

“LIVING GOD’S WAY – 8) KEEP IT CLEAN!”

Exodus 20:14; Matthew 5:27-30

There was a country vicar who did all his visiting by bike and was actually quite dependent on it for getting around his village parish. One morning, when he went to the shed to get his bike for a series of visits, he discovered that it was missing. He asked around his nearest neighbours and then went to have a word with his churchwarden. He was at a loss to know who might have taken it so he suggested that the vicar should read through the Ten Commandments in church the next Sunday and pause after “*You shall not steal*”, have a good look around the congregation and see who was looking uneasy. Sunday came and went, and the next morning the churchwarden saw the vicar peddling up the lane on his bike and called out, “It worked, then. Who had it?” The vicar looked slightly abashed and replied, “Well, I did what you suggested, but I got as far as ‘You shall not commit adultery’ and remembered where I’d left it.”

It’s always seen as good sport to poke fun at pillars of the community and they are considered particularly fair game if their crime is seen as something sexual. The popular press seems to be founded on that very premise. But adultery is increasingly seen as something that is done quite openly and condoned by much of the population. Vladimir Nabokov, the novelist, in a lecture on Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, spoke of adultery as “*a most conventional way to rise above the conventional.*”

Of course, it’s nothing new – as we can see by the fact that it’s included in these commandments from many centuries ago. The Ancient Greek myths are full of stories of adulterous relationships between men and women and between the gods and mortals. There’s an awful lot of Latin poetry on the same theme. The mediaeval romances of Western European literature deal with the concept of “courtly love”, which almost always involves some kind of adulterous relationship. Even the supposedly prudish Victorians were at it, but they managed to keep it under the carpet (ort under the counter). There always seemed to be the feeling, though, that it was wrong, less than ideal, that it was a sin in itself.

Today, though, adultery – having sexual relations with a person who is not your spouse – is considered to be something morally neutral, even (as we shall see) something that is a necessary part of human development. We don’t actually seem to care about the fact that it’s a sin – it’s only the consequences that bother us, and we are finding more and more sophisticated ways of lessening them. So long as you don’t end up with a sexually transmitted disease, so long as the children aren’t hurt, so long as confidentiality isn’t breached, so long as you don’t give away state secrets in bed, it’s OK.

Once again, it is something that is all around us. Everywhere we look we are confronted with the reality and the fantasy of adultery. It’s an integral part of many, many novels. The storylines of the TV soaps would be much thinner without it. The daily and Sunday newspapers are constantly poking their noses in the muck of other people’s messed up marriages and sexual infelicities. It’s one way of attracting the punter with unregulated soft porn. In the wake of the David Mellor affair a few years ago, *Christianity* magazine had this to say:

“Celebrity soft porn on the front pages sells papers to a voyeuristic society to whom the sex act has become the mechanistic pursuit of personal pleasure – not the consummation of a deep commitment.”

Many people actually applaud sexual promiscuity outside the marriage commitment. You will see how politicians’ and other celebrities’ popularity can rise in the wake of an adulterous affair. While I was at university, it was seen as the mark of the truly masculine to sleep with as many women as possible. (Mind you, women who did it were considered to be “tarts”!) This is what Steven Berkoff wrote in *The Guardian* in the wake of more revelations about a politician’s adultery:

“What was his crime? He had a relationship withy another woman that gave them both pleasure, happiness and relief ... I believe affairs are healthy and good for public figures since they engender an attitude more relaxed and freer than that of their colleagues whose personal rigidity and fear of stepping out of their approved orthodoxy finds it outlet in government ... I am for ‘adultery’ ... I

*would rather see a man express his viable **needs** with a lover than seek the divorce, disruption and tragedy that comes with a [marriage] break-up.”*

So this next commandment in our series deals with this area of adulterous behaviour – sexual activity with someone who is not your spouse. We could talk about all aspects of this issue this morning, but the Bible speaks elsewhere about divorce, same-sex relationships, sex before marriage and so on. We will have other opportunities of considering that, so let’s concentrate on adultery this morning (and please don’t take that phrase out of context!).

Let’s start by looking briefly at why it is wrong. The simple answer, for those who take the Bible seriously, is that God says it’s wrong – end of story. Fine, that may be sufficient for a lot of us this morning, but it’s unlikely to cut much ice with those who don’t have quite the attitude to biblical infallibility. Well, we can, I think, argue from another, more widely accepted, biblical premise which we have spoken about before. Adultery violates the creation principle of “*one flesh*”. This is how it is described in *Genesis 2:24*. A man and a woman who come together as husband and wife, who vow to remain faithful to one another, who are united in the act of sexual intercourse are effectively “*one flesh*”, wholly united in the most intimate way. And it is successful only with a maximum of two. St Paul continues the theme in the New testament when he writes to the Christians at Corinth, who were notoriously lax in sexual ethics (*1 Corinthians 6:15,16,18*).

Moving a bit further from the biblical commandment, we can see from our own observation that adultery is essentially selfish. We talk today – as in that piece by Steven Berkoff – about adultery “*meeting needs*”, about “*personal growth*” and “*fulfilling my potential*” and other phrases that betray that it is a very me-centred issue. The late Marje Proops (in a quotation that I still have – not because it was anything to do with me, you understand) told a man who feared that his wife was having an affair, “*The truth you must face, I’m afraid, is that the woman you married **needs** more than one man.*” The reason adultery is so much more acceptable now is that we are living in a society where personal greed and selfishness are foundational to our lives and to the way the country is run.

Now, we may feel, as we did last week when Liz was talking about murder, that we aren’t really guilty of this sin. We may find there are more adulterers than murderers here today, but for most of us, this seems to be a commandment we are not guilty of breaking. The religious people of Jesus’ day took just such a line. Martin Lloyd-Jones writes, “*They imagined that, as long as they weren’t guilty of the act itself, the commandment had nothing to say to them and they were perfectly innocent as far as it was concerned.*” That’s no doubt why they were so high-minded about the woman they caught in the act in *John 8*.

But once again, Jesus extends the scope of the commandment to show that it’s a question of attitude. We saw last week that murder stems from an attitude of anger: this time Jesus says it’s an attitude of “*lust*” that is at the root of adultery. The Greek word that Matthew uses here is *epithymia*, which doesn’t mean a great deal to us like that. Originally, in Classical Greek, it was a word which was morally neutral, meaning “*excitement*” or “*thrill*”. But it gradually came to have an ethically bad connotation because, as one dictionary puts it, “*it results from a false evaluation of the possessions and evils of this life.*” (NIDNTT). Jesus uses it in that’s sense here (and in *Mark 4:19*).

So, as far as what we’re talking about this morning goes, it boils down to this: looking at another human being – made, remember, in God’s image – as a means of satisfying your own desires. And that goes for seeing that person in film, photo or flesh, someone you know or someone you don’t. We’re not talking just about appreciating beauty, but an actual desire for that person – a physical, sexual desire.

It’s a feeling that can come about as a result of dissatisfaction with your married partner or a result of some kind of unavoidable physical separation (often as a result of work demands). You may look lustfully at other men or women, quite indiscriminately. You may find a perfectly innocent relationship with a friend or colleague slipping into an unhealthy sexual attraction. It may be an interest in pornography, from the soft-focus stuff that is easily available in the newsagent or bookshop to the hard

porn that can be accessed on the internet and degrades both subject and user alike. It may be that you get a kind of vicarious pleasure from reading about adultery and so on in newspapers. I remember working with a colleague while I was teaching who could be relied upon to discover the sexual sub-plot behind pretty well any story in the newspaper.

And don't forget, we're not talking only about men here, but women too are easily sucked into this vortex. We may tend to think about men being more aroused by the visual, but there's plenty of evidence that women are just as affected by it too. It's a temptation we all have to face at some time or other and, whatever your views on the over sensationalising of it in novels, films and plays, Jesus had to cope with lust and sexual temptation too. If you don't believe me, look at *Hebrews 4:15*.

Once you give in to lust, it becomes as addictive and ensnaring as any drug or other pattern of behaviour. Back in 1982, in the American ministry journal *Leadership*, to which I used to subscribe, there was an article by an anonymous minister, which has been reprinted in there more than once since. He described how an uncharacteristic visit to a strip club while he was travelling away at a conference led him into a ten-year downward spiral of list and depravity (and this was before the days of the internet and satellite TV channels in hotel rooms). He described its addictive effects by saying:

"Lust points only in one direction. Always you want more ... It is unlike anything else in my experience. Most thrills – scary roller-coasters, trips in airplanes, visits to waterfalls – lose a certain edge of excitement once I have experienced them and figured them out. I enjoy them and will duplicate the experiences if given the chance, but after a few tries they no longer hold such gravitational attraction. Sex is utterly different. There is only so much to 'figure out'."

He went on to describe lust as *"the craving for salt by a man who is dying of thirst."* Everything I've ever read on the subject and the experiences of those whom I have heard speaking about it emphasise for me the awful hold that lust can have as you look for more and more illicit sexual thrills.

And not only is it addictive, but it is destructive as well. It can destroy your relationships as your partner becomes less and less capable of measuring up the ideals of the fantasy you have constructed around the photo in the magazine or the woman in the office or the colleague in the staff room who "£makes you feel so much more like a woman than your husband does." It destroys rational thought as your mind becomes more and more obsessed with the lust that begins to fill it. It destroys any kind of real joy as the guilt and constant requirement for self-justification weigh you down. That's why Alex Comfort's best-selling book, *The Joy of Sex*, is such a misnomer: it's really a mechanical guide to lust, not advice on how to get the best out of a relationship.

Jesus' solution is drastic – if you're having trouble with what you see, gouge your eyes out. If you're wanting to lay hands on her, chop them off. If any of you have seen the cult B-movie *The man With X-Ray Eyes*, you'll realise that such action is indeed drastic. But, as so often in his teaching, Jesus is using the rabbi's device of exaggerated over-statement to drive home his point with even greater force. So what can we really do? Well, let me suggest 5 Rs of response.

1. **RESIST**

Firstly, we need to resist the commonly held view that it's inevitable. We have become so seduced by the science as a society, even as Christians, that we believe anything anyone tells us, so long as they're wearing a white coat, back up their arguments with figures and show us a few graphs. It only needs a couple of "–ologists" to appear on television or write a popular book saying that *"biology is destiny"*, you can't fight your hormones, some kind of sexual safety valve is necessary, and we find ourselves going round saying the 21st century equivalent of *"The devil made me do it"*. That's rubbish! There's no way you have to give in. Of course, there may be some individuals who are genuinely suffering from some kind of sexual dysfunction, but it's no more true that we are all victim to it than that we're all destined to become mass murderers.

2. RECOGNISE THE PROBLEM

The article to which I referred earlier by the American pastor related the way in which he tried to justify what he was doing, but it just compounded the problem. With any illness, dysfunction of sinful behaviour pattern, you need to recognise that's what it is. Why do some people spend so much time and money on analysts? So that they can hide the reality of their sin under a cloak of psychological justification. Why is society going inexorably down the drain of situational immorality? Because no-one wants to recognise that certain things are intrinsically wrong any more. If you are a drug addict or an alcoholic or you have some progressive illness or disease, you're not going to make any headway in combating it unless you first recognise that there's a problem. This morning, if this is an average congregation, there are those of you who are refusing to face up to the fact that what you are doing, what you are thinking is wrong and needs to be desalt with. And if you don't recognise it, you will make no progress at all in overcoming it.

3. REPENT

Now that's almost as old-fashioned a word as sin. But recognition alone is not good enough. You may recognise the problems you face with lust, but you need to come to God and say sorry – to ask for his help to break that pattern of behaviour. It may need some kind of open confession – to a partner, to a church leader, to a wronged friend or colleague. Because with that confession to another person comes accountability, someone who can help you keep a check on your progress. Repentance is more than saying sorry, it's more than a quick prayer for forgiveness – its' an authentic desire to change your ways and move back closer to God.

And God does promise his forgiveness, there's no doubt about that. Jimmy Caret, when he was president of the United States, said in an interview: *"I've committed adultery in my heart many times. This is something that God recognises I will do – and I have done it – and God forgives me for it."* Once we are prepared to repent, God will forgive – that is what is so wonderful about his love and his grace. We can know that it is forgiven and forgotten – and that's an enormous weight off our minds. But remember that when Jesus refused to condemn the woman who had been caught in the act of adultery, he also said, *"Go, and sin no more."*

4. RE-ORGANISE YOUR LIFE

That may sound a bit drastic, you may think. But it's really only the equivalent of what Jesus says here in *Matthew 5:29,30*. Deprive yourself of the opportunities for lust. Keep away from the shelves in the newsagents. Put a filter on your computer and arrange the screen so that others can see it. Ensure that you're not alone with the person you've been obsessed with. (Billy Graham will not, under any circumstances, travel alone in a car with a woman who is not his wife.) Get someone else to run the errands that take you past the person you ogle. I'm sure there are those of you who can remember back to being about fourteen and you organised your whole day around the fact that the boy or girl you fancied got off the bus at 4.35pm outside the shop where your mum got her bread and you were always volunteering to go and get the bread after school! Well, this is the same thing in reverse.

If you are really having trouble, find someone (of the same sex) that you can confide in and make yourself accountable to him or her in this area. As the old proverb goes, *"You can't stop the birds flying over your head, but you can stop them nesting in your hair."* You won't completely remove the temptation, but you can make it a lot harder for yourself to give in to it.

5. RE-DEDICATE YOURSELF ENTIRELY TO JESUS

Finally, think back to something we've said before when talking about temptation. If you want to get something out of your life, make sure there's no room for it. Fill your life up completely with Jesus. Remember *Philippians 4:8* – “*Finally, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.*” Get into the habit of being aware that Jesus is with you. Re-dedicate yourself to him and ask for the special strength of his Holy Spirit. If you cultivate that special relationship with him, there will be no need for you to seek illicit thrills elsewhere. Maybe this morning is the time you need to face up to the fact that Jesus has been long absent from your situation and you need to ask him back.

In the Old Testament God often accused his people Israel of being adulterous in leaving him and going off after other gods, other experiences. Maybe your adultery – actual or in the heart – is a result of leaving Jesus out of the picture. Get him back in the centre of your screen today!

(House group notes follow on next page)

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Although adultery has always been a part of human experience, it now seems more acceptable and is certainly easily visible on every side. The tabloid press thrives on it, soap operas are based on it, novels and films are full of it.

It is wrong because it goes against the "one flesh" principle of *Genesis 2:24* (see also *1 Corinthians 6:15,16,18*). It is also a product of greed and selfishness, which we try to justify with talk of "need" and "fulfilment".

Although we may feel that, being innocent of the **act** of adultery, we are keeping this commandment, Jesus makes it plain that an **attitude of lust** is just as bad. Lust is an addictive and destructive attitude which can harm relationships and detract from joy, Don't forget that Jesus had to cope with the temptation of lust too (*Hebrews 4:15*).

Jesus' solution is drastic, but, although he is exaggerating in the manner of the rabbis, he indicates that this is a serious problem. We cannot take it lightly and must be prepared to make a response.

1 Resist

Resist the commonly held view that it is inevitable, that it is a basic human need that **must** be satisfied. We are responsible individually for our reaction to temptation.

2 Recognise the problem

See lust for what it is and don't try to justify it away.

3 Repent

This may need some kind of confession to people other than just to God. But it is more than just saying sorry – it is a commitment to change. God will forgive, but he says, "*Go, and sin no more*" (*John 8:11*).

4 Re-organise your life

Take practical steps to minimise the effect of temptation. You may even need to find someone you are accountable to.

5 Re-dedicate yourself to Christ

If your life is full of Christ and his Spirit, there will be no room for anything else. Remember *Philippians 4:8*.

Questions for discussion

Why do you think adultery is wrong?

What is the difference between appreciating another person's beauty and lust? Is there a difference between so-called "erotic art" and pornography?

Why do people often consider sexual sin to be worse than any other sin?

What are the implications of Jesus' words for the way we dress and groom ourselves?

Look at *Matthew 5:31,32*. What does this mean for us today?