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Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery

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THOU SHALT NOT

COMMIT

ADULTERY

DISCOURSE BY

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THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.—EXODUS xx, 14.

No apology is needed for addressing the general public on this theme. God says to his ministers: "When I say to the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way to save his life, the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood will I require at thy hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity, but thou hast delivered thy soul." Every preacher should desire to be so faithful in his warnings that he can stand at last before the bar of God with no blood of unreprieved sinner upon his hands, and can say, with Paul, "I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God." How, then, can he pass by in silence a command given upon Sinai, enforced by divine direction with severest penalties, repeated by our Lord, and expounded in the Sermon on the

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RESTRICTED AREA

Mount? If any command is to be omitted from our reproofs and warnings, let it not be this one.

No sin mentioned in Scripture is more frequently or more fearfully denounced than the sin of adultery. The Jews were required to punish it with death. Again and again was the law laid down that those guilty of this sin must be put to death. In the New Testament, also, fornication is classed with the vilest sins. It is written that whoremongers and adulterers shall have their part in the lake of fire. "Because of these things"—viz., fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, and evil concupiscence—the apostle declares that "the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience." This is the sin which pre-eminently defiles a land. God warned the Israelites to beware of the uncleanness of the Canaanites, lest the land should spew them out. Can language furnish a stronger figure? It is this sin which gives the darkest shade to the fearful picture Paul draws of the heathen world in the first chapter of Romans—a picture to the truthfulness of which ancient authors bear ample testimony. So debased in personal impurity were even the polished Athenians that we can not bear to lift the veil which covers the private lives of Pericles, Themistocles, and Demosthenes, the brightest and best of them all.

It is enough to say that the Athenians worshiped a god of incest, and made fornication a part of their religious rites. There were more than a thousand prostitutes in a single temple of Venus at Corinth. The Romans were, if possible, even worse. The pictures taken from the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum are so vile that both sexes can not be allowed to look at them together in the British Museum.

Then, too, adultery is a very general sin to-day, and it should not be passed over in silence. From the time when Sodom and Gomorrah were blotted out because of their impurity till to-day, when great cities, even in Christian lands, are corrupting ulcers on the body politic, there has been no sin more universal among men. You know it is true in our cities that the man whose life has been pure is the exception. Not even drunkenness has half so many followers as this terrible sin, which pollutes the land we love.

Of all the sins forbidden in the Decalogue, this is doubly damnable in that it involves leading another into guilt. Our parents are not made guilty by our refusal to honor them; nor is the man whom we kill, or against whom we bear false witness, or from whom we steal, made guilty by our act; but the adulterer involves another soul as well as his own in sin, and so is

doubly guilty. Cain killed his brother, but did not lead him into sin. The murderer shall rise up in the Judgment and condemn the adulterer, for he killed only the body of his victim, not the soul. The drunkard shall rise up and condemn the adulterer, for he destroyed only his own soul, not the soul of another with him. Shall this sin, so often and so vehemently denounced in Scripture, so ruinous to society, and so doubly damnable—shall this sin be too sacred to be denounced from the pulpit?

Yet it should be rebuked wisely; for of all sins, this is the one which is most aided by the imagination, and therefore it is well to have little to say of it in our homes and daily lives, so that impure thoughts may be banished from our minds. But so long as it pollutes the land, so long must faithful preachers denounce it. To attempt to give a view of the corruption in our highly favored land caused by this sin would, I fear, do more harm by way of suggestion than it would do good by way of warning. One single fact I may venture to mention. A lady in Washington City, who had been for years in the Government employment, testifies that she has had occasion to ask favors of hundreds of public men—Senators, Congressmen, department officials, etc.—and in almost every instance the man

to whom she applied, either directly or indirectly, made an attack upon her virtue. Washington is our national capital, and the officials there, in theory, represent the people of the United States. Judge, then, of the pollution of a nation which selects such men to make and execute her laws.

Viewing this commandment in the light of our Lord's exposition, we see that impure thoughts are forbidden as well as impure acts. "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." We can here see the greatness of God's mercy. Human laws regard only the fruits of the forbidden trees, while God's laws cut away the roots of those trees. No one is ever guilty in action who is not first guilty in thought. "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life," is an utterance of infinite wisdom. Impure thoughts are themselves sins, and we should guard our imaginations for this reason, and not simply lest our appetites should become too strong for us. Have you never indulged in impure thoughts? Have you never cherished ideas you would blush to unveil before your fellow-men? The time is surely and rapidly coming when, unless you repent, all mankind and the angels will know of

your vileness. Think of your agony of shame then. Think of your sin now.

Will you say you can not help your thoughts? It is true you can not help receiving an evil suggestion, but you can avoid cherishing an impure thought. You can pray to God for strength. You can repeat to yourself passages of Scripture. You can resolutely think of other things. You can engage in pure conversation, or, if alone, you can take up a good book or paper, and soon forget the suggestion of evil. "Resist the devil, and he shall flee from you." Only resist; you can do that, however weak you may be. The feeblest can resist the strongest. If we only resist, the promise of God is that the devil shall flee. Keep your body in subjection. Paul found this necessary, and you will never be purer than the great apostle. An earnest effort, with prayer and fasting, to keep the body under would go far to free men from vile imaginings. Strong drink, even in moderate quantities, and rich food render it well-nigh impossible for those who indulge in them to maintain purity of thought. Those who use stimulants are in special danger. Eating less flesh and more fruit would also tend toward purity. Frequent fasting is also helpful. The old ascetics, in their wild efforts to maintain purity, lived on bread and water and fruit. Total

abstinence in drinking and temperance in eating would keep many from sin, and would wonderfully lessen the guilt of the world. None are so pure as not to need earnest efforts to keep the body under; and in this, "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." We should remember that the lustful thought not only leads to sin, but is itself sin.

The fearful progress of impurity in our land shows itself in the relaxing of the marriage bond, as seen in the frequency of divorces and the ease with which they are obtained. The increased boldness and arrogance of infidelity, proclaiming false views of liberty, have been bearing poisonous fruit among us. *Right* and *duty* are considered old fogy words used to express antiquated ideas, while *pleasure* and *gain* are regarded as the only things worth striving for. Thus men's moral vision is blurred and their sense of obligation deadened. The subject of divorce is too large to be treated here; though it deserves and demands the prompt and earnest attention of our moralists and statesmen. Divorces have increased in the United States, and especially in the North and East, much faster than the population has increased. Whoever is divorced and marries again, or whoever marries a divorced person, unless there were Bible grounds for the

separation, is guilty of adultery, and incurs all the terrible curses pronounced in Scripture against the adulterer.

How can we guard against impurity? Take care of your thoughts and your deeds will take care of themselves. There are so many ways in which vile thoughts are suggested that we need to guard against them carefully and ceaselessly in the fear of God. Never, on any account, read any thing that is obscene, either in statement or in suggestion. Alas! that in well nigh all the papers, except the religious ones, there are to be found accounts of the violation of the seventh commandment, written, perhaps, in sprightly style, but polluting in their suggestiveness. The daily papers dish out filth to the public under the pitiful plea that it is "news." Do not read such things. It can not injure you to be ignorant of them, and familiarity with this vice, above all others, is to be avoided. You can read of lying, and stealing, and killing, bad as they are, with less harm to yourself than you will receive by reading of adultery.

But more than this, I would have you set your faces steadily against all such publications as the *Police Gazette*, which are as obscene, especially in their pictures, as they can be to be tolerated by law. I thank God that the Texans

have passed a law prohibiting the sale of such "flash" literature in their State. Shall Texas be ahead of the other States in morality? Young men see these papers at news-stands, in hotels, in barber shops, and on the cars, and are corrupted by them everywhere. I call upon all lovers of virtue and purity to make their power felt in saving our youth from these polluting influences. Do not patronize bookstores or news-stands where such literature is sold. This will stop the sale at every place that claims to be respectable. And do not go to barber shops where such papers are paraded. Let your principles have some backbone, and whether you are a Christian or not, have some fiber in your morality.

I call upon the managers of our railroads to stop the sale of vile literature on the trains. In these days many of our young men are traveling salesmen (one hundred thousand in the United States), and away from the wholesome influences and restraints of home life, temptation to them is doubly dangerous, as they ride on the cars or linger in hotels and barber shops, and have foul books and papers laid before them. I am told that this is controlled by the news companies, which have in them some highly respectable citizens, who get profit from the sale of such literature. Shame

on the "respectable citizen" who for the sake of *pay* will introduce into the families of others obscene papers which he would scorn to introduce into his own home!

I call upon our law-makers to interpose the stern arm of the law between the rising generation who read now, as never before, and the slough of pollution into which they are being drawn by vile literature. Our legislators were ready enough to protect the bodies of the citizens from the foul contagion of yellow fever; let them now protect the characters of these citizens from the fouler contagion of obscene books and papers.

I have said nothing of the grossly impure literature which is already condemned by law, and which Mr. Anthony Comstock and others have done such good service in suppressing. There should be more Comstocks and a stronger public sentiment to see that the law is faithfully executed.

Then there are manufacturers who make obscene brands for their wares; and these brands exhibited on the shelves and counters of stores are corrupting to the last degree. A great deal of cheap literature, especially that translated from the French, saturated with vileness, floods our land and is eagerly read by our boys and girls.

In art, also, lewdness has a prominent place, and because it is *art* the lewdness is allowed to do its deadly work unchallenged. It is no answer to say that works of art should be viewed from an artistic standpoint, and that when *so* viewed by people of pure hearts they exert no immoral influence. The plain fact is, that people's hearts are not generally pure, nor do they occupy an artistic standpoint.

Men can not handle pitch without being defiled, and it is foolish in them to attempt it, even though their object be to exhibit its blackness. So do not tell or willingly listen to lewd stories, no matter how witty, nor how well told they may be. Many a boy has had his soul poisoned and his imagination inflamed by the foul stories he has heard from the lips of older persons. If you are about to tell to companions any thing of doubtful propriety, stop and ask yourself, Would Paul have told this to John? Yet, when it was necessary, Paul listened gravely and sadly to the story of that Church member at Corinth, guilty of a sin not so much as named among the Gentiles, and he sternly rebukes the Church for failing to discipline that member. But you can not imagine Paul's telling Timothy the latest scandal at Athens nor rehearsing the vile things he had heard at Tarsus. The com-

mand is clear and far-reaching, "filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, let it not even be named among you." The word translated "jesting" is used in a bad sense, and means *double entendres*, seemingly decent words which are capable of an evil construction. Your hearts are to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. Will he dwell with you if filthiness is cherished in your hearts and lewd jesting falls from your lips?

The theater, as it exists among us, is another deadly enemy to purity. Not that the drama is in itself evil, but that, as a matter of fact, dramatic representations do have an evil tendency. We have not to do with theaters as they might, could, would, or should be, but with them as they are. From the earliest times moralists, of every age, clime, and school, have united in condemning the theater. It is easy to prove from history that the influence of the theater has ever been for evil. Even in heathen Greece and Rome the priests of Apollo, who were expected to lead pure lives, were forbidden to visit the theater, lest they should be corrupted. And the theater of that day presented the plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and others like them, which were certainly equal to the plays in our American theaters to-day. Then, in those ancient theaters no women were allowed to appear on

the stage, the female characters being assigned to boys and small men, who dressed as women. How much worse must it be to-day, when lewd exhibitions are made in every theater in America! Does that seem to you too sweeping a statement? I suppose it will be agreed that Mr. McVicker's theater, in Chicago, is as pure and clean as any in the land. He is the special champion of first-class theaters, and the chief defender of the stage from the pulpit charge of immorality. And yet Dr. Herrick Johnson has published accounts of the plays presented in Mr. McVicker's theater which clearly prove that here is no exception to the rule. I do not say that every play is bad, but that these theaters which claim to be first-class do present plays which are corrupting to the last degree. I do not know of a single exception, and would be very glad to know it if there is one. My judgment rests on the bills I have seen posted, the advertisements and criticisms of the performances I have read, the testimony of stage managers and performers, the plays I have read, and the people I have known who were corrupted by the theater. Soon after the Declaration of Independence the American Congress passed a resolution strongly urging upon the States to take measures to suppress "theatrical entertainments." And I read not

long ago in one of our city papers the reason a prominent actress gave for keeping her marriage a secret; viz., "An artist is less marketable when respectable than when she isn't." That is to say, stage managers are willing to pay more for an actress, provided she is vile. Does it not become all lovers of virtue, and all who care for the purity of the rising generation, to resolutely turn their backs upon the theater?

You can not imagine Paul's or John's going to see Sarah Bernhardt play. It is not well to say, "I have a right to go to see fine acting, and whatever evil there is in the theater will not harm me." "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." It is an evil sign when people have more to say about their rights than about their duties; and I have often observed that piety comes awkward to Church-members who love the theater. The acknowledged aim of the theater is not to elevate and purify, but to amuse and entertain. The announcements of theatrical performances are always headed "amusements" in the papers, and the dramas are styled "plays." People are not generally fond of instruction; and so long as they are entertained by "spicy" performances, as vile plays are often called, so long will the stage furnish filth to those willing to pay for it.

Another enemy to purity is the dance, as we find it. *As we find it*, observe, and not as it might, could, would, or should be. If the sexes were not commingled in the mazes of the dance, if the ladies all danced in one room and the gentlemen in another, I would never lift up my voice against dancing. It is claimed that dancing is graceful, that it cultivates grace of movement, that it is healthful exercise, and that it is pleasant to keep step to sprightly music. Very well; then let the men and the women dance in separate rooms, and it will be just as graceful, just as healthful, and they can keep step to the music just the same. Far be it from me to charge that all who engage in these modern dances are consciously influenced by impure thoughts; and yet the fact remains that these dances do tend to impurity among men. Women, with cooler and purer natures, are less affected, and so are in less danger; and yet it not seldom happens that a woman's fall begins in the dance. The Christian women who are laboring to elevate their fallen sisters in New York City and elsewhere, report that in a majority of cases it was the dance which first broke down the modesty of the fallen ones and caused their fall.

Those who trade in any article are always quick to find out what will help their traffic.

And so it is quite customary for those who make money out of impurity to have dance-houses connected with their brothels. They know full well how the mazes of these modern dances help on their foul business.

In the face of such facts will Christian people uphold theaters and dancing? Will it be said, "It is fashionable to dance and to attend the theater?" Fashionable, alas! Well, it was once fashionable to witness gladiatorial butchery, and emperors and their wives applauded when wild beasts tore their victims limb from limb. Fashionable, indeed! Have you no objection to sin, but only to the dress it wears? If guilt comes to you beautifully arrayed, will you, on that account, take it to your hearts?

"Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." And whenever women dress in a way to excite impure thoughts they are doing the devil's work of leading men into temptation. Many ladies, feeling bound to follow the fashions, though why they should feel so I could never understand, dress fashionably without any thought in their pure hearts of the immoral influence of the styles. They dress as they do simply because it is fashionable, and yet those styles were invented by vile women in

Paris, and invented for vile purposes. It is a violation of the seventh commandment to do any thing that will tend to awaken foul thoughts and desires; and no one can escape from the guilt either on the plea of the fool, "I didn't think," or on the plea of Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

All fondling between men and women is forbidden by this commandment. And in this I am glad to say the women of our land, and especially of our section, lead the world. They have given least cause of offense to their brethren, and they are to-day the purest beings on the earth. Elsewhere the debasing doctrines of free-love are openly taught, the marriage bond is loosened, and divorce is made easy. In Europe marital laxness *is* notorious. In England the special champion of æsthetic culture is a writer of lewd poetry, and in some sections of the United States very loose views are advocated. The national convention of those who call themselves "Liberals" and "Free-thinkers" squarely advocated the circulation of obscene literature, and their session was enlivened by the recitation of lewd poetry. We hear sad accounts of the fall of those whose special work it is to fight sin and maintain purity. Ministers of the Gospel have fallen into the cesspool, ministers whom

I pity as much as I condemn, because the beginnings of their sin seemed so innocent. It behooves us all to remember that we are not angels, but men, and to strive with the pure-minded apostle to keep our bodies under, lest, at last, we prove to be castaways.

I have spoken plainly the message I felt called to deliver, and have dwelt upon those points where the danger is greatest. With Christ's word's before us, who of us can face this seventh commandment and say, "Lord, I am guiltless?"

Parents, guard your children from impurity; let them read no corrupt books or papers; let them hear no impure talk and witness no polluting exhibitions; keep them from vile associations; know who are their companions and what are their characters. You owe them no higher duty than to guard them from all contamination and to strive faithfully in the fear of God to have their hearts clean and pure from the besetting and debasing sin of concupiscence.

And to the young men of the land I would say: Keep your manhood stainless. Be strong against fleshly passion, and prove your masterhood by your purity. Adultery is a sin because God forbids it, and it is also a sin which nature equally forbids. It pollutes a land and debases a people. You can measure the greatness of a

nation by the virtue of its men and women. Adultery saps the foundation of all high character, and breaks down that fixedness of principle without which there can be no excellence. This sin always mars the health, and often brings loathsome disease on its victim. Alas! how many invalids to-day are dragging out miserable lives of suffering because they or their fathers violated the seventh commandment! Much of the consumption and scrofula in the world come from this source. Licentiousness is not the path of pleasure, even in this world. It makes men aged before their time—witness Byron, old at thirty, and “in the sere and yellow leaf.” It weakens mental power and leads to imbecility and insanity. The adulterer’s mind loses its power to grasp great thoughts, and becomes incapable of long-continued exertion. Just here is the secret of the failure of so many brilliant young men to fulfill in after life the bright promise of their youth. Their brains are clouded, their attention wanders, and they are not the men they would have been had they kept themselves pure. I beg you be strong against this great sin. As you value high thought and honorable character, as you love purity and reverence God, keep your feet far from the paths of licentiousness. Keep your souls clean and

stainless, and your minds unclouded by passion, unbenumbed by carnal indulgence, and strong for the great life-work that lies before you for yourselves, your dear ones, your country, and your God.