

IN DEFENSE OF MARRIAGE AND MORALITY

Exodus 20:14

Ted Turner, the media tycoon, reportedly said: “We are living with outdated rules. The rules we’re living under are the Ten Commandments. And I bet nobody even pays much attention to them because they’re too old.” Turner’s view typifies that of the world; a world which either denies the existence of God; or paints Him as a doting, senile grandfather who cares nothing about the behavior of His children as long as they “stop by the house” on Sundays mornings.

Rejecting God and His laws, the world lives by its own set of rules, calling wrong right and right wrong, despising good and applauding evil. Paul wrote in Romans 1:32, **“Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”** And nowhere is this disregard for God more evident than in the worldly view of marriage, adultery, and immorality.

Immorality has existed since the fall of man into sin, and in many perverse forms. Homosexuality was rampant in the city of Sodom, the source of our word sodomy. Immorality was also prevalent in ancient Rome and Greece. In fact, the city of Corinth was so immoral that the Greek verb KORINTHIAZOMAI, literally “to Corinthianize,” was synonymous with “to fornicate.” The temple of Athena in Corinth housed a thousand priestess-prostitutes, a popular attraction in a harbor city teeming with love-starved sailors.

Yet, in our modern age sexual immorality is not only prevalent, it is proudly flaunted. Those who oppose immorality are labeled unloving, uncaring, and un-American; the product of too much parental scolding or too much religious programming. In many instances, the name of God Himself is invoked to condone immorality and same-sex marriage. A gay presidential candidate recently attacked religious conservatives for their view of same-sex marriage, saying: “If you have a problem with who I am, your quarrel is not with me. Your quarrel, sir, is with my creator.” In other words, “God made me who and what I am.”

Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul wrote: **“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality...Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret,”** Ephesians 5:3, 11-12.

Yet, how would Paul view what our modern society does in public and unashamedly? The filth available on the internet. Gay rights parades. Gay marriages in Christian churches. Vociferous attacks on traditional marriage by secular progressives and even by the U.S. Government. Companies like Ashley Madison proudly advertising on TV: “Life is short. Have an affair.” When asked about the morality of encouraging

adultery, the founder of Ashley Madison replied: “Monogamy has never worked in society, and in many respects and in many regards it doesn’t deserve to be upheld as a social value. So we just want to call it as it is. People stray, that’s all there is to it.”

To such a world God’s command, “**You shall not commit adultery,**” is—as Ted Turner insisted—outdated and old; and Paul’s defense of marriage and morality in Ephesians is absolute foolishness. Nevertheless, such instruction from God has never been more timely, more needed, or more relevant. So then, let’s prayerfully review the Sixth Commandment; specifically, its meaning, consequences, intent, and finally, our response to it.

First, the meaning of the Sixth Commandment. “**You shall not commit adultery,**” Exodus 20:14. Years ago, I asked a group of confirmation students: ‘What is adultery?’ One young man raised his hand and answered, “I’m not sure, Pastor. But I think adultery has something to do with adults.” A logical assumption, if not the correct definition. Our English word adultery is from the Latin word A-DUL-TER-AR-E, meaning to corrupt. The Hebrew word translated as adultery in the Sixth Commandment, NA-AF, has a similar meaning; literally to stain with a dye, and by extension, to defile. So adultery is a staining or soiling of God’s holy institution of marriage. And this defilement occurs when a married person has sexual relations with anyone other than his or her spouse.

And while the Sixth Commandment refers specifically to unfaithfulness within a marriage, it also forbids sex outside of marriage. “Wait. Did he really say that in this enlightened, modern era? That was then. This is now.” Can we see how easily Ted Turner’s perspective is adopted—the idea that God’s commandments are old and outdated; fine for Moses and the Israelites but not modern Americans. Am I mistaken? No. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 69% of Americans surveyed approved of premarital sex, and 63% approved of gay and lesbian relationships.

As with all of God’s commandments, the Sixth Commandment embraces both thoughts and deeds. Why is this important to understand? Human nature often justifies immorality by asserting: “It’s okay for me to look, as long as I don’t touch or take matters too far.” What was that famous presidential line from the 1990s? “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” An excuse based on a technicality, not based on truth. The same logic is often used to justify viewing pornography or engaging in sexual flirtations. However, according to Scripture, if looking leads to lusting, it is a sin and by no means acceptable to God.

Martin Luther wrote in his Large Catechism: “Therefore, this commandment is directed against all kinds of unchastity, whatever it may be called. Not only is the outward act of adultery forbidden, but also every kind of cause, motive, and means of adultery.” Jesus undoubtedly stunned His listeners when He said of the Sixth Commandment: “**You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not**

commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart,” Matthew 5:27-28.

How many churches today have chosen to bow down before the god of political correctness instead of the God of Scripture? Christian churches. Lutheran churches. In 1991 the ELCA adopted a resolution stating: “Gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” Since 2010 the ELCA has proudly permitted the ordination of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual ministers. Is this being a confessional Lutheran church? More importantly, is this in conformity with the clear teaching of God’s Word?

Nor is liberal Lutheranism alone in this practice. Joel Osteen, the pastor of one of the largest nondenominational churches in the United States, said in a 2013 interview with the Huffington Post: “God absolutely accepts everyone, including homosexuals...I believe that God has breathed His life into every single person. We’re all on a journey. Nobody’s perfect.” Osteen went on to say: “I believe every person is made in the image of God, and you have to accept them as they are, on their journey. I’m not here to be preaching hate, pushing people down. I’m not here telling people what they are doing wrong.”

But Pastor Osteen, shouldn’t you be warning against that which is wrong, when God’s Word clearly does so? Paul said this plainly of homosexuality in Romans 1: **“Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion,”** Romans 1:26-27. So then, which is more loving: To warn someone against self-destructive behavior or simply to ignore it or pass resolutions to accept it?

God does accept, welcome, and forgive all those who come to Him through the sacrifice and righteousness of Jesus Christ. Moreover, every one of us sins. Every one of us confesses with the apostle John, **“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us,”** 1 John 1:8. And every one of us obtains forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. But that very forgiveness also mandates a change in behavior. **“What shall we say, then?”** Paul asked in Romans 6:1-2. **“Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means. We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”** Jesus forgave the adulteress in John 8. **“Neither do I condemn you,”** He said. But He also added, **“Go now, and leave your life of sin.”** So yes, God accepts us as we are, but He never leaves us that way.

Second, the consequences of disobeying the Sixth Commandment. While the world views adultery as natural—“People stray, that’s all there is to it,” said the founder

of Ashley Madison—the Bible describes adultery as sinful and destructive. Clearly, adultery is against God’s will. The Sixth Commandment is His commandment. Ultimately, any sin against this commandment is first and foremost a sin against God. When seduced by Potiphar’s wife, Joseph replied in Genesis 39:9, **“How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”** After repenting of his adultery with Bathsheba, David confessed to God, **“Against You, You only have I sinned and done this evil in Your sight,”** Psalm 51:4.

The seriousness with which God views adultery and immorality is evident throughout Scripture. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed at least in part because of their sexual sins. Under the Mosaic Law, the penalty for adultery was death. Leviticus 20:10, **“If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.”**

While the death-penalty for adultery is not part of the New Testament era, we dare not think that God’s view of marriage and adultery has changed. It hasn’t. God’s views do not change because God does not change. In fact, the essence of the Sixth Commandment is clearly reflected in Hebrews 13:4, **“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”**

But adultery is not only a sin against God; it is a sin against many others, especially one’s spouse and family. And such a betrayal of intimate trust, the marriage vow, is not easily forgiven or forgotten. The long-term consequences of a “moment of pleasure” are incalculable when measured in broken hearts, broken homes, and broken families. And by destroying families, adultery—and for that matter, the attack on Scriptural marriage—also undermine the God-ordained foundations of human society.

The question then is this: Are adultery and immorality really as harmless as the world insists? Far from it. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 6:32, **“Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; he who does so destroys his own soul.”** Or translated differently, ‘destroy his own life.’ His life and the lives of many others.

Third, the intent of the Sixth Commandment. God created us as sexual beings. He intended the gift of sex to be pleasurable, procreative, and reserved for the lifelong commitment of marriage. Within that commitment, sex was to be an intimate expression of the intimacy of marriage. In fact, Adam recognized the intimacy and oneness of marriage already in Eden, saying of Eve: **“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man,”** Genesis 2:23. Marriage was also intended to be the loving, stable framework in which to raise children. But friends, there is nothing loving or caring or committed or stable about adultery or sexual immorality. These are selfish, destructive acts. And this is why God prohibited them.

“You shall not commit adultery.” Of course, no one likes to be told NO, especially the Old Sinful Nature. Yet, even at a purely human level, saying no is paramount to safety. Loving parents do not tell their children “no” to deprive them but to protect them. And if this is true of earthly parents, how much truer of our perfect Father in heaven? God did not give the Sixth Commandment to deprive us but to keep us from hurting ourselves, our spouse, our children, our neighbor, and ultimately society itself.

Unfortunately, many Lutherans today have no idea what the historic Lutheran Confessions are, much less what they contain. But these Confessions—the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms—treat many of the same issues we still face in the Twenty-First Century. This is because human nature never changes; and more importantly, the Word of God never changes. And what makes these historic Lutheran Confessions valuable is that they accurately present the timeless truths of the Scriptures.

And so we read the following about marriage and immorality in the Augsburg Confession: “While God’s commandment is in force, and the custom of the Church is well known, impure celibacy will cause many scandals, adulteries, and other crimes that deserve punishment from just rulers. In light of all this, it is incredibly cruel that the marriage of priests is forbidden. God has commanded that marriage be honored. Marriage is most highly honored in the laws of all well-ordered commonwealths, even among the heathen.” Augsburg Confession, Article XXIII.

For a moment, reflect on the phrase “many scandals, adulteries, and other crimes that deserve punishment.” These words were presented by Lutherans to Emperor Charles V at the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1530 A.D. Yet, they still ring true in contemporary headlines about sex scandals in the Catholic Church. CBS News, May 14, 2016: “Sexual abuse scandal rocks Long Island Catholic school.” National Catholic Reporter, May 20, 2016: “Prominent French priest and Vatican advisor accused in sex scandal.” Christianity Today, May 21, 2016: “Spike in sex abuse reports against U.S. Catholic Clergy.” Why these headlines? Why this abuse? In part because of prohibiting Catholic priests and nuns to marry. Something the Lutheran Confessions warned about five hundred years ago.

Finally, our response to the Sixth Commandment. As Christians, our sincere desire is to please the Lord and obey His Commandments. Yet, despite our best intentions and efforts, we still sin against the Sixth Commandment in thought, if not in deed. And so we lament with the apostle Paul in Romans 7: **“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing...What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?”**

But we also rejoice with Paul in his answer to this question: **“Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord,”** Romans 7:25. For in Christ we obtain the forgiveness of our sins. In Christ we obtain the willingness, motivation, and strength to walk the way of God’s commandments, as we are led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. And when we are tempted to commit adultery, in Christ we obtain the ability to say with Joseph: **“How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”**

The Sixth Commandment prohibits adultery. But the immeasurable cost of Christ’s sacrifice for our sins—even more than the commandment—shows how wrong, how out of godly character, and how utterly ungrateful the acts of adultery and immorality are. This is why Paul, when writing to the Ephesians, first mentioned God’s forgiveness in Christ before urging Christians to lead lives worthy of their high calling and the high cost of their redemption.

He wrote: **“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people,”** Ephesians 5:2-3. Improper behavior in view of the commandment; but even more so, improper behavior in view of the cross.

This then is what Scripture teaches in defense of marriage and morality; teaching that is faithfully reflected in the historic Lutheran Confessions; and teaching which by the grace of God we also confess in our own Christian congregation. Adhering to this teaching will not make us popular; but it will make us faithful to the Scriptures.

Perhaps there is no more fitting way to conclude this message than with Luther’s explanation of the Sixth Commandment in his Small Catechism: “Thou shalt not commit adultery. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we may lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed, and each love and honor his spouse.”

To this end, help us God.