



## RESTORING COMMITMENT IN MARRIAGE: THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

*SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES*

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Wm. D. Hyatt  
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It is an honor for me to come before you today to talk about commitment in marriage, a subject which is very important to me. My wife Yvonne and I are celebrating thirty years of married life this summer. This is a testimony to God's grace and blessing in our lives—and to Yvonne's patience with me. Thirty years may seem like a long time—and it is—but our marriage gets better and more fun each year.

One reason I like teaching on commitment in marriage is that there is so much said about this topic in the Bible. Another reason is the immense benefit that can come to our daily lives by understanding God's perspective on marriage and his desire for us in our marriages. While our culture has lost its moorings on the issue of committed marriage, God's word is like a beacon to guide us.

First, we will take a brief look at the biblical description of committed marriage; then we will explore the meaning of the seventh commandment and the issues it raises. Next, we will look to the New Testament to see how Jesus and the apostles viewed the commandment; and we will close by considering ways to protect and strengthen marriage.

If you are not married, you may wonder if this message is for you. It is! All of us, married and unmarried alike, have the responsibility of obeying the seventh commandment and of honoring marriage, especially within our Christian community.

God's pronouncement that committed marriage is important and should be honored and protected did not begin with the giving of the Ten Commandments. It was made at the very beginning, in Genesis, and it is reinforced throughout the Bible. In Genesis 2, when Adam and Eve were brought together and marriage was instituted, God said, "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).

This term, "one flesh," describes the biblical view of marriage. When we hear the words "one flesh," we may think of sexual intercourse. But that physical act does not make two people truly *one* in the biblical sense. Sex is meant to express a oneness that is already there as the result of a marital commitment. An emotional and spiritual oneness needs to be present. Mary Farrar says it well in her book, *Choices*: "We can measure our oneness by the loving commitment we have for each other—emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically. Loving commitment is the glue that cements us into 'one flesh.'" This is why sex outside of marriage or in violation of the marriage vow cannot truly be a "one flesh" relationship.

So "one flesh" refers to a physical oneness. But it implies much more. It implies an emotional and spiritual oneness—a oneness of life purpose. One man and one woman as "one flesh," therefore, is the biblical view of marriage from the beginning, long before the giving of the

Ten Commandments.

In the New Testament, Jesus quotes the verse from Genesis (in Mark 10:6-8), and then adds, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (9). Jesus' own words provide both an affirmation of committed marriage and a warning to those who would attempt to damage that commitment. In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul also quotes this Genesis verse to refer to the husband and wife relationship. Finally, in Revelation, a wedding feast, a marriage celebration, is the image used when the ultimate picture of the church's relationship with the Lord himself is described.

So from Genesis to Jesus and the apostles, the concept of committed marriage (one man + one woman = one flesh, oneness), is upheld. This is God's desire for your marriage and mine.

Today, society has reduced marriage to a kind of social contract, a legal device to insure the proper distribution of property should the marriage be dissolved at some point. Sitting in the lobby of a Silicon Valley company a few weeks ago, I overheard part of a telephone conversation of the receptionist. Apparently she had been married recently and was discussing her wedding with a friend. She had to go to some pains to explain why she had gotten married in the first place. It seems she was not very successful in convincing her friend, because at last, I heard her say, "After all, it's just a piece of paper." What a commentary on marriage today! But to Jesus and Paul, to the God of the Bible, committed marriage is far more than a mere social contract, far more than "just a piece of paper." It is this high view of the value and importance of committed marriage that leads to a strong condemnation of adultery in the Bible, and to the establishment of this ancient boundary on our sexual relationships by God and the biblical writers.

It is important to keep in mind the context in which the Law was given. It is a misconception to think that the purpose of the Ten Commandments was to create a legal system whereby one could earn God's redemption and acceptance. Notice God's own words at the beginning of the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deut 5:6). This is one of the great formulas of Scripture, one that is used more than 125 times in the Old Testament. It demonstrates that grace was given *before* commandment, law, or obligation was spelled out by God. God had already freely redeemed the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

Obedience to the commandments was the "acceptance procedure," as it were, of this gift of redemption. Living according to this acceptance procedure meant that the blessings were already built in. God's grace to the Israelites had already been received in their redemption from Egypt and their establishment as a nation. Obedience to God's law would result in fuller benefits, in the abundant

life and blessings which would come from living in a community committed to obeying God.

Similarly, Jesus does *not* say to us, “If you obey me, I will go to the cross, die for your sins, and redeem you.” His death on the cross has already happened. We are free to accept or reject its benefit on our behalf. We may say, “Oh, how we love you, Jesus.” But, the language of acceptance is not words alone; it is obedience. Jesus says, “If you love me you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

So obedience to God’s commandments does not earn us anything, but it does demonstrate the true desire of our hearts. The acceptance procedure has the blessing of godly living built in. It is with this understanding in mind that we now consider the seventh commandment.

## The Seventh Commandment in the Old Testament

The commandment is simply stated (Deut 5:18):

**“You shall not commit adultery.”**

Adultery is defined as sexual relationships by a married person with someone other than their spouse. This commandment, therefore, requires sexual purity from married people. As the T-shirt slogan says, “What part of ‘no’ don’t you understand?”

The Bible views adultery as an extremely serious sin. It is a breach of the marriage covenant, the marriage commitment made to our spouse before God, our family and the community at large. It is so serious that in the OT, like murder, it was punishable by the deaths of both the man and woman. While the biblical law prohibits sexual relationships between unmarried people as well (the Bible calls this “fornication”), the penalty for this was not death. The reason why adultery was distinguished from fornication in the OT was that adultery was not only the physical act, but the breaking of covenants, commitments made to God, to society and to your spouse.

Commitment is the issue. Does the marriage vow that you made to your spouse before God mean what it says? Are you faithful to your promise?

This prohibition of adultery was primarily an issue of morality. As moral law, it was written on the hearts of men and women long before the Ten Commandments were given on Mt. Sinai. A good example of this is Joseph (Gen 39:7-9). Joseph was overseer of the household of Potiphar, an important Egyptian official. Potiphar’s wife attempted to seduce Joseph, but Joseph responded, “How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” Joseph, whose heart was very sensitive toward God, had analyzed this situation correctly. He saw that adultery was a “a great evil” and a “sin against God.” It was a moral issue.

Consider King David. When the full light of truth was shone on his adultery, by the prophet Nathan, how did David respond? Did he say something like, “All marriages go through difficult times”? or “Look, Nathan, Bath and I are both adults. These things sometimes happen.” No. David confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord!” (2 Sam 12:13).

In Proverbs, an adulteress is described as a “wayward wife who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God” (Prov 2:16-17). In Malachi 2:14, an unfaithful man is told that God will not pay attention to his prayers and offerings “because you have broken faith with her (the wife of your youth), though she is your

partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.”

The wisdom literature of the OT states over and over again that adultery is just plain stupid! “A man (or woman) who commits adultery lacks judgment. Whoever does so destroys himself” (Prov 6:32). Adultery is destructive, not only to your spouse and your children, but to you also.

So throughout the Old Testament, adultery is viewed as a breaking of a commitment and a sin against God.

I am sure that many here this morning could speak to the damage that adultery causes, both to innocent bystanders and to the participants themselves. A woman whose marriage was destroyed by her husband’s adultery said recently: “Adultery is not just a matter between two people. It is as hurtful as murder, and the devastating effects never go away entirely. The offenders have the privilege of choosing to engage in adultery, but their families have no choice about the suffering inflicted upon them” (*Christianity Today*). Many of you have been through this pain. You can testify to God’s forgiveness and healing, even though the scars remain.

In the Bible, adultery is used symbolically in the Bible to describe the most blatant idolatry and unfaithfulness of Israel as a nation. Adultery is the metaphor which God, speaking through the prophets, used to describe Israel’s acceptance of the idol worship of the nations around them, and of their rejection of God and his prophets. Passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and a whole chapter of Ezekiel illustrate this theme.

The positive value that the seventh commandment upholds is the sanctity of marriage. It attempts to protect the right to a home, the place where children can be taught about God. The commandment places great weight and value on faithful, committed marriage. Why then is the commandment stated negatively? Moral law is always double-sided. Both the negative form (i.e., refrain from evil) and the positive (i.e., do good) are required in order for it to be obeyed. So both are in view. But, as every parent knows, it is easier to state a negative command, like “Stop!” or “Don’t!” Also, the “bent” of our human nature is toward evil, toward sin. That is the direction in which we are naturally headed. So a strong negative statement meets our human nature head on. That is where God puts the ancient boundary on this area of life.

So in summary, the seventh commandment is given to strengthen and protect the blessing of a faithful marriage and a godly home.

## The Seventh Commandment in the New Testament

Now let us turn to the New Testament and see if Jesus and the apostles continue the Old Testament theme of the prohibition of adultery, and whether they uphold the seventh commandment.

We will begin with the story of the woman caught in adultery. This woman was brought before Jesus by the Pharisees; they were attempting to trap him. But Jesus confronted the doctors of the law with their own sin, and one by one they turned and walked away. Then Jesus turned to the woman, and said (John 8:10-11): “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.” Notice that although Jesus offers her forgiveness, he upholds the standard of the seventh commandment by calling her sin exactly what

it was—sin! His forgiveness abolishes her transgression, not the commandment.

In Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks at greater length about adultery: “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). Jesus’ intention here is *not* to reduce adultery to the level of lust, but to show that lust will destroy your soul as surely as the physical act of adultery. Both the lustful fantasy and the lustful act are sinful. But, as we discussed earlier, it is clear that the damage that physical adultery inflicts—much of it on innocent people—is immense. Jesus does not want to leave the Pharisees—or us—with our own little private area in which to engage in “safe” lustful activity—“safe” adultery.

Why did Jesus focus on our thought life? David Roper suggests that our Lord had at least two reasons for stating the seventh commandment in this form:

1) Our thoughts will determine our actions. Jesus says: “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” You can avoid adultery by avoiding it in your mind. Turn off those fantasies. David Roper points out that sexual failure is rarely a blow out; it is more like a slow leak. Normally, we are not suddenly taken in temptation and overwhelmed by passion. Failure in this area is the result of a long buildup of sexual fantasy, until failure becomes inevitable.

2) Purity of thought protects our relationship with our own spouses. This is an important point. I especially want men to listen to this: Fantasy erodes our love for our partner. It destroys our *single-mindedness* toward our marriage partner. We will become critical of our spouses and claim that we are unfulfilled by them if we force them to compete with an image of a centerfold model that has been burned into our brain, or compete with a description of sexual athletics that occupies our thought life. The principle here is that Jesus calls us to be faithful to our marriage partner in our thoughts as well as our acts.

Continuing with Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, look at what he says in Matthew 5:29-30: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” Jesus is saying that we need to “cut off” access to the things that stimulate improper sexual thoughts in us.

Again, I want to speak directly to the men here. The reference to the eyes speaks of what we might see. Some of these things are obvious: magazines and movies that are suggestive or pornographic. As a businessman who travels, I know that this is an especially difficult area. You may be tempted to think, “Who would know?” Well, the answer is, you would, and God would! “What would it hurt?” you might ask. The answer is obvious: your relationship with your wife!

The words of Job are helpful here: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl” (Job 31:1). Job goes on to say that his eyes might lead his heart, and then his heart might be enticed by a woman. He recognizes the danger in that sequence (eyes, heart, action), and so he says: “For that would have been shameful, a sin to be

judged” (Job 31:11).

Protect your eyes by guarding what you touch. Consider that knob on the television in your hotel room. All you wanted to do was watch the Monday Night football game or the news on CNN. But in flicking through the other channels your eyes and you get into trouble. I know that all you were doing at the magazine rack was looking for the latest Business Week magazine, but it is those other magazines that will cause you trouble in your thought life. Jesus is telling you to watch what you touch.

I am sure that all of us, men and women alike, have our own personal areas of vulnerability. We must get to know our weakest areas and weakest times and build fences around them. Let us lock the “back door” of our life. Paul says, “Make no provision for the flesh (i.e., do not (even) think about how to gratify the desires of (your) sinful nature)” (Rom 13:14).

We also see that the apostles considered adultery as a sinful activity that was very damaging, both spiritually and physically; and that a life characterized by adultery was not consistent with life in the Kingdom of God. As Paul says in 1 Cor 6:9-10: “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Peter warns that the worst kinds of false teachers and false prophets will be characterized by their adulterous behavior: “With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2 Pet 2:14, 17-19). If your life has been touched by adultery, you can surely testify to those “empty, boastful words.”

The writer of Hebrews is very clear in this regard: “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and an the sexually immoral” (Heb 13:4). Marriage is “honorable.” This is a clear statement of both the positive value of faithful commitment in marriage and of the sinfulness of adultery.

As serious and damaging as adultery is, however, it is *not* the unforgivable sin. The Lord himself offers forgiveness to all who turn to him in repentance. Look at 1 Corinthians again. After Paul gives the list of immoral lifestyles in 1 Cor 6:9-10, which we just read, he continues: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (v 11).

In Corinth then, and in Cupertino today, God’s forgiveness is available.

## Summary of the Biblical View

So the Bible has a very high view of faithful, committed marriage. It teaches that a one flesh relationship is not possible outside of a committed marriage relationship. Only when two people are publicly committed to each other, be-

fore God and the community, can they find the complete oneness that God designed marriage to be.

Further, we have seen that in order to protect marriage, a prohibition against adultery was placed in the commandments and in the hearts of men and women. The Bible views adultery as a very serious and damaging sin. It is a “character sin.” Adultery, typically, is premeditated, prolonged, and repeated. It requires a lifestyle of deception and lies to carry it out. Adultery destroys the souls of the participants and damages innocent people. It is no wonder that God himself, the creator of our sexuality, has placed this boundary on our sexual relationships.

## Application

The application of this commandment seems obvious: Do not commit adultery! But that may not be easy. Let’s talk briefly about some of the ways in which we can strengthen our marriages and encourage others in building faithful, committed marriages. Our current popular culture is of no help in this process. As a matter of fact, popular culture is one of the most powerful forces in undermining the idea of faithful, committed marriage. From the President on down, adultery is openly admitted and then ignored by the public as a question of character .

Many television programs are nothing more than adultery with a laugh track in the background. Most popular movies are stories of adultery accompanied by romantic music. The highly regarded movie, *The Bridges of Madison County*, has adultery as its theme. Another new movie that has adultery as its theme is being advertised as the “feel good” romantic movie of the summer. Clearly, our popular culture will be no help to us in honoring our marriage commitments.

As a matter of fact, most people are not even sure what a stable, faithful marriage looks like. In a recent newspaper report, Judith Wallerstein, a lecturer at the University of California, in Berkeley, and a psychologist who has written influentially on divorce, notes that many people she speaks with, both younger, never married, and older, often embittered divorced men and women, claim they have never seen a good marriage and cannot imagine how one works.

So to be faithful to our marriage commitment we need to build some protection into our lives from the onslaught of our culture, our human nature, and our spiritual enemy (the Bible calls these the world, the flesh, and the devil).

To do this, you have to be very honest with yourself about where you are most vulnerable. Know your weakest areas and your weakest times. Then you need to:

1) Discuss these with the Lord and ask for his wisdom and strength to deal with them.

2) Allow yourself to be accountable, to your spouse if possible, but at least to some friends who know you well. Men: you need two or three male friends who have been where you are and who will pray with you and hold you accountable. Women: you also need to develop some honest relationships with other women who are willing to be mutually accountable.

3) Build tangible “fences” around those areas of your life where you are at risk. You may even have to give up

activities and even friends that are not healthy for your marriage commitment.

Finally, you have to work at strengthening your marriage. This is the best part. Be determined to build on the investment you have already made.

1) Start with the Lord. Grow together in him. Ask him to be part of your marriage. Men: the Lord holds you responsible for the spiritual health of your family. Are you encouraging your wife’s spiritual growth? Are you growing with her?

2) Spend time together on a regular basis—without the children! Try to get away for a weekend together a couple of times a year. You can afford it. You cannot afford the alternative. Recently, I asked a friend whose marriage was going through a rough time, when was the last time they both went away together without the children. He thought for a moment, and then said that it had been in 1988. I said, “I think I may have some insight into your problem!”

So work at scheduling a regular time together. Yes, I said “schedule.” Get out your Day Timer. If you don’t schedule it, it will never happen. Building a healthy marriage takes time, but as the book title says, “Good Marriages Take Time, Bad Marriages Take More Time.”

3) Finally, be in fellowship with other couples. Meet with them regularly so that in the Lord you can encourage each other over the rough spots in married life. An important part of obeying the seventh commandment is helping to strengthen and encourage other marriages in the Christian community.

Your marriage is valuable and important, to you and to God. It will require work and prayer on your part—most good things do—but it will be worth it.

I want to close by reading a passage on love by C. S. Lewis, from his book, *Mere Christianity*:

Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing... You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling. Now no feeling can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all. Knowledge can last, principles can last, habits can last; but feelings come and go. And, in fact, whatever people say, the state called “being in love” usually does not last. ... But, of course, ceasing to be “in love” is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both partners ask, and receive, from God. They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other; as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself. They can retain this love even when each would easily, if they allowed themselves, be “in love” with someone else. “Being in love” first moved them to promise fidelity: this quieter love enables them to keep the promise. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run; being in love was the explosion that started it.

May God grant us that “quieter love” that will enable us to keep our marriage commitments.

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