

WEEK 8: DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY

SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18



The Place of the Passage

The next commandment related to love for one's neighbor is the seventh: "You shall not commit adultery." With one exhortation this commandment promulgates two requirements for a healthy society: sexual integrity and strong marriages. Adultery is a violation against one's own and one another's sexuality. The seventh commandment opposes all forms of sexual abuse and misuse and promotes the development of healthy sexuality. The seventh commandment stakes out the Bible's concern not only for sexual purity within marriage but for the whole institution sealed by this physical act. The calling to maintain sexual relations exclusively within marriage, commonly regarded today in the Western world as quaint and restrictive, remains an abiding word of wisdom for building communities of love.

The Big Picture

Fostering strong marriages bound by sexual exclusivity between a husband and wife is fundamental for communities of love.

Reflection and Discussion

Read the seventh commandment from either Exodus or Deuteronomy. Also read Jesus' commentary on that commandment in Matthew 5:27–32. Use the following questions to help you consider the commandment's meaning and implications. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on pages 176–177, 340; online at www.esv.org.)



Sexuality

The seventh commandment does not prohibit sexual activity; it defines the context for which it is designed: marriage. It is not out of harshness that God limits sexuality to marriage. Why, then, does he do so? How is marriage the ideal, as well as the biblically proper, context for physical intimacy between a man and a woman?

One might suppose this command to prohibit adultery only. But Jesus teaches that the seventh commandment marks out the whole terrain of sexual sins represented by the extreme example of adultery (Matt. 5:27–30). What other sins does Jesus address in his exposition of the seventh commandment?

Following the interpretation of this commandment taught by Jesus (considered in the previous question), what other abuses of human sexuality, either in action or in the heart, could be included under this commandment?

In Matthew 5:29–30 Jesus offers startling “treatments” for sexual lust: remove the eye or hand that causes one to stumble! These solutions are not literal but are hyperbole¹ to ensure we understand just how serious the problem is. What would be some practical ways to follow Jesus’ command to remove sexual stumbling blocks?

The Bible condemns greed, but it does not condemn the desire to make honest money. Likewise, Scripture condemns lust but not sexual desire. Often in history the church has reacted to the promiscuity of a culture with unhealthy sexual repression. Discuss examples of this dynamic in the church today and ways to avoid either extreme.

Marriage

The importance of sexual love is indicated by the presence of an entire book in the Bible on the subject: the Song of Solomon. From ancient poets to modern moviemakers, societies throughout history have used art to reflect on the joys and pains of sexual relationships. The Song of Solomon presents the Bible’s authoritative voice speaking into that heritage of romantic art. Have you ever

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read or studied this biblical romance poetry? If so, what lessons on marriage and sexuality have you learned from it? If not, consider reading it now and writing your reflections below.

The powerful bond that sexual activity creates between two souls is demonstrated by the deep pain that infidelity causes. The seventh commandment protects this bond, promoting its strength and warning against its violation. But physical activity alone does not make a strong relationship. The commandment cites physical exclusivity to represent faithfulness in all aspects of marriage. What other factors, also guarded under this commandment, are essential for marital communion?

In the medieval church (and in Roman Catholicism today) priests were not permitted to marry. The Protestant Reformation rejected that prohibition, encouraging marriage for all. But sometimes Protestants go to the opposite extreme, exalting marriage and neglecting the fulfillment that can be found in singleness. Jesus and Paul modeled the value of singleness for a rich and fruitful life in many callings (Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7–7). How can the church do better at supporting and valuing singleness?

The seventh commandment requires the hearer to honor not just one's own marriage (if married) but also the marriages of others. Sexual standards are a community responsibility. How can Christians uphold biblical standards of marriage and sexuality when the surrounding community does not?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

COVENANT. In ancient Israel a covenant was a special kind of agreement that legally changed the relationship between parties. Adoption was one kind of covenant, wherein a previously unrelated parent and child became family. Marriage is a covenant in which two persons—a man and a woman—unrelated by nature become “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The Old Testament prophets (Ezek. 16:8) and the New Testament apostles (Eph. 5:31–32) frequently point to marriage as an illustration of the covenant God establishes with us and to adultery as analogous to the violation of our covenant with God through idolatry² (Jer. 3:20; James 4:4).

JESUS KEPT THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT. Although he lived in a time when men were expected to marry, Jesus chose not to do so. He remained single throughout his earthly lifetime. The unusual circumstances of his own birth (miraculously born of a virgin; Matt. 1:18–25) may have brought accusations that Jesus was born out of wedlock (John 8:41). On one occasion a prostitute came to Jesus weeping. She had heard his message of holiness and grace, markedly different than the condemning “holiness” of the Pharisees.³ Jesus commended her for her saving faith (Luke 7:36–50). Jesus understood the beauty and pain of human sexuality, ministering grace to the sexually broken while maintaining his own integrity. Jesus kept the whole law, including his perfect fulfillment of the seventh commandment, making him the suitable substitute to achieve our atonement.

Whole-Bible Connections

SEXUALITY AS A BLESSING. Sexual reproduction is part of the original mandate God gave to humans (Gen. 1:27–28). When God first entered into relationship with humanity, he brought Adam and Eve together in marriage (Gen. 2:18–24). They bore children and taught them to worship (Gen. 4:1–4), beginning the community of faith that God desired for the world (Gen. 4:26). God promised to give offspring as numerous as the stars to Abraham (Gen. 15:5) even though Abraham and his wife were too old to “have pleasure” (Gen. 18:12). But God made them fruitful (Gen. 21:2), demonstrating the exalted place of marital sexual activity in the ongoing blessing of his people. Sexual activity has an important role in the history of God’s people, both positively in keeping with the seventh commandment (Gen. 21:1–2) and negatively when that commandment is violated (Gen. 19:30–38), from Genesis through Revelation (Rev. 21:7–8).

ADULTERY. Sexual desires and activity can be misused in many other ways besides adultery, such as in lust, pornography, immoral speech, sexual harassment, incest, polygamy, or other immoralities. Many of these sins are found throughout Scripture. Adultery is the violation focused on in this commandment because it emphasizes the attack on marriage entailed in sexual immorality. This prohibition of adultery is used further throughout Scripture as a metaphor for idolatry (Hos. 4:12–14; Isa. 57:1–13; Jer. 3:8–9; Ezek. 23:1–27), which similarly offends the covenant of God with his people.

Theological Soundings

SEXUALITY AS GOOD. God created humans as sexual beings. Sexuality is part of his good order for mankind (Gen. 1:27–28). The devil has no power to create; he can only distort for evil the things that God created for good. This includes sexuality, which sin can distort for destructive purposes but which God redeems. The seventh commandment affirms the goodness of sexuality in the theology of the Bible—and the importance of protecting its goodness.

SEXUALITY AS BOND. The seventh commandment ties proper sexual activity to marriage. That link is fundamental to a scriptural theology of both sex and marriage. The secular world has separated that connection, treating physical sex as a sport to be enjoyed by any willing partners rather than as a solemn commitment exclusive to marriage. The seventh commandment upholds the function of proper sexual activity as a physical and emotional act that bonds souls together in the communion of two lives (see Song 8:6–7).

WHOLESOME DESIRE. The seventh commandment promotes a proper desire for sexual fulfillment while placing boundaries against wrongful kinds of

sexual desire. The damage caused by sexual sins is so great that Christians often react by stifling and demonizing sexual expression altogether. But a proper theology of sex, consistent with the seventh commandment, both affirms positive sexual desire (Prov. 5:15–19) and guards against its sinful abuses (Prov. 5:1–14, 20–23). The Song of Solomon is a series of poems that fosters such a theology of romance and discovery, conflict and loss, and sexual expectation. The primary audience of that book seems to be youth not yet married (Song 2:7; 3:5; 5:8; 8:4, 8–9), further indicating its value for developing a wholesome desire consistent with the seventh commandment.

Personal Implications

Considering what you have learned in this study, reflect on the Decalogue’s seventh commandment as it informs your faith and instructs your faithfulness today. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18

As You Finish This Unit . . .

If you are memorizing the Decalogue during this study, practice reciting the preface and the first through the seventh commandments. Pray to thank God for establishing his covenant with you, to redeem you and to make you holy.

Definitions

¹ **Hyperbole** – Rhetorical device for expressing ideas in intentionally exaggerated form for emphasis, where the exaggerated expressions are not intended to be taken literally. An example is Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees for “straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel” (Matt. 23:24).

² **Idolatry** – In the Bible, usually refers to the worship of a physical object. Paul’s comments in Colossians 3:5, however, suggest that idolatry can include covetousness, since it is essentially equivalent to worshiping material things.

³ **Pharisee** – A member of a popular religious/political party in NT times characterized by strict adherence to the law of Moses and also to extrabiblical Jewish traditions. The Pharisees were frequently criticized by Jesus for their legalistic and hypocritical practices.