

## **Testimony Diederik Engelen Part 2: Relationships**

My parents divorced when I was 11. This event had a significant impact on how I looked at, and behaved in relationships between people. On the day they separated, my brother and I were told: "Mom and Dad don't love each other anymore and Daddy has someone else he loves."

This was not the whole truth but I didn't find that out until years.

The truth was my mother cheated on my father regularly and wasn't willing to stop. She also advised my father to start a relationship with her friend. And that he did. The Bible calls this fornication. It is one of the worst sins you can commit before God. Because it means betrayal, the betrayal of the other and of the covenant of marriage.

Neither of my parents was willing to go out of their way to stay together. They chose to pursue their own lusts and so called "happiness" instead of doing the right thing.

In our society and also in my parent's view the observation that "it doesn't work anymore" is a valid reason to end a relationship. Instead of doing everything to make it work my parents were not open and honest about the true reasons for their divorce, nor did they choose to explain in a truthful way why they decided to separate. Instead, the blame was placed on my father and his new relationship.

It caused me harbour a lot of resentment towards my father, and especially towards his new partner. After all, wasn't she the one responsible for my parents separation? And to add insult to injury, he soon moved in with her!

Because of their approach, my parents seriously distorted my image of what it is like to be in a marriage or in a relationship. This had very painful consequences. I deeply regret the way I treated my partners at different times. Following the example I received from my parents and which was further nurtured by society.

I understand that my parents are also a product of this society in which we live. They too believed the lie that 'things should be possible' and that 'self-development and independence' are more important than interdependence and loyalty. This society and my parents had led me to believe that this was just "the way things went." And that it couldn't be done any other way.

I told many people later that my parents' divorce "worked out well in the end" because they both ended up with someone who was a better.

God doesn't see at it that way.

To Him, marriage is a symbol of His covenant with His children. This is anything but non-committal. God is faithful. We must be too. And not only to Him but to each other and to our children. My parents violated this covenant and gave my brother and I the message that that's okay.

When I went to study in Rotterdam in 1991, I was 'new' there, just like everyone else. I studied subjects that I enjoyed, that I didn't have to put too much effort into, had some good friends and after a year I finally got the relationship I had been longing for. After all, if you're still a virgin at twenty, there's something wrong with you, I thought at the time.

Amber was 17, made no secret of the fact that she found me very attractive and I was sold. With her I very gradually got to know sex and my own attitude in this and towards my partner. Relationships have always had a great influence on my identity in life. With my parents, but especially with my girlfriends.

However, Amber soon found other men more interesting but I didn't talk to her about her cheating. It was much less painful for me to come to the conclusion that "we were no longer a good match" and to say goodbye than have an honest conversation with her. And it was certainly much less of a blow to my ego.

By treating my relationship with Amber in this way, I did not act honestly. I felt like the victim of something that had been 'done to me' and was left with unspoken bitterness and spite.

Looking back, I see the clear similarities between how I acted and the way my father 'handled' my parents' divorce. Don't confront the other person about them cheating on you, avoid conflict and blow a dignified, smooth retreat.

After about six months I got to know Rose. The relationship I had with her, lasted from 1994 to 2001 and was mainly dominated by her struggle with herself and her bipolar disorder. I loved her dearly but most of the time she didn't love herself and was too preoccupied with her own problems to love me in the way I needed at the time.

In this relationship, I went to great lengths to give her what I thought she needed and by occasion forgot myself. I was convinced I was doing her, and

therefore us, good by acting in this way. I often had to suppress my desire to be noticed and loved by her.

My desire for intimacy, both mental and physical, remained unanswered most of the time. This caused me a lot of grief and frustration, but I stayed with her because I also felt responsible for her and was afraid that she would hurt herself if I broke up with her.

I felt like a victim again, this time of the circumstances, of her illness. Above all, I was a victim of my own inability to face the painful truth. I couldn't help her, I couldn't maintain the noble image of 'strong man helps weak woman', from which I also got a lot of identity and positive feelings about myself.

Looking back I realise it also made me feel good to have someone who depended on me. To be in a relationship in which I was the strong party. And to feel like I'm a good person.

I think my mom spends a lot of time caring for "needy" people for the same reason.

I finally ended the relationship in 2001 when I met Jasmijn. She was uncomplicated, found me very attractive and gave me exactly what I had missed those years before. Love, fidelity and intimacy. And admiration and compliments.

She quickly wanted to go beyond what I was willing to offer her at the time. She would have loved for us to live together, get married and have children.

Her desires also forced me to think about what I wanted in the longer term. I wanted children, but not at that time. And not with her. I also felt that with these blockages in the back of my mind, I should not 'occupy' her and let her go. There was probably someone else for her who did see a real future with her.

For many years I have seriously regarded my way of thinking and acting as noble and honest. Now I see I was being extremely selfish, dishonest and unloving.

In 2003, I cowardly ended the relationship, one of the hardest things I've ever done. I hurt her so much, caused her so much pain, it was terrible.

In my relationship with her, I was exceedingly selfish and almost exclusively focused on what I wanted to get out of the relationship. Lust, feeling superior, someone who looked up to me, who depended on me. I loved it. Until responsibilities came into play. And I had to deliver. Until I had to



commit. I didn't want that. So I took the easy way out. Like I always took the easy way out. Get out of the way of those problems. Run away from responsibility. Don't persevere and fight, but give up and surrender. It's my bad nature, my dark side. The side I'm trying to hide. The satan in me.

In the following year, 2004, I was unhinged. In one year, I had sex with four women. My ex Roos, my colleague Marianne, a one night stand with April, and finally with my stepsister Rachel. I was desperately looking for appreciation, love, being considered important, 'being' something for someone else, I even enjoyed the attention I got from gay men who showed they were interested.

On a winter holiday in December 2004 I met Tamara. Big, strong, hyper-independent and armoured, sexually assertive and businesslike. But I also noticed later that she was vulnerable and insecure when she let her guard down.

With her, I learned to develop a completely different side of myself. Planning, having ambitions, using people for your goals, keeping work and human relationships separate, I learned it from her. I also took a second master's degree and dared to ask for a salary raise for the first time.

She was convinced that she could not have children, and pursued a professional career with great conviction and commitment.

In this relationship, I was often the weaker party. She wanted to live together near her parents, I was fine with it. She wanted house rules on paper about how we interacted with each other, I reluctantly agreed. She dominated, I accepted and adapted. In her, I found someone even more selfish than I was. But she was able to link this to an idea of what she wanted, to great perseverance and willpower. Something I've always lacked.

Her very Catholic mother reinforced the image in me that there is something wrong with people who put God at the centre of their lives. That it is wrong to align your life with the will of the Lord. That had a very negative effect on my attitude toward God for a time. Faith is for weird and irrational people. People who can think for themselves don't need God.

Here, the negative image I had of my mother-in-law reinforced the frame given from home: intelligent and right-thinking people are not guided by faith but by knowledge and science. Because of my lack of backbone, I let myself be completely dominated by Tamara. Because I also got things I longed for: sex, a nice house, little responsibility, opportunity to do things I enjoyed. It was basically a friends with benefits relationship in disguise. And it was nice to be able to blame her when things didn't go well, after all, she decided how things went. Surely I was the victim of that?

In 2012 we started couples therapy. This showed that the above patterns were so ingrained that we were no longer able (I) and willing (she) to change this, and that we understood each other less and less.

The role that my lack of 'balls' and willingness to crawl out of my subordinate victim role played in the failure of our relationship, I only learned to see years later. At that time I didn't want to see my responsibilities towards her. As a result, I ignored all encouragement from her side to take more control of our relationship and our life together. This caused a lot of frustration on her part.

The night we decided to end the relationship was one of the most loving I've ever experienced. Because we didn't have to anymore. Because the pressure was off. But our relationship remained broken beyond repair.

In many of my relationships, I felt like a victim. Of her cheating, of her illness. Of her dominance and selfishness. Of her naivety. Of the fact that we so often didn't understand each other.

This is a wrong attitude that I inherited from home, especially from my mother, and developed further myself. It keeps me from taking responsibility for my part in conflicts and failures. For my mistakes. For my sins. For my selfishness, narcissism and fear of people.

And if I don't take responsibility, I don't confess my sins. And I can't repent of this, testify and receive mercy. I act like the parents of the blind boy who did not want to testify that Jesus had healed their son. Out of fear of the reaction of others.

In John 9:18-24:

*But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind, and received his sight, until they called the parents of him that had received his sight. And they asked them, saying, Is this your son, who ye say was born blind? how then doth he now see? His parents answered them and said, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind: But by what means he now seeth, we know not; or who hath opened his eyes, we know not: he is of age; ask him: he shall speak for himself. These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue. Therefore said his parents, He is of age; ask him. (KJV)*

My mother also often reacts as a victim when my brother, my father, or my wife or myself do something against her wishes or desires. Sometimes in the form of emotional blackmail, but also sometimes by pointing out (the mistakes of) others, circumstances and other external factors. For example, in the settlement of her father's inheritance, she has often explained her lax

and self-serving attitude (I want to continue living in my big house) by pointing to her bad relationship with her father, the emotional charge of the whole thing, and her poor feeling for and interest in financial matters.

I found it extremely difficult and painful to hear my wife say and repeat how selfish and unloving my mother had behaved in this matter. And to finally have to admit that she was. I would much rather see my wife as the evil party, and maintain my favourable image of my mother.

I really did everything I could to avoid facing the truth so that I wouldn't have to hold my mother accountable for what she had done wrong. To my father husband, to my brother and me but, above all, to God.

It is immensely painful to now see how much pain and grief I have caused my wife, how blind I was to my family's inability to discuss sensitive matters in an honest and sincere way. Especially because I now see how much this goes against God's will.

God wants me to put the truth above all else and tell it in love. Also, and, especially when that is difficult. Especially with the people I love. Confess my sins. Be able to see and name evil. Name other people's sins. Be able to give and receive forgiveness.

Sometimes I have to do things that are painful for me to help my wife. Not think from MY interests but from the WILL OF GOD.

Humiliation, pain, being ostracized, I have to be able to bear it to do what's right. I want to stand up for my loved ones, even if it costs me EVERYTHING. Because God did that for me.

After the 'divorce' from Tamara, I moved to a rented apartment in Voorburg in 2013 and was so happy! I had freedom, earned enough, didn't have to conform to anyone, and enjoyed being alone from time to time. I finally went on a trip to my brother in Taiwan, had two fantastic weeks there. He pointed me to an app with which he met women, and I decided to try it when I returned to the Netherlands.

That's how I met my wife. When I met her, she was living in Antwerp. She was a teacher and had a son of about seven years old. She was (is) different from everyone else. I still can't describe exactly why, but I immediately had the feeling that I didn't want to lose her.

After a year she became pregnant and we had to make a decision about where we would live. She had to be able to take her son to school during the weeks that her son was with her, and I had to be able to take the train to



work in The Hague. Roosendaal was the least awkward location in this situation.

The arrival of our daughter in 2014 also made me think more about things that I had taken for granted until then. What values should I teach my daughter? What did I learn from my parents? And my wife's? How do you live well? What's important?

For as long as I had known her, my wife suffered from poor sleep, back pain or a combination of the two. She tried EVERYTHING in her life to get relief, and especially to be able to sleep better. This never led to lasting results.

In 2020, the corona year, she came into contact with a group of Christians and regularly came home with stories about God, Jesus, the Bible, sin, the Truth, etc. Because I was working from home a lot that year, she was able to talk about it more and she could share a lot more of her faith process with me.

I was happy for her that she had found something that gave her support and made her feel a little less angry and anxious. For myself, I didn't need God. Everything was just fine, right? I was healthy, had a nice job, a lovely wife, a beautiful daughter, a nice house and so on.

Over the course of those months, I saw her change. We argued less often, she had more patience and less anger. At her baptism in July 2021, I got to know some of her "Christian friends." When they asked me if I also believed, I had my story ready: Good for her, but I don't need it.

She gave me a Bible as a memento of this day. I put it in the cupboard.

How could this be? My wife was suddenly able to sleep. The moment she touched her pillow she was pretty much gone. In fact, she often got up at night to read or study for a few hours and was full of energy the next morning. She was totally different from when I first got to know her. I couldn't explain it. Something had radically changed, And it remained. She was more loving, more honest. More confrontational too.

She kept telling me about Jesus and what he did for her. I kept repeating my mantra "Good for you, but I don't need it." I occasionally went with her to Bible clubs and such, but mostly as a spectator.

I lost the discussions about topics such as 'what is truth' and 'why do you think you are right' more and more often. Because I began to doubt all those 'certainties' that I had cherished all my life. And because she persevered in

her newly acquired insights. Every now and then I started leafing through the Bible that was sitting on the shelf. It didn't mean much to me, but I did come across some of the things she had told me about.

In the spring of 2023, we went to a church meeting in Bergen op Zoom. I had promised my wife that I would go with her "to see what I would like it." Of course, I didn't know any of the lyrics, songs or bible verses that were discussed, but I did learn that it is possible to be 'very normal' and a Christian, that the one doesn't have to exclude the other.

I met people with a trust in God cast in stone. That's what I wanted. Not living for myself, not asking myself 'what am I doing here?' but living in the trust that your Creator is with you and loves you. That He lets you know in His Word what is good for you. And what is not. That after this life you may come to Him forever in a place without pain or sorrow.

This was the beginning of an ongoing search for my place in God's plan, to try to understand what He expects of me and how I can get rid of all the harmful habits, lies and patterns that I have internalized. In particular, trying to break free from my attachment to people and material things. In this life this takes a lot of effort. I can't do it alone. I need help. His help.

In this I try to live by Philippians 4:6:

*Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. (KJV)*

\* The names of friends are fictitious.