

Walking In Moral Integrity

Jack and Trisha Frost

There is a growing trend of moral failure in the church today. This is seen among single and married alike, men and women. Christians are just as likely to experience divorce as non-Christians, many Christians struggle with shame, and among Christian men, more than half have viewed pornography online. Against this background, there are choices we can make and steps we can take that will lead us away from the precipice of moral failure. We believe there is hope!



In our next newsletter, we will consider specific issues singles face, as well as answer the question, "How do I stay on the path of moral integrity?" This month, we can all learn from the lessons God has taught Jack and Trisha as they address the pitfalls in marriages that lead to moral failure.

We have seen increasing numbers of Christian marriages fall apart in the last fifteen years. In most instances, the pattern that precedes the fall is similar. Couples enter into marriages with a desire to spend their lives together. Some find great joy in serving in their local churches. But somewhere along the way, misplaced priorities lead to a gradual decline in intimacy, and work and/or service to others begins to take precedence over intimacy at home. Partners begin giving too much of that which rightly belongs to their spouses away to the work place or to others!

This was our story. After only being married for a short season, Trisha believed that I loved my work as a commercial fishing boat captain more than I loved her. Then when I accepted Christ and got involved in church life, what little time that I was not at sea was spent helping other people. I was very good at catching fish and making money, and I became overly conscientious about helping people at church. After all, I earned respect among my peers, and feelings of significance and self-worth increased within me. But, I felt inadequate at convincing my wife that I loved her more than all those other things. Subconsciously, I was seeking to have my need for love and intimacy met in the wrong ways, and I walked down a path that could easily have led to moral failure.

Exposing Root Issues

No one plans to marry with the intention of growing distant from their spouse and seeing the marriage eventually end in failure. The root issue is usually a struggle with intimacy (in-to-me-see) that has been simmering for years. Being uncomfortable with intimacy often results in a parallel marriage. A couple gets married and plans to live happily ever after. The husband has won his bride, and he then begins focusing much of his energy into finding self-worth and identity in the work place, sports, or hobbies. The wife wants her "Prince Charming" to meet her deepest needs for intimacy. However, after a short time, her husband appears to be increasingly preoccupied with

other things that seem more important to him than her. After a few years of frustration over her need for intimacy going unmet, she starts seeking for significance in church life, education, or work. Once the husband finds a degree of success, midlife crisis hits and he can no longer find any satisfaction in work or hobbies, so he starts looking for intimacy with his bride. But her unmet need for intimacy with him in the early years has hardened her heart toward him. Her attitude has become, "Tough luck, buddy! You had your chance! I'm going to do things my way now!" They've become like ships in the night that frequently pass each other's way, but they have never gotten to know each other.

A healthy marriage, one that is insulated against a moral failure, must be built upon a foundation of mutually expressed love, respect, and honor (Ephesians 5:25-33; 1 Peter 3:1-7), or it may struggle with the insecurities, isolation, and manipulation which often precede a moral failure. Awareness of the following four stumbling blocks can help you maintain your moral integrity.

1) Living with an unhealed need for love and intimacy

God created us in His image (love) and for intimacy. We were created by love, for love, to love, and to make God's love known to others. The one who knows and abides in God is not necessarily characterized by his prayer life, ability to talk about God, or life of sacrificial service. One who abides in God is characterized by being at home with love and intimacy in his primary relationships. Our ability to receive and give love and to walk in intimacy is the true test of our relationship with God. (Matthew 22:37-40; 1 John 4:7-20; 1 Corinthians 13:1-7)

Most individuals who are in fractured Christian marriages are not characterized by their comfort with love and intimacy at home. Their spirits may be a new creation in Christ, but many developed habit structures of thinking (strongholds) in their youth (2 Corinthians 10:4-6) that later influenced them to seek wrong answers for right needs. Some spent their early years in legalistic, religious homes where love and acceptance were conditional. Others grew up in homes where affection and affirmation were seldom expressed. Others faced divorce, a performance-oriented parent, competitive striving, alcoholism, abuse, rejection, abandonment, or having to care for a dysfunctional parent or neglected siblings.

In my youth, though my parents loved me, I only felt loved and accepted when I performed well in sports, at school, and in daily life. I developed a fortress of thought (stronghold) that said, "I must perform and strive harder to earn people's love and to feel a sense of belonging." When I didn't perform rightly, I did not feel that I had a safe and secure place in my parents' hearts, so I chose to close my heart to love.

Because I was created for love and intimacy but rarely opened my heart to receive it, in my teens and twenties pornography, masturbation, and addictions became sources of comfort and a release of tension. This brought defilement into my marriage and increased my uneasiness with intimacy. The root issue was my unfulfilled, God-given need for love and intimacy. I compounded the problem by seeking identity in the sea and drove myself to be the top commercial snapper fishing boat captain in the fleet. After I came to the Lord, I laid the pornography and addictions down. But the need for love and intimacy was still there, so my unhealed need surfaced in other areas, such as hyper-religious activity and the need to be needed.

Helping others became my source for getting my unhealed need met, and it began taking priority over intimacy and fun at home. I exchanged the counterfeit affection of my love for the sea for serving people, in order to find the adrenaline rushes upon which I fed. I developed an angry, controlling edge at home and with anyone I felt hindered me from building my identity through work and serving people. My unhealed need for intimacy led me right into stumbling block number two.

2) Walking in independence, isolation, and control

Outwardly, in the eyes of our church and the fishing community, I was so kind and upright. But I was not real, open, and approachable, especially with Trisha. Inwardly, I lived for success and the praise of man and easily took offense at the slightest rejection or challenge to my authority. I drove my crew in order to out-fish everyone else and claim the coveted position of Top Hook. I was jealous of others in church who received more attention from the pastor than I. Thus, I wore a religious mask, pretending to be more spiritual than I really was and excusing my faults and weaknesses by blaming others for anything that went wrong. My hiddenness and excuses were the subconscious sins of independence, isolation, and control. "He who separates himself seeks his own desire..." (Proverbs 18:1)

I thought that if people knew the real me, they would reject me, so my relationships were superficial and built upon news, sports, weather, and church. I ended up finding security and comfort by being strong, unyielding, and right in order to protect myself from a sense of rejection and failure. I could not receive admonition or correction without being offended or feeling rejected. Therefore, I was not open to receiving ministry for my personal needs and ended up in denial. "I'm okay! I have no need because I am spending so much time fulfilling my Christian duty and doing so many good, religious things." Once I closed my heart to receiving truth from other people, I opened the door for greater self-deception.

I chose hiddenness over openness (darkness over light), and intimacy with God and family was greatly hindered (John 3:19-21; 1 John 1:5-8; Romans 13:12-14). Because I found acceptance and significance through work, service, discipline, and duty instead of love and intimacy, I grew out-of-touch with the needs of my family as I lived to get my unhealed needs met in the wrong ways. They had to meet my rigid standards and expectations in order for me to value them. What I had to do to feel good about myself was what I required others to do to gain my approval. I had to be in control, and it left a trail of broken relationships. This only served to lead me more deeply into the third stumbling block.

3) Being more committed to work and service than to love and intimacy

Being driven to succeed and to earn the approval of man took all of my energy, and I had very little left for love and intimacy at home. Being Top Hook at sea or serving at church became the only things that brought me joy. It seemed that life would have been better if I did not have to go home. The fishing community thought I was "one of the best." The church people loved my work with youth. "But, this woman God gave me!!! Why can't she appreciate the hardships I face at sea that make us so financially prosperous? Why can't she value all I am doing for the church?"

Communication at home began to break down and often deteriorated to little more than subtle accusations and defensive remarks to protect ourselves. Rarely did Trisha and I

trust each other enough to talk about our true feelings. Instead, we centered our conversations on children and church. My relationship with Trisha and my definition of intimacy basically revolved around good sex!

Trisha eventually became resentful toward me and was left with very little sense of value or honor. She felt unloved and depressed, while her husband relished in the glory of his career and the praise of man. Feeling like a failure in my family's eyes, it became much easier for me to spend even more time at sea and in serving others. People's affirmation of my success and service became the source of my sense of self-worth. I was set up to fall face first over the fourth stumbling block, and I never saw it coming.

4) Finding affirmation and comfort in someone other than your spouse

With the erosion of communication and intimacy at home, I felt drawn to the women who appreciated what a good and successful guy I was. I found delight in being with them and in their affirmation. They were so easy to talk to about my dreams and insecurities and I thought they understood me better than my wife. I became defensive when Trisha asked why I seemed to light up around certain people but seemed so down when at home. This only added to her feelings of dishonor and the tension in our home.

God designed my wife to be a physical and emotional haven of rest and a place where I receive His love and comfort through the intimacy she and I share (Proverbs 5:18-19; Ephesians 5:25-33). When I share my private and intimate concerns or find more delight in being with a woman other than my wife, then I am giving to someone else the position of comforting me in the natural realm. That is called spiritual adultery.

Here are some possible warning signs:

- the tendency to share private, intimate matters with someone of the opposite sex
- seeking to spend inordinate amounts of time with that person
- finding more delight or comfort in being with that person than you do with your own spouse
- beginning to think that that person understands you better than your spouse
- feeling high or youthful around that person
- becoming defensive when your spouse questions you about that person
- becoming divisive or refusing to listen to the warnings of others

Before a full moral failure could ensnare me, Trisha began experiencing depression, partially related to stuffing her resentment and anger toward me for years. I ended up in burnout from a life motivated by the driving desire for recognition and approval; wanting to be seen and counted among the mature. Our pain finally outweighed our shame, and we began seeking help from friends, qualified counselors, and ministers of healing prayer. Through their unconditional love, acceptance, and ministry to us, intimacy slowly began to be restored to our marriage. It took even longer for our children's hearts to come home to ours. God turned to good what was meant as evil against us (Genesis 50:20), and used our experiences as the foundation for a ministry of healing and restoration to the nations.

Maintaining Moral Integrity

Trisha and I learned the hard way that whatever success, spiritual knowledge, or attainments that we may have are of little value if they do not lead into a life that is focused upon love and intimacy (1 Corinthians 13). An angry or hardened edge at home is our spiritual barometer for when our priorities are out of order. Here are some daily practical choices that we now make to help protect our marriage and keep us from tripping over one of the stumbling blocks mentioned.

1) We seek to make family needs priority over the needs of work or serving others. We try not to let busyness hinder us from taking time each week to share in conversational prayer and intimate discussion together.

2) We seek to make time each week to play and have fun together as a family. We go to the beach, the lake, surfing, fishing, or play games together. When we do not, our identities easily begin drifting back to working for the praise of man and away from intimacy.

3) We seek to walk in open, transparent relationships. We give permission to our prayer partners and mentors to ask us the hard questions about our personal lives. "How is your marriage doing? Are you seeking to meet your spouse's need for intimacy?" We no longer hide our faults, fears, and insecurities from each other. Roy Hession, in *The Calvary Road*, wrote, "Light reveals. Darkness hides. Whenever we do anything or say anything to hide what we are or what we have done, that is darkness." Once we choose darkness, intimacy is lost and we begin controlling our relationships with darkness.

4) We seek to first share with each other the deep desires and needs of our hearts before we share with anyone else (except mentors) or in a group setting. This was difficult for us in the 1980's when we struggled so much with intimacy. However, as we began sharing with our prayer partners and counselors (same sex), we slowly began developing a sharing relationship with each other. Weekly reading and discussing a book about marriage also helped us enter into a new level of intimacy.

5) We seek to share with each other the times we may have defiling or tempting thoughts, or if we suspect that someone is seeking to attach themselves to one of us in an impure way. We agree together in prayer that no defilement takes place. We pray that the Cross be placed between us and the one we feel may be pulling on us. When I am away from home ministering or traveling, Trisha also daily prays a hedge of protection around me (see Hosea 2:5-7).

6) We seek to avoid spending too much time with the opposite sex without someone else present. If we ever feel drawn in an unhealthy way to a person, we talk with our mentors about it and pray through any issues that are surfacing.

7) We seek to be honest with ourselves! When we sense that our motivations are impure, when we cannot find rest in our family, when there is a continual angry edge at home, or when we seem to be putting blame on everyone else, we acknowledge we are in need. We initiate a meeting with our mentors and/or prayer partners to minister to our needs and to hold us accountable for our attitudes and actions.

8) At least every year or two, we seek mature and qualified Christian counselors or ministers of healing prayer and receive personal ministry or marital counseling and

enrichment. We believe the future and maturity of our marriage and family depend upon our openness to regularly receive personal ministry and counseling from others.

If you are struggling with even one of the stumbling blocks mentioned, why wait to see if you are going to trip over others? Stop and think of the possible loss of all you have worked so hard to achieve. Once you cross the line of moral impropriety, you will not be remembered for all your success or the many people you have helped, but you will be remembered for the moral failure. Such an indiscretion immediately tarnishes your witness and all you have worked so hard to achieve. Right now, contact one of the counselors or healing ministries in your area that are listed on the Prayer Ministry page of our website.

(Perhaps you, or someone you know, have already experienced a moral failure. First of all, we urge you to bring this into the light [with your pastor or same-sex counselor] and then place yourself in the vulnerable place of receiving ministry, allowing Father God to lovingly open up the roots of your actions and attitudes. This will include walking through many of the steps we have listed, but with restoration rather than prevention as the goal. Restoration takes time, but it is possible and it is easier if you admit your need willingly. Don't wait for your failure to be discovered - seek help today.)

In Father's love,

Jack & Trisha Frost

For further study

We strongly recommend the booklet "Ebbing The Flow of Moral, Marital , and Ministry Burnout" and the CD series "Avoiding Pitfalls For Leaders."

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Shiloh Place Ministries, PO Box 5, Conway, SC 29528

(843) 365-8990

info@shilohplace.org

www.shilohplace.org