

You Shall Not Commit Adultery Part 2: Infidelity and Reconciliation

By
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*“You shall not commit adultery.”
-Exodus 20:14*

*“The man who commits adultery with another man’s wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death.”
-Leviticus 20:10*

Today we will continue our discussion on the seventh commandment which forbids adultery. As we talked about last time though, the purpose of all commandments is to instruct our loving relationships with God and our neighbor. As such, this commandment is less about forbidding extra-marital relationships, and more about protecting the sanctity of marriage itself. So last time we talked a bit about the sanctity of marriage and its importance, today we will discuss the nature of adultery and the hope of reconciliation.

The Importance of Faith

*“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.”
-Galatians 5:6*

What we see biblically is that the foundation for all things is the virtue of faith. In order for love to grow, it must be rooted in fidelity. All of the amazing things that build affection and attraction for another person is rooted in a fundamental trust for that other person. It is upon the commandment given to Adam and Eve in the Garden that paradise is established and grown, it is upon the faithful union of Adam and Eve that the entire world would be subdued and filled by subsequent generations. This means that God intended for all of us to learn the mysteries of love through the marital fidelity shared between our parents. Finally, it is upon faith itself that our relationship with God is founded:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

-Ephesians 2:8-10

As we talked about last time though, our faith is not merely something that we believe in our minds, but it is what we act out in our bodies. It's one of the reasons why a couple will have sex throughout the marriage even though they are already “one” and even if they aren't trying to have children. The purpose of sex is to “practice” the unity that the marriage already contains through our bodies.

But if all this is true, if fidelity really is the basis for love and unity in general, then infidelity would be the root of all division and animosity. It is for this reason that it would be appropriate to see the drama that occurred within the Garden of Eden as an affair:

“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

-Genesis 1:27-28

When God created Adam and Eve in the Garden, His intent was to be one with mankind, to rule and reign over this new creation *with* the pinnacle of His creation that bore His image. As stated before, the fidelity of this relationship is expressed through the commandment to not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. While this commandment has many other implications, one would be that, since fruit bears seed within it, God is asking mankind to be faithful to His “seed”, to the fruit of the tree of life, and to not partake of a foreign “seed”, the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

One reason why Satan, in particular, tempts Eve is to fulfill this symbol of adultery. His approach and temptation of Eve can be seen as a potential lover trying to woo a faithful woman away from her vows. While I think that the text of Genesis shows this point, in John Milton's epic poem “Paradise Lost” he makes this point in a more overt manner in the way that Satan tempts Eve:

“...he glad Of her attention gaird, with Serpent Tongue Organic, or impulse of vocal Air, His fraudulent temptation thus began. Wonder not, sovran Mistress, if perhaps Thou canst, who art sole Wonder, much less arm Thy looks, the Heav'n of mildness, with

disdain, Displeas'd that I approach thee thus, and gaze Insatiate, I thus single, nor have feard Thy awful brow, more awful thus retir'd. Fairest resemblance of thy Maker faire, Thee all things living gaze on, all things thine By gift, and thy Celestial Beautie adore With ravishment beheld, there best beheld Where universally admir'd; but here In this enclosure wild, these Beasts among, Beholders rude, and shallow to discern Half what in thee is fair, one man except, Who sees thee? (and what is one?) who shouldst be seen A Goddess among Gods, ador'd and serv'd By Angels numberless, thy daily Train. So glorz'd the Tempter, and his Proem tun'd; Into the Heart of Eve his words made way..."

-John Milton - "Paradise Lost"

In this version, the tempter flatters the woman's beauty and by so doing tempted the woman away from her vows to God. After this betrayal, mankind is put out of God's "home" and is forbidden from His fruit, the tree of life. It was this infidelity that Christ came to overcome. This is one reason why the stories of infidelity have a prominence in the genealogy of Christ. From Judah's affair with Tamar, to the prostitute Rahab and even David's famous affair with Bathsheba, the concept of adultery is written into the history of our Savior, because it was exactly this faithlessness that Christ came to address. We will talk more about how exactly Christ did this later on, but for now it is important to understand that the story of the gospel can be best understood as the story of infidelity, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

The Path of Adultery

"No aspect of a couple's life elicits more fear, gossip, or fascination than an affair. Adultery has existed since marriage was invented, and so too has the taboo against it. It has been legislated, debated, politicized, and demonized throughout history. Yet despite its widespread denunciation, infidelity has a tenacity that marriage can only envy."

-Esther Perel - "The State of Affairs"

"Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," And call understanding your nearest kin, That they may keep you from the immoral woman, From the seductress who flatters with her words."

-Proverbs 7:4-5

What is most beautiful, and most disconcerting, about the Bible is its unrelenting realism. This is not some simplistic story in which those who commit acts of evil are cartoon villains revelling in their wickedness, but instead it shows the depths of depravity through all too human stories. Even with sins as egregious as this one, we have some of the most prominent "heroes" of our faith fail in this area. Abraham has sex

with his maid, David has an affair with Bathsheba, and many of the prominent names in the old testament practiced forms of polygamy.

As such, what the Bible shows us, is that not everyone who commits adultery is a cold, venomous, narcissist, but oftentimes they are good people who fell to the temptations of the flesh. This is not to mitigate against the evils of this sin, but instead to give context as to why it might happen. If we only understand the black and white law of Scripture, and can only understand the failing of the Law as being the result of malicious evil, we won't know how to guard against it in our own lives.

The Power of Lust

“The motives for straying vary widely, as do the reaction and possible outcomes. Some affairs are acts of resistance. Others happen when we offer no resistance at all... Some infidelities are petty rebellions, sparked by a sense of ennui, a desire for novelty, or the need to know one still has pulling power... Affairs are an act of betrayal and they are also an expression of longing and loss.”

-Esther Perel - “The State of Affairs”

“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.”

-Matthew 5:27-30

Jesus makes a couple profound points in this passage. First, He diagnoses the root of unfaithfulness as lust. This is a word that we don't fully understand in our modern culture, and unfortunately, it has made many believe that sexual passion is something that the Bible is forbidding. In the Greek, the term is “epithemeo” and it carries the idea of *gazing* upon something that is forbidden with passionate desire. It also carries the idea of objectification, because this word is almost synonymous with the word used for “greed”, which is a desire to *possess* something valuable.

This means that, within a loving relationship between two committed people, sexual passion is not only allowable, but it is encouraged in the Scriptures. What is being spoken against by Jesus is not this type of passionate desire that is an expression of the loving unity that a married couple enjoys, but instead a passionate desire for someone that we are not married to:

“Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; And always be enraptured with her love. For why should you, my son, be enraptured by an immoral woman, And be embraced in the arms of a seductress?”

-Proverbs 5:18-20

This is not to say that we can't objectify our spouses or pollute our own marital bed, but that isn't the topic of discussion for today. When Jesus connects the sin of adultery to lust, He is explicitly condemning sensual passion for a person that we are *not* married to. This fits quite nicely with what we are told in the final commandment:

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.”

-Exodus 20:17

Briefly, I want to talk about dating, since this complicates the notion of lust a little bit. Since, while someone is dating, they aren't committed to the bonds of marriage, and yet there still is a level of commitment that is hopefully moving towards marriage. Is sexual passion allowable in this kind of relationship?

“There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yes, four which I do not understand: The way of an eagle in the air, The way of a serpent on a rock, The way of a ship in the midst of the sea, And the way of a man with a virgin.”

-Proverbs 30:18-19

The word “wonderful” in the above passage does not just denote beauty, but instead something that is mysterious and dangerous. All the examples that he gives is something that is indeed beautiful and mysterious, but also something that can quickly end in disaster. So when he ends the passage by talking about “the way of a man with a virgin”, he is talking about two single people who are either betrothed, or moving in that direction. While their sexual passion is normal and beautiful, it is also dangerous and can quickly lead to bad decisions. So this passage doesn't forbid the desire, it warns about its power.

Which leads to the main point, the power of lust. Jesus illustrates the power of lust in the truly shocking end of this passage when He says: *“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.”* The implication is that

lust is such a powerful force, that in order to fight against it we have to be willing to take extreme steps.

To put this point another way, no matter how happy a marriage might be, the pull of lust is still a potent force that needs to be resisted at all costs. Some people wrongfully believe that a happy marriage will inoculate them to the temptations of lust or adultery, but this simply isn't true. It is true that those who are unhappy in their marriages are more prone to the power of lust, but the thing about our lust is that no matter how much we have, we will always be tempted by more. This point is illustrated vividly in Eve's fall to the temptations of Satan:

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”

-Genesis 3:6

All the indications of the text tell us that Adam and Eve were deeply happy in their relationship with God. In fact, her unhappiness with God is not mentioned as a reason for her eating the tree. This wasn't an open act of rebellion, but simply a faithful woman succumbing to the lust of the forbidden. The other power that lust has is to make us blind to consequences:

“Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; He who does so destroys his own soul.”

-Proverbs 6:32

This proverb is not telling us that only dumb people commit adultery, it is instead telling us that the act of adultery *itself* is a foolish and idiotic act because of the severe consequences to our own soul. We will talk more about the consequences of adultery later on, but it is important to understand that in the grips of temptation it is almost impossible to think about the long term consequences of our behavior.

We act in accordance with present pleasure at the cost of long term happiness. The Bible teaches us the opposite. Jesus' call to “pluck out” the offending eye is to sacrifice the present desire of our eye for the benefit of our soul. But since the power of temptation is so strong, we have to be willing to go to extreme lengths to maintain our purity.

The Pursuit of Happiness

“Love is an ideal thing, marriage a real thing; a confusion of the real with the ideal never goes unpunished.”

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

“Affairs are a pathway to risk, danger, and the defiant energy of transgression. Unsure of the next date, we are ensured the excitement of anticipation. Adulterous love resides in a self-contained universe, secluded from the rest of the world. Affairs blossom in the margins of our lives, and as long as they are not exposed to broad daylight, their spell is preserved.”

-Esther Perel - “The State of Affairs”

Even though this sin has always presented a problem throughout human history, for the modern person we are faced with a new dimension to this problem, our heavy emphasis on happiness. We no longer view the concept of “happiness” in the same way our ancestors did. When they spoke of “happiness”, they really meant something like “fulfillment” and not merely an emotional pleasure. They also understood that the only way to be truly happy was to sacrifice present temptations for long term, spiritual blessings.

Whereas the modern person believes that their personal happiness is synonymous with their present emotional state. Furthermore, they believe that their happiness is not merely a good that should be pursued, but a right that they are entitled to. This results in a veritable factory that produces lustful thinking. To put this point more simply, if my personal feelings of happiness are a “right” in the traditional sense, and I am unhappy, then I am actually entitled to do whatever makes me feel happy whether that means committing adultery or abandoning the marriage that I currently have.

“Our experience is colored through and through by books and plays and the cinema, and it takes patience and skill to disentangle the things we have really learned from life for ourselves. People get from books the idea that if you have married the right person you may expect to go on ‘being in love’ forever. As a result, when they find they are not, they think this proves they have made a mistake and are entitled to a change—not realizing that, when they have changed, the glamour will presently go out of the new love just as it went out of the old one.”

-C.S. Lewis - “Mere Christianity”

For our ancestors, when they were personally unhappy in a career or a relationship, they were taught to see it as their responsibility to fix the problem, and not to lay the blame of their unhappiness on another person. The excess of this idea is shown in the

fact that many of them put up with terrible relationships and even abusive careers in the name of this virtue. But the modern perspective has made a god of our own happiness, and this perspective has cut us off from the very means of happiness.

When did this shift happen? While there are many potential culprits in wealth and prosperity, but I think that the marriage counselor Esther Perel gives a pretty good starting point for the modern day iteration of this problem:

"...when sex was decoupled from reproduction, it became no longer just a feature of our biology but a marker for our identity. Our sexuality has been socialized away from the natural world and has become a "property of the self" that we define and redefine throughout our lives. It is an expression of who we are, no longer merely something we do. In our corner of the world, sex is a human right linked to our individuality, our personal freedom, and our self-actualization. Sexual bliss, we believe, is our due - and it has become a pillar of our new conception of intimacy."

-Esther Perel - "The State of Affairs"

When sex is linked to procreation, it is also linked to personal responsibility. When it becomes detached from this, it becomes more about personal pleasure than accountability or responsibility. Beyond this, it becomes a marker for personal identity and authenticity. Like Eve in the garden, in the moment of temptation she could only feel slighted by the one tree that was forbidden to her instead of being thankful for the infinite trees that God had offered freely to her.

We tend to think of "laws" as restrictions on our authentic selves. In other words, when we are doing something that we want, especially when that thing is forbidden to us, we think that we are fulfilling our deepest desires. This is one of the reasons why the "forbidden" often times is tantalizing to us. There is a mystery to the unknown that fills us with passionate desire, while the things that we have become old and tired to us.

One of my favorite, more modern, Disney movies is "The Princess and the Frog", in it, the prince is depicted as a lustful and lazy wastrel. He goes to a practitioner of Vudu to get all his desires met without taking any personal responsibility. In this transaction, he loses his humanity and becomes a frog, which symbolically represents an "amphibious" or an "ambiguous" identity. Something that has no clear loyalty or affiliation to either the land or the sea. As he is being transformed, a chorus sings a haunting line: "You got what you wanted, but you lost what you had."

The pursuit of the forbidden in the name of personal pleasure will always have these results. We may actually get what we want, but at the cost of what we have. The lustful

man might receive the pleasure of a lustful embrace with another woman, but he will lose his marriage, in more ways than one.

This is also an act of selfishness. I mentioned before that the concept of lust is also attached to the idea of objectification. The reason for this has to do with the allure of the forbidden. When we choose to devote ourselves to another person, our love is public and obvious to everyone around us. In order to make this relationship work, the two lives become one and we get to know the other person in the most intimate and vulnerable ways, and we become known in our most intimate and vulnerable ways. One of the reasons why the “forbidden” sexual partner is such an alluring trope in modern so-called romantic comedies, is because it is actually an expression of selfish passion.

“It is our imagination that is responsible for love, not the other person.”

-Marcel Proust

The forbidden affair is one that has to occur in the shadows. We aren't romancing another person, but our own fantasies. We aren't finding our true selves, we are polluting our souls through our own lustful desires. We aren't maturing into the people that we should be, but we are devolving into the worst versions of ourselves. This is why pornography is so rampant and destructive. Viewing pornography is not about becoming one with another person in the light of day, but it is becoming one with ourselves, our own imaginations, merely using the image of another person disconnected from their identity or humanity.

Far from the modern conception, the pathway to identity is not found through a violation of rules and obligations, but it is through a faithfulness to these things. I love how this is put in the book “Jane Eyre” by Charlotte Bronte. There is a part of the book where she has the option to engage in a type of affair with a married man. When he is trying to convince her that this is a good thing, this is their interaction:

“Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law, no man being injured by the breach? for you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me?” This was true: and while he spoke my very conscience and reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with crime in resisting him. They spoke almost as loud as Feeling: and that clamoured wildly. “Oh, comply!” it said. “Think of his misery; think of his danger—look at his state when left alone; remember his headlong nature; consider the recklessness following on despair—soothe him; save him; love him; tell him you love him and will be his. Who in the world cares for you? or who will be injured by what you do?” Still indomitable was the reply—“I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more

unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth—so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane—quite insane...

-Charlotte Bronte - "Jayne Eyre"

She is tempted to see this violation of rules as an act of love and self authenticity, but she reflects and sees the truth of this. The "her" that merely wants to give into her desires is not the "her" that is thinking through her future or her responsibilities, it is merely the "her" of the moment. The insane, passionate desires of a woman who merely wants love at all costs. She is smart enough to know that this isn't the true "her", but only a powerful emotion that is passing through. To be faithful to the emotion would actually be a denial of her true self, and a destruction of her true happiness. While this goes against the modern conventional wisdom, it is the truth. To be faithful to our responsibilities, and our vows, not only in our bodies but our minds, is to be true to the most true components of our souls.

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

-Matthew 16:24-25

The Death of Virtue

"This is the way of an adulterous woman: She eats and wipes her mouth, And says, "I have done no wickedness."

-Proverbs 30:20

The big problem that our lust presents is that it makes us question our identity as a "good person". The above proverb talks about a woman who has seared her conscience to such a degree that she no longer sees any sin in her behavior. To various extents, anyone who gives into their lust must do the same thing. It is almost unbearable to see ourselves as bad people, and so we adopt different views of reality in order to justify our own misconduct.

This is a way to understand the fig leaves that Adam and Eve used to cover themselves. They couldn't face their own shame after violating the trust of their faithful

God, and so they hide from His face, cover their shame, and Adam even gives a slight jab at God for giving him the woman who “deceived” him.

To some extent, this is what we all do. When we find unfaithfulness in our own behavior, we almost always project our own behavior onto our spouse, blaming them for what we have done. One of the most famous books that looks seriously at the effects of adultery would be Leo Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina”. In it, a beautiful, wealthy woman, begins an affair with a young military officer. At one point in the book, she begins ranting about how awful her husband is:

“He’s not a man, but a machine, and a spiteful machine when he’s angry,” she added, recalling Alexey Alexandrovitch as she spoke, with all the peculiarities of his figure and manner of speaking, and reckoning against him every defect she could find in him, softening nothing for the great wrong she herself was doing him.”

-Leo Tolstoy - “Anna Karenina”

Even though there is a hint of truth in her words, they are an inflamed version of events born out of her own shame. She can’t face herself as a woman who has broken apart her family and sinned against a faithful man, she has to paint him to be a villain, which gives her betrayal a hint of “nobility”, and her affair an air of romance and enchantment. But Tolstoy also sees this same mechanism alive and active within the elites of his day:

“In his Petersburg world all people were divided into utterly opposed classes. One, the lower class, vulgar, stupid, and, above all, ridiculous people, who believe that one husband ought to live with the one wife whom he has lawfully married; that a girl should be innocent, a woman modest, and a man manly, self-controlled, and strong; that one ought to bring up one’s children, earn one’s bread, and pay one’s debts; and various similar absurdities. This was the class of old-fashioned and ridiculous people. But there was another class of people, the real people. To this class they all belonged, and in it the great thing was to be elegant, generous, plucky, gay, to abandon oneself without a blush to every passion, and to laugh at everything else.”

-Leo Tolstoy - “Anna Karenina”

This is what happened during our own sexual revolution, and what is happening right now within our culture. As lust and infidelity become more commonplace, our view of marriage takes on more and more negative connotations. Many young people criticize the institution of marriage, speaking about how out of date it is, many young men say it is skewed towards women, and both genders mercilessly criticize the excesses of the opposing gender.

While each of these arguments contain a grain of truth in them, they are also justifications towards unfaithfulness. The truth is, we don't want to confront the things that are wrong in us that might have led to failed relationships and we don't want to see our unwillingness to commit as a defect in our character, we would much rather foist our own negative character qualities on other people, or society itself.

Once again, this is not to say that there aren't marriages in which one person is truly selfish and negligent, but the reason why we would exaggerate those qualities is to excuse adultery, or divorce, for Jesus makes it clear that divorce gives way to adultery and is itself an act of infidelity:

“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”
-Matthew 19:9

Notice in the passage He does allude to certain causes that would justify divorce, like your spouse cheating on you, but He also speaks of the evil of divorce and the beauty of marital fidelity. Once again, as bad as infidelity is, the desire to cover our shame can actually lead to a worse outcome than the sin itself.

“Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”

-Ephesians 4:18-19

The Consequences of Adultery

So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

-Genesis 3:24

The consequences of infidelity are legion, and also complex depending on the relationship. Because of this, I won't spend too much time on each of these points, but I do want to go over some of the more severe consequences of infidelity. I don't do this to unnecessarily shame anyone, but if we want to heal from the effects of this terrible sin, we have to understand what we are healing from, and therefore, what forgiveness can look like when both parties are willing to pay the high price of reconciliation, which will in turn help us understand our relationship with God, and the sacrifice of Jesus.

Because the primary consequence of adultery, from which all other consequences stem, is separation, the destruction of a relationship.

Destroying the Sacred

“I have peace offerings with me; Today I have paid my vows. So I came out to meet you, Diligently to seek your face, And I have found you. I have spread my bed with tapestry, Colored coverings of Egyptian linen. I have perfumed my bed With myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; Let us delight ourselves with love. For my husband is not at home; He has gone on a long journey; He has taken a bag of money with him, And will come home on the appointed day.” With her enticing speech she caused him to yield, With her flattering lips she seduced him.”

-Proverbs 7:14-21

The sacredness, or the holiness, or the uniqueness of marriage is what gives it its glory. The fact that my love for my wife is totally unique in all the world, that she is the only woman who I have given my life to, the only woman who I become one with, and the only woman who I am utterly devoted to is what makes the relationship special. The interesting thing about the above passage, is that the promise of the prostitute is the inverse of what she is doing.

When she says “I came out to meet you, diligently to seek your face, and I have found you...” She is clearly lying to this young man. It is her marriage to her husband that makes this young man feel special, that she is so caught up in passion for him that she would risk everything just to be with him. But it is actually her marriage that makes this action so base and common. This young man is not special, he is simply one more man who can become one with this woman. The bed that he will share with her is someone else’s bed, in someone else’s house.

This same woman who is declaring her love for him, has made the same statements to another man, and will make them to other men after he has gone. The truth is, sacredness can only be achieved through exclusivity. In order for my marriage to be holy, I must share my body and bedroom with no one else besides my wife. My sexual passion should be for her alone. This is the first type of separation that an affair has on a couple, the utter desolation of the sacredness of the sexual union. I think this one marriage counselor puts this point well:

“Swept away... is your own conviction that you and your partner were meant for each other, that no one could make your partner happier, that together you formed a primal and irreducible union that could not be shared or severed. The affair marks the passing

of two innocent illusions - that your marriage is exceptional, and that you are a unique prize.”

-Janis Abrams - “After the Affair”

Destroying Trust

“Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, “Where are you?” So he said, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.” And He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?”

-Genesis 3:9-11

As I said before, the foundation for every relationship, especially marriage, is trust. This is why the marital relationship is built upon mutual vows spoken in front of a community. These vows show our complete devotion to our spouse, the exclusivity of our relationship, and our commitment to fighting for that relationship no matter what. It is through this commitment that trust can grow, and through this trust that vulnerability can be achieved.

As we talked about last time, in order to be “naked and unashamed” we must implicitly trust the other person, and we must believe that we really know them. This is why sex in the Bible is sometimes described as “knowing”.

“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, “I have acquired a man from the LORD.”

-Genesis 4:1

To be completely unified to another person in a state of perfect vulnerability is the perfect expression of “knowing” someone. There are no secrets, no hidden agendas, everything is literally naked and laid bare before the other person. But this act is only special, only truthful, when it is exclusive. To cheat on a spouse is to become a liar. To go back on our vows and to share our bodies with another person. To make the same passionate declarations to another person that we have made to the one that we vowed to be with forever. It makes a lie of the relationship, and destroys the trust that founded it. Also in “Anna Karenina”, the book actually opens with a story of her brother and his affair. The dialogue between him and his wife I think expresses this painful point fairly well:

“...after my husband, the father of my children, enters into a love affair with his own children’s governess?” “But what could I do? what could I do?” he kept saying in a pitiful voice, not knowing what he was saying, as his head sank lower and lower. “You are

loathsome to me, repulsive!” she shrieked, getting more and more heated. “Your tears mean nothing! You have never loved me; you have neither heart nor honorable feeling! You are hateful to me, disgusting, a stranger-yes, a complete stranger!” With pain and wrath she uttered the word so terrible to herself-stranger.”

-Leo Tolstoy - “Anna Karenina”

That last line is the most important. In marriage she thought she knew this man who she had shared so many years with and even had children with. The affair made her question everything, it had made her a stranger to him, and caused him to deny her. To have an affair is to communicate something to another person that is reserved for your spouse. You must lose yourself in the passion of another’s embrace, you must experience ecstasy and intimacy with another person, you must be enraptured with the act and make spontaneous declarations of adoration to them.

This is why, before the crucifixion, it was important for Judas to “sell” Jesus to the Pharisees, and for Peter, as the spokesperson for the apostles, to deny his relationship with Jesus:

“And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, “Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you.” Then he began to curse and swear, saying, “I do not know the Man!” Immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, “Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” So he went out and wept bitterly.”

-Matthew 26:73-75

We can understand this as a type of infidelity. If faithful sex is described as “knowing”, then an act of infidelity would be an act of “denial”, it is an act that makes two people strangers to one another, no matter how long they have loved each other.

Destroying the Past

This destruction of trust, also destroys the past. Once we doubt the words of our partner, we can’t trust anything that has happened between us, the entire past that was so stable becomes a complete mystery to us:

“Infidelity is a direct attack on one of our most important psychic structures: our memory of the past. It not only hijacks a couple’s hopes and plans but also draws a question mark over their history. If we can’t look back with any certainty and we can’t know what will happen tomorrow, where does that leave us?... We are willing to concede that the future is unpredictable, but we expect the past to be dependable. Betrayed by our beloved, we suffer the loss of a coherent narrative...”

-Esther Perel - "The State of Affairs"

So much of our identity is shaped in the institution of marriage. To rupture the foundation is not just to damage the relationship, but even our view of ourselves. To put this another way, if we no longer really know the person who was most important to us, do we really know ourselves? Every happy memory is now tainted, every declaration of love is called into question and we no longer know what to believe and what to depend on.

Destroying the Future

"For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce, For it covers one's garment with violence," Says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, That you do not deal treacherously."

-Malachi 2:16

Dealing "treacherously" with our spouse is an act of violence. It not only destroys what we have, it threatens what we *had*, and now will color everything that we will *have*. This one act will always be a part of your love story, always be a chapter in your life from this point onward. Any potential future without this event is now erased, the very future of the relationship has been brutally damaged.

Since this paper is not intended to be a theological description of biblical divorce and remarriage, I won't go into this, but I will say that divorce is such a violent and destructive act, that in almost all cases it is unjustified and constitutes a form of evil. In fact, most pastors would agree that the nearest sin we have to divorce is actually murder. For in murder we have destroyed a life. Since marriage is the creation of a new one flesh unity, it is, in essence, the creation of a new, unique life.

As such, we must guard and protect it with all our might. And while there are many things that can damage a marriage, there are certain things that can actually kill a marriage. It is my belief that only one of these actions, an action that actually kills a marriage, is the other spouse free to divorce. Not because divorce has suddenly become "good", but because the action of the unfaithful spouse has actually destroyed the marriage itself.

This is a far cry from our modern culture that treats divorce and remarriage with a calm casualness. While most would agree that divorce is bad, many of us have lost the visceral attitude of the Bible on this topic. As such, we tend to lean towards "no fault divorce" and take any vague accusation of "neglect" or "emotional abuse" as enough reason to validate the destruction of a marriage. In fact, while divorce was a shameful

thing for our ancestors, today, choosing to stay in a marriage with someone who treats us poorly is now seen as the new shame.

While I would never counsel someone to stay in a marriage in which they are being abused or cheated on, we have to take these terms more seriously than many seeking justification for divorce tend to, and we also have to say that saving a marriage that is scarred is also a noble act that we should, at minimum, hope for.

While I don't believe the Bible has given us an exhaustive list of all the sins that actively "kill" a marriage, adultery is undoubtedly one of them, and sets the bar for what the other ones might be. Again, this is a much deeper conversation that I don't have the space to delve into right now, but if anyone has any questions for me, I am always available to talk through the Biblical passages. For the purpose of our paper though, it was important to lay the groundwork for what reconciliation in this case would entail. This is not merely mending a minor infraction, this is bringing something dead back to life.

The Price of Forgiveness

"So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God."

-Romans 7:3-4

While this is not a total reason behind the death and resurrection of Christ, the apostle Paul uses divorce and remarriage as a way to understand the need for Christ's death. After the fall, God entered into a new covenant with a people group, the Israelites. However, during the time of their covenant, the people of God continuously acted unfaithfully to God by devoting themselves to other gods. Because of the symbolism of intimacy, which we discussed last time, God likens this behavior to physical adultery:

"I will not have mercy on her children, For they are the children of harlotry. For their mother has played the harlot; She who conceived them has behaved shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, Who give me my bread and my water, My wool and my linen, My oil and my drink.'"

-Hosea 2:4-5

God “divorces” His people due to their infidelity. But instead of casting them off permanently, He calls them back to Himself. However, there is a hint within the Old Covenant that, just as we have spoken about with marriage, the affair, in a sense, destroyed the relationship between God and His people, necessitating a new covenant. Not one built by mutual fidelity, since mankind had shown themselves incapable of this, but through the complete fidelity of God to His people.

God gave this message to His people through His prophet, Hosea. He calls Hosea to marry a prostitute, Gomer, who is perpetually unfaithful to her faithful husband. God explains His own relationship to His people through this tragic marriage. However, when the marriage has ended and Gomer is outside the house, God gives Hosea this message:

“Then the LORD said to me, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by a lover and is committing adultery, just like the love of the LORD for the children of Israel, who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagans.” So I bought her for myself for fifteen shekels of silver, and one and one-half homers of barley. And I said to her, “You shall stay with me many days; you shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man—so, too, will I be toward you.”

-Hosea 3:1-3

God commands Hosea to reconcile with his unfaithful wife, but in this metaphor, God is showing the terrible price of this reconciliation. Notice that even though Hosea has the right to merely call his wife back to himself, since he is her husband, he has to first pay a price to buy her out of her prostitution. God here is showing that mankind, sold under the slavery of sin due to our unfaithfulness to God, needed to be purchased out of our slavery, and this price would be paid by God Himself.

The terrible price that God had to pay was His own Son. Christ, who was both the Son of man, but also was the faithful and true Israelite, bears the penalty of infidelity to God, namely death, the ultimate form of separation and darkness:

“Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

-Matthew 27:45-46

However, like Hosea who first purchases his unfaithful wife but then calls her to faithfulness, Christ does the same. He doesn't offer Himself up so that we might continue in our rebellion, but instead He calls us to be faithful to Him.

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?”

-Romans 6:1-2

Not that the people of God will ever be totally faithful to this call, but that we make it our aim to strive for purity before our God. Not bound by the darkness of sin, but set free to pursue the light and holiness of our God who came to save us. And when we fall short, we know we have an advocate in heaven to forgive us and call us to Himself:

“This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”

-1 Timothy 2:11-13

This is the way that we can understand how reconciliation can happen within a marriage that has suffered infidelity. The marriage that they had was unfortunately destroyed by infidelity, just as God’s relationship with His people was broken through our infidelity. However, if the person who was wronged is willing to forgive, that is to die to the relationship that they had before, and wrestle through the terrible process of forgiveness, moving back to trusting again the person who violated their trust in the first place, there is hope of reconciliation.

This is the terrible death that the offended party must suffer. They have to relinquish their right to divorce, they have to be willing to fight for a new relationship in which they genuinely seek to trust their spouse. Not merely to have a relationship in which this infidelity is a weapon to be used against the guilty party when things turn bad.

But that isn’t all, the faithful spouse must act as Hosea and call the unfaithful spouse to repentance and fidelity. Just as in the passage from Romans 7: *Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.*”

The only way for a marriage to experience the power of the resurrection, both parties must be willing to die. The one who was offended must be willing to die to their right to divorce the other, and the one who did the wrong must be willing to die to themselves. To repent, not just in a moment of sorrow, but to humble themselves daily. To pursue their spouse who they have wronged and earn back their trust through sincere brokenness and genuine repentance. To faithfully address the various lusts and

excesses that moved them to infidelity in the first place, not merely to make a new vow, but to do the intense internal work of the soul to truly transform.

This is a process, and one that is long and arduous, and for this reason, it may not always be possible. Sometimes, the one who was wronged can't trust the other again, and maybe for good reason. So they allow the relationship to die in consequence of the other's infidelity. Other times, even if they are willing to forgive, the other person is not willing to repent. In this case, the trust can't be earned back, and the relationship is doomed to a pattern of unfaithfulness that will eventually end it. But the couple who is willing to go through this, not merely cover over the affair and pretend to heal, but to truly heal can be an example of the resurrection to all who know them.

“Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’ ” And he said to me, “These are the true sayings of God.”

-Revelation 19:7-9

