

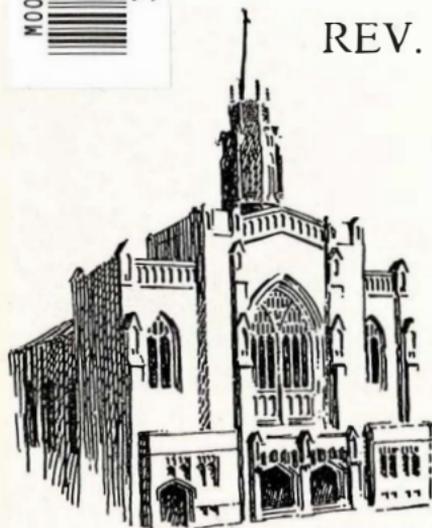
GOD'S LAW ON SEX

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A sermon preached by the Rev. Gordon Powell in St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday evening, 4th July and repeated in condensed form at the Wednesday Lunch-hour Service, 7th July, 1965. Extra copies may be obtained from the Church for actual printing cost, 3d. This is Printed Sermon No. 13. The title of Printed Sermon No. 1 was THE CASE FOR CHASTITY. Copies still available.

GOD'S LAW ON SEX

Exodus 20: 14: Thou shalt not commit adultery.

In our study of the Ten Commandments we come tonight to the 7th Commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." I take as my title "GOD'S LAW ON SEX."

Whenever a Protestant talks about breaking the seventh commandment he is thinking about adultery. You are no doubt aware that when a Roman Catholic speaks of the seventh commandment, he is referring to the one we call the sixth, "Thou shalt not steal." How is it that the numbering has been altered? As we read the twentieth chapter of Exodus it seems to us quite clear that the Ten Commandments are intended to be taken in the order we take them and numbered accordingly. But the Roman Catholic Church takes the first two as part of the original first Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me and thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." They still get ten commandments by dividing up the one we call the tenth which forbids covetousness. The reference to covetting a man's wife they take as a commandment against lust, and the rest they keep as a commandment against covetousness. I am not concerned to argue which is the more correct division, but I offer this explanation in case there is any confusion in anybody's mind about it.

Adultery is an unpleasant subject and frankly I would gladly have dodged it, but when you commit yourself to a series on the Ten Commandments you must face up to it. Heaven knows it is a serious enough problem in the world today and the Church is failing in her duty if she does not at least warn her people about the awful con-

sequences which inevitably follow the growing attitude among so many people who look upon adultery as something in which sophisticated people may indulge. There are even those in our midst who advocate it as a sign of liberation from out-worn primitive taboos. It is all the more important then that we face up to this issue and see how the law against adultery is written into the very scheme of things by God Himself and is essential for human happiness and spiritual development. I therefore ask you to consider first the Old Morality, then the New Morality and then, thirdly, the true Christian Morality.

THE OLD MORALITY

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of stone on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments and read them out to the people, saying, "Thus saith the Lord, Thou shalt not commit adultery," there is no record of the people having any doubt about what he meant, nor do I imagine does the average person today. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary it is "Voluntary sexual intercourse of married person with one of opposite sex." There is double adultery in which both the man and the woman are married, and single adultery in which only one of them is married. The Ten Commandments say, "Thou shalt not do this." In other places in the Bible fornication is condemned. Normally this refers to intercourse between unmarried people.

When we turn to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount we find Him setting the standard higher still. (Matthew 5: 27, 28). "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with

her already in his heart." On that basis there are not many men who can honestly say they have never sinned. Let it be pointed out however, that Jesus was too much of a realist to suggest that any man is guilty of this most serious sin just because impure thoughts come into his mind when he sees a woman who in some way provokes such thoughts. But if he harbours such thoughts, encourages them and lusts after her in imagination then he is to that extent responsible. He has damaged his spiritual life. He has weakened his resistance so that if an opportunity presents itself to commit the sin he is likely to fall.

Jesus and the Apostles put great emphasis on keeping the mind clean from all impurities. On this point I may be permitted to introduce one lighter note before we go on with this most serious subject. Years ago a cousin of mine, a girl of about eight or nine, was being taught the Ten Commandments by her mother. When they came to this commandment Lorna wanted to know what it meant to commit adultery. As she had not yet been introduced to the facts of life, my aunt, feeling her years were still rather tender, explained it in general terms saying it meant that God wants us to live a clean life. You can imagine the shock she got an hour or two later when in the middle of dinner Lorna suddenly exclaimed, "Oh mummy, I've committed adultery. I forgot to wash my hands before I came to the table."

The high ideal of marriage which Jesus proclaimed must be seen against the background of His time. Not least because of the Ten Commandments, no nation had a higher level of domestic morality than the Jews, but even there marriage had frequently broken down and divorce was far too common. It was too easy. A man only needed to give a woman, in front of two witnesses, a document stating he was divorcing her and that was

it. The poor woman probably couldn't even read the document, but it would make little difference. Her marriage was over and a divorced woman could have a pretty grim time of it in that society. In the Roman world, which had grown strong because of its earlier belief in the sanctity of marriage and the home, there was now a widespread breakdown of respect for marriage. In the Greek world for several centuries, going back even to the time of Socrates 400 years BC, a man looked on his wife merely as somebody who bore his children and acted as a housekeeper. For romantic love and intellectual companionship he looked elsewhere, usually to women called hetairai, some of whom exercised considerable influence on politics, culture and other aspects of life. But it was a miserable life for the great majority of women, and a pretty poor atmosphere in which to produce well-adjusted, strong personalities in children. Jesus proclaimed the great law of God on Sex at the highest possible level.

Dr. William Barclay has written about a dozen articles on this Commandment in recent issues of the "British Weekly." In them he includes many interesting items which explain some of our customs today. For instance why does a bridegroom put the ring on the bride's third finger of her left hand? An ancient Roman writer, Aulus Gellius, stated that a very fine nerve proceeded from that finger direct to the heart. Again in ancient Rome very few marriages were performed in the month of May, probably because April was sacred to the goddess Venus and June to Juno, both goddesses of love and marriage. For centuries the Christian Church frowned on marriages during Lent so there were many Easter brides and a rush of marriages in April. Again in the northern hemisphere June is the beginning of the summer holiday period for many people and this was a

convenient time to be married. So there were many June brides and there still are—brides who are probably completely unaware that the month of June is named after the ancient goddess of marriage. I mention these things mainly as a reminder that, not only trivial customs associated with marriage, but the great fundamentals of this all-important institution of human life go right back into ancient history and in some form are basic to all cultures. If there is one thing that history makes very clear it is this, when respect for marriage decays the nation decays, and when the nation decays one of the first signs of that decay is a breakdown in marriage. It is a vicious circle.

THE NEW MORALITY

The so-called "New Morality" is being proclaimed and practised right around the world by people who have rejected religion and no longer fear God. Such people as the Neo-Helenists want to go back to the attitude of the ancient Greeks who, according to them, (a) had no sense of sexual sin and (b) were happy people because they were a-moral. Any one who knows his Ancient History knows that both these claims are considerably exaggerated. Whether or not this freedom and licence made for happiness is a matter for considerable debate, but it certainly did not make for national strength or greatness. Every minister knows the experience of trying to help a wife whose husband has been unfaithful to her, or a husband whose wife has been unfaithful. There are few experiences more shattering to a personality and when we take into account the even more shattering effect it can have on the children of the family concerned, we cannot treat lightly the act of adultery nor regard the so-called "new morality" as any kind of advance.

There is, of course, nothing new about it. Nearly 2,000 years ago both Livy and Juvenal attributed the decline of the Roman Empire to the decline in morality and the decline in morality they attributed to the loss of religion. 200 years ago Bishop Butler recorded the contempt for Christianity and to morality shown openly by the so-called intelligentsia, who regarded it as a religion founded on fiction and suitable only for mirth and ridicule. Fortunately the Church, even if battered and sometimes bruised, goes on in spite of all her critics and outlives the lot of them.

There was considerable excitement in Britain two years ago when Bishop Robinson published his now famous HONEST TO GOD. Newspaper critics hailed it up and down the country and round the world, not least because the Bishop attacked the old traditional views of God, but also, it seemed, the old traditional morality, given by God and expressed in the Ten Commandments. I quote from HONEST TO GOD (page 117), "The fact that the old land-marks are disappearing is not something simply to be deplored. If we have the courage it is something to be welcomed." This is taken from a section in which the sub-heading is "Nothing Prescribed Except Love." You can imagine how this sort of thing was hailed by the New Moralists, the people who regard LADY CHATTERLEY'S LOVER as a text-book and are well described by Sir Arnold Lunn as "prigs of the New Morality who are for ever holding forth on the prurience of the pure and the inhibitions of the chaste." (THE NEW MORALITY, page 3, 4).

To give him his due, Bishop Robinson does not favour the New Morality in the sense that he favours complete freedom of moral action. He has one great guiding principle, "compassion for persons-over-rides all-law."

He goes on to say, "It is, of course, a highly dangerous ethic . . . yet I believe it is the only ethic for 'man come of age'". (page 117). This ethic is highly dangerous because it encourages the irresponsible to do what they like, and in particular to commit adultery if they believe that there is so much love involved it is the right thing to do. But there is much more to it than that as Bishop Robinson acknowledges. So I turn finally to,

THE CHRISTIAN MORALITY

We have seen that Jesus took the old moral law of the Ten Commandments and at first sight made it harder than ever. Many people had found it hard as they still do to live up to its high standards. Yet Jesus said, "You must not even look at a woman to lust after her." I think that here Jesus was doing much more than presenting His followers with a new law. For one thing He was expressing the ideal in the Kingdom of God, the ideal towards which every true Christian ought to aspire. At the same time I believe He was expressing the secret of victory over the fierce temptation which besets many people to commit sexual sin, be it adultery, fornication or some other form of impurity. He is saying in effect, it is not good enough just to make up your mind you are going to keep the Commandments. It is not good enough to appear to be keeping them on the principle that as long as you are not found out it is all right. It is not all right. Why? Because you and the other person know about it, and God knows about it, so two of you suffer any way in your personalities, your peace of mind, in your total health and joy of living. But if you really want to beat this thing, as a Christian should, then you have to fight the battle in your mind, in your thoughts. You may not have complete control of the thoughts which enter your mind,

but you do have considerable control over the thoughts you encourage to stay there. To get rid of the impure thoughts, drive them out with many other thoughts, especially pure and healthy thoughts.

The other day I took our little granddaughter Debbie and her toddler brother for a walk over the suspension bridge at Parsley Bay. It was their first experience of such a bridge and as it began to shake beneath us, as they looked down through the cracks to the water far below, they were frightened. They didn't want to go on. I pointed to a boat out in the harbour and asked them if they could see it. Soon they were so interested in the boat they forgot their fear. Having negotiated the bridge, they were quite eager to come back over it again and get a thrill out of it. It is marvellous what a bit of diversion does to the emotion of fear. Any emotion will get away with you if you yield to it, but if you can divert your mind, your thoughts to something else the emotion and its power are soon diluted if not destroyed altogether

Again as we think of Jesus and His teaching and His example in this difficult matter of adultery, it is important to remember that while He always condemned the sin, He forgave and loved the sinner. From time to time I have found people, usually women, but sometimes men too who, having yielded to this temptation, torture themselves with the conviction they have committed the unpardonable sin. They have not. This is not the unpardonable sin of which Jesus spoke. He Himself frequently pardoned adulteresses. On at least three important occasions He went out of His way to minister to fallen women. There is the famous case recorded in John Chapter 8 in which the scribes and Pharisees brought a guilty woman and held stones ready to stone her to death according to the ancient law and

custom. Having saved her life and discomfited her accusers, Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more." He did not deny that it was sin, and He commanded her never to do it again, but He still offered her forgiveness and pardon for the past. There was His long conversation with the woman at the well of Samaria, a woman who had made an awful mess of her life (John V). But by the time Jesus had finished with her she was a new woman bringing salvation to a whole city, just as some of General William Booth's greatest supporters in the Salvation Army were, and indeed are, women who had reached the lowest depths. Again Jesus worked wonders in the life of Mary of Magdala because He brought to her forgiveness for the past and the power to live a new life of purity in the present and for the future. It is an awful thing to find somebody who believes he, or she, has committed an unpardonable sin and then adopts the attitude they might as well be killed for a sheep as a lamb. So they plunge deeper and deeper into the mire. If any such reads this sermon, Jesus says to you, "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more."

One other thing under the heading of Christian Morality. Bishop Robinson is right in saying "Nothing prescribed except love," provided that love is big enough to consider the ultimate well-being not only of the person most beloved, but also the well-being of all others involved. The adulterer may argue that if love is the only test then he is right in going ahead, but if he also loves his wife and his children, then he can't. If the man has a spiritual love for the other woman and wants her highest well-being in this world and in the world to come, then he will not break the moral law.

Love is certainly the supreme test, but let us never

forget that it is not love in general, or just love for the other person or persons, but primarily love of God. Centuries ago Augustine wrote in Latin "dilige et quod vis fac" which is usually translated, "Love (God) and do what you like." As Bishop Robinson points out it really means, "Love and then what you will, do." If you love God the right thoughts, the right desires will fill your mind and heart. This is the basis of the greatest freedom and the greatest happiness there is, the glorious liberty of the Children of God. My prayer is that somebody reading this sermon will hear Jesus Christ saying to them, "Neither do I condemn thee, go and sin no more." If you believe that and follow the path of purity and fidelity, you will find the most wonderful love and enjoy a freedom you have never known before.

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