

The Ten Commandments 7. You shall not commit adultery

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You shall not commit adultery

Exodus 20:14 (RSV)

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1. The Seventh Commandment: Introduction

You shall not commit adultery

- Exodus 20:14 (NRSV)

1.1. The Meaning of Adultery

Unlike the meaning of the verb "to murder / kill" in the 7th Commandment, there is no linguistic problems in the 8th Commandment. The Hebrew verb *na'ap* unambiguously means to commit adultery. It:

- can have a man or woman as its subject
- is distinguished from other verbs:
 - *skb* to sleep with
 - *znh* to commit harlotry/prostitution

The command relates to specifically to **adultery**, which in the Old Testament is clearly in a different category than **fornication** (= sex between two unmarried / unbetrothed people).

- eg. punishment for adultery was death (Deut 22:22); whereas the penalty for seduction of a virgin was a requirement to marry the woman or pay an appropriate monetary sum.

There was a double standard in the definition of adultery in Patriarchal Israel

- for men, adultery meant sex with another *married* woman
- for women, adultery meant sex with *any other* man

1.2. New Testament Extensions to the Commandment

Jesus declared this extension to 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 has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

- Matthew 5:27-28

1.3. Possible New Testament Extensions to the Commandment

Fornication is clearly frowned on in the New Testament:

“Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.”

- Matthew 15:19

“Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body, but the fornicator sins against the body itself.”

- 1 Corinthians 6:18

However whether these statements intend that fornication should fall under the Seventh Commandment is unclear.

1.4. The Issues At the Heart of the Commandment

At the heart of the Commandment live issues of:

- marriage
- sexuality
- fidelity
- family

2. Marriage

2.1. What is a Marriage?

The scriptures contain many images about marriage, ranging from the erotic imagery in the Song of Songs to the laments about women such as those in the apocryphal book Son of Sirach 25:13 (there is no wickedness or wrath greater than a woman's). There is however no "coherent theology" of marriage to be found in the Scriptures:

“There is not a biblical theology of marriage as a unified set of ideas and concepts. Instead, one has to view the richness and diversity of the various early Christian traditions.”

- Francis Fiorenza in **Systematic Theology**

The Christian sacrament of marriage grew out of the "natural" or secular institution of marriage primarily by adding elements to it, and has evolved with the natural institution over time.

2.2. The Natural or Secular Institution

“Natural” purpose of marriage:

The institution to protect and regulate the sexual and reproductive activities of people

- for the “good” of those directly involved
- for the “good” of society

The institution has thus varied, depending on what the culture deemed "good" for the individual (which might be different depending on whether the individual was male or female) and "good" for society.

Modern developments in the evolution of the natural or secular institution of marriage include:

- partners choose each other (“fall in love”) rather than undergoing an “arranged” marriage for political, commercial or other reasons
- effective contraception has removed the necessity of a link between sex and reproduction

Christian Churches in general (including the Roman Catholic Church) recognize the legitimacy of secular marriages. We discuss the theology behind this recognition in section 5.4, Marriage as a Sacrament

2.3. The Christian Institution

The changes in the Christian institution of marriage as the natural institution has evolved can be seen in the purposes of marriage numerated in the Book of Common Prayer:

1662 Book of Common Prayer:

- **1. First, [matrimony] as ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy name**
- **2. Second, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of the Christ’s body.**
- **3. Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity**

Modern Prayer Book (p. 423) lists:

- **1. “intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity;**
- **2. and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord”**

2.4. The Three Bonds of Marriage

The three Bonds in a Christian Marriage (from Macquarrie):

- **1. Moral Bond**
 - begins with the exchange of vows, as they declare their consent before the church
- **2. Natural Bond**
 - begins with the sexual consummation of the marriage
- **3. Sacramental Bond**
 - begins with the prayers said over them, commending their union to God and seeking divine grace for them

3. The Moral Bond of Marriage - Fidelity

The marriage vows:

- to live together in the covenant of marriage, to love, to comfort, to honor, to keep, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, be faithful as long as both shall live (from the Book of Common Prayer)
- to be sanctified (= set apart) as husband and wife (from Jewish services)

The solemnity of these vows is reflected in:

- The covenant between God and his people is frequently compared to the covenant between husband and wife in Scriptures
 - Hosea invokes images of Israel as an unfaithful wife to God
- The Second Commandment against idolatry and the Seventh Commandment against adultery are both second on their respective tablets, if you picture the Commandments given to Moses as writ on two side-by-side tablets, one listing the first five Commandments, the second the second five Commandments (See Arrangement and Order of the Commandments in the first session in the Commandments series)

“The solemn obligations undertaken by the marriage partners cannot fail to affect them in the very depths of their being. . .” (Macquarrie)

- our commitments define us and shape us. They are:
 - are both moral and ontological (ontological = involving the mystery of being / existence)
 - are essential to the attainment of full personhood

[Marriage vows] **"establish a relationship so profound that it can never cease to be of moral significance. For they bring into being a new unit, no longer you and I, but we -- and however much we fail to act out this unity, once each of us is committed together with the other to the intention of constituting such a unity, neither can ever be the same again, an entirely independent entity, free from all such ties."**

- John Lucas, Theology Vol. 78: 229, 1975

4. The Natural Bond of Marriage - Sex

[The Seventh Commandment] **"points to the recognition that sexuality is enormously wondrous and enormously dangerous. The wonder of sexuality is available in a community only if it is practiced respectfully and under discipline. The danger of sexuality is that it is capable to evoking desires that are destructive of persons and of communal relations. . . around the subject of freedom and discipline in sexuality we deal with the most intense and elemental mystery of human existence."**

- Walter Brueggemann

"At its best, sexual union is the most complete and intimate reciprocal self-giving of which two persons are capable, making them, in the biblical phrase, 'one flesh' (Gen. 2:24). It brings about a relation transcending in its closeness even blood-relationships."

- John Macquarrie

Sexual union in the context of daily companionship and sharing "profoundly and permanently affects the partners in their inward being." (Macquarrie). This psycho-physical sexual union adds a new bond to marriage that perhaps cannot be totally destroyed. It creates:

- a mutual belonging
- a new community

The Seventh Commandment declares God's creational intention which "links a positive role for sexuality with commitment and loyalty" (Fretheim)

Another part of the natural bond of marriage are the children that arise from the sexual union. They are the most visible example of the permanent effects of sexual union

5. The Sacramental Bond of Marriage

5.1. A Sacramental Universe

5.1.1. The Duality of Our Experience of Life

"Teach me, my God and King, in all things thee to see"

- George Herbert, Anglican poet

**"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round and plunk blackberries."**

- Elizabeth Barrett Browning

**"To me, the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."**

- William Wordsworth

"Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."

- St. Paul, Romans 1:20 (NRSV)

Duality of Experience:

- we are embodied beings existing in a very material world
- we can feel intimations of beauty, mystery, meaning through this material world (a bush, a flower, a sunset. . .)

A "sacramental" view of the universe links the two pieces of this duality:

- the material world is good
- the material world can be "door to the sacred"

5.1.2. The Justification for the Sacramental View of the Universe

The justifications for the two parts of a sacramental view of the universe: that the material world is good, and that the material world can be a door to the sacred, are:

- The Material world is good:
 - created by God
 - in the Incarnation, God freely took on embodied existence, lived in space and time
- The Material world can be a door to the sacred:
 - God is both:
 - transcendent reality beyond the world he has made
 - immanent reality who dwells in this world and is active in it

5.2. Natural Sacraments

There are many “natural sacraments:” physical events, actions or rituals, that are “doors” to feelings, inner realities, meaning beyond the mechanics of the act or rite:

- touching, embracing another person
- making love
- sharing a meal together
- giving a gift
- gestures of hospitality and welcome

5.3. The Seven Sacraments of the Church

The Church has defined seven “sacramental” rites or rituals call the “Sacraments:”

There are two **Sacraments of the Gospel**:

- Baptism
- Holy Eucharist

There are five other Sacramental Rites that have evolved under guidance of the Holy Spirit:

- Confirmation
- Ordination
- Holy Matrimony
- Reconciliation of a Penitent (Confession)
- Unction (Anointing of the Sick)

Each of these Sacraments of the Church has:

- 1. an *outward or visible part* = “**matter**” and/or “**form**.”
 - the material object and/or physical action that is the “door” or “portal” to the sacred
 - Catechism: “the outward and visible signs”
- 2. an *inward spiritual reality* = “**res**”
 - heart of the sacrament
 - the action of God on the human spirit
 - Catechism: “the inward and spiritual grace”

5.4. Marriage as a Sacrament

The sacrament of marriage is unique among all the other sacraments in that the ministers of the sacrament are the couple themselves, not the priest. This is the theological reason why most mainstream Christian denominations including the Roman Catholic Church accept the validity of a marriage performed before a justice of the peace or the clergy of another faith.

The **res** (the *inward spiritual reality*) and the **matter** (the *outward or visible part*) of the Sacrament of marriage are:

- **res:**
 - the divine grace that blesses, aids the union
- **matter:**
 - the joining of hands at the ceremony
 - the exchange of rings
 - the act of sexual union that consummates the marriage

5.5. Sexuality in Marriage as a Natural Sacrament

Sexuality in marriage can be a “natural sacrament” - the visible, “material” expression of the inner reality of love between the partners.

Judaism does not include a formal sacramental theology, but does recognize the religious significance of this natural sacrament (recall that in Judaism, wherever two or more are gathered together to study Torah, there will be the Divine Presence, the *Shekhinah*)

“Marriage creates family, which is the locus for the preservation of Judaism and the Jewish people. In this setting, sexual intercourse is a religious act equivalent to prayer or Torah study, and the home becomes a holy place.”

- Rabbi Peter Knobel in **Broken Tablets**

6. Adultery as a Violation of the Bonds of Marriage

In a narrow sense: adultery is a violation of the bonds of marriage by having sexual intercourse outside of the marriage

In a broader sense: adultery is:

- any violation of the *moral bond*: our covenantal commitment to a mutuality that is life-giving, nurturing, enhancing, respectful
- any violation of the *natural bond*: a slap, a punch, a sneer, a shove; the withholding of physical affection, tenderness and care

7. The Family

Marriage is the founding of a new family:

- the fundamental unit of community in society
- the locus of safe human intimacy
- the means by which human race perpetuates itself
- first means by which our values are transmitted to future generations
 - in particular, “the knowledge and love of the Lord”

The Seventh Commandment seeks also to protect the integrity of the family

8. Divorce

8.1. Jesus' Statement on Divorce

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

- Matthew 5:31-32 (NRSV)

It is important to keep in mind the context of Jesus' statement:

- in Jesus' day, a man could divorce his wife for nearly any reason, so long as he gave her the certificate (the requirement dating back to Moses). Women could not divorce at all.
- there was an ongoing debate between two Rabbinical schools of the time: Hillel school (more lenient) and Schammai school (extreme cases only)

Jesus' interpretation can be seen as offering protection for women, putting men and women on the same footing.

8.2. The Exception Clause

Jesus' statement on divorce contains the exception clause:

“except on the ground of unchastity”

There are two suggested meanings of the Greek *porneia* in this passage:

- incest
- adultery: suggesting divorce is allowed when the marriage is already broken.

8.3. The Complexity of the Ethics of Divorce

The issue of divorce is complex, for "adultery" and "divorce" are both *defined* in the context of marriage. This leads us back to the question we considered in the beginning of this session: what is a "marriage"?

■ the "legal" institution,
or:

- the genuine, ongoing relationship that includes an intact:
 - *moral bond* (fidelity, the covenantal, lifelong commitment to honoring, respecting, cherishing, nurturing each other)
 - *natural bond* (sharing the most intimate aspects of themselves as sexual beings only with each other as the ultimate expression of their love and fidelity)

It is God's creational intention that marriage be a genuine, ongoing relationship that mutually enhances the lives of both the man and the woman. Jesus clearly intends that such a relationship -- marriage -- be a lifelong union.

The Roman Catholic interpretation of Jesus' statement on divorce is that once two people are legally married, divorce is not allowed. The two may separate, but remarriage is not possible. (The only "out" is to have the marriage "annulled," a declaration that there never a marriage in the first place). However when the marriage relationship is clearly broken and there is no longer any possibility that it can mutually enhance the lives of the man and woman, this interpretation hardly seems to answer God's creational intention that marriage be a mutually enhancing, on-going, lifelong relationship.

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