



Should I Tell My Spouse About Struggles with Sexual Purity¹

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the witness of a friend and the ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ. Garrett served as the evangelism pastor at Denton Bible Church in Denton, TX while working toward his ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary. Garrett then served as the senior pastor at Graham Bible Church in Graham, TX for seven years. He later spent time on staff with Capitol Hill Baptist Church who helped place him with Del Ray Baptist Church. He is married to Carrie and together they have four children, Eden, Haddon, Phoebe, and Graham. Garrett enjoys hanging out with his family, watching sports and occasionally doing some type of exercise.

“Should I tell my wife?”

Daniel leaned back with no interest in the meal before him. He’d looked at racy pictures again and the weight of conviction was incapable. He had confessed his sin to God and to me, but should he confess it to her?

What would you tell Daniel?

SEVEN PRINCIPLES

Because every couple is different, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. Some couples are totally transparent with each other, while others find it best to allow accountability to be handled by trusted friends. Regardless of where you land on the spectrum, it is important for husbands and wives to develop a plan to help each other fight sexual temptation.

What follows are seven principles to help you and your spouse wade through this sensitive area together.

1. Help each other make it to heaven.

“Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Hebrews 3:13

My chief calling as a husband is to help my wife love Jesus more. My wife has the same responsibility toward me. In fact, I would suggest that the most weighty and wonderful responsibilities in marriage is to help our spouse make it to heaven. One of the ways to make this happen is by doing whatever we can to help them fight off temptation, including sexual temptation (Heb. 12:1-2; James 5:19-20). We are to be each other’s greatest allies in the journey toward the heavenly city (Rev. 21-22).

Satan will oppose your efforts with all he’s got, but you must not lose sight of this fact: your greatest responsibility as a couple is to help each other home by leaning upon the strength of your Savior. Let the mantra of our marriages be the same as the psalmist, “Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together” (Psalm 34:3). This will be painful at times, but it is eternally worth it.

2. Cultivate an atmosphere of intimate trust.

“The heart of her husband trusts in her...” Proverbs 31:11

After God brought Adam and Eve together in the first marriage, we are told, “the man and his wife were both naked and unashamed” (Gen. 2:25). They had nothing to cover up in those days. There were no deleted search histories in Eden. There were no shameful compromises or weeping wounds from unfaithfulness.

Intimacy and trust are still possible outside of Eden, but they don’t happen by accident. They must be cultivated. As 1 John 1:7 promises, “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...” There is no better way to deepen trust in marriage than walking honestly and openly together.

Do you hide things from your spouse?

I believe there should be no secrets in marriage. Surprises? Yes. Secrets? No.

Wisdom and discernment is certainly needed on this point. For instance, it is unwise to share every thought that comes in your head or every conflict you have at work or the details of other people’s lives that have been shared with you. We aren’t talking about those kinds of issues. This is a challenge to not intentionally hide sins from your spouse. Death and deceit breed in the darkness. A husband and wife

should always be honest with each other about the condition of their souls.

If our goal is to build trust, it probably seems counter-productive to reveal trust-breaking sins. But the fact is, nothing builds trust like seeing your spouse trying to delight in God more than anything else. Honesty and humble transparency, over time, produce intimate trust in your marriage. Walk in the light together.

3. Consider the Basics of Accountability.

“Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another...” James 5:16

At some level, husbands and wives should be each other’s accountability partners. Confessing sin to each other should be a normal part of your life together. Because each couple is different, you need to have a conversation about what this will look like in your own marriage.

Here are a few basic ideas:

- **Talk.** If you’ve never had a conversation with your spouse about your struggles with sexual sin, you should have one. Your spouse needs to know to whom they are married. I strongly encourage you to allow your pastor to help you think through how to have this

difficult initial discussion.

- **Plan.** Husbands and wives should work together to make an accountability plan (see #4 below). Because your body is not your own (Gen. 2:24; 1 Cor. 7:4) they have the right and responsibility to talk through this with you. Husbands should lead by taking the initiative in this discussion (Eph. 5:22-25) and wives should give husbands the much-needed help they require (Gen. 2:18). Regardless of which spouse is struggling, you need to help each other. Again, it may be wise to involve a pastor or other mature Christian friends in this process.
- **Ask.** Part of the plan should be that your spouse reserves the right to ask you at any time how you are doing in your fight against temptation—and expect to get an honest answer from you.

I would also suggest that you should always have at least one other person, of the same sex, to whom you are accountable, not just about sexual sin. Sin thrives in the darkness. Making regular and honest confession to another believer is one of your best defenses against sin’s power.

4. Agree on Your Approach to Accountability.

I have spoken to dozens of people

about this subject and every couple does things differently. What follows are two categories on the opposite ends of the accountability spectrum.

Some couples are very open about sexual temptations. Some couples agree it is best to tell each other when they feel tempted, if they find someone else attractive, if they compromise at all on the internet, if they give into self-gratification, and just about everything else. Couples who take this approach say that complete transparency helps both of them to stay honest and vigilant in the battle against sin.

If you lean toward this option,

- Make sure your motives are good. Sometimes seeing the pain that our sin inflicts on the ones we love can be a deterrent to sin, but don't use your spouse just to unload your guilt and make you feel better.
- Don't expect your spouse to respond well to your sin. Your confession may devastate them. Don't get all self-righteous because you're being vulnerable. You've sinned against them. Don't get defensive when they ask questions. Nothing ruins a confession like making excuses. Give them a chance to grieve, process, and go to God. Give them permission to talk to a

trusted friend about what has happened if they need to.

- If you've agreed to a plan, honor it. If you've sinned in a way your spouse would expect you to tell them, follow through with being honest. It will be tempting to find a way out and rationalize a million excuses why you don't need to tell them (I won't do it again, I don't want to hurt them, and so on).
- Be willing to switch your plan if it seems wise. Insecurities can flourish in unexpected and unnecessary ways in these conversations. I have godly friends who have tried going with the "total transparency" option and found it to be way too much for their spouses to handle. There is no shame in making changes to the plan if necessary.
- If your spouse confesses sin to you, you will be tempted to be most worried about how the sin affects you. It is normal to be hurt by sin, but ask God to help you be even more concerned about the way your spouse has strayed from him. None of us can do this perfectly, but plead with God to keep your heart postured in that direction.

Some couples don't talk about this area in detail unless a certain level

of sin occurs. Some couples agree it is best for their spouse to confess struggles with lust to a mutually trusted Christian friend, not to them. They humbly realize they would be too hurt by their spouse's straying heart or that they feel the struggle is too foreign to them to be able to know how to help them.

If you lean toward this option,

- Have an agreed-upon type of sin at which you agree to talk to your spouse. Purity is a heart issue (Matt. 5:28, 15:19), but it is fine for couples to set agreed-upon conversational mile markers. This may be habitually looking at porn, giving in to masturbation, or crossing certain lines with someone of the opposite sex. Pray for God to give you wisdom in this discussion.
- Don't use this approach as a deceptive cover for your sin. Romans 13:14 says "make no provision for the flesh to gratify its lusts." The well-trusted accountability partner should know what these mile markers are and be willing to inform the spouse if sin were to ever get out of control.
- Don't avoid the discussion just because it hurts. As one

wife said to me, "out of love for him, I would want to be a part of the solution, but it would be really difficult." That's a good perspective. Growing in holiness and helping others to do the same is hard and painful work. It is humble to know your limitations, but it is also humble to accept your responsibilities. Pray for God to give you wisdom to know the balance.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this subject. Some spouses will be able to hear about your struggle, be hurt by it, but recover in the grace of God. Others will be devastated by the fact that you'd even be tempted, even if you didn't yield to the temptation. We need to live with our spouses in an understanding way and be willing to humbly and graciously build a plan together (1 Pet. 3:7).

5. Ask Each Other Important Questions

As you begin this process together, here are a few questions to help you begin the conversation.

- How are we helping each other love God more? How can we do this better?

- How can I help you fight against temptation? Who else can help you?
- Do you fear talking to me about these things? How can we make our marriage a safe place to have these talks?
- Do you have any sins in your life that no one knows about?

For many of us, having this kind of conversation can be terrifying. Some of us don't want to know what our spouse is struggling with, and some of us don't want our spouse to know what we're struggling with. But because God's glory and the salvation of souls are at stake (Heb. 3:12-14), we must be willing to have tough conversations.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I talked through this article with a couple of close friends. God used that discussion to help them pray and discuss how they could better serve each other in this area. They said the conversation was difficult at times, but in the end God used it to draw them closer than they had been before.

If you want to do this, but don't know how, I'd encourage you to share this article with your pastor or another mature Christian couple and ask them to help you begin this journey together.

6. Go Make Love

“Do not deprive one another...come

together again, so that Satan may not tempt you...” 1 Corinthians 7:5

Much could be said here, but believe this: making love should be a priority in your marriage. God has given sexual intimacy for many reasons, one of which is to help each other fight against sexual sin. Husbands and wives need to be committed to regularly engaging in sexual intimacy.

Some of you may be tempted to feel like a mere outlet for your spouse's physical desires. Guard your heart from this distortion. As my wife told a friend, “As a wife, you have the great responsibility of protecting your marriage by serving your husband through sex. It's one of God's divinely ordained means to help his heart not be as easily tempted by lust. Sex is sometimes a sweet dying to self.” The same truth goes for husbands. Serve your wife through sexual intimacy, through non-sexual affection, and through regular, intentional, attentive conversations. God can use that to help guard her heart from wandering.

For some of you, this encouragement to make love to your spouse brings up a slew of painful emotions. Maybe you have been sinned against gravely by your spouse and the thought of giving

yourself to them intimately is almost inconceivable. Maybe you're facing physiological problems that hinder you from being able to make love. Maybe it's one of countless other reasons that make sex with your spouse difficult.

If you and your spouse are one of the many who feel this way, please don't give up. Prayerfully plan and begin working through these issues with your pastor, a gospel-centered counselor, or capable doctor. Be patient with each other in this process and trust that the Lord is able to do more than you can imagine (Eph. 3:20-21).

7. Keep the Gospel Central in Your Marriage.

Husbands and wives sin against each other every day. This is part of marriage in a fallen world. But there is something unique about sexual sin that seems to hurt in a distinctly deep way. And even if they haven't sinned but are being tempted to do so, the sting of knowing that your beloved's heart is being tempted to stray can be painful.

So if your spouse comes to you with the weight of sinning against you and the Lord on their back, it will be difficult, but remember that Galatians 6:2 says we are to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Lead them

to the cross where they, and you, will both be refreshed and restored by the Lord who daily bears our burdens (Ps. 55:22, 68:19). Plead with the Lord to cover your pain with his grace and you do all you can to cover your spouse's shame with the truths of the gospel.

Remind each other that the Jesus who spoke severely about sexual sin (Matt. 5:28-30) is the same Jesus who died for those sins and rose victorious over them (Rom. 4:25). He is patient with sinners of all sorts, and promises forgiveness for all who turn from their sin and follow after him (Acts 3:19; 1 John 1:8-9). He promises to intercede for us and provide grace in our time of need (Heb. 4:14-16) while also providing power to help us war against our unrelenting foe (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:17).

Moments like these are where the gospel feels most real and most needed. They are also when the power of the gospel can most transform your marriage. God will help you forgive and work through the process of restoration. So don't lose heart with each other, or with yourself. God's grace is sufficient, even for what you and your spouse face.

Help each other to heaven. Talk about these things. Cultivate intimate trust. Make a plan. Make love. Cast yourselves upon the grace

of God. And do this all with your hope fixed on the glory that is to be revealed. We will be home with Jesus soon, so help each other toward that Day.

For Further Consideration

- Heath Lambert's excellent book *Finally Free* (ch. 5) discusses how spouses should talk about sexual sin.
- Remember that temptation is not sin. This article by Kevin DeYoung may be helpful to read together. (<http://bit.ly/1uARUOa>)
- Dr. Russell Moore answers a man who asks if should confess an affair that happened years ago. (<http://bit.ly/1rWAeuf>)
- Considering marrying someone who struggles with porn? Read Heath Lambert's article and listen to John Piper's advice first. (<http://bit.ly/1saGvE2>; <http://bit.ly/1qgUwKN>)

- John Piper also addresses whether your spouse's struggle with porn is worthy of divorce. (<http://bit.ly/1sZEgkI>)
- What should you do if your spouse confesses that they have committed adultery or is living a secret life of sin? A good article by John MacArthur helps you think through forgiveness, but you must involve the elders of your church in this discussion. (<http://bit.ly/1pPXvuA>)

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ENDNOTES

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