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THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT: THE POWER OF ADULTERY

SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE

We come today to the seventh commandment in Exodus 20: "Do not commit adultery." Adultery: sexual activity in violation of the marriage covenant. Don't do it. Two little words in the Hebrew Scriptures – *lo tin'af*.

Many argue that the old tradition of exclusive, life-long monogamous marriage is an outmoded institution. Oh, marriage is fine, but you really should be free to do and try other things. Try an internet search on the phrase, "Is marriage outdated?" and you will get back page after page of comments, blogs, postings and discussion groups on whether or not marriage and the concept of adultery still carry any social or individual weight in today's world. Perhaps adultery is a concept best left in days gone by and the pages of the Scarlet Letter.

One self-proclaimed Christian website states, "extramarital sexuality with the active participation of both spouses that is marriage enhancing may not be adulteress [sic] at all." It goes on to say, "Christ's laws of love and the golden rule support today's loving, respecting, non-monogamous relationships. The only real difference is that women now have the same rights of sexual excitement and variety that men had in the time of Christ."¹ This perspective is far from unique in our world today. Maybe it's OK?

So why is this commandment here? What did YHWH really intend when he communicated this command to his chosen people through Moses? It seems pretty simple to understand and grasp—be married and don't have sex with anyone else. But maybe it just doesn't apply anymore. What's behind it? Does it still carry any weight? Are we wasting our time in today's enlightened, self-sufficient world?

Let's take a look and see if we can discern what lies beneath this command, and whether there is more to it than an ancient and perhaps now irrelevant word.

The Unbridled Love of YHWH

Last year, I read a little book by James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God*. It was given to me and looked mildly interesting, but certainly didn't seem like anything that would really resonate with me at the time. So I slotted it into my ever-growing queue of books to be read. Finally, I picked it up. To be honest, it's got a cool cover and caught my eye.

As I read through the first chapter I found myself agreeing with phrase after phrase he had written. I thought to myself, I could have written that! I felt like Smith was reaching into my head and pulling phrases right out of me I didn't know I had! For the first time in my life, I articulated in my own mind the thought that I really didn't believe that my Heavenly Father loved me. I thought he did, but did I really believe it? It was an intellectual concept, but not one I felt in the depths of my soul. At best, I had to admit that I thought God tolerated me. Yes, I am saved by grace, I believe in and belong to Jesus Christ, but ultimately God merely tolerates me, and frankly I'm not sure why.

So I began to wrestle with the concept that God really does love me with a deep and unbridled love. I began to ask him that I might, for the first time, really feel that love, experience it in a visceral way. And I believe that this is the first key to us fully understanding the motivation

that God gives us for obeying this command—do not commit adultery.

In fact, the entire Decalogue is born out of this love. Far from being the restrictive and oppressive rules the world would have us believe, YHWH's Ten Commandments are a reflection of the very essence of his character. They are given to us so that we would know how to live in resonance with him. Every commandment reflects what YHWH has done for us out of his boundless love. Therefore, we are called to do the same in relation to him and in relation to others out of gratitude and a desire to live as he intended.

Adultery, as tempting as it may be in trying and seemingly impossible situations, is not a path to happiness. Far greater is the calling to remain faithful, reflecting God's character in a world desperate for truth and salvation. Faithfulness to your mate and faithfulness to your God transcend human feelings of happiness and wellbeing. As God's people, we are carriers of his image on our journey to Heaven—a far greater calling than any temporal emotion or sensation provided by adultery of any sort.

The Call of Love – Where It All Starts

It all started when God reached out and loved us first and unconditionally. From the very first calling of Adam, to Jesus' dying words on the cross, God's words and actions for humankind are laden with love. God calls Abraham:

"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:2-3 NIV)

YHWH's intentions from the beginning were that all nations of the earth would be blessed. His intention was to love Abraham with an unbridled care and affection that would equip him to carry out the commission that was his. Abraham was not threatened, coerced or forced into obedience. He was loved by YHWH.

The Call of Love – Where It Crescendos

Jesus on the cross looks out at a world that is in the act of crucifying him with no mercy and no cause. What does he say?

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. (Luke 23:34)

Jesus pours out love on those who hate him, even those who callously play a game to divide up a dead man's clothing. Through this act on the cross, Jesus provides a way of salvation for his own murderers! We stand in awe of that kind of love. Why then will we not accept it ourselves? Why is it valid for everyone else, but not for us?

The apostle John showers us with reflections of God's love:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

The Call of Love – The Earthly Metaphor

God is crazy about us! He is passionate about his people. David Roper, in his reflections on Solomon's Song of Songs, sees the great love poem as both a joyous celebration of human love and marriage, but also a powerful metaphor for God's abundant love for his people: "On one level it is a description of the purest human love we can imagine, but at the same time, on a deeper level, it reflects our love for God and his unfathomable love for us."² He goes on to say, "God wants you... simply because he loves you. He cannot take his eyes from you. You are radiantly beautiful. Whatever your heart may be saying at this moment this is truth: God is the lover of your soul. He sees you not as you are, but as you shall be: his radiant bride."³

The Call of Love – Beware the Corruption

It is this love that prompts Solomon to write in Proverbs 5:

My son, pay attention to my wisdom,
listen well to my words of insight,
that you may maintain discretion
and your lips may preserve knowledge.
For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
but in the end she is bitter as gall,
sharp as a double-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death;
her steps lead straight to the grave. (Prov 5:1-5)

It is the love of a father, the Heavenly Father, that warns us against the folly of pursuing adultery. It is this love that helps us understand that the lure of the corrupt vision is sweet as honey and as appealing as the finest olive oil, but the results are bitter gall and deadly as the most dangerous weapons of war.

Satan wants us to think of YHWH as a great cosmic spoilsport, eager to quash any semblance of delight. Reality is, God is a lover of people, eager for us to experience the fullness of his love and his life. Ironically, most people who commit adultery are seeking love in the first place. But it turns into a futile pursuit that exchanges moments of physical or emotional excitement for bitter bile not only for the adulterer, but also for his family and his community.

Adulterous living is an enticing chord that seems to offer life and adventure but results only in broken relationships, and in its wake the foul stench of broken commitment.

And that brings me to our second major point. In addition to God's unfettered love for people, this seventh commandment stands with YHWH's eternal commitment.

The Certain Covenant of YHWH

If we take seriously scripture's position that marriage is a metaphor for God's love and commitment to us, then we must view this commandment in that light also.

Signing up for the Ten Commandments embodies signing up to be a part of Israel's story, and more importantly, Israel's God, the one true Lord YHWH. In so doing we are signing up for the same costly way of living embodied by YHWH in the person of his son Jesus. Jesus' life and ministry was one of constant sacrifice, in his life and teaching, and ultimately his death on the cross.

Resisting adultery is no different. Marriage can be, and for most couples is, a very difficult commitment. Let's face it; marriage can be just plain hard and at times seemingly impossible. The temptation to escape the pressures, the emotions and the challenges, whether through emotional or physical adultery, can seem overwhelming.

From the beginning, YHWH makes clear that he is the author and keeper of covenant with Israel and all who will follow him. To Abraham he says:

"I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." (Gen 17:6-8)

Covenant Broken – The Symphony Gone Sour

YHWH's covenant is everlasting covenant. He will not violate his covenant with his people and betray them. Therefore his people are to do the same or else they are outside of his intentions—not just in violation of his guidelines for life, but fundamentally outside and out of tune with his design.

To live in adultery is to live in opposition to the covenant, out of tune with God's song, violating the very character of God. Therefore, his people are to be pure in this area lest they fall out of God's song, like a violin out of tune and on the wrong page of music from its orchestra. Only disaster can result.

Covenant Broken – Devastating Consequence

Waldemar Janzen says: "While all sexual aberration has grave consequences, nothing threatens the family like adultery."⁴ One man wrote of the aftermath of his adulterous affair:

"The carcass of the plane lay strewn across the ground, gnarled sections spread around like a jigsaw puzzle. This scene played through my mind as I thought about the destruction that I had perpetrated upon my own family by my unfaithfulness. I tried to imagine the daunting task of putting the pieces of my marriage back together in the wake of the affair... Like the shattered plane, some pieces have been put back into place. However, sin comes with a price, and our marriage is forever changed. Restored sections lack the original luster and many scraps still litter our lives. The reconstruction has begun. The process is a lifelong commitment."⁵

To carry the metaphor a little further, I once had a man tell me "why should I care what others think about my choices? Doesn't anyone care about my happiness? I need this." What he failed to realize is that every man and woman is flying an airplane. There are passengers in that plane—children, parents, extended family, friends, neighbors, co-workers. When that plane crashes, many are wounded. The wreck leaves few untouched.

How can we expect our children to grasp and embrace God's loyal love if we pursue adultery for our own gratification? A child's perception of God is shaped primarily by mom and dad, particularly dad. Yet the Christian community suffers from an epidemic of fathers and mothers who give in to the siren song of adultery, whether it be literally another man or woman, pornography, cyber-sex, addiction to fantasy, escape to a self-indulgent lifestyle or an obsession with work, success, power and status.

Lo t'nafh had to be in the Ten Commandments; it's an absolute must. Without it, how could we learn to fully trust God? How would Israel grasp the earthly picture so powerfully reflective of God's covenant? Israel was intended from the start to be a paradigm, a model for the nations—a product of God's character.

John Durham says, "The integrity of the Israelite's relationship with YHWH himself was at stake. Everywhere in the ANE, Israel included, adultery was a crime against persons, but in Israel it was first of all and even more a crime against YHWH."⁶

So, the rejection of adultery not only serves to preserve and protect the family, the building block of community and therefore the nation, but also preserves the integrity of God's revelation of himself to the world. How could a nation given over to adultery reflect the character of a God who is incapable of committing adultery against his own people, or for that matter humankind on the whole? How can we as Christians, the new Israel, hope to play a song of grace and redemption in the world around us if we are just as beholden to adulterous living as that very same unsaved world?

So also must we be mindful that as God's people we have the profound calling and responsibility to care for our neighbors. Like the Good Samaritan, we are called to be agents of life to all with whom we come into contact. As such, we are to foster and encourage integrity and sexual purity in all the marriages and families we know. Adultery tears families apart and it tears communities apart.

Obedying this law is costly and sacrificial—but God's reputation and character are on the line. He longs to give us what we need to walk in purity and is swift to forgive when we fail. And that brings us to our final major point today, and that is the Amazing Grace of YHWH.

The Amazing Grace of YHWH

The Full Extent of Adultery

No look at this commandment would be complete without an understanding of how Jesus saw it. How did he understand and communicate the essence of this word? We need to start by looking at how he interpreted and filled out the seventh word:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt 5:27-28)

In one simple phrase, Jesus blows the boundaries off of Israel's understanding of the commandment. This commandment is not simply a matter of physical actions, but Jesus shows us, it is a matter of the heart. The devastating realization is this: we are ALL adulterers.

What do we do with this? We've already seen that God gives us abundant motivation through his unbridled love and through his inviolable covenant. But now we realize that we all stand in violation of this commandment. What do we do?

The Full Extent of Grace

I would offer that the first thing we need to do is recall that God's law, in fact all that YHWH is about, is redemptive. Remember, God called Abraham and later redeemed and delivered Israel well before the commandments were given. The law was given only after mercy and grace were exercised in abundance. The law is sanctifying: it teaches us how to live as God's people, not how to be saved. Amazingly, God gives us not only the means to fulfill the law—the Holy Spirit—but also the ongoing grace and forgiveness to restore us when we fall short. Remember that powerful scene when Jesus was confronted with a woman caught in adultery? His response to her?

Jesus stood up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:10-11)

If you recall, Jesus had bent down to write in the dirt. Many scholars believe that what he wrote was actually the Ten Commandments. No one, NO ONE can live up to these standards. So what do we do? We start by acknowledging that we cannot meet the mark. Then the law has done its work. Then we embrace the truth that, like that woman on trial, we are not condemned.

God is not looking for us to break his law in order to pounce in judgment. Rather, he desires to give us the resources to walk in his law

in order that we might experience the fullness and joy of a redeemed life. We may be tempted to view adulterous living as a source of human happiness, but God says, I have something far better. I think that is what's going on with David when he says, “I love your law!” He goes on to say:

**How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
I gain understanding from your precepts;
therefore I hate every wrong path. (Ps 119:103-104)**

There is nothing sweeter to the human soul than to walk in paths of righteousness, resonating with the Spirit of God. That's why worship is so sweet. Our times of song, prayer, giving, fellowship, hearing from God's word are all times of worship. These times re-tune us to God's frequency after our days and weeks of resonating to the world's frantic and dissonant tune.

This is what was to draw nations to Israel. First, its miraculous redemption by the grace of God, followed by a life radically different, characterized by justice, love and a life of peace under the tent of YHWH's covenant. Obedience to covenant law enables us to live holy and distinctive from the world, not as superiors, which is so often the attitude in Christian communities, but to live in a winsome way that draws unbelievers to ask: what's different here? Why is there so much love? Why is there so much acceptance? Why is there so much grace?

The unbridled love of YHWH, the certain covenant of YHWH, the amazing grace of YHWH—three pillars behind the seventh commandment.

So, what do we do with this? Where do we go with this two-word commandment?

Reflections

The Power of Adultery

In ancient Israel, the family unit was a powerful entity in the culture. Three and often four generations would live on the same land, even in the same household. (In our culture, this is a fearfully frightening thought.) Related households in Israel would then form a clan, usually with a territorial identity, and constitute a societal entity with shared duties of economic, social, judicial and military responsibility. Adulterous relationships would send shock waves through these communities. The ripples would wound several generations, several families and even entire communities as infidelity and distrust were sown.

We've lost much of this in today's world. In our therapeutic culture, we explain away and justify. We value individual achievement so much that we often fail to even note, much less address, the wounds perpetrated by adultery.

I recently counseled a couple and as we reviewed her temperament profile, I looked at her and said, “You know, I think the term self-loathing is not inappropriate in describing how you look at yourself.” With tears streaming down her cheeks and pain in her eyes she nodded, yes. As we probed deeper it became all too apparent that so much of her pain is rooted in her father's emotional infidelity to both her and her mother. This young woman grew up under the specter of adultery and only now is beginning to experience the deep and treasuring love of her heavenly Father.

We are tempted to minimize the pain of adultery, yet its tentacles of pain reach deeply into the hearts of so many around us. Christopher Wright, in his outstanding work *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, says: “God created man in his own image—male and female he created them. Human sexuality is a dimension of the image of God in human life and is therefore intimately precious. The wise person avoids any abuse of it.”⁷ Indeed, we must understand the power of adultery and do everything we can to hold fast to the commitment.

Our Responsibility to the Community

Next, we must understand and take in all seriousness our responsibility in the community. We are emissaries, the presence of God, salt and light in a world that is rotten to the core and dark with death.

Light chases away darkness while salt preserves and flavors. Are we functioning in our communities in a way that upholds the beauty and sanctity of marriage? Are we encouraging our neighbors to tend to their marriages, to get away and enjoy life as couples, to learn how to communicate in a healthy manner? When is the last time you took another couple out to dinner to encourage and bless them? How about taking their kids for a weekend so they can get away? Maybe there's a couple down the street barely making it financially. How about gifting them a weekend away on the coast?

Are we acting with integrity with our neighbors? Are we communicating and relating in a way that is pure or flirtatious? Are we protecting their reputations? We have a responsibility in the community to be marriage encouragers and preservers.

Proactive Efforts In Marriage

And what about our own marriages? Husbands, are you initiating and dating your wives, cultivating romance, communicating with them? Are you drawing her out, giving space to her emotions, probing her thoughts, concerns and feelings? Rick Reilly in a recent column in *Sports Illustrated* posed the hypothetical question from a wife: “‘Why can my husband discuss the Vikings for two hours but us for only two minutes?’ Answer: Men like things simple. Black/white. Win/lose. But relationships are grey/slippery. Not once has a ref brought two coaches together and said, ‘While it’s true you won 49-0, I felt the way you treated him in the third quarter was a projection of your own insecurities, so, actually, you lose and he wins. Shower up.’”⁸

It’s tough for us guys. But we need to go there in proactive cultivation and defense of our marriages. I think this is why Paul calls us to “love our wives” in Ephesians 5. What a curious thing, when you think about it. That we have to be reminded to love the beautiful bride of our youth is indicative, however, of our tendency to engage in our projects, our goals, the mountains we have to climb and the dragons we have to slay. It is all too easy to get so engrossed with our pursuits that we neglect to care for and nurture our wives.

Wives, you don’t have to be reminded to love your husbands. You are natural lovers and nurturers. But you are reminded to serve your husbands—to recognize their need to be encouraged, built up and admired. Will you seek to meet his sexual needs? Paul directs you to allow him to lead. Will you do so even though you think he is wrong? Will you allow him to make mistakes and resist that overwhelming urge to say, “I told you so!”

The Epidemic of Pornography and Fantasy

Will you reject the temptation to engage in the fantasy of the perfect man who will do your every bidding, communicate with perfect transparency, be the great romantic lover you always dreamed of, and best of all, you don’t have to pick up his dirty socks?

Men, will you discipline yourself to stay away from the siren song of pornography—carnal pleasures without the demands of relationship and commitment? Will you swallow your pride and confess your addiction to a trusted brother? It’s time to fight back—whether you are married or single—against the epidemic that is destroying lives at a devastating rate. This is not the time to explore all the effects of pornography and what drives men to it in such enormous numbers, in spite of the shame and guilt that result. But it is time for it to STOP. It’s time we experienced

victory instead of defeat. It’s time we turned from this insidious form of adultery and returned to purity and our wives.

Whether you are single or married, we need a community of men to walk with us, to encourage us to hold us accountable. My son has a great expression when it’s time for a man to stand up and be counted on a matter: “Man up!” It’s time for us to man up, confess our weakness, confess our sins and pursue purity.

A Word To Singles

Finally, I’d like to give a word to our singles. Clearly, matters of sexual purity are every bit as important in your lives whether or not marriage is in your future. But I want to make sure that you are reminded of the fact that there is nothing in your lives any less valuable or less complete by virtue of the fact that you are not married. Marriage is a wonderful institution, a gift from God, but it is not a device by which one is completed before God or in the community. All are free to seek the abundant life that can only be had in the person of Jesus Christ.

As David Roper plainly states: “Single is good. In fact, for some, remaining single is the best option. Listen to Paul: ‘(Marriage is good) yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am,’ that is, unmarried (1 Cor 7:7)”⁹ Roper goes on to say, “The world and its obsession with sexuality had led us to develop a wholly false view of our sexuality. Our sex life is not the measure of our humanity. One can indeed be single and celibate and be human in the fullest sense of the word.”¹⁰

One final word from Roper: “far from curtailing your usefulness, your single status enables you to make the most of our time here on earth—to live...in undivided devotion to the Lord.”¹¹ “There is life beyond love, sex and marriage. It is found in devotion to Christ. If you are not sexual, you will not die.”¹²

Heaven is ahead. Whether married or unmarried, it is only there we will find complete satisfaction. “Whom have I in heaven but you,” says the psalmist Asaph in Psalm 73. “And earth has nothing I desire besides you.”

“Do not commit adultery.” Embodied in these two small Hebrew words are the profound realities of God’s unbridled love, his everlasting covenant, and his amazing grace. May you experience these truths to the depths of your souls even this day.

1. “Biblical Discussion of Adultery,” *Liberated Christians*. Online: <http://www.libchrist.com/bible/adultery.html>.

2. David H. Roper, *Solomon’s Song of Songs* (as-then unpublished manuscript, 2004), 69.

3. Roper, *Song*, 71.

4. Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 2000), 263.

5. John E. Paul, “Rebuilding Trust in the Aftermath of an Affair,” *family.org a Web site of Focus on the Family*. Online: <http://www.family.org/married/stories/a0032526.cfm>.

6. John Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 294.

7. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 369.

8. *Sports Illustrated*, November 7, 2005, 78.

9. Roper, *Song*, Appendix D, x.

10. Roper, *Song*, Appendix D, xiii.

11. Roper, *Song*, Appendix D, xii.

12. Roper, *Song*, Appendix D, xiii.