

# Expanding Our Vision of the 7th Commandment



by AARON SIRONI

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Infidelity devastates.

If you've walked with couples in the aftermath of adultery or have personal experience with it, you know this to be true. It irrevocably changes the lives of everyone involved. It hurts and harms individuals and marriages, churches and communities, and most tragically, the couple's children. No one nearby escapes untouched.

A significant percentage of couples who seek marriage counseling do so after the discovery of infidelity. For counselors, this is some of the most intimidating and challenging work we do. Even after years of experience, I still find counseling in these situations difficult and grievous. The amount of devastation and pain is almost unrivaled. Even after painstakingly working through confession, repentance, and forgiveness, I can feel apprehensive. Did I miss or overlook vital details—details I may have noticed but shrugged off rather than bringing them to center stage? Often there are nagging questions from certain dynamics in a couple's life that I could not resolve or make sense of even when counseling ended "successfully." Utmost on my mind is the same question that haunts these couples even after counseling ends: Will this happen again? Much like an oncologist, counselors want nothing more than to

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reassure couples that there will never be a reoccurrence of this cancer in their lives together.

I've counseled long enough to walk with couples in multiple seasons of their lives. Much of the work that God was doing earlier gains traction quickly in the subsequent counseling. Yet when a couple returns to counseling following a continuation or reoccurrence of adultery, it is altogether different. Often problems come to light that were hidden in the first crisis—problems that leave the couple and counselor sure they should've seen them the first time. Did the couple end counseling prematurely? Were the counselor and wounded spouse naive to hope that unfaithfulness was dealt with and was in the past? Did they overlook the actual state of the marriage and what had been done? Was the unfaithful spouse disingenuous and feigning repentance? "Will this happen again?" is no longer a rhetorical question. A new depth of shame now makes everything harder.

One question that haunts these couples even after counseling ends: Will this happen again?

As a counselor, I've been there. Maybe you have too. It's forced me to ponder God's prohibition of adultery in the seventh commandment (Ex 20:14; Deut 5:18; Matt 5:27–30). What has become compellingly clear is that God's intentions in this commandment go far beyond the mere avoidance of adultery and move positively toward pursuing chastity, true faithfulness, and full contentment in marriage. If the seventh commandment shrinks to a negation of sex outside marriage, its affirmative intention—to foster an active commitment to faithfully love one's spouse—is lost.

As a married man, working with infidelity has chastened me and brought me to my senses time and time again. It's destroyed fantasies and delusions our culture promotes about adultery. Personally, one of my deepest fears is inflicting the pain and agony of adultery on my dear wife, children, family, and community. I'm learning that it's one thing to pray that I won't commit adultery; it's entirely another to pray each day to be truer and truer to my wife in the eyes of God. Even if I manage not to sleep with someone who is not my wife, I am forced to ask myself: Have I *truly* been faithful? Have I applied myself to all that this

commandment requires? Have I devoted myself to sexual purity and nurtured a healthy, happy, and holy sexual relationship with my wife? Would she say that I'm growing in integrity and that I am genuinely content and delighted in her? This is what God intends in the seventh commandment. Counselors and spouses alike need a fresh and expansive vision for fidelity that not only creates excitement and captures our imagination, but also gives us ample room to grow. When Christians understand and seek all that this commandment envisions, protection from adultery and growth in true fidelity is possible.

This article is for counselors and pastors, as well as any couple seeking to expand their understanding of the seventh commandment. We will look beyond the prohibition of extramarital sex to see God's good and holy goals for this imperative. To do so, the first section of the article will develop the most obvious, but overlooked, implication of this commandment—devotion to sexual purity and chastity. The second section will explore two central aspects of God's faithfulness—integrity and compassion—and how they are both needed in marriage. Finally, we will explore what it means to have a heart of full contentment in one's own spouse—one that cherishes and delights in the other.

### **Sexual Purity and Chastity**

The narrowest meaning of the seventh commandment is simply that a married person should not have sex with someone who is not their spouse—but it's so much more than that. This commandment promotes the virtue of chastity, or more commonly, sexual purity. These terms are usually used for singles, but they also apply to marriage. When speaking of this virtue, C. S. Lewis wrote,

Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it; the Christian rule is, "Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence." Now this is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong.<sup>1</sup>

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1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1952), 95.

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