

## Exodus 20:14

### ‘You shall not commit adultery’

#### Michael Faraday

Michael Faraday lived from 1791 to 1867.

He was a British chemist, experimental physicist and natural philosopher.

He was famous for many things.

However, most of us remember him because of his great work on the nature of electricity.

Much of our modern understanding of electrolysis and the relationship between electricity and magnetism can be traced back to Michael Faraday.

Today I want to tell you a story about Michael Faraday.

On one occasion in his life there was a gathering of distinguished scientists who had come to listen to his masterly explanations of some scientific matter.

They listened spellbound.

The final climax came in the last hour when he held his brilliant audience enthralled as he demonstrated the nature and properties of magnets.

The experiment he conducted was so novel, so brilliant, and so triumphant that when he resumed his seat the house rocked for some time with enthusiastic applause.

Finally the applause died down and the Prince of Wales who was later to become King Edward II rose to propose a motion of congratulation.

The resolution was duly seconded.

It was then carried with renewed thunders of applause.

Then suddenly the uproar ceased and a strange silence settled over the audience.

The audience waited for Faraday's reply.

But Michael Faraday did not appear.

He had left the gathering.

Only his most intimate friends knew what had become of him.

You see, Michael Faraday was an elder in his little church.

The church only boasted twenty members.

But the hour at which Faraday concluded his lecture was the hour of the weeknight prayer meeting.

Now, I'm not sure that I hold to everything that Michael Faraday believed about God.

Nevertheless, Michael Faraday did know and demonstrate something of great importance.

He illustrated that faithfulness to God is greater and of more importance than the applause of humans.

The topic for tonight's sermon is the seventh commandment – ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

And as we look at this commandment you will see that I consider this commandment to be about the whole question of faithfulness.

And as we look at this topic I want you to remember the story of Michael Faraday.

For Faraday has shown us something of the essence of what this commandment means.

## Thinking about Exodus 20:14

### ***Adultery in the Ancient Near East***

Okay, let's get underway and take a look at Exodus 20:14.

The first thing we need to do is define adultery.

Adultery is sexual intercourse by mutual consent between one married person and another married person who are not married to each other.

Second, adultery was commonly regarded throughout the ANE.

For example, we know that the Egyptians and other ancient peoples regarded adultery as a terrible social sin.

In fact they used a common term.

They called it 'The Great Sin'.

The way they saw it, adultery was a private wrong committed against the husband.

You see, a wife was his property and in adultery the couple concerned infringed his exclusive right of possession of his wife.

The end result was that the husband could determine the punishment of the couple involved.

### ***Adultery in Ancient Israel***

Now let's take a look at adultery in Ancient Israel.

First of all, adultery was used for a broader range of sins in Israel.

It is used of...

- sexual intercourse of a man with the wife of another man (Leviticus 18:20; 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22).
- sexual intercourse of a man with the fiancé of another man (Deuteronomy 23-27).
- sexual intercourse of a wife with a man who was probably married (Hosea 4:13; Ezekiel 16:32) and was not her husband.

But the big difference between Israel and the rest of the ANE is that Israel did not regard adultery as a social sin.

Take a look at Genesis 39:9.

This verse tells the story of the handsome Joseph who finds himself the object of the attention of someone else's wife.

She continually tries to get him to sleep with her.

But he refuses.

Listen to what he says to her:

*...you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"*

Notice what Joseph is saying.

He is saying that adultery is a sin against God, not against Potiphar.

It is God who says adultery is wrong, not society.

It is God who is offended by adultery.

And therefore in the OT it is God who says what the punishment for adultery is.

And so, in Israel the husband has no legal power to pardon his faithless wife or her partner.

God prescribes the punishment.

And he says that the punishment is to be death (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22; cf. Jeremiah 29:21-23; Ezekiel 16:38).

### **Why is it 'The Great Sin' against God?**

Please understand this important point.  
In Israel adultery is not just 'the Great Sin'.  
It is 'the great sin' AGAINST God.  
But this just makes us ask another question, doesn't it?  
Why is adultery the great sin against God.  
Well, in order to understand this, we need to do some solid thinking.  
Let's start by remembering the context of the commandments.  
Go back to Exodus 20:3.  
Look at what it says:

*"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

*"You shall have no other gods before me.*

God is reminding the people of Israel that he is the God who rescued and redeemed them.  
They are therefore in relationship with him.  
And this relationship with him is to be exclusive as far as they are concerned.  
He is to be their God.  
They are to be his people.  
And they are to have no other Gods but him.  
In other words, the relationship between God and his people is to be one of faithfulness.  
He promises to be faithful to them.  
And they promise to be faithful to him.  
What's more, he has demonstrated his faithfulness time and time again in this past and he will demonstrate it time and time again in their future.  
He is the God who is faithful.  
So, when a man or a woman forsakes their wife or their husband, what are they doing?  
Well...  
Firstly, they are refusing to be like the God who rescued them.  
They are refusing to be faithful like he is.  
They break faithfulness with their spouse.  
And secondly, they are refusing to live by the law that he gave them.  
In other words, they break faithfulness with him.  
Adultery is a great sin against God because it is a refusal to live like God.  
And it is a refusal to live faithfully to him as God.  
Please understand this point.  
The thing that is wrong with adultery is not that it is a sexual act.  
Illegal sexual acts are wrong in the Old Testament.  
But they are not generally punishable by death.  
The thing that is wrong with adultery is that it is the greatest act of unfaithfulness a person can exercise.  
It is an act of unfaithfulness toward their spouse.  
And it is an act of unfaithfulness toward God.  
It is a refusal to be like God and to live before God.

### **What the Lord loves and hates in marriage**

With this in mind, let's turn to the book of Malachi.  
The book of Malachi talks about the sins that Israel has committed against God.

Now in one part of the book, God speaks about marriage.  
And he has some very strong things to say to his people.  
Listen to them from Malachi 2:13-16 (NIV)

<sup>13</sup> *Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. <sup>14</sup> You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.*

<sup>15</sup> *Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.*

<sup>16</sup> *"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty.*

*So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.*

I want you to notice what God loves and what God hates in marriage.  
God loves faithfulness.

You see, marriage is a covenantal relationship like the relationship that God has with his people.  
He loves it when people guard themselves in spirit and do not break faith with their spouse.  
He loves it when they keep their covenant obligations like he keeps his covenant obligations.  
On the other side of things, God hates divorce.  
Because God hates unfaithfulness.  
He hates the breaking of faith.

### ***Lord loves and hates in general***

I want you to hear what I am saying today.  
You see, this sermon is not just a sermon on adultery.  
It is a sermon on faithfulness.  
You see, God is the God of faithfulness.  
He has been faithful to his people even when they have been faithless to him.  
And so he loves it when people are like him.  
He loves it when people are faithful to each other and to him.  
And he hates unfaithfulness.  
He hates it when people are unfaithful to him.  
And he hates it when people are unfaithful to each other.  
Unfaithfulness is an affront to him.  
It is against all that he holds precious.

### **Thinking about Matthew 5:27-30**

#### ***Lust***

So, with this background, I want to turn to Matthew 5:27-30.  
These are the words of Jesus.  
Let's read them.

*27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 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.*

Now, I want you to notice some things about this passage.

First, I want to tell you that the word here for ‘woman’ is the word that is generally used to talk about a wife.

And I think that is the principal meaning here.

I think this verse is primarily about lusting after another person’s wife.

What Jesus is saying is that the commandment said ‘You shall not commit adultery’.

However, when a man looks at another person’s wife to desire her he is already committing adultery in his heart.

You see, to look upon her as a sexual or marriage partner is to engage in the act of unfaithfulness in the mind.

Now I presume we can say the reverse as well.

When a woman looks at another person’s husband to desire her she is already committing adultery in her heart.

You see, to look upon him as a sexual or marriage partner is to engage in the act of unfaithfulness in the mind.

And God has no place for unfaithfulness.

He hates it.

For it is a betrayal of all that he represents.

### **Costly faithfulness**

But let’s look at how Jesus goes on.

He goes on to talk about costly faithfulness.

You see, Jesus is realistic about us.

He knows that we will look around.

And he knows that our sexual and relational urges are strong.

And he knows that these urges have the ability to pull us away from being faithful to him and to our spouse.

And so he calls upon us to get things right.

He calls upon us to do what Michael Faraday did.

He calls upon us to put God first.

And this will mean taking strong action.

When Jesus tells us that we should pluck out our eye or cut off our hand if these things cause us to sin, I don’t think he is talking literally.

I think he means that if we are tempted to sin by the powerful urges that exist within us then we will have to take some drastic action.

For example, if we find a woman or a man so attractive as a sexual or relational partner, then we should put some distance between ourselves and this temptation.

We should consciously choose to give priority to God and not to the urges we have.

This is the radical discipleship that we should engage in.

## Thinking about faithfulness

### *In marriage*

Let's close off tonight by thinking some more about faithfulness.

The Bible is clear, isn't it?

In marriage, God delights in people being like him and being like his Son.

Marriage for the Christian is about commitment.

It is about two people making a promise to each other that they will stick at it.

They will hang in there with each other no matter how difficult things get.

They will work on their relationship.

They will work on improving that relationship.

They will love each other for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death separates them.

A Christian marriage is about two people being committed to seeking each other's good.

It is about cherishing, sheltering, nurturing, edifying, showing patience with each other.

And it is about doing this before God.

And it is about doing in determination to be like God – faithful to the end.

Now let me say, that in our world this is very difficult.

It is difficult because the world says that what is important is us and our rights and our privileges.

But God says that what really matters is not us and our rights and our privileges but him and his glory.

What matters is loving him and loving each other.

And this will be difficult, because selfishness and sexuality is enormously attractive and enormously dangerous.

And avoiding sin will only come with care and discipline.

Staying faithful to our wife or husband will only come by taking practical steps to be godly.

It will take honesty and integrity.

It will take setting correct priorities.

It will take a rigorous attitude to life.

### *In Christ*

However, tonight I don't want to finish on marriage.

I want us to look much more broadly at the issue.

You see, looking at the issue of adultery has raised a much deeper issue.

It has raised the issue of faithfulness.

And so I thought I'd talk about being faithful to God in our more general Christian life.

You see, I think that we modern Christians have soaked up the self-centredness of our world.

We have made ourselves or our careers or our study the center of our lives.

Let me explain what I mean by giving an illustration.

Here at CCC many of us have come to know Jesus Christ.

However, I have noticed some common patterns often happen with many of us.

I have noticed that when the pressure of study or work or relationships comes, then Jesus begins to take second place.

Meeting with other Christians begins to take second place.

Studying the Bible and talking to God in prayer begins to take second place.

In other words, faithfulness to God begins to take second place.

And the Bible is clear that the thing or person you give first place in your life is the thing you worship.

It is your God.

And so, when people put study or work or relationships first before God they are engaging in idolatry.

They are worshipping false God.

And they are being unfaithful to the true God.

Please understand what I'm saying.

God hates unfaithfulness.

He hates it when we are unfaithful to others.

And he hates it when we are unfaithful to him.

What God wants of us is consistency and faithfulness.

And such faithfulness comes only with discipline.

And so, what I am urging you to do today is to consider what Christ and God mean to you.

Are they important?

Well, if they are then you need to reflect this in the way that you live and act.

You need to develop habits of faithfulness.

And you need to deal harshly with things that drag you away from faithfulness.

Remember the example of Michael Faraday.

He got his priorities right.

He was a great scientist.

But he knew that there was something far more important than being a scientist.

God was more important.

And this commitment to God expressed itself practically.

He left the Prince of Wales and a bunch of eminent scientists to go to a prayer meeting.

For there he believed he would meet with the God of all the earth.