

You Shall Not Commit Adultery

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 May 2007

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to turn again to the Old Testament reading, page 156 in the Bibles. And today we finish the second of our series on Deuteronomy this year, and later in the year, I think September, we'll resume the last chapters of the book of Deuteronomy.

Well, let's pray as we come to God's Word. Heavenly Father, speak to us from your Word today. We pray, write it on our hearts by your Holy Spirit, that we may believe it and obey it and bring glory to your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. What men call gallantry, the gods call adultery. So said Lord Byron. He ought to know. He was a serial adulterer, philanderer and others. And that was in one of his poems, Don Juan. What men call gallantry, the gods call adultery.

Adultery must be one of the most redefined words in our language. That is, it's not a word that we use very often because we use all sorts of other euphemisms or definitions to somehow sideline the idea of adultery.

[1 : 22] So for Byron, he would say adultery, well, it's gallantry. It's being a man. Some would say, well, it's just love. And I've heard church leaders say that sort of thing.

Well, it's okay if they're really in love. Some say it's an affair or a fling on the side or a bit on the side or an innocent flirtation.

What happens with the redefinitions of adultery is that it's an attempt to ease our guilt. Somehow to sideline sin.

So that adultery, well, that's out there. But what is excusable and okay and acceptable, well, we call it by different names. The trouble is, of course, in God's eyes, a rose by any other name is still a rose, to quote another poet.

Adultery is still adultery is adultery. You see, we define it in terms that make us not guilty. But, of course, excuses, which is what redefinition of adultery is, is really the habit of sinners.

[2 : 29] The very first man. The excuse, she made me do it. Well, the seventh commandment of the Ten Commandments is unequivocal. You shall not commit adultery.

Full stop. In any circumstances, in any places, for any reasons, you shall not commit adultery. In Deuteronomy, the Ten Commandments occur in chapter 5.

And that's where we find the command, you shall not commit adultery. In chapters 12 to 26, we get a whole sequence of laws, many of which we've looked at in recent weeks.

And those laws, in general, follow the flow of the Ten Commandments. What they do is give us some examples, in a sense, to show us what the law might look like in practice.

And so the last part of chapter 22, in Deuteronomy, which we're looking at today, gives some examples of what you shall not commit adultery looks like.

[3 : 32] They're only examples. It's not exhaustive. There are many other cases. And the selection, in one sense, guides us about how we might act and how the judges of Israel would gather the principles and the degrees of severity in order to bring judgment in various cases.

So it begins in verse 13. Suppose a man marries a woman, but after going into her, he dislikes her. That is, he says, oh, I don't like her very much anymore.

Very common. It's the most common excuse, actually, for divorce and for adultery. Well, I don't love her anymore. Now, the very fact that it goes on to show a charge that he tries to level against her probably reflects the difficulty with which divorce could be obtained in ancient Israel.

It's pre-Lionel Murphy days, of course. Divorce is not quick and easy. And it shows us the high place that is given to marriage. That marriage is a high institution that is to be honored and upheld by all.

So for this man, he concocts a charge against his wife in order to try and get a divorce from her. It may be that he's also trying to get the money back that he paid as a dowry to the parents.

[5 : 06] But fundamentally, it seems he's trying to get out of the marriage arrangement. And so verse 14 says that he makes up charges against her, slandering her by saying, I married this woman, but when I lay with her, I did not find evidence of her virginity.

That is, you're meant to be a virgin when you get married. And he says, well, she wasn't. I was told that she would be, and it's not the case. And in one sense, his charge is against her, and it's certainly against her parents, that they have sold him a dud.

You promised me a virgin, and she's not. So what happens? The next verses go down the track of his charge being false, and then after a few verses, we'll come to the verses that deal with what happens if his charge is true.

In verse 15, The father of the young woman and her mother shall then submit the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. The father of the young woman shall say to the elders, I gave my daughter in marriage to this man, but he dislikes her.

And now he's made up charges against her, saying, I did not find evidence of your daughter's virginity, but here is the evidence of my daughter's virginity. And then they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the town.

[6 : 26] Now the charge is in a sense directed to the parents. They are the ones who are proving her innocence. Now this might strike you, as it strikes me, as being rather odd.

What are they actually doing to prove this? The expression, evidence of virginity, it's argued could refer to one of two things, or could refer to either, depending on what's available.

It could refer to the wedding night sheets from the bed, that if a virgin were bloodstained. And there are still some cultures today, in a sense in a primitive practice, but still carried on in some cultures today apparently, where those sheets would be presented by the bride to her parents after the wedding night somehow, sort of symbolically, yes, we have consummated the marriage.

Now if that was the case, if that was the practice, and we're not aware of this anywhere else in the Old Testament, as being the practice, then it does strike me as odd that the man presumably would know that his wife has presented them to her parents, so if he's concocting a false charge, and he knows there is evidence that they've got to dispute that charge, then why is he doing that?

The other possibility that some argue is that it's perhaps evidence that the parents might have had from immediately before the marriage, so some clothing or sheets that were bloodstained to show menstruation rather than being pregnant, if that's indeed the strength of the charge.

[8 : 01] Either way, it does strike us as odd. Either way, it's clear though that the original Israelites would have been aware of what this is all about, maybe more than we are. The other thing that strikes us as odd, I suspect, is how public this matter is.

The parents don't just go to the man and say, well, here's the evidence, oh, I'm wrong, sorry, and they go back together. They actually go to the elders at the gate. The gate is like the court, the sort of first form of judgment.

In the gate of the city, the judges or elders would be, and they would hear matters of public dispute. What it shows us is that this is a public matter, that adultery or the charges of adultery or the charges of some form of sexual problem are public matters.

They're not private affairs only. We often think, when issues of adultery come to the fore, and may even be an element of public scandal, that it's not really any of our business.

That's certainly often the argument you hear in the press amongst celebrities, where adultery really is something they boast in, but even in political leaders from time to time, that it's something that really, it's a private matter.

[9 : 17] It doesn't affect the public office. I remember when I was on General Synod three years ago, which is the Anglican Church of Australia's sort of parliamentary governing body.

It meets only every three years, and we met three years ago in Fremantle, and I remember overhearing one clergyman say, well, don't they realise what goes on in the bedrooms is none of their business?

And I think that's a very non-biblical view. And I remember quite a deal of debate, both there and in other church circles that I've been part of, where it's as though adultery, well, it's the norm of society, so we should tolerate it.

We should just accept it. It's a private affair. It's not a public affair. What we find here is that this is actually a public affair amongst the people of God. It's not something that's just behind a closed door.

It's not as though it does nobody harm. It's none of your business. Put it aside. You see, the view here is that adultery actually undermines and attacks society.

[10:17] It attacks the basic fabric of a family unit and the unit of a village or even a town and the community of God's people. And so the elders are involved in both seeing the evidence and bringing down the judgment.

So in verse 18, having been given the evidence that his charge is false, the elders of that town shall take the man and punish him. Some say probably that's by beating or whipping rather than imprisonment.

And then they shall fine him, verse 19 says, 100 shekels of silver, twice the amount of a dowry, a substantial amount of money. That's twice what King David paid for the threshing floor of Arana when he bought that as the future temple site.

So a significant amount of money is being fined to these men. And then the sting in the tail, which again probably strikes us as odd, if not unfair.

The end of verse 19 says, she shall remain his wife. He shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.

[11:26] Now I imagine that if you were the woman and your husband had laid a false charge against you about your virginity, it had become a public matter and the charge was shown to be false, you would probably not want to go back to him.

Now I think the way we read this is that he is not allowed to divorce her. There does seem to be an opt-out clause when you compare this law with the similar ones in Exodus.

So the woman may decide, no I don't want to go back. And whilst we may think this looks a bit strange or unfair in verse 19, we need to bear in mind that in ancient Israelite society, a woman who was divorced, a woman who even was widowed, a woman who had been violated, is often unlikely to marry and very vulnerable to poverty.

And so whilst it may not be an ideal marriage, the provision at the end of verse 19 provides some form of security and provision for this woman. Well what happens if the man's accusation is true, that no evidence for virginity is proven or found or given in evidence?

Well verse 20 onwards deals with that scenario. If however this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house and so you shall purge the evil from your midst.

[13:12] I remember the BBC comedy program Yes, Prime Minister and there was a line in that where the government leaders were in an Islamic state and they were joking that in their country in Britain people get stoned and then they commit adultery.

But in this country people commit adultery and then get stoned. We might think this is a harsh penalty. In a society where adultery is not even a crime, here it's a capital offence.

The reason that's given for that at the end of verse 21 is you shall purge the evil from your midst. It's a term that occurs a number of times relating to various laws in Deuteronomy.

To purge the evil from the midst is to cut out the sin at its core. It acknowledges that sin spreads, is infectious and contagious and if it's not dealt with properly and severely then the whole society is vulnerable to corruption and decay from that sin.

That is, this is a very serious matter. Far more serious than our society ever places on the issue of adultery. And the death penalty is therefore to act as a very strong deterrent against others doing the same thing.

[14:35] It shows us then how God's values are so different from our society's values. In God's values marriage is very highly upheld and infringements of marriage like adultery in this case is one example of that are highly serious sins indeed.

Well then another example is given in verse 22 and this is a straightforward case. A married man, a married woman, they sleep together, they're caught in the act somehow and both of them are to be put to death.

That's verse 22. Again, so you shall purge the evil from Israel so that the sin doesn't spread. Notice that both the man and the woman are guilty. Not only the woman as is in some ancient laws, they're equally held guilty.

It reminds us of the alarming situation in John's Gospel where a woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus. They want to stone her. And Jesus says, well, he who is without sin cast the first stone.

But one of the glaring things about a contrived situation is, well, where's the man? If she's caught in the act, there must have been a man with her. Why haven't they brought him? Here the law shows that the man is equally as guilty as the woman.

[15:56] Now that's the simple case in a sense. Two married people, not to each other, caught in a sexual act. Both of them guilty, both to be put to death. What if the woman is betrothed, not married, and they're caught in the act?

Well, that's the next paragraph. In betrothal, in the ancient world, in ancient Israel and other places, you're virtually married. That is, to be betrothed is virtually to be put in the situation of being husband and wife.

A much stronger commitment than engagement is in our society today. So verse 23 and 4, if there's a young woman, a virgin, already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death.

The young woman, because she did not cry for help in the town, and the man, because he violated his neighbor, neighbor's wife. Notice how the betrothed woman is there called a wife. And again, so you shall purge the evil from your midst.

The presumption here is that it's consensual act. That is, it's in a town, the woman hasn't cried out, the language is used that the man meets her and sleeps with her.

[17:10] So there's no force implied in those words. And that if it had been an issue of force or violation, she would have cried out, she would have been heard, and somebody would have responded.

But given there is no witness to her crying out, then the presumption is of a consensual act, and both, therefore, are equally guilty. But note the difference in the next case.

Again, it's a betrothed woman and a man, but now they meet in the countryside in verse 25. The man now doesn't just meet her and lie with her, he seizes her.

Very strong word. Really, we would just say raped her and lies with her. Then only the man who lay with her shall die. Now notice the presumption here.

You shall do nothing to the young woman, the young woman has not committed an offense punishable by death. This case is like that of someone who attacks and murders a neighbor. Since he found her in the open country, the engaged woman may have cried for help.

[18:12] There was no one there to rescue her. That is, out in the country, if she cried her head off, she may not have been heard. So the presumption there is of innocence. Now what these two cases are giving is not, it's not every case that you can imagine.

There are different cases you can imagine where a man and a betrothed woman may or may not have a sexual act together. But the two different cases in a sense set up parameters which could then be applied in other cases for the judges in ancient Israel.

That is, do we presume consensual act? Well, nobody's heard her. If she'd cried out, they would have been heard. That is, there's no witness here. And so the circumstance presumes guilt.

But in the other circumstance, well, she may be guilty. She may have been consensual. But we give her the benefit of the doubt because nobody would have heard. That's how the Old Testament law is meant to function.

It's not an exhaustive list of every case, but rather it sets up parameters, standards, levels of punishment, et cetera, for which the elders, the judges in ancient Israel might glean how their particular situation is to be dealt with.

[19:24] The same for us. That is, we're meant to read these laws and gain the principles from them, whereby we then apply them to the particular circumstances before us. Then we move on.

And in verse 28, we've dealt with already two married people. We've dealt with a man and a betrothed woman. Now we deal with a man and a young virgin.

She's not betrothed to anyone. She's not married to anyone. If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged and seizes her, it's actually a different word from the previous circumstance.

It's a slightly lighter word. So rape might be a bit too strong for this, but in effect, he holds her. There's an element of force and lies with her and they're caught in the act. The man who lay with her, now there's no capital punishment here, shall give 50 shekels of silver to the young woman's father. Now that's a substantial amount. It's the standard bride dowry price that would have been paid in ancient Israel apparently.

[20 : 30] And she becomes his wife. And we might think that that is odd. Here is a woman who at some level of force has been taken by a man.

Now because she's not betrothed or married to somebody, and presumably the man is not, but he might be, she shall become his wife. Because he violated her, he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.

Now again, we might think that's odd. We might think it's unfair for this woman that she's somehow been taken by force and has to become his wife. But again, the option out clause is there in Exodus. It's not mentioned here, but it's there in Exodus.

That is, she may decide the best thing for her as a violated woman for her future security and provision may be to go with this man. She can opt out of it, but she may decide that's the way to go. And if she does, he cannot dismiss her. He cannot divorce her. He is bound for life to provide for her. So that's part of a provision for a woman.

[21 : 33] We might think it a little bit odd, but there was no social security and all that sort of thing. In ancient Israel, as we might be used to. Notice, the fine gets paid to the father as indeed the earlier fine gets paid to the father.

And that makes sense. If it was paid to the woman, then it would actually end up back with the man if he married her. That is, there is a cost to this fine because it goes to the woman's father who has also been offended by these acts and charges as well.

And finally, in verse 30, a man shall not marry his father's wife, thereby violating his father's rights. I remember when I was a teenager going to church and we had the old Book of Common Prayer and when the sermon was boring, which in those days it was mostly, if not always, I would browse through the Book of Common Prayer.

And the Book of Common Prayer that we had, it used to be able to calculate the date of Easter up for 30 or 40 years, probably to about 2007. So I used to enjoy looking at the dates of Easter and things like that.

And the other thing was it had a list of prohibited relationships. So a man shall not marry his father's wife, which is not so much the mother so much as a stepmother or if the mother's dead or even if it was a polygamous case.

[22 : 55] Here, it's presumably a stepmother. The man may or may not be still alive, probably not if it's to do with marriage here rather than just simply sexual activity.

And the reason giving is violating his father's rights, which literally is, as you can see in the footnote, uncovering his father's skirt.

Well, whose father wears a skirt? Rather, it's their robe or tunic, of course. And the sense is that it's an offensive act against the father whom you are to honour, of course, the Ten Commandments say.

If you were to marry your father's, your deceased father's, wife, your stepmother, or whatever. This is a law that actually the Corinthians were abusing in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 5 and Paul chastises them for that.

what we have in this selection of laws, all related around the theme of wrong sexual practice or the theme of not committing adultery, are not a selection of exhaustive laws.

[24 : 02] Not every case is there. But a selection is there to set the guidelines, parameters, and models for ancient Israel's laws and legal system.

They provide principles for acting and judging. And that's even for us how we are to respond to these. We, of course, are not free to exercise capital punishment, for example.

So where we, even if we wanted to, we can't actually apply that part of the laws. I'm not sure that we should anyway. But certainly these laws give us principles that we then, reading through the New Testament, see how they are reinforced.

In our society, adultery is almost a non-issue. It's a joke more than anything. It's something that stirs up the tabloids on the front page for a day or two and then just seems to disappear.

It's not a crime. It's not an offence. It is commonplace. It's even boasted in. And when it becomes an issue, the private keep-out door goes, or sign goes up.

[25 : 11] So when Gareth Evans and Cheryl Curnow were having a fling, keep out. It's none of your business. It's a private act. They're public offices, but the private and the public don't mix.

That's not a biblical view. When Wayne Carey committed adultery with his teammate's wife, the only reason that was an action that led to him not playing football was because his teammate was still in the team.

Whereas Shane Warne, well, he's such a good bowler, let's just excuse it. It's a joke. It's almost something that he's lauded for rather than looked down upon by many in our society.

So what our society has lost is that adultery attacks the heart of community and society, not least of God's people. It is a public issue because it affects the public.

What happens in a bedroom matters. It's not a private affair. And a little fling, so-called, or a little act of gallantry, as Byron might have called it, causes enormous harm in our society.

[26 : 22] I mean, for 20 years I've known the hurt of that and many of you have as well, whether it's your children or, like me, your parents. But more than that, our country suffers enormously economically because of infidelity, adultery, philandery.

It suffers enormous social cost and an enormous emotional cost that no one actually is really quite prepared to confront.

The basic fabric of our society is under attack from adultery. and the people of God in particular are under the same attack when it's tolerated.

I mean, I'm sure that many of you, like me, know what that's like. And many of us know people who suffer in all sorts of ways because of what society calls gallantry or a fling or a bit of a flirt on the side.

It is a harmful, destructive thing. I was reading an autobiography last week of a man who was 12 when the Japanese invaded Burma.

[27 : 38] He was a son of a Scottish father and a Burmese mother. The Scottish father was relatively distant. And this boy, aged 12, was one of the few that survived the trek from northern Burma into India.

He got to India almost dead, 45 pounds, I think, in wait, astonishingly slight, and took months of recuperation.

And some years later, when he was in London as a young man, met again his father and discovered his father's wife, that is, this boy's mother and siblings had died on this trek out of Burma in 1942, and realised from the age of the children that his father had been having an affair with this woman in the years when they were in Burma and he was still so-called married to his wife.

It wasn't just a later marriage. And the hurt that that man felt for the rest of his life was quite evident. Now, that's just one case of thousands of millions of cases where people's lives can be destroyed, harmed, in all sorts of ways.

In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was the community of the people of God. So, at one level, we read this by way of society, but we also must fundamentally apply this to the church as well, for it's the church now that is the people of God as ancient Israel was.

[29 : 12] And just like adultery attacks society in general, it very clearly corrodes the community of God's people as well. And there are churches around that have been cancerously destroyed by the tolerance of adultery within their ranks and within their midst.

And the history of the churches that tolerate adultery, that don't discipline it or excommunicate somebody, whoever it is in their church's life, shows that in the end, those churches spiritually die.

Some of them are simply divided by loyalties to the man or the woman and the church fractures.

But in others, where the sin is just tolerated or ignored or brushed under the carpet or the private keep out sign is put up, then in the end, those churches suffer spiritually and begin to die.

Jesus, of course, upheld not only this command of you shall not commit adultery, but as we heard in the Sermon on the Mount reading, strengthens it that we don't even engage in lust.

Why is pure marriage held in such high esteem in the Bible, higher than our society does? Because marriage is a reflection of the gospel.

[30 : 34] And so when marriage is under attack, as it is with adultery, actually the gospel and God are under attack. Because the institution of marriage of a husband and wife is a reflection of the relationship between God and his people through the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament, many times, in many books, God and Israel are regarded in the analogy of husband and wife. And in the New Testament, the same.

Jesus and the church, the husband and the bride of Christ. So when marriage is treated lightly, when we disdain it, when we abuse it, then actually, spiritually, we are showing contempt for the gospel of God as well.

In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer from 1662, matrimony is an honourable estate instituted of God signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and the church.

and is therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, but rather reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God.

[31 : 49] If we think of marriage so lightly that adultery is okay or tolerated or to it we turn a blind eye, then actually we show scant regard for God's covenant love to us, the pledge to us to be faithful forever.

We dismiss, in fact, the importance of God's faithful pledge to us and therefore we're actually too short-sighted to look forward to the heavenly wedding feast of the church and Christ and we actually ignore and thus abuse or show contempt for the cross of Christ where he died for the bride he loved.

We are not at liberty to redefine adultery as our society does. It is not gallantry. It's not merely an affair or a fling. It's certainly not something that is private and nobody else's business behind a closed door.

We cannot condone marital infidelity. We know, of course, we live in a fallen world. We know, of course, that we, too, are sinners.

We're thankful for forgiveness but the grace of forgiveness urges us to godly living, faithful in marriage and we are under obligation to strive with all our effort to live godly lives under god's law.

[33 : 24] Amen.