

Adultery is also a sin against the generous provision of God. God provides a place for the satisfying expression of our sexuality. When we bind ourselves to another in marriage, we have a lifetime sexual partner. With patience and love, as time goes by, we can get better and better at giving and receiving sexual pleasure. Adultery, however, is a rejection of what God provides in favor of something illicit: the lure of

forbidden fruit, the tease of the quick fix. Adultery is a variation of the old, original sin. It's our imagination telling us that we know better than God. It's the devil telling us that once again God is holding out on us, that there are untold pleasures awaiting us, if we just cross over the line and if we just ignore the damage to our own spouse or to someone else's, never mind to ourselves.

Adultery is a bad thing. **So, what do we do about it?** First, we have to be on our guard. Our Catechism warns about "actions, looks, talk, thoughts, and desires" which "incite unchastity" (A109). Some of this is outside us. Advertisers, clothing designers, novelists, movie producers, drug companies . . . so many people want us to be thinking constantly about sex. They want to keep stirring up our sexual appetites, to make us hungry for what we don't have. They want us to buy their beer or their sporty hatchback. But we may skip that, buy their worldview instead, and start shopping around for more sex.

So we need to be careful, to be alert, to be aware of this outside stimulation. And with the Spirit's help — we are temples of the Spirit, after all, not mere shells of desire — with the Spirit's help, we need to reject the manipulation.

We also need to monitor our inner life. Temptations come from outside at first. But we store them away. We remember the images and replay them, stirring up our own fires. We may live in a sex-saturated culture, but we often choose to be saturated. We decide what to read, what to watch, what to listen to. We decide what to revisit in our memories.

Now, there's nothing wrong with sex. There's nothing wrong with thinking about sex. And there's nothing wrong with noticing someone's sexual attractiveness. The question is, where do we let our thoughts run?

We have to be on our guard. That's the first thing. We also have to be considerate. It's not only about how we are tempted, it's also about how we tempt others. That includes what we choose to talk about with others. It includes the way we encourage others to look at and evaluate people. Reducing people to mere objects of sexual desire is not right. Nor is dressing ourselves in ways that arouse everyone who looks, tempting others to sin in their hearts, even if nowhere else.

What can we do about adultery? We can be on our guard. We can be considerate. And we can be passionate in our marriages. "Satisfy each other," the Apostle says (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:2-5). "Drink deeply from each other; be intoxicated with each other," says Proverbs 5 (cf. vv. 15-19). The Bible is in favor of sex, really good sex. And it sees marriage as the place for it — your own marriage, not your neighbor's!

The Bible, of course, says a lot more about sex. One book of the Bible, the Song of Songs, is an extended, poetic celebration of sex. But adultery? That's another matter altogether. Adultery is destructive. It destroys marriages. It destroys the people who belong to those marriages. But God did not give us sex for destructive purposes. Sex that harms people — not just adultery, but sex of any kind that is harmful — sex that harms people, sex that damages relationships, sex that leaves people vulnerable and insecure, that is not a good thing, not for us, not for anyone. Sex the way God intends it, however, is a good thing. And if that's part of your life . . . enjoy it!