

The Big Ten: Sacred Marriage
By Jason Huff
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Proverbs 6:20-32; Matthew 5:27-32; Exodus 20:1-17

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is from Exodus 20:1-17. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to follow along with the study guide in your bulletin. Let's listen to the Word of God. "And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. "You shall not murder. "You shall not commit adultery. "You shall not steal. "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.""

I learned about the law of unintended consequences in my church youth group during a high school retreat. One of the awesome things about those retreats were library films – back when you could borrow actual film prints from the local library. Our youth group leader Paul would get these films with no clue what they were about. We'd watch silly stuff like "Bambi Meets Godzilla" and "Old Drye Frye." But one time, Paul picked up a movie called "Kudzu." You ever heard of kudzu? I never had until we watched that movie, a documentary about kudzu.

Kudzu was introduced into the American south from Japan in 1876 as a way to beat the heat. It was used to cover trellises and porches to provide shade. The U.S. government thought kudzu was a wonder plant that would feed livestock and save farmland from drought. That was then. Move to 2014. Nothing in the American ecosystem stops kudzu. It now covers over 7 million acres spreading as far north as Massachusetts and as far west as Texas. It grows a foot a day. It destroys ancient trees and stops hardwoods from rooting. The US loses \$500 million dollars a year due to kudzu...all because people wanted some shade.

The seventh commandment is about many things, but one of them is unintended consequences. Of all the commandments regarding other people, this may be the one most ignored in today's society. It's considered out of date, naïve, simplistic. But God's commandment concerning our intimate relationships has never been more necessary or poignant than it is today. It affects all of us. And we need to know how to talk about it.

Like the sixth commandment before it, the seventh commandment is blunt and short in the Hebrew. A literal translation would be, “Never commit adultery.” “Adultery” is a verb in Hebrew, so it’s really terse. The commandment required fidelity within marriage. Marriage was to be pure and honored. Scripture rarely points to this command as the basis not to commit adultery, though. It usually goes back further to Genesis 2, to the creation of woman out of man. In verse 24, it reads, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

This was the groundwork God set for relationships. The rest of the law goes into detail about the ramifications. Some things surprise us – for example, the law did not prohibit men from having more than one wife. However, every story in Scripture that involves polygamy contains a metric ton of conflict and heartache. God knew we’d want what we’d want, so instead of outlawing it, He showed us through the poor choices of others what a bad idea it was.

But many of the laws go far beyond adultery rigidly defined. The law prohibited all forms of sexual intimacy outside of a marriage between a man and a woman. And for its era, it is surprisingly conscientious towards women. Adultery was considered “the great sin” in other nations because it brought family lineage into question. But in surrounding nations, only the woman was to blame and was punished. In Israel, men were punished for their role in sexual sins, even potentially the death penalty for adultery. A man had to bear the responsibility of his actions -- if he seduced a woman who wasn’t engaged, he had to pay her dowry, even if her father refused to marry his daughter to him. The law made it clear that marriage was created by God and intended by God for our good, and that no other arrangement was blessed by Him.

God also taught that sexual sin was not just a personal thing. In Leviticus 18, following a listing of prohibited sexual sins, God says the nations He was casting out of the land had defiled themselves by acting in these ways. In Leviticus 19, God commands against prostitution, saying the land itself would be defiled and prostituted if they allowed it. Throughout the Old Testament, God likens the Israelites worshipping other gods to adultery. And God condemns the nation of Israel for the sexual sins of its individuals.

By Jesus’ day, the religious leaders had gotten these rules down pat. They strongly condemned prostitutes. Proper religious men did not associate with women at all except their relatives, and even then only out of necessity. But the key issue was still lurking, and Jesus addressed it. Jesus condemns lust as the same thing as adultery. We might think of Jesus’ words about plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand as barbaric and extreme. They were extreme. They were hyperbole. But they point out the truth – we are guilty. Lust is in the mind. Cutting off a hand or an eye wouldn’t fix it. It needs deeper fixing.

The same was true with Jesus’ teaching on divorce. Jesus says divorce was allowed by the law only because of the stubbornness of human hearts, but that divorce caused sin by both parties. The disciples themselves were shocked by Jesus’ teaching on divorce. Jesus wasn’t necessarily setting down a new rule about remarriage; He pointed out that God’s standards are far higher than our own. God’s standard is nothing less than holiness. We fall short of it time and again, especially when it comes to sexual sin.

All this makes us ask: why? Why is this God's standard? Why does God care what happens in our bedrooms? He cares because He made us for marriage. He made us able to become one flesh with another person. Nothing else works like He intended. This is where unintended consequences come into it, both good and bad. There are a lot of good unintended consequences from Christian marriage. Usually when we get married, we are still young and idealistic; we don't know what we're getting into. We can't understand all the consequences. But if we are committed to honoring God in our marriages by showing self-sacrificing love to the other person, which is the center of Christian marriage, all sorts of good things happen.

For one, when we truly mean our vows, we can share ourselves without fear. If we truly mean "until death do us part," then we can put aside our fears of rejection. We can put aside shame. We can share things we can't share with anyone else because the other person is committed to us and to our well-being, just as we are committed to them and their well-being. We not only can have children, but we can model what it means to love and care and discipline in a good and godly way. When we stay true to our vows, we learn about real sacrifice and real heroism, and so do the people around us. We begin to believe God's promise to us, "never will I leave you, never will I forsake you," because we've seen it modeled by godly people around us.

A good Christian marriage has all sorts of unintentional consequences, all of which point us to a loving God who takes broken people and makes them whole, a caring God who made us for real relationship, a gracious God who in marriage shows us that sexuality and intimacy and relationship and children and family are created for our enjoyment and pleasure and fulfillment of some of our most basic longings. And most important, we find that marriage is sacred. It is blessed by God. Time and again in Scripture, God uses marriage to illustrate His relationship with His people – first to Israel and then to the church. We are His bride who through Jesus Christ He has washed and is perfecting, to be ready for the day when we meet Him face to face.

So all those are good. But what's the harm from not following this command? Just as a strong Christian marriage has good unintentional consequences, the fallout from disobeying God's ways are just as unintentional and just as lasting. 64 percent of children are now born out of wedlock; at least a third of those are never in a home with their biological father. Many of those children in that third will be raised at or near the poverty line. The Centers for Disease Control reports that over 50% of Americans will get a sexually transmitted disease in their lifetimes. Of current youth, one in four teens will get an STD while still a teenager; half will have one by the age of 25. The direct cost of treatment for STDs in America is \$16 billion/yr.

And it gets far worse than that. Pornography brings in \$13 billion yearly in America, more than the \$10.8 billion the motion picture industry makes at the box office. Pornography use makes the likelihood of adultery go up over 300%. Its use is a major cause of depression in teenagers. It leads to a loss of productivity in workplaces of \$16.8 billion a year. It causes genuine addiction in both men and women who lose jobs, families, and mental health over it. The desire for fantasy has led to a growing sex trade around the world, and low estimates say 17 million people around the world are trafficked in sexual slavery. Just like the kudzu that keeps on growing no matter what you do to stop it, sexual sin grows until it has a stranglehold. Our culture's pursuit of sexual fulfillment outside of traditional marriage has sold many in our society into bondage and addiction and despair. Just researching the statistics this week broke my heart.

It's a big issue; what can we possibly do about it? How can we honor the seventh commandment and break the cycle of unintended consequences? We have two calls – a call to personal purity and honesty, and a call to care for families and the broken.

The first call is to get our own house in order. It is really difficult to speak truth to someone else when we refuse to live out that truth in our own lives. When Jesus talked about taking out an eye or a hand, He was teaching us obedience. You do what you have to do to be obedient. For Christians, the first step towards obedience is turning it all over to God. We are broken. We don't have it all together. We have sinned in this area, whether we've done the worst of the worst or we've just fantasized. We need for Him to heal us. We can't obey until we're healed. Healing comes when we acknowledge we're sick and in need of God's touch. When that happens, the rest can follow.

The second step of obedience is removing those things that tempt us or drive us to sin. It really doesn't matter what they are; we've got to get rid of them. If there are obvious things like pornography, then of course, we get rid of that. If you need a filter for the computer, get one. It's worth the cost.

But there are other temptations that many of us don't acknowledge. If you are tempted by unwholesome romance novels that make you think your marriage is unfulfilling, ditch them. If you find yourself lustfully attracted to someone at work, stay away from anything beyond work with that person, even if that means losing a promotion or appearing distant. Your marriage, your relationship with your spouse and your relationship with God, are more important than whatever jeopardizes them. I know that's a hard word for all of us. We might find it silly. What harm is there in a book or a movie or a TV show, a harmless flirtation at work, a little fantasy here and there? It's all in the unintended consequences.

And that's where honesty comes in. Marriage is hard. The very best marriages are still very hard. It's tough work, even when it's great. It's getting your spouse when they're grumpy after a hard 10-hour day. It's diapers and dishes and school plays far more often than dates and kisses and romance and intimacy. It's having to cook when you want to go out for dinner and repairing the cars instead of taking the cruise. It's saying "no" and disciplining the kids when they need it. It's making time for your children long after they become adults. For many of us, it will be taking care of our spouse when their body fails before ours does. It's messy and it's tough and it is not a fantasy. It's not about being easy. It's not even about being happy.

It's about being joined together as one by God, and loving each other even when you really don't like each other because God has brought you together. Nobody gets a smooth ride. But it is good. It is good for us when we love someone else in spite of ourselves because that's the way God loves us in Jesus Christ. It is good for us to learn to love without regard for ourselves because it makes us more like our Savior. It is good for us *because* it is hard. God works through the hardness of it to change us.

Let's also be honest with ourselves that our choices make a difference. Our kids and grandkids, the children in the church, they learn from us. They aren't dumb. Whether he says a word or not, the 16-year-old grandson's decision how to treat the young women he dates changes if the Grandpa he respects is a man of integrity or shacks up again and again. They notice if we steer clear of trashy stuff or entertain it. It is never too late to become a person of personal purity. The decisions might be difficult – to figure out how to get married, to end a relationship that isn't leading to marriage rather than enjoying the physical pleasure of sin for a time – but they honor the God we serve. If that's you, let's talk some time as you are comfortable and we'll work together to steer towards integrity.

If our first call is to personal purity, the second call is to care for families and the broken among us. The only way we are going to earn the right to speak into others' lives about marriage and family is to back up our thoughts with action. It is ridiculous for us to tell others how God wants them to live their lives without lifting a finger to help them actually do it. We are not simply individuals in singular pursuits of God. We are a community of faith journeying together, and as we journey, we help each other out.

How are we going to support families that are trying to make it in today's culture that says that marriage is where dreams and intimacy go to die? How about helping parents find time for God and each other? What would it be to offer to take care of kids during our Bible studies? A movie night for adults? What might it be to see if parents in the congregation need someone to watch their kids so they could go on a date once in a while to recharge and reconnect? Maybe it's making sure your own children with children can do that too. For those of us who are parents, maybe it's making a deal with another family to watch somebody else's kids once a month and trading off with that family so that mom and dad get a chance to be home alone. It doesn't have to look any particular way, but what will we sacrifice to show that family matters? We've got to put our faith into action here – otherwise, it's worthless.

It works in other ways too. What happens if a widow wants to remarry and honor God but can't figure out how to do it financially? Do we just say, "You ought to get married?" Or do we work with them to help? How do we get them in touch with an attorney who can figure out pensions and retirement accounts and whatnot to make it happen? If it is a financial burden, how do we help lessen that burden so that they can honor God by getting married? We must start thinking about it as a community.

And for those who are outside the church, outside the faith...the solution is not just to say, "Stop living together or get married." Unbelievers who don't believe in Jesus Christ and what He said about these issues aren't going to listen to us any more than I'm going to listen to a Hare Krishna. Most Millennials have never heard God's Word about relationships. And you know what? Divorce rates among nominal Christians, people who say they believe in Jesus but only come to church once or twice a month, don't have a strong prayer life, don't have a deep faith, they're more likely to divorce than atheists. Marriage alone without God at the center of it isn't the answer.

Instead of preaching at them or condemning them, invite them to church and talk to them about your faith. Help them find out that Jesus is real, that faith is real, that there is a loving God who is near if they will approach Him. They need to wrestle with the living God themselves once they've encountered Him. Scripture doesn't show us sinners getting cleaned up and coming to Jesus. They encounter Jesus and they're changed by the encounter. Let's set up the invitation and see where God leads them as He makes them aware of His will for their lives and the promises that come from obedience to Him. We can pray that God will show them the sacredness of marriage and help them grow into wanting a marriage that honors God.

Like all the commandments, we see we're just scratching the surface. But God made marriage; He made the family; He made sex; He made them all good. His command is good. As we obey God and His seventh word to us, we're doing far more than rejecting our culture's "anything goes" attitude towards intimacy. Instead, we're embracing the incredible goodness of marriage, how it is meant to be a blessing to us, and how it points us to the love God has for His people, His bride, which He has washed white with the blood of Christ so we will be spotless for Him throughout eternity.