

Yeah, this is the commandment that gets everybody all queazy. It really is about sex. “Don’t have sex with somebody else’s husband or wife.” I mean, *come on!* Isn’t that kind of, like, *duh?* Isn’t it kind of instinctive, don’t we all kind of know, that we’re not supposed to wreck people’s lives like that? And why are we spending time on a commandment that doesn’t apply to most of us, since most of us will never come close to breaking it?

This commandment at its core is about being faithful. It touches on a lot more than the simple act of sex. That’s why it’s listed so early in the Commandments, right behind murder. That’s why we need to spend some time thinking about it today.

First things first. There’s a lot here that doesn’t meet the eye, that you need to know. The first thing is what they thought adultery was.

Now, you and I know, if anybody involved in any hanky-panky is married, the thing is automatically adultery. Doesn’t matter who it is, it just takes one person in the tango to make it adulterous. Right? You might be surprised to know that it wasn’t exactly that way for Moses’ Israel. Since men could have more than one wife, a married male could sleep with a virgin, and then take her as his wife. But the reverse wasn’t true; if a woman who was married had relations with someone other than her husband, she was considered guilty. There wasn’t a remedy, like marriage, for her. Pretty unequal, huh? It wasn’t until Jesus that equality came along. The famous passage in John chapter 8, that was probably inserted later, the one that ends with “Let he who has no sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” might have been the first step in that process. What Paul

wrote in some of his letters finished it up, since monogamy became the standard for Christians.

Thankfully, the death penalty that went along with breaking this commandment wasn't enforced all that often in Israel. By Jesus' time, it was never enforced. Does that tell you something about how Israel felt about this commandment?

There's a basic problem with this particular commandment, and the sin it names. Let's think about other violations. Say you rob someone. If you got caught, or you came clean, you could make retribution – you could pay it back. You'd just give back the money or pay for the thing you stole. If you did a violent act upon another, you could allow a similar act to be committed upon you, or have your freedom taken away for an agreed-upon amount of time. Even murder has a rough sort of parity available; if you killed someone, then the powers that be could take *your* life. But what do you do to offer retribution, to pay back, this sin – adultery? There's nothing you can do. And that makes us feel really strange.

But you know what makes us feel even more strange? It's what breaking this commandment means. Look, you could have a bad moment, get angry, and kill a guy. You could! You could be having a bad time in your life, and on impulse steal something from a store – shoplift, in other words. It happens! I had it happen in a youth group once at a conference! A really good kid did it. Adultery takes more work than that. You have to go through some stuff to put yourself in the position to do it. And all along the way that little voice is saying, "No! Think of the hurt you're about to bring down!" Because it always comes out. You know it always comes out. Always. So you know what it means,

when you go ahead, and ignore that little voice, and do this un-repayable, unredeemable thing? It means you've decided to be faithless to someone you're supposed to be faithful to. It means you went ahead and hurt someone who is worth a lot to you.

So that's why it might be the biggest sin of all. And yet, don't we do it when we break faith with others, when we destroy their trust in us, in so many ways?

You see faithlessness everywhere! Think of the faithful employees, who work for 10, 20, 30 years or more for a company, making it into something really good. But when times get lean, what happens? The fat cats on the board sell the company; or they merge with another company; or they declare bankruptcy, sell off the assets; it all ends up the same, they put those faithful employees on the street. If you've given 10, 20, 30 years or more of your life to a company, that's a lot like being married. So to be treated like this is to have your faithfulness broken, in a way that can't really be repaid, not really. No severance package can repay that. Who can you trust? – if not your employer of 20 or 30 years.

You see this lack of trust, this breach of faith, everywhere. Teachers aren't trusted to teach anymore; they have all kinds of requirements they didn't used to have, and now there are "Misconduct Policies" in place, telling the teachers things they already know. Doctors aren't trusted to heal; police officers aren't trusted, not like they used to be; elected officials have fallen out of consideration for any trust whatsoever. These are people we used to look up to, people who meant a lot in our lives. But not any more. Our faithfulness has been betrayed. It's nearly as bad as adultery.

How do we get back to where we want to be? How can you restore a broken relationship? For adultery, there has to be three things. There has to be an honest taking stock. Why did this happen? What was wrong, or missing? Is this relationship worth restoring? Then there has to be true, honest repentance. Now, understand: repentance isn't just heartfelt "I'm sorry!" It means turning around, it means turning your life around. So for things to be restored, a person needs to turn their life around, and *show* that they've turned it around. Finally, there has to be forgiveness. Not simply letting it slide because that's easier than confronting it; not "being forgiving" because that's the model, the role, you have to live up to. No, I'm talking about *real* forgiveness. Did you know that in the Bible the verb for "forgive" has as its root meaning "to leave behind" or "to set aside?" One of the worst of those cute little popular phrases is "forgive and forget." It's as if they're somehow different. And there's always someone who says, "I can forgive – but I can't forget." *Then you haven't forgiven!* If you haven't "left it behind" or "set it aside" then you haven't really forgiven.

Which brings us back to square one. If you really love someone, what do you do naturally? You do good things for them, and you DON'T do things that will hurt them. You turn away from things that will break down your relationship, and look for things that will build it up. When mistakes happen as they inevitably will, you "leave them behind" so you can keep going forward, happily.

That's the way it is for us because of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has been faithful to us human beings all along, but we have been unfaithful. God even used language in Hosea the prophet to describe us as being so unfaithful that we were like

prostitutes! And God was like that prophet, who he ordered to go marry one! God has felt the pain of our adulterous ways, our breaking faith with him. But what did God do? Instead of turning away in rage and getting a good divorce lawyer, God took stock of the relationship, and knew he wanted this relationship with us. He knew we wanted it too. He knew we wanted to repent, to turn around our lives, but we didn't know how. He was more than ready to help us with that; he was more than ready to forgive and welcome us back. So God sent his son Jesus for us, and he showed us how to turn around. He showed us how to live in relationship with him, and therefore with God. He even died on the cross, as the way to make sure our breaches of faith got left behind.

So what do we do now? This is the part of the sermon called "application!" Of course, "Just don't commit adultery," of course! That goes almost without saying, though it never hurts to say one of the Commandments. Let's do better. Let's recognize that the bigger issue is faithfulness – between us and God, between ourselves. Let's work to make sure that faithfulness does not get breached, and that it gets stronger. Let's share that insight with others, too. Because if we do that, our lives will be awesome; and we'll be just one step closer to the life God has in mind for you and for me.