



The Scarlet Letter

SERIES: *The Good Life: Finding Freedom in the Ten Commandments*

Today we're continuing to look at the Ten Commandments. We've seen that this isn't easy material. These commands are anything but sugarcoated. They challenge us at a very personal level. And it almost seems that as we move along from one to ten they become even more personal and more threatening. So it's not all that surprising if we react emotionally to what God is saying here. It's like God has been reading our mail. But like a skilled surgeon, his words are cutting with careful precision right where the disease lies.

In light of that, there are some things we have to keep in mind. Remember that God gave us these commands as a source of blessing. They're for our good and not our misery. That's why the Bible says things like, "Oh, how I love your law!" And "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul." That's why we've called this series, *The Good Life: Finding Freedom in the Ten Commandments*. These commands aren't meant as something we hate, but love. They aren't designed to enslave our soul but to restore our soul.

But for that to happen we have to remember something else. These commands weren't given so that we might earn a relationship with God. God isn't saying, "Listen, if you want to be my people, if you want me to really care for you and love you and work in your life, then you're going to have to live by these rules." NO! Before he even listed these commands God said, **"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt."** They didn't earn that; that was their salvation and that was a gift. When we really come to grips with all that God has done for us in saving us and making us his people then we're naturally going to want to live in a way that pleases him. So keeping these commands isn't a way to earn God's favor, but a way to respond to all the favor he's already shown.

But there is one more thing we have to keep in mind. As much as we want to please him, all of us fall short. As long as we're living in these old bodies; as long as we're living in this corrupt world; and as long as we're exposed to the one Jesus called "the Father of lies," then we're going to struggle and at times we're going to fall. All of us are a work in progress. None of us have these ten nailed down in our lives.

Each of these things I've mentioned are especially important to keep in mind as we come to the 7th commandment. The 7th command is no less painful and personal than the others. As a matter of fact, you might feel it's more painful and more personal than anything we've seen so far. It consists of just two words in the Hebrew. Most English Bibles stretch it out to five: **"You shall not commit adultery."**

I doubt that there is a person in this room who

hasn't in some way been confronted with the pain of adultery. You might have been a child who grew up in a home where this act of betrayal took place and you still feel the resentment boil up when you think of it. You might be husband or a wife who found your spouse was cheating and your whole world fell apart. You still feel the rejection; it's as real as if someone had died. And then there are those who have actually broken this command themselves. No one has to tell you it was wrong. To hear this command is to relive the shame and the guilt all over again.

But there is a sense of which all of us are guilty. If we really grasp what this command means, we'll see that.

I. What is adultery?

A. Physical adultery: Let's start there. When we talk about adultery, what are we talking about? Simply put, we're talking about voluntary sexual involvement between a married person and someone other than his or her spouse. Make no mistake, the primary purpose of this command is to protect marriage. This is not talking about sex before marriage, although other parts of the Bible address that as well. We're talking about breaking the marriage vows through physical, sexual involvement with another person.

B. Mental adultery: But that's only one piece of the puzzle. There is also what we might call mental adultery. There is a kind of adultery that doesn't involve physical intimacy but rather takes place in the mind. Make no mistake, the battle always begins in your mind. Jesus made this point quite clearly. He said, **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart"** (Matt. 5:27-28).

This seems kind of unrealistic. Is he just talking about a single thought or pang of desire? Is he just talking about a look that sparks a feeling? No! He's talking about what you do with that look and what you do with that thought and what you do with that desire. He's talking about an intentional and repeated indulging of those thoughts and desires. It's when a look becomes a gaze and a gaze becomes an action lived out in your mind. We all know what I'm talking about. Luther said, "I can't prevent a bird from flying over my head, but I can prevent him from making a nest in my hair." Get it?

By the way, this doesn't mean mental adultery is the same as physical adultery. Someone might say, "Well, I've already committed adultery in my heart; I may as well follow through with my actions; it's all the same." But it's not the same. Physical adultery breaks the marriage

covenant in a way that mental adultery doesn't. Physical adultery is grounds for divorce; mental adultery isn't. Physical adultery defiles your body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit, in a way mental adultery doesn't. And physical adultery is something many have avoided; mental adultery is something no one has totally avoided. Yet, mental adultery is so dangerous that Jesus followed up his words about it by saying, **"If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell"** (Matt. 5:29). We say, "Oh, I'm just looking. What harm is in that?" Jesus says, "More than you can imagine."

C. Emotional adultery: But there is one more kind of adultery that I would be foolish to leave out. It's what we might call emotional adultery: developing emotional intimacy with someone other than your spouse. There is a kind of emotional closeness that a married person should share with no one but his or her spouse. The "oneness" that a married couple experiences is more than just a physical oneness; it's also an emotional oneness. When a marriage begins to disintegrate it usually begins right there. It begins with a married couple losing that emotional connection they once enjoyed. More and more they become like roommates who live separate lives. They can't communicate at a deep level. There is this sense that he no longer understands me. I can no longer share my true feelings with him. When this takes place in a marriage you're vulnerable to this emotional form of adultery. You meet someone and at first it seems like nothing. You say, "We're just friends. What's wrong with that? He's just someone I do business with." Or, "She understands the pressure I live with. I can talk to her." We say what's wrong with that? But THAT so often leads to more. Pretty soon you're sharing things with that person you don't share with your spouse. You're keeping meetings and conversations a secret. You find yourself looking forward to seeing that person and spending time with them. You're exchanging physical touches which might look platonic to others but you know better. This is usually how physical adultery starts.

II. Why is it a big deal?

All of us know that whether it's physical, mental or emotional adultery, we're talking about something that's an epidemic today. For example a columnist named Jill Tweedie wrote this, "The pundits blame the rising divorce rate on our godlessness, our selfishness, our lustfulness. I blame it on wrongful expectations of thinking that people can live together as long as they both shall live. This expectation goes against our deepest nature, stunting our growth and requiring us to distort our lives to fulfill it. Outside the bonds of Christian marriage, we will, I hope, learn for the first time what love is all about." Because of this kind of thinking, which by the way exists both outside and inside of the church, we might ask the question, why is this such a big deal?

A. It is a big deal because of how God made us: First of all, it's a big deal because of how God made us as human beings. He made us to be in relationship with him. This is the thread that runs through the whole Bible: God seeking

relationship with people. And the way God makes relationship with us is covenantal. Throughout the Bible you see him making covenants with people; and that covenant relationship is defined by commitment and exclusivity. It has boundaries around it. We've already seen how the Ten Commandments began with God saying, "You shall have no other gods before me. I want your exclusive loyalty. I alone am your God."

But we also know that as those made in his image he calls us to relate covenantally to other people. For most of us that means entering into the covenant of marriage. And usually covenants have signs or seals; something which glues the relationship together. In the New Covenant we've entered into with Jesus Christ we have the signs of bread and wine which we use when we take communion. In the covenant of marriage, that sign or seal is sexual union. Sex was designed by God to be what we might call "covenant cement." It's physical, but it's more than physical. It unites us in body and soul. It binds us together in a way we're bound with no one else. Sex is like super glue. It has a powerful ability to bind two people together, but squeezing it out at the wrong place and at the wrong time creates an awful mess. The wrong things get joined together and getting them unstuck tears at the soul. This is why adultery is forbidden. God made us in such a way that sex is a great force for good, but only when used to join one man and one woman for life. God made us in such a way that sex is wondrous and a dangerous gift that can either glue a marriage together or tear it apart.

B. It is a big deal socially: But that's not all. It's a big deal because of how God made us but also it's a big deal socially. You see, marriage is the building block of a healthy society. As marriage goes, so goes a nation. Let me put it this way—we live in a great big world, right? But that world is made up of nations; and nations are made up of states; and states are made up of cities; and cities are made up of communities; and communities are made up of families; and families begin with a marriage. We say, "Well, what goes on in a person's bedroom is nobody's business." But think of the fallout from those choices in a child's life. Children of divorce are twice as likely as those from intact parents to drop out of school, three times as apt to get pregnant as teenagers, six times as likely to be in poverty, 12 times more likely to be incarcerated. Adultery is like an earthquake—the initial event is hard enough, but the aftershocks that come after in a ripple effect are even more destructive.

C. It is a big deal spiritually: But even more significant than the social consequences are the spiritual consequences. Adultery is also a big deal spiritually. Remember when Joseph was living in Potipher's household. Potipher's wife had eyes for him. She wasn't sheepish about it, she went after him. Day after day, she tried to seduce him. "Come on, Joseph. You and I can have our fun and no one will ever know." Do you know what Joseph said to her? He said, **"How could I do this great evil, and sin against God"** (Gen. 39:9)? Joseph understood it didn't matter who knew or who didn't know; God knew. He understood though it would have been a sin against Potipher, most of all it would be a sin against God. David also understood

this when he confessed to God after committing adultery with Bathsheba, **“Against You, You only, I have sinned, And done what is evil in Your sight”** (Ps 51:4).

III. How can we keep this command?

This leads us to the last question: how can we keep this command? I could talk for hours on this but let me boil it down to three points.

A. Work at your relationship with God: First of all, you need to be working hard in your relationship with God. This is where you start. You have to develop a kind of God consciousness where you live in his presence, talk to him throughout the day, and seek to obey his word with everything you have. I believe it was that which allowed Joseph to ask, “How can I do this thing and sin against God?”

Part of working at our relationship with God is knowing we’re in a battle. We can’t let our guard down. You and I are under attack in this area. We can’t afford to be ignorant that the enemy will seek to bring us down. If you think you could never fall into this sin, think again. Not a person in this room is above falling hard in this area. Christians fall. Pastors fall. Elders fall. Fathers fall. Mothers fall. Young people fall. Old people fall. People with bad and good marriages fall. No one is immune.

Honestly, I believe it was this that David failed to understand and caused him to be susceptible to temptation when he fell into sin with Bathsheba. David was King of Israel. He had conquered his enemies and established his kingdom. He was living in royal luxury. He was famous and handsome. We’re told that one night he **“arose from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king’s house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance”** (2 Sam. 11:2). You know the rest of that story.

But the interesting thing is that his real downfall began earlier. David had no business being up there in the first place. He should have been out defending his people. His downfall began with these words, **“Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel...”** (2 Sam. 11:1). This verse does more than tell us where David was, it tells us where he should have been and what he should have been doing. His people were still at war but David decided to take it easy. His guard was down. He’d stopped serving, sacrificing and giving his life away to others. Sexual sin is never just about sex. It’s always connected to the rest of life. David would have never fallen if he was working at his walk with God and making sure he was doing what he was supposed to be doing.

B. Pursue personal purity: Second, you have to pursue personal purity in every area of your life. Listen to Proverbs 4 where a father speaks to his son and gives him godly counsel about these very things. He starts out and he says, **“Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”** That’s where it always starts—in your heart; in your affections; in your mind. And then he gets real practical about this. He says, **“Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put devious lips far from you.”** Personal purity starts with the heart but then we have to watch our

words as well. We live in a day where a filthy mouth is often seen as kind of cool. As believers we like to show our freedom in Christ by how we can joke about sex. Proverbs says don’t go there. Next he says, **“Let your eyes look directly ahead, and let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.”** Personal purity starts with your heart, extends to your speech, and then has to impact what you look at. That means what we look at on TV, at the movies, on the internet, and at the beach. Finally, he says this, **“Watch the path of your feet, and all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; Turn your foot from evil.”** Personal purity also has to do with where we go. It’s like a domino effect. If you don’t guard your heart, your mouth will be next, and then your eyes, and finally your feet have gone somewhere you never thought they would go.

I want to say just a word to those here who are not married. How difficult but how important this is for you. What you must understand is that the discipline and the willingness to surrender your will to God’s will in this area will make all the difference in the world in your marriage. Your fidelity to God now will help you practice fidelity to your spouse later. It may be hard to believe but sexual temptation is as much a part of the married life as it is a part of the single life. And the more you take up your cross now the better you’ll be at it when you get married. Whether single or married, pursue personal purity.

C. Nurture and guard your marriage: Here is the third thing. If you’re married, nurture and protect your marriage. Be intentional about this. This takes work. Marriage is a wonderful gift full of many joys, but it’s also very hard work. And if you don’t work at it, your marriage will suffer. So be intentional about spending time together without the kids. Be intentional about communicating openly with each other. Be intentional about serving one another. Be intentional about praying with and for one another. Be intentional about holding one another accountable. Don’t hide anything. Secrets will destroy your marriage. E-mail should be an open book. Web sites you’ve been on as well. Movies and TV programs you watch are ones you should be able to watch with your spouse present. There are things you as a couple should agree on that you will NOT do with members of the opposite sex. For example, I don’t go out to lunch or dinner with women. There are hedges that you should place around your life that will keep you away from trouble. Be intentional about nurturing and guarding your marriage.

I want to be like the man I know who worked his whole life to become president of a Bible college. As he fulfilled his life’s dream and vocation, Alzheimer’s disease struck his wife. Her health degenerated to point where he could not possibly take care of her and work his full-time job. So, he quit his job. His colleagues came to him and said, “What are you doing? Your wife doesn’t even know who you are!” The man answered, “She might not know who I am, but I know who she is. She’s the woman I made a promise to until death do us part.”

CONCLUSION

I want to close today by speaking to those of you who know that this is an area of your life where you’re in

trouble; where perhaps you've fallen and you don't know what to do. In some way, physically, mentally, emotionally you're falling and you want it to stop.

Let me bring you back to a story that appears in the gospel of John. A woman was caught in the act of adultery by some Pharisees. They brought her to Jesus and threw her down amidst a crowd of people and they asked him, **"Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?"** And then remember that Jesus stooped down and wrote something in the dirt with his finger. We don't know what he wrote but it reminds us of God himself writing the Ten Commandments on stone tablets with his finger. What will Jesus say? Then he straightened up and he said, **"He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."** One by one they began to leave, starting with the older ones, and then he was left alone with the woman. He spoke right to her and he said, **"Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?"** And she said, **"No one, Lord."** And Jesus said, **"Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more."**

There are three things I want to tell you from this story if you are in her place. First, you're not alone. Every man and woman in that crowd knew they had fallen in this area in some way. If I asked the same question today this room would be empty. Second, forgiveness is possible. Jesus said, **"Neither do I condemn you."** He could say that because he would provide the perfect sacrifice for our sin. Jesus became an adulterer on the cross so you and I could be freed from the penalty of adultery. But for that to happen you have to bring it out in the open. You have to confess it to him. Third, you can change. Jesus said to the woman, **"Go and sin no more."** What a freeing statement. She didn't have to go living the way she was. Repentance is a change of mind about sin that causes a change of action towards sin. That's what Jesus means when he says to each one of us, **"Go and sin no more."**

© 2009 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA