

Adultery in the Christian Church – The Scarlet Letter Revisited

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Many of us read this Nathaniel Hawthorne classic for English class somewhere in our educational journey. Hester Prynne was a young Puritan woman whose husband had apparently been lost at sea some years before the story began. We soon learn Hester had a child, born of an affair with a man whose name she refused to reveal. The man chose not to come forward.

Giving your memory the benefit of the doubt, you may recall the man who was the adulterer and father of the child was the local pastor, Dimmesdale. Cowardice and fear kept this ‘man of God’ from stepping up and confessing his sin. That had two consequences—one sad, the other fatal.

Sadly, the reverend’s unrepentance kept Hester bearing the shame alone. She was forced to wear the scarlet letter ‘A’ on her chest at all times. It would be a sign of her sin – Adultery – to all who encountered her from that point forward. Her daughter saw it every time she saw her mother. (Hard to imagine this because none of us want to be reminded of our sin.)

The second, and more dire consequence, was that of Reverend Dimmesdale. Concealment of his sin, and the shame it brought to someone else, ate him alive from the inside out. That kind of thing should sound familiar to those who know the Bible and recall the travails of King David. I shared this verse in the lesson on Secret Sins. He described the consequences as follows:

“When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.” (Psalm 32: 3 NASB)

As a closing footnote to the story, when the reverend finally did muster the strength to confess, he mounted a scaffold, exposed his chest on which he had burned into his flesh the letter ‘A’, and then dropped dead. Years of bearing the unconfessed guilt and shame of his adultery, and the pain it caused others, apparently did as David said it would.

Adultery in the Post-Modern World

As a society, we have moved from the era of biblical times where women and men were put to death when caught in the act of adultery, to the Puritan age when they were forced to wear the letter ‘A’, to the present politically correct, non-judgmental age in which we do not even use the word. It might offend someone. And the practice itself is so widespread, it really isn’t that big a deal to (too) many.

Adultery is often dismissed or laughed about in our bedeviled culture.

I shared previously the devastating statistics of Christian men and pastors and their participation in pornography. Here are equally disturbing ones on Christians and adultery. Quoting from a well-known Christian research group study,

“nearly a third (30%) of the self-proclaimed born-again Christians admitted to having an extramarital sexual affair while they were married.”

To put this in biblical perspective and call out Christians and the church on the subject, consider three difficult, very specific, teachings spoken directly from the mouths of God and Jesus.

Adultery as sexual sin—unfaithfulness in marriage. God spoke strongly and directly to this issue with the Israelites in the

seventh of the Ten Commandments.

"You shall not commit adultery." (Exodus 20: 14 ESV)

The fact that this sin was punishable by death suggests God was very serious. Today our culture prefers the phrase "having an affair" because it is less offensive and almost commonplace in too many areas. Any sin grieves the heart of God, but *adultery is* obviously high on the list for reasons I am about to explain that go beyond the covenant vows of a man and woman when they marry. Before we go there, consider this.

We know, just by looking around, that we live in the most sensual, sexual age in the history of man. But the temptations of the flesh have plagued men since our earliest days. We are too easily tempted to lust after another man's wife or a woman who is not ours. There is no stronger natural inclination in the carnal remnant of the heart of even Christian men.

So we are instructed to "resist the devil and he will flee from us." (James 4: 7) If we resist, God promised to help us escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). Perhaps the best example is when Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife so fast he left his coat behind in her hand. (Genesis 39)

I offer two solutions. (1) Direct more attention developing the last stated fruit of the Spirit—**self-control** (Galatians 5: 23). Easier said than done I know, but it may be the only hope for some men. If we are honest, most of us need more self-control in these areas. Spirit-filled Christians who walk in the Spirit are given His power to resist and exercise self-control. (Galatians 5: 16) We have no chance to make it under our own power—read those stats again.

(2) **Personal accountability** which I laid out in the last lesson. I refer you to that, and the link is provided. (Accountability)

Adultery as God viewed and defined it—the sin of a nation. In Scripture, we move from personal adultery to that of an entire nation. God frequently used a phrase throughout the Old Testament to call out Israel. From Numbers, early in their rebirth as a people, to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, after the fall of the northern kingdom and during the final collapse of Judah, God accused His people of *“playing the harlot”*- being an adulterous people.

In fact, God said this was the final reason He had enough of their adulteries and allowed both kingdoms to be overrun—even allowed the temple to be destroyed. Serious punishment from an angry God Who demanded only faithfulness to Himself.

“And I saw that for all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also. (Jeremiah 3: 8)

“These things will be done to you because you have played the harlot with the nations, because you have defiled yourself with their idols.” (Ezekiel 23: 30)

(Please note more than 2,500 years passed before Israel became a nation again.)

Many ask if this could be the fate of the United States? The better question is could it be the fate of the Christian church of the US? I want to call to your attention that God did not destroy the nations of Israel because of the sins of pagan enemies. He allowed them to be destroyed because of their sins of “playing the harlot”.

Speaking to Christians and the church, we know that God is love and all the amazing good that comes with it—grace, mercy, and more. We thank and praise Him for that. But as I illustrated, God becomes an angry Father when His children say they love and obey Him, yet commit *adultery* with every “other god” imaginable. That violates the first commandment—***no other***

gods before Me. Three takeaways from His strong words:

- ***God demands holiness not harlotry.***
- ***God extends forgiveness to His children who are truly repentant of their sins—not just sorry they got caught.***
- ***Spiritual adultery is putting any person or thing before your relationship with the Lord God. In the OT, God called that “playing the harlot”. He still does.***

Adultery as Jesus redefined it. Finally, we get to sweet Jesus. This has been a hard lesson. Surely there are some soft, sweet words from our Savior that comfort and console in this area. As He often did, Jesus came along and spoke words that blew everything up and indicted all of us men. The Sermon on the Mount was full of such teachings.

Affairs of the Heart. Once again in this amazing series, Jesus appears to abruptly change course. The subject became *adultery*. These were His only words,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5: 27-28 ESV)

As men, we cry out, “C’mon Jesus, give us a break! We are all guilty of that at times.” If He was standing among us in a men’s group, He might ask questions like these, as He liked to do when confronting people.

“What did Moses say was the penalty under the law for those caught in adultery?” (Death)

“What happened to Israel for her ongoing adulterous affairs with “other gods”?” (Destruction)

“What did I offer the woman brought to me caught in the act of adultery?” (Mercy)

My dear brothers, here is the good news on which we close this lesson on these very hard teachings of God and Jesus. Though we are known adulterers on each front we discussed, God offers us mercy with same instructions He gave the woman.

“Go and sin no more.”

Let our first response be to confess our sin—personally and as His church. Then let us return to loving the Lord God first and best—lay aside all “other gods” and worship Him alone. Only that will assuage our loving Father’s anger and restore us, and His church, to our amazing place in His kingdom. What are we waiting for?

Walter