



Rebuilding a Devastated Marriage

By Jeff Colón

Internet pornography and sexual sin has flourished in the Church in recent years, destroying innumerable marriages in the process. In an online poll of 10,000 Christians conducted by Focus on the Family several years ago, 47% stated that pornography had been a problem in their home. No doubt this onslaught of sexual sin has played a part in the fact that the divorce rate within Christian homes is hovering around 50 percent—about the same as the rest of our nation. Commenting on this phenomenon, Barna Project director Meg Flammang said: “We would love to be able to report that Christians are living very distinct lives and impacting the community, but in the area of divorce rates they continue to be the same.”ⁱ Christians divorcing at the same rate as unbelievers? Is it possible that we can do no better than the unbelieving world in dealing with our problems?

My own marriage could have easily become one of those statistics. Rose had every reason to divorce me, and she most certainly would have if God had not intervened and performed a miracle. That was over 15 years ago. Since then, I have been privileged to witness countless marriages lifted from the ash heap and transformed into beautiful representations of God’s love and forgiveness. That’s what can happen when both husband and wife live in repentance and appropriate God’s tremendous promises for their lives.

Ultimately, marriage is a matter of the heart. If a marriage is to be preserved, then hearts must change. This is where God always does His work in a person’s life. And it’s amazing how all of the other problems besetting the marriage are somehow resolved as God deals separately with each spouse’s heart.

My book, *From Ashes to Beauty*, is drawn from Jesus’ great Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes found in Matthew 5 are meant to become a spiritual foundation in each heart. God can use those building blocks to raise a marriage out of the ashes of sexual sin and into His glory. If the Holy Spirit is allowed to have His way, He will construct a marriage truly reflecting Christ’s beauty on earth.

The truth is that the Beatitudes reveal seven states or qualities of the spiritual life that God desires for His people. They also represent seven aspects of His character. It could be compared to the spectrum of colors generated by passing a beam of light through a prism. The light is broken down into seven distinct colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. Just as we can observe that there are seven different colors in the same beam of light, so the Beatitudes enable us to behold and appreciate each of the aspects of God’s character individually. He desires His children to reflect these divine qualities in their own lives. This is the greatest reflection of His glory possible.

In the same way that those seven blessings provide a road to spiritual recovery for a life ruined by sin, so too they provide a blueprint for the restoration of a marriage devastated by sin. Let's take a cursory look at how this process unfolds.

Before this rebuilding process can begin, there must first be a solid foundation. Thus this building project must begin with *poverty of spirit*. God must bring both spouses to an end of their own resources, abilities and strengths in order to accomplish His work in their lives. It is as they stand empty-handed at the foot of the Cross, that He is able to begin the work of rebuilding their lives and marriage.

The first place the Lord begins this marvelous restorative work is teaching each spouse how to focus on his or her own failures, rather than on those of their mate. This awareness of one's sinfulness brings about a sense of godly sorrow: *blessed are those who mourn*. As each spouse acknowledges and repents over their own sin, they become compassionate toward their mate's struggles. This new camaraderie further strengthens the foundation within the marital relationship.

Sinful behavior, and the marital problems that result from it, are ultimately rooted in a lack of submission to God's authority. But the repentance that comes about through godly sorrow humbles the person into a state of *meekness*: a subjection of one's will to the will of Another. As both spouses begin to obey and to actually live God's Word, a new atmosphere fills their home. Mutual support and camaraderie replace the selfishness, defensiveness and finger-pointing.

Inevitably, meekness begets *a hunger for righteousness*. As the couple grows in their desire to please God, Christ is able to reign in the center of the marriage. This new mindset will cause the couple to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." Couples will need to examine their priorities in life, including how they invest their time and resources. God can only bless a marriage that is in line with His desires. Ultimately, a marriage can only glorify God when both spouses hunger and thirst to be like Jesus.

It is the *merciful* who are promised mercy from God. Most marital problems arise from a selfish preoccupation with one's own rights and desires. However, the process of repentance found in the Beatitudes brings people into the love of God, and this is especially true in the marriage setting. Consequently, rather than each spouse settling into a selfish preoccupation with their own rights and desires, they both learn to consider the needs of the other. "It is more blessed to give than to receive," said Jesus. (Acts 20:34) One of those blessings is that the more each mate shows mercy to the other, the more they are sure to receive in return.

By this point in the process, another fruit of repentance, purity of heart, will emerge. Not only will the *pure in heart* see God, as the beatitude promises, but they will also enjoy freedom from controlling sin. The effects of habitual sin on the marriage are deep and pervasive. As both spouses proceed through the process of repentance, however, sinful attitudes are exposed in the Light. Issues that are buried deep within the heart come to the surface and are dealt with. Little by little their hearts will become purified and they will gain a greater sight of God. What is happening in their individual hearts will also be expressed in the marriage.

Finally, as a couple allows the first six spiritual truths to be worked into them, this last beatitude simply arises as the culmination of all the others in God's transforming process. The closer a person comes to Christ, the more he or she will become what Jesus called a *peacemaker*. Where once strife and disunity permeated the marriage, the couple is now able to reconcile differences and enjoy godly communication with each other. Harmony in the marital relationship is the crowning fruit of a life of repentance.

The previous section offers a roadmap for the restoration of an ailing marriage. Having a clear-cut path to marital unity should be a great source of encouragement to the sincere husband and wife. However, that map to success is only valuable to the degree that it is actually followed.

Sometimes when we come to God for help, His answers are not what we want to hear. There were times the Pharisees were so frustrated with Jesus' answers that they were ready to kill Him. It takes humility to hear and receive a "hard word." Most couples who have come to Rose and me for counseling through the years have come expressly looking for solutions to their marital problems. Many times, however, what we tell them doesn't sit well with them. Some couples are interested only in a temporal fix for their marriage while God is interested in building His kingdom.

Rose and I have been counseling for nearly 15 years and are still amazed at the level of resistance we face from Christians who claim to believe the Word of God. In spite of the fact that our counseling is all based in Scripture, it is amazing how often people respond with statements like, "God wouldn't expect me to do that," or "That's not what Dr. So-and-So wrote in his book." Still others protest, "You don't understand what I have been through." It grieves me to hear these kinds of responses, because I know these people are only evading and prolonging what God needs to do for them.

To put it bluntly, marriages fail because people are unwilling to conform their lives to God's Word. Restoring a marriage is difficult, and the work of restoration nearly always goes against the grain of our natural tendencies. Winning this battle requires people to consistently do things that are uncomfortable.

Rose and I are continually amazed at the goodness and mercy of God. He has blessed our lives and marriage more than we ever could have imagined. He is a "more than" God: *more than* able, *more than* willing and *more than* sufficient. He always goes beyond our expectations and there are no limits to His offer of mercy. He is "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us..." (Ephesians 3:20)

Adapted from Chapter One of *From Ashes to Beauty* by Jeff Colón, © Pure Life Ministries, 2009.

ⁱ Meg Flammang, Barna Project http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm

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