

THE COMMAND TO FORGIVE: WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU DISCOVER THE
LOVE OF YOUR LIFE HAD AN AFFAIR

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This is in response to a letter asking for pastoral advice in view of one's girlfriend confessing to having an affair with a co-worker. He's deeply in love with her and is experiencing terrible pain. Yet he is seeking the right course of action. Here is my pastoral advice to him.

My Dear Friend:

My heart was grieved when I read your letter. When an affair occurs, whether a one-night stand, a short but intense affair, or a long-standing affair, the convergence and mixture of feelings can just knock you down to the ground and repeatedly hit you right in the gut-like waves on the seashore.

Anger, betrayal, disloyalty, bewilderment (e.g., am I not enough?), the desire to ignore the "elephant in the room," the biblical command to forgive and love, all the deception and lies that surrounded the affair, personal past mistakes and propensities, the fear of letting her go, and the desire not to start over with a future relationship, are perhaps just a sampling of all that you are experiencing.

What are you to do as a Christian? Evidently you love her and you wholeheartedly wish this never occurred. But it did. So, what are you to do?

First, even though you are commanded to forgive her, you must realize that those feelings will not necessarily diminish any time soon and perhaps never. Like a serious football injury, the feelings can emerge throughout the years. You lay awake in bed and the memories flood your mind. Reminders from various conversations, TV shows, movies, songs, gossip, and announcements of other affairs, prod such memories and feelings, given the fact that our greatest obstacle in our society is the problem of false pleasure (with all of its allurements, promises, and perils). When you find yourself in a future

argument with this lady or perhaps with another, feelings from this kind of deep hurt can break forth like water flowing from a broken dam.

But biblically speaking, *agape* love is the commitment of your will to the true good of another person. *Agape* love is sacrificial, self-surrendering, ever so genuine, and is demonstrated by meeting practical needs (1 John 3:15-16). *Agape* Love, being the greatest virtue (1 Corinthians 13), is to be a habit that we called to inculcate (instill) and exemplify in our daily lives-no matter how deeply we have been wounded.

For example, Jesus Christ became a "Man of Sorrows." He too suffered and suffered greatly. Rejected by his family, abandoned by his disciples, and crucified in part by His own people (even though He was declared innocent a number of times by Roman authority), experienced pain like no other. Yet, on the cross of Calvary, Jesus Christ demonstrated *agape* love, dying on the cross as our substitute, taking all our sins upon Himself so that we might have eternal life. What love in the midst in the horrific pain and rejection!

Second, I ask you to consider how can you best love her? You must forgive her. The grace that has been extended to you from God needs to be extended to her. God loves both of you infinitely, completely, and perfectly. No matter what mistakes we have all made, no matter how many times we raise our fist in rebellion against Him, God, who knew every sin we would ever commit, still died on the cross for our sins and rose again. His forgiveness is infinite to those who have placed their trust in Him for salvation. Likewise, the love your parents and closest friends have for you covers a multitude of mistakes you may have committed against them in times past.

To be sure, these feelings you are experiencing will continue to find expression. You have been betrayed. Nevertheless, you must commit yourself (will) to forgiveness and hopefully with time and obedience, recognition of your own frailties, and the love and forgiveness of God, the continual obedience to the command to forgive will go beyond your will to saturate your mind and heart.

Moreover, God understands the difficulties of forgiving those who have betrayed us. He does not forbid you to have these painful feelings of anger

and distrust... but he does ask you to forgive her just as God has forgiven you:

Matthew 18:21-22:

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

Mark 11:25:

"When you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions."

Ephesians 4:32:

"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace."

Colossians 3:13

"Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you."

1 John 1:9

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

One of the worst things you can do is take on the mindset that this is "water beneath the bridge... just move on." Simply "moving on" does not foster a disposition of forgiveness. Why? Like water flooding the banks of a bayou following a fierce thunderstorm, these feelings will hit you again, and often times it happens when you want or demand something from someone. It especially occurs in later disagreements with your girlfriend. We have this uncanny ability to bring up these past mistakes. Like a weapon we strap on our shoulders, we will use this painful event as a weapon to win an argument or gain permission.

Moreover, if you do not forgive her, then you might eventually find yourself struggling with bitterness, the inability to trust others, and even despair. A lack of forgiveness is toxic and can poison everything you are, all that you have, and ruin the possibility of becoming what you were born to be.

So, every time you feel the pain emerging inside of you, even though you have volitionally forgiven her for having this affair, you make the decision not to feed it; do not dwell on it, my friend! If God has forgiven her, you should as well. Her past, like ours as believers, is covered in God's grace. Every sin is conquered by God's forgiveness. Stated differently, forgiveness demands that you do not allow this act of betrayal to control you. To be sure, forgiveness does not mean that it excuses her sin, nor does it guarantee that she will not hurt you again. Rather, forgiveness means you are not going to dwell on it nor use it as a tool to manipulate her or others.

Third, when do you commit yourself to forgiving her, you should share with her the pain this has caused you. Why? Remembering the pain she has caused might prevent her from straying again-whether it is with you or with another fellow.

Fourth, it is pertinent to know what emotional and physical things did she receive with this other guy that was unavailable in your relationship. Why explore this painful issue? Perhaps she found something in this affair that that was lacking in the relationship you both shared. While this is difficult to examine, especially probing what this lack could be without arguing, it needs to be done. See, all too often affairs occur because there is something lacking in the current relationship (e.g., lack of communication; too little affection). Because our situations change and other venues demand our attention, one or both of you can become attached to a certain activity, person, or duty, thus generating a lack or need in the relationship. But the lack of something is also a reaching out, and unfortunately, selfish people come around like wolves in sheep clothing. These eager wolves prowl on these needs, ever so willing to listen, hear, and manipulate the situation for personal gain. But wolves are not expressing *agape* love. No, these ever-watchful wolves pursue with the intent to satisfy their own desires, exploiting and manipulating without considering the true good of others.

The bottom line is that the desire to have certain needs met can lead us to places we never thought we would go. Often, infidelity is a joint-problem developed because of a certain lacking (s) in the relationship. By knowing the nature of that lacking, recovery is possible. Moreover, a better relationship can be generated from lessons learned-whether it is with her or with another.

Fifth, while you can forgive her, you cannot forgive her out of your own strength! We are too frail, limited, and selfish. But if Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian European Holocaust survivor, can forgive the brutal Nazi guard who asked for her forgiveness one evening after she gave a talk about God's grace, then you can as well. How? Corrie Ten Boom found that it was God who worked in her both to will and do for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13), enabling her to honestly forgive this cruel man (who became a Christian following the war). All she did was pray! She told God in the privacy of her thought as the former Nazi guard extended his hand in reconciliation that she could not forgive him but that God could through her. Instantly she found herself embracing her former captor with both of them crying out of joy. God's forgiveness flooded their souls.

Should you continue on with this relationship? While you are called to forgive her as a believer, can you honestly see yourself spending the rest of your life with her in marriage? Can you see her as a nurturing, godly mother to your children? If it is not a real possibility, then I would lovingly end the relationship. On the other hand, if it is a real possibility that you could envision her to be your wife, then trust God. But part of trusting God involves heeding practical wisdom as reflected in the Book of Proverbs.

If she is not fully committed to the Word of God, then end the relationship. Why? Marriage can be great, but it is always tough! You want her committed to the Scriptures because there will be times when she does not feel committed to you (vise versa).

I, for one, advise young men who are looking to court for marriage, not to marry one who has a lot of emotional baggage, psychological disorders (her or family line), or is not significantly intelligent (dumb breeds dumb). You want to marry a lady who will enrich your life, add her qualities to your own and your posterity, and not rob the best parts of life from you.

Furthermore, I advise them to acutely and extensively study the mother in order to get a better idea what your future wife may be like (disposition, looks, reactions, impulses, habits, etc). Could you live with her mother? Are you attracted to or repelled by the person you see?

See, any baggage (whether emotional, psychological, familial, spiritual, or genetic) your wife carries will only be inflamed in your marriage. Since approximately 60% of all Christian marriages in the U.S. presently end in divorce, scarring and marring not only their lives, but also the lives of the children, the less baggage, the better. But you have to decide what problems you are willing to embrace and work on-as you grow old together. While you may be delivered from certain problems that are brought into your marriage, other ones may enter, and other remain. Trust, in particular, is critical to a healthy marriage.

Do not settle for anything but the best. If you have had sexual relations with her and you decide to break it off rather than marry her, then know that the breakup will be incredibly difficult. Sex is God-intended to "cement" the relationship. People who are terribly afflicted from a breakup or who cannot seem to recover from a breakup are often those who have enjoyed sexual intimacy before marriage. God intended that marriage come before intimacy because one critical part of sexual intimacy is to unite husband and wife into one flesh. So, if you do break up with her, and you did have sex with her, then know it will prove to be very painful experience, perhaps more painful than some of your previous relationships.

Along the same lines, if she not only had an emotional affair, but also a sexual affair, then a "cementing" occurred between the both of them. Thus, if you press onward together, then I would really recommend Christian counseling for the both of you in light of these further complications. I can recommend a great one. (Personally, if she was involved in a sexual affair and since you are not married to her, then I would recommend that you move on as the baggage will be so heavy-but only you can make that call).

Even if you choose to end this relationship, you need to take the time to work through the steps of forgiveness or you will project the anger and distrust onto the next person with whom you start a new relationship. You will not be able to start afresh. Moreover, whether it is with her or someone

else, you will not be able to grant the freedom she will need to form healthy relationships and choose you. In fact, she may end up resenting you for not giving her the freedom to choose faithfulness; it will be like "forced faithfulness." Without God's forgiveness applied to her through you, there will be a painful domino affect where pain and mistrust lead to more and more problems. You will want to blame her but it will not completely be her fault anymore.

In conclusion, all of that I have said will take time, whether you continue in this relationship or not. But you will need to walk through all this stuff. It might really be a good thing to take a break from the relationship in order to walk through it without other things adding to it. Distance can foster clarity.

I hope you find that my long letter to you is an indication that I care for you deeply and only desire the best for you. You are an amazing gentleman, one of my all-time favorite individuals, and one with phenomenal potential! Given your gift cluster, that is, your abilities, temperament, and resources, the opportunity lies before you to make your life count for something great - all unto the glory of God! So, I encourage you, whether you continue your relationship with her or not, to never settle for anything less than God's very best! Pursue excellence in all things! My friend, too much is at stake!

Love in the Lamb,

Paul