



part Three - Risky Business: The Things That put Our Relationships in Peril

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:31-32

DAY 1

What is bitterness?

Metaphorically, bitterness can express desperation, pain, despondency (Genesis 27:34; Ruth 1:20; 1 Samuel 1:10; Matt. 26:75), and even enmity (Psalm 64:3; Acts 8:23). Bitterness toward fellow Christians is condemned in the New Testament lists of virtues and vices (Romans 3:14; Ephesians 4:31; cf.¹ Colossians 3:19; James 3:14). The counsel of God concerning the coming "days" is sweet in the mouth but bitter in the stomach, i.e., because of his harsh judgment (Revelation 10:9-10).²

In the Bible, bitterness is symbolical of affliction, misery, and servitude (Ex. 1:14; Ruth 1:20; Jer. 9:15). The Chaldeans are called the "bitter and hasty nation" (Hab. 1:6). The "gall of bitterness" expresses a state of great wickedness (Acts 8:23). A "root of bitterness" is a wicked person or a dangerous sin (Heb. 12:15).

The Passover was to be eaten with "bitter herbs" (Ex. 12:8; Num. 9:11). The kind of herbs designated is not known. Probably they were any bitter herbs obtainable at the place and time when the Passover was celebrated. They represented the severity of the servitude under which the people groaned and have been regarded also as typical of the sufferings of Christ.³

Study Questions

1. How might bitterness develop in a relationship?
2. Do you have any unresolved conflict?
3. How can bitterness affect your relationship with your spouse and with God?
4. How do you deal with bitterness? How should you deal with bitterness?

¹ cf. compare, see

² Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (161). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

³ Easton, M. G. (1996). *Easton's Bible dictionary*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

DAY 2

Are you a brawler?

Anger is the word normally used in the Bible to refer to rage, fury, or indignation. In most instances, anger is considered to be wrong. Psalm 37:8 (NLT), for example, commands: "Stop your anger! Turn from your rage!" Jesus paralleled anger with murder when he said, "If you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment!" (Matthew 5:22, NLT)—just as if the person had actually committed the murder he felt in his angry heart. Ephesians 4:31 and Colossians 3:8 both list anger, along with bitterness, wrath, malice, and slander, as attitudes that Christians must rid themselves of once and for all. In his list of attributes for a bishop or pastor of a church, the apostle Paul said that a Christian leader should not be prone to anger, that is, easily provoked (Titus 1:7).

The Bible recognizes that humans get angry; it does not condemn the anger in and of itself but what often happens as the result. Humans have a habit of letting their anger get the best of them, causing them to sin. That is why the apostle Paul said, "Don't sin by letting anger gain control over you" (Ephesians 4:26, NLT). The longer a person allows anger to continue, the greater the danger that it will develop sinful qualities, giving Satan a foothold (see Ephesians 4:27).

Anger of a good sort is also spoken of in the Bible. "Righteous indignation" refers to the extreme displeasure of a holy heart unable to tolerate sin of any kind. The anger of God contains this element: man should be good, yet he sins—and God is angry "because they forsook the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them" (Deuteronomy 29:25–26, RSV). It was in that sense also that Moses' anger burned on Mt Sinai and caused him to smash the tablets of the covenant on the ground when he saw the golden calf and Israel's idolatry (Exodus 32:19).

In the New Testament, Mark says that Jesus looked with anger at the Pharisees, who were hoping to catch him breaking their law (Mark 3:5). Jesus' anger was also shown in his cleansing of the temple (John 2:13–22); it should have been a place of prayer but was being used as a place of business. So Jesus "entered the Temple and began to drive out the merchants and their customers. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the stalls of those selling doves" (Matthew 21:12, NLT). His holy indignation was neither a weakness nor a sin. Such anger is an appropriate response to iniquity and injustice, especially when they are apparently unpunished.⁴

Titus 3:2 says "...to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men." When we are called in verse 2 to be 'peaceable,' Paul is using a word that can be translated 'not contentious,' or 'not quarrelsome'. The KJV renders it 'to be no brawlers', i.e. people who are ready to resort to violence in difficult situations. It is an aspect of self-control. Tensions may be running high in the office, the home, or the church meeting but we are not to make matters worse by exploding in uncontrollable anger. Instead we are to be 'considerate', i.e. gracious, conciliatory, peace-makers. A believer is to be anxious to heal rather than to deepen wounds; to preserve peace rather than to destroy it.⁵

Study Questions

1. What do you get most angry about in your relationship with your spouse? In your relationship with Jesus?

4 Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (47). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

5 Campbell, D. (2007). *Opening up Titus*. Opening Up Commentary (94). Leominster: Day One Publications.

2. Is there a groove or cycle that conflict follows in your marriage?
3. If the cycle is unhealthy, what are some things you can do to break it? Are you doing these things?
4. Read Romans 5:6-11. Why is peace with our spouse so important?

DAY 3

Avoiding neglect

Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Corinthians 7:3-5)

That celibacy is wrong for those who are married should be an obvious truth, but it was not obvious to some of the Corinthian believers. Because of their erroneous belief in the spiritual superiority of total sexual abstinence, some members in the church practiced it even within marriage. Some over-zealous husbands apparently had decided to set themselves apart wholly for God. In doing so, however, they neglected or even denied their responsibilities to their wives, especially in the area of sexual relations. Some wives had done the same thing. The practice of deprivation probably was most common when the spouse was not a believer. But Paul applies his command to all marriages, as is clear later in verses 10–17. Married believers are not to sexually deprive their spouses, whether or not the spouse is a Christian.

The apostle made no exception to the instruction that the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. God holds all marriage to be sacred and He holds sexual relations between husband and wife not only to be sacred but proper and even obligatory. Paul makes it clear that physical relations within marriage are not simply a privilege and a pleasure but a responsibility. Husbands and wives have a duty to give sexual satisfaction to each other. There is no distinction between men and women. The husband has no more rights in this regard than the wife.

In verse 4 Paul reinforces the mutuality of obligation. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. God honors sexual desire and expression within marriage. In fact, failure for Christian husbands and wives to submit sexually to the authority of their spouses brings dishonor to God because it dishonors marriage.

The present tense of *exousiazei* (have authority over) indicates a general statement that is always true. Spouses' mutual authority over each other's bodies is continuous; it lasts throughout marriage. In the normal realms of life, a Christian's body is his own, to take care of and to use as a gift from God. And in the deepest spiritual sense, of course, it belongs entirely to God (Rom. 12:1). But in the marital realm, it also belongs to the marriage partner.

Sexual expression within marriage is not an option or an extra. It is certainly not, as it has sometimes been considered, a necessary evil in which spiritual Christians engage only to procreate children. It is far more than a

physical act. God created it to be the expression and experience of love on the deepest human level and to be a beautiful and powerful bond between husband and wife.

God intends for marriage to be permanent and for the sexual relationship within it to be permanent. His original plan for marriage did not allow for divorce or for celibacy. Christians are not to forsake unbelieving spouses (vv. 12–17), and they are not to sexually deprive spouses, whether believing or unbelieving. The prohibition is inclusive: *Stop depriving one another*. It is an emphatic command. Sexual relations between a husband and his wife are God-ordained and commanded.

One Exception

The only exception is both mutual and temporary: by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer. As in the case of fasting, if both partners agree to abstain from sexual activity for a brief period to allow one or both of them to spend time in intensive prayer, they may do so. Both the ideas of a specific period of time and of a specific purpose for prayer are implied. The length of time for physical separation and the specific need and purpose of the prayer should be agreed on in advance.

God may give us a strong burden about a person or a ministry, a burden that requires our undivided attention and concentrated prayer. Grief or serious illness, for example, may lead to this. Or we may fall into a particularly harmful sin and need to withdraw for awhile to get straightened out with the Lord.

After the covenant at Sinai had been given, the Lord planned to come down and manifest Himself before Israel “in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with [Moses].” In preparation for His coming, the people were to consecrate themselves by washing their clothes and by abstaining from sexual intercourse for three days (Ex. 19:9–15). Hundreds of years later, in response to Judah’s extreme wickedness, the Lord commanded: “Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping, and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the Lord your God, who knows whether He will not turn and relent... Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders. Gather the children and the nursing infants. Let the bridegroom come out of his room and the bride out of her bridal chamber.” (Joel 2:12–14, 16)

The need of forgiveness was so great that even brides and grooms were to leave their nuptial chambers to join in national mourning and penitence.

When Jesus Christ returns He will “pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him... the land will mourn, every family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves” (Zech. 12:10, 12). Marriage relations will be forsaken during that time of mourning.

But when such urgent spiritual needs are past, normal marital relationships are to resume. Husbands and wives then are to come together again. The reason for coming back together is explicit: lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control. When the time of concentrated prayer is over, normal desires and temptations will return, often with greater intensity. Satan knows that Christians can be especially vulnerable after a mountaintop experience. Our defenses are apt to be down and our pride may be up. Or, because of the experience, we may simply not have the desire for sex for a while afterward. Our spouse, on the other hand, especially if he or she has not shared in the prayer, may have developed a particularly strong desire during the separation. As a guard against falling into temptation ourselves, or of causing our marriage partner to fall into temptation, sexual relations are to resume immediately.

Unless it is by mutual consent, for a specific prayer need and for a brief period of time, sexual abstinence can become a tool of Satan. It is never to be used as pretense for spiritual superiority or as a means of intimidating or manipulating one’s spouse. Physical love is to be a normal and regular experience shared by both marriage partners alike, as a gift from God.⁶

⁶ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1984). *1 Corinthians*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (156–158). Chicago: Moody Press.

Study Questions

1. How can emotional neglect lead to physical neglect?
2. What are the Biblical purposes for sex?
3. Consider the instruction "Do not deny one another..." in 1 Corinthians 7:5. In light of this, how can you be sure to avoid neglecting your spouse physically, emotionally, and spiritually?

DAY 4

Dangerous Liaisons

In an affair, a married person begins to allow someone other than his or her spouse to meet emotional and eventually sexual needs that should be met only by one's spouse. An affair is not synonymous with adultery (i.e., a sexual relationship with someone other than one's spouse), for people can commit adultery without developing an emotional relationship (e.g., a sexual encounter with a prostitute), and the early stages of many affairs do not include adultery.

There are a number of ways of understanding the reasons people become involved in affairs (Virkler, 1992). First, some people develop unhealthy personality styles (personality disorders) that make them vulnerable to affairs. Among these personality styles that often predispose a person to unfaithfulness are the narcissistic, histrionic, borderline, and antisocial personality disorders.

Second, sexual addictions often lead to infidelity. In a sexual addiction, a person begins to use sexual encounters in the same way a person with a developing alcohol addiction uses alcohol; that is, to deal with more and more of the stresses of everyday life (Carnes, 1983, 1989). Thus the person with a sexual addiction begins to search for a sexual experience when bored, lonely, anxious, frustrated, or depressed. It might be more accurate to say that those with sexual addictions are likely to have a series of adulterous encounters rather than affairs, since they generally have many partners rather than develop an emotional and sexual relationship with one individual.

Third, as people go through life they face a number of developmental situations. When they do not resolve these successfully, the lack of resolution may lead to an emotional state (anxiety, anger, dissatisfaction, loneliness) that makes them vulnerable to the temptation of an affair. Examples of such developmental situations include making the transition from romantic love to commitment love during the early months of marriage; learning to negotiate differences in ways that result in both marital partners feeling counted; pregnancy, birth of the first child, and mothering; extraordinary stress at work for either partner; being away from home too much; rejection or failure; success; and mid-life crises.

Fourth, people also become involved in affairs because they are exposed to temptation-filled situations for which they are inadequately prepared or in which they do not set wise boundaries. Affairs that fall into this category have been given names such as the friendship affair, the office affair, and the people-helper affair. The majority of affairs start as friendships, often well-meaning and innocent friendships, and move toward an emotional and sexual attachment so gradually and sometimes so unconsciously that the persons involved may not be aware that the relationship is changing until significant transformation has occurred.

Fifth, some people become involved in affairs because of unconscious, unrealistic, or uncommunicated expectations they hold. Everyone enters marriage with many expectations, some verbalized, others un verbalized, and some of which they may not be consciously aware. When people have unconscious or un verbalized expectations, their partners sometimes may not meet them, and they become dissatisfied with the marriage. At other times people enter marriage with unrealistic expectations (e.g., that honeymoon fever will last forever, or that if my partner really loves me, he or she will know what I want without my having to ask). When those expectations are not met, a person may feel dissatisfied with the marriage, believing that something fundamental is missing from the relationship, and be tempted to start looking elsewhere. When someone has an affair, it does not always indicate a defect in the faithful partner or in the marriage.

Sixth, there are a number of situations in which the faithful partner can produce a situation that makes the person who eventually becomes unfaithful more vulnerable. One of these is when the faithful partner fails to meet realistic, communicated requests of the spouse. Scripture clearly teaches that we are to be loving and gentle with each other and that marital partners should meet each other's companionship and sexual needs. While failure to do so does not justify adultery, it does increase a partner's vulnerability when someone else shows the warmth, respect, or compassion that had been requested from the spouse.

Seventh, each person has ego needs. Harley's research (1986) suggests that the top five ego needs of men and women are usually different. Women's top five needs, according to Harley, are for affection, conversation, honesty and openness, financial support, and commitment to family. Men's top five needs are sexual fulfillment, recreational companionship, an attractive spouse, domestic support (managing the home well), and admiration. Men and women generally try to show love to their spouse in the way they want to be loved, without realizing their spouse has different priorities of ego needs. As a result men and women sometimes do not meet their spouse's ego needs well, causing an emotional void that leaves the spouse more vulnerable to temptation.

Eighth, almost any psychopathology in the faithful partner, if it is extreme enough, can frustrate that person's partner and make him or her vulnerable to having an affair. Examples include paranoid personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (extreme perfectionism that keeps normal human needs from being met), substance abuse, physical or emotional abuse, or chronic passive-aggressiveness. For reasons that are not totally clear, codependency also seems to encourage infidelity in the partner but probably for different reasons than the above.

We know from Scripture that a person can be "a man after God's own heart" and still fall into adultery. It is wise to remember Ellen Williams's words (cited in Peterson, 1983, p. 79): "If you are thinking to yourself, 'An affair could never happen to me,' you are in trouble. To believe we are immune leaves us wide open and unprotected."

References

Carnes, P. (1983). *Out of the shadows: Understanding sexual addiction*. Minneapolis: Compcare.

Carnes, P. (1989). *Contrary to love: Helping the sexual addict*. Minneapolis: Compcare.

Harley, W. (1986). *His needs, her needs: Building an affair-proof marriage*. Old Tappan, NJ: Revell.

Peterson, J. (1983). *The myth of the greener grass*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.

Virkler, H. A. (1992). *Broken promises: Understanding, healing and preventing affairs in Christian marriages*. Dallas: Word.⁷

⁷ Baker encyclopedia of psychology & counseling. 1999 (D. G. Benner & P. C. Hill, Ed.) (2nd ed.). Baker reference library (53-54). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Study Questions

1. Do you have any friendships that make your spouse feel unsafe? Does your spouse have any that make you feel unsafe?
2. Other-gender friends who AREN'T YOUR SPOUSE should never give you advice about your spouse because...
3. How can other couples who don't share your values be a bad influence?
4. How can the internet and social media affect your marriage? Do you have total access to each other's technologies? Why or why not?
5. Extraordinary challenges sometimes hurt marriages because...

DAY 5

Another look at adultery

Adultery is a breach of the unity of marriage. It describes any act of sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man other than her husband, and all sexual intercourse involving a married man and a woman other than his wife.

In Old Testament times, polygamous unions were not considered adulterous (cf. Deut. 21:15). Nor was a husband branded as an adulterer if he had intercourse with a slave woman (Genesis 16:1-4; 30:1-5) or a prostitute (Genesis 38:15-18)— though the latter was, of course, condemned as immoral (1 Corinthians 6:15).

Any imbalance between the sexes was dispelled by Jesus in his teaching on divorce and remarriage. While he did not rule out the possibility of divorce in cases of sexual unfaithfulness (Matthew 5:32; 19:9), he warned that in all other circumstances remarriage involves both (ex-) husband and (ex-) wife in adultery. Paul added that the charge of adultery only applies if the remarried person's original partner is still alive (Romans 7:2-3).

Jesus also sharpened the OT's definition of adultery by applying it to a man's thought life. Any man who fantasizes in lust (as distinct from just being tempted) has committed adultery in mind and intention, even though there is no physical contact (Mt 5:27-28; cf. Jb 31:1, 9).

The Bible's condemnation of adultery is written into the heart of the OT law, prophecy, and wisdom literature. The Ten Commandments ban it unequivocally (Exodus 20:14; Deut. 5:18). The prophets list it among offenses that attract God's anger and judgment (Jer. 23:11-14; Ezekiel 22:11; Malachi 3:5). And the book of Proverbs scorns it as a senseless act by which a man destroys himself (Proverbs 6:23-35; cf. 7:6-27).

The NT echoes that clear condemnation. Where there is no repentance, adultery excludes those who practice it from God's kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9). It is the very opposite of love of one's neighbor (Romans 13:9-10), and it stands under the judgment of God himself (Hebrews 13:4).

In the OT the penalty for adultery is death—for both the man and the woman (Leviticus 20:10; Deut. 22:22). The same applies if the woman is single but engaged to another man, assuming she has not been raped (in which case only the man is to be executed—Deut. 22:23–27). The refrain “You will cleanse the land from evil” (22:24) shows that adultery was considered a serious threat to society’s health, not simply an attack on the family lives of the two people involved.

In both the OT and NT, the language of adultery is used figuratively to describe human unfaithfulness to God. The OT prophets likened God’s covenant relationship with his people to marriage (Isaiah 54:5–8; cf. Rev 21:2), so in their eyes the breaking of that relationship, especially by idolatry, was equivalent to spiritual adultery (Jeremiah 5:7–8; 13:22–27; Ez 23:37).

Jesus used the same imagery to characterize those who either rejected his claims or showed their lack of faith in him by demanding unnecessary extra signs of his deity (Matthew 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38). And in another vivid NT passage, James describes God as a loving, jealous husband coming to deal with his adulterous people who have become good friends with the world and its false standards (James 4:4).

This is the special theme of the prophet Hosea. God used the prophet’s own experience of a marriage broken by adultery to teach the seriousness of his people’s unfaithfulness to him (Hosea 2:2–6) and his keen longing for a full reconciliation (3:1–5). Spiritual infidelity, like physical adultery, brings God’s judgment. But in both cases his overwhelming desire is for a mended relationship following sincere repentance (Jer 3:1–14; Ez 16:1–63).⁸

Study Questions

1. What is spiritual adultery?
2. What Bible passage stood out to you concerning adultery and why?
3. How can we safe guard our relationship with God from adultery?
4. How can we safeguard our marriage from adultery?

⁸ Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (18–19). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.