

Matthew 5:21-26

21 ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Exodus 20:13

You shall not murder

Jesus combines the issue of adultery with the issue of divorce. These issues of divorce and adultery are complex and complicated. They strike families everywhere, and no family is immune to this tragedy and the breaking of faith. It feels like a failure to so many. That which started with high hopes for many then forever dissolves into a failed relationship, to the extent that some have pushed the whole notion of forever out of the marriage picture.

In my lifetime, Jimmy Carter's *Playboy* interview in the November 1976 edition of the magazine spoke about committing adultery in his heart. What he meant as straightforward Baptist teaching came close to costing him the election. He was acknowledging a powerful teaching of Jesus that warns us to be careful.

Although found on the second tablet of the law, which deals with our relationship with neighbors, the prophets used it to speak of Israel's relationship with God. The prophets speak of Israel chasing after foreign gods and worshiping them as an image, using adultery for our relationship to God when we are unfaithful. Breaking faith with God or another yields separation. Indeed, some theologians call sin separation from God caused by not putting God first.

Not only is the breaking of our relationship with God covered by this commandment, but it also has a trajectory that flows over all our interactions, calling us to faithfulness and integrity in all our dealings. We are always to act with faithfulness and integrity in all areas of life.

The Bible roundly condemns adultery as against God's will, as it is a severe breaking of a loving, faithful trust between people. As an aside, this command was also to protect women from being cast aside in a patriarchal society at the whim of a husband.

In the Bible, one story of adultery stands out: although often misinterpreted, the story of David and Bathsheba. The quote on our board outside is from Psalm 51, attributed to David after he was unfaithful to his wife. Create in me a clean heart.

The story shows the fall of David from a man after God's own heart to a broken man whose family is severely disrupted. It foreshadows the split between the northern and southern kingdoms upon the death of David's son Solomon.

The story begins in 2nd Samuel 11, during the springtime when all the kings lead their armies to war, with the notation that David remains behind and sends Joab. His first step down the slippery slope of moral failure is his failure to lead his troops into battle; instead, he sends Joab. The story about David and Bathsheba is about Adultery and its destructive consequences, but so much more as well. The story is as current as today's headlines.

David, a popular religious and political leader, sets his eyes on Bathsheba one evening as he gazes upon her bathing from his palace. So, while the battle raged, he went up on the roof of his palace, gazing at Bathsheba bathing, probably partaking in one of the Hebrew baths of purification. Checking out who she is, David decides to summon her. His lust is kindled. He desires her. He is King. She is married to one of his soldiers. So what? He summons her with a royal command. He has sex with her. Think about it; when David summons her, what can she do? He is the king and has the power of the state to gratify his desires.

According to scripture, this is full-blown adultery on David's part, and he knows it, but then again, he is king, and he can do what he wants. The power differential between the two is gigantic. Power differentials in relationships, especially in the workplace and education, should sound alarm bells when they arise. We often read about it in business and politics. And power differentials should warn us off until we can correct or remove that imbalance, say, by taking another job or by absenting ourselves from the situation as long as the imbalance remains.

Now we need to correct some of the fanciful interpretations of this story. Bathsheba is innocent; she has done nothing wrong, and she can't resist the king or his commands. David is at fault; she did not seduce him. He used his power and authority as king to command her presence. And we do not know more than that he used his power as king to coerce her into a sexual encounter.

She comes to him as a response to a command. And David can't say, "It's not my fault; I saw her bathing and couldn't help myself." As we know, David has no excuse. David is guilty of adultery and worse—maybe even rape. David stands guilty with no excuse. Bathsheba is a preyed-upon victim. There is such a power differential between David, the king, and Bathsheba, the commoner. David's kingship renders Bathsheba's free choice nonexistent. He covets Uriah's wife, another broken commandment. David is the adulterer, not Bathsheba. She is not the temptress, nor did she lead him on. He saw what he wanted, and he took it.

It doesn't matter what kind of clothing or look she has or what she was doing when he saw her. Exploitation, harassment, and rape are not excusable. While this was well before "no means no," that wouldn't have mattered. Neither would any notion of consent. David wouldn't have cared anyway. He is the king, and her life is in his hands.

While we don't know what their relationship was, in one sense, it doesn't matter. The King has violated his vows as keeper of God's laws. David has violated Bathsheba, God's law, and his own

claim to integrity. What we do know is that she returns home and later sends the ominous message. “I’m pregnant.”

So, what does the fallible leader of Israel do? He begins to seek to hide his deed. No brave man accepting responsibility; he doesn’t man up; he tries a cover-up.

Things get worse as David pursues this cover-up. Uriah comes home from battle, and David tries to convince Uriah to sleep with his wife, but he won’t. Uriah is a loyal soldier who will not have sexual relations with his wife while a battle is raging, and people are dying. He will not violate his tradition and enjoy the pleasures of life while the ark of God and Uriah’s fellow soldiers are engaged in battle. So, David plots to have Uriah killed.

So, David sends Uriah into the fiercest of battles and then has the troops withdraw from him so that he might be killed. And that is what happens.

Uriah led the troops into battle, not David. Wow! David doesn’t lead his troops into battle like a commander; his victim does. David’s sin also leads to his failure to step up as a leader. He is a murderer, another commandment broken. Uriah is killed in battle. Time passes.

Bathsheba laments her husband's death. When she was done mourning, David again sent for her and made her his wife, and she bore a son. David took Bathsheba into his house and made her his wife.

And then, Bam! Bam! Bam! Nathan the prophet shows up, pounding on the door with a tale of horror. He tells David about a poor man with a beloved little lamb. A rich man takes that lamb from the poor man to make lamb chops for a feast. The poor man’s only lamb is served at the rich man’s dinner to entertain his guest. He doesn’t take one from his flock; he preys on the poor man. Now Nathan makes clear that this lamb was not for eating but was more like a pet puppy who ate from the table, drank from his cup, and was beloved by the family. Yet the rich man seizes it, slaughters it, and serves it. David got very angry and said Who would do something like that? He is demonic and has no compassion and must restore the lamb seven times over.

David vows to pursue justice for the wronged man. Then, to his dismay, he finds out this is not about lamb chops, it is about kings, wives, and husbands. It is about David. Nathan says **YOU ARE THAT MAN.**

So, this is a story about David breaking faith, and, as Psalm 51 says, he has sinned against God — and, we might add, against his troops, Uriah, Bathsheba, and their child.

So, the sin of breaking faith is multifaceted; it affects our relationship with God, with one another, and with our souls.

David confesses his sin, and God spares his life, but the child of David and Bathsheba dies.

David realizes part of his sin against God but fails to recognize his sin against Bathsheba. He repents, and there is some sense of forgiveness. You might also want to read Psalm 51, which in part reads:

For the music leader. A psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him just after he had been with Bathsheba.

51 Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

2 Wash me completely clean of my guilt;
purify me from my sin!

3 Because I know my wrongdoings,
my sin is always right in front of me.

4 I've sinned against you—you alone.
I've committed evil in your sight.

That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,
completely correct when you issue your judgment.

5 Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,
from the moment my mother conceived me.

He is forgiven, but just like us, he cannot escape the consequences of his actions, nor should he. The writer of this story wants to go even further and blame much of what follows directly on this sin. We could argue that point forever.

But I think the direct resulting death of the child of this union is an earlier understanding that later in the scripture says is untenable, as children won't be punished for the sins of the parent. Even the best of us suffer. We also learn that God's sun and nurturing rain fall on the just and the unjust.

But even without the child's death, David's failures are multiplied by the tragedies that follow—even some that have a direct root in David's failure, his wrongdoing, his sins. As the Biblical narrative unfolds with terror, there is not only the death of a child, but also rape and murder in the family. Even his child, Absalom, revolts against him and is killed. And after a time, his nation, too, becomes divided. David's life and legacy are a mess. This is the underside of the story of the great king with feet of clay.

We know that the breaking of faith with God or with one another can and does have tragic consequences. It can and does destroy our lives and our integrity.

But Jesus has shown us another way in the story of the Woman caught in adultery.

Remember the story when people brought Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery, and she was caught in the act, but the man was not present—no answer on where he was. So, Jesus, after drawing on the ground, turns to the crowd of men and says, "If you are without sin, throw the first stone," and they slowly fade away. Jesus asks the woman, "Who condemns you?" and she says, "No one." He says, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

As Adam Hamilton notes, this forgiveness does not erase the consequences, nor should it. And the breaking of this commandment can have grave consequences. People may suffer as David did, but we know that in Jesus, God always steps to us in mercy first, ready to offer forgiveness, not condemnation. As Paul says, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God we have in Jesus Christ.” It is that kind of love that can empower us to want to keep commandments for faithfulness and integrity with God, our neighbor, and ourselves, for that is the path for us to follow in our walk of life.