

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO REDEEMS

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 20:14

To understand more about the seventh commandment and its implications for us today.

The First Institution

Of the three major human institutions that God defined and created, marriage is the first and, therefore, preeminent institution in all of creation (the other two being *Israel* and *the church*). Established in Genesis 2 after Adam was found to be alone, the woman was formed from Adam's rib and joined together with him in the first marital union, and this establishes a pattern that is repeated throughout the New Testament: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." The marriage matters to God. It should come as no surprise, then, that one of the Ten Commandments is entirely focused on preserving the sanctity of this important institution.

Read the Text:

You shall not commit adultery. (Exodus 20:14, ESV)

Study the Text:

Protect the Marriage

While the seventh commandment is often cited to condemn forms of sexual sin, it is actually focused on the preservation of marriage. Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart reminds us that "adultery was known in the ancient world as 'the great sin.'"¹ As a foundational institution to human flourishing, anything that seeks to destroy marriage ought to be rigorously rejected, and there is perhaps nothing more destructive to marriage than adultery. Given the power dynamics of the ancient world, one might be tempted to make the case that this commandment only applies to women, but this would be an erroneous conclusion. Old Testament scholar T. Desmond Alexander notes the lack of an object after the verb, indicating that both men and women are being addressed.²

Some scholars have sought to make the case that the seventh commandment does not strictly prohibit *polygyny*, a man having more than one wife. However, two things should be noted. In every instance in the Old Testament where men have more than one wife, there is tremendous discord in the household (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon). The Old Testament hardly affirms such marriage arrangements but rather describes both the positive and negative actions of important individuals. Further, marriage is often illustrated in the Old

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 463; This language is reflected in Genesis 20:9 by Abimelech.

² T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 417; Alexander also notes that this likely applied to men and women who were engaged. Engagement in ancient near Eastern cultures was far closer to actual marriage than it is in our modern context.

Testament through the relationship between the LORD and Israel, which sets marriage into a monogamous caste, Hosea being the premium example.

The seventh commandment, simply stated, prohibits any sexual act with another person's spouse. However, as we have seen in our study of previous commandments, the actions prohibited by the Ten Commandments stem from deeply rooted sin in the human heart. Therefore, if the people of God are going to rightly obey the Ten Commandments, attention must be given to these deeper issues. Our next section will explore such issues in greater depth.

Broadened Perspectives

We might have our perspective on the seventh commandment broadened in a couple of ways.

WESTMINSTER LARGER CATECHISM

The Westminster Divines paint a broader picture of what is required and forbidden by the seventh commandment. Question 138 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* asks what duties are required by this commandment, and it answers: "The duties required in the seventh commandment are, chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior; and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, modesty in apparel; marriage by those that have not the gift of continency, conjugal love, and cohabitation; diligent labor in our callings; shunning all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations." Several details stand out in how the WLC handles this commandment. All of the required duties better enable the Christian to be obedient to this commandment. One will protect the marriage and stray from adultery by doing these. Note the appeal to marriage for those "that have not the gift of continency." This echoes the sentiment of the apostle Paul, who says it is good for Christians to remain single, but "if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9). The WLC's handling of this commandment is helpful because it gives the Christian a proactive approach to avoid breaking the seventh commandment.

In usual order, the "sins forbidden in the seventh commandment are then listed: "adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy, and all unnatural lusts; all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections; all corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto; wanton looks, impudent or light behavior, immodest apparel; prohibiting of lawful, and dispensing with unlawful marriages; allowing, tolerating, keeping of stews, and resorting to them; entangling vows of single life, undue delay of marriage; having more wives or husbands than one at the same time; unjust divorce, or desertion; idleness, gluttony, drunkenness, unchaste company; lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays; and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others." Again, a number of details emerge. Anything that is impure in stature or substance should be avoided. Notably, "undue delay of marriage" is stated, but why? In this modern age of evangelicalism, it is not uncommon to be counseled to date for at least a year and to avoid rushing into marriage. While certainly marriage should not be entered into carelessly, any undue delay in marrying sets up an individual to falter into sexual sin, which has implications for the marriage.

THE TEACHINGS OF CHRIST

In His monumental Sermon on the Mount, Jesus redirects our understanding of the seventh commandment in a way that no one is able to avoid: "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 lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). For the Lord, it is not merely that we ought to do things in order to avoid committing adultery but that the mere act of lust is in and of itself a violation of the seventh commandment because of

what it indicates about the human heart. To lust is to break the commandment because adultery has already occurred inwardly.

It should be noted that the word “looks” (Greek *blepō*) is a present tense participle, which refers to someone who continues to look rather than just a passing glance. This, again, speaks to the intent of the action. It is not merely a mental image of nudity or nakedness but an ongoing lustful meditation. Now, why is this an important detail to consider? Because in the age of “purity culture,” it is not uncommon for any kind of sexual desire to be condemned as a sinful or negative desire, and this is simply not true and, in many cases, actually damaging. Sexual desire is not shameful but natural. It is unchecked sexual desire that leads to sexual promiscuity or sexual immorality that should be rejected. Therefore, the difference between taking under control our natural, God-given sexual desires as we take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ and continually looking upon an individual with lustful intent is an important distinction to make.

What About Now?

When we study the seventh commandment, it ought to reinforce just how important the sanctity of marriage is. As Christians, we ought to be willing to do anything and everything in our power to protect our hearts and minds from letting lustful thoughts take root in our lives. Adultery begins long before it occurs physically. The seventh commandment is a warning to be sober-minded towards anything that draws us offside and into danger. More broadly, another takeaway is simply the reminder that all sins ultimately begin in the sinner's heart. Our actions proceed from our intentions. We should always evaluate what we hold in high esteem based on our actions because our actions highlight what we treasure.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 20:14. What is the basic understanding of this commandment?

2. Read Genesis 20:9. According to the notes, what is adultery often referred to as in the ancient Near East?

Day Two

1. What requirements in the seventh commandment from the *Westminster Larger Catechism* do you think are most important?

2. What requirements in the seventh commandment from the *Westminster Larger Catechism* do you think are least important?

Day Three

1. What things forbidden in the seventh commandment by the *Westminster Larger Catechism* do you think are most important?

2. What things forbidden in the seventh commandment by the *Westminster Larger Catechism* do you think are most important?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 5:27-29. What constitutes adultery, according to Jesus?

2. According to the notes, what kind of “looking” is prohibited by Jesus?

Discuss the Text!

Week 54 Discussion: Protect Your Heart

The primary focus of the seventh commandment is protecting the marriage, but more broadly, to protect the marriage begins with protecting your heart against things that could lead to the destruction of a marriage. Talk as a group about what is required and forbidden by the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, and discuss the details you agree with and perhaps things you disagree with as well.

1. Icebreaker: Do you consider adultery to be “the great sin” as people in the ancient Near East did? Why or why not?
2. In *your opinion*, what is the most important thing a person can do to protect themselves from adultery?
3. Are healthy marriages necessary for a flourishing society? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think adultery is granted as a permissible reason for divorce?
5. Is adultery forgivable? Should it be forgiven, according to Scripture?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): When you go on dates (and married couples, you should go on dates regularly), explain to your kids that dating is important because it gives dedicated time for the mommy and daddy to grow in their love for one another and it helps the marriage be strong and protected. It also establishes a healthy expectation of what commitment looks like for your children when they get older.

Takeaways:

1. The seventh commandment is about protecting the institution of marriage from adultery.
2. Adultery is specifically constituted as sexual actions with the spouse of another person.
3. More broadly, it can be avoided by protecting the heart.
4. Ultimately, Jesus defines adultery as ongoing, continual lust.