

Series: “10 Keys to Joyful Living”
#7: The Tie that Binds
Malachi 2:13-16 and Exodus 20:14 (GNT)
By Rev. John Gill

He was already married, and so was she. And yet, there was something about her – when he first laid eyes on her, he just knew he had to have her. And why not? His marriage was just an empty shell, a mere formality. He didn’t really love his wife. He had only married her because of her family-ties – he wanted her dad’s position, and figured it was smart to marry into the family. But, he didn’t love her.

He wasn’t even sure that he loved this woman he had been watching from a distance. He didn’t even know her name. But he wanted her, just the same.

So, one day, it happened. He arranged a rendezvous with her when her husband was out of town. He turned on all his charm, and she fell for it. And, before they knew what had happened, they had fallen madly in love.

Their secret love affair brought excitement to their lives. They thought they could keep it hidden. But then, she turned up pregnant. When he heard the news, he panicked! To solve the problem, he arranged to have her husband murdered.

A story-line from a soap-opera, perhaps? No. Try the Bible. The account of the most notorious adulterer in history: King David. This story is ancient, and yet thoroughly contemporary. This sad scenario has been played out millions of times, and the results, though maybe not as extreme, are always tragic.

Yet, for some reason, people throughout history have failed to learn from David’s mistake. In fact, instead of being shocked by adultery, we in America today have accepted it, almost as a normal part of married life. Where would the soap operas be if suddenly they were no longer allowed to depict adultery? Sooner or later, it seems every marriage on TV is impacted by this sin. And it is no secret that one of the major causes of the high divorce rate in America is the unfaithfulness of one or both spouses.

J. Elsworth Kalas says that *“you can judge the quality of a culture by that which shocks it.”* He writes, *“The naïve are shocked by almost everything . . . we are shocked by almost nothing, and we’re rather proud of it.”* Kalas goes on, *“The peril of leprosy, we’re told, is not that it damages the extremities, but that it causes a loss of feeling in the skin. As a result, a patient may burn or injure himself or herself without knowing, because the patient has lost the defense mechanism of pain. Similarly,”* Kalas says, *“adultery itself may not be as destructive to our culture as the virtual indifference with which we respond to it. By losing our capacity for ethical pain, we are weakening our moral defenses.”*

Adultery destroys marriages, brings loneliness and despair, and often ends in divorce, leaving children confused and angry. It’s no wonder God put it as one of his Top 10 rules: *“Just don’t do it!”*

If adultery has been recognized as causing so much pain and turmoil in our marriages and within our culture, why don’t we ever learn? We know the devastation it causes, and yet, many otherwise good and moral people succumb to its temptation, and leave ruined lives in their wake.

Why? What's the reason so many people break this commandment? Well, there are a couple of reasons:

1) First of all, we are basically self-centered.

Our society teaches us that we should gratify our own wishes and desires FIRST, and only consider what impact our actions may have on others as an afterthought. In other words, our culture legitimizes our sinful human nature – our original sin that has plagued us from the very beginning.

David was more driven in satisfying his animalistic sexual drive than in considering what effect his liaison might have on his already strained relationship with his wife and children. He was so obsessed with sleeping with Bathsheba that he didn't even recognize how it might compromise his reputation and his ability to govern the nation. And he was so overpowered by his carnal nature that he never even considered that his actions would put his relationship with God himself in jeopardy.

We want what we want – and we want it NOW! And if we think it will make us happy, we don't really care if it makes anyone else unhappy. We are selfish. And our society says, "That's OK!"

2) The other reason so many commit adultery is that society has taught us that "love" is the supreme virtue in relationships.

It used to be that, when couples came to the altar to be married, they would say, "for as long as we both shall live," – and really meant it. Nowadays, they may still repeat those words, but in their heart-of-hearts, they are saying, "for as long as we both shall LOVE." (Some even have changed the word in their vow!) No longer is marriage, "for better or worse." It's, "until someone better comes along."

American couples today have lost the old-fashioned notion of "commitment." We talk about "falling" in or out of love as being the prime justification for our marriages, our adultery, and our divorces. If "falling in love" is our only criteria for who we should have a sexual relationship with, then there is nothing to stop us from engaging in pre-marital or extra-marital sex. And if we have to FEEL "in love" all the time to remain married, then it's no wonder that there are so many divorces!

Friends, I've got shocking news for you! Love is NOT the basis for marriage! The basis for marriage is commitment. Throughout any marriage relationship, there will be moments when you are madly in love with each other; but there will also be moments when your love may seem to grow cold. And those are the times when the level of your commitment is tested.

The basic problem of most marriages today is that people don't know that marriage is a "covenant." In the eyes of the state, when two people get married they enter into a marriage "contract." In a contractual arrangement, two parties agree to do certain thing for one another, and to expect certain things from the other. So long as both parties live up to the contract, the relationship between the parties remains intact. But, if a couple sees their marriage as a contract, then, if one of the parties FAILS to live up to the terms of the contract, then the other party may not feel bound by it.

For instance, if this is your understanding of marriage, and your husband is not very romantic or fails to satisfy your needs, then you can feel "justified" in having an affair. After all, HE is not living up to his part of the contract – so why should you? It makes perfect sense – if marriage is contract.

But according to the Bible, marriage is NOT a contract, it is a “covenant.” When two people stand before the altar of God and exchange their vows, they are willingly submitting to one another and uniting in a covenant.

Now, covenants are very different from contracts. When two parties are in covenant – yes, they agree to do things for one another. But more than that, they commit to love one another unconditionally, the way that Christ loves us. If one party of a covenant should fail to live up to their side, that does NOT release the other party to do as he or she pleases. He or she is still bound to the covenant, and is expected to work toward reconciliation. Now, I must offer a caveat: Of course, when all those efforts at making a reconciliation have been exhausted, it may well be that divorce is unavoidable – but at least you tried your best. (And of course, if one party is experiencing abuse of any kind, certainly divorce is justified.)

The Biblical model for the marriage covenant is the covenant God has made with us in Jesus Christ. God and we have entered freely into a covenant of love. Yet you and I constantly fail to live up to our side of the covenant. But, praise the Lord, God continues to live up to his side. A covenant is a tie that binds, and it ultimately cannot be severed, even when it has been betrayed.

That’s why God takes adultery so seriously. That’s why he made it one of his Top 10 rules to live by. In fact, he considers it so serious that the Old Testament punishment for adultery was death! It is wrong. It’s wrong for many reasons: It’s wrong because 1) it is motivated by self-centeredness, 2) it brings harm to all the parties involved, 3) it devastates families by leading to divorce. But the main reason it is wrong is 4) it is a sin against God.

I think it’s telling that a synonym of “adultery” is “infidelity.” Infidelity has two meanings: 1) adultery, and 2) godlessness (as in the use of the word, “infidels”). In fact, in a number of places in the Bible (especially in the Prophets), whenever God’s people turned away from God, they would be accused of spiritual “adultery.” If you or I were to enter into an adulterous relationship, we would be denying our relationship with God – Why? Because our bodies were made by God and therefore, we are not free to do with them anything we want.

You know, we all realized that human beings have both a physical and a spiritual dimension. However, most people today have the misconception that their physical self has nothing to do with their spiritual self, and visa versa. That’s how young people who consider themselves to be faithful Christians can decide to live together, and see nothing wrong with it. In fact, any pastor will tell you that the majority of couples who come to the church to be married now-a-days are already living together, and they don’t see any incongruity in that.

And if our physical and our spiritual selves have nothing to do with one another, then there WOULD be nothing wrong with it. But that’s NOT the Biblical view. According to scripture, God created us to be one unity, body AND soul. It is impossible to do something with the body, and not have it impact the soul, and the other way around. When a man and woman unite in sexual intercourse, something profoundly spiritual takes place. And no matter how casually we try to make illicit sex, we can’t escape the fact that, once we have crossed that physical threshold, we are bound together on a much higher plain.

You see, that was God’s divine plan from the very beginning. God created us to be sexual beings and he blessed sexual relationship – but ONLY within the bounds of the marriage covenant. It is God who joins

man and woman into one. As the marriage ceremony puts it: *“Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder.”*

If we should decide to wander outside of God’s ordinances and break the marriage covenant that God has ordained, we would be uniting, both physically and spiritually, with someone without the blessing of God. We shouldn’t be surprised, then, when disaster follows.

So, no question about it – having a sexual relationship with someone other than your spouse is wrong, no matter what the circumstances. That’s what the Bible teaches!

But, does that let the rest of us off the hook? If we’ve never actually committed adultery, this commandment doesn’t have anything to say to US, does it? Yes it does. We break this commandment, not just by sleeping with someone besides our spouse, but in lesser, more innocent ways. For instance:

1) If you or I fail to nurture and strengthen our marriages – if we neglect our spouse and are not a full and equal partner in the covenant, then, in a way, we are committing a kind of adultery. That’s because adultery is a by-product of a neglected marriage. This means that, even if a person is the victim of an adulterous spouse, the victim MAY bear part of the guilt! – MAY... Of course, that doesn’t excuse the act of adultery – that is plainly sin. But if we have not done everything we could do to build up our marriage, WE may share in the blame.

2) Another way we can break the commandment is by committing a kind of “emotional adultery.” It is fully possible that a person can remain sexually faithful to their spouse, and enter into a non-physical intimate relationship with another person. This can be very subtle, but every bit as devastating as sexual unfaithfulness. With emotional adultery, a person gets their emotional or relational needs met by someone other than their spouse – perhaps a co-worker, a neighbor, or a friend. It may SEEM innocent, but it can drive a wedge between you and your spouse that can destroy your marriage.

3) A third way we all can break this command is by lusting after others. Jesus spoke very directly about this danger, as well. In the fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus says: *“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 lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

As always, Jesus not only reinforced the Old Testament law, he cut right to the heart of the matter and raised it to an even higher standard. Just as the underlying sin leading to murder is hate, the underlying sin leading to adultery is lust.

Now, Jesus wasn’t saying that all sexual attraction is bad – far from it! God CREATED sex! In fact, one whole book of the Bible, The Song of Solomon, is dedicated to celebrating romantic and sexual love between husbands and wives. Within marriage, it is a glorious thing! It is only a problem when our sexuality is mis-directed.

The Greek translation of the word “lust” Jesus uses here is this: “to look at a woman (or man) with the deliberate intention of lusting after her (or him).” In other words, Jesus was saying that we must not lust after what we have no right to desire. (By the way, that’s also why pornography is a sin.)

Years ago, Jimmy Carter got into “hot water” when he confessed in an interview that he had “lusted” after other women. The secular press had a field-day. But Carter understood that no one is exempt

from the universality of this sin. Who can honestly say that they NEVER have looked at another woman or man with lust in our hearts? We are all guilty of breaking the seventh commandment, if even only in the quietness of our own imaginations.

So, as we consider this prohibition against adultery, we find that we all have broken it, to one degree or another. We are ALL “adulterers.” We stand convicted of this sin, and we had better do something about it!

In order to deal with this sin, I’d like to offer a word of advice to all of us here this morning:

- 1) First, a word for those of us who are happily married. God bless you! Celebrate your marriage! Guard it jealously. Lavish each other with love! Do all in your power to nurture the love and commitment you share. If you will do this, you will make your marriage “adultery-proof.”
- 2) And a word for the many of you here this morning who have lost the love of their life to death, I say to you: Give God thanks for the years you shared. Treasure the memory of your beloved, and honor his or her life by living a full and joyful life here and now, just as she or he would desire for you. And pray for and encourage young married couples in your life who may find inspiration from your experience and wisdom.
- 3) For those who may be in marriages that are somewhat less than fulfilling: Ask yourself, “Where is God in our marriage?” There is a proverb that says “a three-stranded rope is not easily broken.” It takes three to make a marriage strong – the husband, the wife, and God. If you and your spouse will invite God into your marriage and diligently work to keep Him as the focal-point of your home, you will be amazed at how close the two of you will become, and Satan will not be able to get a foot-hold in your marriage.
- 4) Now for those who are unhappy in their marriages, and those who are single: Beware of lusting after someone you have no right to desire. That means, under NO circumstances are you to come between a husband and wife. There is no joy in being “the other woman or man,” and living with the knowledge that you have “put asunder what God has joined together.” Concentrate on focusing your romantic attention on potential mates who are not already committed to someone else.
- 5) And finally, a word for those who may have already been affected by adultery. As bad as this sin is, your marriage is not beyond redemption. In the 8th chapter of John, a crowd of self-righteous men dragged a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery before Jesus, and wanted to know what they should do with her. *“The law says that she should be stoned to death,”* they said, *“What do you say?”* Jesus looked at them straight in the eye and said, *“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”* One by one, they all slunk away.

When they were alone, Jesus asked her, *“Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?”* *“No one sir,”* she said. And Jesus uttered the most beautiful words to her – words we all long to hear Jesus say to us – He said, *“Neither do I condemn you.”*

Now, if the story ended there, it still would be a wonderful story of forgiveness and restoration, because, in Christ, we can be forgiven of ANY sin, no matter how awful. That the Good News!

But there is a stipulation Jesus gives this woman . . . not a condition for forgiveness, but an instruction on how to live a new life in Christ: *“Neither do I condemn you,”* Jesus said. Then added, *“Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again.”*

If your marriage has been marred by infidelity, there is good news for you! There is hope for healing and the promise of a fresh start – But only if you can bring yourselves to ask for and grant one another forgiveness, and then recommit to the covenant you made with each other on your wedding day. Friends, if God can raise the dead, He can surely resurrect your marriage!

So there you have it – the seventh key to the joyful life. The secret to a fulfilling and satisfying marriage is to remain faithful to the vows you made when you stood before the altar of God when you sealed the covenant between you. If you will do that, then you will be able to say, along with the hymn writer, “Blest be the tie that binds – our hearts in Christian love.”