

I Messed Up: Confessing Sin to Your Boyfriend or Girlfriend Before You Get Engaged

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Jonathan wanted to get engaged to Julie. They had been dating for about a year, and things seemed to be going really well. They had grown very fond of one another. They were encouraged by each other's faith. They had lots of family and friends investing in them as individuals and as a couple. They had met the parents. With each passing day, they were getting closer and closer to engagement. What was left?

Just a few days ago, Jonathan sat on my couch and with a look of dread written all over his face, he told me, "I don't want to tell her about my past. I scared she won't forgive me for the stupid things I did prior to meeting her."

There is a strong temptation at moments like these to *not* say anything. Why? Because hiding is fundamental to the way sin works. Sinners cower in the darkness and hate to be exposed to light. Picture Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after eating the forbidden fruit. They covered themselves with fig leaves and hid behind a tree. Because of their guilt and shame, they didn't want to *expose* themselves. As the old adage goes, "What they don't know can't hurt them, right?"

If you are dating someone right now, are you scared to tell him or her about your sinful past? Whether you've struggled with difficult sins from the past, or you are still struggling with significant sins right now, it's important to talk to your future spouse about these things.

Why should you say something to your boyfriend or girlfriend before getting engaged? *Because it is important that the other person actually knows who he or she is marrying.* No secrets. Don't hide your sin. Mold grows in the darkness, not in the light. Honesty and bringing things out into the light is usually the more redemptive way to handle *any* relationship ([Ephesians 5:1-14](#)). How much more so should you do this in a dating relationship, especially when you are considering making it a permanent relationship by getting married?

Too many couples hide sin in the midst of marriage, and that decision sadly inhibits their ability to build genuine intimacy. Your goal in marriage is to become one flesh ([Genesis 2:24](#))—to be unified—and you can't do that if you let sin get in the way.

Hiding sin in your dating relationship or engagement is a poor precedent for a potential marriage.

There are two types of sin that might need to be confessed in a dating relationship (or in engagement) prior to marriage—*current* foolishness or *past* foolishness.

Current Foolishness

Foolishness that is *current* and *on-going* needs to be discussed between a boyfriend and girlfriend in some detail, because it has huge implications for the *immediate* relationship. Wisdom is needed as to how much detail to discuss, so it is good to seek counsel from an older, wiser married person before you to talk to your boyfriend or girlfriend.

The boyfriend or girlfriend needs to hear enough to know: (1) how to be an ally with you against your on-going sin and (2) if he or she wants to marry into this problem. Every husband and wife has problems (because everyone is a sinner!), but one of the choices you make in picking a spouse is which set of problems you *choose* to get married to.

To deal with current foolishness in a dating relationship, consider the parable of the wicked servant in Matthew 18. Notice how God's forgiveness of our enormous debt of sin should motivate us to forgive the much smaller relational "debts" that have come between us and another person. Compare the difference between the wicked servant's debt in verse 24 and the fellow servant's debt in verse 28. Notice how much greater the debt is between the wicked servant and the king; and consequently, how foolish the wicked servant is because he is unwilling to forgive the much smaller debt of the other person. The principle is simple: *Those who have been forgiven much will more keenly see the mercy of God; so it is no surprise that they will in turn be willing to forgive others.* The fact that God has first forgiven us ([Eph. 4:32](#)) overflows into our forgiving of others.

Past Foolishness

Past foolishness describes sins from a previous season of your life. As you take this big step of getting engaged, you want your future spouse to feel confident about the person he or she is marrying. Sharing past sins is an important part of revealing who you are and what you've struggled with.

Sexual sins are the most common sins people need to share from their past, but a wide variety of other sins could also fit in this category (bad financial debt, drug or alcohol addiction, eating disorders, etc.). However, *most folks are scared to share because they fear rejection.* But if they are honest, and if God has already forgiven them, they

can reasonably expect that eventually (or hopefully immediately) the future spouse will accept that the sins are covered by God's grace.

When you share with your boyfriend or girlfriend, a general rule of thumb is to be more general, rather than specific, about your past sin. There is no need to go into detail about it (with one exception, addressed below). If your boyfriend or girlfriend demands more detail, be careful about how much more you say because: (1) He or she might have a false notion that more knowledge will somehow give more control over your problems, and that is just not true. (2) Your sin has already been paid for once by Christ, and you have received God's forgiveness for that sin. You don't need to re-crucify your sin through your future spouse's cross-examination. Give him or her enough detail to understand the nature of the sin—what it was and when it happened in your life. After that, seek to move on with your life together.

In regards to sexual sin from the past, we break it down into three categories:

(1) Pornography – “hard” porn (magazines), or more commonly, “soft” porn (internet)

(2) Premarital sex

(3) Scandalous sins – sleeping with prostitutes, going to strip clubs or massage parlors, etc.

For pornography and premarital sex, be more general about your past sins. For the more scandalous sexual sins, you need to give the other person more details and let him or her ask any questions that come to mind. But just because your sins were scandalous doesn't mean the other person gets to be highly critical of you. Once you have revealed your sins and talked about them, the same Christian response is required as of other sins—forgiveness in Christ ([Ephesians 4:32](#)).

Being this vulnerable with your darkest sins is a very hard thing to do. Please realize, your future spouse would much more prefer *honesty* over *lying*. Hiding your past is basically lying to the other person. When you get married, you have an expectation that you know your spouse. Many boyfriends or girlfriends will be very willing to walk alongside of you and help you battle your sin, but would be very angry and disappointed if they found out you've been hiding things about your past. Being vulnerable about past sins sets a good pattern for openness and honesty in the relationship. It also serves to protect your future marriage. If your past struggles return, a spouse equipped with knowledge about your past problems can more readily help you fight them. A spouse ignorant of the problem can't do much to help.

If you are considering dating a person, look for whether or not the person acknowledges and is quick to admit his or her own faults. Confession and honesty are good for the soul ([Proverbs 28:13-14](#)), and they build endurance in the marriage.

As your boyfriend or girlfriend confesses past sins, one question to consider is: Does this person live *now* in a way that realistically takes into account those past sins and faults? For example, consider a young man who struggled with pornography in his past, but doesn't have any protective software on his computer or accountability with friends. Does he show himself to be foolish and ignorant about the power of sin? His girlfriend should be troubled by his superficial treatment of sin and his downplaying of past problems. She shouldn't stay in the relationship if his disposition towards his own sin doesn't change.

A Hard Conversation

Back to my friend Jonathan. He went ahead and had the difficult conversation with Julie. I wish I could say that Julie was quick to forgive. She wasn't. Initially she took the news very hard. She prayed, searched the Scriptures, and (with Jonathan's permission) talked with a pastor, her parents, and close friends. After a few days, she came back to him and said she wanted to move forward. Because God had forgiven him, she wanted to forgive him also. Now that she knew about Jonathan's difficult past, she planned to leave it behind ([1 Corinthians 13:6](#)) as they built a future together.

What if Julie decided to break it off? Jonathan could give in to the lie that he was foolish for being honest. Even if Julie had decided not to move forward, as hard as that would have been, that would not have made God any less faithful. For Christians, living in the light—a life of honesty, vulnerability, and transparency—is the higher calling that we are called to live as we follow in the ways of our Savior.