

Faithful God - Faithful Marriage

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, let's pray. Gracious Father, please be with us as we look at your word tonight. Help us to learn from you. And please be at work in us to shape our wills that we might put the things we learn into practice.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Michael Faraday lived from 1791 to 1867. He was a British chemist, an experimental physicist, and a natural philosopher. He was famous for many things. However, most of us remember him, well, because you're sitting under his lights, sort of, because his great work was the work on the nature of electricity. And much of our modern understanding of electrolysis and the relationship between electricity and magnetism can be traced back to Michael Faraday. Today I want to tell you a story about this man. On one occasion in his life, there was a gathering of distinguished scientists who had come to listen to Faraday's masterly explanation of some scientific matter. And they listened spellbound.

[1 : 11] The final climax came in the last hour when he held his brilliant audience enthralled as he demonstrated the nature and property of magnets.

The experiment he conducted was so novel, so brilliant, and so triumphant that when he resumed his seat, the house rocked for some time with very vigorous and enthusiastic applause. Finally, the applause died down. And the Prince of Wales, who was later to become King Edward II, rose to propose a motion of congratulation. And the resolution was duly seconded, and it was then carried with renewed thunders of applause.

And then suddenly the uproar ceased, and a strange silence settled over the entire audience. The audience waited for Mr Faraday's reply.

But he didn't reply. He had left the gathering. Only his most intimate friends knew what had become of him.

[2 : 18] You see, Michael Faraday was an elder in his little church. The church only boasted 20 members, but the hour at which Faraday conducted his lecture was the hour of the weeknight prayer meeting.

Now, I'm not sure that I hold to everything that Michael Faraday believed about God, but he did know and demonstrate something of incredible importance.

He illustrated that faithfulness to God is greater and of more importance than the applause of humans. It's a great thing, isn't it?

Now, the topic for tonight's sermon is the Seventh Commandment. You shall not commit adultery. And you might wonder what Faraday has to do with that. Well, hopefully by the end you'll see. As we look at this commandment, you'll see that I consider that this commandment is fundamentally about the whole question of faithfulness.

And as we look at this topic, I want you to remember the story of Michael Faraday, for Faraday has shown us something of the essence of what I think this commandment means. So, let's get underway and take a look at Exodus 20, verse 14.

[3 : 24] Now, the first thing we need to do is define adultery. Adultery is sexual intercourse by mutual consent between one married person and another married person who are not married to each other.

Is that fair enough? Secondly, adultery was commonly regarded through the ancient Near East as a terrible thing. For example, we know that the Egyptians and other ancient peoples regarded adultery as a terrible social sin.

In fact, they had a common term for it. They called it the great sin. The way they saw it, adultery was a private wrong committed against a husband.

You see, a wife was his property, and in adultery, the couple concerned infringed his exclusive right to the possession of his wife. And the end result was that a husband could determine the punishment of the couple involved.

But let's have a look at adultery in ancient Israel. First of all, adultery was a term used for a much broader range than elsewhere. It's used of sexual intercourse of a man with a wife of another man, Leviticus and Deuteronomy and so on.

[4 : 32] Or sexual intercourse of a man with a fiancé of another man, Deuteronomy 23. Or sexual intercourse of a wife with a man who was probably married and was not her husband, Hosea 4 and Ezekiel 16.

The big difference between Israel and the rest of the ancient Near East is that Israel did not regard adultery as a social sin. Take a look at Genesis in your Bibles, Genesis 39 verse 9.

So we're in Exodus. So you just have to flip back to Genesis and 39 and verse 9. This verse, if you look closely at it, tells us the story of a handsome young man, Joseph, who finds himself the object of the attention of someone else's wife, Potiphar's wife.

And she continually gets him to, tries to get him to sleep with her. And he refuses steadfastly. And listen to what he says to, he says, you are his wife.

How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God? Now, I want you to hear what Joseph is saying. He's saying that adultery is a sin against the husband?

[5 : 45] No. It's a sin against, well, it may be, but more importantly, it's a sin against God, not so much against Potiphar. It is God who says adultery is wrong, not society.

It is God who is offended by adultery. And therefore, in the Old Testament, it is God who says what the punishment for adultery is. By the way, I ought to make just a note here. If our society decided adultery was no longer wrong, and there was no problem with it, as much of our society does, does that mean it's no longer wrong?

No, because it's a sin against God, you see. It's God who determines whether it's right or wrong. In Israel, the husband has no legal power to pardon his faithless wife or her partner.

God prescribes the punishment for adultery, and he says that the punishment for adultery shall be death. Leviticus 20, Deuteronomy 22, and so on. I want you to really understand this point.

In Israel, adultery is not just the great sin. It is the great sin against God. And that just makes us ask another question, doesn't it?

[6 : 51] And that question is this. Why is sin, why is adultery such a great sin against God? Well, in order to understand this, we need to do some solid thinking.

So stick with me. Let's start by remembering the context of these commandments. If we get back in Exodus 20, verse 3, look at what it says. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You shall have no other gods but before me. Can you see what God is doing? He's reminding the people of Israel that he is the God who rescued them, who redeemed them. They are therefore in relationship with him.

And that relationship with him is to be exclusive as far as they are concerned. They are to have no other God but him. He's to be their God. They are to be his people.

They are to have no other gods but him. In other words, the relationship between God and his people is to be one of faithfulness. He says, I will be faithful to you. And they respond.

[7 : 54] Well, he urges them that they ought to be faithful to him. And that is what they are to respond back with, faithfulness to God. What's more, he's demonstrated his faithfulness time and time again in the past and will demonstrate it time and time again in the future.

He is a God whose essence is to be faithful. So when a man or a woman forsakes their wife or their husband, what are they doing, do you think? Well, first, they're refusing to be like God who rescued them.

He's faithful and they're saying, you can very well be faithful, God, but I don't like faithfulness. I am not going to be. They break faithfulness with their spouse. That's what they're doing.

Second, they're also refusing to live by the law that he gave them. In other words, they're breaking faithfulness with him as well. So not only are they breaking faith with their spouse, they're breaking faithfulness with God.

They're breaking his law. Adultery is a great sin against God because it's a refusal to live like God. And it's a refusal to live faithfully to him as God. Please understand this.

[8 : 59] The thing that is wrong with adultery is not that it is a sexual act. Please understand. Illegal sexual acts are wrong in the Old Testament, but they are not generally punishable by death.

The thing that is wrong with adultery is that it is the greatest act of unfaithfulness a person can exercise with another person. It is an act of unfaithfulness with a covenant partner, with someone you have entered into a contract with for life, with whom you have left father and mother and cleaved to and become one flesh.

It is a refusal to be like God and live before God. Now that in mind, I want you to turn with me to the last book in the Old Testament, Malachi. So just keep going.

If you hit Matthew, you've gone too far. So flip through the Old Testament and then just before Matthew, you'll find Malachi. And I want to read to you from Malachi chapter 2, 13 to 16.

The book of Malachi talks about the sins that Israel has committed against God with whom they are in covenant relationship. Now in one part of the book, God speaks about marriage and he has some very strong things to say to his people.

[10 : 22] Listen to this. This is from Malachi 2 and I think it's an earlier version of the version that you have. So it'll be slightly different in one or two places. Another thing you do, says God to his people, you flood the Lord's altar with tears.

You weep and weah because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. And you ask, why? It is because the Lord is acting as witness between you and the wife of your youth because you have broken faith with her.

You have been faithless toward her. Though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant, has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit, they are his.

And why one? Well, he was seeking godly offspring. So guide yourself in your spirit and don't break faith with the wife of your youth. And here's where it may be slightly different in your version.

I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel. And I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment, says the Lord Almighty.

[11 : 29] So guard yourself in spirit and do not break faith. I want you to notice what God loves and what he doesn't love. God loves faithfulness, doesn't he?

He cherishes faithfulness. You see, marriage is a covenantal relationship, like the relationship between God and his people. And he loves it when people guard themselves in spirit and don't break faith with their spouse.

He loves it when they keep their covenant obligations like he keeps his covenant obligations. On the other side of things, he has a strong dislike for one of our versions, many of our versions, the older versions, have hate.

He has a hatred for divorce because God, you see, hates unfaithfulness. He hates the breaking of faith. Now, I want you to hear what I'm saying.

And my mum is divorced, so I know and understand the pain of divorce and I know that sometimes it happens. So my parents were divorced, so I know all the difficulties of it, but I'm just trying to explain what scripture says about it.

[12 : 35] And even scripture does allow in the Old Testament divorce and so on. You see, this sermon though, what I want to say is it's not just a sermon on adultery. It's a Bible talk on faithfulness.

You see, God is the God of all faithfulness. He's been faithful to his people even when they have been faithless to him. And so he loves it when people are like him.

He loves it when people are faithful to each other and to him. And he hates unfaithfulness. And he hates it when his people are unfaithful to him.

And he hates it when they're unfaithful to each other. Unfaithfulness is an affront to him. It is against everything that he holds precious.

So that background, I want you to flip over into Matthew's gospel and Matthew 5, 27 to 30, which we read earlier on. These are the words of Jesus. And let's read them.

[13 : 36] Verse 27. You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off, throw it away.

It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. Now, did you notice some things about this passage? First, the word here used for woman, I should tell you, is the word generally used to talk about a wife.

And I think that's the principal meaning here. I think this verse is primarily about lusting after another person's wife. What Jesus is saying is that the commandment said you shall not commit adultery. However, when a man looks at another person's wife to desire her, he has already begun the process in his mind, in his heart.

[14:38] You see, to look on her as a sexual or marriage partner is to engage in unfaithfulness in the mind, in the heart. You see, to look on him, and a woman, I presume it works the other way too, when a woman looks at another person's husband to desire, she's already committing adultery in her heart.

You see, to look upon him as a sexual partner, a marriage partner, or to engage, is to engage in the act of unfaithfulness in her mind. And God has no place for unfaithfulness. He hates it.

It's a betrayal of everything that is close to him. But let's look at how Jesus goes on. He goes on to talk about costly faithfulness. You see, he's realistic about us.

And he knows that we will look around. And he knows that our sexual and relational urges as human beings are strong. After all, he made them. He knows how strong they are.

And he knows that these urges have the ability to pull us away from being faithful to him and to our spouse. And so he calls upon us to get things right. In other words, in one sense, he calls us to do what Michael Faraday did.

[15:45] That is to put God first. And that will mean taking strong action if you're going to put God first. It means that you get up and while the applause is going on, go to your prayer meeting, as it were.

Or, to put it in the context of a marriage, it means that should I ever feel some way, this way, about another woman, I will go away, flee it, go and tell my wife and be open and honest with her and say, I need to tell you this is not on and I will have nothing to do with it.

See, when Jesus says we should pluck out our eye or cut off our hand if these cause us to sin, I don't think he's talking literally. I think he means that if we're tempted to sin by the powerful urges within us, then we have to take drastic action.

For example, if we find a woman or a man so attractive as a sexual or relational partner then we should put some distance between ourselves and this temptation.

We should consciously choose to give priority to God and not to the urges that we have. So Heather and I have a covenant, as it were, with each other. Well, we don't, well, we have a covenant of marriage but we've also got an agreement with each other that were either of us to ever feel this way about another person, we would tell each other that we'd be open and honest.

[17:13] You see, this is our way of saying we are consciously choosing to give priority to God and not the urges that we have. This is radical discipleship, isn't it?

And that's what we're called to engage in. Friends, I've been a pastor long enough to know that in every congregation there are adulteries going on.

Not necessarily with congregational members, between congregational members, but there are adulterous people in congregations. And it is.

And people will not flee it. They will not run away from it. The Bible is clear. In marriage, God delights in people being like him and being like his son.

In marriage, God delights in people being like him and like his son. Marriage for the Christian is about commitment. Now, I know some of you aren't married here, but this won't hurt you because most of you will end up married.

[18:16] It is about two people making a promise to each other that they will stick at. They will hang in there no matter how difficult things get.

They will work on their relationship. They will work on improving that relationship. And they will love each other for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health until death separates them.

A Christian marriage is about two people being committed to seeking each other's good. It is about cherishing, sheltering, nurturing, edifying, showing patience with each other.

And it's about doing this before God who sees. It is about doing it in determination to be like God, faithful to the end.

Now, let me say that in our world, this is incredibly difficult. It is difficult because our world says that what is important is us and our rights and our privileges.

[19 : 20] And so if we want another sexual partner, we ought to be able to have one. But God says that what really matters is not us and our rights and our privileges, but him and his glory.

What matters is loving him and loving each other. And this will be difficult because selfishness and sexuality is enormously attractive and enormously dangerous.

And avoiding sin will only come with care and with discipline. So staying faithful to our wife or husband will only come by taking practical steps to be godly. It'll take honesty and integrity.

It'll take correct priorities. It'll take a religious attitude to life. However, I don't want to finish there tonight on marriage. Actually, I want to look much more broadly at the issue.

You see, looking at the issue of adultery has raised, hasn't it, a much deeper issue. And it's raised the issue of faithfulness. And so I thought I'd talk about being faithful to God in our more general Christian life so that it applies to everyone, not just those of us who are married.

[20 : 28] You see, I think that we modern Christians have soaked up the self-centeredness of our world. And we have made ourselves, or our careers, or our study, or whatever it is, the center of our lives.

Let me explain what I mean by giving an illustration. Here at Holy Trinity, many of us have come to know Jesus Christ. However, I notice some common patterns often happen with many of us.

I've noticed that when the pressure of study, or work, or relationships come, then Jesus begins to take a second place in our lives. Meeting with other Christians begins to take second place.

Studying the Bible, talking to God in prayer begins to take a second place. Meeting, in other words, faithfulness to God begins to take second place in our lives. And let me tell you, if it takes second

place in our lives, for those things, it'll take second place in our lives when our sexual urges beg.

But the Bible is clear that the thing or the person you give first place in your life to is the thing you worship. It is your God. And so when people put study or work or relationships before God, they are engaging in idolatry.

[21 : 42] They are worshipping false gods and being unfaithful to the real God. Please understand what I'm saying, you see. God hates unfaithfulness. unfaithfulness. And yet, we often express unfaithfulness to the true God.

That's why we need those commandments, isn't it? To tell us not to do it. Because our inclination is to do it. God hates unfaithfulness. He hates it when we're unfaithful to others and he hates it when we're unfaithful to him.

And God wants of us consistency and faithfulness. And such faithfulness only comes with discipline. Let me tell you. So what I'm wanting to urge you to do today is to consider what Christ and God mean to you.

Are they important? And if they are, then you need to reflect on this in the way that you live and the way that you act. You need to develop habits of faithfulness.

And you need to deal harshly with the things that drag you away from faithfulness. Remember Michael Faraday? So we'll come back to him. Remember him? I think we would think him quaint these days.

[22 : 54] Naive, silly, misguided. We might never put it that way. But those values have slipped, haven't they? Because everything else has become more important all of a sudden.

But I think he got his priorities right. You see, he was a great scientist by the gift of God. But he knew there was something far more important in life than being a scientist.

God was more important. And coming to God in prayer with the people of God was more important. And that commitment to God expressed itself in a very practical and public way, though only a few knew what he was doing.

And so he left the Prince of Wales and a bunch of eminent scientists so he could go to a prayer meeting. For he believed when he got there he would meet the living God.

And he knew that meeting with the living God and being faithful to him was even more important than the Prince of Wales and a bunch of eminent scientists.

[24 : 03] So he went and he prayed. He was faithful to the God he knew and loved. So let's pray. Father, we thank you that you are faithful.

Thank you that you do not break covenant. That you don't initiate breaches with your people. And in fact when they breach covenant themselves you have arranged ways for them to be forgiven.

Father, thank you that you are faithful for without that there would be no hope for us. Father, please help us in every area of life particularly in our relationship with you and with our spouses and with those close to us.
Help us to be faithful. Help us to be like you, our Father, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.