

CHAPTER 10
You Shall Not Commit Adultery
promoting purity in your family

Introduction

The western cultures have become visual cultures. Images are constantly put before people, through the Internet, television, or even billboards on the side of the highway. The presence of images is not a problem, in and of itself. However, the kinds of images often displayed in these different media sources is often inappropriate for adults, let alone for young children. In today's sexualized culture parents need to be paying special attention to the seventh commandment: "You shall not commit adultery."¹ Even if children did not grow up in this day of hyper sexualized advertising, there would be a temptation to break the seventh commandment. So parents must work to prepare their children to address the various temptations that are sure to come their way. They can do so by helping them understand what this commandment means and by giving them some guidelines to practice even at a very young age.

¹ Exodus 20:14 (ESV).

Adultery in the Bible

In the Old Testament there are many instances of the word that is translated “adultery” in the Ten Commandments. These uses teach a broader understanding of what the Old Testament means by the word “adultery.” The definition of this word is not narrowly reserved for sexual unfaithfulness within the context of marriage. That is not to say this kind of sexual unfaithfulness is not part of what is in view in this commandment. For example, in Leviticus 20:10, where the Moses records the laws regarding sexual immorality, he begins with the act of adultery between a man and the wife of his neighbor. In Israel’s civil laws this sin was a capital crime. Both the man and the woman were to be put to death.² What is informative is that in Deuteronomy 22:23, the same penalty and principle is applied to one who lies with the betrothed of another. In those verses, something that today is considered fornication is an application of the commandment dealing with adultery. The reason for the death penalty being levied against the betrothed virgin and the usurping man is that he has violated the wife of his neighbor. So there once again is a broader application of the Moral Law. Outside the narrow consideration of marriage similar implications are also drawn for a betrothal. A narrow reading of adultery is already challenged in the Pentateuch, but Jesus does much more to expand the scope of this commandment in the Sermon on the Mount.

In the three chapters that cover the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spends much time addressing the folly of only attending to the outward compliance of the Law without understanding the underlying motive which must be honored too. As has been shown in chapter 9, when Jesus deals with murder he broadens the scope of that commandment to harboring anger in the heart. Likewise, when dealing with adultery, Jesus broadens the commandment to include lustful thoughts. “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.”³ These words turn adultery from exclusively a physical act into something that is found first in thoughts and motivations. Jesus broadens the application of this law to include the sins of the heart.

Good and Necessary Consequence

As Christian pastors and teachers have considered the implications of the Moral Law, one of the most comprehensive ethical treatments of the commandments comes to us through the *Westminster Larger Catechism*. Its treatment of the seventh commandment comes in questions and answers 137-

² Deuteronomy 22:22 says, “If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.”

³ Matthew 5:27-28.

139. When the positive requirements of the law are listed in the *Larger Catechism* the catalogue is exhaustive:

The duties required in the seventh commandment are, chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior; and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, modesty in apparel; marriage by those that have not the gift of continency, conjugal love, and cohabitation; diligent labor in our callings; shunning all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations thereunto.⁴

What the catechism is pointing toward is an approach to obedience that encompasses thoughts, words and actions. The catechism begins by echoing the biblical call to chastity, or refraining from sexual activity. What may be surprising is that people are not only called to this chastity in action. The Christian is called to chastity in his thoughts to distinguish himself from the actions of the Gentiles and their passion of lust.⁵ He is called to chastity in his words to ensure his speech builds his neighbor up.⁶ The Christian is called to chastity in behavior through Peter's words to women who are married to an unbeliever. Peter urges them to live so purely that their conduct wins over their unbelieving husbands.⁷ His words are addressed to a specific audience but can certainly be applied to all Christians. When Christians live according to the chastity described in these passages and listed in the catechism, God is honored in their lives. However, there are also things forbidden in the seventh commandment.

When the *Larger Catechism* deals with the prohibitions they range from a straight-forward command against committing adultery even to suggestive looks, immodest dress, desertion in marriage, and sexually explicit songs, books, dancing and other such behavior.⁸ It is not only the English Puritans who applied God's commandments so broadly. The *Heidelberg Catechism*, although not as detailed, contains the same basic understanding. When asked if the seventh commandment only pertains to adultery, the writers of this catechism said:

Since both our body and soul are temples of the holy Ghost, he commands us to preserve them pure and holy: therefore he forbids all unchaste actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires, and whatever can entice men thereto.⁹

According to the *Heidelberg*, the positive force behind the commandment is unmistakable, dealing even with thoughts, eyes, and intentions. There is a consistent understanding of the application of

⁴ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q/A 138.

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 (ESV).

⁶ Ephesians 4:29 (ESV).

⁷ 1 Peter 3:2 (ESV).

⁸ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q/A 139.

⁹ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q/A 9

God's law in historic reformed theology. Knowing what the limits are helps parents see what must be addressed in their families.

What Will This Look Like in My Family?

Like in any other aspect of sanctification, it is so much easier to recognize the weaknesses of others. However, Christian parents are called to recognize their own sin first. Once they understand where they have gone wrong they can go about the business of teaching their children what they have learned for themselves. Jesus taught that very same order of living through the image of the beam and the speck in a man's eye.¹⁰ When faced with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees Jesus tells them they ought to be focusing on that which is more pressing: their own sin. In the Christian, there is a beam of sin in their own eye, but it is easier to fuss about the speck of dust in a brother's eye. If this truth applies to relationships outside the homes, how much more with those who are immediate family.

The first step of parents is to diligently work at putting to death the sin that is in their hearts. The more they work at living faithfully to God, the better example they will set for their children. Parents must have an awareness of their own sin, and a desire to turn away from it. No child will desire to follow a self-righteous parent. Choices in language, entertainment, music, humor, even how to relate to people of the opposite sex will impact parents' credibility when they try to teach their children to live purely in an age that is almost obsessively sexual. For that reason it is important that especially fathers are diligent to strive toward obedience. Once the tone is set at home through parental example, the important work of protecting the little ones from the temptations of this world can begin.

As sad as it might be, today perhaps more than any other, there is a need to protect Christian homes from temptations to break the seventh commandment. The reason for this increased need for diligence does not flow from an increase in depravity in the human race. Scripture records the behavior of the Sodomites in Genesis 19. There it is clear that sexual promiscuity and deviation is not unique to the modern age. What has changed is how easy it is to access material that violate the seventh commandment. The advent of satellite television, specialty cable channels and the Internet have made sexual immorality a commodity that can be easily found and all in the privacy of the home. The steady stream of unchaste images that could come into Christian homes as a result of modern mediums require that special care must be taken. Parents must be diligent about what they permit to pass across their own and their children's eyes. There is true heartache when the mind of a parent is overwhelmed by this sin, or the loss of innocence in children exposed to moral filth. Parents must be pro-active and careful in this regard.

¹⁰ Matthew 7:3-5.

One problem that arises immediately in considering modern media is that the Bible does not address them directly. Questions about what is allowed and what is not are not directly addressed in the Bible. Electricity, televisions and the Internet were not available, so Scripture does not specifically define how to apply God’s word to entertainment. So parents have to work through the teachings of Scripture on the seventh commandment and make wise applications.

Though Scripture may be silent on modern mediums of entertainment, there are instructions in the word of God as to how thoughts should be limited to conform to the seventh commandment. More than that, the Bible presents the positive commandments of how we are to live in the presence of God. Christians are given commands about the kinds of things that they *should* think about. The apostle Paul does so when he says, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”¹¹ Among this catalogue of virtues are listed truth, purity and honor. These qualities form the opposite virtues to the sins behind adultery, namely lust and impurity. By studying these traits parents will be equipping themselves to discern what may be inappropriate when it comes to entertainment.

Truth

The Bible defines the concept of truth on several levels. On the one hand, the Bible teaches the source of all truth. God is the only one who communicates absolute truth. God is described as the one who speaks truth to his people: “I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain.’ I the Lord speak the truth; I declare what is right.”¹² Parents can have great confidence that our God speaks the truth to them. In fact, the Bible teaches that God is incapable of speaking anything other than the truth: “So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.”¹³ It is not possible for God to lie. God is the only paradigm for truth. In addition, John 14:6 describes Jesus as the truth. It is part of his nature. On the other hand, Scripture also gives a clear definition of how the truth should be applied.

In addressing the returned exiles, God tells Israel how they are to live in light of the renewed blessing He has brought upon Israel: “These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to

¹¹ Philippians 4:7-8 (ESV).

¹² Isaiah 45:19 (ESV).

¹³ Hebrews 6:17-18 (ESV).

one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace;”¹⁴ Truth-telling is an essential component of obedience for the returned exiles. Moreover, Proverbs describes specifically what truth telling involves: “Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.”¹⁵ Truth is described as honest evidence and the opposite is deceit. Truth telling means speaking factually and accurately about the world around us without any attempt to mislead the person to whom we are speaking. When it comes to the seventh commandment, truth telling requires calling what is evil, evil. The Christian may not call it good. If God calls the entertainment that is permitted in your home evil, you as a parent are in no place to call it good.

The entertainment parents allow in their homes should be marked with truth. However, much of today’s entertainment calls the foundations of the Christian faith into question, presents a distortion of the truth, and therefore ought not to be permitted unless with qualification parents are using them as a teaching tool. It may be acceptable to watch movies that distort Christianity with older children for the purpose of educating them in the fallacies of the world’s arguments against the Bible. However, if children are allowed indiscriminate access to those kinds of movies parents are allowing a powerful voice to whisper into their children’s hearts: “Did God really say...?” Contrary to what Adam did when Eve was tempted with this phrase, parents should step in and protect their children from those temptations. Not only will the whispers of the evil one come to them with regards to truth but also with regard to foundational structures of relationships.

Honor

When dealing with the idea of honor in Scripture, showing proper respect to whom it is due is in mind. Children are to honor their parents (Exodus 20:12), all people are to honor the aged (Leviticus 19:32), and citizens and sojourners are to honor the civil authorities (1 Peter 2:17). That means Christians are to demonstrate proper deference based on the relationship held with each person. The same is true in the realm of sexuality. God has set aside marriage for physical and sexual intimacy. Whether the individuals are known personally or not, they are dishonored if physical or emotional adultery is committed with them. Not only are the people dishonored, but more significantly, the God who made them is dishonored.

When it comes to honor, the scriptures teach to show proper respect to the different kinds of relationships held, specifically in the realm of sexuality. How many movies have been made about young love, typically called the “coming of age” movies. You know the plot line. The stodgy old parents interfere with the love lives of their children. The parents’ wisdom is thwarted and on screen the fornication of these young people is presented in such a way as to gain the approval of the audi-

¹⁴ Zechariah 8:16 (ESV).

¹⁵ Proverbs 12:17.

ence. When the young man dishonors the young girl through inappropriate advances, or leading her in rebelling against her parents, the movie is skewed in such away that those watching will nod with approval. These kinds of movies teach that fornication is a beautiful expression of teen-age love. God does not agree with them. When movies or television shows teach those kinds of themes we can be assured they should not be in our homes.

Purity

In the Bible purity is achieved by living according to the commandments. In Psalm 119:9, the psalmist asks “How can a young man keep his way pure?” The answer comes back “By guarding it according to your word.” Only in measuring actions by the standards set forward in God’s word is anyone able to determine whether their behavior is pure. No other standard will do. Not only does Scripture teach that man’s heart is deceptive (Jeremiah 17:9), but Proverbs confirms that same idea when it says, “All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit.”¹⁶ Parents must constantly evaluate their thoughts and actions to see whether they align with the word of God. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus’ teaching on adultery showed it is much more than just a physical act. That is where the seventh commandment has applications specifically to entertainment. Parents are not permitted to take a neutral approach to the content that comes into their home because entertainment may be causing parents and children alike to commit adultery in their hearts. But Christians are not to commit adultery with their eyes. Instead they are to demonstrate their love for God by honoring his commandments.

Other movies or television shows are still more blatant in their promotion of sin against the seventh commandment. Movies that depict new-found love are commonplace. However, often this newfound love is found in illicit relationships. Often what is displayed on the screen in these movies is grossly sexual and therefore inappropriate. These depictions run contrary to the seventh commandment and by watching the actors themselves are compromised morally by their participation in the project, and actually dishonor another person made in God’s image.

Truth, honor, and purity help filter through what is acceptable content allowed in the home. By reflecting on and promoting these traits, parents will guard themselves against demonizing all uses of movies, Internet and television, while realizing at the same time that where they do not align themselves to the Scriptures God’s righteous standard is compromised and sinned against. This chapter considers the “big three”: movies, the Internet and television with a view of considering the safeguards that must be utilized to restrain sin in our homes.

¹⁶ Proverbs 16:2.

Entertainment in Christian Homes

There are appropriate uses for movies, Internet and television. Families will all have somewhat different applications as to what they will and will not allow. There will not be uniformity about which shows will be allowed between different Christian homes, and neither is such conformity necessary. However, there are principles that should be applied with wisdom by all Christians to determine if material is appropriate in the home. Parents must particularly consider what they watch or allow to be watched, because it is a prime vehicle for adultery to make a surprise appearance in their homes.

Movies and Television

It is not uncommon to hear people scoff at the Utopian view that can be held of earlier times. The notion that somehow the 1950s in the United States was the pinnacle of moral behavior in a culture is not accurate, to be sure. However, when considering the content, both in theme and imagery, of the popular movies of that era and compare them to what passes as entertainment today the dramatic down-turn in morality can easily be seen. There was no nudity and little to no profanity in the movies of that era, whereas today it seems the approach of the film makers is to add as much as possible of both. There is discernment needed by parents to protect children from the temptations to sin against the seventh commandment in today's movies.

Through complacency parents can fail to use tools that are available in the protection of their children. The rating system of the film industry does make anticipating inappropriate movies simple, especially when it comes to the issue of purity. If parents see the disclaimer that there is sensuality, nudity or other sexual content in a movie there is no need to even crack the case open. Why would parents knowingly allow their family to be tempted to adultery? If this kind of warning makes it onto the ratings report, the makers of the movie intended specific scenes to provoke a response out of accord with the seventh commandment. Allowing children to watch these movies exposes them to sin against the seventh commandment. Parents ought never to give their children the impression that it is acceptable to break this commandment, even if only for a few brief glances. Television and movies certainly present their challenges, but where TV creates problems, the Internet does so in exponentially more ways.

Internet

So often, the Internet is heralded as a great innovation that has made life more convenient. Information is instantly accessible. Knowledge can be shared quickly and easily. These observations are certainly valid in a broad range of scenarios. However, one area where the introduction of the Internet has increased the challenge to parents is in the realm of honoring and obeying God's seventh

commandment. Through the Internet a child's innocence can be ruined forever in the span of two seconds. Curiosity in the sexual realm is much more easily satisfied now than ever before. Not only is there ease in access, but the material that can be accessed is such that it can instantly shatter your son or daughter's world. That means parents need to be proactive and diligent in safeguarding their children. Some issues will be resolved with common sense. For example, parents should not allow our children to have computers or electronic devices in their rooms. The temptation is too great. Parents would shudder at the thought of taking a loaded gun and making it part of their children's toy basket. Television and computer access should be viewed in much the same way. Password protected computers in public areas of the house are a good starting precaution that all can implement and diligently enforce. However, that should only be the start. There are software solutions that take away the ease with which the seventh commandment can be broken. Without mentioning any specific companies or products there is software that will monitor all Internet activity and send reports to specified accountability partners. There are also software programs that limit content access. Err on the side of caution in implementing these restraints and monitors.

Promoting the Good

So far this discussion has centered around restraints in the area of entertainment that should be instituted in Christian families. The points discussed deal with self-control structures that parents could use to protect their homes. However, there is also a positive action that Christians can take when it comes to applying the seventh commandment in the family. These actions extend beyond entertainment and into how male and female present themselves and view each other, especially within a Christian context.

Modesty

As Christians conform their behavior by the word of God they are to put to death any sin that dwells in them (Colossians 3:5-10). When it comes to the seventh commandment, adultery and its accompanying sins are in the bull's-eye of the Spirit's mortifying work.

Christian daughters should be taught to dress modestly. This statement in itself can be problematic because different people assume different standards of modesty. The topic is emotionally charged and often leads to people accusing their opponent of the worst of motives. Although prone to misunderstanding, it is still necessary and helpful for Christian parents to work through some basic principles found in the Bible that deal with modest living. In 1 Timothy 2:8-11 Paul paints a picture of modesty that points out the beauty of a woman ought not come from her outward adornment, but rather from a spirit that honors God in her thoughts, words and actions.

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works.

From these verses immodesty is equated with seeking to glorify self rather than Christ. That distinction can be used as a criteria when it comes to assessing decisions in fashion at home.

A simple test can be applied in determining appropriate dress. Parents can encourage a study into the goals of the people who are designing clothes. I do not mean trying to guess what is in their hearts, as if that would be possible for anyone to do so. Parents can simply look at the headlines on most, maybe even all, of the fashion magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle*, and others. These publications are typically not shy about proclaiming their main objectives in the area of fashion. They are focused on sexuality in its raciest expressions with headlines too crass even to mention here. The clothing depicted in those magazines is part of that sexualized image of women. Therefore, if Christian moms or daughters look like the people in *Cosmo*, you can assume that, what you have chosen to wear will have a provocative effect on most of the men around you. That may not be the intent of the one who chose the outfit, but it is the intent behind the very design of the garments. Parents ought to protect their daughters from sinning against the Lord by seeking to glorify themselves rather than him and in so doing failing to protect the chastity of their brothers. That does not mean daughters should purposefully seek to make themselves unappealing. It does mean that in their choices of clothing they should avoid provocative clothing and choose conservative attire.

When daughters are little, this process is simple. Their fashion world is controlled by the parents and they can purchase clothing that falls within the boundaries of the principles of the Bible. However, as daughters progress into their teen-age years, parents should help them by having some clearly defined markers. Parents must consistently enforce these boundaries, perhaps even with much difficulty. It is possible that daughters will not understand the limitations placed on them. Parents need to patiently continue to discuss the biblical reasons for their decisions with their daughters. They should never waver in their commitment to biblical limits and boundaries. However, the counter-cultural nature of your standards will likely introduce some tension in the relationship. In working with daughters parents must also give equal attention to their sons in this matter. Men carry an equal responsibility in honoring the seventh commandment.

Training Your Eyes

The number of words dedicated to the issue of modesty should not be an indication of the level of responsibility in pursuing purity in human relationships. The issue of modesty is simply more difficult to explain than the positive role men play in honoring the seventh commandment. Men cannot

blame the immodest dress of women for their own sins against the seventh commandment. The sin of lust is not excused in the Bible. Absolutely not. Both women and men are charged to uphold the seventh commandment. One of the ways the woman is charged to do so is by dressing modestly. The man, on the other hand is charged to refrain from lust. That means sons must be taught how to live as gentlemen among the women in their lives. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches that we are not to look lustfully at a woman. That instruction begins conditionally: “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent...”¹⁷ The implication is that looking lustfully is not necessary. Boys must be taught to set their eyes on the things above (Colossians 3:1-3). There are many biblical accounts parents can use to teach their sons these truths, but below are a few examples:

- Genesis 9:20-27. The account of Noah demonstrates how looking on someone’s nakedness is a shameful and disrespectful act;
- Habakkuk 3:15: “Woe to him whom makes his neighbors drink – you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness!” This verse warns of the sin of pornography. Your sons must be addressed very directly on this topic and challenged to confess their sins, if necessary. Teach them the significance of God’s warning;
- Ephesians 5:25-33. Teach your sons that the relationship between a husband and a wife represents that of Christ and the church. Show them how lust makes that relationship look ugly because you are taking advantage of another person. Really, participating in sexual sin, whether fornication, pornography, physical adultery, is a distortion of Christ’s relationship with his people. Christ does not dishonor the church in this way. Instead he purely and sacrificially lays himself down for her sake.

In addition to teaching from Scripture, give your sons opportunities to practice honoring the women in their lives. You can teach your sons to hold the door for their mother, sisters, and others. Have them carry bags and groceries so that they can learn what it means to honor a woman. Perhaps some will not understand the gesture, but it is a way to give your sons an opportunity to practice honoring. In addition, young men should be taught to avert their eyes from inappropriate images if they are surprised by them. Purity must be held in high esteem, and the desires of the flesh toward impurity must be mortified by the Spirit’s power at work in Christian men.

Of course these moments of teaching take discernment. Parents can ruin the innocence of their children even while trying to protect them. They have to gauge what level of discussion the children may be able to handle, and talk with them often to find out what their thoughts might be. Consider their age in all of this. However the goal is that, both in entertainment and modesty, sons and daugh-

¹⁷ Matthew 5:28 (ESV).

ters should be instructed to honor the Lord by their words and actions. Parents should always be drawing their children back to their main purpose: to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Conclusion

Today's cultural landscape has some unique challenges when it comes to the battle against temptations to break the seventh commandment. Parents must be diligent to guard against them. If they wait until sin is knocking at their children's door, they are not doing enough. Parents are leaving them defenseless and exposed. However, more than just giving children a list of things not to do, parent must help them to see a positive alternative: relationships based on truth, honor and purity.

Study Questions

1. Page 109 quotes the Heidelberg's explanation of the requirements of the seventh commandments. What are your thoughts on the expansion of this commandment given there.
2. What are the three virtues listed in Philippians 4:7-8 that provide the framework for the positive Christian alternative to the present sexualized culture? Briefly describe the substance of each.
3. In reference to the use of entertainment, how can truth, honor, and purity be compromised?
4. What are the unique dangers presented in the present age when it comes to the seventh commandment? Are seventh commandment violations unique to the present electronic age?
5. When it comes to the issue of modesty, what responsibility should we teach to our sons? What to our daughters?

