

Exodus 20 v14 Sex is sacred

Introduction

Something is not right about a significant proportion of attitudes and values in our culture towards sexual activity, relationships and marriage. After more than half a century of increasingly explicit sex education in Britain we know more about pro-creation and human biology than any previous generation, yet as a society we are increasingly incapable of forming and maintaining long-term healthy relationships. The breakdown in marriages coupled with the much greater failure of co-habiting relationships has caused serious damage in the home environment for many adults and their children. Then in the workplace and social settings, what are appropriate boundaries for interaction and friendships? In the past the majority of people would have thought such a question simple to answer –yet today a large proportion of us in Britain would be less than confident about setting boundaries, for example for appropriate dress or topics of conversation in these settings. It has been particularly hard on women, where greater apparent freedoms to work socialise and exercise financial responsibilities take place in a culture where boundaries of appropriate dress or relational attitudes are increasingly blurred.

The seventh commandment recorded in Exodus 20:14 states: *You shall not commit adultery.* This seems clear enough. Registry offices in England since 1866 have advertised the following definition of marriage: ‘Marriage according to the law of this country is the union of one man with one woman voluntarily entered into for life to the exclusion of all others.’ The sad reality of Governments in London and Edinburgh, together with most opposition parties, wishing to open that definition to include biblically unsanctioned relationships is a statement about the moral decline in our land that thankfully a majority of people are currently resisting. Adultery is understood as an attempt to break a marital relationship either by one of the two parties that consented to a marriage and/or by a third party from outside the marriage. Does this then mean that this commandment only applies to the 50-60% of the population who are married? Or have nothing to say concerning relationships between individuals who are single? Of course this is not the case. The intention behind it was to limit the full expression of sexual activity to marriage; in addition to prevent the abuse of a gift God has given to us for its use in inappropriate settings, together with prohibiting deviant and perverted forms of sexual expression that can only result in psychological or physical harm to both the victims and perpetrators of such behavioural choices. It is, therefore, essential that we take time to reflect on how God intends us to use the good gift of our sexuality, for our good pleasure and for His glory.

1. Conduct outside the biblical boundaries that is forbidden

The pressure to lower biblical moral standards in our society has increased dramatically in recent decades. The message from the entertainment industry is that people of faith and others who share our moral standards are old fashioned and need to lighten up. This message was communicated clearly in the 1998 film *Pleasantville*. The story presented was of two teenagers, David and Jennifer from the 1990s going back to a small town in America in the 1950s when everything was black and white and boring and with their advocacy of sexual liberation it brought colour and happiness to the lives of the characters in the film. Robert McDaniel in his review of *Pleasantville* declared: "Pleasantville is a false hope. David's journey tells him only that there is no "right" life, no model for how things are "supposed to be". (*Film and History* May–June 2002, pp.85-86). By contrast, the Bible cuts right across the moral relativism of our society and throws down the gauntlet of how things ought to be for our good and for God's glory. Our

heavenly Father is not a kill-joy wanting to make people miserable. On the contrary He see the pain and heartache caused by the selfish choices some people make in this area of their lives that damages potentially not only themselves, but also their relationships with their spouses, children and other friends.

The Hebrew word *na'aph* first used in this commandment covers two things in the Old Testament. First of all, a sexual relationship that broke a marriage covenant and secondly spiritual apostasy which broke Israel's relationship with her God; the New Testament uses a variety of terms to cover a wider range of sexual misconduct in the wider Roman world. The most common word for adultery is *moichao*, but a more inclusive term *porneia* from which we derive the modern term 'pornography', covers various forms of sexual misconduct. Matthew 19:9 states: *anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness (porneia), and marries another woman commits adultery (moichatai)*. In Matthew 5:32 the Greek term *porneia* is translated 'marital unfaithfulness'; the NIV renders the same word as 'sexual immorality' in Galatians 5:19, in the list of sins of the fallen nature. It is followed by two other terms in that list that describe 'impurity' in general and 'unrestrained sexual licence' respectively. The wide range of sexual activity forbidden that violates the boundaries God has given includes homosexual practices (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9); sexual relations with close relatives (Leviticus 18:6-18, Deuteronomy 27: 20, 22-23); bestiality (Leviticus 18:23, Deuteronomy 27:21); and transvestism (Deuteronomy 22:5); together with inappropriate heterosexual sexual activities prior to or outside the boundaries of marriage (I Corinthians 6:9). God has given us guidelines for living not to restrict our happiness, but with a view to enabling us to enjoy life in its fullness. The message presented in our culture today teaches the opposite to Scripture so often, but the broken nature of so many families and the heartache and pain an increasing proportion of our society are experiencing bring home forcefully to us that our heavenly Father actually does know what is best for us and we should trust Him in this as well as other areas of our lives.

2. Why must we hold firm to biblical standards

(a) **The significance of sexual relations** The Bible has a healthy attitude to human relationships and is unafraid to celebrate the physical aspect of marriage as seen in the Song of Solomon. However, in the early medieval period the Western Church (Roman Catholicism in practice) accepted a secular Greek philosophical idea that bodies were evil and sex was at best a necessary evil to preserve the race. What is worse in order to become a serious Christian you had to commit to celibacy, forget any thoughts of marriage and become a monk, nun or priest. Thank God for the Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century that reclaimed a biblical view of the honoured status of marriage in the purposes of God. Sadly in the Roman Catholic Church they have still clung to the vestiges of that medieval philosophy and banned their clergy from getting married in violation of the biblical principles on this subject. What ever Paul meant in his list of criteria for those holding the pastoral office by the words: *the husband of one wife* (I Timothy 3:2), and there are a few possible interpretations, a compulsory requirement for celibate single clergy was not one of them.

(b) **The importance of the marriage bond** Genesis 2:24 is the key verse that describes the special relationship between the first human couple, Adam and Eve. It states that: *...a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh*. There are some clear principles here: (i) **Leaving** Why does it only specify the man 'leaving' his parents and not the woman? This is easily answered from the cultural practices of the patriarchal age. In that context when a woman was married she left the home of her parents and moving into with her in-laws sometimes as part of his extended family. This is what happened to Rebekah, for example, when she married Isaac (Genesis 24 –especially Gen.24:67). This

young woman might never see her family again, and prior to modern communications being invented, might in the worse case scenario have no further contact with them. Therefore, it is abundantly clear what point is being made to the new husband. Your wife might be joining your family, but this relationship is not simply an additional one in your immediate family circle, it is your top priority. This relationship is unique. Although respect towards and care for your parents will continue, it does take a secondary place in comparison with your relationship with your wife. This independent union takes precedence over all others. (ii) Uniting When a couple get married the union covers every aspect of their lives without exception. There is a requirement for complete openness with one another. Now sadly circumstances can arise where this is no longer possible. If one party in the marriage has serious problems handling finance the other may need to have sole responsibility for bank accounts and credit cards to avoid massive debts piling up. Likewise when various forms of addictive behaviour are manifested drastic measures may be necessary, out of love for the one who has succumbed to a problem lifestyle. But the intention is of a sharing of a whole future life together that ought normally to be workable, even if a couple may choose for one or the other to take a lead in particular areas of family life. (iii) Becoming one flesh Marriage involves more than promises being uttered before invited guests and a legal contract being signed; it includes a deep emotional and physical union as the husband and wife are no longer two separate individuals. The biblical language is that of a covenant, an agreement with life-long mutual obligations, that have been freely entered into by both parties. It is no surprise that the language of the marriage covenant is used in the Old Testament to describe the relationship between God and His people. God is described as the loving and faithful husband to Israel (Isaiah 54:5: *For your Maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is his name*); her apostasy from Him is described as a form of adultery, in very frank and harsh language on various occasions (for example, God declares to Israel in Ezekiel 16:32: ³² “*You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!*”). The whole story of Hosea and his unfaithful wife Gomer, was a picture of the nation and its departure from loyalty to the One with whom it was in a covenant agreement (Hosea chapters 1-3 in particular). In the New Testament, in the one passage where the marriage relationship is described –Ephesians 5:22-33- at the very end of that section of Paul’s letter, he adds this comment in Ephesians 5:32: *This is a profound mystery –but I am talking about Christ and the Church.* The loyalty and commitment envisaged in the Bible concerning marriage is completely counter-cultural to the pressures of contemporary opinion formers in 21st Century Britain. Almost everything is time-limited and disposable. Life is too short not to do what makes you most happy and fulfilled, it is claimed. I wonder what percentage of people who have walked away from a marriage for another relationship have later regretted the choices they have made? No-one can give a definite figure, but my suspicion is that it is much higher than most people would imagine. God wants to spare us and the other people in our lives the heartaches that can come as a result of inappropriate choices.

(c) The security of family life for children(c) The security of family life for children It is profoundly sad that a high portion of children from broken homes experience lower levels of educational attainment, a greater proneness to depressive illness and in the worst cases a greater degree of dysfunctionality in their own relationships with other people and with the law of the land. Thank God this is not inevitable, but the effort required by the parent or parents responsible for bringing up the children is much greater than if God’s original intention of a father and mother fully involved in their children’s lives is their experience. Although I have heard it cited much less frequently in recent years, one reason sometimes given for divorce is ‘for the sake of the children’; yet survey after survey reveals that the overwhelming majority of children would prefer their parents to remain together and work through their problems, even when the parents’ relationship falls far short of what we would

wish. Sadly this is not always possible and some separations or divorces are almost inevitable, but the emotional and financial implications of such decisions must ensure that this is a last resort not a first option when difficulties arise.

(d) **Promises matter** Jesus' teaching on divorce In Matthew 19:1-12 Jesus is reported as being involved in an extended discussion on the subject of marriage and divorce. It is important to understand the context of that debate. Under Jewish law at that time a man could divorce his wife but she could only request a divorce which may or may not be granted. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was the passage used as the basis for their practice at that time: *If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, ²and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, ³and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, ⁴then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.* However, notice the specific question of Matthew 24:3: *Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for **any and every reason?**'* There was a fierce debate amongst the two schools of Pharisees. The stricter school led by a rabbi called Shammai held that Moses was restricting the permission for a divorce to the one cause of adultery. The more liberal school of Hillel extended this permission to include any reason a man may choose. The extent of this permission was truly alarming for women. Rabbi Akiba said this included 'if he found someone prettier he could divorce her (*Mishnah, Gittin 9:10*); Josephus the famous Jewish historian reported that he had 'divorced his wife because he was displeased at her behaviour', but never specified what it was that he had in mind. He also wrote: He who desires to be divorced from the wife who is living with him for whatsoever cause- and with mortals many such may arise (*Antiquities 4.253* – both cited by L. Morris, *Matthew*, p. 480). Hillel himself famously suggested that a spoiled dinner was a sufficient ground for divorce. How did Jesus respond here? he appeals to the Bible to the teaching in Genesis 2:24, God's creation mandate for human society. The conclusion He draws from that was given in Matthew 19:6: *So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.* The shocked Pharisees remind Jesus of the verses given above from Deuteronomy 24 and suggest that He is being stricter than Moses on this subject. Jesus affirmed their deduction and reinforced it by declaring that although sadly a small number of marital unions become irreparably broken, it was God's intention for marriage to be a lifelong partnership, not a union broken on the whim of a man having a mid-life crisis! The vulnerability of women and children under such permissive divorce legislation was potentially a very serious problem, but Jesus made every effort to safeguard their rights and urge Jewish men of His day to take seriously their marital responsibilities. In Mark's account of Jesus' teaching on this subject (Mark 10:1-12) Jesus made it plain that husbands and wives in His view were equal before the law and that if a man was legally entitled to divorce his wife then she should have the same entitlements before the law, before issuing the same cautions to wives as He had earlier given in that passage to husbands.

3. **The dangers to guard against –David and Bathsheba** (II Samuel 11-12)

In II Samuel 11-12 there is the profoundly sad story of David's lust for Bathsheba and the appalling consequences that resulted from that illicit union. David should have been away at work, ironically with Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, who was one of his most loyal army officers. Instead David, for whatever reason, stays at home and spies on his neighbour's wife having a bath. This was not difficult as washing facilities were outside and Bathsheba would almost certainly not have been bathing herself had she been aware of a possible male audience. His hormones override his brain as he asks an aide to get the woman for him. Sadly

the fallout from this action affected first Bathsheba's husband and it led to his murder; then two families would never be the same again; later the loss of moral authority here prevented David from disciplining his son Amnon when he raped his half-sister (II Samuel 13) which led to Absalom murdering Amnon, which led to the estrangement of Absalom and David and eventually a national civil war between forces loyal to Absalom and those loyal to David. In the decisive battle of the war, on one day twenty thousand men were killed (II Samuel 18:7). Like the ripples in a pond when a stone has been thrown in, the consequences of the choices we make can be far reaching beyond anything we had thought possible at the time. Michael Douglas, the well-known actor, in his divorce proceedings some years ago pleaded 'diminished responsibility'. He declared: 'Sex is a wave that sweeps over me, the impulse that is, and when the urge comes I am helpless every time' (J. John, *Ten*, p. 110). Thankfully David when challenged by his pastor Nathan took responsibility for his sin. Psalm 51 is the psalm of penitence he wrote following his restoration to fellowship with God –although the fallout from his misconduct would affect his life for the rest of his days.

4. **The example to inspire us –Joseph and Potiphar's wife** (Genesis 39:6b-23)

In Genesis 39 there is the account of Joseph during the early years of his time as a slave in Egypt. It is probable that he is in his late teens or early twenties. (a) **The predicament he faced** *Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me!'⁸ But he refused. 'With me in charge,' he told her, 'my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. ⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even to be with her.* (Genesis 39:6b-10) Joseph had no choice but to work in that place. He could not look for another job. It is most likely that this lady had made the same proposition to other slaves under her authority and had expected their willing submission to her request. As long as she was happy no harm would have resulted to their physical wellbeing. In too many workplaces up and down the land bosses or managers have sought sexual favours from their juniors, sometimes with a hint of possible promotions or the opposite of a threat of redundancy, if an employees needs to be let go. For some people the pressure to yield is enormous and it is very hard to advise them how to respond to these kinds of situations. However, God has created us in His image and we are all able to say 'yes' and 'no' when choices are presented to us. Joseph to his credit resisted this powerful temptation. (b) **The fallout he experienced** (Genesis 39: 11-20) One day this woman physically tried to manhandle him into her bedroom and he took the only course of action available to him of leaving the premises –at the cost of leaving his coat behind. She falsely claimed Joseph had been after her until she screamed and as a result he was put in prison. Some Christians can misunderstand Potiphar's actions. Joseph was not put in prison because he was guilty of a sexual assault on his master's wife – certain death would have followed in that case. It was because he believed Joseph was innocent. Life isn't fair. Paul in Colossians 3:23-24 gave some advice to Christians who were enslaved, but these words are applicable to us all: *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, ²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.* God sees the choices we make even if our family and friends do not and this ought to guide the steps we take in our relationships with other people. God saw that Joseph had maintained his integrity and would later deliver him from this situation, but this young man was given time and space to reflect on the fact that some years earlier he had given inaccurate reports to his dad about his elder brothers to get them into trouble (Genesis 37:2). He now gained insight into why living a life

of integrity is so important. (c) **The honour he experienced** (Genesis 41:41-43) Joseph became the equivalent of Prime Minister of Egypt. He was an exceptional man in extraordinary circumstances. We may never experience either the heights or depths he faced, but God will honour us as we honour Him with the moral choices we make.

5. **The Affirmation of Marriage**

We need to work at our marriages- unless your marriage is already a perfect one. Marriages are based on (a) **Respect** Ephesians 5:33 *each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.* Affirm and encourage not criticise and pull-down, especially in public. After all if we think our spouse is making bad choices –think about whom they married! A single person contemplating marriage ought to ask do I respect this man or woman –if not then marriage is out of the question. (b) **Responsibility** Philippians 2:4-5: *not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*⁵ *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.* This is true in all relational contexts, but especially important in marriage. (c) **Relate** Time with each other – this is real problem for many couples, not least when children come along. I fear the reason some couples split up when the children leave home is that they no longer have anything else in common and cannot face another twenty to thirty years together with someone who has not been a major part of their lives for years. (d) **Romance** it is not meant to stop when you get married, but it does call for a degree of creativity as the years go by. (e) **Resolve** a shared commitment to the highest standards of faithfulness, truthfulness to and honesty with one another for the rest of your lives (5 R's taken from J. John, *Ten*, pp,117-119). Job, the Old Testament patriarch made a number of boundaries for his life. In Job 31:1: *I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.* Each of us have to look at our own lives and ask what boundaries we need to put in place to uphold our own principles.

6. **The Affirmation of Single People**

One of the biggest weaknesses of our culture is the common assumption that if people are not in a 'relationship' with someone there must be something wrong or unfulfilling about your life. This is complete nonsense. Jesus never married and had the fullest life possible with a wide range of friends of both men and women, across the faith communities. Had He been married it would have been impossible to do the work He did. We are all social creatures who need friendship. Some people choose the single life. It can allow them more time, for example, at work, or with friends or in certain forms of mission service overseas as the apostle Paul did. There is no simple template that covers everyone's preferences. All of us need a strong sense of belonging to a family or community and the local church should seek to support all its members whatever our relational status to be the best we can be in Christ, Amen.