

A Complete Breakdown of Trust

Numbers 5:11–31

The basis of all human relationships is trust. This is especially so with respect to marriage.

If I find the neighborhood grocer is shortchanging me, I may choose not take him to court, but I *will* take my business elsewhere. The message is: “You cheat me, you lose me as a customer.” That works most of the time.

But when a couple enters into a marriage covenant, they both take vows to forsake all others and cleave to one another alone, so long as they both shall live. The marriage covenant lasts a lifetime, as long as both partners are living. No one should ever get married without understanding the significance and importance of such an important vow. Jesus said in Matthew 19:5, “Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” No more “twain”—no more two separate individuals—but now a married couple. Five or ten years down the road you can’t say, “I didn’t understand what I was getting into. I’ll just get a divorce.” Hear the Word again: “What . . . *God* hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” It is *God himself* who joins a man and a woman together in the covenant of marriage, and *no* human being on earth has lawful power to dissolve that marriage without specific grounds set forth in Holy Scripture.

Marriage is a lifetime commitment, but I have good news for you: it is possible for a man and a woman to keep wedding vows *with God’s help*. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”¹ There are abundant joys in biblical marriage, but there are challenges too. The challenges are good for us; God sends them to us for our good, so that we learn to face them with his help. We should pray for all our married couples, that we would be able to keep our vows and live happily in the holy estate of marriage, as God intended.

Our text that has been read in your hearing describes the “adultery test”² that was provided for under the Mosaic law. Here is a rite that was appointed by God himself for his people. It is a very *solemn* ceremony—consequential, imposing—designed to put the fear of God into a wife trying to evade responsibility for her actions.

God does *not* say, “Hey, husbands, get a life. Don’t take this so seriously. Don’t you know that your wife is beautiful and attracts men’s attention? They didn’t mean any harm. It’s not her fault. Everyone messes up once in awhile. It’s no big

¹ Phil. 4:13

² NASB section head

deal.” Rather, what we see here (to paraphrase Calvin) is *a solemn rite by which God proclaims himself the guardian and avenger of marital faithfulness.*³

The law concerning jealousy concerns a number of the Ten Commandments, for example:

The first: God himself is a *jealous* God. A godly husband jealously guards his relationship with his wife and becomes rightly jealous if his wife gives herself to another man.

The third: breaking the marriage vow sworn in the name of God is a taking of his holy name in vain.

The fifth (the basis of all human relationships): requires the preserving the honor and performing the duties belonging to other persons, as superiors and inferiors. The husband, as the superior, is duty-bound to love, cherish, provide for, and protect his wife; the wife, as the inferior, is duty-bound to obey, respect and honor her husband.

The seventh: requires the preserving of our own and our neighbor’s chastity in heart, speech and behavior; and forbids all unchaste thoughts, words and actions. Committing adultery is a direct violation of the seventh commandment.

The eighth: forbids taking what rightly belongs to one’s spouse (one’s full and undivided affection) and giving it to another.

The ninth: claiming to have lived a life of purity while practicing impurity.

Now as we consider today’s text, remember that it is a *ceremonial* law, having to do with the Aaronic priesthood (Aaron and his direct descendants), the tabernacle, and animal sacrifices. Remember that there are three basic categories of law: (1) *moral* laws, expressing the perfect character of God himself, which are universally binding upon all peoples in every age; (2) *ceremonial* laws, having to do with the priesthood, tabernacle and sacrifices; and (3) *judicial* laws, instructions to Israel’s judges that contain moral principles applicable to every age. As our Confession teaches, all the ceremonial laws are now *abrogated*, under the New Testament. They are fulfilled in Christ and are no longer binding upon the church. It is utterly impossible to keep the stipulations concerning the jealousy offering today. Here are three reasons: (1) The Aaronic priesthood does not exist any more, having been superseded by our Lord Jesus Christ, who is a high priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek. No man on the face of the earth today could prove biblically that he is the direct descendant of Aaron, with a lawful claim upon the priesthood. (2) The earthly tabernacle prescribed in the book of Exodus no longer exists but has been superseded by Christ, “the *true* tabernacle.”⁴ It is utterly impossible now to take dust from the floor of the tabernacle. And (3) We are no

³ “By this rite . . . God proclaims himself the guardian and avenger of conjugal fidelity” (note on Num. 5:11, Logos Bible Software).

⁴ Heb. 8:2

longer required to bring the sacrifices of the Mosaic law as we worship, as Christ's death upon the cross, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself, is the true and only valid sacrifice for sins, which all the sacrifices under the Old Testament foreshadowed.

Clearly, the law before us is now abrogated, though it contains moral principles applicable for all time, and for our time.

The church is the bride of Christ that he purchased for himself with his own precious blood. Paul writes: "For I am *jealous* over you with godly *jealousy*: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ."⁵ It is appropriate for a godly husband to want to keep his wife entirely to himself, just as Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, wants to keep his church entirely to himself. The Bible does not teach what some have euphemistically called "open marriage," where partners agree to engage in extra-marital relationships without considering it infidelity.

So consider what our text is saying. Here is a situation where a man suspects that his wife has been unfaithful and has had intercourse with someone other than her husband—what the Ten Commandments call adultery. Now this is a serious *crime*, as well as a sin. A crime is a wicked deed punishable by civil authorities. Romans speaks of this when it says that the civil ruler bears the sword on God's behalf to execute wrath on those who do evil.⁶ God's law requires that both the adulterer and the adulteress be put to death. The law is very clear on this: "The man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death."⁷ Since God's law calls for the crime of adultery to be punished with the death penalty, we know that it is a serious crime. How different is the biblical view from the moral laxity of our permissive age!

But here is a wife accused of unfaithfulness, but there are no witnesses. There is no proof, no legal case against her—only her husband's gut-suspicion that his wife is guilty, but he can't prove it. He is insanely jealous. Can he trust her? If they have a child, can he be sure that the child is his? He is obsessed and can think of little else. There has been a complete breakdown of trust in their marriage. So he brings his wife before the priest. They bring the requisite sacrifice required by the law, which is offered to God.

The priest brings her near and sets her before the LORD with her head uncovered, so that there is no escaping the divine gaze. She is brought before God's face with her head bared. That in itself is an awesome experience. To stand before the LORD if one is guilty! Here is a foretaste and type of the final

⁵ 2 Cor. 11:2

⁶ Rom. 13:4

⁷ Lev. 20:10

judgment. To stand before the God of heaven and earth, the God of absolute holiness, the God who determines the final destiny of every man, woman or child who has ever lived. To stand before the LORD and be on trial. A lot of people profess to be unconcerned whether their life measures up to God's absolute standards. They want to play by their own rules. They want to live their life as they see fit. They say they don't believe in God. They don't know if he exists or not. They might even profess to be atheists—to be dead-sure that the God of the Bible absolutely doesn't exist. No matter! It is appointed to every man once to die, and after this the judgment. No man can make himself immortal. No man can escape his ultimate appointment with death. Some people live like there's no tomorrow. But all of us must face the inevitable fact that, ultimately, we are going to die. And at the moment that we draw our last breath, we are going to leave this life and stand before God. All our boasting that we are masters of our own destiny, that we play by our own rules—it won't matter then. We will stand before the God of heaven without a mediator; nobody will come to our defense. It will be just us and God, and we know deep down inside that we are unworthy to stand in his awesome presence.

But remember, this is a trial of the husband too. To subject his wife to the horrible judgment of God only on account of certain trifling suspicions, knowing that there is a complete absence of objective proof—no witnesses, no family, friends or neighbors testifying against her, no missteps, no telltale clues. What if it's all just in his head? What if his wife comes through this ordeal unscathed, her faithfulness vindicated? What will happen to his own reputation? Everybody might have previously thought him to be a model husband—upright, honorable. What will they think of him now?

The priest takes “holy water” in an earthen vessel. What is holy water? This is the only place in the Bible where the phrase occurs. I did an AI search on the question *what is holy water in the Bible* and received the reply “Holy water is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible as a specific term”—but that, of course, is not true. Here is the term—plain as day.⁸ AI is neither omniscient nor infallible. Does this one-time usage justify the Roman church's claim to possess holy water? No, it does not. Let us be clear. This use of “holy water” is at the express command of God. Nowhere does the Bible give fallen humans the authority to create or market their own holy water!⁹

So what is holy water? Calvin makes a convincing case that the “holy water” of Numbers 5 is the water of Numbers 19, where “the ashes of the heifer burnt for

⁸ The Hebrew is מַיִם קְדוֹשִׁים, *mayim q^odōshim*, literally, holy waters (plural; the word for water does not occur in the singular in Hebrew). The word for *holy* (singular) is the adjective קְדוֹשׁ *qadōsh*, the same word used in the phrase קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ *qadōsh qadōsh qadōsh*, “Holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3).

⁹ “Holy water” is found only in the Mosaic ceremonial laws which were abrogated with the coming of Christ, who fulfilled them in his own Person. There is no biblical basis for incorporating them into any church ceremony today.

purification from sin” and “running water” are put in a vessel and kept for “water of purification.” In the words of Calvin: “thus the woman was admonished that, if she perjured herself, no further means of expiation remained.”

Added to this “holy water” was dust swept up from the floor of the tabernacle. Let’s just say that this was not some expensive brand of natural spring water! This is not water that one would ordinarily want to drink. This was indeed an *ordeal*—what the dictionary defines as “an ancient test of guilt or innocence by subjection of the accused to severe pain, survival of which was taken as divine proof of innocence.”¹⁰ If a wife failed the test, then her thigh would rot and her belly would swell. The Hebrew says that her thigh would literally “fall.”¹¹ “Thigh” is put for *uterus*—a figure of speech known as metonymy, in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated (similar to Scripture’s use of a child coming out of a man’s “loins”¹²). What is meant here is something like the condition known as prolapse of the uterus, where the uterus drops down due to weakened pelvic muscles.

Our text today describes an *ordeal*—this is where the term comes from. If an accused wife drank this “bitter water that brings a curse” and did not become sick and die, then that would prove her innocence. The husband who brought the charges would be discredited—publicly shamed in the prevailing honor-shame culture. This alone would give most husbands pause to even think of using this provision.

But this was not some kind of naturalistic folk-medicine. Remember, this ordeal was instituted at the specific command of Almighty God. Ultimately, it was a calling upon God himself to demonstrate the woman’s innocence or guilt according to the procedure he himself had instituted. This is unique. There’s nothing else like it in the Bible. This is not a blanket license or direction to mere man to dream up similar ordeals.

Was it ever used? No one knows for sure. While it was inscripturated in Holy Writ, and could be used as long as the tabernacle itself remained standing, “the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures make no direct reference to the ceremonial use of this ordeal in a documented historical event.”¹³ Sexual purity, marital faithfulness and the necessity of a holy seed—covenant children brought up in faithful, godly households, taught the true religion by dedicated, loving parents—are important biblical themes. Paul teaches us that “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are *holy*” (1 Cor. 7:14). Godly parents

¹⁰ *New Oxford American Dictionary* (macOS)

¹¹ Heb. נָפַח *nāphal*

¹² “Kings shall come out of thy *loins*,” Gen. 35:11 (KJV); cf. Gen. 46:26, Ex. 1:5, 1 Kgs. 8:19, 2 Chr. 6:9, Heb. 7:5

¹³ https://biblehub.com/q/evidence_of_numbers_5_trial_by_ordeal.htm, accessed 5-30-26

don't want to raise children for the devil; rather, they desperately want to raise godly sons and daughters who know the faith and want to adopt it for themselves as a lifelong calling.¹⁴

Most Western countries today do not take biblical marriage this seriously. Many governments have instituted what is euphemistically called “*no-fault* divorce,” but under God’s law there is no such thing. Both husband and wife have taken vows to be faithful to one another until parted by death. To break a lawful vow incurs guilt. The person who breaks a vow is by definition at fault. Adultery and divorce are attacks upon the institution of marriage—the fundamental institution of an orderly society.

The husband takes the vow: “will you have this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of marriage? And will you love her as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her, will you comfort her, honor and cherish her, and forsaking all others keep yourself only unto her as long as you both shall live?”

The wife takes the vow: “will you have this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of marriage? And will you love him, comfort him, respect and submit to him even as the church submits to Christ, and forsaking all others keep yourself only unto him as long as you both shall live?”¹⁵

Here are vows freely entered into, taken before God and witnesses, taken not for a specific period of time, and then expiring, but with the specific language: “as long as you both shall live.” This is an open-ended agreement that cannot be annulled without incurring fault.

If you are married, and both you and your wife are still living, and a biblical divorce has not been granted, then you are required to keep your marriage vows. According to our Confession, “nothing but *adultery*, or such *willful desertion* as can no way be remedied by the church, or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein, a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed; and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills, and discretion, in their own case.”¹⁶ If your spouse has committed adultery, or has willfully deserted you, and will not be reconciled, then you *may* sue for divorce (which can be granted by either a church court or civil court). Once decreed, then you are, in the eyes of God, the innocent party in the divorce, and free to remarry without guilt.

In Ephesians God reveals his holy standard for Christian marriage: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that

¹⁴ See, for example, Gen. 17:18.

¹⁵ <https://opc.org/BCO/Services.html>

¹⁶ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_24

he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” Note that husbands are to love their wives in the same manner that Christ loves the church. His love for his church is selfless, pure, holy and faithful, with constant regard for the church’s improvement, betterment and sanctification. Christ is not married to his church in order to benefit *himself*, but to benefit the *church*. He left the glories of heaven to become man, so that as man he might go to the cross to pay the penalty for his people’s sins. He had nothing to gain and everything to lose. His purpose was to love his people with a perfect love. And the Father was completely pleased with his Son: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

What about your own marriage (if you are married)? Is there mutual trust? Is there love and affection? The Bible promises: “Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table. Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the LORD. The LORD shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life. Yea, thou shalt see thy children’s children, and peace upon Israel” (Ps. 128).

May it be so within our congregation! Amen.