

Date: August 16, 2009
Series: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives
Sermon: Breaking Covenant Instead of Keeping Covenant
Scripture: Exodus 20:14
Speaker: Phil Thengvall

Are you someone who can be trusted to keep a promise? It seems simple enough to follow through on a promise to a child to be at their soccer game, to read a book to them, to play catch in the yard after supper. Keeping a promise is a simple form of being faithful to a covenant. We look down on people who are not dependable, who break promises to children, whose word cannot be trusted. Do you consider yourself to be a promise keeper?

I still remember how shocked Dotty and I were when we found out that one of our best friends was being unfaithful to his wife of almost 30 years. That was in 1985. Since then news of adultery among our peers has become much more common, but no less difficult to hear about. Today, breaking the seventh commandment is usually viewed as a personal matter, no one's business except the parties involved, and perhaps the wounded spouse. But this isn't the way God and the Scriptures look at it, nor is it the way we who profess to be Christ followers should see it. Adultery is devastating for the individuals and the family involved; but also for our city, state, and nation.

As I begin this message on the seventh commandment, I want to avoid breaking the eighth commandment (stealing) and acknowledge material I have adapted from fellow pastors Mike Andrus and Larry Osborne (San Diego).

Our sermon text is brief and to the point. Look with me in your Bibles at Exodus 20:14, "You shall not commit adultery". The seventh commandment is a simple, unqualified, irrevocable negative. (G.C. Morgan)

How do we break the seventh commandment?

When asked to tell his Sunday school teacher what adultery was a child said it was "the sin of pretending to be older than you are." (J.I. Packer) Pastor Mike told me a true story of a young child who opened the door to a salesman who asked him if there was an adult in the house. The child answered, "No, but the adulteress is in the kitchen".

As I prepared for this message I thought about those of you who would come to listen and wondered what thoughts you had in advance. Maybe you are single, and thought, "This commandment doesn't apply to me because adultery can only be committed by those who are married." You are somewhat correct if we use a strict legal definition. The Oxford Dictionary defines adultery as "the act of being unfaithful to one's spouse by voluntarily having sexual intercourse with someone else."

What activities fall under the ban of this commandment?

How do we commit adultery?

- **We can commit adultery with our body.** Having intercourse with anyone other than our spouse is a violation of this commandment. Furthermore, anyone who has sexual relations outside of marriage not only violates God's command against fornication, but violates the premise of this

commandment. In so doing you are being unfaithful to your future spouse, and are having intercourse with someone else's potential future spouse. God's word is very clear that any and all sexual intercourse outside of marriage is wrong. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."

- **We can commit adultery in our heart and mind.** Jesus warned us about this danger in Matthew 5:28: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman (or a man) lustfully has already committed adultery with her (or him) in his heart". The violation here is more than having a fleeting, lustful thought. It involves repeated mulling over the possibility, desiring this person as a sexual partner. Lewis Smedes said, "We should not equate every erotic feeling with lust, nor is every feeling of attraction toward an exciting person the spark of lust. There is a difference between the awareness of someone's sexual attractiveness and being dominated by a desire for that person's body."

This desire that leads to committing the unfaithful act in your mind is lust and this violates the commandment.

- **We can commit adultery spiritually.** When the seventh commandment says, "Do not commit adultery," it asks us to be covenant keepers. There is a parallel here to our relationship with God. One of the most pervasive metaphors in the Old Testament is Israel as the wife of Jehovah. Israel behaved like a faithless wife, rejected her husband, and shamed herself by repeatedly pursuing other gods. God called Israel an adulteress. Look at Jeremiah 3:12-14.

Go, proclaim this message toward the north:
 " 'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD,
 'I will frown on you no longer,
 for I am merciful,' declares the LORD,
 'I will not be angry forever.

Only acknowledge your guilt—
 you have rebelled against the LORD your God,
 you have scattered your favors to foreign gods
 under every spreading tree,
 and have not obeyed me,' "
 declares the LORD.

"Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband."

In the New Testament, the metaphor is similar; the Church is the bride of Christ. The key text is Ephesians 5:31, 32.

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church." God is clear that we are to love Christ, our spiritual husband, with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He considers idolatry in any form to be spiritual adultery.

Having looked briefly at these three ways we can commit adultery, I suspect there are some of you here who agree, but thankfully you see no application to your own experience. You are happily married and cannot imagine ever dealing with the pain and anguish of sexual immorality or adultery. I rejoice with you

and thank God for what you have in your marriage. As we talk about ways to safeguard your life, I hope you will be affirmed in your commitment and may even find your marriage enriched.

Not every married couple can say that, however, and we cannot talk about what ought to be, without saying something to those of you that are trapped in marriages that feel like a prison sentence, marriages that do not resemble the biblical model. It is with all of you in mind, the unmarried, the happily married, and those with difficult marriages, that I have prayerfully prepared this message.

This letter from the Dear Abby column gives us a clue to **the state of affairs in America**.

Dear Abby:

How about a letter from a "winner"? My married lover left his wife for me. I was told that I wasn't breaking up anything; his marriage was dead long before he met me; his wife had gotten fat. I was married too, but I assured him that my marriage was also over; my husband had gotten dull and boring. So I divorced my boring husband and he divorced his chubby wife. Oh, yes, we both had children, but we explained that we were both in love and when they were older they would understand.

Our marriage was "a dream come true." No more lying and sneaking around. At long last we were legally man and wife for all the world to see. Our apartment was filled with modern furniture and old-fashioned guilt, and plenty of doubt and mistrust.

Two years later he was meeting someone new. I told him he was a liar and a cheat. He said it took one to know one. And by the way, he had gotten a little dull and boring, and I had put on a little weight.

Signed: A Winner.

While there is nothing new about adultery its presence and activity have increased in our day. Television, movies, and novels feature adultery almost as a celebrated cause. Hollywood has done its part to soften resistance and remove the shame and embarrassment from adultery. The portrayal of adultery has gone from something seedy and disapproved of in the movie **Casablanca** in 1940, to being glamorized in **Sweet Home Alabama**, in 2002. With the use of panoramic scenery and big name stars the sinful and immoral aspects of adultery were downplayed, while the romance was emphasized. What was once seen as a dark and secretive act is now redefined as an acceptable alternative form of adult behavior.

Easy access to pornographic sites on the internet has also contributed to the increase of adultery. Who can compete with air-brushed models? The danger in pornography, according to Lewis Smedes, is its tendency to "become a substitute sexual life for those who have neither the imagination for fantasy nor the spiritual ability to communicate sexually with his or her spouse."

Let's not overlook the impact of online chat rooms, face book, my space, and email. These internet communication tools and sites can be innocuous in the beginning, providing fun connections with friends, new and old. But what begins when you find a friend that is exciting, complementary, then flirtatious, can lead to discussing sexual issues, often with intimate details of your marital relationships.

These online virtual affairs can be as destructive to a marriage as physical affairs. The 1998 movie, *You've Got Mail*, with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan was built around a romantic relationship that developed

between two strangers on line. The movie portrayed each of them as being in unsatisfying relationships that made them vulnerable.

Statistics tell us adultery has increased by 5% or more in each of the last three decades. The largest increase is among women who are employed full-time and are working outside the home.

When asked their opinion, 80% of Americans say they disapprove of adultery. Nevertheless records indicate that at least 60% of married men and 35% of married women admit to having at least one extramarital sexual affair. What impact does this have on the divorce rate? Only 35% of the couples who go through the trauma of marital infidelity remain together. Adultery is becoming all too common and all too accepted in American society.

Is the Christian community immune from such problems? In a workshop I attended last month, the presenter, who travels the nation talking to men about the dangers of pornography on the Internet, said Satan is attacking the church through its pastors. Many of his seminars are just for pastors and are held in large hotels. After the conference is over the speaker routinely asks the hotel management for the percentage of rooms used by conference attendees in which the X-rated movie channels were accessed. He said the lowest percentage reported has been 60%.

Adultery is a problem with national significance. Elton Trueblood, author, educator, philosopher, and theologian said, "Any culture that fails to deal realistically with the adultery problem is likely to go to pieces. The sexual urge is powerful and universal. It comes early and is strong before marriage is a proper course to follow. It occupies a considerable share of conscious thought and it continues in one way or another through our lifetime." He said this in 1946. What would he say today?

What does God say about Sex, Marriage, and Covenant-keeping

The scriptures, both Old and New Testaments are filled with verses about human sexuality. In the Old Testament, teaching against adultery (and all sexual sins) is second only to teaching against idolatry. Paul's instructions in I Corinthians 7 underline the importance of the sexual relationship within marriage. I will begin reading in verse 1. "Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.

Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."

What does it mean that we are to be a covenant keeping people? In the scriptures a covenant was a solemn commitment, guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both covenanting parties. It applied to divine-human commitments and agreements between humans. God established his covenant with Israel through the Patriarchs.

Prior to giving the Ten Commandments to Moses, here is what God told him in Exodus 19:3-5: "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. **Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant**, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a

holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." To keep the covenant today means to obey God fully in all we do, to please him in all things.

Since even our sexuality is meant to be bound by covenant there is no such thing as a recreational, trivial, or unimportant sexual experience. We need to be people who are so committed to purity in marriage that it becomes unthinkable that we would sin sexually. The commandment is, "Do not commit adultery." Its positive counterpart is, "Be committed to marriage." We must see that God established these boundaries so that our sexual potential can serve us instead of hurt us. Human sexuality is one of God's most delightful gifts, but the record of human history is filled with examples of the abuse of this gift. How can you avoid becoming a statistic? I cannot help you affair proof your marriage, because a good marriage takes two partners who each want to remain faithful. Are you interested in affair-proofing your life?

How to Affair-Proof Your Life. Some of you may have never been tempted to break the seventh commandment.

But there are many here this morning that have been, or are now being, or will be tempted in this way in the future. Here are some ways to strengthen your resolve to be covenant keepers.

- **Don't disrespect the Biblical mystery of marriage.** God established marriage to be a drama of Christ's relationship to us, the church. Turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 5:22-25. "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Husbands, how we love and care for our wife is a statement about how we think Christ should treat the church; and wives, how you respect and honor your husband is a statement about how you think the church should treat Christ.

Choose to let your body serve the one to whom you are married. Instead of pressing to maximize the benefit to yourself, choose to be a servant, to shed your right for sexual pleasure and learn to give preference to your spouse. When you make a choice to do this the power of your sexuality becomes creative rather than destructive.

Choose to delight in your wife or husband. Look over at Proverbs 5:18 and following:

¹⁸ May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.

¹⁹ A loving doe, a graceful deer—
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love.

²⁰ Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress?
Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?

²¹ For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD,
and he examines all his paths.

Your commitment to your spouse should be so fierce and strong that anything that dares to come between you is mercilessly put to death at once.

There are certain doors of our lives which should never be reopened after marriage.

Once your marriage vows have been taken those doors should be locked and the keys thrown away or destroyed. Trouble comes into a marriage when one of those doors is secretly unlocked and left ajar. How can there be a secure, lasting relationship when the possibility of ending the marriage is treated as an option? The battle is lost almost before it is started.

- **Don't think it can't happen to you.** King David of Israel, a man after God's heart, was an adulterer; what makes you think you are not vulnerable? Vigilance is not optional. Jesus told his disciples, "Watch and pray, that you may not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the body is weak." (Matt. 26:41) Past successes do not guarantee future obedience. Surround yourself with Biblically minded, spiritually wise advisers to whom you can be accountable. The thoughts we need to battle against take root as our minds are bombarded daily by unclean images and suggestions. Paul said "Take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). It is easy to convince ourselves that we want something when we really don't. Augustine said that when he was a young man he prayed constantly for chastity; but years later he realized that while his lips had been saying, "Oh Lord, make me chaste," his heart had been secretly adding, "But please don't do it just yet."

A July 18 article in WORLD magazine entitled "Giving Account" spoke of the lack of accountability in the life of the governor of S.C. On June 24th, Gov. Mark Sanford confessed, "I've been unfaithful to my wife." He apologized to his wife of 20 years and to his four young sons. A trusted friend had warned him about the dangers and pitfalls of public office, and went so far as to refuse to financially support his campaign for congress. His friend said that Sanford was incredulous: "He was insistent that it wouldn't happen to him." When he won a seat in the Congress he joined a Christian accountability group. But by the time he reached the governor's mansion, any system of accountability had disappeared. He said "no" to an invitation to join another accountability group.

He had stopped attending church as well. It was only a matter of time until he would succumb to the temptations. Do you have people in your life who help keep you on the course of purity and faithfulness? I do.

- **Don't fight when you can flee.** I Cor. 6:18 says "Flee from sexual immorality". 2 Timothy 2:22 says, "Flee the evil desires of youth." When it comes to sexual temptation, self discipline is the tool of the fool. God says to run, so run! If you pause to think it over, you already have your foot in the door. You should especially run from - the flirt, an emotional connection with someone other than your spouse, and when you experience the first feelings of secrecy or shame.
- **Don't assume you are above suffering and self-denial.** There is no such thing as a perfect marriage, or a perfect marriage partner. We are all called to remain faithful in less than good marriages. Most of us get the opportunity to live out our vows, "for better or worse, in sickness and health, for richer and for poorer." It saddens me each time I have had fellow Christians say, "I have not been finding fulfillment and satisfaction in my marriage. But thankfully, God has brought a new person into my life. It looks like God wants me to be happy again." This is not a gift from

God, but a deceitful ploy of Satan whose main objective is to ruin your marriage and destroy your life and the lives of everybody around you. The God who asks us to be covenant keepers does not provide a way of escape to get out from under our vows. Instead he gives us grace and strength to remain faithful to Him and to our spouse.

- **Don't ignore God's early warning system.** God has given us alarms and early warning devices to let us know when we are entering dangerous territory. Your spouse is often aware of signs that you may not be in tune with, so pay attention to what he or she says. Our own built-in defenses may be at risk when:
 - We are tired physically, emotionally, or mentally. Typically men are more apt to be tired physically, while women are susceptible to emotional fatigue. It is almost impossible to make good choices when you are exhausted.
 - We are more at risk when are going through major life transitions, like the empty nest, mid-life crisis, retirement.
 - We need extra caution after we have had an emotional high point, like a promotion at work. A celebratory attitude can lower our resistance, "I been good, I've earned this little departure from the straight and narrow."
 - When our basic needs are going unmet we are more vulnerable; we can become discouraged and disillusioned. Self-pity will foster thoughts like "This isn't fair! I can't go on like this. I deserve better than this. What a loser my spouse is."
- **Don't lay a foundation where you can't build a home.** Friendship and emotional connection are the foundations of intimacy, the bedrock of a healthy marriage. Giving this foundation to someone besides your spouse robs your spouse of what is rightfully theirs and places you in an incredibly susceptible position. Prov. 4:23 tells us to "guard our hearts". Beware of delights that are occurring outside your marriage that are not taking place within your marriage. Emotional adultery almost always precedes physical adultery. If you can give a positive response to any of the following questions you may be laying a foundation where you can't build a home. As you dress in the morning is the person you hope to impress someone other than your spouse? Are you looking forward to telling someone something that you would not tell your spouse? Do you find yourself dreading your arrival at home? Do you look forward to receiving hugs from someone other than your spouse? If you have a friendship with someone of the opposite sex that is becoming too close, and you find yourself making special time to spend together, you could be taking your first steps toward adultery.
- **Commit to keeping covenant.** Will you be a covenant keeper or not? Will you be a person who keeps your promises to your children, and to your spouse? We can allow the reservoir of our sexuality to be channeled toward life or permit it to overflow and destroy us and those around us. There are some here today whose marriage is more like jail than joy, who feel they have made a horrible mistake, or would say that their marriage has gotten to the point where there is nothing left but dryness, anger, and frustration.

Others have convinced themselves that past failures disqualify them from healthy and honorable marriages.

However, let me assert as clearly as I can that in these cases (hurting marriages, past failures, loneliness), Jesus is our companion and helper, our friend that sticks closer than a brother.

For the sake of him who gave himself for us, I urge each one of you to renounce sexual sin and be faithful covenant keepers. As we learn to be covenant keepers our ability to worship and trust God will grow greater. As we trust him to work, and begin to let go of anger and manipulation, He will meet our needs for intimacy and change our circumstances to our benefit. Healing, and help, and wholeness, will come from Him.

We, as a pastoral staff, are here to help you, to give counsel, to assist you in peace-making and restoration. If you are hurting in your marriage, struggling with addictions, you are not alone. Please seek God, seek help, and seek one another.

Good morning. It was great to hear from the Word today about what God thinks about purity as it relates to a husband and wife and the marriage bed. This message has brought sexual purity to the forefront of our minds today. This morning I'm specifically talking to my brothers in Christ.

Seven or eight years ago First Free had a men's retreat up in Hesston, and during that weekend many of us began to deal with issues of sexual purity in our lives. Many men here this morning were there then. After that weekend, several of us met weekly for about a year or so as we sought to encourage each other to follow the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

As a response to this message, we would like to offer again to First Free men the opportunity to meet, fellowship, confess, encourage, support and love each other through whatever individual issues you may be dealing with in this area. This group would NOT be meant to compete with the Men's Fraternity. In fact, if you are looking for general men's fellowship, growth, and encouragement, please join the Men's Fraternity! That's the place most of us men should be.

But if you are a man who finds yourself in bondage to things in this arena that keep you from fully following the Lord – and you know who you are – this is the group that is committed to helping each of us men find Christ's complete sovereignty over this area and all areas of our lives. And wives, if your husband shows an interest in this group, I will pray that you will not freak out. If he needs this, you NEED him to need this.

Colossians 3:1-5 says: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

The contact information is in the bulletin. Or you can talk to me directly if you wish. May we go forward as men dead to sin, and alive in Christ.

Thank you.