

*“Aseret ha-Debrot: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”*  
Part Eight: The Seventh Spiritual Principle ~ “You shall not commit adultery.”

Commitment Keeping

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

First Christian Church, Murray, KY

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Exodus 20:14: “You shall not commit adultery.”



*Thou shalt not commit adultery* by Baron Henri de Triqueti (1803-74). 1837. Bronze bas-relief panel on the door of the Madeleine Place de La Madeleine, Paris

A mother shared the following:

“While making school lunches, my six-year-old daughter and I were having a conversation about her Religious Education Class she would be starting the following night. We were having quite a question / answer session, she being the one asking, and I answering. Then, to change things around, I started asking her questions about things she knew while throwing in a couple of things to teach her. A question to her was, ‘Do you know about the Ten Commandments?’ ‘Hmmm,’ she said, thinking a minute, ‘No, don’t think I do. What are they?’ I explained they were God’s rules we must all live by. She asked, ‘What are the Ten?’ ‘Argggghh!’, I thought to myself, now I have to delve into my memory I was sure I lost during both my pregnancies and recall what I learned all those years in school. I began to recite them. She listened, and didn’t say too much because I explained them a little as I went along. I got to ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’ and as quick as I said it, she asked, ‘What does that one mean, Mom?’ I chewed my lip a bit and thought about how I was going to tackle this one. But I got my thoughts together and began to try to explain when she stopped me abruptly grinning ear to ear, extremely proud to come up with the answer herself. ‘Oh wait, I know! It means you can’t cut down an adult tree.’ I thought I was going to die. It was so cute and innocent—and of course I tactfully told her what it meant.” (cited from Laura Schlessinger and Rabbi Stewart Vogel, *The Ten Commandments*, pp. 207-208)

As the mother in this story chewed her lip a bit and thought how she was going to tackle this topic with her daughter, I admit I’ve chewed my lip too on how to talk with you about the Seventh Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” This topic is more the stuff of private counseling sessions than sermons for people of all ages. But I can’t skip over this one. After all, what we call the Ten Commandments should not really be understood so much as moral laws but rather as the most important spiritual principles governing our lives. They are the ten most important things we ever try to do in life and also what leads to our and our society’s greatest fulfillment.

People have always struggled with this commandment. There’s the joke that after Moses came down from the top of Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, his followers sent him back up to renegotiate the commandment dealing with adultery. Yet the negotiation apparently didn’t work and God didn’t give in for the Hebrew scriptures hold up murder, idolatry, and adultery as the worst possible violations.

While today we would not liken adultery to something as horrible as murder, we continue to struggle with it, especially at a time when one out of two marriages ends in divorce, many of which are linked to infidelity.

I've recently been trying to clear out magazines that have accumulated over the years going back to when we first arrived in Murray. I wondered whether it was providential when, this morning, I pulled out the July 13, 2009 edition of *Time*. Its front cover has a picture of a wedding cake with the bride and groom sinking down into it, with the caption *Unfaithfully Yours: Infidelity is eroding our most sacred institution: How to make marriage matter again.* (*Time*, July 13, 2009) The article starts out on a light note with the author Caitlin Flanagan sharing the following: "Around the time of my parents' 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, I turned to my father at the dinner table one night and said, 'It's amazing, Dad—50 years, and you never once had an affair. How do you account for that?'" He replied simply, 'I can't drive'." The article, which has a photograph of John Edwards and the governor of South Carolina, Mark Sanford, both of whom have been caught in adultery, states: "The ... pain that resulted from the[se] midlife crises make manifest a bleak truth ... 'Adultery is not about sex or romance. Ultimately, it is about how little we mean to each other'. ... There is no other single force causing as much measurable hardship and human misery in this country as the collapse of marriage." (*Time* July 13, 2009, pp. 45-47) That was 2009! Lots of high ranking political figures have engaged in adulterous relationships since John Edwards and Mark Sanford. Today, though, it seems that we merely shrug our shoulders at it.

Adultery comes from the term *adulterate*, which means to contaminate or make impure. We adulterate ourselves, or make ourselves impure, when we violate the commitment we have made to our marriage partner by having voluntary sexual intercourse with someone other than our legal spouse. Since our Christian understanding is that the body actually houses the Holy Spirit and, therefore, all sexuality must therefore be understood as a sacred spiritual act, we contaminate God's Temple through extramarital affairs.

Adultery today is understood differently than it was in ancient biblical times. Then it had little to do with monogamy, since a man was permitted to have more than one wife. Think, for example, of Jacob who was married both to Leah and Rachel and fathered children not only with both of them but with their handmaids as well. Adultery, rather, related to having a sexual relationship with the wife of another man. Since a woman belonged to a man as his property, a man who had a sexual relationship with this woman had stolen another man's property and disrupted the man's sacred lineage.

In biblical times, adultery was such a serious offense as to deserve the death penalty. (Deut. 22:22-27) Unless, of course, you were a king! Then, as today, people in high positions get away with things that ordinary people do not. And that king was none other than King David. David—the great hero of the Christian faith whom we remember as the shepherd boy who killed Goliath with a sling shot and then went on to become one of the most beloved kings of all times—would not pass a background check today. For not only did he commit adultery but he then murdered the woman’s husband to try and cover up for it, thereby breaking at least two of the ten commandments.

Do you remember the story? You might not, for it’s not one we teach our kids in Sunday School or VBS. There’s so much cruelty, deceit, and violence in this story that it would definitely be ranked as R-rated. Yet perhaps it’s a story that should be told in premarital counseling sessions so that couples might understand the harmful repercussions that can result from adulterous relationships, since so many people can be hurt along the way.

The story in II Samuel 11 goes something like this: King David was lounging around his palace while his troops were out at war, fighting for him. He wasn’t with them on the battlefield where he should have been. Rather, in what might be seen as the contemporary equivalent of porn, he was watching a woman bathing on a nearby roof. She had no idea that she was being violated by his gaze. And even though he had a number of wives, he decided that he wanted to have sex with this bathing woman, even though he learned that she was married to Uriah the Hittite, one of his leading officers, who was out putting his life on the line for him. King David used the power of his office and his status as a privileged male to order her to come to him and have sex with him. She had no choice but to obey his command.

To understand why this adulterous affair that King David had with Bathsheba was so sinful we first need to understand how the Bible views the human body and sex. In the Judeo-Christian view, our bodies are sacred. The Old Testament repeatedly reminds us that we are made in the image of God. The New Testament calls our body “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (I Cor. 6: 18-19). Our bodies are not really our own but they are temporarily on loan to us from God to use for God’s purposes. One of the purposes of our bodies is to enjoy a sexual relationship with our partner.

“The Torah uses the term *yada*—“to know” to indicate a sexual relationship. We often use the phrase “he *knew* her in the biblical sense” to refer to a couple who has engaged in sexual relations.

We first find this expression when “Adam knew [*yada*] his wife” (Gen 4:1) and later when Rebecca is described as “fair to look on, a virgin, and no man had known her” (Gen 24:16). Jews and Christians believe that sex is so much more than a mere biological act. It also includes two people sharing intimate knowledge. Felder says that it “involves two individuals *knowing* [*yada*] each other—respecting and caring for each other deeply in both physical and spiritual dimensions—loving each other maturely enough to desire a permanent sharing of their lives.” (Felder, *The Ten Challenges*, 145) It is a sacred act.

David did not know [*yada*] Bathsheba. He used her as an attractive commodity, stole her from her husband for a one night stand for his own pleasure. He had no concern for her feelings or well being. Therefore, what occurred between David and Bathsheba was not a sacred act, not holy sex, but unholy lust, a serious sin. And it was not just a one-time sin because adultery has consequences. This is why adultery is included in the Ten Commandments. It is included because it leads to a web of deceit, with lies covering up lies, and so many innocent people getting hurt.

David’s violation of Bathsheba had consequences. The Bible says that **“*The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, “I am pregnant”*”** (II Sam 11:5). After David learned that Bathsheba was pregnant, he did what we all do. He tried to cover up his sin. He did some quick thinking. Bathsheba was pregnant while her husband Uriah was out on the battlefield. But if Bathsheba and her husband had sex, all would be solved. Uriah would assume the baby was his. So he called Uriah back from war, using the excuse that he wanted updates about the battlefield.

After meeting together, King David got Uriah drunk and then told him to go back to his own home to relax and enjoy an intimate evening with his wife. But Uriah was a man of decency and honor. He felt that he couldn’t spend time with Bathsheba when the soldiers under his command were risking their lives on the battleground. He returned to the battlefield without spending time with his wife. After Plan A failed, David moved to Plan B. David arranged to have Uriah placed in **“*the front line of the fiercest battle where he would be killed*”** (II Sam 11:15). Uriah, a faithful military commander, died on the battlefield, to cover up for King David’s sin. Bathsheba was inconsolable.

Adultery can have serious and unintended consequences and far reaching ramifications. Many innocent people get hurt while we are trying to hide the truth. In adulterous affairs children, spouses, extended families, and friends can be deeply, deeply hurt.

Sacred vows are broken. Trust is destroyed. I cannot even begin to tell you how many innocent children I have seen permanently damaged through the acts of their parents.

King David initially thought he had gotten away with it. After all, the only person who could testify against him was Bathsheba. What he hadn't considered was the fact that God knew what he had done. God knew that he had used Bathsheba as an object for his own pleasure. God knew how he had effectively murdered her loyal and faithful husband. That an innocent baby was in her womb. David began to anguish. And since he was not an ordinary person but a king called by God to guide God's people, God sent the prophet Nathan to counsel David (II Samuel 12:1-4).

The prophet Nathan met with King David and shared an interesting dilemma for his consideration. I can imagine Nathan beginning his story by saying, "My most honorable King David. I want to tell you about something that happened recently that I would like you to decide upon ...

***"There were two men who lived in the same town; one was rich and one was poor. The rich man had many cattle and sheep, while the poor man had only one lamb, which he had bought. He took care of it, and it grew up in his home with his children. He would feed it some of his own food, let it drink from his cup, and hold it in his lap. The lamb was like a daughter to him. One day a visitor arrived at the rich man's home. The rich man didn't want to kill one of his own animals to fix a meal for him; instead, he took the poor man's lamb and prepared a meal for the guest."*** (II Sam 12: 1-4)

David was greatly angered after hearing this story and he said to Nathan, ***"I swear by the living Lord that the man who did this ought to die!"*** (vs 5)

God through Nathan had set David up and David took the bait. It was then that Nathan dropped the bombshell. Nathan said to David, ***"You are the man!"*** (vs. 7) You stole Bathsheba from Uriah and had him killed. You, King David, were the rich man with many cattle and sheep, namely many wives. Uriah was a poor man who had only one lamb, one wife, whom he dearly loved. You David stole Uriah's wife. Now David could have denied that he had done this. He could have rationalized, made all kinds of excuses, tried to justify himself. Said that he was above the law. He could even have had one of his guards kill Nathan on the spot but, instead, David made the noblest statement of his life: ***"I have sinned against the Lord"*** (II Sam 12:13a).

David confessed his sin and expected to die from it. Yet, it is when we are truly honest with God that we find His mercy and grace. Nathan said to David, ***“The Lord has taken away your sin; you shall not die.”*** (II Sam 12:13b).

Some say that this was the defining moment of David’s life, when he confessed and accepted full responsibility for his action of violating not just one but two people, causing one permanent harm and the other death. While prepared to follow Uriah in death, God instead allowed David to live. From that moment on he knew that he was alive for one reason only: the sheer grace of God. There but for the grace of God go I! That turning point changed the direction of David’s life and deepened his relationship with God to a level he had never known before.

We would all love to have something like a Hallmark ending to this story. We would all like to think that adultery is nothing too serious. That’s how our society thinks of it, at least. Yet even though David was forgiven, we see from his story that our behavior has consequences. Adultery can have a ripple effect hurting countless other people along the way. David moved the pregnant Bathsheba to his home, married her, and she became his favored wife. She bore David a son, who became sick, and died when seven days old. The Bible says that the child’s death was a direct consequence of his sin.

The grief they had to bear from their one-night adulterous stand was substantial: the death of an innocent and honorable man who had loved his wife and had her stolen from him, the shame and grief of Bathsheba whom David selfishly used, the death of their son, the remorse David felt in his heart, which David expressed in one of the most poignant laments ever found in scripture. We know it as Psalm 51 and David writes that he had written it ***“when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.”*** Listen to some of its words and feel David’s anguish and deep shame as he cries out to God, realizing the enormity of his sin:

<sup>1</sup> ***Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions. ...***

<sup>3</sup> ***For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.***

<sup>4</sup> ***Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight ...***

*<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

*<sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*

*<sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

*<sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.*

...

*<sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.*

*<sup>16</sup> For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.*

*<sup>17</sup> The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Chances are good that some of you listening to this message today will have engaged in some form of adultery. You too, like David, stand before God with a broken spirit and contrite heart. You too want to shout out: ***“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.”*** Or perhaps, like Bathsheba, you have been violated by someone who used you and threw you away. Or perhaps your parents or close friends had an adulterous relationship that violated your trust. But no matter who you identify with in this story, whether you are one of the main characters, a victim, or a bystander to the events, no matter what you have done or what has been done to you, God’s restorative grace and healing is available to you, just like it was for David. We can be confident that forgiveness is available, for was it not Jesus who saved the woman caught in adultery from being stoned and then said to her: ***“Go your way, and from now on do not sin again”*** (John 8:11).

**Closing Prayer:** Loving God, who created us in your image and designed the sexual act to be holy, we ask that we might keep the sacred vows that we have made to our partners or spouses. We pray where vows have been broken that there also might be healing and forgiveness. In Jesus’ name. Amen.