

When a Christian Falls

Bonnie and I were walking out the door when I heard the phone ring. I quickly turned back into the house, preparing to take a message and return the call later. "Mike, this is Amy." The voice of an old friend on the other end of the line surprised me. What she said next stopped me in my tracks.

"Can you please call Alan? He told me he's in love with another woman and asked for a divorce. I don't think he'll listen to anyone else."

As Amy wept on the phone, my mind was flooded with memories. Bonnie and I had known Amy and Alan for years. Alan and I went to college together. They had helped us in our first church by serving in the youth ministry. It was hard to believe Alan was willing to destroy his marriage and fracture his family—all for another woman.

I subsequently spoke with Alan on numerous occasions. No matter what I said, he was bent on pursuing personal pleasure at the expense of his family. He ultimately married the woman from this adulterous relationship only to divorce her a little more than a year later.

Only a short time later, Alan was married for the third time. Ironically, his third wife called me one night. She voiced her confusion and disappointment as she explained that Alan was not the man she thought she had married.

Yet despite this track record of poor decisions, whenever I spoke with Alan, he saw himself as a victim of circumstance, unable to take personal responsibility for his actions or his life. He continued to delude himself into thinking his actions were justified.

Over the years, I have ministered to many Christians who have experienced moral failure such as Alan's. The circumstances

are as varied as the people involved, but the results are as common as they are inevitable—broken families, shattered lives and severely crippled ministries.

In spite of the tragedy infidelity creates, life does go on. But what I find most disconcerting is the lack of genuine restoration and healing. Far too many of these people continue their lives as mere shadows of what they once were. Why? Because they are unwilling to embrace the principles that release God's supernatural work of restoration.

Here are four of these principles that I believe are necessary to experience true restoration.

1. Repentance. In 2 Corinthians 7:10 Paul says, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (NKJV). In this verse we see two types of sorrow—the sorrow of the world and godly sorrow.

Many people interpret the pain they feel when they are caught in sin as repentance. Yet, this is actually the sorrow of the world. In other words, the pain they feel didn't come as a result of the realization that their sin has grieved the heart of God. They hurt because they have been caught.

There is another kind of sorrow that comes simply because we have violated our conscience. This is also the sorrow of the world. We may feel guilty for what we have done, but experiencing guilt doesn't necessarily mean we have experienced true repentance.

Genuine repentance is a work of the Spirit of God. In Psalm 51:4 we hear the heart of true repentance when, after committing adultery with Bathsheba, King David prayed, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight." David realized that he had broken the heart of God and damaged his intimacy with the Lord. David refused to

blame anyone for his sin.

True repentance begins with a willingness to take full responsibility for one's choices. This means refusing to embrace a "victim mentality" that blames others for personal failure. Yet I often hear those who have committed sexual sin attempt to shift the blame on everything and everyone around them.

They blame their sin on generational curses or explain it away because of the negligence of their spouses. Some have even pointed a finger at demonic activity over their cities as the reason for their immorality.

Understandably, there are always hidden factors contributing to the temptations we experience, but we can never allow those factors—no matter how legitimate they may seem—to become excuses. In James 1:14 we read, "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed."

It is our own desires that give power to temptation. Therefore, it is our choice to establish the boundaries of our hearts, keeping our lusts under the control of the Holy Spirit.

The only thing Satan can do is tempt us. It is we who cast the deciding vote. True repentance realizes that regardless of family history, demonic activity or the behavior of others, sexual sin is committed as a result of one's own personal choice. It is only as a person accepts complete responsibility for his choices that true restoration can begin.

2. Time. Forgiveness is received in an instant, but restoration is a process. I believe the most overlooked principle in the restoration process is the element of time.

Many people fail to understand that it takes time to get to the place where one is willing to commit sexual sin. The temptation to commit adultery doesn't overtake a person like a

seizure. We are “wired” by God in such a way that it requires time to talk ourselves into the act of adultery.

Consequently, it takes time to re-establish a foundation of character in one’s life subsequent to a moral failure. Time is required to rebuild trust with a spouse, family and other people. It is also necessary in rebuilding the person’s relationship with God.

I am appalled by recent accounts of well-known Christian leaders who have committed sexual sin yet refuse to step down from their ministries. Some have divorced their wives and had the audacity to remarry within days.

These men viewed time as an enemy they needed to conquer. They obviously felt that their ministries couldn’t survive the time it would require for them to be out of the pulpit. As a result, they deceived themselves into thinking they were justified in continuing their ministries after a quick prayer of forgiveness.

I once heard Jack Hayford say that we have elevated Christian leaders to the status of celebrities and, therefore, we are willing to overlook their obvious lack of character as long as they continue to entertain us. The tragedy of this truth is that preachers minister more than words, they minister spirit as well. By this I mean that an idea is not all that is communicated through a sermon; it is also the spirit—the disposition in the heart of the leader—that is communicated to the hearts of those listening.

In Proverbs 6:32-33 we read, “Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; he who does so destroys his own soul. Wounds and dishonor he will get, and his reproach will not be wiped away.” According to this passage, a wounded soul is the result of adultery. But what does a wounded soul look like?

Since the soul comprises our intellect, emotions, conscience and will, we'll break down the definition of a wounded soul into these four categories:

Intellect. There is always a level of deception involved in sin, but a soul that has been wounded by sexual sin results in a greater degree of deception. Once the act has been committed, the level of deception increases.

Emotions. The offender will almost always demonstrate emotional deadness toward his or her spouse. In addition, the one who has fallen into sexual sin will demonstrate a myriad of emotions, ranging from anger and depression to insecurity and fear.

Conscience. Often a person's conscience becomes hardened after the sin has been committed. This makes it initially difficult to recognize the seriousness of the transgression and leads the person to minimize the impact of their actions.

Will. The will of a person who has fallen into sexual sin becomes weakened, making it that much more difficult to resist the temptation the next time. If the healing process doesn't take place, more than likely, the individual will fall again in the same area.

Thankfully, the healing process is possible. Isaiah 61:1 tells us that Jesus has an anointing to bind up the "brokenhearted." Isaiah 42:3 lets us know He will not break a "bruised" reed, an analogy for people whose hearts have been bruised. But we can't fast-forward through the healing process—it takes time.

3. Renewing your mind. Choices we make do not increase God's grace, forgiveness or love for us, but they do make a difference in our lives here on earth. There are certain disciplines we can embrace that position us to receive the power of God's grace in our lives. The only way a person can break free from the strongholds or destructive thinking patterns that caused him to fall into sin is through the

renewing of his mind.

In Romans 12:2 we read, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” This verse indicates that the result of renewing our minds is that we experience a transformation in our lives. It is only through meditation on God’s Word that we experience the renewing of our minds.

As we meditate on the Word of God, we attack and tear down the strongholds in our thoughts. This is important because it is our thoughts that determine our actions. Your body or your life can never go in a direction that your thoughts have not previously gone.

As we meditate on God’s Word, we are allowing the Word to paint a picture for us of strength, purity and victory. The process of exchanging these pictures is the process of “renewing” our minds. As you meditate on His Word, allow the Spirit to breathe His Word into every chamber of your soul.

4. Accountability. Proverbs 18:1 says, “He who willfully separates and estranges himself [from God and man] seeks his own desire and pretext to break out against all wise and sound judgment”(Amplified). Because a person who has been caught up in sexual sin has wounded his soul, usually his perceptions are inaccurate and clouded by his own sin. Therefore, he needs to be accountable to someone else.

The principle of accountability is imperative to the restoration process. Any sexual sin is fostered in the darkness of secrecy. The one who has committed sexual sin has developed a pattern of lies and deception. Therefore, it is necessary for someone who has fallen into sexual sin to begin to live a life of transparency.

One of the most common misconceptions about accountability is

the idea that the responsibility for being held accountable falls on someone else. For example, if I am accountable to someone, the misconception is that it is their responsibility to call me and ask me the hard questions.

This backward mentality couldn't be further from the truth. In reality, it is my responsibility to live a life of accountability. Consequently, I am the one who needs to recognize when I am being tempted. I need to make the call for help.

Accountability needs to be built on relationships established by God and grounded in His Word. A healthy relationship of accountability is one that directs you toward a more intimate relationship with Jesus. Such a relationship will challenge you to take responsibility for your own relationship with God, as well as for your own choices in life.

Accountability is a choice to expose yourself to the wisdom and counsel of others who are spiritually mature. God places godly friends and coaches in our lives—people who will help us reach higher levels in our walk with the Lord. The key is recognizing that divine flow we sense with another individual, pursuing that relationship and allowing it to take on the character that God desires.

The God of Restoration

The good news is, when God restores He doesn't use duct tape! In other words, when God restores something that has been broken—a life, a marriage, a family—it is always better, stronger and richer than before.

Yet this man knew that his heartfelt confession and apology would not be enough to bring restoration to his life and his marriage. Consequently, he chose to live a life of transparency.

When he left the house he would tell his wife where he was

going. When he arrived, he would call her to inform her that he had arrived. He went out of his way to help eliminate anything that would cause his wife to feel insecure or suspicious.

He was also willing to take all the time necessary to rebuild his wife's trust, as well as rebuild his relationship with the Lord. Amazingly, he didn't make any demands on his wife or ask her to make any commitments to him. Rather, he began to live his life before her as a man of God.

It took some time. It took a lot of work on the part of both, but eventually, as this man grew in his relationship with the Lord and began to experience the healing of his soul, he also began to witness the healing of his marriage.

All of that took place more than 12 years ago. Today, their marriage is better than ever. They are both in the ministry, bringing restoration to others who have been broken by sexual sin.

Unfortunately, such stories of true repentance are rare. Yet, God is no "respector of persons." What He has done for this couple, He is willing to do for others. God's grace is greater than any sin. His ability to heal is greater than Satan's power to destroy. If those who have fallen into sexual sin will surrender to God's principles of truth, they will experience the power of His healing.

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