

The Scarlet Letter

Exodus 20:14

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

April 28, 2002

If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus 20:14. We're continuing to work our way through the ten words, the ten commands, which are the summary of God's revelation of His moral law to the people of God in the Old Testament. They came from God's own lips to His people at Mt. Sinai. We are in the second table of that law. The first four commandments are known as the first table of the law. The second six commandments are known as the second table of the law. The first table of the law pertains especially to our duty to God and the second table of the law pertains especially to our duty to our neighbor and to our fellow man, but the two are related. As we have seen all along, the first four commandments very directly pertain to our relationship with God. The first command tells us that we are to have no other God. The second command tells us that we are to worship the one true God in the way He tells us to worship Him. The third command tells us that we are to treat His name reverently, and the fourth command tells us the day on which are to worship Him. The fifth commandment then, the first command of the second table turns to our horizontal duties. If the first four commands deal with our vertical duties to God, the last six commands deal with our horizontal duties to one another and the first of those commandments is to honor father and mother.

The last time we were together we looked at the second of those commands, "Do no immoral killing" or "Do no murder" and we noticed the connection between the first table and the second table. Even in the nature of those first two commands of the second table of the law we noticed, for instance, whereas in the first four commands God makes it clear that He claims our exclusive reverence, our ultimate reverence is for Him and Him alone. He will not allow us to show our ultimate reverence to anyone else but Him. But the very first commandment of the second table demands that we do what? That we show reverence to our father and mother, and so as we see already the linkage between loving God and loving our neighbor, we cannot fail to show reverence to father and mother and still claim to truly reverence God nor can we truly reverence God without following through and showing reverence and respect for our parents.

In the second commandment we saw a similar linkage. As Moses explains this in Genesis 9 he makes it clear that the reason that we are not to do immoral killing, the reason we are not to murder, the reason that we are not to unlawfully take

human life, is because humans are made in the image of God and so our treating human life with respect is a gauge of how we respect God. If we treat human life with disrespect, the image of God, then it shows that we do not have true respect for the living God. And so we have already seen how in those two commands the second table is linked to the first table of the law. To put it another way, how loving man is linked to loving God. You cannot truly love man without truly loving the one true God. And you cannot truly love the one true God without loving your neighbor as yourself.

We see this same principle as we come to the third command of the second table of the law, the seventh commandment. Let's hear God's word:

"You shall not commit adultery." Amen and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let us pray.

Lord, we thank You for Your word. Teach us from it, instruct us in it, correct us by it, confront us with it. We ask, O Lord, that by Your Spirit that we would not only understand it but that we would embrace the obedience that it calls us to, and more than that, that we would embrace the rock of our salvation who is the only one who can enable us to obedience to your word, in Jesus name we ask this, Amen.

Our culture struggles mightily with the sin forbidden in this commandment. You don't have to look far around you to see the relevance of God's speaking to this issue in His moral law. Just a number of months ago Ted Turner made one of his typical cynical and fairly unintelligent quips before the media when he said, "If you're only going to have ten rules, I'm not sure whether one or them is going to be 'don't commit adultery.'" Well that probable tells you more about Ted Turner than it tells you about the law of God. But you know, that's an incredibly ignorant kind of comment in light of the scandals we've been watching unfold in Boston and in New York in the last few weeks as you have been pelted in the media by accounts of the pedophilia being perpetrated, the sexual activity being perpetrated by Roman Catholic priests in their own parishes. The idea that having a commandment on sexual purity is something that is either passñ or irrelevant or unwise, well, that sort of idea itself looks terribly unwise, downright idiotic in light of this.

But you know, you don't have to look up the east coast towards Boston to see the relevance of this. It is a sin that we struggle with in our congregation. It's a sin we struggle with in Jackson, Mississippi. We struggle with it both explicitly and implicitly, both outwardly and inwardly. This is a commandment that is relevant to us. And it is very important for us here to not fall into a typical American trap. We often say that "My religion is a private matter" and by that we mean, "Don't get too close poking around in my personal life because that's between me and God and you have nothing to do with it." And usually we say that in the context of saying that we don't want the government involved in our personal life. You've

heard it said, "Keep the government out of the bedroom." The idea is we don't want the government making laws and enforcing laws about our private lives and choices. They have no business with doing that. Whatever the logic of that particular view, it is very clear that God is interested in what we do in the bedroom. He puts a claim on every area of our life. He says, you are mine and I set down the standards for behavior for every area of your life.

God claims the right to dictate the bounds and nature of our sexual activity. In fact, our behavior in this area, our behavior in the arena of our sexual experience is an important index of our spiritual health and of our relationship to God. And that is why He says in His seventh word, "Do not commit adultery."

I want you to see two things today as we study this commandment and it's New Testament application. First of all, I want you to understand what the Old Testament is teaching us about adultery and sexual purity here in Exodus 20:14 and in some other passages. Then secondly, I want you to see the New Testament teaching and application of this Old Testament principle and we will go especially to Matthew 5:27-30 to learn that from the lips of Jesus as He quotes the seventh commandment and then applies it to our lives. And then if we have time, I want to look at several specific applications of this particular commandment to our situation today. I have seven of them, but I may not get to them all today.

I. As believers show covenant loyalty to God only, they also show sexual loyalty to their spouse/future spouse.

First, let's look at the Old Testament teaching on adultery and sexual sin here in Exodus 20:14. God is teaching us here that as believers show covenant loyalty to God only, so also we should sexual loyalty to our spouse or future spouse only. As believers show covenant loyalty to God only, they should also show sexual loyalty to their spouse only or to their future spouse only. Now, some of you will know that liberal critical scholars will come to the Old Testament and the seventh commandment and they will say basically, "All this commandment does is to protect the property rights of men and of husbands" and they'll go on and on about the fact that polygamy is not explicitly condemned in the Pentateuch, and they'll mention that whereas women are condemned for taking other husbands men are not condemned for taking other wives. And they'll point this out in order to restrict the bounds of this command. Now, I don't have time to adequately respond to that now, but if you are really interested in that subject I'd be happy to sit down with you, but right now I'd rather spend my time on something else.

Let me say one thing about this. It is interesting that Moses himself makes it clear by the other laws that he records for us on sexual purity, in his first five books, that he is not merely concerned with husbands' property rights, if I can put it that crassly. In fact, he is comprehensively concerned for sexual purity, and for the

family, and for the honor of God in the covenant community. I'm going to demonstrate that for you in just a few minutes, but let me show you three or four things that we learn from this commandment.

We have here a strong negative just like we met in the sixth commandment, very brief, two words: no adulterating. Just as 'no murdering' so also 'no adulterating.' This is a strong, strong negative and it's perfectly sensible to include it here in the Ten Commandments. This is a perennial problem. There can be few, if any, men in this congregation that are not regularly tempted to lust and sexual impurity and the practicality of this command is absolutely common sense. It also relates to covenant loyalty. The Old Testament teaches us, and the new Testament confirms, that marriage is a covenant relationship between a man and a woman and loyalty in that relationship demands that we be sexually loyal to one another, husband to wife and wife to husband. The spouse in the covenant relationship is to be explicitly and exclusively loyal in his sexual or her sexual commitments to his or her spouse. Marriage is a covenant and because marriage is a covenant the Old Testament and the New Testament view all sexual sin as covenant disloyalty.

Now let me pull back. This shows you how this is disloyalty to God. In the first four commandments, what has God asked for? Exclusive covenant loyalty and commitment on your part to Him. Worship no other gods, worship Me My way, reverence My name, honor My day. Now in the context of our human life and experience, He says, "Show absolute covenant commitment to your spouse." He calls us to sexual purity. Is it any wonder that when God wants to illustrate disloyalty to Him through the writings of the prophets, what metaphor does He use? He calls Israel 'adulterous' when Israel is unfaithful to Him. Why? Because a covenant requires commitment, and when we are disloyal, when we are unfaithful sexually to our partner, we violate that covenant in the deepest way that it can be violated. In fact, we violate it so deeply that Jesus says that becomes a legitimate biblical ground for divorce in His teaching. And so God says, your faithfulness in marriage to your partner is a picture of faithful covenant relationship with me. Paul spells that out explicitly for us in Ephesians 5 where he says that marriage is a picture of the union that exists between Christ and His church, and therefore our fidelity in marital relationships is to mirror our fidelity to God. And so we find this strong condemnation of adultery and sexual immorality and sexual impurity and it makes perfect sense in relation to God because sexual infidelity and sexual impurity is something that strikes deeply in our spiritual relationship.

Turn with me to Psalm 51:4. When David was caught in sin with Bathsheba it is obvious that he had sinned against Uriah, her husband. Now if the liberal critical scholars were right and Moses was only concerned about a husband's property rights in his wife, would David have prayed this way: "Against You, You only have I sinned." Now is David praying that prayer to Uriah? No. He's praying that prayer to God because he understood that his sexual infidelity, that his adultery, that his

sexual immorality, that his sexual immaturity, his sexual impurity had struck right at his relationship with God. It was an act of disloyalty to God.

He wasn't denying that he had sinned against Bathsheba. He had dishonored her. He had. He wasn't denying that he had sinned against Uriah. He had. But he is affirming that first and foremost his sexual impurity struck at his loyalty to God. You see, there is a linkage between our loyalty to God and our sexual purity.

Now, of course, this command also protects family. It is very clear from Moses' teaching that the command is designed to protect the integrity of the family, and more than that, it is designed to provide the framework in which the most beautiful expression of God-given human intimacy that can be experienced physically is to be experienced. He is concerned to link, notice, intimacy with commitment. There is to be no sexual gratification apart from covenantal commitment.

Notice how that protects a woman. Instead of a woman being a tool, an instrument for a man's gratification first, God demands that he commit himself to her. Then he experiences the gratification which only she can provide him in God's plan, but not without committing the totality of himself to her. Notice how Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5. Turn there and look at verse 4 in 1 Corinthians 7:4. Paul basically says this, look at it with your own eyes, "Husbands, your body belongs to your wife, and wives, your body belongs to your husband."

Now there are many practical deductions from that truth and in this context it's clear some of the applications that Paul intends by it, but it is very clear that our sexual experience, the expression of our sexual experience in our physical bodies is something which deeply concerns our spouse and our bodies themselves and their sexual expression belongs to our spouse and to no other. And it is in that framework that the sexual expression is to occur.

So Moses is teaching us in Exodus 20:14 that our sexual activity says a lot about our love for God and our loyalty to Him. Our sexual activity is to be expressed in the context of family because your body belongs to your spouse and your spouse's body to you. And in this passage we are learning that it is a fundamental principle that sex is to be tied to a covenant commitment. There is to be no sexual expression apart from covenant commitment. God has so designed that there should be no sexual intimacy apart from the attendant covenantal commitments. It protects women, it protects the family, it protects spouses, and this is the reason that adultery is chosen by God as a image of what it means to be disloyal to Him. And so sexual purity is an expression of our love for God and our loyalty to Him and is an expression of our loyalty to our future spouse. We have no right to give to someone who is not our spouse that which only belongs to our spouse. That's what we learn as we study the Old Testament. We could find more and we will later as we continue on through this book, but that gives

you an outline of the seventh commandment.

II. As believers seek to be outwardly pure in their sexual life, so also they must strive to be inwardly pure.

Let's turn then to Matthew 5:27-30, and again Jesus says more than we have time to do justice to, but it's clear here that Jesus is concerned for believers to be holy and pure not only in their outward life, but in their inward life. They are to strive to be inwardly pure with regard to their sexual behavior. It's not enough to abstain from physical adultery. It's not enough to abstain from physical fornication. Jesus wants us to be pure in our hearts and in our thoughts, in our thinking. "You have heard that it was said," Jesus says in verse 27, "you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble tear it out and throw it from you for it better for you to lose one of the parts of your body than for the whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble cut it off and throw it from you, for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Notice that Jesus is saying several things to us here. First of all, He's telling us that there is more than one way to break the command, "You shall not commit adultery." Just because you have not taken up with a prostitute doesn't mean that you have kept this commandment. Just because you have not had an extramarital affair or a premarital affair doesn't mean that you've kept this commandment. There is more than one way to break this commandment and Jesus goes right to the issue of lust. Look at verse 28. "I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." He's just spoken to every man in the room and every man in the room knows exactly what He's talking about. He says, consider lust. If you think you are perfect with regard to this command consider your lust.

You see, He was talking to Pharisees. The Pharisees were hard on physical adultery but they were lenient on divorce. He's getting ready to go back at them on the issue of leniency, unbiblical divorce, in verses 31 and 32. But just so He can give them an example that there's more than one way to break this command He starts out with lust and He says, lust is a breaking of this commandment. And then He says, consider you heart. He takes the issue right into the heart, right into our desires, our thinking, the things that we yearn after, the things that move us to look at certain things and He tell us here that what we lust for with our eyes affects our hearts, and our hearts also determine to a certain extent what we lust for with our eyes. Consider our heart and then look what Jesus does. It's like a hell fire and brimstone preacher. He connects lust with hell.

Now why does he do that? Because He knows how powerful this particular sin can be. People who are caught up with sexual sins of their various sorts will do everything to deny that they have a problem, to deny admitting to a dear friend who comes to them and says, "Brother, you have got to stop having that affair. Brother, you have got to stop viewing the pornography. Brother, you have got to stop engaging in that activity." They will circumlocute, they'll euphemize, they'll come up with any way they can to spare themselves of the omission of sin and so Jesus links it with hell and He says this is the kind of sin that can so take hold of your soul that it becomes a conduit to hell.

You see, Jesus' ultimate concern isn't just our moral purity. It's our salvation and He realizes that these kinds of sins, sexual sins, can so take hold of the heart that they can separate us from God and so He calls in this passage for us to deal with it decisively and He uses the most graphic language, cut your hand from you and cast it away, pluck your eye out and cast it away if it causes you to stumble.

Jesus deals with sins of the sexual life with deadly earnest, and I'd like you to see several specific applications of these important principles to several crucial issues of our time and the first one is pornography. Pornography is pervasive in our community. You can see it on regular television, you don't even have to own cable. You can see it in the movies and you do most of the time when you go. You can read it books, you can hear it on radio, you can see it on billboards there are even some living, walking, talking examples of pornography that you can see from time to time in our community. Pornography is a pervasive problem and it is a challenge for men. There are, I am told, over 150,000 pornographic internet sites, and 200 are added everyday. There must be some customers out there because it usually takes a credit card.

A. Pornography.

This is a pervasive problem for men and it is a problem in three particular areas that I want to speak about. When you have indulged in pornography, when you have allowed your eyes to go back to that book, or to those pictures, or that film, or that web site over and over again, you have already begun to commit the sin of idolatry because idolatry does what? It divides the heart, it divides the loyalties of the heart. Instead of the heart being undividedly loyal to the one true God, you are beginning to love and to worship and to find your gratification in something that is not God, and in fact, something which He has forbidden. And that idolatry is a dangerous spiritual sin and so Satan has one hook already planted.

And there is a second thing that goes along with pornography and that is secrecy. Those who are engaged in viewing or partaking of pornography normally don't want to announce that out loud. It's not the kind of thing that they talk about with their wives, with their girlfriends, with their friends, with their buddies, with their parents, with their children. They are concerned to hide it and that secrecy leads to a divided life. You live one way in one place and another

way in another. During the day you're a upstanding citizen. At night when your wife is asleep, when the family is gone or when you're on a business trip, you live another way, and the danger of this is not only inherent in that type of divided life but when you learn that you can live a divided life in one area you think to yourself, "I could do this in other areas." And so as men have told me from this congregation who have come to me struggling with these things, "I started off on business trips watching pornography in the hotel. I'd go down to the hotel bar. I'd meet women. I realized that if I could watch the pornography that I was also in a city where my wife was not and nobody knew me and I could do other things as well." The divided life and the secrecy pattern tempts us to sin in other areas.

And finally, pornography is isolating. It teaches us to seek our gratification alone when God meant that gratification to be experienced in fellowship with our spouse. And when we find that gratification alone rather in fellowship we perhaps cause a barrier to ever experiencing it in fellowship. We either become angry towards a spouse who is not a centerfold or become indifferent and the bed is cold. Pornography is a powerful problem and it is pervasively present. Men, are you taking precautions? Do you ask your wife to check behind the history of your internet searches? Do you have an open door policy on your computer? Do you allow your assistant access to your computer so that your assistant can see everything that you have done on it? Are you taking precautions in this area?

B. Immodesty.

Immodesty is the second area that I'd like to address. Friends, if we are dressing in a way that is provocative. May I speak to the young women especially? If you are dressing in a way that is provocative, if your clothing is provocative, then you are inviting trouble upon yourself as well as causing difficulty for your brothers. Ladies of this congregation, I've never been in a congregation, community, or state where the women were more beautiful. It is difficult for men to look at your faces and to remain pure, when they are tempted to look everywhere else in public. It makes their sexual purity almost impossible. If your clothing is provocative, even though it may be your heart's desire to remain pure for your spouse, you are sending the message to men, to boys, that you are ready for that sexual activity now. You're sending a conflicting message and you're making it hard for your brother to remain pure. When your clothing draws attention through its tightness, or through the flesh that it reveals, away from your face, where you could be treated as a person of intelligence and dignity, and to those parts of your body which have sexual functions, you are asking for trouble and you are causing your brother to stumble.

Men, fathers, husbands, when was the last time you said to your wife, "Honey, I don't think you should buy that dress" or "Don't wear that dress," or to your daughter, "You're not going out dressed like that." Friends, if we're not doing that, in this community where our women go to store after store and most of the options that they have test the bounds of prudence, then we're just dropping the

ball. And it's easy for us because you know what, we like it when they look that way. It's fun for us when they look that way. But do we want our wives and our daughters to be looked upon as sex objects for the gratification of other men?

III. Third area, premarital sex.

From the biblical standpoint all sex outside of marriage is a matter of disloyalty to God and disloyalty to our future partner. Did you hear what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:4, "Your body belongs to your spouse and so all sexual expressions, all." Don't let our former president fool you about the bounds of sexual relations, all sexual expression outside of marriage is a betrayal of our spouse and an act of disloyalty to God as well as a spiritual and a physical danger.

We're in prom season. Let me ask you something, young men. Did you treat your date last night, or whenever it was, in a way you would have wanted your future spouse to be treated by her date? Did you honor her in that way? Did you help her? Did you treat her with purity? Young women, did you dress in such a provocative way that you offered yourself to your date? Premarital sex is a violation of God's commands. It is a disloyalty to our future partner. It is a spiritual danger as well as a physical danger. This commandment tells us to be sexually pure in what we think and say and do and to help others to be the same way. That's what our children's catechism says, what wise words we find in that catechism, beautifully expressing what the bible says about the seventh commandment.

Friends, we need help in this area. We need mutual accountability children being accountable to parents' friends being accountable to friends, husbands being accountable to wives. Men, are you talking in your serious friendships, in your serious Christian friendships with your Christian male friends, about your struggles in this area. Are you accountable to them? Are you asking them to hold you accountable? Young people, do you think this is something to play with, to explore with no consequences. Let me tell you this. I have never met a problem in adults with sexual perversion that was not rooted in that which started in early life, whether it be pornography, or homosexuality, or the experience of abuse or something else. Every sexual perversion issue I've ever met began in teen or preteen life. This is not an area to play with and my friends, if you have already transgressed the bounds in this area then I have an answer for you. You first run to Christ because you won't be able to deal with this on your own. And if you have been kept pure in this area then you run to Christ because it is only the Rock of Ages who can help you in this society keep the seventh commandment. May God help us as we aim to please Him through the obedience of His word. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bow before You and we ask Your grace and help from

the Rock of Ages. In Jesus name. Amen

Commandment #7 - Part 2

April 30, 2002

The First Epistle

I am so appreciative of the hosts of folks who have encouraged me in the wake of last Sunday's sermon on the seventh commandment. To be quite honest, I approached that text with fear and trembling. It speaks to such important and hard and uncomfortable issues in our lives, I knew that it would be disturbing. But we are committed to God's word here, and integrity demanded that the difficult issues (and passages) not be ducked. Many of you have said that the Lord's word ministered to you deeply, and for that I'm profoundly grateful.

Now I mentioned to you that I wanted to address seven areas of application of the commandment, but in both services we only got to application 3. I will come back to this subject matter again as we work through Exodus (fairly soon, actually), but I think that I will also do some reflection with you on these things in The First Epistle as well.

For one thing, today, I'm going to reveal to you all seven of the areas! I first made the point that the seventh commandment teaches us that as believers are to show covenant loyalty to God only, they are also to show sexual loyalty to their spouse/future spouse. The inclusion of this command in the Ten Words makes perfect sense. Sexual infidelity is a perennial problem, and it relates to covenant loyalty. Marriage is a covenant and therefore all sexual sin is a violation of that covenant. When we say "adultery" we mean especially "any sexual relations between a married person and someone who is not his/her spouse." "Fornication," on the other hand, is "sexual relations between the unmarried." Both are condemned by Christ in His interpretation of this command, and so it is clear that the Bible prohibits all extra-marital or pre-marital sexual relations. The point being made here is fundamental: sex is to be tied to a covenant commitment. There is to be no sex apart from commitment. God has so designed us that there should be no sexual intimacy apart from the attendant covenantal commitments. Furthermore, we emphasized that sexual purity is an expression of love for/loyalty to God, as well as for our spouse/future spouse (see Psalm 51:4 and 1 Cor 7:4). There is a reason adultery is chosen by God as an image of what it means to be disloyal to Him (see the OT prophetic writings)!

Second, I commented that as believers seek to be outwardly pure in their sexual life, so also they must strive to be inwardly pure. This is clear from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:27-30. Jesus' exposition of the true meaning of the law

here shows that, because the Law is Spiritual, the keeping of the Law is a matter of the heart. The requirements of the Law extend to our hearts, eyes and hands. Jesus is speaking here of sexual immorality of any sort, for instance, lustful viewing is eye-adultery. Men know exactly what Jesus means! But Jesus also characterizes this eye-adultery as heart-adultery. This is not a superficial or trifling sin.

Jesus' prescription is shocking. Take drastic action in getting rid of whatever may be the conduit of temptation, He says. The present is not our only life. An eternal destiny awaits us in heaven or hell. Nothing, however pleasurable or satisfying at the moment, should be allowed to doom us eternally. Sin must not be pampered or toyed with, but put to death (flung aside immediately and decisively). "Dillydallying is deadly." The book, the pictures, the film, the web-site, the social tie, the baneful habit — must go.

What areas of application does this teaching have? Many. Many more than I list here. But seven were/are on my mind. Several crucial issues for our time: (1) Pornography: involves idolatry (divided heart), secrecy (divided life), and isolation (non-intimacy). This is a rampant problem. (2) Immodesty: if our clothing is provocative, then we are inviting trouble upon ourselves and causing difficulty for our brothers. (3) Pre-marital sex: shows disloyalty to God, disloyalty to our future partner, and is a spiritual danger, as well as a physical danger. [I could have added in the issue of extra-marital sex]. (4) Homosexuality: whatever our society may say, it is clearly out of accord with the Bible. Paul's language of censure is drawn right from the law of Moses! (5) Pedophilia: now that homosexuality has been normalized, pedophilia will be next. Christians must engage the culture on this. (6) Unbiblical divorce: rampant in our community, reveals lack of commitment in our day and time. (7) Intra-marital Sexual Deprivation: see Paul's comments in 1 Cor 7:3-5.

More on these things later.

Your friend,

Ligon Duncan

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