

Dark Secrets

By Pastor Alan Utting



'There is no darkness so deep that God's light cannot reach it.'
Corrie ten Boom

In saying 'Goodbye' to a friend recently, he jokingly commented, 'I can keep a secret; it's the friends I tell who can't.' On that note, we left with a good laugh. We all have secrets. Some are harmless, while others are deeply troubling.

A dark secret refers to an action someone has committed and kept hidden due to guilt and shame—something that, if revealed, could lead to significant relational breakdown or even the loss of employment or income. These secrets might involve sexual misconduct, domestic violence, fraud, or other serious offences. In some cases, they may relate to criminal activity.

Over the years in ministry, I've encountered many such dark secrets in people's lives. Some of those people were good friends—friends who, at times, even attempted to deceive me.

If you are carrying a dark secret, or are walking alongside someone who is, the question is: how can we best move forward through such turbulent waters? There are no easy answers. We need great wisdom. While the Bible offers wise guidance, we may also need to consider other tools and resources alongside it.

Bible References

'Friend, your sins are forgiven' (Luke 5:20).

'Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death' (2 Corinthians 7:10).

'Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted' (Galatians 6:1).

1. When a Person Confesses Their Dark Secret Voluntarily

- a. A voluntary confession shows a better heart posture than one forced by confrontation.
- b. If you have an emotional connection with the person confessing, be careful not to react in anger. That won't help them open up. While it's okay to express disappointment, do so with wisdom and at the right time. 'Don't sin by letting anger control you. Think about it overnight and remain silent' (Psalm 4:4 NLT).
- c. Repentance is often a process. It takes time. The person with the secret needs to meet with someone mature and unshockable.

- d. Someone with a dark secret may need to step down from ministry, at least temporarily, to allow space for healing and accountability.

2. Confronting a Person with a Dark Secret

- a. Remember that 'God's kindness leads to repentance' (Romans 2:4). Be gentle.
- b. Be prayerful. Listen to God's voice to discern both the issue and the way forward.
- c. Confirm the facts before confronting someone. I haven't always done this well, and it can be damaging.
- d. Where needed discuss serious concerns with two other trusted leaders (e.g. Eldership) for wisdom and prayer.
- e. The Bible outlines a clear process for confronting sin:

'If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along... If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church' (Matthew 18:15-17).

I've had to bring serious matters before a special member's meeting on two occasions, both times involving sin against the church. However, in our current culture of 'saving face,' legal risk, and spiritual immaturity, I approach this step with extreme caution.

- f. Approach confrontation with humility and reverence. We, too, will be judged.

'Not many of you should become teachers... because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly' (James 3:1). I've spent many sleepless nights before a confrontation.

- g. Once, I confronted a married man attending our church occasionally about a sexual relationship with an unmarried woman who also came to our church. Beforehand, I consulted a solicitor, who advised me to approach him alone first. At the time, the risk of defamation claims was lower, it was his word against mine. Today, things are more complex. Conversations can be secretly recorded.
- h. In difficult conversations, consider allowing the person to bring a support person. You can then do the same.
- i. In a legally constituted church with closed membership, disciplinary processes are usually protected by law. Ensure your facts are accurate and allow the accused the right to respond. I've read public statements on behalf of people, only with their agreement.

- j. When a person confesses sin to a leader, the leader's response matters. A casual or dismissive attitude can have long-term consequences. If that leader later falls into the same sin, their response may set the tone for others, normalising what should have been taken seriously. We must judge every situation biblically.

3. Who Needs to Know?

- a. Not everyone needs to know.

When it became known that a homegroup leader was abusing his wife, the group was understandably upset. In a confidential setting, they were able to talk, express their grief, and begin to heal.

- b. In serious cases of misconduct people can respond in an unhealthy way, from harsh condemnation to what some call 'cheap grace'. That is, If God forgives, why shouldn't we? Of course we need to forgive, that is not the issue.

But true forgiveness requires real repentance, and restoration takes time. If sin is treated lightly, it can reoccur, like a spirit that spreads among others. This is especially true in cases of unaddressed immorality.

- c. Remember, not all need to know.

4. Work Towards Restoration

- a. The goal of discipline is always restoration.

'Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins' (James 5:19-20).

- b. People who confess dark secrets need support. Find the right person, normally of the same gender, to walk with them.
- c. After David's fall with Bathsheba, he lost something of his former glory, but remember God still used him. He was still called 'a man after God's own heart' (1 Samuel 13:14) because he repented deeply as below -

'Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me' (Psalm 51:10-12).

Resources

Kerry Patterson, *Crucial Conversations*

Don Barry, *Water Under the Bridge*