

# The Long Way Home: Counseling after Infidelity

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*Sex confronts us with the practical duties of stewardship. What must we do to protect the beauty, the pleasure, and the sanctity of these good things?*

*The point about temperance, including sexual discipline, is not that it reduces pleasure, but that it safeguards abundance.*

Wendell Berry<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction: it's a long way home

- a. No shortcuts
- b. What needs to happen?

“Make every effort [**take action**] to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

“For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge [**get insight**] of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins” (2 Peter 1:5-9).

## 2. From rehearsing to reinterpreting

- a. Retelling the narrative
  1. The problem with rehearsing and cycling the same story
  2. Other common problems
    - a. Building a divorce narrative
      - a. Common narratives
      - b. Special cases (abuse)<sup>2</sup>
    - b. Building a narrative of quick deliverance
    - c. Telling incomplete narratives
    - d. Telling stories that diminish culpability
  3. A way forward: *yes, there is much against you*

“You ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” (2 Cor 2:7b-8)

- b. Confession<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As interviewed in “Sex in the Christian Life,” *Modern Reformation* Vol. 10, No. 6 (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Helpful self-assessment: “The Emotionally Destructive Relationship Test” by Leslie Vernick, <http://www.leslievernick.com/pdfs/Relationship-test.pdf>

1. Why confession should be both immediate and delayed<sup>4</sup>
  - a. A good apology requires awareness that typically comes over time
  - b. Basic principles of confession<sup>5</sup>
2. Learning responsibility (as a process)
  - a. Responsibility as both word and concept

“[The senator] was as bold as a lion about [the necessity of returning runaway slaves to their masters], and "mightily convinced" not only himself, but everybody that heard him;—but then *his idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word*. . . . The magic of the real presence of distress,—the imploring human eye, the frail, trembling human hand, the despairing appeal of helpless agony,—these he had never tried. He had never thought that a fugitive might be a hapless mother, a defenceless child,—like that one which was now wearing his lost boy's little well-known cap.” - *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe

- b. Responsibility as a heart matter

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matt 15:19).

- c. The bridge to infidelity

“In order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes” (2 Cor 2:11).

1. Pain
  - a. Distance
  - b. Loss
  - c. Fear
  - d. Disappointment
  - e. Being/feeling wronged
  - f. Shame

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<sup>3</sup> “The fastest way to bring a wrecking ball to our skewed interpretations is through confession.” (Edward Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection* [New Growth, 2012], p. 91).

<sup>4</sup> Why delay? “The idea of an apology will be meaningless until significance is attributed to the consequences” (Michael White, *Narrative Practice: Continuing the Conversation* [New York: Norton, 2011], p. 106). The OT prophets made clear that a certain priority was necessary and certain conditions must be met before an apology. Seeking forgiveness from God was of no value if the people did not first own the severity, or consequences of their sins (e.g., violation of the covenant, the covenant’s curses, God’s displeasure). If they were not prepared to rend their hearts, they need not rend their garments (Joel 2).

<sup>5</sup> Sande and Johnson’s 7 “A’s” of a good confession: 1) Address everyone involved (“your confession should reach as far as your offense”), 2) Avoid “if,” “but,” and “maybe,” 3) Admit specifically, 4) Acknowledge the hurt, 5) Accept the consequences, 6) Alter your behavior, 7) Ask for forgiveness (and allow time). (Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, *Resolving Everyday Conflict* [Baker, 2011], p. 64).

- g. Deadness/boredom
- h. Loneliness
- i. Injustice/unfairness

2. What was done with the pain

- a. Resentment
- b. Self-aggrandizing
  - a. Relieving shame
  - b. Recasting self as benevolent rescuer

“Many adulterers think they are looking for love when in fact they are seeking to feel better about themselves.”  
Clinton and Laaser<sup>6</sup>

3. Moving toward infidelity

- a. “Mirroring”

“A compelling aspect of emotional affairs is the positive mirroring that occurs. We like how we see ourselves reflected in the other person’s eyes. By contrast, in our long-term relationships, our reflection is like a 5x makeup mirror in which our flaws are magnified. In a new romance, our reflection is like the rosy glow of an illuminated vanity mirror.” - Shirley Glass<sup>7</sup>

- b. Noticing and contemplating opportunity
- c. Seeing it as good (or at least answering a problem)<sup>8</sup>
- d. Minimizing steps taken<sup>9</sup>
- e. Giving yourself permission
- f. Infidelity<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Clinton and Mark Laaser, *The Quick-Reference Guide to Sexuality & Relationship Counseling* (Baker, 2010), p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Glass, *Not "Just Friends": Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity after Infidelity* (Atria, 2004), p. 45. Also note that there are more than circumstantial and instrumental reasons why affairs happen over social media: “We have to remember that social media is not a reflection of people as they are, typically. It is a reflection of how we want others to see us.” Ray Carroll, “Is Facebook Ruining Your Marriage?” *Fallen Pastor Ministries* <https://fallenpastor.com/is-facebook-ruining-your-marriage/>

<sup>8</sup> Adultery is alluring not because it makes good logical sense, but because we see in our imagination its offer of happiness, secrecy, thrill, and fulfillment.” Samuel James, “Seeing Ourselves in ‘The End of the Affair,’ August 17, 2017. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/seeing-ourselves-in-the-end-of-the-affair>

<sup>9</sup> “Self-deception can take the form of denying self-indulgent motives or refusing to acknowledge the potential damage. **With practice, people find it easier to hide those unacceptable parts of themselves from themselves.** They gloss over aspects that are inconsistent with their internalized values. They tell themselves that what they are doing isn’t so bad, that everybody does it and life goes on” (Shirley Glass, p. 63).

<sup>10</sup> In a popular-level presentation, Esther Perel defines an affair as involving 1) secrecy, 2) emotional connection, and 3) sexual alchemy. (“Rethinking Infidelity: a Talk for Anyone Who Has Ever Loved.” *TED*.)

- d. The betrayed partner's retrospective
  1. Surviving the initial blow
  2. Navigating the intensity and complexity of the feelings, (e.g., of shock, numbness, anger, despair, embarrassment)
  3. Navigating feelings of guilt
  4. Reflecting vs. ruminating
  5. (*Later*) Re-writing the marriage story, recognizing that, in most cases, they were co-creators of a problematic status quo in the marriage<sup>11</sup>
  
- e. Finding God in the story

“[Fidelity requires] accountability to something, Someone, greater than even one’s marriage vows. And it requires that love is not a means of making oneself great but a means of pouring oneself out for another. It means that one must see that the arena of **marriage is not a mirror but a cross**” - Russell Moore<sup>12</sup>

### 3. From controlling to caretaking

- a. Everything is threatened
  1. Threats to family life
  2. Threats to sense of self
    - a. Feeling misunderstood
    - b. Overload of criticism
  
- b. Common missteps in response to threats
  1. Defensiveness
  2. Counter-attack
  3. Reputation damage control

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[https://www.ted.com/talks/esther\\_perel\\_rethinking\\_infidelity\\_a\\_talk\\_for\\_anyone\\_who\\_has\\_ever\\_loved/up-next](https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_rethinking_infidelity_a_talk_for_anyone_who_has_ever_loved/up-next)).

This definition is helpful in that it highlights how boundaries are crossed whether or not sexual acts occurred. My convictions align with broad definitions of infidelity. The definition of *fidelity* provided by the *Westminster Larger Catechism* is thorough and searching: “The duties required in the seventh commandment are chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior; and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, modesty in apparel; marriage by those that have not the gift of continency, conjugal love, and cohabitation; diligent labor in our callings; shunning all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations thereunto” (A. 138).

<sup>11</sup> “[When one man’s wife had an] emotional affair [it] was not his fault, but he humbly recognized that the foundation in his marriage was fractured and needed attention.” Ellen Dykas, “Emotional Affairs: When Closeness Becomes Destructive – Part I.” *HarvestUSA*. August 22, 2017, <http://harvestusa.org/emotional-affairs-closeness-becomes-destructive-part/#.WZwrE7Ly3A>. This brief article also contains several helpful diagnostic questions about whether a relationship has become problematic.

<sup>12</sup> Russell Moore, “Will a Happy Marriage Prevent an Affair?” September 14, 2017, <http://www.russellmoore.com/2017/09/14/will-happy-marriage-prevent-affair/>

“Failing to mention time spent alone with a lover or a gift of an intimate nature is as misleading as telling an untruth. Sometimes people think they are on firmer moral ground if they deal primarily in lies of omission; however . . . **the person who is betrayed rarely appreciates the subtleties.**”<sup>13</sup>

- c. The restoration plan
  - 1. Commitment with flexibility<sup>14</sup>
  - 2. Compliance with engagement<sup>15</sup>
  - 3. Conflict with love
    - a. Impatience
    - b. Pain
    - c. Separation<sup>16</sup>
- d. Becoming a source of healing (after being a source of hurt)
- e. Help for the offended spouse
  - 1. Control: carrying responsibility to exact justice or to fix
  - 2. Caretaking: “the constructive displeasure of mercy” (tough love)<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. From vice to virtue**

- a. A new framework
- b. The old vices: understanding where adultery fits in the wider pattern of your old life
- c. New virtues: understanding how the new life fits together and reinforces itself
  - 1. Patient endurance
  - 2. Openness
  - 3. Humility

**“Christians, when recovered from backsliding, are commonly more watchful, and walk more circumspectly than they ever did before. They cannot but be more humble.** The remembrance of their base departure from God fills them with self-loathing. Whenever spiritual pride would lift up its head, one thought of a disgraceful fall will

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<sup>13</sup> Glass, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> “Your pastor or counselor can help you draft this, but the plan must come from you.” Robert Jones, *Restoring Your Broken Marriage: Healing after Adultery* (New Growth, 2009), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> “Ironically, our desire to clean ourselves actually minimizes the problem of uncleanness. It assumes we can give ourselves a good enough scrubbing to get a little holy before we meet the Holy One. But beware of any approach to uncleanness that doesn’t rely on the cleansing power of God,” (Welch, p. 92).

<sup>16</sup> “Separation, especially if the affair has been going on for a long time, may allow both parties time and emotional space to process feelings and clarify the situation. The goal of separation is to have the couple begin to build a friendship and reestablish trust,” (Clinton and Laaser, p. 139).

<sup>17</sup> David Powlison, “The Constructive Displeasure of Mercy,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* (24:4), 2006.

often lay the soul in the dust. And whether the backslider's sins have been open or secret, the recollection of his traitorous behavior fills him with shame and self-abhorrence. When such persons have so conducted themselves as to bring upon them the censures of the church, so as to be separated from the communion of the Lord's people, **at first, it is probable, resentment will be felt towards the officers of the church who perform the painful duty.** But **after reflection, these resentments are turned against themselves**, and they pass much heavier censures on themselves than the church ever did." Archibald Alexander<sup>18</sup> (1772-1851)

4. Agency
5. Empathy

d. Help for the offended spouse

1. A word of comfort—patient endurance as alternative to pressure
  - a. Resist pressure toward quick decisions
  - b. Resist pressure toward unrealistic and unbiblical views of forgiveness<sup>19</sup>
2. A word of challenge

## 5. Conclusion

- a. A time of connection
- b. A time of service
- c. A time of gratitude

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<sup>18</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 175.

<sup>19</sup> Sande and Johnson are helpful here: "Can you ever mention the sin[s] again [to the person who has wronged you]?" Yes, they argue, because "you're . . . bringing them up for his good" (p. 94-95).