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A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 18.4.3.6 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: The Sixth Commandment

By means of the Fifth Commandment God protects our life and the life of our neighbor. By means of the Sixth Commandment God protects our wife or husband and the wife or husband of our neighbor. Thus, God protects marriage, which, next to our life, is the most important blessing we have on this earth.

The commandment itself is very short: **“You shall not commit adultery”** (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). God was certainly serious about this commandment, for in Israel’s civil law He demanded the death penalty for those who were openly guilty of adultery: **“The man who commits adultery with another man’s wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. The man who lies with his father’s wife has uncovered his father’s nakedness; both of them shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them. If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall surely be put to death. They have committed perversion. Their blood shall be upon them. If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them. ... If a man mates with an animal, he shall surely be put to death, and you shall kill the animal. If a woman approaches any animal and mates with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood is upon them”** (Leviticus 20:10-16).

There is a great difference between such laws and the civil laws of most countries today. The sin of adultery has become so common among us that it is almost expected of both young and old alike to either practice or at least endorse sexual intercourse with someone who is not your husband or wife.

In the narrow sense adultery is a sin committed by married people who are not faithful to their spouse. But in a broad sense adultery is any thought, word, or deed that dishonors God’s institution of marriage. The terms “fornication” and “sexual immorality” are used for sexual intercourse between persons who are not married to each other.

Even though the world pays little attention to the Sixth Commandment in most modern countries, this commandment is still God’s will for us today. It is part of God’s moral law because it is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus said: **“What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man”** (Mark 7:20-23).

Those who openly sin against the Sixth Commandment without regret or repentance may be considered law-abiding citizens by the civil government, but that is not God’s verdict. The apostle Paul wrote: **“Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God”** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Paul also wrote: **“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”** (Galatians 5:19-21).

It is also written: **“Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Hebrews 13:4).**

Martin Luther gave this explanation of the Sixth Commandment in his *Small Catechism* (the *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 353):

The Sixth Commandment

You are not to commit adultery.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.

In order to gain a better understanding of the sin of adultery, it is good for us first of all to contemplate the blessings of marriage. We need to understand that God instituted marriage and He alone has the authority to tell us what marriage is, and how it is to be put into practice. Nowadays people think that marriage as we have it today has gradually evolved along with mankind from some kind of primitive notion developed by man himself. For this reason, they believe that person has the right to change marriage today into what they would like it to be.

But God Himself instituted marriage on the sixth day of world history in the Garden of Eden when He created woman from the man and gave her to the man as his wife. From the beginning God intended marriage to be a lifelong union between one man and one woman. **“And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helper comparable to him”** (Genesis 2:18). **“And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man”** (Genesis 2:21-22).

It is not clear who spoke the words of Genesis 2:24, but whether it was Adam or Moses, it is the word of God through one of them: **“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh”** (Genesis 2:24). Jesus referred to this passage when He said to the Pharisees: **“Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate”** (Matthew 19:4-6).

Adam was a biological male, and Eve was a biological female, and it was those two and no others that God brought together in the first marriage. After sin entered the world, it was not long before a man named Lamech took it upon himself to define marriage in his own way: **“Lamech took for himself two wives”** (Genesis 4:19). But this was not God’s plan.

In the years after the flood having more than one wife (polygamy) became common practice among unbelievers in certain areas, and there is evidence that some believers in the promise of the Savior followed this practice also. For example, Jacob, Elkanah, and David had more than one wife. Even though God did not intervene in these marriages, and Israelite civil law made allowance for plural wives (Deuteronomy 21:1-17), this did not alter God’s original institution of marriage. Jesus’ words to the Pharisees with reference to divorce, **“From the beginning it was not so”** (Matthew 19:8), certainly apply also to the practice of polygamy.

In the New Testament polygamy is not an option for believers in Christ, for the apostle Paul wrote: **“Because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband”** (1 Corinthians 7:2). Then Paul added these words: **“Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt**

you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). Following these instructions would be impossible in a plural marriage.

The death of either spouse brings the marriage to an end. In the same chapter Paul writes: **“A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes”** (1 Corinthians 7:39). The same would apply also to a husband.

It is clear from the Genesis account that the primary blessing of marriage is companionship. The words of God are clear: **“It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him”** (Genesis 2:18). A man and a woman united in marriage for life are good for each other. They help each other; they encourage each other; they comfort each other. King Lemuel’s mother taught him these words about marriage: **“Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her. So he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life”** (Proverbs 31:10-12).

The fall of man into sin has made marriage less than ideal in many cases. Men have abused their wives, and wives have made life miserable for their husbands. The woman Abigail was married to a very foolish man named Nabal. Her servant reported to her concerning her husband: **“He is such a scoundrel that one cannot speak to him”** (1 Samuel 25:17). Abigail herself said to David: **“Please, let not my lord regard this scoundrel Nabal. For as his name is, so is he: Nabal** (which means “fool” in Hebrew) **is his name, and folly is with him”** (1 Samuel 25:25). A little later the Bible reports that Nabal **“was very drunk”** and **“then it happened after about ten days, that the LORD struck Nabal, and he died”** (1 Samuel 25:36-38). There are likewise wives whose attitude and behavior prove this proverb correct: **“Better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman”** (Proverbs 21:19). **“It is better to dwell in a corner of a housetop, than in a house shared with a contentious woman”** (Proverbs 25:24).

God’s intention for marriage was that each person would be a blessing to the other. Besides companionship, another primary blessing of marriage is the blessing of children and the blessing of family life. **“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them”** (Psalm 127:3-5). Even before sin entered the world, God said to Adam and Eve: **“Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it”** (Genesis 1:28).

Many in our world today do not agree that children are a blessing. Some couples even enter into marriage with the intention of having no children. But with few exceptions parents should look forward to having children. While birth control in-itself isn’t sinful, all methods of birth control are subject to abuse. Christians who deliberately limit their families must consider whether their reasons for doing so are God-pleasing.

Besides the blessings of companionship and the blessings of family life, marriage is a blessing from God because it permits a man and a woman to have a sexual relationship with each other without guilt or shame. God Himself is the originator of sexual pleasure, for He created the man and the woman to enjoy the body of the other sex, as we read in the passage from 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 quoted above. Sexual intercourse without sin is indeed a blessing from the Lord. It is written: **“Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well. Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love”** (Proverbs 5:15-19). Single men or single women who have a desire to have a sexual partner should ask God to guide them to a suitable marriage partner. The apostle Paul, who was single himself, advised: **“If they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion”** (1 Corinthians 7:9).

It is wrong to demand marriage of everyone, and it is wrong to forbid marriage to anyone. There are some who can remain chaste and sexually pure without marriage, like the apostle Paul and our Lord Jesus. Paul says: **“Each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that”** (1 Corinthians 7:7). But he also says that it is a doctrine of devils to forbid marriage: **“The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry”** (1 Timothy 4:1-3). The Roman Catholic Church is guilty of such a false doctrine, forbidding their priests, monks, and nuns the privilege of marriage. This rule of theirs has only led to greater sin.

Sins against the Sixth Commandment are common in our day. Let us first consider the various ways married people sin against this commandment. Married people commit adultery when one spouse is unfaithful to the other spouse by having sexual intercourse with someone outside of the marriage. David sinned against the Sixth Commandment when he invited a neighbor's wife to his home and had sexual intercourse with her. The woman, Bathsheba, had a husband to whom she should have been faithful. Then David sinned even more by having her husband Uriah killed in battle and then arranging a quick marriage with Bathsheba. The Bible says: **“The thing that David had done displeased the LORD”** (2 Samuel 11:27). God sent the prophet Nathan to David to call him to repentance: **“Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight?”** (2 Samuel 12:9).

John the Baptist boldly denounced his own ruler, Herod Antipas, saying to him: **“It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife”** (Mark 6:18). Herod had deserted his own wife and stolen the wife of his brother Philip. This woman, Herodias, later saw to it that John the Baptist was killed for condemning her marriage to Herod.

The Sixth Commandment is transgressed by what is called “malicious desertion”. This takes place when a husband or wife simply walks out of the marriage and does not return. Job requirements sometimes make it necessary for marriage partners to live apart from each other for a time, such as when a soldier is summoned to military duty. But malicious desertion involves desertion for no good reason, contrary to God's clear Word. Paul says: **“A wife is not to depart from her husband. ... And a husband is not to divorce his wife”** (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

If malicious desertion happens and there is no possibility of restoring the marriage, the one who is left behind is no longer bound to the partner who has deserted. Paul says: **“If the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases”** (1 Corinthians 7:15). In other words, the partner has deserted the other has ended the marriage, and the partner who has been deserted is no longer bound to the marriage and is free to marry someone else.

In rare instances, because of sin, it may be difficult for a husband or wife to remain in a marriage. In such cases God's Word through His apostle Paul may be applicable: **“A wife is not to depart from her husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband”** (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

Since marriage is intended to be a lifelong union between one man and one woman, any time there is a divorce, sin is involved. When Jesus was asked a question about marriage and divorce, He replied: **“I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery”** (Matthew 19:9). There are only two situations presented in Scripture that allow for divorce. One exception, as Jesus points out, is in the case of sexual immorality or sexual unfaithfulness. In other words, the spouse who is the victim of unfaithfulness may divorce the unfaithful partner. The victim does not have to divorce the unfaithful partner but may do so without committing adultery. The other exception is a person who has been deserted may get a legal divorce from the deserter, as we explained above.

The civil laws in most countries today permit divorce for many reasons that are not in agreement with Bible teaching. But as believers in Jesus, we should be willing to follow a higher standard than that of the world.

Besides the above outward transgressions against the Sixth Commandment, anything a married partner does by thought, word, or deed to harm the marriage is a sin. Obviously, there has never been a marriage partner who has been a perfect partner at all times and in all ways. All married people need a Savior from sin: Jesus Christ, the only One who has always been without sin.

But it is not only married persons who sin against the Sixth Commandment. Unmarried persons can sin against this commandment as well. Unmarried persons as well as married persons sin against the Sixth Commandment and the Fifth Commandment by sexual assault or rape. David's own son, Amnon, raped his half-sister, Tamar. The Bible account says: **"He took hold of her and said to her, 'Come, lie with me, my sister.' But she answered him, 'No, my brother, do not force me, for no such thing should be done in Israel.' ... However, he would not heed her voice; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her"** (2 Samuel 13:11-14).

Even when it is not forced, sexual intercourse between persons who are not married to each other is **"fornication"** (also called **"sexual immorality"**). This includes sexual intercourse with prostitutes, strangers, and between people who are planning to get married to each other in the future but have not yet married each other. Prostitution of all kinds is condemned by God's Word. An active sexual life apart from marriage is condemned by God's Word. Premarital sexual intercourse is not tolerated by God in His Word. The use of birth control pills and other means of contraception and the wide use of antibiotics to control venereal disease have made people less concerned about sexual sin. But God is not mocked. Unrepentant fornicators will be judged.

Sexual immorality was common among the Greeks to whom the apostle Paul brought the Gospel of Christ so there are many warnings in his letters against sexual immorality (fornication). To the Corinthians he wrote: **"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For 'the two,' He says, 'shall become one flesh.' But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body"** (1 Corinthians 6:15-18).

In our times there are even church leaders who defend and even promote sexual intercourse between two or more men or between two or more women or any combination of partners. But God condemns such sin in the New Testament just as He had in the Old Testament. Speaking of the idolaters in the heathen world, the apostle Paul says: **"Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful"** (Romans 1:24-27).

God condemns all these sexual activities and lusts outside of marriage such as lesbianism, homosexuality, sodomy, and incest. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **"Fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God"** (Ephesians 5:3-5). There can be no such thing as a godly marriage between persons of the same sex.

The temptations to sexual sin are many in our day: jokes that make fun of marriage, indecent books and magazines that promote sexual sin, indecent movies and photography, the pornography that is readily available on the Internet and on television or in movies, indecent advertising, and indecent dancing, all of which tend to degrade marriage or arouse lust. Alcohol and certain drugs also lead people to lose their inhibitions and do things that otherwise they would not do. Jesus said that adultery begins in the heart with lustful thoughts, for He said: **"I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart"** (Matthew 5:28).

Since lust can be aroused by indecent exposure, such as total or partial nudity, stripping, or immodest clothing on the part of both men and women, we have this word from the apostle Paul: "**I desire ... that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation**" (1 Timothy 2:8-9). We need to remember that David's great sin of adultery and murder started with lust in his heart. "**From the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold**" (2 Samuel 11:2).

God intended sexual pleasure as a blessing, and it is a blessing within a loving marriage. But it is important that marriage and the relationship between men and women be conducted according to God's principles. Most Christian churches today have set aside these principles as being old-fashioned and out of date in today's society. From the beginning of creation God has established the headship principle, for God created the man first, and He created the woman to be man's helper. For this reason, Paul wrote to Timothy: "**I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression**" (1 Timothy 2:12-14). Our confessional Lutheran congregations follow this principle by not permitting women to be pastors or teachers of males or to have authority over men in the voters' assemblies. Women in the congregation can be teachers of women and children and can serve as men's helpers in many different ways.

The same thing is true of marriage. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "**I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God**" (1 Corinthians 11:3). In explanation he says: "**Man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man**" (1 Corinthians 11:8-9). As men and women are not the same biologically, so also they have not been given the same roles in marriage or in the church. To the Ephesians Paul wrote: "**The husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church**" (Ephesians 5:23).

As far as sin and salvation are concerned, men and women are equal. For Paul wrote to the Galatians: "**There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus**" (Galatians 3:28).

It is also true that just as women need men, men need women, for Paul says: "**Neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God**" (1 Corinthians 11:11-12).

It is important for Christian husbands and wives to pay close attention to the Lord's instructions for them. Notice that the model for the husband is Christ Himself, and the model for the wife is Christ's Church. These are Paul's words: "**Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. ... Let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband**" (Ephesians 5:22-33).

In a similar way Paul wrote to the Christians in Colosse: "**Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them**" (Colossians 3:18-19). The apostle Peter was in full agreement, writing: "**Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands. ... Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered**" (1 Peter 3:1-7).

Thus, wives keep the Sixth Commandment by submitting to their husbands in love and honoring and respecting them as their God-given heads. Husbands keep the Sixth Commandment by loving their wives unselfishly and honoring them as their God-given companions.

Since marriage is a lifelong bond of mutual love and respect, a Christian should be very careful in choosing a marriage partner. They should seek the advice and consent of parents. External beauty, attractiveness, or wealth is not as important as inner spirit. Unity of faith in Christ is of the utmost importance. And do not forget prayer.

Marriage customs may differ greatly from one country to another. While marriage is a divinely ordained institution, many governments have their own requirements for a legal marriage. Among Christians in our American church body the usual practice for couples intending to marry is this: they become engaged (betrothed), which is an unforced solemn promise to marry in the future that a Christian cannot take lightly, obtain a state marriage license, and then have a wedding ceremony by an approved representative of the state.

Unmarried persons should prepare for marriage by remembering that their bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, as the apostle Paul said: **“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s”** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Joseph was a handsome young man in Potiphar’s house. Temptation came to him from Potiphar’s wife, who said to him: **“Lie with me.”** But Joseph resisted her invitation and said words to her that people today can say in similar circumstances: **“How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”** (Genesis 39:7-9). She persisted in her seduction, until finally **“she caught him by his garment, saying, ‘Lie with me.’ But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and ran outside”** (Genesis 39:12).

Like Joseph, we today should run away from sexual temptation, keep ourselves busy with clean fun and decent entertainment and hard work (sports, school projects, hobbies, jobs), and pray for God’s help to keep us chaste and decent. Paul wrote: **“Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things”** (Philippians 4:8).

When we consider all that is involved in living according to the Sixth Commandment, it should be clear to all of us that we have sinned against this commandment in thought, word, and deed. All adulterers and fornicators deserve the penalty of eternal death. Therefore, this commandment, like all the others, shows us our sin and hopelessness under the law. Our only hope is Jesus Christ, who was pure and spotless in thought, word, and deed, as it is written: **“He is pure. ... In Him there is no sin”** (1 John 3:3, 5). He extends to us in the Gospel His perfect righteousness, and He has been punished for our many sins against the Sixth Commandment. Through **“the washing of water by the word”** Christ presents us to Himself **“a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing”** (Ephesians 5:26-27). The filthiness of our thoughts, words, and deeds is forgiven, and we pray with penitent David: **“Create in me a clean heart, O God”** (Psalm 51:10). Remember: **“The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7), including sexual sin.

Questions

1. What does God protect by means of the Sixth Commandment?
2. How do we know that the Sixth Commandment is part of God's moral law?
3. What does God's Word teach us about polygamy?
4. Why do we human beings not have the right to change marriage as we like?
5. What are the three main blessings God gives us through marriage?
6. Does God command or forbid marriage? Explain your answer.
7. How did David sin against the Sixth Commandment?
8. What is meant by malicious desertion?
9. In what circumstances is divorce permissible?
10. Name some of the temptations that lead unmarried people astray.
11. What does God say about homosexuality?
12. Why is it contrary to God's will for women to be pastors?
13. What good example did Joseph give for all believers?
14. What are the primary duties of husbands and wives?
15. Why can't we be saved by keeping the Sixth Commandment?
16. What is our only hope for salvation? Why is this true?