

“You Shall Not Commit Adultery”

The Sixth Commandment

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
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“You shall not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14)

***“Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.” (Psalm 51:10)***

Beauty and ugliness. We have all heard the adage, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” It means that certain forms of art are appealing to some, but not to others, and that certain pieces of music move some people while others just don’t like them. Then there is the concept of human beauty, where one person may find another person attractive in ways that others do not. And beauty can include inner beauty, leading some to see a person as beautiful in a holistic way.

Yet for most of us, there are limits to this concept. Some things simply aren’t beautiful. Death and destruction aren’t beautiful. It is hard to see anything but ugliness in a horror movie that is designed to depict hell. Hatred and cruelty are ugly. In fact all evil is inherently ugly.

To that list of things that are ugly, we add adultery, the action and attitude that is forbidden in the Sixth Commandment. Seen in its essence, which is our purpose today, it is ugly, and destructive. We know that it ruins marriages, tears families apart, and often has a chain of consequences that is devastatingly long. Careers can be ruined. Trust is most often severely damaged. Stability is almost always dissipated. Self-esteem is undermined. Happiness is vanquished.

It is for this reason, and because of the far-reaching negative effects of adultery, that they Lord says, don’t do it: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). Within this commandment is an inherent contrast. Adultery is at one end of the spectrum, and genuine marriage is at the other. The one is ugly and the other is beautiful. The one is dirty, and the other is pure. And the point of this commandment to keep it that way in our attitudes and actions.

A command of mercy. Before going further, I’d like to focus for a moment on the actual words of the commandment—on the way they sound. They can sound so judgmental and condemning. People have, and can fall into that attitude of condemnation that caused the Pharisees to bring to Jesus a woman caught in the very act of adultery. “Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the Law, commanded us that such should be stoned...” (John 8:4-5). We know the response: “Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground...[then] raised Himself up and said to them, ‘He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first’” (John 8:6,7). Everyone who has read that story and reflected on it sees an attitude of mercy. Yes, this woman had done wrong, and the Lord spoke to her about that. But not with judgment; instead with mercy.

So it is that we approach this commandment with mercy. The Lord gave it to us not to condemn, but to help. He spoke those words out of His ardent love for our happiness to eternity, and His desire to keep pain and suffering from our lives. If it is true, and it is, that adulteries destroy marriages and families... If it is true, and it is, that they ruin trust and create pain and suffering for many people...then wouldn’t we expect a God of love to do whatever He could to lead us to avoid all that hurt?

Contrasts: “Where does it lead?” In the spirit of mercy, and in an attempt to capture some of the Lord’s desire to lead away from hurt toward happiness, we next explore some of the teachings that expand on the concept of contrasts between adultery and marriage, in terms of their character, and where they lead.

When studying the Word, there is a long and sad list of things that tend to come along with the package of adultery. Adulteries are associated with ugliness (*Continuation Concerning the Last Judgment* 9), with “unrestrained lust” (*Arcana Caelestia* 824), an unmerciful attitude (*Arcana Caelestia* 991), savageness (*Ibid.*), the desire to possess another person for selfish purposes (*Arcana Caelestia* 5990), deceit (*Arcana Caelestia* 824), hypocrisy (*Arcana Caelestia* 1326, 5060), and more than anything else, with cruelty (*Arcana Caelestia* 824, 4631, 5057, 7370).

Marriages, on the other hand, are said to be “holy, pure, and clean” (*Conjugal Love* 64). They are associated with “innocence, peace, tranquility, inmost friendship, complete trust, a mutual desire of heart and mind to do the other every good, and...the happiness of heaven” (*Conjugal Love* 180).

Another reason for drawing up these two lists is that sometimes we don’t see these things. In our culture, adultery doesn’t always appear ugly. There are perspectives that see beauty there. There are movies that make it seem enticing and romantic. And there are confused states of mind where people feel persuaded that there is something good there. It is for this very reason that one passage makes the statement, “Licentious embraces and conjugal (or married) embraces seem alike in their outermost results, although they are entirely different inwardly” (*Conjugal Love* 439; cf. no. 478). We are called to acknowledge: the one is inwardly ugly; the other is inwardly beautiful.

The fallacy of short-term happiness. If we stop and think about it, all of us know these things at some level. So we might ask ourselves, why do people find themselves committing adultery? Why do some throw away years of marriage and family life for another relationship? We know that there are many reasons, including ignorance, seduction, and the like. But some people get caught up in them because they are persuaded by the hells at some level that they deserve it. There is a fallacy of short-term happiness that leads particularly to adultery and things that are associated with it. Within our culture is the message, “You deserve to be happy—and if you’re not happy, then it’s okay to do what makes you happy.”

How many times have you seen it in a movie, or sadly talked with a friend who has fallen prey to this attitude, where the person “comes to their senses” as it were, and says, in effect, “I don’t know what I was thinking”? The thing is, most people aren’t thinking when caught up in adultery or lust. They’re acting more on impulse. They’re deluded by the moment. They’re stuck in the present, thinking on a lower level about what will make “me” happy. It is the fallacy of short-term happiness.

Unlawful couplings. We are taught that we are led by our loves, or that our affections drive us. This is all well and good when those loves are good. But when they are self-centered, one of two things happens. Either our brains go to sleep and we just act, or our brains become enlivened in an effort to seek confirmation, justification, for what we want.

One of the fascinating things in this regard is the whole new way that the Writings for the New Church lead us to think about the Sixth Commandment. They lead us beyond the more common way of thinking about adultery, to the concept of unlawful couplings in general. We read:

In the internal or spiritual sense [‘committing adultery’] means perverting forms of good and falsifying truths... [and] using the Word to lend support to evils and falsities....

Scarcely anyone at the present day knows that these things are meant by ‘committing adultery’ in the spiritual sense, because few people within the Church at the present day know what the spiritual realm is and how it differs from the natural. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8904)

What does falsification of truth and adulteration of goodness mean? Sticking to the subject at hand, we can bring forward the fallacy of short-term happiness. We’re talking about justifications here. The mind latches on to ideas that support what the will wants to do. Not only does it look for such justifications in the world around us, but it can also look to the Word for support in the very things the Word commands against. One might say, “The Lord forgave the woman caught in adultery.” Another might reason from the Word that man is weak and fallible, unable to control his physical urges. In fact, some people have gone so far as to seek evidence in the Word for the fact that they cannot control themselves, and are therefore not responsible for their adulterous actions. To the extent that true ideas from the Word are applied to some selfish love, it is an unlawful coupling.

The same is true for something good that is tainted. Marriage is holy and wholesome, as taught in the Word. To the extent that a person belittles or undermines it, there is a mixture of something inherently good with something not good. This is why in the deepest sense, this commandment is about “denying the holiness of the Word and profaning it” (*True Christian Religion* 315). It is also why one passage adds to this, “denying the divinity of the Lord” (*True Christian Religion* 236), for He is the Author of the Word, and the Creator of marriage. Therefore to scoff at marriage, to discredit the Word, and to turn oneself away from the Lord, all leads to a joining NOT of goodness and truth within a person’s life, but to the joining of evil and falsity. It leads, not only to committing adultery in the more literal sense, but to the whole array of other destructive things that human beings can involve themselves with. Any evil which is justified with true ideas from the Word, any mental gymnastics we perform to delude ourselves into thinking that something commanded against in the Word is okay, anything good and wholesome that is spoiled is, more broadly “committing adultery.”

“Shunning wandering lusts...” But there is power in focusing our attention on adultery and marriage in particular—what leads to the one and what supports and honors the other. While it has broader applications, this commandment rightly calls us to shun adultery and everything that leads towards it. The truth of the matter is, we live in a depraved world, where almost anything goes. Therefore this commandment is here to urge us to pay attention to the messages, attitudes, and allures of the world around us that can subtly and powerfully lead us astray. It is a call for us to ask ourselves, “How can I move more towards order and goodness?”

The answer comes in one passage in the Writings for the New Church. It’s talking about how people can receive, even in this world, “an internal union or union of souls which makes a real marriage”—what some in our church call the dream of love truly conjugal. It says,

[This can happen] in the case of people who, from their youth had loved, desired and sought from the Lord a lawful and lovely partnership with one, and who spurn and reject roving lusts as an offense to the nostrils. (*Conjugal Love* 49)

This, incidentally, is the same thing the Lord was calling us to, when He said, in the negative, “Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

It's not over. Well seen in all these ways, there are many of us who can feel that we have blown it. There are those who have committed adultery in its literal form. There are those, many of us, who have fallen prey to lust, and who have given room to uncleanness. And even if this arena is not one of our greatest spiritual challenges, all of us have work to do with regard to justifying thing the Lord forbids, or giving room to selfishness within us, and letting it break forth in ugly ways. There are unlawful couplings in our lives.

It is true for many that an exploration of this commandment can leave them feeling somewhat low and demoralized. But I do not believe that is what the Lord wants us to feel. We talked before about contrasts. For every expression of selfishness there is an opposite goodness. Even as there is ugliness around the subject of adultery, there is beauty around the subject of marriage. And there is mercy in this command. It indicates a way forward for all of us.

What can we do? We can shun wandering lusts. We can honor marriage as the central institution it is—one of the basic building blocks of society, and the source of the greatest happiness that two human beings can experience. We can put energy and effort into our own marriages if we are married. We can reaffirm within ourselves the basic truth, marginalized in so many ways in our world today, that the sexual act still belongs exclusively to the marriage relationship. We can learn about marriage in terms of its origins: that it comes from the marriage of goodness and truth within us, or comes to us to the extent that we engage in the work of spiritual growth or regeneration. We can remain watchful for the ways in which the fallacy of short-term happiness, or “I deserve...” filters into our thinking. We can recognize with sadness the ugliness and suffering that comes to people's lives when adultery happens. We can pray to the Lord daily, saying “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). We can look for and honor all that is beautiful with regard to marriage. We can celebrate anniversaries more ardently—our own or those of people we know. We can honor and respect the decisions of those who are not married, to hold out for the dream, instead of getting married for the sake of getting married. We can take advantage of the tools the Lord has given to help marriages remain strong or even to work through difficult times.

The truth is, there are lots of ways we can honor the Sixth Commandment. It is not just for those who are married. It is not there to condemn. It is not only about marriage. It's about striving for what is pure and clean in all things of life.

We close today with a teaching that I believe gets at the heart of the commandment against adultery. It reminds us of the Lord as the Author of this commandment, the Creator of marriage, and the one who strives to bring genuine happiness in marriage to us all:

Consequently, if conjugal love is received from its Author, who is the Lord, it is accompanied by holiness from Him, which continually purges and purifies the love. If, then, people have a desire and striving for it in their will, that love daily becomes more clean and pure to eternity. (Conjugal Love 64) **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Matthew 5:27-32; *True Christian Religion* 313-315; *Apocalypse Explained* 983.

Matthew 5

²⁷“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

³¹“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”

True Christian Religion 313-315

You are not to commit adultery. In the natural sense, this commandment forbids not only committing adultery, but also having obscene desires and acting on them, and so indulging in lascivious thoughts and talk. It is clear from these words of the Lord that even lusting is committing adultery:

You have heard that it was said by the men of old, You are not to commit adultery. But I say to you, that if anyone looks at another man's wife so as to lust after her, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Matt. 5:27, 28.

The reason is that when lust is in the will, it becomes like a deed; for the enticement only enters the understanding, but the intention enters the will, and a lustful intention is a deed.

In the spiritual sense committing adultery means adulterating the various kinds of good in the Word and falsifying its truths. These meanings of committing adultery have until now been unknown, because the spiritual sense of the Word has until now been hidden.

In the celestial sense committing adultery means denying the holiness of the Word and profaning it. It follows from the spiritual sense given above, which is adulterating the good and falsifying the truth of the Word, that this is the meaning in the celestial sense. The holiness of the Word is denied and profaned by those who in their hearts ridicule everything connected with the church and religion.

Apocalypse Explained 983

That marriage is heaven and that adultery is hell cannot be better seen than from considering their origin. The origin of love truly conjugal is the Lord's love for the church and this is why the Lord is called in the Word the “Bridegroom” and the “Husband,” and the church the “bride” and the “wife.” It is from this marriage that the church is the church in general and in particular. The church in particular is a man in whom the church is. From this it is clear that the Lord's conjunction with a person of the church is the very origin of love truly conjugal.