



MARRIAGE COUNSELING OUTLINE

Important Elements in the Process¹

1. URGENT MATTERS

Take immediate action, and make changes and agreements that are necessary to stop further damage to the relationship.²

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. Matt 18:8

“Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 2 Tim 2:22; cf. Gen 19:15

2. FORGIVENESS (“First Stage”)

This is entirely between you (as an individual) and God. It is a promise to Him that you will not seek vengeance in action or thought, but will release judgment to Him so that you can bless and not curse those who wrong you.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Matt 5:44

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. Mark 11:25

Do not seek revenge....Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. Rom 12:21

3. TRUTH-TELLING

Disclose all facts relevant to the problems and the restoration needed. Be thorough, detailed, and absolutely honest to reveal and understand the chronology of the sin patterns.³

And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. Gen 2:25; 3:7

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. John 8:12 *If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.* 1 John 1:7

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor... At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.... Eph 4:25; 5:8

4. BIBLICAL EVALUATION

After full disclosure of the facts, seek a biblical interpretation of those facts.⁴ Consider the entire downward spiral of sin, not simply the bottom result. Understand the sins committed at each point on the spiral (sins of commission) and also the biblical alternatives you failed to do at each point (sins of omission). Ask, “What could I have done instead of what I did?”

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:22-24

¹ These steps are presented in a logical order, but not necessarily a chronological order. Wisdom is always needed to determine how to best minister to the couple at any particular moment.

² Some examples: following a “time-out” procedure to stop destructive fights, breaking off all contact with an adulterous relationship, getting a relief-from-abuse order to protect your life.

³ For example, adultery often starts with neglect of one’s mate, being careless in spiritually dangerous situations, giving in to mental lust, pornography, etc. Repentance deals with every point on the spiral.

⁴ “What exactly went wrong, how and when, and what is the significance of this?”

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord....Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Eph 5:8-17
...That your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.... Phil 1:9*

5. ADDRESS MOTIVES

Understand motives—the “heart” issues. Repent of the inward idolatry of desires or fears that drive the outward sins. Spiritual change is not mere behavior modification but life transformation from the inside by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matt 11:28-30

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. 1 Cor 6:19-20

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Heb 4:12; Jer 17:9; Mark 7:21
Dear children, keep yourselves from idols. 1 John 5:21*

6. MAKE COMMITMENTS

Commitments clarify the biblical opposites of the old sin patterns. They provide a benchmark for confession, express intentions for radical change, set a new trajectory in lifestyle, and give hope for change. They should be few and focused, with clear applications of them in the immediate future.⁵

From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.... Then will I ever sing praise to your name and fulfill my vows day after day. Psa 61:2,8

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 1 Cor 9:24-25

But that is not the way you learned Christ!... Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:20-24

But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Phil 3:13-14

...Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Heb 12:1

7. CONFESSION

When serious offenses come between a couple, full reconciliation requires sincere confession rooted in full-orbed repentance. It includes a high level of understanding by carefully listening to the offended person, admitting the sins accurately, and humbly asking for forgiveness.⁶ This “horizontal” reconciliation between people is analogous to the “vertical” reconciliation with God. Note that repentance and faith go together and two sides of the same coin.

Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father. Gen 50:17

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. Psa 32:5; cf. Psa 51

...Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. Eph 4:25-29

See what godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness... what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. 2 Cor 7:11

⁵ Some examples: I promise that I will be faithful to you in the exclusive covenant of marriage and will avoid all competing relationships and activities. I promise that I will be entirely truthful with you and never deceive you in any way. I promise you that I will use my words only in ways that build you up and never tear down, especially when I feel angry.

⁶ It must be understood, however, that repentance might be genuine, yet still incomplete and defective. The deeper the understanding of sin and level of repentance, the deeper will be the level of reconciliation. An implication: Do not accept “I apologize” or “I’m sorry” if the sin is serious. Confession should come in this spirit: “I was wrong when I did _____. I am very sorry about how I hurt you. Will you please forgive me?”

8. FORGIVENESS (“Second Stage”)

This is a promise to the repentant offender that you will not hold the sin against him, or bring the matter up again to him or to others. This opens the way to reconciliation and the potential for full restoration of the relationship. The words, “Yes, I forgive you,”⁷ are an objective promise that initiates a powerful, yet sometimes incremental, healing process.

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. Gen 50:20-21

First go and be reconciled to your brother. Matt 5:24 If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.... Matt 18:15

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. Luke 17:3

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Gal 6:1

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Eph 4:32

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Col 3:13

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. Jas 5:16

9. TRUST-BUILDING

Establish agreements that will rebuild and maintain the trust that was broken.⁸ This is distinct from forgiveness, although closely related.

...These men were considered trustworthy.... Neh 13:13

Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find? Pro 20:6

They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Dan 6:4

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. 1 Cor 4:2

...Women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. 1 Tim 3:11

10. PLAN & PRACTICE A NEW LIFESTYLE

Change your habits: replace sinful ones with godly ones. This process must be intentional, practical, and carefully monitored. Review your commitments frequently (#6 above) and work hard to implement them. Develop a new lifestyle of vibrant love, affection, kindness, and unity. There is no turning back to the old ways, but only moving ahead in a new lifestyle of love for God and for each other.

Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! Pro 6:6

How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers. Song of Solomon 4:10; 5:1

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Rom 12:10

If anyone is in Christ—New Creation! The old has passed away. Behold! The new has happened! 2 Cor 5:17 (author’s trans.)

Do not let any rotten word come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may give grace to those who listen. Eph 4:25

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her....let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Eph 5:25-32

For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 1 Tim 4:8 The hard-working farmer...ought to have the first share of the crops. 2 Tim 2:6

11. COMMIT TO THE CHURCH: Worship, Fellowship, Accountability

God made you for covenant relationship with him, together with the Christian family. You need open and honest relationships with others to stay on track. Specifically, you need the spiritual oversight of mature Christian leaders. Find a mentor couple to hold you accountable to your commitments. Learn to *worship and pray* as a couple. Christ must remain at the center of your marriage. Your life’s purpose is to honor Him and reflect his “image” together.

⁷ There are four promises embedded in forgiveness, as we forgive others as God has forgiven us: 1. I will not dwell on the past sin. 2. I will not bring it up to you again. 3. I will not bring it up with others to use it against you. 4. I will not allow it to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship. Ken Sande’s outstanding summaries of reconciliation can be found at www.RW360.org, Resources, Free Downloads.

⁸ Examples: I will close my mouth and leave the house if you ask me in order to prevent destructive anger. I will give you full access to my cell phone, and meet weekly with our pastor for accountability and prayer.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. Gen 1:27

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Psa 95:6

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2:42 (Elders) pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. Acts 20:28

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. Eph 5:31-32, cf. Gen 2:24

You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. Teach the older men....Likewise, teach the older women.... Then they can train the younger women....Similarly, encourage the young men.... Titus 2:1-8

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb 10:25

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Heb 13:17

12. PLAN WITH HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Get a long view of what God is doing. He will bring good even out of sins and hurts from your past. Keep your ultimate focus upon the New Creation!⁹

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Psa 51:12-13

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Rom 8:28

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. 2 Cor 4:17-18

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Phil 3:12

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Jas 1:2-4

...You ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." James 4:15

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 1 Peter 1:6-7

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

Rev 21:2-3 (cf. chapters 21-22)

⁹ Questions for reflection and discussion: a. What good can you imagine might come out of the deep trials you have been through in your marriage? b. Imagine a day in your life together 10 years from now. What do you want it to look like? Be specific.