

## Chapter 6. What is adultery?

Next, we must address the Bible’s use of “adultery.” Plainly, adultery’s basic meaning is sexual sin against the marriage covenant. But by the First Century, “adultery” had taken on a much broader significance.<sup>22</sup>

In the writings of the prophets, “adultery” often referred to the worship of idols by the children of Israel, speaking of Israel as the bride of God—

*Jer. 3:6* During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, “Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed **adultery** there. *7* I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. *8* I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her **adulteries**. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed **adultery**. *9* Because Israel’s immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed **adultery** with stone and wood. *10* In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense,” declares the LORD.

*Jer. 5:7* “Why should I forgive you? Your children have forsaken me and sworn by gods that are not gods. I supplied all their needs, yet they committed **adultery** and thronged to the houses of prostitutes.

*Jer. 13:25* This is your lot, the portion I have decreed for you,” declares the LORD, “because you have forgotten me and trusted in false gods. *26* I will pull up your skirts over your face that your shame may be seen—*27* your **adulteries** and lustful neighings, your shameless prostitution! I have seen your detestable acts on the hills and in the fields. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! How long will you be unclean?”

*Ezek 6:9* Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me—how I have been grieved by their **adulterous** hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices.

*Ezek. 23:36* The LORD said to me: “Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices, *37* for they have committed **adultery** and blood is on

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<sup>22</sup> Based on Edwards, although the argument has been made by many authors.

their hands. They committed **adultery** with their idols; they even sacrificed their children, whom they bore to me, as food for them. 38 They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths. 39 On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house.

*Hosea 1:1* The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel: 2 When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go, take to yourself an **adulterous** wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest **adultery** in departing from the LORD.”

Jesus, as he often does, borrows from the prophets in his choice of words—

*Matt. 12:38* Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.” 39 He answered, “A wicked and **adulterous** generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”

James, the brother of Jesus, uses the same image:

*James 4:4* You **adulterous** people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Peter similarly refers to those who divide the church as adulterers:

*2 Pet. 2:14* With eyes full of **adultery**, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood! 15 They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness.

Jesus, James, and Peter are not speaking of literal adultery. Rather, following the prophets, they use “adultery” for violating one’s covenant with God—by idolatry, by testing God, by being friends with world, or by dividing the church. Clearly, when the Bible speaks of adultery, we cannot assume that sexual sin is the reference. Rather, “adultery” is a favorite metaphor for any violation of a covenant.