

Innocent or Guilty?

By Barrington H. Brennen, April 24, 2009

Many romantic relationships end because one partner is "guilty" of doing something that destroyed the relationship, which makes us conclude that the other partner is innocent. Is this really so? Too many partners get away with the "innocent" cry because the spouse has done the "obvious" – committed adultery, or had a non-sexual affair. Then you hear the innocent one exclaim: "I am innocent. I did not break my marriage vow." The sad part about this picture is that although it might be true that one partner did have an affair, we often come to the conclusion that the "innocent" partner did no wrong. The other painful result is the "innocent" goes on living a well respected life because to the world he has done nothing wrong.

I avoid coming to the conclusion that since a partner did the "wrong" we all can bear witness to, then the other partner is really innocent. Many partners have committed adultery after years of loneliness, abandonment, abuse, or not having their emotional needs met. This does not excuse the behavior, but it sure does not exonerate the "innocent."

The irony is that the "innocent" does look innocent in public. He or she is usually well poised, gracious, kind, respectful, and well mannered. However, no one sees the ugly, dark side displayed in the home. There are cases when even the children will vouch for their parent's "innocence." This is usually because the "innocent" knows how to camouflage the behavior with kindness, or the children are too young to understand what is happening.

A SPIRITUAL MATTER

This is a deeply spiritual matter. The truth is both the innocent and the guilty can be candidates for punishment in hell fire. However, many times it is the "guilty" spouse who is remorseful, repents of his or her wrong doings and goes on to live a godly, Christian life, in peace and happiness because his or her sins have been "washed in the blood of the Lamb." For this repentant "guilty" spouse, there is a crown of glory awaiting. Ironically, the so-called "innocent" spouse remains arrogant, self-righteous, proud, and stubborn, making him or herself a good candidate for hell fire. His or her relatives actually reinforce that self-righteousness because they refuse to believe that their sister, brother, son, or daughter would do such wrong.

Since it is the "innocent" spouse who is never dropped from membership, or loses his or her job, because the church refuses to investigate both sides, the arrogance blinds him or herself to the fact that lurking around the dark corners of his or her heart is a "cancer" that will soon metastasize throughout the body, causing a long and painful, spiritual death. It is true that there will be surprises in heaven. Matthew 5:7 reminds us: "You hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you will see clearly enough to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

UNMET NEEDS

For decades I have been saying that unmet needs in a relationship makes one vulnerable to having an affair. Yes, no one goes looking for an affair and most do not want to have an affair. It starts very innocently with a "healthy" friendship relationship. The partner feels comfortable with this new friend because he or she listens, is kind, and pays attention to his or her pain. Then the "wounded spouse" who is seeking attention, wakes up one day to the realization that he or she is caught in the emotional web of a romantic encounter. Although it might be confusing at first, it feels good.

The “innocent” partner may suspect or actually discover the questionable behavior and warns or argues with the “wounded” or “guilty” spouse. The “innocent” partner refuses to hear the plea for inclusion and romance. The “innocent” partner comes home anytime, often very late at nights, does not discuss where he or she has been, and in some cases does not get involved in sharing household duties. Many innocent partners are emotionally or physically abusive, utilizing perhaps one of the most subtle, yet powerful form of abuse – intimidation.

It is as though the “guilty” has become the slave and the “innocent” the slave master. But we do not know that the “well-behaved and respected” spouse is a “slave master” or “cold ice box” in the home. We quickly throw stones at the one who did the “terrible thing” and never pause to question or challenge the one who appears to be innocent. Even family members of the “innocent” are often blind and provide bias support, criticizing the “guilty” partner, condemning, and causing more emotional pain and frustration.

Yes, there are many partners who are truly innocent when the other partner violates a marriage vow. But far too many are not innocent. Our role is to help expose the truth, even if it is painful. We must stop preserving the “good image of the family” at the expense of the emotional health and destruction of a relationship. Are you innocent or guilty? Before you accuse or condemn your guilty partner, pause and take a look at your behavior. My concluding statement is one that should cause you to think: The “guilty” may have painted the room red, but the “innocent” bought the paint. Think about it.

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