

# “A Clean Heart”

Exodus 20:14; Psalm 51; **Matthew 5:27-30** <sup>1</sup>

In the beginning, *the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. . . . The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him. . . .*

*So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.*

*The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame (Genesis 2:7, 18, 21-25). So it was in the beginning.*

As we continue our journey through the Ten Commandments, I want to affirm once more that these Commandments are fundamentally a “pearl necklace” made of tokens of God’s incredible love for us. It was this eternal, divine love that overflowed into the creation of the first man, and it was that same love that overflowed into the creation of the first woman, so that the man would have a partner for life—so that they might become “one flesh.”

The best short statement I’ve ever seen of what that was—and is—all about came from my friend, Ernie White, who said that “Love is the overwhelming desire and the persistent effort of two people to create for each other the conditions in which each may become the person God created each to be.” That’s worth saying again: **“Love is the overwhelming desire and the persistent effort of two people to create for each other the conditions in which each may become the person God created each to be.”**

Both the Old and New Testaments affirm that the best way to understand God’s love for us—and our love for God—is to use the image of the passionate, transforming love of a man and a woman. When the biblical authors tried to explain what it looks like to love God with “all our heart, soul, mind, and strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 13:30), they found themselves, over and over again, using romantic love and marriage as their central metaphor for describing our relationship with God (cf. Isaiah 62:5). And, beyond this, whether we are comfortable with it or not, the Bible frequently uses the sexual relationship of marriage as a metaphor for our relationship with God (e.g., Ephesians 5:31-32).

Our sexual desires are God-given and are inherently creative. They exist in order to create new life, replicating God’s creation of humankind on the Sixth Day. When we share sexual intimacy in the context of marriage, our joining together is one of the most sublime and miraculous acts of creation of which humans are capable.<sup>2</sup>

The truth of the matter is that our desire to procreate is every bit as fundamental as our desire to eat and fight and flee danger. At the same time, when it is unbridled, our sexuality quickly tears us away from everything that we know to be good and right.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 2, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> David Hazony, *The Ten Commandments: How Our Most Ancient Moral Text Can Renew Modern Life* (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Hazony, pp. 178-179.

One of our great challenges as spirit-beings who are embodied in flesh and blood is that our flesh cares nothing for happiness tomorrow or peace of heart for a lifetime. Our flesh cares nothing about the well-being of those we love. All it seeks is gratification right now.<sup>4</sup>

And so it is that God's loving commandments have been given to protect us, putting a barrier between us and the unbridled desire that would destroy us.<sup>5</sup> And this brings us to the Seventh Commandment, which simply states, "*You shall not commit adultery*" (Exodus 20:14).

As you may have recognized, the Bible is the only book that tells the whole truth about our sexuality. Only the Bible tells us that our sexuality is a wonderfully *good* gift that God has given us; and only the Bible tells us the truth about the heartbreak and ruin that come when sexuality is used in ways God does not intend.<sup>6</sup>

We do well to remind ourselves at this point that God's guidelines for our sexuality are not designed to wall us off from pleasure. Much to the contrary, these guidelines are to given to ensure our joy and to prevent our destruction. God loves us so much that God has given us a "User's Manual" to protect us from things that would be extremely destructive to our lives and the lives of those we love. Adultery is one of those things.<sup>7</sup>

In the technical sense, as I'm sure you know, "adultery" refers to sexual intercourse between two persons, at least one of whom is married to someone else. When neither person is married, the Bible calls that the sin of "fornication." The Bible knows nothing of our euphemism, "sexually active." In a biblical worldview, intimate sexual involvement outside of marriage is either fornication or adultery. There are no other choices.

Dear Abby once wrote that adultery provides more material for her column than any other topic, and rampant adultery is a blight on society that undermines the core of the family as a haven for stable relationships of love and for the raising of healthy children. If the Sixth Commandment showed us the value of life through the extreme case of murder, the Seventh Commandment highlights the most devastating failure of marriage as a lesson about love.<sup>8</sup>

It was the spring of 997 B.C., and King David was at home when he should have been at work. Israel's army was at war, and the King should have been out with the troops. Nor was David working hard in his office at the palace. On the day in question, he actually had been taking an afternoon nap, and he took a stroll on the roof of his palace after waking up (2 Samuel 11).

In those days, most roofs were flat, and folks sat on the roof in the evening instead of on the porch, as we sometimes do. Because the palace was on one of the highest points in Jerusalem, the palace roof gave David a commanding view of the city below.

As he scanned the city, David noticed "*a woman of unusual beauty*" taking a bath on the roof of her home. While David might not have been able to help the first look, he certainly could

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<sup>4</sup> Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father's Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998), p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Mehl, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> In the beginning, this commandment was probably perceived primarily as a prohibition that protected a man's right to produce his own heirs and safeguard his own property—which is how wives had come to be regarded in those days. We have only to compare such a situation with the Creation account to see how far relationships had fallen from God's intention (Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953]), p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Mehl, p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> Hazony, pp. 166-167.

have avoided the second—but he didn't. David sent someone to find out who the woman was, called her to the palace, had intercourse with her, and sent her home.

Sometime later, Bathsheba discovered that she was pregnant. When David learned this, he tried to cover his tracks, and failing in this, he arranged for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to be murdered. All of this was awful enough, but the enormity of David's sin was compounded by the fact that Uriah was one of his Thirty Mighty Men, one of the bravest and most loyal soldiers in his army!!! (2 Samuel 23:39).

After the prophet Nathan confronted David with his treacherous adultery, David cried out to God in the words of Psalm 51. I suggest to you, however, that Psalm 51 isn't just about David. It's about you and me as well. Every one of us can pray Psalm 51 with David, because every one of us can be located in one or more of five widening circles around this Psalm:

1. First, in a group this size, it's quite likely that some of us have committed adultery in the same way that David did; indeed, some of us may be involved in such relationships right now.
2. Second, Jesus raised the standard enormously when He said, "*Whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and remarries, she commits adultery*" (Mark 10:11-12). The question of divorce and remarriage has been a difficult one for Christians since the very beginning, and the issues involved are often complex. We need to beware lest our abhorrence for divorce trumps the Good News of God's forgiveness; but Jesus was very clear about God's intent that we keep our promises about marriage.
3. Jesus raised the standard even farther when He said, "*You have heard that the Law of Moses says, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust in his eye has already committed adultery with her in his heart*" (Matthew 5:27-28). Now if we're truly honest, I suspect that there are precious few of us in this room who are innocent of adultery when it's defined in this way.
4. But we're not through yet. For those who still feel safe from the Seventh Commandment, the Bible's word is that when we allow anything else to take God's place in our hearts—sexual or not—we have committed adultery against God (e.g., Jeremiah 3:8-10).
5. And finally, because Psalm 51 applies to all sin, not just to adultery, there is simply no escaping it, because the Bible affirms again and again that "*there is no one righteous, not even one*" (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:10, 23).

So . . . now that we've "gotten down off our high horses," let's look again at the matter of adultery. Our media these days carefully airbrush away the shame, deceit, betrayal, and shattered families that inevitably follow adultery.<sup>9</sup> In fact, I think we have to admit that our culture rather encourages those attitudes and behaviors that tend to lead to adultery.<sup>10</sup>

While shame usually arrives later than passion does, it stays longer, and we do well to look at adultery's bill and wonder what kind of a deal Satan is really proposing. We do well to look hard and long at the terms of his loan and the terms of his payment plan.<sup>11</sup> One man, considering these things wrote, "If I go through this door . . . .

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<sup>9</sup> Mehl, p. 175.

<sup>10</sup>Davidman, p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> Mehl, p. 177.

1. I will grieve the One who redeemed me, and I will drag His sacred Name through the mud. Further, I will have to look Jesus in the eye one day and give an account of my actions.
2. I will shame my family, and I will inflict untold hurt on my wife, who is my best friend and who has been faithful to me.
3. I will lose my wife's respect, love, and trust, and I will hurt my beloved children.
4. I will destroy my example and my credibility in the community, and I will lose my own self-respect, bringing life-long shame upon myself.
5. I will form memories and flashbacks that could plague any future intimacy with my wife.
6. I might reap the consequences of disease, or I might cause a pregnancy that would be a life-long testimony to my sin.
7. I might lose my wife and children forever."<sup>12</sup>

How could a loving God do less than to warn us about these dangers? How could God do less than to place the protective fences of these commands across the landscape of our lives and urge us to walk safely within them?<sup>13</sup>

Many people these days enter marriage with the secret reservation, "if it works." And because of this defective commitment, they're more ready to conclude that marriage "isn't working" when the inevitable rough places come along. The reality is, though, that marriage never "works." We have to work. We have to discipline ourselves to develop those interpersonal skills that nurture marriage, because the alternative to the disciplined keeping of this promise is a marriage that withers under the damaging winds of selfishness, suspicion, fault-finding, and those creeping infidelities of mind and heart that frequently lead to infidelity of the body.

It doesn't help that we live in an age in which we expect to continually upgrade everything we have to "new and improved versions." Windows 10 came out this week, and I was eager to get it installed on my laptops. A new operating system will come out for my iPhone this fall, and Microsoft Office will be upgraded next spring. In such a world, it's not much of a stretch to think about upgrading our marriages as well, and indeed we can . . . but not by changing partners. We upgrade our marriages by upgrading our hearts, our commitments, and our character. That's what the insert in your worship order is all about.

There are four peaks of divorce in our culture, and each of these seasons creates a climate conducive to violation of the Seventh Commandment. The peaks are these (approximately): 0-2 years; 7-10 years; 18-20 years; and after the last child leaves home. Those peaks correspond to the vertical lines on these handouts, which also correspond to the transition times between the "chapters" of a marriage that lasts a lifetime.

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<sup>12</sup> Mehl, pp. 176-177. Consider these principles that can be found in Psalm 51:

1. Sin soils the Soul (vv. 1-2, 7, 9).
2. Sin saturates the Mind (v. 3).
3. Sin stings the Conscience (v. 4).
4. Sin saddens the Heart (vv. 8, 12).
5. Sin sickens the Body (v. 8).
6. Sin sours the Spirit (v. 10).
7. Sin separates us from God (v. 11).
8. Sin softens the Will (v. 12).
9. Sin stains the Hands (v. 14).
10. Sin seals the Lips (v. 15).
11. Sin sends us to God (v. 17).

<sup>13</sup> Mehl, p. 178.

These “chapter changes” are times in which we’re tempted to say to each other “You don’t sing me love songs, you don’t bring me flowers anymore.”<sup>14</sup> We feel as though something is dying, but for those with eyes to see, the pain is really birth pain rather than death pain. In those seasons, we’ve come to the end of the “dance steps” we know, and we need to learn new steps for a new dance—the “dance” of the next chapter of marriage. Marriage counsel and coaching can give us the skills we need to make those transitions successfully, and God’s Spirit is our enthusiastic and faithful Ally in that process.

My friends, I’m here to tell you that very few affairs were intended from the beginning. Like David with Bathsheba, sexual sin overtakes us because we move too near and look too long. Dr. Howard Hendricks interviewed 246 Christian men who had become involved in adultery, and without exception, they had convinced themselves that “moral failure will never happen to me.”<sup>15</sup>

And my friends, if you’re married, you need to know that there will be a number of other people across the years to whom you will be attracted and with whom you might possibly have had a happy life. But if you’re married, you’ve already made your choice. Life is about character. And character is about keeping promises whether you feel like doing it at the moment or not (Psalm 15:4).

If you’re wise, you’ll plan ahead for those opportunities to be unfaithful to your marriage that are going to come. Decide right now how you’re going to handle those situations when they do come. Don’t tell yourself, “I could never do that.” You most certainly could, and if you don’t steadfastly intend not to, you *might*.

Temptation is going to come. You can bank on that. The Good News is that God promises that “*When [we] are tempted, God will show [us] a way out so that [we] will not give in to it*” (1 Corinthians 10:13). If we’re in Christ, at almost the same moment that we become aware of temptation, we also become aware of how to escape it. So when you’re tempted, push “EJECT”! Use the off-ramp God provides. Don’t “move too near and look too long.”

If you’re a teen, a college student, or an unmarried young adult, know that the spiritual discipline of faithfulness begins long before marriage. Actually, it begins now. **Be faithful to your mate even if you haven’t met her or him yet.** Practicing the spiritual discipline of sexual faithfulness now will make such faithfulness easier later. Temptation is not going to go away just because you’re married.

Marriages that last a lifetime don’t grow on warm, fuzzy feelings. Lifetime marriages grow on *faithful and indestructible commitment*. **Nobody ever said this business of following Jesus was going to be easy.** Even the apostle Paul had a hard time living a virtuous life, so you and I don’t need to be surprised or discouraged when we have a hard time, too (Romans 7:18-8:1). The Good News is that **when you and I run our lives aground, God sends a rescue team, not a firing squad.**

The Bible says that “*If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong*” (1 John 1:8-9, NLT).

So here are three things I hope you’ll remember about the Seventh Commandment: (1) Yes, you really *could* commit adultery in one of the ways I’ve mentioned; (2) indeed,

<sup>14</sup> Neil Diamond, Alan Bergman, and Marilyn Bergman, *You Don’t Bring Me Flowers* (Columbia, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> Steve Farrar, *Finishing Strong* (Multnomah, 1995).

*you already have*, in at least one of these ways. (3) But if you turn your heart back to God as David did, your heart can be clean again.

Thanks be to God!