

SERMON TITLE: "Ten Commandments 7 &9: Be a Faithful Witness"
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 20:1-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 4, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, before hearing aids were so common, *a golden anniversary party was thrown for an [older] couple. The husband was moved by the occasion and wanted to tell his wife just how he felt about her. She was very hard of hearing, however, and often misunderstood what he said. With many family members and friends gathered around, he toasted her: "My dear wife, after fifty years, I've found you tried and true!" Everyone smiled approval, but his [hard-of-hearing] wife asked, ["What'd you say?" So the husband] repeated louder, "AFTER FIFTY YEARS, I'VE FOUND YOU TRIED AND TRUE!" His wife harrumphed and shot back, "Well, let me tell you something—after fifty years I'm tired of you, too!"¹*

Ever since the beginning of this New Year, we've been working our way through the Ten Commandments. Last Sunday, I told you that I was mixing them up a bit here at the end. I wanted to wait until this Valentine's month of February to talk about matters of love and honesty. Anyone who's ever read much of the Ann Landers or Dear Abby columns knows that these two issues go together. It's hard to love someone that you can't trust, and it's hard to trust someone who isn't honest. So, let's take some time this morning to consider how commandment seven, "You shall not commit adultery," and commandment nine, "You shall not bear false witness," can teach us how to "be a faithful witness."

1—ADULTERY

OK, let's begin by acknowledging the elephant in the room. It's hard for us to talk about sex in church. And, as soon as we begin that conversation, all of our minds start going to places and people in our past or our present. We think of struggles we ourselves have had with infidelity, or we think of people we know who have hurt their families in this way. Some of us may hurry to exceptions and excuses, hoping and praying that God will understand.

In former times, most of us would have known someone that we considered trapped in a bad marriage. Because of religious and cultural traditions, community mores, family expectations, the sake of the children, or financial reasons—people often stayed in unhappy and sometimes even dangerous marriages. Sometimes the commitment to the marriage was a commitment to the official status more than to a heartfelt relationship. Sometimes the marriage was entered into and/or maintained out of guilt or duty more than love. In those cases, adultery was, no doubt, more tempting than in relationships where mutual respect, care, and benefit abounded.

Sometimes people have sidestepped the adultery issue by having another kind of affair. Many a spouse has felt neglected by a husband or wife who cares more about their job, their hobbies, or their addiction. Even when there's no sexual misconduct, affections and interests can be out of balance.

Because of changing ideas about marriage, not as many people put up with unfaithfulness as they used to. Even here in pro-family Utah, the state Senate voted just this week on a bill that would do away with the 90-day waiting period for a divorce. We don't know yet if the House will pass it, but, either way, we get the clear message that divorce is possible. There may be some trade-offs, for sure. But no one has to stay in an unhappy marriage. So, adultery is not in any way, shape, or form a "necessary" option. If you aren't finding your current relationship fulfilling, you have every right and responsibility to bring it to a clean and honest end before you go out looking for someone else. I'm not saying that couples shouldn't try to improve their relationships and go to marriage counseling. Of course, those would be important steps before ending a marriage. But don't pretend that you're happy about your marriage when you're not. And don't pretend to be faithful when you're not. The very least your spouse deserves is honest communication.

2—FALSE WITNESS

That's where commandment nine about being a truthful witness really connects. If we're not supposed to bear false witness against our neighbor, how much more we're obligated to speak truth to

and about our most-intimate partners. And by “truth,” I mean not exaggerating about how terrible they are or blaming them for our own failings. Jealously imagining unreal scenarios is not truth, either. So much pain is caused by former lovers who turn against each other and then spread lies, rumors, and gossip. Whether married, divorced, or none of the above, we owe each other the common decency of not making other people look worse just so we can look better.

I know many people are still quite uncomfortable with LGBTQ persons and issues, but maybe we can all agree that it’s better for persons to be honest about their sexual orientation than for them to try to live in way that feels false. How many marriages, I wonder, have been compromised and jeopardized by a spouse who isn’t able or willing to admit how they really feel? Conversely, those of us who know a longtime and faithful same-sex couple are often able to see the kindness, support, and beneficial companionship they give each other.

While we’re talking about sex and truth, I’d be remiss not to mention the recent movement in our society to “out” those persons who have used their positions of power to abuse others with sexual harassment, intimidation, and even rape. While those aren’t necessarily cases of *adultery*, these commandments about truth and sexual misconduct flash bright warning signals. We have no right to misuse human sexuality in ways that hurt other people. And we have no right to suppress the truth to cover up our abusive behavior. If our behavior can’t bear coming to the light, then we shouldn’t be doing it. I realize there’s the possibility of false accusations, and we all need to guard against that. Unfortunately, the scales of justice have so long been weighted in favor of the perpetrators of sexual misconduct, it may take some time to find the right balance in issues of sexual truth.

3—FAITHFUL WITNESS

When we put commandments seven and nine together, what we get is God’s expectation that each of us should be a faithful witness. That idea isn’t just here in Exodus 20. Listen to some other biblical passages where this idea comes up.

In Acts 1:8, just before he ascended to heaven, Jesus told his disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

These acts of witnessing to the truth of Jesus’ gospel would not just be empty words. This faithful witness would be backed up by deeds. In Matthew 5:16, Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Similarly, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians at Thessalonica, “You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers . . . urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God” (1 Thess. 1:10-12).

And, of course, the most faithful way to witness would be living in the love of Christ. In John 13, Jesus told his disciples, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (34-35).

A faithful witness is one who maintains purity and appropriateness in their sexual relationships. A faithful witness is one who speaks truth. And a faithful witness is one who does all these things in the kind of love that maintains appropriate boundaries of protection and respect for other people and for oneself. Abusing others or allowing them to abuse us is not love. Saying that abuse doesn’t matter or denying that it even exists isn’t honest. To be a faithful witness, we need to pay close attention to our relationships with other people.

Recent news about Catholic Pope Francis has been interesting to me. Francis was popularly acclaimed when he was first elected as pope because he was believed to be a man who cared deeply for the poor and the dispossessed. But in his recent visit to Chile, his reputation and witness seem to be marred by his quick dismissal of claims of priestly sexual abuse and cover-up in the Chilean church. I’m glad that the pope has now appointed someone to follow up and check things out. But I imagine that the pope’s initial lack of sympathy to the victims has lost him some credibility and tarnished his ability to

connect people to Christ. All that goes to show how tricky it is to be a faithful witness in sexuality and truth.

Fortunately, young people today are getting a lot of training that we older ones didn't have. Children are taught about "good touch, bad touch" so they can recognize when someone is doing something wrong. Today, young men and women are taught to ask their dates, "Is this OK?" before they proceed to the next level of sexual intimacy. And the #MeToo movement is empowering young women and men to stand up and speak truth about real situations that previously would not have been believed or judged valid.

With these new developments, all of us are being held to higher levels of accountability. We have to be much more careful in the ways we behave and speak in order to be considered a faithful witness.

CONCLUSION

I found a website that lists 36 songs that have to do with honesty. The top one on the list is Billy Joel's song from 1979. Maybe you remember his lament:

Honesty is such a lonely word; everyone is so untrue.
Honesty is hardly ever heard--and mostly what I need from you.

I also liked an LDS children's song I found:

I believe in being honest; I believe in being true,
that honesty should start with me/ in all I say, in all I do.³

As we wrap up this series on the Ten Commandments, let's order our lives according to this wisdom. Let's avoid sexual misconduct in all its forms. Let's be honest in all we say and in all we do. Let's be a faithful witness.

¹James S. Hewett, ed., *Illustrations Unlimited* (Tyndale House Publ, Wheaton, IL: 1988), p. 333.

²<https://spinditty.com/playlists/Songs-About-Honesty-Truth-Integrity-and-Trust>

³Lyrics by Ruth Muir Gardner, c. 1986. <https://www.lds.org/music/library/childrens-songbook/i-believe-in-being-honest?lang=eng&r=1>