

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204
704.333.5428 www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

THOU SHALT COMMIT COMMITMENT

Exodus 20:14; Matthew 6:22-24; John 8:2-11

The Seventh Commandment in Our Summer Sermon Series
The Ten Commandments for the 21st Century: The Calling of Wisdom

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 30, 2017
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



Jesus used a phrase that is a riddle to many people. After teaching, Jesus would often say, “*Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.*” There are some messages you cannot hear until you are ready to hear them. You may not hear a message until you realize you have a problem or need. Today’s message focuses on commitment. ‘*Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.*’

Yesterday, our two-year old granddaughter was a flower girl in a Texas wedding. She was serious about her role – as if she were the reason everyone assembled. Of course, she was mistaken, for, once again, amidst joy and excitement, two well-intentioned and fragile people garnered all the clarity they could muster promising to lay down their lives for one other. They committed themselves to fidelity using vows to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, until separated by death. Their bright visions of love sparkled with vulnerability, honesty, trust, – and imperfect humanity. I always tell couples getting married: ‘*You are not committing yourselves to those vows; you are committing yourselves to God and to each other. Weddings happen for many reasons; but healthy marriages only happen through commitment.*’

Your commitments matter! And, your lack of commitment also makes a difference.

We are an intergenerational congregation. Gathering with people of five generations to worship The Living God is a rare gift that also brings a few challenges and limitations; such as when the sermon is addressing the 7th commandment, “*Thou shalt not commit adultery.*”

The way to obey this commandment is to commit commitment. The word, ‘Commit’ is from the Latin word, ‘mitto’ meaning, ‘to let go.’ When you commit, you ‘let go’ so you can embrace; like a trapeze acrobat must let go of one bar to embrace the other. You are committed to numerous persons, groups, responsibilities, organizations, etc. However, commitment is not merely saying ‘yes;’ it is also saying ‘no.’ When you commit to a person, you say ‘no’ to others.

You must prioritize your commitments. If you feel overly committed, it may not be the number of your commitments but the weight of your commitments; all commitments do not weigh the same. You must prioritize those commitments which nurture you to be a God-centered person. If you let go of the wrong commitments, life becomes more empty, meaningless and lonely. Even the best of persons can become burdened down by the weight of their commitments. Anyone can become so diluted in their multiple commitments that they commit adultery against the core commitments in their lives. The 7th commandment focuses on the marriage commitment. This commitment dwells within what I will speak to later as the third circle of commitment.

Let's consider this commandment historically, theologically and relationally.

FIRST, CONSIDER THIS COMMANDMENT HISTORICALLY.

1. In the ancient world, this commandment had distinctly different repercussions for men and women. Women were property, not persons; they had no rights. In the custom of the law, since a woman was property, men used this law to protect their property – their wives. If a husband became jealous and thought his wife was flirting with another man, or merely had suspicions about her being unfaithful, he could bring her before the priest for accusation and, if the priest determined she was guilty, a certificate of divorce was decreed.
2. Men were criticized for adultery; but women could be stoned to death. Women have been stoned to death after being accused of adultery in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
3. This was the law and custom Jesus confronted in John 8. The woman was thrown at Jesus' feet like a sack of grain. Most likely, they had framed her; how else would they have known when to find her with the man who was not her husband. The accusing men may have had stones in hand as they charged her with unfaithfulness. We have no record of Jesus ever making eye contact with her. She is not named. Her only identity is that of a sinful, guilty, anguished and ashamed person. Jesus turns the table on the men. Rather than focusing on the guilt of the woman, Jesus emphasizes they are all imperfect. After the plaintiffs disappear, Jesus speaks to her emphasizing that he does not condemn her; but he challenges her to live a life pursuing a higher commitment than sin. He encourages her to let go of her guilt, shame, and anguish to embrace God's loving forgiveness.

TRANSITION: In the teachings of Jesus, your thoughts and actions reveal your commitments. (“*You cannot serve two masters. You can only be loyal to one.*” “*Where your treasure is, your heart will be also.*”) Jimmy Carter echoed Jesus’ message: adultery is the fruit grown in the soil of self-indulgence fed by wrong commitments. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Jesus took this historical idea of adultery and reminded people of its theological meaning.

SO, SECOND, CONSIDER THIS COMMANDMENT THEOLOGICALLY.

1. Throughout biblical literature, the ideas of marriage, commitment, faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, promise, covenant and trust are theological foundations for life in God.
2. Jeremiah portrays the people of God in his generation as “*Well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor’s wife*” (Jeremiah 5:8). The image here is not only a picture of debauchery or immoral self-indulgence, it is that of an uncommitted, unfaithful animal with his nose in the air seeking a scent of anything different. People who are committed to God should not be sniffing the air for other core commitments.
3. When Nathan confronted King David, it was not only for his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and his killing of her husband, Uriah, it was his sin against God; his sin was more than sociological or moral – his sin was theological.
4. Hosea refers to the people of God as morning mist; like dew that vanishes early in the day. He reminds God’s people that God desires commitment with loyalty. Hosea’s wife is an adulteress and their relationship becomes a theological metaphor for the adulterous people of God. She is repeatedly turning away from Hosea’s love, offering herself to others and giving birth to ‘Not Mine’ and ‘Not Loved.’ Hosea reflects the nature of God who has forgiven, redeemed and blessed, yet is hurt by betrayal of commitment and stubborn unfaithfulness.
5. In the teachings of Jesus, weddings, bridegrooms, brides and feasts of joy reflect the theological foundations of commitment made available in God’s covenant of redeeming love.
6. In the theology of the early Church, we become the Bride of Christ by responding to God’s covenant of redeeming love through commitment to learn and obey the teachings and lifestyle practices of Jesus.

TRANSITION: Throughout our Judeo-Christian history, the theological foundation of our tradition has been God's covenant commitment to us and our response to God in commitment. We do not want to be like Jeremiah's neighing horses, King David, Hosea's wife, or the men who threw the woman at Jesus' feet. We realize our imperfections theologically; we make commitments, keep commitments, break commitments and reshape commitments. As we confess our brokenness and sin to The Living God, we become like marred clay in the hands of the Potter; we are being remade into God-centered useful vessels. This is because before theology is doctrinal, philosophical or cerebral – theology is relational.

SO, THIRD, CONSIDER THIS COMMANDMENT RELATIONALLY.

We commit ourselves relationally to God. We embrace God's gift of God's Self offered to us and we offer ourselves back to God who gives to us the gift of life in the first place. When we commit to following Jesus, we commit to obedience and actively faithful discipleship. Gradually, we see more clearly God's vision for the world and our sense of calling to participate in God's vision. We see needs and the resources we can offer. We become more aware of the pain and suffering of others and we feel the additional weight of that burden. We add the weight of that commitment to all our other commitments. As we go along the journey, one by one we add other commitments to our lives and most of those commitments gain weight. It is possible to carry so many commitments that it becomes difficult to locate your commitment of a personal relationship with God; it is under the swollen mass of all your other commitments which demand to be fed.

1. In your worship bulletin, you see three concentric circles. The line on the top left pointing to the core circle is for: **NATURE OF GOD'S COMMITMENT TO HUMANITY.**

The core of all healthy relational living is the Nature of God's Commitment to Humanity.

- a. God's nature is loving, redeeming, forgiving, making things right, reconciling, etc.
- b. God's commitment to you is initiating, enduring, non-ending, patient, persevering, and transcendently present in your midst; hidden in plain sight.
- c. God's commitment to you is unfailing love that is vulnerable to the point of suffering.
- d. Yet, in Christ, we see that God's love cannot be shut down forever; God's covenant love rises.

2. The line pointing to the middle circle, is for the **CHARACTER OF HUMAN COMMITMENT TO GOD.**

The nature of God's commitment to humanity – to you – is perfect and unfailing; yet, the nature of your commitment to God is imperfect – you fail.

- a. Last Wednesday evening, in our conversation group, we discussed the difference between nature and character; nature doesn't change; character can change.
- b. Your commitment to God reflects your imperfect nature; yet, your commitment to God is based on God's nature. The character of your commitment to God may fail; but, God's unfailing love will redeem you as you continue to pursue God's will for you.
- c. **AS YOU ALLOW THE CHARACTER OF YOUR COMMITMENT TO GOD TO BE SHAPED BY THE NATURE OF GOD'S COMMITMENT TO YOU, YOUR LIFE MATURES IN CHRISTLIKENESS. You take on the character of Jesus.**

3. The line pointing into the outer circle is for: NATURE AND CHARACTER OF OUR COMMITMENTS TO ONE ANOTHER. It is in this circle that your marriage commitment is placed. As you love one another, you will fail. Yet, if you will pursue the character of God's nature, you will forgive, express patience, seek peace, etc.

A writer traveling in India interviewed a Hindu priest. The priest said that he wanted to come to the United States as a missionary. The writer asked, "*Do you want to convince Americans to become Hindus?*" "*No, I want to convince American Christians to live the teachings of Jesus. They invoke God's name and speak of Jesus but commit themselves to what God condemns. They have confused culture and custom with commitment.*"

Thou shalt not commit adultery is really, 'THOU SHALT COMMIT COMMITMENT.' As you allow God's nature to shape the character of your commitment to God and to one another, you refuse to accept any lesser nature of love or adjust your living to the mediocrities around you. Marriages and other loving relationships will become healthier because of you, as you allow the nature of God's commitment to shape the character of your commitments. Beloved, you are committed to The Living God who was first committed to you. Renew your commitment to one another by renewing your commitment to be shaped by God's commitment to you.

THOSE WHO HAVE EARS TO HEAR, LET THEM HEAR. Amen and AMEN.