
Three Solutions to Adultery

2 Samuel 11-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 30 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

The story of David and Bathsheba comes at a key moment in the Old Testament. Up until this moment one can read the Old Testament as a story of Israel's growing confidence and assurance of God's grace. Israel is given the law, by and large keeps it, and becomes a kingdom of great power and prosperity. This is the apex of the Old Testament. But after this moment it all seems to go downhill. A fight over the succession leads to a split in the kingdom, and the two kingdoms in turn are invaded and humbled. Today's story is a kind of reprise of the Fall. David is like a rerun of Adam.

I'm going to read this story twice. The first time I'm going to talk about David; the second time I'm going to talk about you and me. This is one of the most uncomfortable stories in the Bible, so the next 20 minutes isn't going to be easy listening. Usually I judge whether you're engaging with what I'm saying by whether you're perfectly still: today I shall judge by whether you're shifting uneasily on your seats.

Let's start with David. The story has an opening scene that sets up a problem and then three scenes that seek to solve the problem. In the opening scene, David is at the height of his power. Yet he is idle. This is the time of year when kings go out to battle, but David stays at home. His kingly office carries all the pressing affairs of state, but in mid afternoon David's having a nap. With nothing much to occupy him, he wanders around looking for amusement or gratification. His gaze settles on a beautiful woman.

Idleness and power are a lethal combination. With nothing better to fill his time, David forgets what his power is for. His power is for keeping Israel faithful, and keeping Israel secure. But he uses it for his own gratification. He ignores the fact that Bathsheba is still ritually unclean from her period. He ignores the fact that her husband Uriah is one of his best soldiers, and what's more a sojourner in Israel who deserves special respect. David sets about possessing the woman, not for ever but for now, not for sharing joy but for discharging lust, not to see her flourish but to hear her scream. Once used up, she's tossed back to her home. But there's one problem. She's pregnant.

David's first solution is to try to pass off the child as Uriah's. He brings Uriah home, gets him drunk, and tries to get him to sleep with his wife. You have to pick up the irony and the comedy in this scene. David is all powerful, but try as he might, he can't persuade a manly soldier to go home and sleep with his stunningly beautiful wife. Uriah's priorities become simpler the drunker he gets; meanwhile David's priorities become murkier however sober he remains. Look what happens to David. First he chats apparently normally to a man he has betrayed. Then he tries to persuade his faithful soldier to be less faithful and more selfish. Then he spends a whole evening trying to get his soldier drunk. David is getting more and more desperate, and more and more unscrupulous, and more and more powerless. He is turning into a monster.

Having tried every subtle approach and failed, David resorts without hesitation to a ruthless and violent solution. He resolves to murder Uriah. Having forced Bathsheba to fulfill his desires, only for the situation to get out of control, he then finds Uriah can't be controlled, and must be eliminated. Still eager to appear righteous, David gets his commander Joab to engineer Uriah's death in battle. But it turns out that quite a number of other soldiers get killed in order to make Uriah's death seem plausible. More and more people are becoming casualties of David's clumsy solutions. First a woman of the city becomes the tool of David's lust and idleness. Next David sets his kingly duties aside to work full-time on engineering a cover-up. Then the whole strategy of the army is transformed into a system to dispose of a guileless husband. Idleness leads to lust, lust leads to deception, and deception leads to murder.

And so to a third solution. The prophet Nathan comes before David and tells him a story. A rich man had everything he could wish for, while a poor man had just one little ewe lamb, which he treated like his own child. When the rich man needed a lamb to feed a guest, rather than slay one of his own he took the poor man's precious ewe lamb. David is outraged. For the first time in the story he thinks of someone other than himself, and considers a good more significant than satisfying his own desire and preserving his reputation.

Compromised as his own situation may be, he sees this story as a straightforward matter of justice. And Nathan says, ‘You are the man!’ This story is your story. This situation is as straightforward as you could imagine. You are the man. David’s secret is exposed. His outrage is turned on himself. He comes to his senses, and says quite simply, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’. At last, a true solution can begin.

That’s the story of David. Now, how about the story of you and me? I’m aware of the limitations of drawing wisdom from an ancient monarch who already had several wives and a young wife of a soldier whose own wishes don’t get a mention in this story. Nonetheless I’m going to draw five lessons from this story that may help us live more faithful lives. We’re all sinners. Some of us commit adultery; many of us misuse power in other ways; all of us tie ourselves in knots of self-deception and draw others into our webs of deceit. What are we to do?

Let’s start with David back home taking a nap in the afternoon rather than going out to battle like a proper king. He wants to go on being king but he’s stopped doing what kings do. He’s heading for trouble. The best way to avoid sin is simply to have something more important to do. The time we spend with students helping them plan their careers and discern their vocations is about helping them so fill their lives with worthwhile things that they won’t have time to go astray. It’s not about being busy for its own sake: it’s about recognizing the massive need, overwhelming beauty, and remarkable goodness in the world and aligning one’s own gifts and aspirations with those. There’s more than a lifetime’s occupation there for all of us. Perhaps the most straightforward reason for David not to take up with Bathsheba is that he hadn’t got time to.

That’s not to say we don’t need to develop self-control. David goes on the roof and spots a beautiful woman. There’s nothing wrong in going up on the roof. But as soon as his desire starts to affect his judgement, he’s heading downhill. What should he do? Quite simply, come down from the roof. And think twice about going up there again in the late afternoon. One person complained that it was so hard for her because a gorgeously attractive man got onto her train and sat there simply being irresistible. What could she do? A friend suggested, simply, ‘Change trains’. Change trains. Sometimes the simplest advice is the best. If you can’t change trains, take a friend along with you. Recognize your limitations. Ask a friend for help if you’re out of your depth. Don’t put yourself in situations you can’t resist. Don’t go on the business trip with the gorgeous assistant. Don’t go for the spontaneous drink after the late night meeting.

One of the things that restrains us from changing trains is self-pity. Most of us don’t feel as powerful as David. For most of us, the temptation of adultery is not about the thrill of power as the illusion of powerlessness. We tell ourselves a story that we are not very attractive, not very interesting, and not very happy. We feel trapped and unappreciated. And then along comes this wonderful person who amazingly seems to regard us as beautiful, fascinating and inspiring. So of course we sleep with them. It’s almost a way of saying thank you for appreciating me. But the real problem here is the false story we started off with. Most of us have far more power than we realize. Of course we listen if those close to us treat us with disdain and demean us. But the tragedy is if we only realize the power we have when we see the damage we can do.

The next thing David does is to assume sleeping with Bathsheba will be so fantastic it’s worth whatever it costs. One thing most of us never learn is that another person, fabulously beautiful or fun or interested in us as they may be, will never become that magical toy that fulfills all our desires. When we meet an attractive person, or spy them from a rooftop, that person becomes the vehicle onto which we project all our desires. To be cynical one could say that most relationships last as long as each partner can keep up the appearance of carrying the other one’s projections. This is expecting too much of another person. But it’s also turning them into an instrument of our own fantasy. Before we are too quick to condemn David, we have to recognize that we each do this all the time. We are constantly disappointed when people fail to fulfill expectations they never invited us to place upon them. A real relationship is based on learning to love the real person once the fantasy has disintegrated – not just seeking a new fantasy. Pretty much everyone at some point in a marriage meets someone they would rather have married than the person they did marry. The only mistake is to think that’s a big deal. David needs to grow up a bit.

The most positive thing for David would be to see this as an opportunity for re-educating his desire. There’s nothing wrong in seeing a person, even a naked person, and saying to oneself, ‘I have just seen an incredibly beautiful person’. The question is, what one says and thinks next. Just imagine saying, ‘Seeing the beauty in this

person makes me realize the beauty there is in every person – indeed in every created thing. This person is making me wake up to the wonder in the world. It is not that I admire him or her too much, but that I admire others too little. There are probably a thousand things in him or her that I should admire but haven't spotted yet. If I am drawn to him or her, I should become all the more aware of those astonishing things in each living creature, and even more sensitive to the glory of God's creation. If I really loved God with my imagination as well as my will, my interest in this person would be a very small part of my real desire. After all, desire is fundamentally a gift to lead us to God.' David doesn't say any of this because he thinks everyone can become his tool. He turns every person into a toy, and thus loses his wonder in God.

So here are some lessons we can learn in the face of disordered desire. Fill your life with such important things that there isn't time for distractions. If you're stuck on a train opposite a forbidden pleasure, consider changing trains. Don't tell yourself a false story that portrays you as the powerless one and forgets the damage you can do. Realize that every attractive person becomes a vehicle for your fantasies and don't assume this new person is so special that you can suspend all logic. And see this moment of temptation as an occasion to educate your desire, not to debase it.

So far, so good. But I'm not pretending these strategies always work, even with the wise, the far-sighted and the faithful. There's a lot of adultery around, and the statistics would suggest that about half the people here today know about it all too well. Nobody can say this has got nothing to do with me. If you're a person who knows about adultery all too well, here's a few suggestions.

Number one, don't say it's the end of my marriage, my family, my world. Sometimes it does prove impossible to rebuild trust and hope and joy in a relationship. But it doesn't always turn out that way. Adultery is more often a symptom of trouble than a cause, and if both partners are committed to finding out together what the real cause is, it can become a new beginning. More than one person has said to me 'I can hardly believe I'm saying this, but I'm almost grateful for what she did because things are so much better now'.

Number two, don't pretend this affair obliterates everything you previously knew about yourself, your partner or the world. Adultery is fundamentally idolatry when you become so obsessed by another person you lose sight of all your other commitments. If you discover your partner or you yourself have feet of clay, you haven't discovered the whole truth about the world, though it might feel like it at the time: you've just discovered that the gospel is more about repentance and renewal than it is about never getting it wrong, and that we all desperately need God. Don't let it make you cynical. Don't let yourself be sentimental – you can't go through your whole life keeping everyone happy. Don't pretend you are powerless and there's nothing you can do to make things better. There always is.

And finally number three, don't think God cannot bring good even out of this. Don't flatter yourself that this is the greatest sin of all time. Don't pretend your sin is bigger than God's grace. If God brought good out of his son's crucifixion, he can bring something extraordinary out of your or your partner's foolishness and pride.

David got it badly wrong. He tried first of all to make it look like nothing had happened. Then he tried to blow away anyone who stood to expose him. Finally he got down on his knees and said 'Sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I've been stupid, deceitful, selfish, and shortsighted. I can see that for a few moments of pleasure I've jeopardized everything else that I value. I want to begin the rest of my life from now. I want to learn how to love again, learn how to be faithful, learn how to let God speak through my weaknesses and shine through my brokenness. Please help me.'