

Calvin Speaks



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The Sanctity of Marriage* (Part 1)

**Title not in the original.*

Sermon 129. 15 January 1556. Deuteronomy 22:25-30.

25. But if a man finds a betrothed girl in the field, and forces her and lies with her, then only the man who lies with her shall die.

26. But you shall do nothing to the girl; there is no sin in the girl worth of death, for just as when a man rises up against his neighbor and murders him, so it is in this case.

27. When he found her in the field, the betrothed girl cried out, but there was no man to rescue her.

28. If a man finds a girl who is a virgin and not betrothed, and takes her and lies with her, and they are discovered,

29. Then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl's father fifty [shekels] of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her, and he may not divorce her as long as he lives.

30. A man shall not take his father's wife; he shall not uncover the skirt of his father's garment.

We saw yesterday that God intended for wedlock to be faithfully observed. And with good reason; otherwise the whole order of nature would have to be overthrown, for there is nothing among men which ought to be more carefully kept and observed than this. Other covenants are, indeed, to be kept faithfully, but because this exceeds in holiness, it ought to have the greater reverence.

The Maintenance of Chastity

It is not without cause, therefore, that God has decreed that a man who meets a betrothed maid and deflowers her should die without remission. Why? Because he has broken a covenant which ought always to be kept holy among men, for it is God's will that His name be called upon when the covenant is joined, so that the parties to it might know that they are joined together with an inviolable bond. When there is such rebellion committed against God, it is fitting that the chastisement be matched appropriately with it.

And so we are still better confirmed in this doctrine, which is that unless we want to encourage the vengeance of God upon us, we must observe wedlock in a holy fashion. And we must not follow the common opinion in the matter, for if we want to be wiser than God, He knows full well how to punish our devilish pride, and we shall always be rewarded as we deserve if we refuse to use the remedy He has appointed in His Law. Indeed, we are not bound to it precisely in all points (as we have already noted, and which we will more fully explain later on), but at the same time, God warns us that if we allow wedlock to be broken, and grant such liberty that adulterers remain unpunished, we will fall into horrible confusion and extreme beastliness, as I have told you already.

We ought to note here further, that a man who rapes a girl is here likened to a thief who meets with his neighbor and slays him. The comparison is not with one who beats his neighbor.

This comparison evidently declares that the act in and of itself is outrageous and intolerable beyond measure. For just as the life of man is precious to God, so is the chastity and the faith plighted in marriage, because the wife is linked to her husband to live and to die with him. Once this faith is falsified, what honesty can there be any longer among men? Therefore, to show the grievousness of the sin, God says it is a kind of open theft and murder if a man meets with a maid and deflowers her by force. This is an unpardonable offence.¹

Moreover, God wants us to understand that maidens should take as great account of their chastity as of their lives. For, as has been told you, if a girl does not fight for her honesty, and for her virginity, doubtless she is not worthy to live in this world. If she does not cry out, but permits herself to be defiled, she must die without pardon. Therefore, our Lord in this place again declares that a maiden ought to behave herself honestly, so that if she meets with any misadventure or with some dissolute character who would entice her to evil, she must have less regard for her life than for her good name, and rather suffer her throat to be cut than her body to be defiled and to live in such shame.²

You can see, then, in a few words, what we have to bear in mind concerning this passage. Because the matter was handled at length yesterday [Sermon 128, *Calvin Speaks* 11:4, April, 1981], it will suffice to be brief in dealing with the remainder of the passage. And here we see that it is not enough for us to stand on custom or on the fancies of men. Nowadays men think that it is a sufficient defense to point out that adultery is not punished [in our present system]. When they argue, "Well, who complains about it?", you can see how God has been shut out. Many men, therefore, think that it is a reasonable defense to point out that all men used to do such and such, and that it is the common custom, and that it is the opinion of all men. But to the contrary we see here how God always reserves authority to Himself. Even though men corrupt themselves through abuse, even though they flatter themselves in their vices, even though they are of the opinion that everything is lawful for them, yet notwithstanding this does not excuse them, nor does it impeach God's authority one whit. So then, let men not depend on common custom, and let them not harden themselves, but let them have an eye to that which God has commanded once and for all, for it is that which must keep a man in the right course.

And indeed we can see what corruptions have arisen in the world when men have swayed from the Word of God after the fancy of this man or that man. It is from this that all superstitions have arisen. You see how the Papists nowadays, being besotted in their follies, cannot be brought back to the right way of salvation, for they believe that they are sufficiently armed with this argument: that for a long time men have lived as they do, and that they themselves are not the inventors of the religion which they hold. But, as I have told you, this can serve them to no purpose, any more than it can serve for a defense of adultery to insist that it is not punished nowadays nor any account made of it. No. But God, Who is the heavenly Judge, will in the end show that these are such enormities as He can in no wise permit.

Temporal and Eternal Punishments

Now, that which Moses adds proves the same thing which we touched on yesterday, namely, that God did not always punish offences in such a way as He might rightly have, speaking of those punishments according to the law which He gave for the ordering of the people Israel. For He put up with many things because of the hardness of that people, as our Lord Jesus shows them when He speaks of those divorces

conducted against all reason and objectivity. For He says here that if a man finds a maid, and she yields herself to him without being forced,³ he shall be quit of charges by giving money for the marriage of the maid, by taking her to wife, and by being debarred from ordinary liberty, so that he may never forsake her. Now I grant that this was a chastisement to the man who has played the fornicator, but was it as grievous as the fault required? No indeed.

What shall we say then? Did God permit whoredom [in this case], or did He mean to give free reign to the passions, or are we to understand that sin is to be pardoned? No, none of this. For we have shown before that when God delivered his Law, which consisted of ten words, He declared in them His will and prescribed for men a certain rule whereby they should live. Now that is the Law which shall judge us at the latter day, and it not only serves to condemn offenders to temporal punishment, but also teaches us that we must answer to it before the judgment seat of God, to perish forever. Therefore, when we escape the hands of men, and think God has winked at our sins, yet must we in the end come to our account before Him. You see then that the Law of God is to judge us.

As for this [the particulars under consideration], it served only for an earthly polity. And God, as I have said [in yesterday's sermon], did not devise this polity with respect to the perfection required of the faithful, but rather accommodated it to the hardness of the people, who were very tough and hard to rule. And although He did not punish those divorces which were made against all objective assessments, yet it is not to be said because of this that He permitted them. For we hear how our Lord Jesus Christ pronounces thereof, that whosoever for-

¹ Calvin is fond of comparing adultery and rape to theft. In this case, he is drawing on the phrase in Deut. 22:26, "rises up against his neighbor" to substantiate the idea of a thief caught in the act. This is not at all clear in Hebrew, for the word for "rise up" is *qum*, which simply means "stand up". All the Bible is doing is comparing the innocent party in a rape to a murder victim.

While it is true that to break one commandment is to break them all, so that adultery is indeed a kind of theft, it is also true that each of the commandments sets out a sphere of morality unique to itself. Sexual morality cannot simply be reduced to a morality of economics (theft) or a morality of violence (murder). Sexual morality must also stand on its own two feet. Calvin knows this, but tends too often to engage in a reductionism, which the reader ought to beware following too closely.

² Calvin bases this on v. 24, which prescribes death for the girl who does not cry out in the city. One might think that Calvin is taking this a bit far. After all, if the woman cries out and no help comes, it is not necessary for her virtually to force her attacker to murder her. Calvin is a bit more realistic in his *Commentary* at this point: "Although, however, the terms are accommodated to the comprehension of a rude people, it was the intention of God to distinguish force from consent. Thus if a girl had been forced in a retired part of a building, from whence her cries could not be heard, God would undoubtedly have her acquitted, provided she could prove her innocence by satisfactory testimony and conjecture." (*Calvin's Commentaries* are published by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Ind.)

³ In Deut. 22:25, the man rapes the betrothed girl, for the verb *khazaq* means to grasp or seize fiercely; whereas, in v. 28, which Calvin now has in view, the verb is *taphash*, which means to catch. Importunate seduction is in view here, not forcible rape. The parallel passage in Ex. 22:16 simply says that the man "seduces" the unbetrothed girl.

The Bible does not deal directly with the case of the forcible rape of an unbetrothed girl. There is a kind of sliding scale between cooperative seduction and forcible rape. Putting together what the Bible teaches, it seems to the present writer that what we have is this: if a girl willingly cooperated in her seduction, ordinary marriage would be the appropriate requirement. If a girl resisted her seducer, so that she was "humbled" (v. 29), the stipulations of w. 28-29 would apply. If she were forcibly and wantonly raped and abused, the death penalty would be appropriate. In each case, the matter is dealt with to the satisfaction of the girl's father (Ex. 22:17; and see the abuse of this in Genesis 34).

In a small town in the ancient world, the girl would recognize her seducer/rapist and dealing with the situation was not difficult. The modern forms of rape, the random assault on women by habitual rapists, and gang rape are not directly dealt with in the Law. Doubtless the death sentence is the only appropriate penalty in such cases.

sakes his wife and takes another (except it be for adultery, so that he can prove she has played the whore) is an adulterer, and whoever takes her to wife commits adultery as well, and his marriage is not lawful but detested by God (Matt.19:9).⁴ The present case is the same. For although God does not punish him severely who commits fornication with a maid, it is not because whoredom is in any way at all to be pardoned. If it is not punished by men, yet God always has His rights reserved.⁵

But this is done [that is, temporal punishments are not always as severe as they might be] because commonly in the estate of government men will sooner punish those faults whereby their own commodities are hindered, than whereby God is offended. Indeed, judges and magistrates ought not to be so lax as to permit God to be mocked, His name dishonored, or all religion trampled under foot; for we have seen that blasphemies were more grievously punished than murders. But when there is some lesser offence committed, wherein there is no manifest despising of God to be seen, men will not pursue it so" fiercely as when a matter touches themselves.

So then, concerning the fornication which Moses speaks of at this place, since it concerns the toss and discredit done to a man because his daughter is kept back from preferment in marriage, he that has humbled her must assign her a dowry; and because it may be that she shall not be able to find another match, he must take her to wife if her father permits it. And if he should cast her off again after a little while, she would have to be provided for anew. Thus, he must keep her, and so be debarred from that common right which belonged to others, that he may never forsake her. You see, then, how God provided for her wellbeing.

Yet for all this, however, God is still offended if a man defiles the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is his body, and gives over the members of our Lord Jesus Christ to such wickedness (1 Cor. 6:15). For we are all members of His body. And further, when he goes about to defile a maid who is the temple of God and a member of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, I say that such a deed is tremendously evil. And yet for all that, she is not punished, at least not by the civil order.⁶ But the law of God always remains in force, that law which He has given us to live by, and which will not bend at our pleasure.

To be short, God, by giving His law, intended to frame us to His obedience and to show us our duty towards Him. And therefore the law goes to work and shows us where we are bound. Moreover, touching civil order, God had an eye to that which the weakness of the world might be able to bear, and conformed Himself to it; and therefore there were many things which were not punished by the law of Moses. Nevertheless, we are taught that even if our faults are not judged by men, we must not on that account fall asleep in our sins. For we shall gain little, though earthly judges leave us alone and we escape without punishment before them, if in the mean time the wrath of God increases upon us. And if He waits patiently for us to change our ways, His wrath grows more and more against us, and it becomes true of us that which St. Paul says, that we hoard up to ourselves a treasure of greater condemnation (Romans 2:4).

Let us therefore learn not to have so much respect for men that we think we are acquitted for our sins if we are not upbraided by them, or if they do not accuse us, or if they frame no indictment against us. On the other hand, let us realize that it is good for us sometimes to be awakened by men, for when we are chastised by men, God is doing that which St. Paul says in another place: He punishes us according to the flesh in this world that we might not perish everlastingly (1 Cor. 5:5). Now therefore, let us lift up our eyes always to the judgment seat before which we must come and appear. Even if we have been borne with in this world, and we think that our sins will remain unpunished, we must be doubly punished at the hand of God

because we have been stubborn and hardhearted to the uttermost, and have so abused His patience. Since He waited so long for us to change our ways, and sought by all gentleness to win us to Himself, if we, for all that, have continued rebellious and have as it were laughed at His loving kindness which He demonstrated toward us, must He not call all this to mind to our greater cost?

Victimless Crimes?

Let us note further that many use the empty excuse of saying, "Whom have I harmed?" Nowadays if a man charges these blasphemers with their wickedness, they twist their mouths and come up with I know not what shamelessness, saying, "And who has complained against me? To whom is it that I have done any injury?" If we were all such as we ought to be, doubtless we would cry an alarm when the name of God is blasphemed, and we would all be prosecutors in the case, seeing that God confers on us this honor of maintaining His majesty and His own cause.

Yet for all this, we make no account of it. If any injury is done to us, we cry aloud about it. But if God is evil spoken of, so that His name is put to open shame, we let it pass, we take no care of it. Those who have so shamefully offended may say, "Who is he that accuses us?" But yet for all that, this type of move will avail them little. For will God Himself forget it? Will He permit Himself to be so despised and then do nothing about it? Has not He sworn by His own name that He will maintain His glory to the uttermost? Now seeing that this is so, what will come of it if we reply against Him and say that no one is complaining of any injury done against himself, when in fact we have so offended the majesty of God? Surely this is worse than having to take on in battle all of creation!

Now the case is the same respecting fornication. I grant that a man who is guilty of fornication may say, "No man complains against me, for both parties were agreed to the act." But what of it? You see that the temple of God, as I told you, has been violated. And is that treachery so small a thing? If a man has robbed, he certainly will be punished, as he well deserves. But here is a far greater sin than theft.⁶ For when the temple of God is defiled, this is far worse than all the extortions and pillaging which men can suffer respecting their goods. You see how two temples of God are defiled at once through fornication.⁷

You also see how our Lord Jesus Christ is thereby

⁴Matthew 19:9 is contested as to the proper reading, since there are conflicting textual variants. Matthew 5:32, however, makes the same point, and there is no textual problem there. Calvin, by the way, is simply in error in saying that adultery is the sole ground for divorce. Christ explicitly avoids the term for adultery, which He uses in the very next clause, in favor of the more general term "uncleanness." For a full treatment, see R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig press, 1973), pp. 401 ff., and Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig Press, 1977), pp. 97ff.

⁵Calvin's argument that God has a higher standard for some situations than for others is not very helpful. It would be better to say that God has delegated certain penal responsibilities to the state, and reserved others to Himself. Jesus' point about the hardness of men's hearts in Matt 19:8 is not to the effect that God has lowered His standards to accommodate the sinfulness of men, but that the sinfulness of men has introduced into the world certain manifestations of Divine justice which otherwise would never have been seen, such as the death penalty, sickness, disinheritance, and divorce. Properly speaking, divorce is not sin but the remedy for sin, analogous to excommunication from the church and execution by the state. A careful study of the New Testament data will show that there is no change in divorce legislation from the Old to the New Covenants; cf. the references in footnote 4 above.

⁶At this point, Calvin clearly grants the separate ethical integrity of the sphere of sexual or marital ethics. See footnote 1 above.

shamefully abused. For He vouchsafes to us this honor that we be members of His body, He unites us to Himself, and for all this should we go and abandon ourselves to such shameful villainy? Is not this a tearing of the body of the Son of God in pieces with all our might?

So then, let men delight themselves as much as they like, and let others soothe them in their filthiness and make a game of it; surely they shall fare no better at God's hands for all that. So, let us learn, as I have told you, to lift up our eyes to the heavenly throne, and to walk in such a way that we may always have a warrant within us that we have proceeded in all uprightness with God. And let us not be so foolish as to rest ourselves on that which men command, but let us hold that rule which cannot deceive us, which is the law God delivered to us, and whereto He will have us conform our whole lives.

Motives to Righteousness

But alas! how little such considerations are weighed these days! How many there are who, if there were no laws and no threats, would never come to church to hear one word of the doctrine of God! And yet we see very obviously that such men only attend worship for fashion's sake. So, they do come to worship. But when? only on such days as are required. But where there is no express commandment concerning attendance at worship, they are of the opinion that they are not bound to attend. It would be better if they never came to church at all. Their presence only defiles the temple of God. They show that they have never tasted one whit of doctrine. They come like so many dogs or pigs. And so we see that many in this world have no care for anything except what is ordered or forbidden by the magistrate. Their only concern is that they be not fined, or punished by the civil order in some other way. Otherwise they demonstrate only that they have no religion, but are merely beasts.

But as for us, since we see that God is so gracious to us as to declare to us His will that we might follow it, let us consider how to draw nearer to Him and how to make His righteousness shine in us. For this is His true image. And in this way we declare that we are His children, and it is our warrant for believing that He has adopted us and that He will execute the office of a father towards us. But there are very few who consider this. Yet, notwithstanding, it is important for us to be attentive to that which I have mentioned already, to wit: because God has called us to Himself, and has condescended to teach us how we ought to live, we also ought to profit in His school, and come willingly of our own mind to Him, and accomplish that which is spoken of in the psalm: that to be good soldiers of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must come of our own accord without being forced and without being threatened, but coming with an open and free heart (Ps. 40:8; 110:3) as if to say, "Lord, behold, I offer myself to You." Therefore, if we will permit

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