Devotional

The Stern But Sweet
Seventh Commandment

Neal A. Maxwell
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Anciently a gifted writer's wit and wisdom were combined into an assemblage of adages known as the book of Proverbs. Perhaps some future generation will be the recipients of a similar volume of literary gems known as Maxwell's Maxims: a collection of significant sayings from one blessed with inspired insight. Among the proverbial statements contained in this work of wisdom might be the following:

* "The wars of tomorrow are this day being forged in the overheated families of today."

* "Recycling regrets does not change reality. Pawing through the past is not productive."

* "The biting of the tongue, on occasion, can prevent the tearing of the heart."

* "Only the Lord can compare crosses."

* "Judas' soul-slide was not a sudden thing."

* "Weak individuals make great dominoes."

* "Lucifer is permissive on most things, but not on granting passports for citizens to leave his realm."

* "In the economy of heaven, God does not send thunder if a still, small voice is enough, or a prophet if a priest can do the job."

* "Feet are made to move forward--not backward."

* "How often our little pebble of poor performance helps to start, or to sustain, an avalanche."

* "Pilate's hands were never dirtier than just after he had washed them."

* "We should, of course, learn from our mistakes, but without forever studying the instant replays as if these were the game of life itself."

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of similar such "Maxwell maxims" that might have been quoted. However, we shall leave that responsibility to our
speaker; for he is the well from whence this wisdom was dipped. One of the Presidents of the First Quorum of the Seventy, Elder Neal A. Maxwell:

--Hoyt W. Brewster, Jr.--
Devotional Advisor
"THE STERN BUT SWEET SEVENTH COMMANDMENT"

Elder Neal A. Maxwell

My attempt today will be to speak somewhat differently about the basic cluster of standards associated with chastity before marriage and fidelity after—all of which are a part of the stern but sweet seventh commandment, perhaps the least popular of the ten commandments.

Not a usual topic in our day, the seventh commandment is one of the least heeded but most needed laws of God. It is probably Exhibit "A" as to how much the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints differs from the world on very basic behavioral issues. The world cares very little for the keeping of this commandment, so long as people appear to be admirable in any other respect.

It is important for you to be philosophical defenders as well as practicers of chastity. Articulate advocacy is surely needed now with regard to some of the damaging balderdash we see and hear in the world pertaining to immoral lifestyles.

Austin Farrer warned, "... though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned." (Light on C. S. Lewis, Harcourt and Brace, NY, 1965, p. 26.) Peter said, "... be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear." (I Peter 3:15.)

The other day on national television I heard a psychologist pushing the notion that, since the old ethics of our American society are no longer reconcilable with our behavior, we ought to adjust our ethics downward. My mind at once recalled another age and another advocate who pushed the carnally convenient notion that "whatsoever a man did was no crime." (Alma 30:17.)
This psychologist was saying, in effect, that because young people mature today at 12, on the average, and don't marry, on the average, until they are 22--the idea of abstaining from fornication and associated wrongs is unrealistic. With the avoidance of pregnancy seemingly being the only real challenge for this psychologist, very heavy petting was encouraged and all the things associated with it as a safe substitute.

Once they are driven off the high ground of principle, so many people then settle for being "practical." But immorality is so impractical! Provisional morality always emerges once people desert a basic truth. Such individuals are forever falling back trying to develop substitute rationales, drawing new lines beyond which they vow they will not be driven, only to abandon these also under the pressure of growing evils. It is like providing people with methadone instead of heroin--the addiction remains, but is transferred to something that is seen as less bad. There will always be those who will think themselves quite clever for suggesting such ways out of dilemmas which, of course, are not "ways out" at all but, rather, "ways in"--into more cul-de-sacs.

Moral uncertainty always leads to behavioral absurdity. Prescriptions which are value-free always prove to be so costly. Unprincipled pragmatism is like advising someone who is hopelessly mired in quicksand not to struggle--so that he will merely sink more slowly!

Yet absurdity is achieving a certain momentum today. It is somewhat like the cumulative intimidation experienced by some when the escape of Napoleon occurred. As supposedly recorded by journalists, these successive newspaper headlines read: "The Monster has escaped from his place of exile." Second, "The Corsican werewolf has landed at Cannes." Then, "The Tyrant has reached Lyon." Next, "The Usurper has dared to advance within 150 miles of the capital." Then "Tomorrow Napoleon will be at our gates." Finally, "His Majesty is now at
Fontainebleau."

As disciples, we cannot so cave in. We have been given the commandments concerning chastity before marriage, fidelity after, and the avoidance of homosexuality. We have even been instructed with regard to the perils of mental unchastity. (Matt. 5:28.) The trends of a particular time cannot alter the eternal laws of God, nor can we give up just because there is a general giving way before the march of some Napoleonic notion.

I have long believed that inside some of the hardest doctrines, deep inside them, are some of the greatest truths and the most precious principles. But these are not to be discovered casually or irreverently. Obedience actually brings both blessings and additional knowledge as Peter promised; obeying correct principles accelerates knowing. (2 Peter 1:8.) Such is the case with the seventh commandment.

For instance, Alma said that we must bridle all our passions, so that we can be "filled with love." (Alma 38:12.) If such passions were actually true love, they would not need to be replaced with love. The Lord (in an 1839 revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith) linked "charity towards all men" with letting virtue garnish our thoughts unceasingly. Only with such congruence, we are assured, can our confidence wax strong in the presence of God. Here again is the declaration that if our mind is filled with wrong things, there will be no place in it for true love of God and our fellowmen. Thus a failure to checkreign sensuality carries with it both personal penalties and, more than we realize, deprivations for our peers and associates. No wonder Paul said that to feed these lusts is to "drown men in destruction." (I Tim. 6:9.) Unchastity and sensuality are so preemptive in the demands placed upon sensually-minded individuals, and if the dominance is not one of frequency, it is one of intensity or priority.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of how some of those who might change for the better fail to do so because the lusts of former things actually
"choke the word." (Mark 4:19.) This choking occurs because carnality is a profound contraction of the soul.

In pondering the seventh commandment, we come to see that we are also dealing with considerations of a transcendental or eternal character. In Proverbs we read, "Whoso commiteth adultery . . . lacketh understanding; he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul." (Prov. 6:32, underlinings supplied.) There are some consequences of sexual immorality which we are simple not able to measure fully; but they are very real—though not seen. Paul wrote about the things which are not seen which are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:18.)

Quite frankly, brothers and sisters, we should be preparing now to live in a better world. This life is so vital, but it is such a small moment. And if we are too quick to adapt to the ways of this fleeting and flawed world, that very adjustment will maladjust us for our life in the next—a life which will last forever! No wonder those who break this commandment "lacketh understanding."

There are, of course, some concerns associated with the seventh commandment which we share with the world. Both in the Kingdom and in the world, there is a desire to avoid the disease that often goes with unchastity and infidelity. People naively assumed that with the coming of antibiotics venereal disease would no longer be a concern. The secularists were wrong again.

A second point of concurrence is avoiding pregnancies in unwed mothers. Unfortunately, when their pragmatism fails, the world's "final solution" is that Buchenwald for babies—abortion. Abortion, like unchastity, produces, as Jacob so eloquently wrote, conditions in which many hearts die, "pierced with deep wounds." (Jacob 2:35.) Listen to these sounds of pain put in the form of questions to me by a young woman who had two abortions:

I wonder about the spirits of those I had aborted, if they were there, if they were hurt? I was under three months each time, but a mother feels life
before she feels movement.

I wonder if they are lost and alone?

I wonder if they will ever have a body?

I wonder if I will ever have a chance again to bring those spirits back as mine?

Alas, brothers and sisters, "wickedness never was happiness." (Alma 41:10.)

A third somewhat shared concern as between us and the world is that sexual immorality adversely affects marriage and family life, increasing the spiraling divorce rate. Though, having so said, it is not likely that the world is so concerned with family life that they would yet agree with Charles Pe'guy's assertion made earlier in this century that "The true revolutionaries of the twentieth century will be the fathers of Christian families." (The Passing of the Modern Age, John Lukacs, p. 82.)

Fortunately, the Kingdom's reasons for keeping the seventh commandment go far beyond these three concerns, real as these are.

The primary reason for obedience to all the laws of chastity is to keep the commandments of God. Joseph understood that reason clearly when he resisted the entreaties of Potiphar's predatory wife. (Gen. 39:9.) Joseph, who clearly noted his loyalty to his employer, Potiphar, concluded, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" Joseph's obedience was an act of many-splendored loyalty--to himself, to his future family, to Potiphar, to God, and, yes, even to Potiphar's wife!

Many in the world, of course, would not agree with the basic need for obeying God. Yet there is clearly a spiritual ecology that involves human nature, however, and the violation of these laws of nature.

Another major reason for complying is that breaking the seventh commandment evicts the Holy Ghost from our soul. We lose the great value of His companionship, because He cannot abide in a sinful soul. And without His help, we then become
less useful, less perceptive, less functional, and less loving human beings. In a sense, we are then on the sick roll in the army of the Lord—and at the very time when we are so much needed.

Sexual immorality is also dangerous because it is so desensitizing. Lasciviousness can, ironically, move people who wrongly celebrate their capacity to feel to a point where they lose their capacity to feel! They become, in the words of three different prophets in three different dispensations, "past feeling." (I Nephi 17:45, Eph. 4:19, Moroni 9:20.)

Norman Cousins warned:

... People who insist on seeing everything and doing anything run the risk of feeling nothing ... Our highest responses are being blunted without our knowing it. ("See Everything, Do Everything, Feel Nothing," Saturday Review, January 23, 1971, p. 31.)

The sensual life as a means of certifying or reassuring to someone that he is, after all, alive is a sure shortcut to the shriveling of the soul! The end of Camelot came with the beginning of the breaking of the seventh commandment.

To celebrate Eros is to ignore Agape, or charity, the highest form of love. The Atonement came through obedience and charity, not a lesser form of love.

It was the most selfless and significant act in all of human history, while immorality, on the other hand, relentlessly reinforces selfishness—which already exists in plague proportions in the world. Eros teaches us wrong things, cruel and incorrect things, about the great attribute of love. True love is the centerpiece attribute in both the first and second commandments—on which every other law hangs! Therefore, to misunderstand the true nature of love is to misunderstand life. To be unchaste, in the name of love, is to destroy something precious in order to celebrate its existence. A rogue policeman is "for" law and order. Benedict Arnold was "for" America.

When we lose our capacity to feel, it is because we have destroyed the tastebuds of the soul. We have blunted our capacity to appreciate those
refinements, that graciousness and empathy which belong to that better world towards which we are pointed.

Our whole selfish society tends to travel light, pushing away from anyone who might be an obligation--jettisoning "used" friends, relatives, and even partners. This disposability is one of the final stages of selfishness in which the individual is not willing to risk a commitment of any enduring nature, nor to be depended upon for anything. Those whom sensuality has made into such ciphers must remember in their efforts to erase their loneliness by being surrounded by sensations--that in the arithmetic of appetite anything multiplied by zero still totals zero!

Yet another reason underlying the need to keep the seventh commandment is that unchastity lowers self-esteem, because we are actually sinning against our nature and who we really are. (I Cor. 6:18, 19.) In my opinion, we are also breeching previous promises made in the premortal world before coming here, promises which are imprinted, subtly but indelibly, in our soul.

Unchastity also impacts severely on others, suggesting wrongly to them, among other things, that everyone is, after all, the same; appetites will prevail and, therefore, one might as well join the march of the lemmings. It is too bad that those who are sexually immoral are not required to submit an environmental impact statement before proceeding. The father who somehow gets the strange idea that his adultery is uniquely justified does not fully gauge the impact of that act upon his wife and children. His letting go takes others with him.

As a bishop of a student ward adjacent to the University of Utah campus about 18 years ago, I tried vainly to hold a young marriage together. The wife had been unfaithful, and as I sought to help and to understand, I learned that as a child this woman had seen her adulterous father flagrante delicto. Though unjustified, she acted out her feelings about men. What she then did
was not love. Several years after my release as bishop, I saw a story in the local paper about her having been picked up for prostitution. I know not where she is today, but I cannot put out of my mind the words of Jacob who decried unfaithful fathers who had lost the confidence of their children because of their bad example. (Jacob 2:35.)

Likewise, the tens of thousands of young people who are unmarried but living together represent a major breach in the family way of life. The consequences of that breach on our social environment will be felt for generations to come. A wise French philosopher, Bainville, warned, "One must want the consequences of what he wants." The lines of another Frenchman, LaRocheaufoucauld, could have been spoken of this experimentation in non-family life when he said, "There goes another beautiful theory about to be murdered by a brutal gang of facts."

Just as our basic values are interactive, so are our basic institutions. We cannot corrupt our families and expect to have good governments! Once, for instance, we suggest by our behavior that the commandments do not really matter, then it is open season. A parent may wink at embezzlement, the grown child at adultery, and the grown grandchild at treason. If disobedience is not wrong, then each can select which commandments he will break.

These, and other concerns, go far beyond the world's concerns over disease and pregnancy. But the Church must resolutely be, as Paul said, "the pillar and the ground of the truth." (I Tim. 3:15.) The institutional concern with keeping the seventh commandment—as measured in the Church's regular pattern of interviews of its leaders and members—borders on being exclusive in today's world, and that expression of specific concern is not accidental!

The Church is also concerned with one of the ultimate dimensions of freedom which is freedom from sin in addition to sharing the world's concerns with political and economic freedom, the important and more traditional dimensions of freedom. Paul said, "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."
(2 Cor. 3:17.) Jesus said, "The truth shall make you free." Without acknowledging in action these great overarching truths pertaining to the seventh commandment, we will be imprisoned in the "single well-lit cell of one" impulse and one appetite.

When we think of this interconnected constellation of reasons, we can understand why it is not just recurring rhetoric when prophets, like Moroni, observe that the loss of chastity is the loss of that which is precious above all things. (Moroni 9:9.) And why, so many times in history, the writers of the scriptures, observing their own people's decadence, have equated ripening in iniquity with the spread of fornication and adultery. (Hel. 9:26.)

There is another irony--but only for those who need it: The great apostle of love, John, reminded us that this world will pass away and the lust thereof. (1 John 2:17.) This means, quite frankly, that not only can lust ruin this life, but it is a pandering to an appetite that will have no existence in the next world!

By denying ourselves some appetites altogether, by ordering other appetites, and by losing ourselves in service--we find ourselves. (Alma 39:9, 3 Ne. 12:30) We simply cannot make a difference in the world if we are just like the lost people of the world. Remember, if the salt loses its savor . . . !

If we had the full record of what happened at Sodom and Gomorrah, we would see this cumulative giving way--in which each individual failure at each human intersection put even more pressure on the remaining junctions, until they too gave way.

Contrast all that happened in the destroyed cities of the plain with that marvelous period of time when, at least for a few brief decades, there was a righteousness which did not lapse. There was a sweet Nephite society in which there were no whoredoms, nor any manner of lasciviousness and "surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of
God." (4 Nephi 5:16.)

We must resist the wrong fashions of the world. The thirteenth Article of Faith does not say that we believe in all things which are popular, fashionable, ugly and sensual, and that we seek after these things! Rather, "We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men..." And these attributes depend on each other.

Another of the consequences of gross sexual immorality with its densensitization is that it begins to rob man of hope. As an individual is emptied of hope, despair quickly enters in, for as one prophet said, "Despair cometh of iniquity." (Moroni 10:22) Thus wickedness and despair are terrifyingly self-reinforcing.

More than we know, the alienation abroad in the land is due in significant measure to the gross sexual immorality--before which faith, hope, and charity all fall. That special triad of virtues is savaged by unchastity.

There is some useful mortal wisdom concerning this slackening of standards with regard to chastity and fidelity. This is now cited, not because we rely upon it for enunciatory truth, but because it is often necessary for us to speak to people after the manner of their understanding--in order to give helpful reasons, as Peter urged.

Charles Unwin, a British sociologist who labored both at Oxford and Cambridge, studied dozens of civilizations and was bold enough to foresee "in so many words that, in the struggle between nations, those who cling to chastity will, in all likelihood, keep the upper hand--last but not least, we shall add because they try to keep intact the family which promiscuity and homosexuality (as well as the war between the sexes and the tension between the generations) tend to destroy." (The Human Life Review, Spring 1978, p. 71.) The French historian, Ernest Renan, said succinctly: "What gives one people the victory over another, who has it to a lesser degree, is chastity." (The Human Life
John Lukacs observed that sexual immorality is at the very center of the moral crisis of our times—"it is not merely a marginal development." (The Passing of the Modern Age, p. 169.)

Will and Ariel Durant in their monumental history of mankind observed: Sex is like a river of fire—it must be banked and cooled by a hundred restraints otherwise both the individual and the group will be destroyed.

C. S. Lewis wrote:

When I was a youngster all the progressive people were saying, "Why all this prudery? Let us treat sex just as we treat all other impulses." I was simple-minded enough to believe them and what they said. I have since discovered that that meant exactly the opposite. They meant that sex was to be treated as no other impulse in our nature has ever been treated by civilized people. . . . it is like having a morality in which stealing fruit is considered wrong—unless you steal a nectarine. . . . (A Mind Awake: An Anthology of C. S. Lewis, edited by Clyde S. Kilby, Harcourt and Brace, p. 193-4.)

Lewis made an even more trenchant observation with regard to modern society's preoccupation with sex—and he did this before the TV talk shows so many of which have merely transferred the language of the locker room to the living room. Such shows would suggest, to a man from Mars, that earthlings have but a single concern.

Lewis wrote:

Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing in a covered plate onto a stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? (A Mind Awake, p. 194-5.)

My closing counsel to you is contained in these ten additional observations:

1. Resist the rhetoric of the world, and you will find that, if you stand fast, so will others—some surprisingly. Remember the lesson in the lines of Sadie Thompson in Somerset Maugham's story, "Rain"? She said, after being disillusioned during a brief walk on the road to repentance by a supposed man
of God, "You men, you filthy dirty pigs, you are all the same, all of you." (The Trembling of a Leaf, Doubleday, Doran, and Co., NY, 1921, p. 301.)

Men are not all the same, and LDS men must help women to see that reality—just as LDS women must resist the lures of false liberation which will prove to be empty beyond belief. As Paul said, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." (2 Cor. 3:7) Neither women nor men can be truly free if they behave so as to lose the Spirit.

2. Since you don't let people come in and walk around in your house with muddy feet, do not let them walk through your minds with muddy feet.

3. Build your strong personal link in a chain of chastity and family fidelity, so it can proceed forth from grandparents to parents to children and then on to their posterity. To be so welded together is, of course, to be drawn together in the strongest kind of bond, and is to affirm, by your actions, that you believe in the commandments in spite of what is going on in the world around you.

4. Do not company with fornicators—not because you are too good for them but, as Lewis wrote, because you are not good enough. Remember that bad situations can wear down even good people. Joseph had both good sense and good legs in fleeing from Potipher's wife.

5. Along with the traditional predatory, selfish male there is now the predatory, selfish female. Both, driven by appetite, have a false sense of being free—but it is, alas, the same sort of empty freedom Cain possessed (after he had broken a commandment by slaying Abel) when, ironically, he said, "I am free." (Moses 5:33.)

6. Where mistakes have been made, remember we have the glorious gospel of repentance. The miracle of forgiveness awaits all who are seriously sorry and who will follow the necessary steps, including anyone who might be listening today. Bear in mind, however, these are situations in which the soul must
first be scalded by shame, for only with real cleansing can real healing occur.
But the road of repentance is really there.

7. Where the impulse to do wrong appears, act against that impulse while
the impulse is still weak and while the will is still strong. Dalliance merely
means that the will weakens and the impulse grows stronger. There is a Parkinson's
law of temptation: Temptation expands so as to fill the time and space available
to it. Keep anxiously engaged in good things, for idleness has a way of wrongly
insisting, again and again, that it is ourselves we must think of pleasing.

8. Because our behavioral standards are different, connect that fact with
what several prophets have told us about how we must come to despise the shame
of the world. We must not hold the people of the world in contempt; we must
love them. But we must come to have contempt for the shame of the world,
because it matters so little in the end. The scorn and derision of the world
is fleeting. James, who was not shy concerning truth, counseled, "Ye adulterers
and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with
God." (James 4:4.)

9. Remember, those who are in error must not call the cadence for your
life, for those who boast of their sexual conquests are only boasting of that
which has conquered them—in the same way that people who make nervous jokes
about drunkenness are only mocking that which has come to mock them. We may
pity behavioral clones, but we do not envy them.

10. My young friends, in your concern for justice, deal justly with
yourselves! There is a very telling verse in the Book of Mormon which describes
an ancient political leader with these words, "For he did deal justly with his
people but not with himself because of his many whoredoms." This verse presents
the paradox we often see in secular leaders. William Law, in writing of a lady
of some renown, said of her that she was "nice in everything that concerned her
body or dress, careless of everything that might benefit her soul . . ." (A Serious
I have tried to describe for you some of the consequences attached to immorality: Penicillin instead of abstinence; pills instead of children; partners instead of marriage; childbirth with unwed parents; and old perversions masquerading as new thrills.

I now need to say, however, that so far as the stern but sweet seventh commandment is concerned, obedience is also entrance. By avoiding the evils and consequences of unchastity, we also gain entrance and access to such blessings as always accompany those who keep the commandments. Moses promised ancient Israel that if they would keep the commandments—"And these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee." (Deut. 28:2.) These next blessings and others "shall come on thee, and overtake thee" if you keep the seventh commandment:

A. Keeping the stern seventh commandment in the full sense of the word will yield the blessings of being in harmony with divine law and the Lord—an immensely important blessing in this age of alienation.

B. Obedience will likewise give the blessing of identity by being in harmony with our own potential selfhood. The gospel helps us think of ourselves not only for what we are, but for what we have the power to become.

C. Keeping the seventh commandment will bring the blessing of specific and deserved self-esteem. How many neighbors go unloved because people first despise themselves?

D. The keeping of this commandment blesses us with freedom from the tyranny of appetite, which may be the most oppressive tyranny of all.

E. There will come, too, the blessing of freedom from corrosive guilt with its wasted rationalizations and with its turning inward to self-pity instead of outward in genuine service.

F. We also come to know the blessing of expanded free agency by learning to act wisely for ourselves rather than merely being acted upon by appetite, a
vital dimension of agency. (2 Ne. 2:26.)

G. There is, too, the significant blessing of personal momentum which always comes when we practice decision making in which we both reject wrong and choose the good. We thus avoid what one prophet called the sorrowing of the damned. (Mormon 2:13.) It is not enough to reach a bland behavioral point when we no longer take pleasure in sin; we must hunger and thirst for righteousness.

H. Additionally, there is the immensely important blessing of the integrity of soul which leads to personal wholeness and unafraid openness. How can we become "one flesh" in marriage if, as we enter into marriage, we are a sundered and several self? Chastity, integrity, and serenity--these are interdependent and inexpressible blessings.

My young friends, deviations from the commandments of Jesus Christ are a lessening of our personal Christianity. Therefore, part of being a true Christian is to keep the seventh commandment.

When God the Father introduced His Son, Jesus Christ, to the young prophet, Joseph Smith, His opening words were, "This is my Beloved Son. Hear Him." This Church and its prophets have been hearing Him ever since! Including what He has to say about chastity and fidelity!

God bless us so to think, so to live, and so to witness articulately I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.