

The Christian Life (12): The Seventh Commandment

The seventh commandment concerns the sanctity of sexuality. "The purpose of this commandment is to confirm chastity inside and outside of marriage" (Udemans).¹ "The seventh commandment requires the preservation of our own and our neighbor's chastity, in heart, speech, and behavior."²

The seventh commandment requires: (1) chastity, and a preservation of it in ourselves and others; in or out of a state of wedlock; and to abstain from all impurity of flesh and spirit; and to make use of all means to preserve it; as lawful marriage, conjugal love, and cohabitation; (2) It forbids all the species of uncleanness; not only adultery, but simple fornication, rape, incest, and all unnatural lusts; (3) It forbids all unchaste thoughts and desires, all adulterous looks, obscene words, and filthy actions.³

I. The Seventh Commandment popular

1. *Sins forbidden*. "The seventh commandment forbids all unchaste thoughts, words, and actions."⁴ "Since both our body and soul are a temple of the Holy Spirit, it is His will that we keep both pure and holy. Therefore He forbids all unchaste actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires, and whatever may excite another person to them."⁵ The seventh commandment forbids all sexual uncleanness within and without marriage. "In this short abbeviat of the law of God, where one sin is expressly condemned, under it are forbidden all sins of the same kind. So here the whole dunghill of filthiness is set before us for our abhorrence, and detestation of our souls" (Boston).⁶ "When God singles our adultery as the most shocking and debasing vice of all the sins which are repugnant to chastity, He at the same time prohibits and condemns all wandering and wanton lusts, whether they be found in married or unmarried persons, and prohibits all other sins and vices contrary to chastity, together with their causes, occasions, effects, antecedents, consequents" (Ursinus).⁷

(1) Lust. "Do not lust after her beauty in your heart, nor let her allure you with her eyelids" (Prov.6:25). "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt.5:27-28). "The commandment not only forbids all acts of uncleanness, but also the desire of them. The Pharisees made it extend no farther than to the outward and physical act, supposing that if the iniquity was restricted to the mind, God would be indifferent. Yet, our Lord here declared that the seventh commandment is broken even by a secret though unexpressed desire. There is, then, such a thing as *heart adultery*. Impure thoughts and wanton imaginations which never issue in the culminating act are breaches of the Divine Law. All lusting after the forbidden object is condemned" (Pink).⁸ "Unchaste lusts and thoughts are those which, upon arising at certain occasions, are retained and reflected upon. This also applies if a specific occasion is not the initial cause, but you stir up your own lusts by creating images in your fantasy, mentally reflect upon past fornication, or fantasize about given situations (of

¹ Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 358

² Shorter Catechism, Q.71

³ John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 993

⁴ Shorter Catechism, Q.72

⁵ Heidelberg Catechism, Q.109

⁶ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:281

⁷ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 589-590

⁸ A.W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 81-82

which one knows that they will not come to pass) in consequence of which fornication issues forth" (Brakel).⁹

Let no man flatter himself with the idea that he cannot be charged with unchastity because he has abstained from the actual deed while his heart is a cesspool of defiling imaginations and desires. Because God's Law is "spiritual" (Rom.7:14) it not only forbids the gross outward acts of filthiness, but it prohibits and condemns unchastity of heart as well—all unlawful imaginations and contemplations. As there is such a thing as heart murder, so there is *heart adultery*, and he who commits speculative uncleanness and prostitutes his thoughts and imaginations to the impure embraces of lust is guilty of transgressing this commandment. Therefore we find the Apostle did not content himself with saying that it is better for a man to marry than pollute himself with a harlot, but "it is better to marry than to *burn*" (1Cor.7:9)—that is, harbor consuming passion.¹⁰

(2) Fornication. "This commandment forbids the uncleanness of fornication. Which, properly, is the sin committed betwixt two single persons" (Hopkins).¹¹ "Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication" (Gal.5:19). "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders (6th), adulteries (7th), fornications (7th), thefts (8th), false witness (9th)" (Matt.15:19). "Fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb.13:4). "The apostle marks its seriousness because he who commits fornication makes his body one with another, sins against his own body, profanes a temple of the Holy Spirit and pollutes a vessel of grace" (Turretin).¹² "Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body" (1Cor.6:18). Thus, it's proper to view sexual immorality as an especially heinous sin, as "it defiles the body with a peculiar type of filthiness."

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The greatness and heinous nature of this sin appears: (1) In that it is a sin, which murders two souls at once; and, therefore, the most uncharitable sin in the world. Other sinners can perish singly. The swearer damns none by his oaths but himself. The drunkard with his intemperance drowns but his own soul in perdition. Only this sin of fornication necessarily requires partnership and involves another in the same condemnation. (2) This is the most degrading sin of all others. It debases a man from the excellency of his nature and resembles him to the condition of brute beasts. So far does this beastly sin besot the mind and befool men, that, according to the chaste and modest phrase of Scripture language, it is frequently called *committing folly*, as if there were no folly like to this, and it alone deserved to carry away the name and title from all other sins. (3) This sin is justly the most infamous and scandalous amongst men. A sin that brands them with the greatest shame and reproach; a reproach which can never be wiped away. *Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding: he who does so destroys his own soul. Wounds and dishonor he will get, and his reproach will not be wiped away* (Prov.6:32-33). (4) It is a sin against the body. What saith the Apostle in 1Cor.6:19? *Know you not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?* And if it were a blasphemous impiety to turn the Temple of God, which consisted only of vile materials, wood and stone, to vile

⁹ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:208-209

¹⁰ A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 37

¹¹ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:483

¹² Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:120

¹³ Notes from Geneva Bible, 1Cor.6:18

and inferior uses; how much more heinous wickedness is it, to convert the living temples of the Everliving God, even our bodies, which were redeemed and consecrated unto God by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, unto impure and unclean uses, and to turn His sanctuary into a brothel.¹⁴

(3) Adultery. "Adultery occurs when a married man or woman has a relationship with another person – either married or unmarried. If this sin is committed by two married persons, then there is double adultery. If it is committed by a married and an unmarried person, there is single adultery. Not only does the married person commit adultery, but also the unmarried person" (Brakel).¹⁵ "This is even more serious than fornication. This is seen in that under the law of Moses fornication was not punished with death, but adultery was. 'If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die' (Deut.22:22)" (Williamson).¹⁶ Adultery can take place by looks, words, and actions. This means, the way we look at our spouse, speak to our spouse, and act toward our spouse is to be reserved solely for our spouse. "A bishop must be...the husband of one wife (lit – 'a one-woman man)" (1Tim.3:2). (a) Looks. "Unchaste gestures are committed first of all with the eyes; that is, when by way of observation one stirs up and stimulates his own filthy lusts. Peter speaks of 'eyes full of adultery' (2Pet.2:14). One also commits fornication with the eyes if, by gazing or casting lewd glances, one seeks to allure others to commit fornication/adultery" (Brakel).¹⁷ "Do not lust after her beauty in your heart, nor let her allure you with her eyelids" (Prov.6:25). Thus, the LORD described Ezekiel's wife as "the desire of your eyes" (Ezek.24:16). (b) Words. "For the lips of an immoral woman drip honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil" (Prov.5:3). "With her enticing speech she caused him to yield, with her flattering lips she seduced him" (Prov.7:21; 7:10-20; 9:13-18). (c) Actions. "You shall not lie carnally with your neighbor's wife, to defile yourself with her" (Lev.18:20). While actions are more serious than looks and words, these latter two often precede the former, and without true repentance, often lead to it. "The aggravations of this heinous sin are three: it is a breach of the marriage oath (Mal.2:14); it involves two at once in the same guilt (1Cor.6:16); and it is a crime committed after obtaining the remedy which God has provided against it (1Cor.7:2)" (Fisher).¹⁸

There are gestures and words which are a type of adultery in God's sight. Whenever a man and a woman associate with each other in such a way as to invite room for Satan and lose their shyness toward each other to the end that they especially become entangled in his traps, and abandon themselves in servitude to him, that is adultery in God's sight. For although there may be nothing in effect, nor any conclusive action taken, in any event God will not let such things rest unpunished, for they have attempted it too blatantly.¹⁹

(4) Sodomy. "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination" (Lev.20:22). "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites" (1Cor.6:9-10). "The law is not made for a righteous person...but for murderer of fathers and mothers (5th), for manslayers (6th), for fornicators and sodomites (7th), for kidnappers (8th), for liars and perjurers (9th)" (1Tim.1:9-10). Thus, while all sin is heinous, not all sins are equally heinous. The sin of sodomy is doubly heinous as it's a sin against

¹⁴ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:485-488

¹⁵ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:206

¹⁶ G.I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, 2:62

¹⁷ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:208

¹⁸ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 326

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Ten Commandments*, 176

the law and nature. "For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due" (Rom. 1:26-27).

(5) Polygamy. This refers to having more than one spouse at the same time. (a) God created one man and one woman. "As only a single pair was created, it appears to have been the intention of their Maker that a man should have only one wife, and a wife only one husband. In this manner Malachi explains the fact, when he says, 'And did not He make one?' namely, one woman. 'And wherefore one? That He might seek a godly seed' (Mal. 2:15)" (Dick).²⁰ (b) Polygamy is nowhere commanded or commended. "Lamech, of the posterity of Cain, was the first polygamist we read of in Scripture (Gen. 4:19). It's true several of the godly likewise were guilty in this matter, but though these and other bad actions of good men are recorded in Scripture, they are not approved of, nor proposed for our imitation; but rather set up as beacons, to prevent our making shipwreck on the same rocks" (Fisher).²¹ (c) The New Testament expressly forbids polygamy. "Polygamy was unlawful in the beginning; even then, when the necessity of increasing the world might seem to plead for it: and how much more unlawful now, when that necessity is ceased! Besides this, the Apostle has commanded, 1 Cor. 7:2, *Let every man have his own wife, and every woman her own husband*" (Hopkins).²²

(6) Desertion. This refers to any unlawful divorce. Outside of adultery (Matt. 5:31-32) and abandonment (1 Cor. 7:15), marriage is binding until death. "Marriage is not a temporary contract but a union of a man and a woman for life. They are bound to adhere to each other during the term of their natural lives, and neither of them is at liberty to enter into a new engagement, without an offence against the law both of God and man" (Dick).²³ Thus, those who unlawfully divorce and remarry are guilty of adultery. "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery" (Matt. 19:9). Both of these phrases "whoever divorces his wife (unlawfully)...and marries another, commits adultery" and "whoever marries her who is divorced (unlawfully) commits adultery, refer to the guilty party in the divorce. Innocent parties can lawfully remarry. "It is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and after the divorce, to marry another as if the offending party were dead" (WCF).²⁴

2. *Duties enjoined.* Like the other commandments, the seventh commandment isn't merely negative (do not) but positive (do). And similar to the negative aspect of this commandment, the positive concerns our behavior as single and married. If a person evidently lacks the gift of celibacy, they have the obligation, within the bounds of prudence and governed by divine providence, to pursue marriage. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:1-2).. "The seventh commandment enjoins the sincere endeavor to keep oneself pure in body and spirit, outside and within matrimony" (Udemans).²⁵ And thus, the seventh commandment enjoins contentment in singleness and faithfulness in marriage. Content while single and faithful when married.

²⁰ John Dick, *Lectures in Theology*, 4:473

²¹ James Fisher, *Exposition of the Shorter Catechism*, 324

²² Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:484

²³ John Dick, *Lectures in Theology*, 4:473

²⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith, 24:6

²⁵ Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 409

(1) Contentment in singleness. People are single for one of three reasons: they are widowed, they are waiting (looking), and they are gifted. With respect to the third, God has uniquely gifted them for singleness. "There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it" (Matt.19:12). "For I wish that all men were even as I myself (single). But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that" (1Cor.7:7). But with reference to the first two, it's ordinarily the Lord's will for them to marry/remarry. "But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry" (1Cor.7:8-9). "Therefore I desire that the younger widows marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully" (1Tim.5:14). And yet, while such people await marriage, they must not only remain pure but content.

We do not condemn celibacy (as the papists say), however, for we acknowledge that celibacy has some benefits: it helps single people focus on the task of serving God, and some ministries are easier to do while single rather than married. We commend people who are truly celibate of soul and body, and remain so, but we do not regard celibacy as preferable to marriage. If it were so, the patriarchs, prophets, and priests of the Old Testament, would have been less equipped to serve the church than monks or other unmarried people. It is preposterous to think that is so (Udemans).²⁶

(2) Faithfulness in marriage. As with the other commandments, it's not enough to merely comply with the prohibition (you shall not commit adultery), but there's the implied positive (the promotion of a healthy marriage). "God in this commandment enjoins and sanctions the preservation of chastity and marriage, and hence authorizes marriage itself; for whenever God forbids anything, He at the same time commands and authorizes the observance of that which is opposite thereto. God, now, in this commandment forbids adultery, which is a violation of conjugal fidelity" (Ursinus).²⁷ "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb.13:4). "It is not having a wife, but loving a wife, that makes a man live chastely. He who loves his wife, whom Solomon calls his fountain, will not go abroad to drink of muddy, poisoned waters. Pure conjugal love is a gift of God and comes from heaven" (Watson).²⁸ "Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1Cor.7:3-5). "In marriage there is mutual promise of living together faithfully according to God's holy ordinance. Among the Romans, on the day of marriage, the woman presented to her husband fire and water: signifying that as fire refines, and water cleanses, she would live with her husband in chastity and sincerity" (Watson).²⁹ "Because lawful intimacy (found in virtuous union) is a remedy for the irregular lusts and illicit intimacy forbidden by this precept, the lawful use of marriage instituted by God is enjoined in those who are unwilling or unable to contain themselves in a single condition" (Turretin).³⁰

Married persons may break this command, if they do not possess and enjoy one another in holiness and honor (1Thess.4:4-5), and do not give to one another all *due benevolence*

²⁶ Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, 383

²⁷ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 589

²⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 160-161

²⁹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 153

³⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:123

. Thus men do sin in the defect, by not cohabiting, by withdrawing without consent one from another, and by proving a snare one to another. The apostle calls it (1Cor.7:5), *defrauding* of one another; and many pieces of unkindness amongst married person, unbecoming the honor and respect that the one should have to the other, may be here comprehended.³¹

This Lord in this commandment requires purity of heart (1Thess.4:5); and he also requires speeches savoring of sobriety and chastity (Col.4:6); and He also requires that we keep our eyes from beholding vanity and lustful objects (Ps.119:37); Job 31:1); and He also requires that we possess our vessels in holiness and honor (1Thess.4:9); and if we have not the gift of chastity, He requires that we take the benefit of holy marriage (1Cor.7:29); and that the man and wife do in that estate render due benevolence towards each other (1Cor.7:5).³²

This precept addresses married persons in the first instance and forbids the violation of the fidelity which they pledged to each other when they entered into the conjugal relation. It requires mutual affection, cohabitation, the faithful performance of their duty, the avoidance of all temptations to sin, and of all means leading to it, and such care of one another as shall prove effectual, through the blessing of God, to preserve them pure and blameless.³³

And when a man, having prayed to God and cast himself upon Him, sees that he cannot refrain, let him take a wife in order not to lead an immoral life, or behave like a dog, or a bull, or some wild beast. Thus when he marries, as ordained by God, that is how vice is covered, and hidden, and not brought into judgment. And herein we see the inestimable goodness of our God, that although He leaves this vice in us, which indeed ought to make us feel ashamed, He nevertheless ordains a helpful means by which it may be overcome. The mantle of marriage exists to sanctify what is defiled and profane: it serves to cleanse what used to be soiled and dirty in itself. Therefore when we see that our Lord is that benevolent and has ordained such a remedy, are we not that much more malicious and ungrateful if we do not use it and if all the excuses which men put forth are not rejected?³⁴

³¹ James Durham, *Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 328-329

³² Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity, The Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, 7:431

³³ John Dick, *Lectures in Theology*, 4:474-475

³⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 179-180