

Commandments 7: Solemn Vows

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Exodus 20:14 and 2 Samuel 11:1-17, 26-27

As a pastor, one of my greatest joys in what I do comes from what is debatably one of the most stressful rites in the Christian faith: that of Christian weddings. While some view the ceremony as more a formality than anything, I see the ceremony as the most important part because the couple makes solemn vows to one another in front of a multitude of witnesses. They vow “to be loving and faithful in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as they both shall live.” In making these vows, the betrothed are swearing complete and total dedication to one another regardless of life’s circumstances. These are more than just hollow words to be taken for granted. I think this is the reason that when we hear about adultery, we are so morally and spiritually offended, why there is such disbelief that one person could do what they’ve done to another person. These people swore utmost and complete faithfulness to one another and yet one of them has faltered. They took those words for granted and sought out personal fulfillment, even at the other’s expense. This is why, I believe, we find adultery so offensive, and why we find the reading from 2 Samuel so shocking.

In the Christian faith, we view King David as this pinnacle of faithfulness. He was the one who singlehandedly defeated Goliath. He was the one who united both Israel and Judea. He is a king among kings, chosen not by the people but by God Themselves. However, great and idyllic as he is, he falters. He shows his human weakness in committing adultery, and not even by choice. He doesn’t wake up one day and say, “Today I shall be lustful and commit adultery,” no. Rather, he sees Bathsheba bathing, going through her monthly cleansing ritual after her period. Sensible though we believe David to be, something animalistic takes over him. He cannot avert his eyes for whatever reason, and he watches her bathe, wishing to make love to her, a married woman. So, he invites her over his home and sleeps with her. When she becomes pregnant with his child, he has Bathsheba’s husband killed so that he cannot find out and so she can be made available for him to marry, therein covering up the scandalous affair. However, he quickly discovers that though his misdeeds were hidden from the eyes of the people, they were not hidden from the eyes of God.

In the subsequent passage, the prophet Nathan approaches him, telling him a parable of two shepherds, one who abuses the other’s lamb. David, upon hearing this, is livid, and he begins shouting curses against this second shepherd, saying he is to be punished most severely for his crimes. Nathan then reveals that David is this second shepherd, scolds him for his adulterous actions, and sentences David on God’s behalf. At this point, David is feeling the full weight of God’s wrath, fearful for his very life and wanting that same punishment he sentenced the second shepherd in the parable to endure. God, however, is merciful, still punishing David but not taking his life and allowing David to remain married to Bathsheba. However, let us not think that David broke today’s commandment simply because he was lustful, because, as can be anticipated, today’s commandment isn’t just limited to affairs and adultery as we think of it.

The commandment for today sounds very easy to understand on the surface. “You shall not commit adultery” means that one shall not be unfaithful to one’s spouse. As has been the pattern with the other commandments so far, though, this applies not just to physical action but to words and thoughts as well. It forbids the having of affairs as much as it does lusting after another person and viewing explicit material. If it is in any way unfaithful to one’s spouse, it is a violation of this commandment. However, this commandment encompasses other offenses as

well like rape, sodomy, and other non-consensual crimes. However, this commandment so far has only been interpreted at face value because the word “adultery” in our language has such a narrow definition relating exclusively to marital and other romantic relationships. What we can divulge, though, even with this narrow definition is the true nature of adultery in all its forms: it is one person taking advantage of another person in their relationship and benefiting at the other’s expense. What would happen if we broadened this commandment to include all relationships, though? If we look at this commandment as encompassing all relationships, we begin to find its true meaning.

Consider all the relationships we have for just a moment. There’s the relationship between God and Their children. There’s the relationship between humanity and the rest of Creation. There’s the relationship between a parent and child. In any and all of these relationships, there is the potential for that relationship to be taken for granted, for one party to be abused for the other’s benefit. Christians have weaponized God and Scripture to justify their anti-Christian and anti-Scriptural judgments of others. Humanity has so severely polluted the earth we were charged to care for that we are experiencing global warming, holes in the ozone layer, and other phenomenon. Children are removed from parents’ homes because the parents turn their children into veritable cash cows for welfare checks. This is only the tip of the iceberg. If one’s thoughts, words, and/or deeds in any given relationship violates that relationship and uses it for one’s own benefit, it is a violation of this commandment.

So, what does this commandment call us to do? The short answer is it calls us to maintain fidelity to those relationships in our lives. As parents, we vow to care for children, grandchildren, etc. As Christians, we vow to turn away from sin, to forgive endlessly, and to love our neighbors. As God’s children, we vow to afford God and God’s Word, both that which is spoken and that which has been written down, the brevity and honor that they are to be afforded. As spouses, we are called to have and hold our better half through all life’s challenges. Another way of understanding this commandment is in relation to something we find in Scripture. The good book tells us that our bodies are temples in which the Spirit dwells. If your words, thoughts, or actions would desecrate said temple, then it is being adulterous towards that relationship we have with God. However, if your words, thoughts, and actions maintain the sacredness of that temple, hold it in the highest esteem, whichever image you choose, then we are upholding those sacred vows this commandment calls us to uphold. So, that in mind, I ask: How clean is your temple?