



Roy Bishop (ed. Richard Collins)

Adultery

(Part One)

Adultery can catch us like a trap. From seemingly out of nowhere, it can leave us with irreparable damage in our lives. And in the lives of those we love. Jesus once taught, 'You have heard that it was said, 'do not commit adultery,' but I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' Jesus' words condemn me. He knows the integrity of my heart. And your heart.

But all is not lost. He also said to the woman caught in adultery, 'Neither do I condemn you; go now and leave your life of sin.' The religious leaders who accused her were forced to consider the sin in their own hearts. The stones they had intended to throw were dropped at their feet. It was a powerful moment, full of dramatic tension. Jesus' refusal to condemn the woman ended up liberating her. She could begin her life afresh.

Such is the wonder of this man, the Lord Jesus, that John wrote of him, 'we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.' If you're someone who provides pastoral care for those trapped in an adulterous relationship, then you will need both of those qualities: grace and truth.

Where do we start?

What about the loss of peace? Those in adulterous

relationships don't have peace. It's gone. It's disappeared from inside their hearts, they often experience rising tension with others, and for people of faith, they've lost their peace with God. Efforts to keep everything under wraps are exhausting and ultimately, they end in failure. The truth eventually leaks out, touching many lives. We are relational creatures and so betrayal, lies, and broken hearts follow from adultery. Like a stone thrown into a pond, the ripples

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reach far and wide. The poet, W.B. Yeats, once wrote, "But I, being poor, have only my dreams; I have spread my dreams under your feet; Tread softly because you tread on my dreams." When we counsel those caught up in an adulterous relationship, we are handling broken dreams, damaged lives. We must therefore handle them with great care.

Most people get married, or enter a long-term relationship, with the hope that it will indeed be long-term. Marriage is for life. But marriage is hard, and people change. The shine wears off and irritations

and frustrations soon build up. (A Daily Telegraph survey showed a rising rate of divorces among people in their sixties, often initiated by women. The over-sixties divorce rate has risen by 4% in the past two years. Furthermore, experts say that many older couples are tending to separate once their children have flown the nest).

Why does adultery happen?

There are many factors, so we should not jump to conclusions or offer quick solutions. For those who offer counsel, it's tempting to lecture when we should be listening. But good counsellors always listen first. Always. Every adulterous relationship has a different story and we must listen to that story. So let's consider some possible scenarios we might hear.

- **The Spark.** I'm happily married but I met someone at work or through a shared interest, for example the gym, or even church. There was a spark, a rush of blood that developed into a crush. From out of nowhere, my heart was racing. I didn't look for this, it just happened.
- **Seduction.** She sought me out and seduced me.
- **The Listening Ear.** At work, I discovered someone who would listen properly. What a contrast to my husband, who never listens.
- **The Abused.** I'm in an abusive marriage, so I admit I was looking for comfort elsewhere. Who wouldn't want to escape from an abusive home?
- **Marriage-Lite.** I have a problem with commitment, always have, so you know, when things got tough, I went back to my old bad habits.

Our response should be guided by taking into account the details of each story, because each story is different. I'm going to look in turn at each of the parties affected by adultery, starting with the injured party. So how should you respond when someone confides in you that their marriage partner is having an affair?

Whether the affair has been discovered recently, or a while back (perhaps they hoped it would die away) there will be a sense of betrayal, rejection and very often, anger. There might also be confusion. In addition, there's often a feeling worthlessness and self-recrimination. 'I'm just no good – it's all my fault. What did I do wrong?'

When offering counsel, it's important to remember that, regardless of how much you may value the

institution of marriage, you cannot change the hearts of those involved. So start with empathy. A person in

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pain needs to be heard and they need to feel heard. They also need to feel safe, so confidentiality is critical. Lots of issues can become tangled. They may start with self-recrimination and guilt, then express anger, but quickly move back to regret. So they require the time to express these emotions. Later on, they may have multiple questions around practical issues of children, finance, and accommodation. Human beings aren't computers; you won't hear a clear list. The conversation will probably move all over the map.

Next, boundaries.

Boundaries, important in any relationship, are ignored, twisted, and distorted in adulterous relationships. So when responding to an injured party, it is important to ensure that their boundaries are acknowledged and respected. This helps build a good relationship, one in which they experience support and respect, and are treated with dignity. It will certainly mean going at their pace. You will need to acknowledge their goals and expectations throughout the process.

A word of caution here: you should ensure that as far as possible, you only counsel those of the same gender. Counselling the opposite gender when they are vulnerable and your role is to be an empathetic listener can lead to significant danger for both of you. Signals can be misinterpreted, leading to all sorts of problems. These can be avoided by simply suggesting that the client might prefer to speak to a person of the same gender.

There may be times when a woman might approach you after a service. It would be heartless to turn her away. Ensuring that others are still in the auditorium, it is right to listen to her concerns. But what should you do if she makes an appointment to see you privately in your office and then starts to tell her story, which includes significant heartache and emotional trauma? It is, of course, right to listen. Be very wary, however, of any kind of physical contact, such as hugging, since such signals can be misread. For further meetings, same gender counselling should be

suggested or perhaps she could meet with a couple (husband and wife). She could also opt to bring a friend with her.

At all times

1. Be careful about physical contact, eye contact, and any other signals which may be misinterpreted;
2. Don't rescue the person from her tears (e.g. by putting an arm around her), rather wait with her while she cries;
3. Try to be objective rather than personal about any positive attributes he/she may have;
4. As far as possible, always meet in a public place, or at least let someone to whom you are accountable know when and where you will be meeting. It may be sufficient for the person talking to you to know that someone else is in the building while you meet.

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but it is rare. Far more important in offering support is our ability to listen well. Suggestions – particularly at the beginning – can cause more damage, if we're not careful. What they need to know more than anything is that we are for them and not against them. God is too, so reminding them that they are loved is also important.

Prayer, when accepted, is important. But here we need sensitivity. Offer it too soon and we can cause offence. It gives the impression that the problem is more important than the person. It can also come across as a quick fix, as though it will sweep away all the problems. Instead, the focus should be on loving, accepting and listening to

the wounded party. Only by doing this can you help to restore a bewildered, broken and confused person, setting them on the road towards peace with themselves, others, and God.

In Part Two, I'll look at how to counsel the 'guilty party.'



Roy Bishop

At the time of original writing, Roy Bishop was accredited by the Association of Christian Counsellors as an Emeritus Counselling Practitioner/Supervisor, and facilitated ACC Pastoral Skills Course in UK and Sierra Leone. He was also a trainer with Crisis Care Training International (www.crisiscaretraining.org), and an elder with Kennet Valley Free Church in Reading (www.kvfc.org.uk). Following a heart attack in 2016, he retired from formal activities.

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