

Foundation of Faithfulness

The prophet Jeremiah says, “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, / his mercies never come to an end; / they are new every morning; / great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22–23). The Lord’s love never wavers; his grace knows no bounds. Every day he is completely trustworthy. He provides the foundation of faithfulness on which we build our lives and our families as his faithful and faith-filled children. Even during times of difficulty, we can say with the psalmist, “I will sing of your mercies, O LORD, for ever; / with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations” (Psalm 89:1).

Faithfulness and Trust

“The heart of her husband trusts in her” (Proverbs 31:11a). What does that mean? First of all, it does not mean that she offers him a heart-healthy diet. *Heart* refers to the mind, the soul, the spirit of this man. He entrusts his well-being to her.

He commends himself to one worthy of that trust. The psalmist has duly warned him: “It is better to take refuge in the LORD / than to put confidence in man. /

It is better to take refuge in the LORD / than to put confidence in princes" (Psalm 118:8–9). He does not trust his wife instead of the Lord; rather, he trusts her because she trusts the Lord.

During the time I sensed that Scott was to be my husband, but we were not yet dating, Psalm 37:3–5 was a powerful word for me:

Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will dwell in the land, and be nourished
in safety.

Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.

My security rested in the Lord, trusting in him to act in his time. In the meantime I focused on doing good and delighting in him. That way I could ask him to either change the desires of my heart or give me what my heart desired. One of those desires was a faithful spouse. Isn't that a good desire?

Love Has Boundaries

I once had a professor who prided himself on causing a ruckus. He opined, "If your spouse does *not* have an affair in the first five years of marriage, it means you have an unhealthy marriage. It means that you don't trust your spouse to be with someone else and return to you."

Faithfulness, according to this professor, equaled stagnation and distrust; unfaithfulness revealed a healthy marriage. What a convoluted view! Some girls left the class in tears; I was ready for a fight.

I approached the professor. "I don't believe you. I intend to marry a Christian who will have the Holy Spirit. As much as he loves me the day we marry, I believe that his love and his faithfulness will grow, for faithfulness is a fruit of the Spirit. Temptations are out there for both my future husband and me to commit adultery, but that doesn't mean we will fall. By the grace of God we'll imitate God's faithfulness by our own."

The professor smirked in response, but Scott and I have lived the truthfulness of these words.

Love has boundaries in marriage, and the health of a marriage is found within those boundaries. We give ourselves completely to one another and to no other. Therein lies freedom and security.

If you are unmarried, realize that past sexual relationships can weaken the trust a future spouse will have in you. Establish chastity as the way you live now, and trust will grow. Use wisdom in sharing about sins of the past: Details are not necessary or helpful. And give your future spouse time to grieve, if he needs to, for the loss of what you have given away. If he is unable to forgive you and grow beyond your past, he is not the one for you. Likewise, if you cannot let him

share his past failure and forgive him, then you are not the one for him. Unconditional love is necessary for any marriage to work.

Faithfulness in courtship is important because you are developing the habits for a successful marriage. Privately you give each other no cause for suspicion. For instance, your friends of the opposite sex should also be friends with your beloved. If not, pull back from those relationships so that their intimacy is never misconstrued as unfaithfulness.

Publicly you do nothing that could reflect poorly on the other. You are aware that you represent the other, and you do all you can to honor him or her in front of others.

Missteps Toward Unfaithfulness

When a couple marries they usually do not intend to commit adultery. So how does this ultimate betrayal happen?

The Book of Proverbs gives a scenario of how infidelity unfolds. Let's look at what the seductress does to entice the man and examine the missteps the man takes. Then we'll contrast those actions with what the woman and man of God can and should do. (Warning: Women can have loose morals; men can be stupid.)

For at the window of my house
I have looked out through my lattice,

and I have seen among the simple,
I have perceived among the youths,
a young man without sense,
passing along the street near her corner,
taking the road to her house
in the twilight, in the evening,
at the time of night and darkness.

And behold, a woman meets him,
dressed as a harlot, wily of heart.
She is loud and wayward,
her feet do not stay at home;
now in the street, now in the market,
and at every corner she lies in wait.
She seizes him and kisses him,
and with impudent face she says to him:
"I had to offer sacrifices,
and today I have paid my vows;
so now I have come out to meet you,
to seek you eagerly, and I have found you.
I have decked my couch with coverings,
colored spreads of Egyptian linen;
I have perfumed my bed with myrrh,
aloes, and cinnamon.
Come, let us take our fill of love till morning;
let us delight ourselves with love.
For my husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey;
he took a bag of money with him;
at full moon he will come home."

With much seductive speech she persuades him;
with her smooth talk she compels him.

All at once he follows her,
as an ox goes to the slaughter,
or as a stag is caught fast
till an arrow pierces its entrails;
as a bird rushes into a snare;
he does not know that it will cost him his life.
(Proverbs 7:6–23)

The Seductress

The seductress is “wily of heart.” She notices that her husband is leaving town with a lot of money—he is not returning home for a fortnight. Now is her opportunity to pursue an affair.

She leaves her house dressed provocatively, intending to lure a man. Rather than remain busy at home, she is wayward and she is loud, fickle and unruly.

She lies in wait in a kind of ambush—her infidelity is premeditated. When she sees the man approach, she is inappropriately affectionate with him.

She speaks to the man seductively yet includes a reference to religious acts she has completed that day, giving a spiritual veneer to her speech. She does not intend to take no for an answer. “For the lips of a loose woman drip honey, / and her speech is smoother than oil; / but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, / sharp as a two-edged sword” (Proverbs 5:3–4).

If the man is married, her enticements may be a kind of competition with his wife: “See how I have prepared to make love with you while your wife does

not." She is presenting a challenge, knowing that once a couple has been married for a while, a wife may not tune in to her husband's needs in the same way she did when they first married. She takes advantage of the fact that the wife may be caring for children all day, working at home and possibly juggling work outside the home. She knows that the many responsibilities and pressures of married life can diminish the time, energy and desire for making love.

The adulteress, on the other hand, has no one to think of besides herself and the one she is seducing. A woman who is bent on seducing a man is probably going to take more time to make lovemaking seem really wonderful, really fun, adding all the perfume and luxurious trappings.

The seductress appeals to love: "Come, let us take our fill of love till morning." Is this love? No, this is lust. This is not true commitment; it is each one using the other.

The Man's Lack of Discipline

Notice that the man does not avoid the near occasion of sin. He chooses to go out at night, when he should be home with his family, and deliberately takes the path near the house of the seductress. He can tell himself that he did not pursue her, though he goes where he is sure she will find him. Then he pauses to listen to her. He offers no rebuke when she is affectionate. He lingers as she allays his fears of being found by her

husband. He lets her woo him with promises of delight, confusing lust with love.

Instead of being a leader and refusing to enter into sin with the adulteress, he follows her like “an ox to slaughter.” No excuse can warrant his actions—not a mid-life crisis, stress at home nor a neglectful wife. Those excuses explain how a man becomes vulnerable, but they do not justify adultery.

For a little bit of pleasure, the cost is tremendous. This is mortal sin, and it will cost him his life. “He dies for lack of discipline, / and because of his great folly he is lost” (Proverbs 5:23). This is of course true for the adulterous woman as well.

What Should a Godly Wife Do?

In contrast to the adulteress, a godly wife wears attractive but modest clothing; she dresses to please her husband rather than to tempt other men. She makes her home a haven where her husband wants to be with her and the family. She has “a gentle and quiet spirit” (1 Peter 3:4). Her speech and affections are sincere and full of love. She practices the faith sincerely rather than as a pretense.

The godly woman prepares for times of intimacy, letting her husband know her joy in physical expressions of love and her desire to meet his needs. She is trustworthy whether her husband leaves town on business or not. She is watchful, aware that temptation might come but not living in fear and suspicion toward

her spouse. She prays for herself and her spouse regularly for protection against any evil that would rob them of the security and happiness of their marriage and family.

What Should a Godly Husband Do?

The man's solution to the lure of adultery is to fill his heart with delight in the wife of his youth. "Let your fountain be blessed, / and rejoice in the wife of your youth, / a lovely deer, a graceful doe. / Let her affection fill you at all times with delight, / be infatuated always with her love" (Proverbs 5:18–19).

Both husband and wife need to nurture affection, to delight in one another. They protect each other from temptation by meeting each other's needs for physical affection.

Our marriage is the core relationship of the family. Our spouse should be our primary priority, and our children second. We need to meet our children's needs without being consumed by them, with little left over for our spouse. By God's grace, we can maintain our priorities. Given the urgency of needs and the ages and number of your children, that may be easier said than done.

In particular, there is a legitimate and beautiful need for physical affection between spouses that nurtures their relationship and blesses all members of the family. Children enjoy seeing their parents smooch and snuggle—small acts of affection, not inappropriate

intimacy. A Cincinnati couple I know refer to it as “snitchin’ in the kitchen.” Children walking in may groan, but the smiles on their faces belie their true feelings: Mom and Dad don’t just love each other; they like each other!

When our small children would squeeze between us, I thought they were trying to separate us. Now I realize they just wanted to be included, to feel the crush of love.

Be on Guard

One of the ways Satan tries to destroy an effective witness is to destroy marriages. People involved in an apostolate—youth outreach, CCD, the diaconate, RCIA—need to be aware that they might be particular targets. Why? They are making inroads into the kingdom of darkness, and they may become vulnerable if they are not watchful.

Sometimes people get close spiritually—praying together or working in an apostolate together—and don’t realize how vulnerable they are. They might not recognize as inappropriate small expressions of affection, gifts or personal sentiments. However, their positive responses to these small steps can lead to more of an entanglement. And that entanglement must be dealt with before it becomes a full-blown affair.

One time a pastor received a note from a parishioner that expressed inappropriate sentiments. He called her

for an appointment and asked her to bring her husband. When they met, he asked her to read the letter aloud in her husband's hearing. After she did so, she asked both the pastor and her husband for forgiveness.

A woman approached Scott after one of his talks. She gave him a big hug that made him feel uncomfortable and then offered him a place to stay with her anytime he was speaking in the area. It may have been an innocent offer; however, Scott immediately said he didn't stay in women's homes on his trips. Then he alluded to me: Even the mention of a spouse's name can put a wet blanket on someone's smoldering temptation.

Some people, however, do not care if you and your husband are married. A wedding band just makes their ploy more of a challenge (and they might think there is less risk of venereal disease with a married person). And just because someone is "spiritual" does not mean she or he will not come after your spouse. You cannot afford to be naïve. "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Be wise in your friendships. Do not assume that just because someone is a good friend of the family, an affair could not happen. A good friend stops by occasionally, available when your spouse is not, and the next thing you know, your hearts can become entangled. That can lead to death: spiritual death and the death of your marriage.