



The Ten Commandments

(37) The Seventh Commandment

(4) Pornography

Exodus 20:14

Matthew 5:27-30

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

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This is the fourth sermon on the Seventh Commandment. The Seventh Commandment is “You shall not commit adultery.” The Seventh Commandment is about all of life from the perspective of the fact that God created us as sexual beings. And pornography is a subject that must be dealt with because it is a huge issue in our time and a huge problem in the church.

Of course, sexual immorality has always been a problem ever since the fall. Sex in its proper sphere is good. Sex in its proper sphere is profoundly meaningful both in terms of the marriage relationship and in terms of how the marriage relationship points beyond itself to our relationship with God. Part of the meaning and the goodness of sex in its proper sphere is the intensity of sexual desire. God designed it that way and that is part of its goodness. It would lose much of its beauty and significance if it was a weak or a tepid desire. It needs to be a strong desire in order for it to accomplish its purpose both in marriage and as a symbol of our relationship with God.

But the strength of that desire becomes a problem once sin has entered the picture and the desire to please ourselves has replaced the desire to please God with which we were created. Because of sin, we have problems controlling our desires and so keeping sex in its place has been a huge problem throughout history. We see that reflected in the Bible in that the Seventh Commandment is one of the Ten and in that

sexual sin is addressed in the Bible from one end to the other. The powerful desire that is such a good thing in marriage becomes a very problematic thing outside of marriage.

So in a sense our time and place is no different from any other time in place in regard to sexual sin. It has always been common. But in another sense our era is one of the worst in the history of the world because of the so-called sexual revolution in which most restraints have been lifted and people feel free to satisfy their sexual urges pretty much in any way they desire. There are still some practices that society declares off limits, but the prevailing perspective is that satisfying your sexual desires is a huge part of what it means to be a human being and the biblical parameters are considered to be harmful and oppressive.

And in this context, pornography has become a massive reality in our society. The combination of the absence of restraint and the technology for distribution have made pornography easily available in complete anonymity for anyone who wants it. The demand is insatiable and supply unlimited. And the devastation is great.

This is a problem in the world although much of the world does not see it as a problem. But it is a huge problem in the church as well. The literature makes it clear that many people, both men and women, who profess Christ struggle with pornography to varying degrees. This is not surprising. On the one hand, not all who profess Christ are truly saved and so they do not have the desire to resist. But on the other hand, true believers are not yet free from their sinful natures and pornography is a powerful temptation, and many give in to it. That is not surprising given the fact that sin remains a powerful force in the lives of Christians. But it is serious. It is always harmful. And if it is not repented of, it will lead to condemnation.

It is true that no true Christian will completely fall away. But the Bible does warn all professing Christians that living in sin without repenting of it means that a person is not yet truly in the kingdom.

On the other hand, there is forgiveness for those who repent and believe in Jesus and the struggle with sin is part of the Christian life and so a person can be a Christian and struggle with pornography. But if he

or she is a Christian, there will be a genuine desire to live a life that is pleasing to God also in this area and the gospel is the way to overcome also this sin.

Matthew 5:27-30 is a key passage in this area. These are Jesus' words interpreting and applying the Seventh Commandment and what Jesus says here applies to all sexual sin. First hear what he says in verses 27-28. "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.'" Now Jesus here is speaking from the perspective of a male looking with lustful intent at a woman. The principle applies to women as well as men. The Bible often speaks from the perspective of a man when it is clear that the principle applies to all people.

The term "lustful intent" translates a Greek word that is occasionally used of a good desire, but most often is used of a sinful desire. Jesus uses the word here and in Mark 4:19 in his interpretation of the parable of the sower where he says, "but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." In both cases when Jesus uses this word it is referring to sinful desire. So "lustful intent" refers to a sinful desire. What Jesus is talking about is sexual desire that is not focused on one's wife or husband. The Bible is very clear that sexual desires of husbands for wives and wives for husbands is a good thing. But it is also clear that that kind of desire for someone who is not your wife or husband is sinful and here Jesus calls it adultery.

Now it is important to be clear about what Jesus is speaking about here and what he is not speaking about. Sexual desire itself is not sinful. It is part of being human. It is not that when a married couple are alone together for the first time after they are married that they suddenly discover that there is such a thing as sexual desire. That is not how we human beings are wired. And just the desire is not sinful. It is when the desire is nurtured and stimulated outside of marriage that it becomes sinful. Jesus here is speaking about a sinful desire and so the word lust is an appropriate translation.

We are given all kinds of desires that are part of our humanity. But those desires are to be controlled and satisfied only in ways that are part of God's design for them. It is good to desire food. It is sinful not to control our desire for food and eat like a glutton. It is good to desire rest. It is sinful to love rest so much that you are lazy. And so what Jesus is referring to here is any uncontrolled sexual desire for a person outside of the marriage relationship.

Clearly viewing pornography falls into this category. The whole purpose of pornography is to arouse the viewer sexually. And so it is intended to do exactly what Jesus forbids in this passage. Its purpose is to stimulate lust by observing the nakedness of a person who is not one's husband or wife. Of course it is not the only application of what Jesus is saying here. Looking at other people with lustful intent is possible without pornography. No doubt there was some form of pornography in Jesus' day, but also no doubt it was not as readily available as it is today. But Jesus was addressing something that has been a reality ever since sin entered the world. The look of lustful intent has always been possible – even before pornography became so easily available.

So the use of pornography is condemned by Jesus' teaching here. But so is any viewing or thinking or reading that stimulates sexual desire outside of the one place it is holy and good within a marriage relationship. Sexual desire is part of being human at least in some periods of life, but it is to be controlled in all situations except in the marriage bed. When it is not – when it is encouraged – when it is indulged – it becomes lust and it is what Jesus is speaking about in these verses.

Now it is significant that Jesus uses the word adultery here to refer to the sin of looking at a woman with lustful intent. Strictly speaking, adultery refers to sexual sin that violates marital faithfulness. Normally the term "adultery" does not refer to sexual sin if no married people are involved. Normally the term, sexual immorality, or fornication or some other word covers sexual sins of non-married people. But in this instance it is clear that Jesus is referring to any looking at another person with lustful intent. Jesus is using very broad language here. "[E]veryone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already

committed adultery with her in his heart.” As Craig Blomberg puts it in his commentary on this passage. “Adultery usually referred to sexual relations by a married person with a partner other than his or her spouse, but v. 28 makes it clear that Jesus is not limiting his commandments to married people but speaking of sexual sin in general.”

It is very important for our understanding of sexual sin that Jesus uses the word adultery here to refer to it. One of the reasons that Jesus uses the word adultery here is that he is giving the true interpretation of the Seventh Commandment which is “You shall not commit adultery.” So this is an instance of Jesus teaching that each of the Ten Commandments is much broader than its literal meaning. So the Seventh Commandment which forbids adultery is broken by sexual sins that are not literally adultery.

There is an insight here that is very important for our understanding of all sexual sin. The fact that Jesus uses the word adultery to refer to sexual sin that is not literally adultery points us to the fact that all sexual sin is an attack on marriage. By calling any sexual sin adultery, Jesus is teaching us that all sexual sin is a violation of the institution of marriage even if it is not a violation of a particular marriage at that point.

Sexual purity by unmarried persons is statement concerning the sacredness of sex within marriage. Sexual immorality by unmarried persons is a statement of denigrates the sacredness of sex within marriage. When a married person commits adultery he is despising his own marriage, but also the sacredness of sex within marriage in general. When unmarried persons commits sexual sin, they are committing adultery because any sex outside of marriage is an attack on the institution of marriage.

There is a broad and a narrow perspective to this. The broad perspective is the big picture. The widespread sexual activities of unmarried people in our society are an attack on the whole institution of marriage and it is part of the devaluation of marriage in our society which is at the same time a devaluation of sex itself.

But there is also a narrow perspective as well. Sexual sins are always damaging to the marriages and the sexuality of those who commit them. A single person who commits sexual sin is committing adultery against his or her future marriage partner should there ever be one. Any sexual activity that takes place outside the marriage relationship has an effect on the sexual relationship within a marriage relationship whether present or future.

Sex in its proper sphere is a delicate thing. It is physical, but it is much more than physical. It is a constituent part of a marriage relationship. It is not only about physical intimacy. It is about the deep union of persons in the marriage relationship. The two becoming one is a profound and tender and delicate thing. And a huge part of the depth of the one flesh relationship is its exclusivity. And any sexual activity outside of that exclusivity including mental sexual activity takes away from the depth of intimacy of the marriage relationship.

Now what that means is that the intimacy of every marriage is affected by the sexual sins of the partners because no one is without sexual sin just as every aspect of a marriage relationship is affected by the sinfulness of the partners. In spite of this through the grace of God in the gospels imperfect marriages can still be good marriages. Likewise with sexual relationships. No sexual relationship is perfect and it is part of our calling as married people to strive towards a sexual relationship that is as much as possible what God created it to be which means that it is not just physical – it is about love – it is about serving the other – it is about relational intimacy.

Both singles and married people should strive for sexual purity as a means of pursuing God's intention for sex within marriage. Married people should strive for sexual purity in thought and in deed both because it is required by God, but also as a way of loving and serving the spouse. Single people should strive for sexual purity because that is pleasing to God, but also as a way of loving and serving a future spouse should God provide one, or as a way of upholding the sacredness of sex within marriage if God's call is a call to singleness.

The Seventh Commandment is about guarding the profound meaning of sex within marriage. That means that sexual purity is about guarding the

profound meaning of sex within marriage whether one is married or not. The world has it completely wrong when it comes to sex. The world thinks that the importance of sex means that everyone should be free to indulge their sexual urges. The Bible says that the importance of sex means that it must be reserved for the profound purpose for which God has given it and that sexual purity is a witness to the great significance of sex in its proper place.

This is why Jesus refers to all sexual sin as adultery. All sexual sin is an attack on the profound significance of sex within marriage. It is always harmful to marriage both in society-wide terms, but also in terms of individual marriages whether present or future.

And we must see pornography in the light of this principle. According to Jesus here, pornography is adultery when we are married, and it is adultery if we are not married. Sex is a very delicate thing and any sexual activity that is not an expression of tender love to a spouse is going to take away from the exclusivity which is an integral part of the marriage relationship. That is true in the present for those who are married, and it is true for future marriages for those who will someday be married.

All sexual immorality is a distortion of the meaning of sex and it harms those who indulge in it as well as the spouses of those who indulge in it. Sexual immorality is about the physical pleasure of sex without the deeper meaning of sex. It is fundamentally selfish which is the very opposite of the purpose of sex in marriage. And so pornography and all forms of sexual immorality distort one's understanding of sex and also inhibits one's ability to experience sex the way God intends for it to be experienced in marriage. It is the cause of untold sexual difficulties within marriage because it fosters selfishness and expectations that distort what marital sex is supposed to be all about which is love rather than just physical release.

And in spite of the fact that it is clearly wrong in biblical perspective and harmful in so many ways, it is a huge problem among professing Christians. Why? Because we are not yet completely delivered from sin in our lives. Galatians 5:17 gives us the answer. "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the

flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” The flesh here refers to our sinful nature – not just our physicality. We still have sinful natures even if we are believers and that means that we have an attraction to sin even though we are being transformed by the Spirit so that we love the law and want to live in a way that is pleasing to God.

There are two biblical truths that we need to keep side by side in this discussion. One of those truths is that Christians still struggle with sin. That means that Christians struggle with sexual sin in various ways and to various degrees. It means that it is possible to be a Christian and struggle with pornography – that it is not the unpardonable sin and that there is forgiveness for those who fall. That is one truth that we must keep in mind. The other side is what Jesus mentions in Matthew 5:29-30, the verses that come right after the verses that we have been dwelling on. Jesus says “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better to lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

Jesus here and the Bible in many other places makes it clear that sexual sin that is not repented of will land you in hell. Repenting of sexual sin is an urgent matter. Jesus uses the extreme imagery of gouging out your eye if it causes you to sin or cutting off your right hand. He does not mean this literally, but he does intend to make a forceful point. Do whatever it takes to get free from sexual immorality because if you don't you will land up in hell. This is a matter of life and death – eternal life and eternal death.

But the other truth is the truth that Christians are not completely free from sin and so they fall into sin including sexual sin. The difference is the difference between living in sin and struggling against sin. A Christian can fall into sexual sin, but if he is a Christian he will confess his sin and repent and turn to the Lord for forgiveness. And he will fight against it and he will hate it and seek to be free from it. Not fighting and just indulging is a sign that one is not a Christian. This is a very important distinction. A true Christian will love God's law including the

Seventh Commandment and he will be very serious about keeping it so that when he falls he will repent, and he will strive for purity. If that struggle is not there, it is a sign that one is not born again. In the light of what Jesus says in our text, if we are not dealing seriously with sexual sin we are heading for hell unless we repent.

But the larger context is the whole story of Jesus which includes the cross, resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The larger context is the tender compassion of Jesus and his Father to all who confess their sins and believe in Jesus. Jesus has told us that he “came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). He told the parable of the prodigal son. He told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who prayed, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” He warned about the terrible consequences of continuing in sin. But he had come to deliver people from their sins. And as we learn of his character from the gospels we encounter one who was tender and compassionate to the weak and needy. His own disciples were weak and foolish and yet he loved them and did not reject them. And then he gave his life so that all who believe in him might not perish but have eternal life.

There are resources in the gospel to fight sexual sin as well as all other sin. In Galatians 5:16 Paul writes, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. Here too there is the side of what God does in the gospel, and there is the side of what we are required to do in connection with the gospel. Jesus’ words about plucking out eyes and cutting off hands suggest drastic measures. And the whole teaching about the gospel assures us that the Holy Spirit is at work in those who believe to give them the strength to make progress against sin in their lives. Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

There are practical steps that we can take if pornography or other sexual sin is a particular problem. 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, “Flee from sexual immorality.” Some people have found it helpful to seek someone to be accountable to. Some people have found freedom through opening up to a pastor or elder or a trusted friend of the same sex.

Some people have been helped by counselling. Some people have been helped by various software programs that either block or track or both. Plucking out eyes and cutting off hands means that we must do what it takes. Not everyone has the same weaknesses, but we are all weak in one way or another. If this is our particular weakness, there are steps to take, there is help. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

But the most important thing is the gospel and all the different facets of the gospel. God uses his Word and Spirit to change our hearts. The things that we are called to do to nurture our spiritual lives are key to strengthening our desires for holiness and weakening our desires for sin. All of the means of grace are about strengthening our love for God and love for our neighbor. That kind of love is a huge antidote to sexual temptation because it is about finding joy in God and in pleasing him and it is about learning not to focus on ourselves, but on being a blessing to others.

Fighting against sin is a multifaceted thing – it is about putting off sinful attitudes and actions and putting on godly attitudes and actions. It is about drawing on the resources that God has given us in the gospel. It is about being part of the body of Christ and receiving rebuke and encouragement from the other members of the body, and it is about nurturing love for God and our fellow man through the nourishment of the means of grace. When Jesus was resisting the temptations of the devil he quoted Deuteronomy 8:3. “[M]an does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” God uses his word in connection with all that Jesus has done for us and continues to do to cause us to grow in loving what God loves and hating what God hates. Sex in the right place is a beautiful thing. Sex in any other place is ugly and destructive. The more clearly we see that, the more we will be helped to keep it in its place.