

“Commands With Promise”
“You Shall Not Commit Adultery”

As I continue this series of message on the Ten Commandments I hope we are realizing that a wise and loving God has given us these laws for our own personal happiness and the well-being of society. This is certainly true of the seventh commandment: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). This command is given to protect the sacredness of marriage.

“Adultery” historically refers to a married person having sexual intercourse with someone other than their husband or wife. It is unfaithfulness to one’s marriage partner. But one can have an *emotional* affair even if the relationship is not consummated sexually. Today with electronic communication (email, text, Facetime, dating sites) it’s much easier to get *emotionally* involved with someone who’s not *physically* present. The commandment is clear: marital infidelity is wrong; commitment and faithfulness in marriage is what God wills.

Adultery is not new! In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah spoke against the adultery committed by God’s people. “Why should I forgive you? Your children have forsaken me and sworn by other gods that are not gods. I supplied all their needs, yet they committed adultery and thronged to the houses of prostitutes. They are well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for another man’s wife. Should I not punish them for this?’ declares the Lord. ‘Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?’”(Jeremiah 5:7-9). In chapter 23 of the Book of Jeremiah it says even the *prophets* (the spiritual leaders) were guilty of adultery! *Jesus* more than once referred to His time as an “*adulterous* and sinful generation”

How common is adultery today? It’s really difficult to accurately assess how many partners cheat on their spouse. I read an article in *Psychology Today* that said this: “Marital infidelity is difficult to research because most people are reluctant to admit it. One survey made headlines showing that only a tiny percentage of spouses cheat.” *But the researchers interviewed respondents with their spouses present.* Duh! The article continues, “University of Colorado researchers surveyed 4,800 married women using face-to-face interviews and an anonymous questionnaire. In the *interviews*, only 1 percent said they’d cheated during the past year. But the *anonymous questionnaire* showed 6 percent” (*italics mine*).

Perhaps the best research, the writer of the article maintains, is the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted annually by the University of Chicago researchers. For about a 20 year period (1991-2008) about 20-25% of men and 10-15% of women admitted cheating on their spouse. More recently, in 2018 and 2019, 20% of men and 13% of women admitted infidelity. It is lower for those who attend religious services (that’s encouraging!). Actually, the percent of people believing infidelity is always wrong has *increased* about 10% in recent years (up to 81%).

The author of the *Psychology Today* article adds that it’s also difficult to know how many spouses cheat because people define infidelity in different ways. Some years ago 3 Dear Abby columns were devoted to a survey conducted on the question, “Have you ever cheated on your mate?” Over 210,000 people responded (150,000 women, 60,000 men). Now this was not clinical research or a scientific sampling – just a number of people sharing what they are thinking and doing. 85% of women said they never cheated on their husband (which means 15% did).

74% of men said they never cheated on their wife (assuming then that 26% did). Some of the responses were interesting! One man wrote: "My wife and I are very much in love. We are also sophisticated, mature adults who realize that as we travel along life's way, eventually we will meet others to whom we will be physically attracted, so rather than suppress the normal desire for sexual variety, we choose to express our healthy feelings openly – without denial or deception. Would you call this 'cheating'?" (*Hmm...I would!*) Many who wrote in said their infidelity stemmed from their frustrations with their marriage. One investment broker wrote: "Occasional affairs with call girls keep me sane. It's the only way I can tolerate the emptiness of living with a woman who is unable to show any affection through physical intimacy."

Women also wrote about the boredom and frustration in their marriage to explain why they cheated. But there were also tons of letters from people who had remained faithful, some of whom said they never cheated, never wanted to, never needed to and never expected to. One elderly woman wrote: "Female, married 66 years. I have never cheated on my husband. I am 83 and my husband is 89 and says he can't remember."

I think I can say with certainty that adultery violates God's good will and purpose for us. The Bible never justifies adultery. There is no place in Scripture where adultery is spoken well of, or excused by God! For example, Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." Even if 90% of married people cheated, it wouldn't change God's mind on the matter!

People have affairs for any number of reasons. Boredom, dissatisfaction in marriage, loneliness, low self-esteem. Some cheat on their spouses because they have a sex addiction or a love addiction. Or, it can be a "one night stand", where a decent and honorable person gives in to the weakness of the moment.

Will you permit me for a moment to take off my preacher's hat and put on my marriage and family therapist hat. Here's something to remember: one partner, or both partners, having an affair may well spell the end of a marriage, but not necessarily. While never legitimizing it and saying adultery is ok, it's important to try to understand *the meaning of an affair*. If a couple can understand *why* the affair happened, each take responsibility for their part in it and the brokenness that led to it, marriages can recover. Of course, it takes time to heal, to regain trust, to forgive. I don't think I need to tell you how much adultery crushes people, and causes heartache and chaos in families – and *that's why God is so much against it!*

Perhaps some of you reading this have been in a situation where there has been unfaithfulness. Your husband or wife cheated on you. You know the feelings of rage, often the sense of worthlessness, the unbelievable hurt. God understands what you've been through. He loves you and wants to help you heal. Maybe *you are the one* who cheated on your partner. It's not an unpardonable sin in God's eyes. But you need to confess, ask God's forgiveness, and find the Lord's strength not to do this again. If you, or your partner, has had an affair, and haven't resolved it yet, get some help. Get some counseling. Give your life to God so He can give you a new start!

I think we need to hold up marriage as the pure and beautiful relationship God intends it to be! It's a powerful thing when a husband and wife love each other with a special kind of love reserved for *no one else*. Where each knows that he or she can *trust* each other. Where a couple can look each other in the eye in the sunset years of their lives and say, "Honey, I have kept myself for you and you alone all these years!" I once heard a Christian leader talking about a pastor we both knew, who got involved with another woman. This leader I was talking to said, "In times when I'm tempted to think seriously about another woman, I think about my wife and our children and I say, 'That's too wonderful a thing to destroy'"

The commandment says: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Before I finish this message, I want to look at *what Jesus said about this seventh commandment*. We find our Lord's words on this commandment in Matthew 5:27-28: "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." Jesus, as usual, looked beyond the *outward act* of adultery to the *inward motive and intent* that can lead to the behavior. There is an adultery of the *mind* and *heart* which is also sin. Jesus said if we men look on a woman lustfully, we've already committed adultery with her in our heart. *Guys! Anyone not guilty here?* (Women too can be guilty of sexual lust).

Sexual lust is a problem for many people today – including Christians. Our society is flooded with sexual images, sexual talk, sexual innuendos. The internet and cable TV allow people to view almost any kind of sexual materials in the privacy of our own homes. Many *men* are wrestling with pornography and sexual addictions. *Women* also struggle with sexual addiction (which often plays out in "love addictions").

Research today pretty much indicates that this is a problem for people in the church, as well as the general society. But we in the church are often reluctant to be honest about this. Keith Miller, an author and Christian counselor, once told of leading a conference in a church with the help of several Christian men. They were in a group of men, and it so happened that the men helping him had wrestled with problems of adultery and lust, and they shared with those in the group how Christ was helping them deal with this. But it seemed like they weren't getting through, and the pastor of the church afterwards came to Keith and said, "You must have the wrong men in mind. These men are respected members of our church and on our church board."

Keith worried that he had struck out with this approach, so he sat that night in the office of the church, thinking about a new approach for the morning's meeting. Just then one of the men from the church quietly came in, and talked honestly with Keith about his temptations in this area. Then another man came in...and another. The next day, there was a new atmosphere in the meeting: a spirit of honesty and openness, a sense of compassion and hope.

In some ways, fortunately, the church is beginning to open up about this problem. Christian psychologist Stephen Arterburn, has a bestselling book on sexual temptation, with the appropriate title, *Every Man's Battle*. *Celebrate Recovery* is a Christian-based 12 step recovery program that is being held in a growing number of congregations. Of course, this 12-step

program includes believers struggling with sexual temptations.

Jesus says if we men look on a woman with lust in our heart, we have already committed adultery. What is the lust Jesus is talking about? Jesus doesn't *explain* what He means, so we must try to interpret. I don't believe Jesus is forbidding the normal, healthy sexual feelings and passions that God created us to have. It's natural for men to be attracted to a beautiful woman, or for women to notice a handsome guy. God wired us to have sexual feelings and desires. In fact, if someone is 20 or 30 or 40 years old and has no desire for sex, this could signal either a physical problem or a mental health issue. Sexual fantasizing about each other can help marital partners have a healthy and fulfilling marriage. And just being married doesn't mean that we will no longer feel sexually aroused at times by others besides our spouse!

But the *lust* Jesus mentions seems to be the *untamed, excessive* desire to *possess someone* – to *use someone for our own sexual pleasure and selfish desires*. Lust is dehumanizing. We view someone as an *object* to satisfy our desires and not as a complex human being of value and worth. We can't control the thoughts that come to us – if we're stimulated by a picture or the sight of a sexy person. But we can choose not to *nurse these* thoughts and fixate on them. Acknowledge the momentary attraction...then just move on!

Jesus told us what to do! “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 than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, 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” (Matthew 5:29-30). *That will fix things, right!* Of course, Jesus is using figurative language – deliberate exaggeration - here to say that this is an important matter, and we need to deal with it! “Plucking out our eye” or “cutting off our hand” may mean avoiding a situation where we know we'll be tempted: the magazine, the film, the TV show, the internet, the relationship on Facebook or email. And, we are learning that for those with sex addictions or love addictions, most men and women need counseling and involvement in a 12-step recovery program to recover.

“You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). Maybe you have fallen short of God's will by committing actual adultery. Every one of us has broken this commandment because of lust – adultery of the mind and heart. The good news is that when there is honest confession, regret for the sin and a desire to change, God forgives!

In the Gospel of John, chapter 8, there is a story of how religious leaders one day caught a lady right in the act of adultery and dragged her to Jesus. They say to Jesus that the Old Testament law says that she should be stoned to death. Remember how Jesus handled the situation? After pausing a while, He says to them, in effect, "OK, do it. Those of you who are without sin, you throw the first stone. None of them does, and eventually they all leave the scene. Jesus says to the woman, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more” (John 8:11).

That's the good news for us too!

