

Another disappointing story

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

November 14, 2012



As the intern and I looked over Sunday's bulletin, he noted our reading from Samuel and asked, "Did you hear about the fall of the other King David?"

David Petraeus's moral failings aren't the same as his biblical namesake's. Unlike poor [Uriah](#), no one went to die so the former CIA director could bed Paula Broadwell. Besides, Petraeus was a secular leader, and he was not known particularly as a man "after God's own heart."

Still, we expected more.

One clergy friend asked, "Why are we always surprised when people ruin their lives?" We pastors have all seen people mess up their professional and personal lives. It doesn't surprise us—but it does disappoint us.

I have no personal interest in the rise and fall of Petraeus or Paula Broadwell or any member of this story's growing cast of characters. I'm disappointed because my line of work is staked on a claim that people can learn to resist temptation, to turn away from sin—that they can and often do manage to live with integrity and fidelity. But when public figures lauded for their wisdom fail to do this, commentators often shrug their shoulders and say that [this is the way of things](#).

Some suggest that we Americans are obsessed with tawdry things that make little difference in someone's public work. "Can a terrible husband be a great leader?" [asks Katie Roiphe](#). "History would of course be on the side of, 'yes.'" But the nature of marriage has changed a bit over time, as has the import of infidelity. Even the French, known on our shores as endlessly permissive, [have limits](#) to what they'll accept from public figures.

I'm disappointed to see the idea that infidelities don't matter gain traction. As you know if you've seen a grief-stricken cuckold or heard an adulterer beg for forgiveness, this just isn't true. If Petraeus had been asked to resign because he and his wife were exploring nonmonogamy *together*, or because his private life resembled J. Edgar Hoover's, then I'd call foul. Instead, this man—whose understanding of loyalty and faithfulness was fairly critical to the safety of U.S. personnel—showed us that he could not be counted on to remain faithful in his most personal relationship.

I'm also disappointed because women have a hard enough time pursuing success without another example of how it can all go wrong. *That's the trouble with ambitious, educated, aggressive women*, the naysayers sniff. Never mind that several of our recent Secretaries of State have been women who managed to enjoy widespread job approval without cheating on their husbands.

And I'm disappointed because I have a family, and my husband is a teacher who works with lots of cute and smart women, and I work with a lot of charismatic men, and my friends have families and wonderful spouses. I need to know that faithful marriages are possible. I counsel people preparing to be married, and I need to know that they see fidelity as a worthy goal. Affairs happen—but they wreak havoc. They're also avoidable.

For all that conservative Christian culture gets wrong about sexuality, one thing it's managed to understand well is the power of temptation. Sometimes we meet people, attractive people who flatter us and are interesting and interested in a way our spouses haven't been for a while. Sometimes we're far from home. Sometimes we're avoiding the bigger, underlying issues in our marriages and lives. [Sometimes we flirt](#), which can be innocent and friendly and fun but can also cross lines. Sometimes we come dangerously close to breaking our vows. Sometimes we just fantasize about breaking them.

It may be that conservatives don't always do enough to empower people to resist temptation. But we mainliners tend to simply downplay its power.

Emotional intelligence isn't necessarily the same kind of intelligence that makes a good CIA director. But given the complexities of Petraeus's vocation, it's fair to wonder how effective he could be with so much of his energy dedicated to infatuation and secret-keeping. And it's fair to question his judgment.

That said, I don't know whether being a faithless husband means Petraeus needed to resign his post. My moralistic faith tradition is predicated on the notion that people can change. Repentance has power; suffering can transform; grace is even more powerful than sin. At rock bottom, Petraeus could perhaps see what's at stake. That's why some marriages can recover even from a humiliating affair.

But does Petraeus's world have space for an anthropology of sin and redemption? "The retired general is devastated by the incident," his former spokesman reports. "He sees this as a failure, and this is a man who has never failed at anything."