

Michael Jackson

AGAINST ADULTERY

Exodus 20:14

One Main Thing

God's seventh commandment that we should not commit adultery is rooted in the nature of God himself and has sobering implications for the way Christians honor their marriage vows.

Introduction

Adultery is mentioned more than 40 times in more than 35 verses of most modern English translations of the Bible. But what exactly is adultery? Adultery is voluntary sexual intercourse by someone in a married relationship with someone else who is not his or her marriage partner, which is regarded as a violation of the marriage vows.¹ The biblical record reveals further

1. *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://www.oed.com/>), entry "Adultery," definition 1a.

descriptions of this definition.

In the Old Testament, we find that adultery is not only limited to a sexual relationship after marriage, but also includes someone who is betrothed (engaged in a contract of marriage; Deut 22:23–24). The penalty for adultery according to the Torah is death (Lev 20:10; cf. John 8:1–11), indicating the seriousness with which the sin was taken. The evidence is mixed on how consistently this punishment was carried out in Israel. The seriousness of the sin of adultery may also explain the grouping of this commandment with murder and stealing in the order of the Ten Commandments and elsewhere in scripture (Jer 7:9; Hos 4:2).

In the New Testament, Jesus reveals his divine understanding of the commandment:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matt 5:27–30)

Jesus' insight into adultery broadens our understanding of where adultery begins (in the heart) and deepens our appreciation for just how seriously we should take the biblical instruction against it (hell is not worth whatever gratification adultery may bring).

Going Deeper

Why does God so expressly forbid violation of the marriage vows with such serious consequences? This has been a question of interest to scholars and Christians. Understanding why God commands what he commands leads us on an important journey in equipping ourselves to live the way he desires for us to live. Here are some explanations that have been put forward:

*Mistaken paternity.*² It is suggested that Israelite society strongly depended upon the knowledge of who a child's father was. Without a paternal guarantee, an illegitimate heir could be given the family inheritance and be expected to carry on the family name. Even though the father might not know of this infidelity, his family name could become extinct. Leviticus 20:20–21 demonstrates the social importance of the concept of family extinction in Israel by stating that childlessness will follow those men that commit adultery with their close relatives. In addition, children of illicit unions were

2. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), entry "Adultery," section A.

not allowed into the worship assembly (Deut 23:2).

Economic violation. It has also been suggested that in a patriarchy like Israel, women and children were under the responsibility of fathers/husbands, and thus a property violation occurs in the transaction of adultery. While there is no doubt that Israel was a patriarchal society, this view receives less attention in the biblical texts on adultery (but see Exod 22:16–17).

*Violation of exclusive sexual rights.*³ Husbands in Israel were considered to be the guardians of their wives' sexuality, and therefore exclusively entitled to it. This is why, when adultery is condemned in certain parts of the Torah, it is expressly stated as a transgression against the husband of the woman caught in adultery (Deut 22:24).

Violation of creation. The Bible portrays the union of man and woman into one flesh as divinely ordered for the benefit of both parties (Gen 2:18, 23–24). It is clearly indicated in those passages that there is an intimacy in the union of man and woman to one another, addressing loneliness, meeting needs, and ushering in a transition from childhood to adulthood. In this design, man is fruitful and multiplies (Gen 1:28). Perhaps more importantly, the image of God is

3. *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. J. B. Green (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), entry "Adultery."

reproduced in the world when his purposes for man and woman are followed (Gen 1:27).

While we certainly recognize the importance of the social consequences of illegitimate heirs in a patrilineal (property and title are inherited by the male lineage) society, the true key to understanding God's heart in the commandment to abstain from adultery is found through an understanding of points 3 and 4, especially when these are seen as flowing from the very nature of God himself.

God Desires Our Exclusive Allegiance. As you have already learned in this study, the Ten Commandments begin with a reminder of our responsibility to be faithful exclusively to God. It makes sense, then, that God desires for us to honor our vows of faithfulness in the covenant of marriage. This connection does not only make sense logically, it is metaphorically referenced in passages in scripture where adultery is used as imagery for spiritual unfaithfulness.

Why should I pardon you? Your sons have forsaken Me and sworn by those who are not gods. When I had fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the harlot's house. (Jer 5:7)

Harlotry, wine and new wine take away the understanding. My people consult their wooden idol, and their diviner's wand informs them; For a spirit of harlotry has led them astray, and they

have played the harlot, departing from their God. They offer sacrifices on the tops of the mountains and burn incense on the hills, under oak, poplar and terebinth, because their shade is pleasant. Therefore, your daughters play the harlot and your brides commit adultery. I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot or your brides when they commit adultery, for the men themselves go apart with harlots and offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes; so the people without understanding are ruined. (Hos 4:11–14)

The nature and character of God requires allegiance to our covenants and vows to him as well as to our fellow man and—in the case of adultery specifically—our spouse.

God's Created Order Is Purposeful in Its Design. Jesus appealed to the created order as proof of God's intention for how man and woman were to dwell in the union of marriage together (Matt 19:4–6). Paul extends this order to our understanding of Christ himself and his relationship to the Church (Eph 5:22–33).

If we wish to understand why God so expressly forbids the violation of marriage vows, and why the punishments for those violations are grave and severe, then we must first endeavor to understand how important it is to God that we pledge total allegiance and fidelity to the covenants we make. And, we must understand that marriage itself is based in the nature and character of

God's created order, which provides us a better way of understanding Christ himself and his relationship to the church.

Application

I'm reminded of a news story I recently saw about a politician who had just been sworn into office. The headline read, "Jordan Intends to Keep His Vows." The headline engenders sober reflection, even though it is intended to be positive. Is it news in today's world to keep the promises we've made? It is a struggle that we all face.

Jesus knew this. He teaches us over and over that we should honor our word and commitments (Matt 5:33–37; 7:21–23; 12:36–37). Why is this so important? Because God himself is faithful. He expects our lives to be lived in light of that truth.

And yet life brings challenges that strike at the very core of our identity, testing our commitments and our intentions: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the joys and struggles of children and parenthood, and/or health problems, etc. Those who are married often find themselves reconsidering their marriage vows, though they may have made those vows sincerely at the time. God desires that during those times of reevaluation, we reaffirm our vows.

Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the

marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge. (Heb 13:4)

Conclusion

Faithfulness to God is shown in our faithfulness to one another. This is nowhere more important or evident than in the way we honor the commitment of marriage. Adultery is expressly forbidden by the seventh commandment and shown throughout scripture to be in violation of God's image for his children. We as God's children must endeavor to be faithful in all things with him as our help and guide.

Discussion

1. What do the passages referenced from the Old Testament teach us about God's views on adultery and transgressing the seventh commandment?
2. What insights do Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount give us to help us understand how adultery
3. Why do you believe that God so expressly forbids violation of the marriage vows and invokes such serious consequences?
4. How does an understanding of God's creation and the relationship of Christ to the church help us to understand our marriage vows and their significance?
5. What strategies might we use to help us hold to our commitments in those times when life stretches them to their limits?