

Exodus 20:14
Be faithful!

You might know this verse from Psalm 119 off by heart. It's a good memory verse. And although it says "young man", it just as obviously applies to "young women", too. And older people, we also need to think:

***How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.***

(Psalms 119:9)

So maybe you are patting yourself quietly on the back because you knew the answer before I showed it to you. But we need to realise that the world around us is very largely coming up with a very different response.

Why would you bother?

Why fight, they'd say, when you know you want it? Why be so stupid? And that response is exactly what we were told we would face ... or the same that followers of Jesus in that first century A.D. *did* face. Peter had just written that Jesus' disciples' lives must now be different. They had not just found the gracious forgiveness of a Saviour, but had also come under the rule of a new Lord. So they are ... we are ...

... to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

(1 Peter 4:2)

What's that going to mean about our lives from now on? They are going to be different from our past ... and from what is commonly still happening round about.

For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.

(1 Peter 4:3)

But the people still carrying on in this way can't get their heads around this. And what they do not understand, they are likely to mock, or worse.

... they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;

(1 Peter 4:4)

How can these people suddenly want to give up so much pleasure? What's the point of it? Where's the fun in that? Oh, I see, they've become some kind of small-minded religious nutcase! They've taken up with that mean-minded God who is always spoiling everyone else's fun!

How can a young man keep his way pure?

(Psalms 119:9)

Why even try? Peter has an answer to that, if we read on:

... but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

(1 Peter 4:5)

And that could be - *should* be - enough to settle things. But today we are going back into the OT again, and looking at that Commandment which, probably above every other, is most set at odds against 21st-century society:

“You shall not commit adultery.”

(Exodus 20:14)

Remember, as we said last week, that this isn't just an arbitrary set of rules imposed out of the blue on this nation that God has rescued from slavery in Egypt. God has a *further* purpose in that rescue. It's not just setting his people free - though that would be good enough. No, there is something even better than that. He's not just going to pat them on the head and encourage them to move on out into the big wide world to fend for themselves. Instead, here is a glorious promise for them:

“And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.”

(Exodus 29:46)

That's meant to be read as a foretaste of heaven, actually. Go right to the other end of the Bible, and you will see this explaining why heaven *is* heaven:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

(Revelation 21:3)

But there is a joint promise and command associated with this relationship:

“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

(Leviticus 19:2)

“You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”

(Leviticus 20:26)

And when it comes to this particular commandment, there are two immensely counter-cultural implications for our modern society: the Biblical understanding of marriage itself, and the Biblical understanding that sexual intimacy can only be

legitimately expressed between two people who are married to each other. In other words - and, once again, in only six Hebrew letters:

“You shall not commit adultery.”

(Exodus 20:14)

I don't to just stand here and do a bit of tub-thumping on those two basic points. Just going through those same three headings as last week will probably be enough to make sure we consider those basics fully enough. But I would like to flag up for your prayers that sad decision from the Methodist Conference this week (here as summarised in the *Christian Concern* weekly e-mail:

This week, the Methodist Church voted to allow same-sex 'marriages' to take place in its buildings and for Methodist ministers to be allowed to officiate at the ceremonies. The proposals were supported by all but one local synod (Shetland) and by 254 votes to 46 overall.

That's one reason I had to mention a moment ago that there are *two* key Biblical concepts underpinning this one Commandment. It's why *Christian Concern* is right to write the word “marriage” there in quotes, because, although by the Law of the Land it might be “marriage” nowadays, the Bible insists otherwise. We have to go back, as did Jesus, to the way God set things up: one man, one woman:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

(Genesis 2:24)

And *Christian Concern's* following comment hits the nail on the head:

Sadly, it's not just the Methodist Church that is compromising God's plan for marriage. But amongst Christians, the debate is not truly about marriage or sex - it's about whether we have confidence that God is real and he knows what's best for us.

Why I particularly want to flag this is not so that we can self-righteously wring our hands and hypocritically “lament” the decline of that once firmly evangelical church. It's much more because in our area I know there are some convincedly evangelical Methodist ministers, who are profoundly discouraged by all of this, and we would do well to pray for them as they face some very difficult choices over the coming days.

So this Seventh Commandment is the second one which deals with how we are to honour God by honouring the people around us who are made in his image. Last week, that commandment concerning destroying that image by murder. This time, instead, it's about defiling that image by adultery.

If the sixth command prohibited regarding our neighbour as expendable, the seventh prohibits regarding our neighbour as consumable.

Jen Wilkin, *Ten Words to Live By*

What *doesn't* it ban?
Don't be limited by the literal
Flip it over

- **What *doesn't* it ban?**

The traditional view is that Christians are seriously prudish, at best. The Puritans are largely thought of wooden oafs who sought to take all enjoyment out of anything and everything, and who therefore insisted that sex should only be for procreation, minimising any unfortunate side-effect of pleasure.

My suspicion is that that is just poor history. It could have been wilful, like the way Shakespeare could lampoon his caricature Puritan **Malvolio** - even giving him a rather nasty-sounding name, as well as making him the butt of a long-running joke in *Twelfth Night*. Or that sad caricature could just have been based on misunderstanding: how could anyone serious about godliness actually enjoy something like *that*?

But the idea that anything “earthly” is bad, and only the “spiritual” is good is actually a *pagan* philosophy. The Bible is really very much opposed to that. What do you of something like this?

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.

(1 Timothy 6:17)

Go right back to the start of things, and here is God's declaration:

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

(Genesis 1:31)

Go to Proverbs chapter 5, with an absolutely uncompromising warning about the dangers and follies of adultery, but see how the *converse*, of positively delighting in the special joys of marriage, is described. It's daringly explicit, I thought. I almost have to flag up a **warning** before reading it out!

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.

(Proverbs 5:18-19)

Flick over the page to the Song of Solomon, and you have even more clearly erotic stuff. It's all very tastefully said, with all the arts of poetry, but there's no mistaking that there is something very sensual being alluded to here. And it is clearly regarded as holy and wholesome.

He: Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow. She Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits. He I came to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gathered my myrrh with my spice, I ate my honeycomb with my honey, I drank my wine with my milk. Others Eat, friends, drink, and be drunk with love!

(Song of Solomon 4:16-5:1)

But even, if I can say it with some subtlety, things are not limited to the restrictions supposedly insisted upon by the missionaries, it is not the case that there are *no* restrictions. Go back a few pages, and you can see how “you shall not commit adultery” applies here, in poetic form:

A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed.

(Song of Solomon 4:12)

Just the same as Proverbs insists it must be.

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you.

(Proverbs 5:15-17)

So what is *not* banned by that Seventh Commandment? Even if some parts of the church down through the centuries have been exceedingly prurient, that isn't the Bible's position on the matter. Within the safe space of marriage, husband and wife are actually *encouraged*, I think I'd say, to enjoy themselves to the full.

Just because sexual intimacy *outside* marriage (and that includes *before* marriage, as well) is forbidden here, that's not because it's bad. If anything, it's the opposite: it's *too* good and *too* potent to be indulged in outside of its proper setting.

And these desires, *within* marriage, are wholesome, too. Oh yes, it's still possible for these desires to be corrupted to something lustful, but for that we have to move on to a question of the heart. But, that apart, those enjoyments of marriage reflect something of God's original holy, *very good*, creation order, when

And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

(Genesis 2:25)

- **Don't be limited by the literal**

I just mentioned the *heart* a moment ago. Once again, Jesus takes this Commandment and shows how we can seem to keep within the letter of the law, but still seek to evade its proper force. It's not just a matter of the deed, but the thought.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

(Matthew 5:27-28)

Let’s start by pulling out that little phrase in the middle, to make sure we understand what Jesus is saying here: “with lustful intent”. What he’s getting at is not just seeing or noticing, but *looking*. There is something more than incidental or inadvertent going on here. Something more deliberate, something more intentional is being spoken about. This is the turning to look again at that person you have noticed. Quite literally, it could be translated “looks at *with the intention of desiring*”. That’s not just the eyes; that’s the *heart* also involved. So ...

“You shall not commit adultery.”

(Exodus 20:14)

... says Jesus, is not limited to the actual commission of that act. The foothills of which actual adultery is the mountain peak can lie at the bottom of our own gardens.

I remember hearing of someone’s first experience of **New York taxis** and their drivers. I suspect the principles work just as well (or badly) in London, too. All that jostling for position on the road. Drawn up side by side at the traffic lights, perhaps, your windows down in the sweaty heat of summer. Their suspicion that you might do something to sneak ahead of them when the lights change, greeted by the shout of ***Don’t even think it!***

That’s the kind of thing Jesus is talking about here. Don’t be content to think that because you or I are not guilty of that literal sin, that we haven’t committed sins from that family of various degrees of sin - and which might not grow, if given water and sunshine instead of being weeded out.

And folks, again, don’t be limited even to the literal of what Jesus says here. Don’t presume that because he here uses the picture of a man lusting for a woman, then women are exempt from lust. Don’t think that because Jesus talks here about a man lusting for a woman that he is only condemning *straight* lust.

Don’t think that because Jesus uses the image of a physical man and a physical woman, that lust doesn’t come into play in the context of digital screen technology.

Don’t think that because Jesus talks about seeing, that lust cannot be indulged in by the medium of voice-only phone calls, or even the exchange of letters.

It’s not the *physical* eye that is the necessary medium of lust, but the heart that indulges the thoughts - and the fantasies of the mind, of course, can go way beyond what would ever be possible in real life. So when Jesus goes on to say ...

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.”

(Matthew 5:29)

... he’s not advocating self-mutilation, but warning about the seriousness of the sin. You *could* wrench your eye from its socket ... but would that mean that that object of illicit affection has been removed from what we call your *mind’s* eye? The same with the hand, in the next verse - the *right* hand, typically the stronger and more dexterous: we would be better off without even that ... if this bursting dam of lust could be plugged again.

“And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

(Matthew 5:30)

Folks, do we know what our weak spots are here? It’s not just a question of visiting the local red-light district .. though it *could* be. But when things pop up on our TV screens, advertising this or that raunchy new drama ... or the next episode of the soap when that affair is taken to its next level ... how do our hearts respond? Are we drawn to watch those programmes?

I wonder whether it wouldn’t be a good practice to record or stream most of our TV viewing, not just so that we can fast-forward through the adverts, but when the slinky saxophone music starts to swell, and we know there is a “love scene” coming up any moment - actually, a “lust scene” is a more appropriate phrase, in that context - we can *not* inflame our minds by *not* watching it. At least jump forward to the viewing equivalent of clear water again. Or do the digital equivalent of cutting your right hand off: hit the delete button, if that’s what it takes for you.

Whose presence do you find yourself just a bit too excited about being in? Who are you tempted to share just that minutest shade too personal a remark with? Whose Facebook profile do you check with greater frequency? Who do you think is attractive ... and just have to check out each time you see them? Who do you especially hope to see on the way to work, at work, on the way home ... or at church, for that matter?

What chapters of a book are you likely to read over again ... or read more slowly and lasciviously, when you realise what is coming ... so that you can indulge a little bit of what you tell yourself is just harmless fantasy, just a bit of day-dreaming?

It’s in the old **Disney** cartoon films that the girl can dream about “some day my prince will come”. Who’s *your* prince or princess? And be especially wary to remember Jesus’ words if that person is not the person you are currently married to.

- **Flip it over**

Finally, once again, let's flip this over into the positive. Instead of stopping at "don't be unfaithful", particularly in the context of marriage, wouldn't it be worth thinking of how you can positively cultivate faithfulness?

It would make sense to start with marriage, of course. How can we positively cultivate faithfulness there?

If you're not married ... then first of all, get a handle on what *the Bible* says marriage is about. Don't presume that what you see on TV programmes or read about in novels - or hear behind the bike-sheds! - is going to be anything like representative of what real marriage is all about. Listen to what Jesus says. Let *those* words determine what *you* believe marriage to be. Answering people who had a false understanding of marriage, he said ...

But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God."

(Matthew 22:29)

So don't think in terms of marriage as being something eventual, that you will maybe do after you've been living with someone for a few years, trying before you buy. Don't think if it just in terms of a big celebratory **wedding**, but the start of a lifelong adventure of self- and mutual discovery. Be prepared to open yourself up to that other person. Be prepared to grow because of it. Be prepared to be challenged because of it. Be prepared to *give* yourself because of it - because marriage is designed the way it is deliberately to present us with a worked-out picture of loving and sacrificial giving.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ...

(Ephesians 5:25)

If you're married already, I think I would have to say that we should none of us think that we have finally arrived, that we've learned enough that we can now just coast the rest of the way home. Maybe after all these decades your marriage is more like a well-worn and comfortable pair of **old slippers** than the flashy shoes you wore for the dance floor in your youth, but keep working at it, keep intentionally stoking the fire so that you will remain faithful to those vows all those years ago.

That's mirrored in our spiritual lives, too:

... I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

(2 Corinthians 11:2-3)

What if your marriage is over, though? Divorce or death, they both bring pain, and they both bring challenges. Some of the challenges will be strangely similar, and some will be very different indeed.

And it's further complicated in the case of divorce, because - although this is a very tricky area when it comes to individual circumstances, and even the basic principles to work by are not as clear as I'd like -

But it seems to me that if we're fair to the Word of God, for some people, after a divorce, re-marriage is not permissible - at least while the ex is still living. But there are circumstances, I think, when a believer can divorce their spouse or be divorced, and where re-marriage *would* be permissible. It's a whole different topic, and I hesitate to say even this much, not wanting to present you with a distraction.

But *faithfulness* kicks in in each of these circumstances. Faithfulness is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

(Galatians 5:22-23)

If your spouse has died, you are not being unfaithful to them by remarrying. You kept your word: *till death do us part*. That's the fact. But the feeling of ... how could I find anyone who could hold a candle to them? ... that I totally understand. You're only *permitted*, but not commanded to re-marry.

If it's following a divorce, then there are really so many potential complications that I don't think I can say much that is very specific now. But for some, if you will remain faithful to Jesus Christ, you will be walking a road that seems very long and very lonely, and that this society - just as we said back at the start - will call you to depart from. Everyone has their needs. Everyone has their *rights!*

But not everyone has Jesus Christ. If your road of faithfulness seems hard and stony, remember *his* road. Remember *his* faithfulness. Remember *his* loneliness.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

(Isaiah 53:3)

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

(John 1:11)

And if the Word of God calls you to a path of faithfulness that is not easy

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ...

(Acts 11:23)

then we need to cling onto the knowledge that it is a path that our Lord himself has also walked along. See the picture of the risen Lord Jesus in Revelation:

... Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

(Revelation 1:5)

“Witness” - or the Greek word there is the root of our word “martyr”. If we are called to faithfulness in marriage, it is because *he* is the faithful one whose example we are to follow.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ...

(Ephesians 5:25)

And remember that Jesus Christ is the visible image of the invisible God,

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ...”

(Exodus 34:6)

And this faithful God is one we can fully, totally, completely depend upon.

For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.

(Psalms 33:4)

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

(Psalms 36:5)

For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

(Psalms 100:5)

And therefore we are called to walk in and cultivate faithfulness:

I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set your rules before me.

(Psalms 119:30)

Even if it is a difficult path, you can rely on the faithfulness of the Faithful One:

For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do.

(Hebrews 6:10)

If ever you need a bit of encouragement, check out that phrase “God is faithful” in the Scriptures:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

(1 Corinthians 10:13)

But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

(2 Thessalonians 3:3)

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

(Hebrews 10:23)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9)

Faithful and just