

What Forsaking All Others Really Means

I'm sure you remember as I do—as clearly as if it were yesterday—the feeling of standing in front of the crowd of family and friends with the pastor before you. Ours asked the first promise to each of us individually in the form of a question.

“Do you promise to forsake all others?” We generally acknowledged in some way, “I do.” This is the first promise we committed to in becoming husband and wife.

In its most simple meaning, a young 20-year-old couple interpret that promise as “You will not have any other girlfriend or boyfriends other than this person standing in front of you the rest of your life.” However, this promise goes way deeper and continues to grow in meaning over time.

The promise to forsake all others means much more than not having other romantic relationships, but let's first explore this primary aspect of the promise we've made.

We all know a Christian couple who have been damaged and divorced because of some form of infidelity. Circumstances surrounding the dissolution of their marriage might involve a long affair, a one-night stand or an anonymous encounter from someone via the internet.

I counsel couples struggling with infidelity. Couples fly in to Colorado Springs every week to visit my offices from all over the world to attend intensive sessions to repair all forms of infidelity. However, forsaking all others is not exclusive to infidelity.

Let's quickly touch upon the matter about repairing past issues. Such issues can consist of family of origin issues,

prior romantic relationships, abortion, alcohol or drug, or pornography addictions. These issues can contribute to how honest or mature you can be in your marriage. However, the following biblical illustration expresses how important God thought it was to heal before marriage.

“But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So, the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh” (Gen. 2:20-21, NIV).

After God anesthetized Adam, performed surgery, he “closed up” Adam or healed him. God did not want Adam’s marriage, or any marriage for that matter, to be based on one person’s pain. Our pain, regardless of what it was from our past, is ours to allow God to heal. If you didn’t work on your past pain before marriage, then attack these issues as soon as possible.

Let’s return to the couple who have drifted into a dry, functional marriage, or a “functionship” as we call it. This couple needs to treat the pain in some way. Some turn to God and pray while others turn to helpful resources, books, counseling and marriage seminars. Sadly, however, some turn to “others,” and “others” can be a plethora of options. Turning to others begins to erode the promise we made to one another to forsake all others.

Let’s explore what those “other” options I’ve seen begin to erode or actually break that early promise to forsake all others. The obvious choice is the one everyone thinks of first: adultery. This act could be a one-time occurrence or happen multiple times.

A long-term affair can take place with one person over years or decades. Multiple affairs can include prostitutes, strip clubs, lap dances and adult bookstores including any gender.

I can attest to the fact that I’ve met many “religious” people who believe that as long as they didn’t actually have a sex

act with an actual other person that they were keeping their wedding vow promise to their spouse. This promise can be utilized very legalistically within the Christian community.

When one commits to or feels strongly about the deeper spirit of the promise to forsake “all others,” that it isn’t just defined as having sex outside of marriage, then the promise is a priority promise. This means I put you above all other people or circumstances. As Christians, we must always put God first. Second should be our spouse. Lovers know this intuitively. However, the paradigm of some husbands and wives might exclude this priority after marriage.

“Therefore a man will leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, MEV). Even in the first marriage where there were no parents, God made clear what the priorities of marriage are.

Just recently, I counseled a couple who shortly after marriage made the decision that the man would work for his father. They both communicated to me in counseling that his heart was more focused on pleasing his father than his wife, and this behavior went on for many years. In my more than 30 years of counseling, I’ve heard wives complain about their husband’s loyalty to a father, mother or siblings over them. I’ve also heard from husbands who have felt their wife was more committed to her parents or family than to him.

To be faithful and forsake all others includes prioritizing your spouse over your family of origin, including your parents. Of course, you should have a loving relationship with these people, but make sure to evaluate the priority of these relationships and how these priorities affect your marriage. It needs to be said that forsaking all these others is not just a problem among women. Both spouses struggle here regularly.

Forsaking all others also means you prioritize your own

children in such a way that your marriage remains the priority. I am in full support of women who want to be great mothers, but I've repeatedly seen this as an excuse not to be great lovers to their spouse. In these situations, dating the spouse ceases, the woman rarely expresses affection and praise, she lacks the energy or urgency to prioritize intimacy, and she has no time for dates or fun or weekends away here and there. These are all symptoms of a woman who has moved from a lover-spouse to prioritizing her children or her role to be a "good mom" over her husband.

A man can also prioritize his children over his wife, although this is more common in later years or after he retires. The wife feels he's always helping the children with projects, time or money. He stops prioritizing her, becomes too tired for her, ceases sex and stops expressing affection as well.

Forsaking all others includes *all* others. You can also evaluate whether friends hold too high a value in either of your lives. I've had to work with men who give way too much time to a set of guy friends or friend by scheduling hunting and fishing trips or golf outings. A man like this has to adjust his priorities. It doesn't mean he has to stop his activities; he just has to adjust them. I've had to deal with a "golf widow." That's what a wife is called when her husband golfs all weekend, most weekends. Her husband adjusted to one round of golf per week, and that felt fine to everyone.

Women can also overprioritize friendships and/or social activities such as making excessive or long phone calls, Facebook perusing, attending athletic activities and volunteering. She can over involve, overvalue and overinvest her heart and time in these relationships. In some of my marriage books, I've written about the value of same-gender relationships, but there must be balance.

Our church family is another set of people we must balance in our life. I'm a church-loving guy. I love going to church.

Through the years, Lisa and I have been involved in various forms of groups, activities and leadership positions. However, some couples or individuals can overprioritize the church or their “ministry.” For all involved, forsaking all others also means that you find balance with how you dedicate your time to your church.

Community is also another group of people we need to evaluate. Examples of community are volunteering or just participating in community events. Again, in balance this is healthy and great for a couple to enjoy or contribute in events locally or even globally. You must evaluate your priorities in the area of volunteering and community and create a balance so you can keep your promise to forsake all others.

You should now take a moment to reflect, evaluate and ask yourself whether there’s a family member, friend or group of people that you overprioritize. Remember, you promised to forsake all others. Therefore, your husband or wife should feel and believe they’re the most important soul to you in the whole world.

So, live up to your promise, forsake all others and place your spouse in proper priority in your life. {eoa}

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