

# REQUIRED OF HUMANS: COMMITMENT TO COVENANT

by Steve Zeisler

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In this series of studies on the Ten Commandments, I would like to set the stage for our discussion of the seventh commandment by reading a letter recently written to "Dear Abby":

Dear Abby:

How about a letter from a "winner?" My married lover left his wife for me. I was told that I wasn't breaking up anything; his marriage was dead long before he met me; his wife had gotten fat. I was married too, but I assured him that my marriage was also over; my husband had gotten dull and boring. So I divorced my boring husband and he divorced his chubby wife. Oh, yes, we both had children, but we explained that we were both in love and when they were older they would understand.

Our marriage was a dream come true. No more lying and sneaking around. At long last we were legally man and wife for all the world to see. Our apartment was filled with modern furniture and old-fashioned guilt, and plenty of doubt and mistrust. Two years later he was meeting someone new. I told him he was a liar and a cheat. He said it took one to know one. And by the way, he had gotten a little dull and boring, and I had put on a little weight.

Signed: A Winner.

This is the testimony of one who followed the wisdom of the world, thinking that "The grass is greener on the other side." She wrote to express the regret that many experience who have listened to the braying of "experts" and followed the example of celebrities.

Non-Christians desperately need to hear biblical answers to the questions they are asking. Although we will often be misunderstood and rejected for our convictions, we need to view ourselves as a source of hope, regarding marriage and sexuality. Since the world no longer knows what it means to be married, we need to hear the word of God, believe it, teach it, and live it with enthusiasm.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE

The seventh commandment of the decalogue is a simple statement: "Do not commit adultery." The law is written negatively, as a prohibition, but it testifies to a great positive truth--the importance of marriage. To choose against sexual sin one must believe in the goodness and worth of marriage as God has created it. Thus, we want our discussion of sexual choices raised by the commandment to lead us to an understanding of the nature of marriage .

Many evangelicals in the past discussed human sexuality primarily in negative terms. A generation ago, many in the church taught, either directly or indirectly, that sex was a necessary evil and should always be approached with trepidation. The Bible, however, teaches that human sexuality is powerful, not evil. Like anything powerful, the potential for destruction is great, while it is also true that there is great potential for creativity, growth, and beauty.

In recent months I have been teaching one of my children to drive. A car is a powerful machine capable of running into things, racing off faster than you expect, and stopping awkwardly if the driver does not know how to operate it. When the non-driver first sits behind the wheel it seems mysterious, but what must be

learned are the skills to harness that power so it is effective. Similarly, we need to recognize that God made our sexuality. It is extremely powerful, and it needs to be placed within boundaries of a marriage. Once placed within those boundaries, our sexuality can bring about much that is beautiful and life-enhancing.

## **THE POWER OF SEXUALITY**

There is abundant testimony that human sexuality is powerful. Think about the many areas it encompasses. First, we reproduce through sexual expression. God might have made us like amoebas that divide in half to create another. Although reproduction happens that way among other living things, for humans it is sexual intercourse that leads to new life.

Second, anyone who is past puberty knows of the influence of hormones on our minds. The most powerful and demanding thoughts come about through the power of sexual attraction. It was not long ago for my son and his friends that girls were considered "gross," and were entirely ignored. Last night, however, as I went crazy in front of the TV watching a game-winning home run by my favorite team in the play-offs, I noticed that these same boys preferred to talk to girls on the phone. That girls should be preferred over baseball is testimony to the power of sexuality, because it was not long ago that the exact opposite was the case.

Memories of sexual experience are powerful. People who have been lovers will never again treat each other the same way because of what they have shared. We are never more vulnerable than when we are unclothed and uninhibited. Thus, we know that we are dealing with something of tremendous potency and power that can be a good or bad. Like any power it can bully and crush, make us miserable, and chain us to things that are degrading; or it can be life-giving and open us up to love. It can laminate us to another person so that something new is created by God that brings about an openness and joy as nothing else can.

In these matters, especially, we must not follow our feelings or fantasies, which are notoriously fickle and unreliable. Our Maker commands us to forbid sexual sin: "Do not commit adultery." However, once we have decided not to commit adultery we must also turn to our God to ask what is proper and right. What is it about marriage that makes it the appropriate place for sexual expression?

## **THE ORIGINAL MARRIAGE**

Let us turn to the first marriage in Genesis 2:22-25 to find our answers:

And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which he had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. And the man said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

The Lord was the initiator of marriage by creating the woman and bringing her to the man. Adam's response was electric. He had surveyed all of creation and never found a correspondence to himself. When God brought him a woman, he was overcome: "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!"

Clearly there is a sexual element to his response. The two were naked and not ashamed, and they became "one flesh," a metaphor drawn from the experience of human beings in intercourse. However, there is much more at stake than just the physical sexuality and the energy that it brings to a relationship. The man and woman share a name. The word for man in Hebrew is ish (masculine); the word for woman is ishah (feminine). Adam called the woman by his name. We have said before that names in Hebrew are important, and here it is an offering of an identity. Further, we note the leaving of parents.

Everything is altered by the choice of this relationship initiated and brought about by God. Marriage is a uniting of two people at every level. The energy of sexual attraction brings about a oneness that is profound.

The choice to marry means a commitment to one whole person for one whole lifetime.

Reading of the wedding day of Adam and Eve reminds me of my own. I remember feeling fairly calm as I stood in front of the church with my friends and family surrounding me. I was not conscious of my emotions when the back door of the church opened and my wife and her father walked down the aisle, but I realized a moment later as we stood next to each other that I could not walk up the stairs to the platform. I was so overwhelmed by the nature of what was going on that every muscle in my body was as tense as it could be. I thought, "I'm going to fall down, I can't walk up these stairs. I'm going to embarrass all of us." It took maximum concentration to relax my leg enough to walk up the stairs.

God the Father walked beside Eve, bringing her to her husband, and Adam, too, was overcome with the importance of God's gift. Marriage, the covenant of one whole person to another whole person for a lifetime and nothing less, is the proper context for expressing the sexual potential that God has created in us.

## **OVERCOMING HURTS**

There are some people here who agree that the Bible teaches these things, but see no way to bring them to life in their experience. We must not talk about what ought to be, without saying something to people who are living real lives that have not gone according to this plan. There are some in this room whose marriage is more like jail than joy, who feel they have made a horrible mistake, or that their marriage has gotten to the point where there is nothing left but dryness, anger, and frustration. Others have convinced themselves that past failures disqualify them from healthy and honorable marriages. Or, finally, we should remember those who are single but desire marriage. However, let me assert as clearly as I can that in these cases (hurting marriages, past failures, loneliness, or any other), Jesus himself is our companion. We must give the Lord greater place, trust him to work, and begin to let go of anger and manipulation. He can meet our needs for intimacy and change our circumstances to our benefit.

## **THE WORK OF THE LORD**

I recently married a couple who had been divorced five years ago when they were non-Christians and they went their separate ways. God saved them both, brought the relationship full circle, and I was privileged to remarry them. I remember one of our elders saying some time ago that he had no idea how to be married, and did not start to make healthy choices until he had lived with his wife for 15 years. Although he had acted immaturely and selfishly until there was finally just a shell of a relationship, God acted redemptively for them. I do not know the difficulty of your present experience, but I do know the way out is to minimize your own role and give greater place to the third, invisible Person of the relationship. Healing will come from there.

If your past is something that you view with remorse, let me remind you that the most famous adulterer in human history was David the king, who is a type of Christ, the father of Messiah, the man after God's heart. In the genealogy of Jesus there is a prostitute, Rahab, and Judah, the visitor of prostitutes. The Bible has sexual sin sewn throughout it, and it also has the redemptive work of God.

## **FAITHFULNESS AND LOVE**

One of my favorite accounts in the New Testament is at the end of Luke 7. A woman with a tarnished reputation cried at Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair in the presence of a group of self-righteous Pharisees. Jesus described her actions as an indication that she had been changed from within. She was forgiven and had the burden of sin lifted from her. Jesus said that the capacity to love (God, and then people) grows out of gratitude for sins forgiven. Jesus said, "Her sins which are many have been forgiven." The one who loves much is the as one who has been forgiven much. ("He who is forgiven little, loves little").

The load of guilt or sorrow in your past may become that thing which, being forgiven, allows you to deeply love Christ. It is precisely your sense that Jesus has forgiven your sins, made you new, and canceled the debt

which can open you up to a capacity to love him and others that the self-righteous will never have.

Your past might be reprehensible as far as you are concerned, but it does not determine your present or your future. Your present might be awful, but that does not mean that God is finished. Regarding the future, you can begin making choices now to allow your sexuality to be creative and life-enhancing.

## **MAKING GOOD CHOICES**

Let me suggest two words of advice. One is found in I Corinthians 7: 2-5:

. . . Let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

The first word of advice I would lay before you in your marriage is: choose to let your body serve the one to whom you are married. Instead of pressing to maximize the benefit to yourself, choose to be a servant, to shed your right for sexual pleasure first and learn to be one who gives benefit to your partner. When we make a choice to do that, the power of our sexuality becomes creative rather than destructive.

The second suggestion that will set us in a hopeful direction for the future comes from Proverbs 5:15-21. These are the words of a father who has lived a long life, writing to his young son about marriage:

Drink water from your own cistern, and fresh water from your own well. Should your springs be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be yours alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated ["intoxicated"] always with her love. For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress, and embrace the bosom of a foreigner? For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and he watches all his paths.

In addition to serving our spouses the second choice we can make is to choose to delight in them. The proverb describes this woman as "the wife of your youth," the one married at the height of attractiveness and desirability. She is the same woman even if years have passed. The choice is to desire and delight in her (or him; this counsel applies to both husband and wife), letting go of the boredom and frustration that can enter into longstanding marriages. We can both serve and delight in our partners because we choose to do so. The great potency of sexuality then becomes creative, beautiful, and life-giving. Properly bounded by the channel of covenant, it is a source of blessing.

## **SEX IS ALWAYS SIGNIFICANT**

There are some who would say that sexuality as I am describing it is one option. There is loving, married sexuality and then there is "recreational" sex, sex without feeling. I Corinthians 6:1-20 tells us that there is no such thing as sex on the surface only. Even when there is sex with a prostitute, the most anonymous and shallow of sexual experience, something important takes place. If you are a Christian, the Spirit of God goes with you, and is joined to her in a one flesh relationship..

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body with her? For he says, 'the two will

become one flesh." But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with him. Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Since our sexuality was meant to be bound by covenant there is no such thing as recreational, trivial, unimportant sexual experience. We need to be people who are so committed to marriage that it becomes unthinkable that we would sin sexually. The commandment is, "Do not commit adultery." Its positive counterpart is, "Be committed to marriage." We must understand the wonder that God accomplished in building these boundaries so that our sexual potential can serve us instead of hurt us.

## **RIGHTLY RELATED TO GOD**

Let us take the understanding of covenant and expand it a bit further, as we did in our studies of previous commandments. When we discussed the fifth commandment, honoring our parents, the goal was ultimately to equip us to honor our Heavenly Father. The sixth commandment talked about the refusal to take the life of one created in the image of God. When the seventh commandment says, "Do not commit adultery," we are learning to be committed to covenant. Again, there is a lesson to be learned about our relationship with God. One of the most pervasive metaphors in the Old Testament is Israel's relationship as the wife of Yahweh. Israel was a faithless wife, rejected her husband, and shamed herself by repeatedly pursuing other gods. The Lord, however, remained faithful to Israel, kept his covenant, and did not change.

## **THE BRIDE OF CHRIST**

The church is the bride of Christ. If we learn to channel our sexuality within the bounds of marriage, we are more likely to believe that the Lord will keep his covenant with us. As we learn to be covenant keepers our ability to worship and trust God will grow greater. These laws are about human experience but they testify to God's relationship with his people.

I want to close by reading from Revelation 19, the occasion of the marriage supper of the Lamb. The bride is adorned for her husband, the church prepared for Christ, is given in marriage:

"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready." And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, 'these are true words of God."

We will or will not be covenant keepers. We can allow the potential of our sexuality to be channeled toward life or allow it to overflow and destroy us and those around us. For the sake of him who gave himself for us, I urge each one to forbid sexual sin and be clothed in "fine linen--the righteous acts of the saints."

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