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Adultery



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by

RICHARD GINDER



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“Daddy, have you ever committed adultery?”

His knuckles went white as daddy clenched his newspaper a little more firmly for a second or so. Then slowly, he lowered the paper and studied the child before him.

“Why, Son?—what brought that up?”

“Well, we learned the Ten Commandments last Sunday at church and that’s Number Six: ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery.’ But, Daddy, what *is* adultery?”

“. . . It’s, umm, it’s running around with another man’s wife. A fellow’s supposed to stick with his wife once he marries her.”

“You mean that if you were to go out with Mamma it would be wrong?”

A shade of annoyance crossed the man's face.

"If I were to go out with your mother, it would be wrong?" he repeated slowly. "Which mother? You don't mean Viola, do you?"

"No, no, no! I mean Mamma . . . the real one . . . where I go for summer vacation."

"That's very complicated, Son. You know we're divorced — and, as a matter of fact, I guess it would be wrong for me to go out with her again."

"You mean — she's not really my mother?"

"Of course she's your mother!"

"But you're not married to her . . . you mean my mother isn't your wife? Is that what you mean, Daddy?"

"But she *was* my wife, Son. Here . . . why don't you look at some of these magazines? Have you seen this week's *Life*?"

"She's my mother and she's not your wife. It used to be all right for you to go out with her and now it's adultery. It used to be adultery for you to go out with Viola, but now it's O.K. Something must be mixed up somewhere, Daddy . . ."

“Oh, confound those Ten Commandments,” the man groaned. “You’re too young to understand those things, Son. I’ll explain them to you after you get a little older. Now why don’t you just go down and take in a movie?”

For Successful Living

That child raised an interesting point. It is, in fact, a question that won’t be solved by looking at *Life*, or going to the movies, or confounding the Ten Commandments. It’s a point so serious, so vital, that it demands earnest consideration and has to be faced by every living man and woman.

All God-believing people accept the fact that the Almighty has put certain strict limits on human conduct — limits which He codified chiefly in the Ten Commandments.

It might seem a contradiction to say that these limits, although in a sense they restrict our liberty, actually point the way to our greater happiness here and hereafter. But it’s a fact. They are based on the nature of mankind, and they are the sort of limitation imposed,

say, by the auto-manufacturer when he directs the purchaser to keep five quarts of oil in the crankcase, to shove in the clutch before shifting gears, etc.

Now one is perfectly free to drive with only two quarts of oil — or none at all; and one may attempt to shift gears without first depressing the clutch. But most of us are agreed that such a course of action wouldn't pay. It would, in fact, be the action of a madman.

And so it is with the Ten Commandments. God is our "Manufacturer." He knows how we are to operate most successfully and with maximum happiness to ourselves. Hence He has given us rules for our direction. And among those rules we find

"Thou shalt not commit adultery."

That is a law based on human nature. And since human nature doesn't change, neither does that law. That is to say, as long as we're talking about human beings, rather than horses, or puppies, or geese, adultery is wrong.

Violation Is Disastrous

It is, in fact, a principle of the moral order — parallel with the physical prin-

ciple that it's wrong to drink lye, eat toadstools, or get in the way of a fast-travelling bullet. And the effects of violating a moral principle are just as disastrous as those following in the violation of a physical principle. The difference is that in the one case the ruination is visible, more or less dramatic, and often immediate, while in the other case the harm done is silent and generally not apparent for quite some time.

There is another angle to these Ten Commandments. Since, like the laws governing good health they are based on the nature of man as we find him, then — like the laws of good health — they are beyond control by human opinion or legislation. For instance, it is possible (though hardly probable) that a medical society might issue an endorsement in favor of eating toadstools. But that endorsement and its adoption by crowds of people would in no-wise change the poisonous effect of toadstools on the human system.

Likewise, it is possible (and not too improbable) that a group of people

somewhere might issue an endorsement of adultery. It might be made legal, for instance, and even recommended by various misguided elements in the community. It might even, so help us, become a fad — the practice of adultery— all of which would change God's Law not one whit, nor would it modify the disastrous effect on the individual, body and soul, and on society.

God's command, then, is unchangeable and independent of public opinion. No Gallup Poll can alter it. Like the 98.6 which is the normal temperature of the human body, it is a permanent fixture. It will be with us until the end of time.

What Is Adultery?

Now — just what is adultery? Adultery is the exchange of sexual relations between two people, one or both of whom are married to someone else.

It is first of all an offense against the virtue of purity, which dictates that sex be used only within the limits of a legitimate marriage, i.e. between a man and his wife.

But it also involves a sin against justice, whereby husband and wife have given their bodies, each to the other until death.

And finally there is a sin against charity. Each is leading the other astray, contributing to the other's delinquency through bad example.

Adultery, then, is a triple sin.

It is not necessary, incidentally, that the marriage act be completed before there is serious sin. Any yielding on this point, physically or mentally, is a grave matter as far as Almighty God is concerned.

So closely related to the subject of adultery is that of marriage and divorce that no discussion of the subject could be closed, in this twentieth century, at least, without an examination of that very question: Who is my wife and, if I divorce her, can I have a second wife?

Who Is My Wife?

First: Who is my wife? — Your wife is the woman with whom you first exchanged your marriage vows. You

elected her to be the mother of your children and, before a duly appointed official of the community, you accepted her as your wife "until death do us part." If either you or the girl were Catholic, there was no marriage unless a priest officiated.

You gave yourself to her until death, and she gave herself to you until death. You vowed that as long as you lived you were hers. And she vowed herself the same way.

That answers the question on divorce if by divorce is meant legal separation with the possibility of re-marriage — for if by a solemn pledge uttered in the presence of Almighty God a person gives himself to another for life, how can he give himself to a third party when he is no longer his own to dispose of?

When Kelly sells his car to Casey, he loses ownership of that car so that there can be no question of Kelly's selling it again to O'Brien, since Casey is holding the title.

In somewhat the same sense, every wife holds title to her husband, and every husband to his wife.

Every analogy limps, they say, and that one is no exception. There is a difference between marriage and other contracts. Practically all the others can be broken by mutual consent. Both parties can agree to call everything off and restore things to their former status.

But marriage is unique in that it can't be broken even by mutual consent, first by God's Command, and then because of the purposes of marriage. It has to be a permanent union for the sake of the children.

The Words of Christ

As for God's command, Our Lord stated His mind quite clearly in the Gospel and through His apostles.

"Have you not read that He who made man from the beginning made them male and female?" He asked the Pharisees. "For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall be in one flesh. Therefore, now they are not two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." (Matt. 19:4-8).

When the Pharisees asked Our Lord why divorce had been permitted under the Old Testament, He answered that this had been allowed only "by reason of the hardness of your heart."

In St. Mark's Gospel, we have Jesus saying that "Whosoever shall put away his wife committeth adultery against her. And if the wife shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery (10:11-12).

St. Luke quotes Him to the same effect: "And he that marrieth her that is put away, committeth adultery" (16:18).

St. Paul the Apostle underscores all this for the benefit of the early Christians. Writing to the Romans, he says:

"For the woman that hath an husband, whilst her husband liveth is bound to the law; but if her husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. Therefore, whilst her husband liveth, she shall be called an adulteress if she be with another man; but if her husband be dead, she is delivered from the law of her husband, so that she is not an adulteress, if she is with another man" (7:2-3).

“To them that are married, not I, but the Lord commandeth,” he writes to the Corinthians, “that the wife depart not from her husband. And if she depart, that she remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband” (*I Cor.* 7:10-11).

Civil Law No Guide

Nor can we be guided by civil law in the matter. As St. John Chrysostom wrote over a thousand years ago:

“Do not cite the civil law made by outsiders, which command that a bill be issued and a divorce granted. For it is not according to these laws that the Lord will judge thee on the Last Day, but according to those which He Himself has given.”

This, of course, has been Christian teaching from the beginning. Hermas, one of the earliest Christian writers, said, around the year 160 — only 60 years after St. John the Evangelist laid down his pen: “If a man have an adulterous wife, let him put her away, and let the husband remain by himself. But if he put his wife away and marry then, he also commits adultery himself.”

At about the same time (165), St. Justin Martyr wrote: "Whoever marries a woman that has been put away by another, commits adultery."

St. Clement of Alexandria (150-216): "The Bible declares it to be adultery if a person marries another while his or her partner is still alive."

St. Jerome (340-420): "As long as the husband is alive, even though he be an adulterer . . . and is deserted by his wife for his crimes, he is still her husband and she may not take another."

As a matter of fact, until quite recently practically all Protestants repudiated the idea of divorce as breaking the marriage tie. It has only been in recent decades that they have reversed their stand and accepted divorce — under pressure from their communicants, one must suspect. But if divorce and remarriage was wrong a hundred years ago, how can it now be right?

The Catholic Church, comprising the great majority of Christians throughout the world, has always held and still holds that marriage is a world-without-

end bargain: one wife for life. And any violation of marriage fidelity, with or without state approval, is adultery, a violation of the Sixth Commandment, punishable by condemnation to the everlasting pains of hell.



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