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August 5, 2018

The 10 Commandments – “You Shall Not Commit Adultery”

Ephesians 4:2-3 – With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Exodus 20:14 - You shall not commit adultery.

In the past 5 weeks of our worship series on the 10 commandments, we've uncovered little nuggets from our scriptures, and particularly from the historical context of the early Israelite culture, that have helped us see aspects of these familiar words in a new light. Today as we look deeply at the 6th commandment, we're going to find a great deal of difference in our expectations of what this means today in comparison to what it meant in its original context. And from those differences, we get to determine what these words mean to us now... how they can continue to guide our moral compass and the way we faithfully live into our relationships and communities.

When you think back about the stories and relationships in the Bible, you'll quickly realize that almost no one actually keeps this commandment... at least not as we understand it today. Adultery in our culture is when one married person has sexual relations with anyone who is not their spouse – otherwise known as an affair or infidelity. Well, our Hebrew scriptures are full of adulterous relationships, as well as polygamy and the taking of concubines. Solomon, Israel's first and most revered king, a model of wisdom and justice, had 700 wives! Jacob married both Leah and Rachel. David took Bathsheba from Uriah, the commander of his own army. Abraham took Hagar as a concubine to produce an heir. Marriages in the Bible are not necessarily something we want to look to for relationship advice!

Marriage in Biblical times was practiced and defined in very different ways than it is today. While people may have grown to love one another over the course of a marriage, romantic notions and courtship were far from the ancient understanding of tying the knot. A woman could simply be called out of the tribe and brought to the king... he didn't even have to know her to marry her. The primary value of marriage was not love, but duty and obligation. The Hebrew husband and wife had responsibilities for one another that the entire

culture understood and expected. They were meant to grow and protect a family, to continue on the lineage and inheritance lines, and they were expected to keep those boundaries.

In the Bible, adultery has NOTHING to do with the violation of a lifelong commitment of one person to another in a spiritual relationship of mutual support and endearment. Rather, it was about PROPERTY RIGHTS and inheritance. To sleep with another man's wife could dilute the bloodlines of the family if she got pregnant, muddying the lines of inheritance. It threatened the integrity of an estate. It meant that someone, not really a biological descendent, might get the property in the end.

In Biblical law, the idea of adultery is different for men than for women. A man had the right to have more than one wife, because wives and children were the primary measures of his wealth, not stocks and IRAs or pensions or bank accounts... wives and children, and cattle, determine the nature of his wealth. The wives and children were a promise of future security. The more children, the more security in your old age. To have multiple wives was to assure the possibility to have many more children than any one wife could possibly bear. Through Rachel, Leah, and two concubines, Jacob had 12 sons, and who knows how many daughters! Not only was his future secure, but his legacy was sure to live on through the generations.

So adultery then, had nothing to do with a man's sexual relationship with his multiple wives or even unmarried women. It had to do with having sexual relationships with ANOTHER MAN'S WIFE... another man's property... like taking something from him that accrued to his wealth. This is drastically different than our contemporary understanding, where women are not seen as property, marriages are built on love, rather than simply duty and obligation. It may even make us cringe at the patriarchal misogyny of it. We may think we have a much healthier understanding of marriage... and yet, in our day, one out of every two marriages ends in divorce.

So... what can be gained here from this ancient commandment that can possibly give new spirit to our own age... because we obviously don't have it all figured out either. The word implied by the 6th commandment is commitment - commitment to the needs of others, and that is the key to any marriage. A marriage breaks down when either party refuses to take the needs of the other as their own.

Commitment is what calls us to really care for the other people we love, not to use them, not to exploit them, not to ignore them, not to patronize or manipulate them. It calls us to recognize that people are neither toys nor trophies. The people we love are those to whom we commit our lives, entrust our futures, and share our selves so that both we and they can grow into fully loving people. In a relationship, two equals are meant to become more together than they could ever be alone.

We treat the 6th commandment as if it were about physical misbehavior, but the 6th commandment is really about sincerity of heart, integrity of commitment. It is about loving rightly, with the soul as well as with the body - the mind and the personality as well as with our connections. It's about loving for the long haul, in season and out, with the soul far more

than with the body, which is why substituting another body for it never works. Disregard for the relationship, exploitation of the partnership, narcissistic victimization of another – sexually, emotionally, psychologically – for the sake of the self is a violation of the 6th commandment.

Adultery is seldom what really destroys the relationship in a marriage. Adultery is often what signals that the relationship has already deteriorated, whether both parties are aware of it or not. The commitment that it takes to maintain a marriage IS about duty and obligation, about family and future. It is a whole lot of little choices and big decisions... it is the everyday rededicating of one's self to love of the other and the family. Simone Signoret wrote, "Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads, which sew people together through the years." It's weaving those threads that counts. Really sustaining a healthy relationship – the intimacy, commitment, and passion takes time and work, patience, trust and honesty. It takes forgiveness and surrendering to the process of growth.

We call relationship partners "significant others" because there is a significance... a meaning and value that is added to life as we share it with others, as they bear witness to the big and small things... as they challenge and strengthen us to be more than we can be alone. The relationship must go beyond casual or commercial, or even self-satisfying physical passion, to intimacy, to knowing the other, to supporting the other... To encouraging their potential and their dreams. It's about enabling one another to be everything they can be, so that every day we can become something better together.

That's why marriage is a concern of the community. That's why these are community building words... It effects not only the couple themselves, but it affects the whole community around them. In a healthy marriage, we love each other into the best version of ourselves, supporting one another through the weak spots and challenges, and celebrating in the midst of the triumphs. And the ripple effect of a healthy marriage is unimaginable... not only impacting any children a couple has, but the community around them as well. We all can think of some couples that just inspire us by the way they love each other, the commitment they have for one another, and the way they make each other better people. This is kind of marriage builds up the community around it, as well as impacting their own future generations!

When you hear the words, "You shall not commit adultery"... hear also a call to deeper commitment to the needs of others, to the building up of family and community through love and mutual respect. That is commandment that we can all stand by. Amen.