

Psalm 119:113-128

- 113 I hate the double-minded,
but I love your law.
- 114 You are my hiding-place and my shield;
I hope in your word.
- 115 Go away from me, you evildoers,
that I may keep the commandments of my God.
- 116 Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live,
and let me not be put to shame in my hope.
- 117 Hold me up, that I may be safe
and have regard for your statutes continually.
- 118 You spurn all who go astray from your statutes;
for their cunning is in vain.
- 119 All the wicked of the earth you count as dross;
therefore I love your decrees.
- 120 My flesh trembles for fear of you,
and I am afraid of your judgements.
- 121 I have done what is just and right;
do not leave me to my oppressors.
- 122 Guarantee your servant's well-being;
do not let the godless oppress me.
- 123 My eyes fail from watching for your salvation,
and for the fulfillment of your righteous promise.
- 124 Deal with your servant according to your steadfast love,
and teach me your statutes.
- 125 I am your servant; give me understanding,
so that I may know your decrees.
- 126 It is time for the Lord to act,
for your law has been broken.
- 127 Truly I love your commandments
more than gold, more than fine gold.
- 128 Truly I direct my steps by all your precepts;
I hate every false way.

Exodus 20:14

You shall not commit adultery.

Sermon

Back in 2003, when I was a senior in high school, I got a \$100 Amazon gift card for Christmas. This was the early days of Amazon, and I remember thinking to myself that I could barely imagine how to spend a whole \$100 in one place. Thanks to the internet memory of my Amazon account, I can go back to that December 28, 2003 and review what high school Kelly purchased: cds by Elliott Smith and Nick Drake, a subscription to Rolling Stone Magazine, copies of Zoolander and Ever After on DVD, and books by Elizabeth Wurtzel. If any of these names mean anything to you, you'll know that High School Kelly liked to live vicariously through deeply indie artists and writers, feeling all sorts of her big feelings.

You're probably not quite as weird as I am, but occasionally, every few years, I take a few minutes and scroll through the history of my consumption as recorded by Amazon. What books was I reading? What music did I listen to? What weird baking ingredient couldn't I source from the grocery store? And these purchases, aside from bringing me mild chagrin at the large sum of money I've spent on Amazon, they're like little memories of who I was, who I wanted to be, and who I was becoming. It's like my own capitalism scrapbook.

And I mention this, because this week I was faced with the question—what would I do if I lost access to my Amazon account? I'd lose this history, sure, along with all the digital content I've purchased—movies and tv shows and the like, and I'd also lose all those little bits and pieces that lighten my mental load. Things like, what brand of glucosamine does my dog need and what kind of iron pills do my children use? How often do I need to order my favorite tea, and what was the name of that cleaning product I really liked? I'd lose all of that, and if you're the primary purchaser of household goods, that's actually a lot of work to reconstruct.

I was thinking about this loss because a friend of mine called me with exactly this problem. She's going through a rather nasty divorce, and part of the disentangling of their family life has included losing access to what was her Amazon account for over a decade, and all the data that account contained. She rightly described this sort of mundane, bureaucratic minutia of divorce as one of the "thousand tiny indignities" of separating your life from the life of another. There's the biggies—like bank accounts and mortgages and child custody, but then there's the stuff most of us wouldn't even consider. Like an Amazon account. Some of you all could speak to this with far more nuance and experience than I can, because my role has simply been as a friend on the road, walking alongside others, and that's a vantage which only serves me so far.

But what struck me about our conversation this week was what an absurd ripple the loss of an Amazon account felt like, circling out from that stone dropped in the pond when the separated. We know and can predict that when a rock is dropped into water, ripples will form and circle outward, but we know neither how many rings will be formed, nor can we

predict the final effect of the turbulence as the ripples bounce back and create interference with one another. The start is predictable, the effect is beyond what we can fully anticipate.

Now, we've talked about divorce before, and about how sometimes it's the right and good decision, how it's not evil or verboten, and we should be open to discussing and thinking about it as a part of human life. Nothing is beyond the concern of God and all that. And divorce isn't exactly what this commandment is about. But it's sort of a natural consequence or corollary to what we are thinking about, which is fidelity.

The commandments, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, are now focusing on our neighbors—how we treat one another. And as we started with our closest neighbor, our first neighbor, our parents and elders, and then moved into protecting life, which is, at its deepest core, about ourselves, respecting our lives in order to promote the life of others, we now sort of move one rung out, to our next closest neighbor, the family with whom we choose to live this life. And, of course, families look different from one another. There's the Norman Rockwell man and wife and 2.5 kids and a dog, but there's also the single parent of three, and the two women without children, the widower and his son and their pet snake, and the house of single people who have become for one another a family of choice.

In many ways, John and my family looks quintessential: two parents, three kids, and a dog. But our family flexes all the time, including friends and interlopers who need, for a season of whatever length, to become a part of our family of choice. Sometimes to literally live in our home and eat at our table and become a part of our mundane family rhythms. And this is a commandment for all of this: our families of choice, however they are constructed, by marriage or happenstance, by promise or common law.

Now, Calvin and Luther and Augustine and many of the church fathers did a lot of hand wringing over this commandment. All about chastity and modesty and whether it was better to remain unmarried than to marry and become liable to such a concern. There's a lot of nonsense about women being the concern here—as if adultery is always her fault, and that men would be just fine if it weren't for those tarts and their wily ways. But, honestly, I think they miss the mark by focusing so narrowly on marriage and the act of adultery alone. They'd probably be somewhat appalled by my expansive definition going beyond marriage alone.

And of course it's about marriage, about the faithfulness of the vows we make before God and these witnesses, but it's about more than just that. When we flip this commandment inside out, it's not just a prohibition against acts with violate our vows, it is instead a commandment which nudges us to be people of integrity.

This is a commandment with two directional forces, internal and external, and that makes it somewhat unique among the commandments we've talked about thus far. So, stick with me and I'll do my best to explain. First, and the way we think of this commandment most of the time, is what I'd call the internal force. This commandment asks that I take seriously and honor the vows I have made to my own family of choice. For me, that's John and the

kids, my parents and my sister, my grandma and a few of my closest aunts and uncles. I've made promises, both public and formal, like those words I spoke at my wedding in front of 400 people, and informal and unspoken, like showing up when my aunt needs me to backstop my grandma's care, or when one of my kids is having a hard day and needs me to be a bit more understanding and flexible than the rest of the world seems. In keeping my promises to the people closest to me, I honor them and I honor my own calling to fidelity and integrity.

But this commandment also has a secondary, external force. Take adultery, because it's the literal example given. It, as the saying goes, takes two to tango. And if I engage in that action with someone else, I not only violate my own vows, the internal force of this commandment, but I also engage in aiding and abetting another person in violating those promises in their own family. Likewise, when I honor the vows I have made, when I chose not to engage in acts which threaten or violate the vows of others, I am helping my neighbor to keep this commandment as well. My fidelity has the positive effect of encouraging and supporting the fidelity of others. Internal and external force. And it's not just literal adultery, right? There are a thousand ways, big and small, in which we can violate our promises without ever touching another human being, and we all know it.

Because there's little we do in life which makes us more vulnerable than placing our trust in others to the point of allowing our lives to be bound up in one another, right? And a violation of that trust does damage to others, but it also wounds our own integrity, and the value of our word. And violating that trust, be it with a literal act of adultery or something else entirely, it's like a stone dropping into a pond. We know there will be ripples, we just don't know how many, or what the interference might be. We can't always predict who will be hurt or heartbroken along the way, or how long it might take to come back to that smooth surface, if it ever does.

And this is the commandment which states, in no uncertain terms, that we are to be people of integrity. Honor the vows you have made, to your family of choice and family of biology, and help others honor theirs, as well. Take seriously the vulnerability of those whose lives are bound up in yours, and honor their gift with your commitment. Because our lives, especially within our families, become woven together in a thousand tiny ways—from our Amazon accounts to our bank accounts—and those threads are painful to cut, but wildly supportive when we invest in making sure they are held fast.