

**Sermon File # 674**

**Scripture Text and Reading: Exodus 20:14; Matthew 5:27-30**

**Sermon Title: *Commandment 7: a Great Sin in Need of a Great Savior***

**Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached**

**At International Baptist Church of Brussels, Belgium**

**On Sunday morning 4 September 2011**

**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

**Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.**

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## ***Commandment Seven: Adultery, a Great Sin in Need of a Great Savior***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles to our text, as we continue the series from the Ten Commandments, guidelines for a life that pleases God. We've noted already that the standards God has set for his covenant people cannot be reached because of the weakness of our sinful nature. Only the sinless Son of God, Jesus, was able to obey all the commandments of the Moral Law, and he demands that his followers obey them, but not just in a minimal, legalistic way. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus explains how these 10 Commandments are to be obeyed and fulfilled in a broader, spiritual and positive sense.

For example, two weeks ago we looked at the sixth commandment against murder and noted that the purpose of this commandment according to Jesus is not just to refrain from physical murder but to value human life as created in God's image, and to express that respect for others through refraining from anger and harsh words and

by loving even our enemies. Today with seventh commandment we'll note the broader, more demanding interpretation of Jesus who tells us how we are to refrain from adultery by living a pure life that pleases God. Adultery in the strictest sense is "voluntary sexual intercourse between a married man and someone other than his wife or between a married woman and someone other than her husband" (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*).

But as we'll note, this term for adultery "represents all sexual sins" (Oswalt, *NLT*, 159). More is represented in this seventh commandment than the "bare details" of overt adultery, and "any sexual activity outside of an exclusive, committed heterosexual marriage" is included in this prohibition (Oswalt, *CBC*, 446).

Follow as I read **Exodus 20:14** and **Matthew 5:27-30**.

I like what Philip Ryken, President of Wheaton College (Illinois, USA) and former Presbyterian pastor, writes upon quoting passages from the Song of Songs:

"Although God's Word is never pornographic, it is unashamedly erotic. If this comes as an embarrassment to some Christians, it is only because we are more prudish than God is. The Bible celebrates the sexual act of love—exclusively within marriage (see Prov. 5:15-19)—as a gift from God" (Ryken, 629).

Just as sex within the context of marriage is God's great gift, the violation of the purpose of sex is "the great sin," which was the "discreet euphemism" given to the sin of adultery by ancient Egyptian and Ugaritic cultures. The Hebrew Scriptures also speak of adultery as "the great sin," using marital unfaithfulness as an analogy to and even as an indication of spiritual adultery as unfaithfully forsaking God for the worship of idols. "Great sin" is used in the Old Testament for both of these betrayals as a serious breach in the covenant between a husband and wife and in the covenant between the Lord and his people (Durham, 293f).

Adultery is a great sin that violates a great gift. The gift of sex was not just for the procreation of the human race, but also was for our pleasure and delight. What the culture around us fails to understand is that our faith is not a negation of the body and its God-created appetites. As CS Lewis said, "Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body" (*MC*, 91). After all, God the Son took upon himself human flesh and forever lives in his resurrection body. The appetites that God has created he will gratify in his time and way, in accordance with his plans and purposes. Most contemporary Old Testament scholars and commentators interpret The Song of Solomon as a celebration of human love, including the pleasure of sexual intimacy.

In his *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis' fictional demon, Uncle Screwtape, advises his nephew demon Wormwood in his planned destruction of a new convert to the Christian faith: "A real pleasure was the last thing you ought to have let him meet" (Lewis, *SL*, 58f). What this experienced demon realized was, when a follower of

Christ discovers the pleasures that God can give us, including the sexual, we will want nothing more to do with the fallen world's lesser pleasures, which are bound to disappoint and eventually leave us as diminished souls. God's pleasures are discovered and experienced within his purposes.

God created us as physical, sexual beings and sexual pleasure is to be experienced within the context of a loving marriage relationship to which man and woman are committed for life. No matter how sexually liberated people may think they are, true sexual pleasure, as God intended, will always elude them apart from the context of committed love, which make true intimacy possible. In fact, without a relationship of committed, self-giving love, sexual intimacy is impossible and sexual gratification is destined for disappointment, if not also the destruction of relationship. Our passions are to conform to God's purpose.

Because sex is a great gift, adultery is...

### **A great sin**

We can assert with certainty that adultery is a great sin because it is...

#### *Greatly practiced*

This commandment, as understood in the context of Jesus's teaching and of the entire Bible, covers all sexual activity, intimacy and fantasy outside of the marriage relationship. Jesus referred to the society of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century as "a wicked and adulterous generation" (Matthew 12:39), and in fact, since the Fall there hasn't been any other kind (Davidman, 85). The Greek word for sexual promiscuity is *porneia*, and indeed we in Western Europe and North America live in an intensely and pervasively pornographic culture. The average American is exposed to some kind of sexual material more than 100,000 times annually through the ubiquitous media (Ryken, 632). Sexual imagery and innuendo are used to sell everything from cars, clothing and soaps to even heating and plumbing services. Sexual promiscuity has invaded the youth culture, with many teenagers giving away their virginity and having no understanding of the importance and exclusive place of sexual intimacy within a marriage commitment.

Not only is there widespread sexual permissiveness and promiscuity, but also the sexual perversion of homosexuality is rampant and culturally protected by the politically correct interpretation that same-sex intimacy is a normal alternative to heterosexuality. Homosexual practice is to be a perfectly acceptable alternative to heterosexuality, and any question of this norm is considered homophobic.

Adultery and sexual practice outside of marriage between a husband and wife is commonly featured in the cinema, on television and now also on the Internet, which is perhaps "the greatest danger of all" because it is so accessible, anonymous and

affordable (Ryken, 637). Now sexual promiscuity and fantasy comes cheaply, easily and secretly into the privacy of the home, and nobody sees you, except God, that is.

And the sad truth is that adultery, fornication (sex before and outside of marriage), pornography and perversion are as greatly practiced within the membership of churches as outside in the secular world. There seems to be little difference in the sexual practices of professing believers and complete pagans and nonbelievers (Ryken, 633).

Because adultery and sexual permissiveness and perversion are so widespread and treated so casually we may be likely to lose sight of the fact that adultery is called a great sin because it is...

### *Greatly destructive*

Adultery was such a serious capital crime that that the punishment was the death penalty by stoning or burning (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22). As we noted with the sixth commandment against murder, God's law was given to protect society from itself. Just as devaluing and destroying the life of another was strictly prohibited and enforced by capital punishment, so was the sexual unfaithfulness and destructiveness of adultery. Just as murder threatened the stability of society, so adultery and unfaithfulness militated against the foundation of the community of God's people (Wiersbe, 130).

A society is weakened when the stability of the family is destroyed. The marital betrayal of adultery often renders the restoration of trust impossible, which is the reason it's the exception Jesus gives to allow divorce (Matthew 5:31f; 19:9). Adultery and divorce result in children who feel abandoned and particularly sons, who may lose the guiding influence of their fathers. We likely will see the devastating results of children of same-sex marriages and the negative impact on children who are without the nurture and influence of a father and mother committed to each other for life. Marriage between a man and woman is "the central element in the maintenance of social cohesion" (Enns, 423).

Adultery and all sexual sin are also destructive of the image of God and thus are self-destructive. Sexual activity outside of marriage always promises more than it can deliver, and when God's gifts are misused the results are always disappointing. No sexual pleasure outside the marriage commitment can be fulfilling emotionally as well as physically. "Falling in love" outside a marriage relationship will always lead to a downfall in mutual respect and trust. An adulterous relationship and affair, even when it seems right by rationalization and self-justification, will give rise to future distrust and suspicion. As someone has said, "Anyone who cheats with you may well cheat against you."

Adultery and sexual sin, porn addiction and perversion are self-destructive, always further marring the image of God and sense of self-respect and self-worth. When we give way to sinful desires, God's wrath is simply to give us over to our sinful desires that take us into a morally downward spiral (Romans 1:24ff). Even professing Christians have become entrapped in, for example, porn addiction that leads to a complete loss of self-respect and genuine intimacy in the marriage relationship.

But primarily adultery and all sexual sin are great sins and are greatly destructive in our relationship with God. The witness of Scripture is overwhelming in affirming the connection between faithfulness in marriage and sexual purity and our faithfulness to God and our purity in his sight. The Lord God has called us into a covenant relationship with himself and also with our spouse, and any breach in either covenant damages the image of God in us and also betrays our pledge before God as expressed in the marriage ceremony. To sin sexually is to be unfaithful to God as well as to our spouse (Motyer, 228f). The Lord denounced Israel's unfaithfulness, which was evidenced by breaking faith with one's spouse and violating the purpose of a permanent marriage bond with divorce, which the prophet Malachi says God hates (2:14-16).

Both Joseph and King David understood that adultery and sexual sins are primarily against God. When Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph, his resistance was based on his awareness that adultery would have been a grievous sin against God (Genesis 39:9). David tragically succumbed to the weakness of his own sinful flesh in his adultery with Bathsheba, and when confronted by the prophet Nathan, acknowledged that his sin was against the Lord (2 Samuel 12:13; Psalm 51:4).

In the New Covenant we are called to a life of faithfulness and sexual purity in guarding our new nature and our relationship with the indwelling Christ, the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds us that our bodies are "members of Christ himself" and that it's unthinkable to unite our bodies with a prostitute. Sexual intimacy is not a purely physical act, but rather is also a spiritually mystical union that involves our entire being, including the presence of the Holy Spirit, who has made our bodies his temple. When someone is sexually united with another, Paul reasons, God looks on them as two persons having become one flesh. Paul differentiates sexual from other sins: "All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body" (1 Corinthians 6:18). Sexual sin defiles the body of a believer, which has become a sacred temple of the Holy Spirit (19f).

Adultery and all sexual sins are some of the most effective and destructive sins in Satan's arsenal which he directs against God's people. Adultery destroys relationships, and the most important human relationship of all, between a husband and wife. Sexual sin destroys purity of heart and incurs lifelong self-inflicted wounds to one's conscience and spirit. Sexual sins and marital unfaithfulness ruin character, destroy testimonies, divide families and scandalize the church. Although, as Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:28) that looking lustfully and committing

adultery in one's heart is as sinful in God's sight as is the actual act of adultery, the consequences of actual adultery and outward sexual immorality have a damaging effect on others as well as on oneself.

The church in Corinth was being infected and divided by the sin of an unrepentant member who was involved in a sexual relationship with his stepmother. Paul urged the church to exercise decisive and immediate discipline upon this man in order to protect the unity and witness of the church. As Paul says, the church has a serious responsibility to exercise discipline that will remove such an evil influence from the fellowship (1 Corinthians 5).

Such great sexual sins call for...

### **A great Savior**

Adultery in whatever form is a great sin with grave consequences for the individual, the family and the church. Although adultery is not an unpardonable sin, its consequences are pervasive and permanent. As Nathan assured a repentant David following his confession of adultery with Bathsheba, his sin was forgiven but the consequences would begin immediately and linger for the remainder of his life (2 Samuel 12:13f). Adultery is a life-damaging sin that has personal, marriage, family, church and social repercussions. For that reason God gave this seventh commandment and our Lord Jesus gave his broader and stricter interpretation.

To give help and hope regarding the great sin of adultery we have a great Savior...

#### *With great expectations*

Our Lord Jesus Christ, in his Sermon on the Mount, interprets the full intent of the Moral law, expecting personal righteousness of character as well as negative abstinence from certain outward behavior. He says that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law we "will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Regarding this seventh commandment, Jesus says we are guilty of adultery if we have lusted in our hearts over someone other than our spouse. And he adds that we must take severe measures with ourselves in order to avoid sexual lust as well as outward sin, which can lead to eternal separation from God in hell (Matthew 5:27-30).

Christ expects us to do whatever is necessary for us to obey his great expectations for us, to be pure in mind as well as in body. This is a tall order in this "adulterous generation" and sex-sated culture.

No one can avoid being tempted. Even Jesus was tempted, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). We cannot avoid seeing tempting sights or hearing voices and sensing influences that, unless rejected, would lead us toward sexual lust and

eventual sin. As Martin Luther is credited with saying, we cannot stop the birds from flying overhead, but we can keep them from building nests in our hair. Jesus expects us to not allow ourselves to let the look turn into lust that could that would turn into the actual act of adultery, fornication or any sexual sin. Jesus expects us to take whatever measures are necessary to meet his great expectations of us to avoid committing this great sin. And gratefully Jesus himself has provided us helpless and hopelessly condemned sinners...

*With great grace to overcome*

The great expectations of Jesus are for pure hearts, minds and eyes. And our Lord Jesus is the only person in history to ever obey this commandment, he who was tempted as we are, yet was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He is the Great High Priest who helps us when we are tempted by sexual sin (Hebrews 2:18). By grace through faith we receive the perfect righteousness of Christ himself. We cannot by our efforts achieve this perfect righteous standard that God requires (Galatians 2:16), which is where faith comes in. We can never be good enough in ourselves to achieve the perfect righteousness God demands (Galatians 3:10f). Through his perfectly sinless life and death on the cross, Christ accepted the punishment we deserve for our sin and moral failure to keep God's law (3:13).

When we turn from our sin, admitting our moral failure, and accept Christ's death as a gift to make us right with God, we receive his free gift of righteousness. God accepts us now as being in Christ and covered by his righteousness, given a new standing and peace with God (Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:8f). Before God we are now considered "not guilty" because Christ is now our righteousness and high priest who reminds God forever of our new standing in him (Philippians 3:9; Hebrews 7:25).

The glorious truth of the good news of Christ is that when we repent and receive God's forgiveness we have a new beginning and a new standing with God as new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul described what some of the Corinthian believers were like before they came to Christ:

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God*" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Italics mine).

When we trust Christ and follow him as Lord and Master we receive a new nature and the power of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to obey the law, not just in refraining from certain outwardly scandalous behavior, but by fulfilling the full intent of the Moral Law (2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 8:1ff). We now have the indwelling

Holy Spirit who enables us to leave behind the old “works of the sinful nature” (which includes “sexual immorality, impurity and lustful pleasures” [NL7]) and who produces in us the fruit of the Spirit, which includes self-control (Galatians 5:16-25).

By grace through faith and by living obediently in step with the Holy Spirit we have grace to change our thought life, our relationships and our outward behavior. Jesus says that the place to begin with sexual purity is in the mind and heart, the secret place known only to God. He says, in effect, take radical measures to not allow lust to take root in your mind and heart and lead you into sexual sin. Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is not advocating mutilation but mortification, which is death to the old sinful nature. To die to the old unconverted nature is more effective than gouging out the physical eye. It’s doing away with the lustful eye and replacing it with the eyes and the mind of Christ, through whom we can see heavenly reality (Colossians 3:1-2). The way of mortification is the way of the cross, of death to the old sinful nature and allowing the nature and mind of Christ to control us (Luke 9:23ff).

The late John Stott’s comments at this point are helpful:

“The command to get rid of troublesome eyes, hands and feet is an example of our Lord’s use of dramatic figures of speech. What he was advocating was not a literal physical self-maiming, but a ruthless moral self-denial. Not mutilation but mortification is the path of holiness he taught, and ‘mortification’ or ‘taking up the cross’ to follow Christ means to reject sinful practices so resolutely that we die to them or put them to death.

“What does this involve in practice?” asks Stott. “Let me elaborate and so interpret Jesus’ teaching: ‘If your eye causes you to sin because temptation comes to you through your eyes (objects you see), then pluck out your eyes. That is, don’t look! Behave as if you had actually plucked out your eyes and flung them away, and were blind and so *could* not see the objects which previously caused you to sin. Again, if your hand or foot causes you to sin, because temptation comes to you through your hands (things you do) or your feet (places you visit), then cut them off. That is: don’t do it! Don’t go! Behave as if you had actually cut off your hands and feet, and had flung them away, and were now crippled and so *could* not do the things or visit the places which previously caused you to sin.’ That is the meaning of mortification” (Stott, 89).

God gives great grace to enable us to overcome this great sin of adultery and sexual sin. But he expects us to seize his grace, follow his guidance and live by his inner strength and discipline. Gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand for some might be not turning on a hotel television when traveling or perhaps not accessing the Internet when you’re alone. It might mean avoiding contact or conversation with someone you find tempting you in the office or classroom.

We are saved by grace alone and we depend on that same grace to enable us to obey this commandment to be sexually pure and faithful in our private thought life and our God-given relationships. And thank this God of grace that we have a great Savior...

*With great mercy to forgive*

Although the story of the woman caught in adultery is a later addition to the Gospel of John, not appearing in the earliest manuscripts, "it is likely an authentic story from Jesus' life" (Burge, 1,785). The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. These enemies of Jesus thought they had caught Jesus in a trap, since the law clearly stated that adultery was punishable by stoning to death and yet Jesus was known for his compassion and forgiveness toward sinners of doubtful reputation. If Jesus were to interfere with her just punishment, then he would be advocating breaking the law.

While these self-righteous legalists were demanding a verdict from Jesus, he simply began writing on the ground. Many have conjectured about what he may have written. He may have written some of the names of these enemies whom he knew to have committed adultery undetected, or he may have written other specific sins these self-righteous men had committed. Jesus then said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7). I'm sure as they saw what Jesus had written in the ground they became very nervous, and wished they could disappear, which is exactly what they did, one by one. None could begin the execution because all of them stood condemned by their own secret sins. Jesus then asked the woman, "Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (10f).

Adultery is a great sin but is not unpardonable. God's mercy and grace are greater. CS Lewis said that sexual sins are not the supreme vice. Sins of the flesh are bad, he says, but they are "the least bad of all sins." He explains: that "there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self and the Diabolical self. The diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why," explains Lewis, "a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than the prostitute. But, of course," he concludes, "it is better to be neither" (MC, 94f).

Adultery and sexual sin are evil and destructive, as are self-righteousness, but the mercy and grace of Christ is greater and able and willing to forgive the repentant heart. As David prayed in brokenness after his adultery,

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin....Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:1, 2, 7).

The repentant sinner must seek God's mercy, grace and forgiveness. Also, in cases of adultery the repentant spouse must seek the forgiveness of the sinned-against partner and then work faithfully and diligently, by the grace of God, to be reconciled and to regain lost trust. Jesus told the adulterous woman whom he had forgiven to go and "leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). We're completely forgiven but are called to live a new life of inward and outward purity that reflects God's grace and honors Christ's holy presence within us.

### **Conclusion:**

Adultery and sexual immorality are great sins, with great potential to damage and even destroy us and those around us. They have resulted in great disappointment and heartbreak and have brought dishonor to the name of Christ and the witness of his church.

If you are right now struggling against sexual temptation, I urge you to seek the grace of Christ through prayer and the word of God and the encouragement of fellow believers. Perhaps your problem is like that of many professing Christians and regular church-attenders—pornography addiction. If so, I encourage you to seek counseling from a pastor or Christian counselor. Also, I encourage you to make yourself accountable to other Christian men with whom you can share your addiction and who will hold you accountable as you seek freedom from this powerfully enslaving habit.

If others of you know of someone in the Body of Christ who is slipping into temptation or who has already fallen in sexual sin, God may be calling you to gently restore the one you know who has been caught in a sin (Galatians 6:1). But as you seek to restore, Paul says, "watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (2). We need to practice vigilance regarding ourselves and gentleness and mercy toward the fallen.

Adultery and sexual sins are great sins, but we can rejoice and be encouraged that we have a great Savior whose mercy, grace, forgiveness and love cover all sins and give us a new beginning. By God's grace, even in cases of adultery, Christ can enable true repentance, forgiveness and even a rebuilding and restoration of trust between husband and wife. Although divorce is permitted in cases of adultery, it's certainly not required, and believing couples are responsible to seek God's grace and make every effort to keep their marriage together. Please let me and others who assist me in pastoral counseling encourage you who are facing the challenge of repairing the damage of adultery. Tragically, too many couples wait until it's too late, when too much damage and distrust have mounted, before they seek counsel.

I encourage all of us today, as we prepare to partake of the Lord's Table, to come to Christ and receive his cleansing, the cleansing power of his blood shed upon the

cross. Let's bring all of our sins, those of the mind, heart and spirit, as well as those of the body to Jesus, in order to receive his mercy, grace and pardon. He's a great Savior for great sinners. Adultery is a great sin, but our Savior Jesus Christ is greater still.

**Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. What is God's intention for sexual intimacy between a husband and wife? Do you agree with the statement that some people are more prudish about sex than God? Explain your answer.
2. Do you think sexual intimacy realizes its greatest pleasure between husband and wife; and if so, why?
3. In what ways are adultery and sexual immorality destructive?
4. Why do you think Jesus says that looking lustfully is to commit adultery in one's heart (Matthew 5:28)? When does "looking" become "lusting"?
5. In what ways does the Internet pose especially powerful temptations to lust?
6. Can one who has committed adultery find forgiveness? How? Although adultery may justify divorce, how is it possible for the repentant adulterer to be reconciled with his/her spouse and restored to fellowship in the church?
7. Are sexual sins more serious than sins of the spirit, such as self-righteousness or a critical, harsh, and unloving spirit? Why or why not?
8. What are some Scriptural guidelines for remaining sexually pure in a sexually immoral culture?

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