

TEN | Breaking the Covenant/ Adultery

Jimmy Harris July 18, 2021

Introduction

We are in the middle of a series about the Ten Commandments. **Today** we will be diving into a difficult topic: Adultery.

In counseling couples over the years, I have heard many heart-breaking stories about infidelity:

- “I couldn’t brace myself because I never saw it coming.”
- “I didn’t have my guard up because I thought I was safe.”
- “It never crossed my mind that the person I loved and trusted and felt safe with would hurt me.”

For these couples, nothing makes sense. Fear, terror, and suspicion become their ways of life. They frantically start questioning everything, including themselves:

- How did it happen?
- How did I not know?
- I feel so rejected, so abandoned, so alone.
- I don’t know what to think, how to feel.
- The only thing I know for sure is that life will never be the same.

An infidelity story with a redemptive ending:

There was a couple I counseled in Northern Idaho—the wife had an affair with the man across the street. The wife was completely repentant, brokenhearted, and wanted restoration. The husband was also heartbroken, and he swung between being angry with his wife and desiring reconciliation with her. This situation was made more challenging by the fact that the “other man” lived across the street, wasn’t going anywhere, and wouldn’t let go of the relationship. He kept crossing the street to approach the wife.

One day the husband said to him, “Here is a line in the middle of the street. Do NOT cross it. Do NOT approach my wife. If you do, there will be consequences.” Well, the man didn’t respect this and continued to cross the street, so the husband walked across the street and beat the living tar out of the guy. The man said, “I’m pressing charges.” The wife called me—she was really torn up—not only had she destroyed her marriage, but now she was worried that her husband would go to jail. The police responded to the call and came out to the house and found out the whole story. Then the police said to the man, “Well, we understand that you want to press charges. But here is our advice—don’t cross this line ever again.”

The couple worked through the brokenness and ended up stronger than ever before. They now serve others who are going through the same thing. They took the brokenness of adultery and turned it into something redemptive.

**The big story of infidelity is that God is faithful when we are faithless.
None of us deserve it,
but God’s love reaches out and redeems people’s hearts and lives.**

Marriage Is a Covenant before God and Man

In Scripture, marriage between one man and one woman is God’s design. It was never God’s intention that there would be polygamy (every one of those stories in Scripture ends in horrible tragedy), infidelity, or divorce.

Matthew 19:4–6

And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male

and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

- He made us male and female—there are two genders, and that’s it. This is God’s design.
- When you marry, God joins you into one flesh. This is the covenantal relationship.

What is a covenant?

- Abrahamic covenant: Animals were slain and cut in half and then separated to create a pathway of blood (**Genesis 15**).
- In other words, “I will cut you in half if you don’t follow through on your end of this covenant.”
- A covenant is very serious, is not to be broken, and lasts forever.
- You don’t hear this at a lot of weddings, but it’s true. “If you don’t stick with me through thick and thin, you will be cut in half.” This is the rending of the one flesh described in Matthew 19. Divorce destroys people as much as being cut in half does.

Marriage is hard.

- Why do we put all those specific conditions in marriage vows (richer or poorer, in sickness and in health)? Because marriage is hard, and we are sinful.
- On average, marriages go through a crisis at about year seven and then again at about year fifteen.
- For those who persevere, the golden years of marital satisfaction are not at the beginning—they are at the end. Good marriages are like wine. They get better with age.

Gary Thomas, author of the book *Sacred Marriage*, asks this question, “What if God didn’t design marriage to be ‘easier’? What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?”¹

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s classic book *The Scarlet Letter*, protagonist Hester Prynne gives birth to a child out of wedlock and is forced to endure years of public shaming for her sin by wearing a scarlet A on her clothing for the rest of her life.²

There are many divorced and remarried folks here today. We have no intention of shaming you or put a scarlet A for adultery or D for divorce on you. But, we’re not going to shy away from what Jesus said either, just because it might be difficult for us to hear.

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:21–30

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny. You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

¹ Thomas, Gary. *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* Zondervan, 2015.

² Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Boston: Ticknor, Reed & Fields, 1850.

- This passage can't be separated from its context in the broader Sermon on the Mount.
- Jesus said, in effect, "I am not here to get rid of the Law, but to raise the standard for holiness."

Regarding the disintegration of marriage, notice the distinct order in which Jesus places these teachings and the careful instructions for each one:

1. **Unresolved anger**, or allowing offenses to build up, leads to contemptuous murder (actual or emotional).
2. **Contempt** ("You're the worst—you always have been and you always will be") is an emotional death sentence to your relationship.
3. Contempt then becomes **resentment**, which leads to lust.
4. **Lust** is the same thing as committing adultery in your heart. This was and still is a shocking statement.

What is **lust**? Lust is not the same as idolatry or coveting.

- **Idolatry** is trusting in something that is not God.
- **Coveting** is wanting something that is not yours. Wanting someone else's wife is as an example of coveting. Lust is different.
- **Lust** is the dehumanization of a person into an object. The harm of lust is making a person who was created in the image of God into a thing of pleasure, which is devastating to them and to your own soul. It is the raising of sinful desires and the lowering of another's worth.

Example—The epidemic of pornography is sweeping the country and is accessible to everyone, all the time. It is a major cultivator of lust in the developing world. The dehumanizing effect of it cannot be measured. Pornography not only is wrong in and of itself, it is also complicit in global sex trafficking.

- 25 percent of search engine requests are related to sex.³
- 35 percent of downloads from the internet are pornographic.⁴
- 40 million Americans say they regularly visit porn sites.⁵
- One-third of all internet porn users are women.⁶
- Sunday is the most popular day of the week for viewing porn.⁷
- In the past minute, more than 80 million people have visited a porn site in the US.⁸

**When we dehumanize someone,
we make them into an object of pleasure
rather than a person made in the image of God.
That is the real problem of lust.**

Christians have become ensnared as well. A recent study showed that approximately 50 percent of self-identified "Christians" say that casual sex between consenting adults is always or sometimes acceptable.⁹

Just this past week, eighteen men in Spring Hill were arrested for soliciting sex with a minor.¹⁰ One of them was a local pastor. Imagine how much bigger the problem is when you apply it to the entire nation.

³ <https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/process-addiction/porn-addiction/pornography-statistics/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/31/half-of-u-s-christians-say-casual-sex-between-consenting-adults-is-sometimes-or-always-acceptable/>

¹⁰ <https://www.wkrn.com/news/tennessee-pastor-national-guardian-among-those-busted-in-spring-hill-sex-sting/>

What is the way forward for your family? For the Church?

It starts with the people of God reining in their televisions and cell phones. Christians would not allow their teenagers to be alone in their bedroom with their boyfriend or girlfriend, but they do allow them unmitigated access to pornography with no filters or protections on their devices. We have to wise up before it's too late. Parents must model it. Set reasonable limits. Use technology to communicate but also *respect it as a dangerous weapon in our homes*.

What about those who are trapped in a destructive, addictive sexual sin?

Ask God to help you to see every person as a child of God. The first step out of sexual addiction is not shame or effort. It is only by the power of God and the people of God. Get help! This is an inside-out situation. Jesus taught that the act of adultery is the result of sinful forces operating in us like an infection.

What if your marriage is in trouble?

It starts with you, not your spouse. If your marriage is in trouble, confess your own sin, repent, and turn to God with desperation for Him to change you from the inside out. Get help before it's too late.

Divorce, Separation, Reconciliation

Matthew 5:31–32

Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

- A divorced woman in Biblical times was often forced into prostitution as a practical reality of survival. To divorce a woman was to leave her unprotected, uncared for, and publicly shamed.
- **This provision for divorce in the law as clarified by Christ is the greatest known protection for women in the history of the world. Jesus affirms the sanctity of marriage in part to protect women.**

Application—Don't misapply what Jesus is saying. He is defending the fidelity of marriage, not trying to build a case for more people to get divorced. If you are unhappily married or remarried, the principle of staying married applies to your current relationship. Do not use Jesus's words as an argument for getting out of your marriage (**1 Corinthians 7**). Two wrongs do not make something right. God puts His arms around marriage to protect it, not to create a new form of legalism to allow for the dissolution of marriage.

Biblical grounds for divorce:

There are two Biblical grounds for divorce clearly set forth by Jesus Christ (**Matthew 5:32, 19:9**) and His apostles (**1 Corinthians 7**) in the New Testament: **sexual immorality** and **desertion**. These are the only explicit Biblical reasons whereby a person may divorce a spouse.

What about abuse? What about . . .? Are you telling me that . . .?

Separation and reconciliation:

There are many instances where **separation** is the best decision for a time. The goal of a separation always is to reconcile to a healthy relationship. Separation is not an excuse to desert your spouse and call it "separation" when there is no intent to reconcile. That is desertion.

Separation can be an important tool in the process of **reconciliation** because there are some situations that are completely unlivable. You need to get away and then get wise Godly counsel on how to proceed (**1 Corinthians 7:10–16**). Don't separate before you have a plan on how to reconcile.

Conclusion

Did you know that God went through separation and divorce?

Jeremiah 3:6–14

The Lord said also to me in the days of Josiah the king: “Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. And I said, after she had done all these things, ‘Return to Me.’ But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense,” says the Lord. Then the Lord said to me, “Backsliding Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah. Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: ‘Return, backsliding Israel,’ says the Lord; ‘I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,’ says the Lord; ‘I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God, and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice,’ says the Lord. ‘Return, O backsliding children,’ says the Lord; ‘for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.’

- God promises to do what the Mosaic Law could never do: restore the broken marriage between Him and His people.
- This is revolutionary. It was unthinkable that a human husband would take back his unfaithful wife, but God is greater than that. He can and will forgive His wayward people when they repent of their sin and seek Him again.

Anger/contempt, lust/adultery, and divorce are symptoms of a bigger problem. **Sin is the problem.** We like Israel have gone astray (**Romans 1–3**). We are unfaithful. Our sin has created a seemingly irreconcilable difference. God has every right to put us away. He has Biblical grounds to divorce us, but He doesn’t do that. God has made a way to reconcile us with the sacrificial blood of Jesus.

**The true story is not actually about us.
It is about Him.
God has chosen His bride.
He made an eternal covenant.
She abandoned and betrayed Him.
He divorced her,
but then He forgave her and died for her.
Jesus is the Groom. We are the bride of Christ.
He is fighting for us.
He is coming back to take us home.
He is faithful even though we are unfaithful.
He paid the price even though we abandoned Him.
He goes before us and makes a way for us.
Jesus is the Redeemer, the Restorer, and the lover of our souls.**

Discussion Questions

1. How is marriage a covenant between God and man? How does this change or affirm your understanding of the marriage relationship?
2. Discuss: “What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?”
3. What is lust? How does unresolved anger turn into lust? What is the real problem of lust? How does it undermine what God says about us and how He made us?

4. What practical steps are you willing to commit to in order to protect yourself and your family from the dangers of lust and sexual sin?
5. What does Jesus say about divorce? What are the only two Biblical grounds for divorce? How was His teaching revolutionary at the time? How is it revolutionary today?
6. Discuss Jeremiah 3:6–14. How is our relationship with God a marriage? How does His indescribable faithfulness and love give you hope, joy, and encouragement?

NOTES