

# **The Sixth Commandment:**

## ***You shall not commit adultery***

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

We've been working our way through the Ten Commandments, considering one commandment in the Decalogue each month (in conjunction with the *Rise Above It* program running concurrently here at the Bryn Athyn Church).

Today, we consider the sixth commandment, the one against adultery.

As you can imagine, this is a topic that's difficult to navigate. After all, the Ten Commandments are a *personal* and *private* matter, a sacred covenant between ourselves and God, the details of which are not really anyone's business and rarely make it out into the public realm anyway. But adultery can be different in that sometimes this transgression spills out into the public arena and people find out and judgments are made.

And so it's useful to be reminded of the account in the gospel of John in which a woman is caught in the act of adultery and put on trial in a very public and humiliating way. What's instructive about this account is how the Lord handles this woman's sin. That we need to make judgments is not the issue. Murder is murder, stealing is stealing, lying is lying, adultery is adultery. And so at the end of this poor woman's frightening public trial, the Lord tells her to go and "sin no more." A judgment was made. But taking it one step further and *condemning* someone when they do wrong, that is "passing sentence" on them - this is a type of judgment we are *not* permitted to make. And so to the woman's accusers who were ready to pass sentence on her, the Lord said, "*he who is without sin, let him cast the first stone...*" This stopped everyone in their tracks because no one could claim to be without sin and the same is true today; we shouldn't "pass sentence" on those who transgress one of the Lord's commandments since none of us are blameless or without sin, which means none of us can claim moral superiority (see also CL 531).

Another important thing to remember about this commandment is that it's not just addressing marriage, although that is the obvious context. It's *also* addressing a deeper spiritual issue that everyone - men, women, married, single, young and old - experience in their spiritual development, in their re-birth and regeneration. Again, the teachings of our church speak to physical adultery within the context of marriage (and the steps of repentance which can lead to healing) but much of the doctrinal

instruction that follows is a deeper treatment of the spiritual issues at play (see CL 478-500 and TCR 313-316) which is what we will be focusing on today.

Specifically, our attention is drawn to *causation*, to what may lead a person to breaking this commandment. We are encouraged to open the "eyes of our understanding" so that we may truly see what's going on in our spiritual landscape, within our own hearts and minds. This is one of the distinctive, *life-giving* features of New Church theology - understanding causation. If we can learn to see (and anticipate) how adulterous thoughts and feelings sneak their way into us, we will gain a new kind of freedom and we'll be able to battle those hellish influences which seek to twist and pervert all that is sacred, pure and clean.

The word "adultery" means to pollute or make impure. It contains the idea of something pure getting corrupted or falsified or defiled. This is a concept we can readily identify with and appreciate. Think about the food we eat, or the water we drink, or the air we breathe. These things can very easily get polluted and contaminated and so we expect them to be *clean*, free of harmful impurities, unadulterated, for the simple reason that we want what goes inside our body to be pure and clean.

It's no coincidence then (and part of the Lord's plan) that we expect "purity" in *other* areas of our life, especially when it comes to important things like our relationships with other people. Think, for example, of how much joy and pleasure we get from being around infants and little children. How can anyone not be affected by their sweet innocence, their pure joy and delight? Their sphere has a magnetic pull to it, and why is that? It's because the sphere of innocence is *pure*, fresh from heaven. We're drawn to newborns and little children because they are totally free of spiritual contaminants like cruelty, or greed or deceit. And in the context of this commandment, the little ones in our midst are completely devoid of vulgar, crude, filthy thoughts and feelings. That is why we're drawn to them - they remind us of the purity, the innocence, the clean joy and unselfish happiness that we long for in *all* our relationships, especially in marriage.

So this leads us to the main point of today's sermon - if we are to truly appreciate what this commandment against adultery is asking us to do, we need to first look up, not down. We need to visualize what it is that the Lord wants us to defend and protect because once we have clarity on that we will have a much easier time rejecting all of the filth and selfishness that bubbles up from hell. This is why the Lord says in His Word, "*Blessed are the pure in heart...for they will see God*" (Matthew 5:8).

So let's move to some eye-opening revelations about the sixth commandment.

We're taught that the highest (and deepest) meaning of the command to not commit adultery (sometimes referred to as the celestial sense) means to *not reject God, religion or*

*eternal life* (see TCR 315, CL 497). Now you might wonder how this could possibly have anything to do with someone committing adultery in this world, but this would be to forget the all-important teaching we have about *causation* because when someone truly rejects God, religion and eternal life (and thankfully that's a judgment we cannot make) they are *simultaneously* rejecting everything of heaven, everything of innocence. And because the higher regions of their mind are closed off, they have no sacred regard, no respect, for the holy state of marriage or anything that is holy, pure and clean like chastity and innocence and all the precepts of morality.

The other higher meaning of the command to not commit adultery (sometimes referred to as the spiritual sense) means to *not pervert or contaminate the teachings of the Lord's Word* (see TCR 314). Again, we might wonder who in their right mind would go out of their way to pervert and contaminate the beautiful teachings of the Lord's Word but again we need to think about causation - our will and understanding, both of which need to be reformed (see CL 493), dwell in the spiritual world which puts us in contact with dirty, impure influences which pollute and contaminate our clear sight of the Word and prompt us to justify selfish wants and needs (see CL 500, DP 340:6 regarding Swedenborg's conversation with devils on these matters).

Now, from this perspective, from taking a few minutes to look up, to "*elevate our understanding*," and to "*gain some rational insights*" as our reading this morning encouraged us to do (see CL 495) we might ask, "Why would anyone want to destroy their own marriage or someone else's marriage? One answer would be, they don't. Anyone who is trying to do the right thing, of which there are many, *doesn't* set out to destroy their marriage or someone else's marriage.

So how do things go wrong? They go wrong because the spiritual pollution and contamination we've been talking about is hard to detect - it could be a tiny leak that's been infecting a certain thought pattern or behavior for years. One teaching in our church says "*the human inclination toward marriage goes hand in hand with religion at every step. Every little step and every stride away from religion or toward religion is also a step toward or stride away from the marital (or conjugal) inclination*" (CL 80:2, see also CL 497).

The point is this: evil hates the light which means evil works in secret, in the shadows, in tiny incremental ways. The hells which proudly, unabashedly seek to destroy all of the beauty, all of the innocence, all of the purity and chastity we are actually striving for in our lives, do their work in secret. If we saw what they are doing in the clear light of day, we would be repulsed, appalled, sickened, but we don't sense their noxious fumes in any obvious way. Instead, they feed on our insecurities, our weaknesses, always putting our own selfish wants and needs above those of others.

Thankfully, the Lord has implanted in us all a *strong* antidote to counter these harmful influences. That "antidote" is our desire for purity. This desire for purity is a true

blessing because it keeps the higher regions of our mind open to the fresh air of heaven, to the warmth of the Lord's love and tender mercy. It keeps our mind open to the cleansing teachings of the Word and becomes a fulfillment of what the Lord promises, that *"the pure in heart...shall see [Him]"* (Matthew 5:8).

As we keep the Lord, and religion and eternal life as our focal point we gain a new kind of freedom, one that gives us the strength and resolve to battle the spiritual pollution we encounter.

For just as we strive to live in a world free of pollution and contamination, so will we strive to live lives of purity that are free of the filth and profanity in and around us which threaten to contaminate our relationships, especially marriage, the precious jewel of human life, but also our family and friends and everyone we seek to serve with integrity and kindness.

So when we consider the 6th Commandment, let us remember that the Lord, in His infinite mercy and love, seeks to cleanse our hearts, inviting us to say in prayer,

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting."*

And:

*"Create in me, a clean heart, O God, and renew a firm spirit within me."*

**Amen.**

**Lessons:** Psalms 51:7, 10, and 139:23-24, Matthew 5:1-12, John 8:1-12, CL 495