



The Virtues That Sustain Marriage

Strong marriages depend on more than sexual exclusivity; they are sustained by a commitment to the “twin virtues” of fidelity and integrity.

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AMERICAN FAMILIES OF FAITH

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In Disney’s “Up,” the quiet love story of Carl and Ellie captures the essence of fidelity and integrity within marriage. Their journey—from childhood friendship to lifelong partnership—is a testament to enduring love, mutual commitment, and shared values.

Integrity and [fidelity](#) are central to flourishing marriages. In fact, the virtues of integrity and fidelity were recently described by one research team as the “twin virtues” of marital commitment that represent not only [sexual exclusivity](#) but also emotional devotion, honesty, and accountability. The American Families of Faith project—a qualitative [study](#) exploring exemplary Christian, Jewish, and Muslim married couples

across diverse races—sheds light on how these values are cultivated, sustained, and lived out in everyday life.

Drawing on findings from this study, the present article explores how these racially and religiously diverse couples define and practice integrity and fidelity, offering four insights into how these principles strengthen their marriages.

Integrity and Fidelity Matter in Marriage

For many American Families of Faith participants, fidelity involved more than refraining from extramarital relationships—it included emotional and spiritual unity. In “Up,” Carl and Ellie’s life together showed that fidelity encompasses more than sexual exclusivity—it also includes emotional devotion, honesty, and alignment in life’s core vision and goals. Their shared dream of visiting Paradise Falls, while never realized in the way they envisioned, symbolized their mutual commitment to one another.

Similarly, Ron (pseudonyms are used to protect participant’s identity), a white Jewish husband from the American Families of Faith study, reflected on how honesty shaped his marriage:

I don’t hide anything from her, and that means that I can’t do anything that I need to hide from her, ‘cause I won’t hide anything from her. ... That influences every moment of my marriage. How many times a day [do I think], “Is this something I would not want to tell her?” ... It’s really part of my consciousness all the time.

Sebastian, a Hispanic Christian husband, similarly emphasized the ripple effect of fidelity:

[One] thing that is very important in marriage is fidelity. When you’re not faithful, it doesn’t matter what [else] you can do or how sweet you can be or how loving you can be. ... [If you are] cheating on your wife or vice versa, no matter what you do, it’s hard to put the pieces back together. For me, I have to know how to be faithful [while I’m] ... at home and [when I am] not ... at home. So, fidelity, integrity has a lot to do in the relationship of the couple. Also, in the relationship of the children, if they see [your faithfulness to each other],

they will want to emulate the example, they will want to live it—because they will see that regardless of the challenges and problems, there was fidelity.

Integrity as a Core Marital Value

In their in-depth interviews, American Families of Faith participants repeatedly described integrity as essential to the health of their marriages. Beatriz, a Hispanic Christian wife, succinctly stated, “Loyalty, fidelity, integrity are key.”

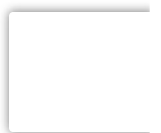
Couples discussed a wide array of challenges related to stress in their work or personal lives, in-laws, conflict, parenting, illness, and even family deaths. However, their ability to navigate these hardships together demonstrated the resilience that fidelity helps foster. Idris, an African American Christian husband, said:

Character and integrity in a marriage is everything. [They are] ... the most important source of strength [to our marriage]. ‘Cause if you really don’t have that, you don’t really have a relationship. ... You [could] just be an aimless wanderer [and] be blown in the wind anywhere when something comes along. When you have character and integrity in a relationship, then you’re trustworthy. Then your mate, your spouse, has no worries, no hang-ups about where you’re at, what you’re doing. ...[T]rust is crucial in a relationship.

The Role of Religion in Teaching Fidelity and Integrity

For most of the wives and husbands interviewed, religious faith reportedly played a critical role in shaping their understanding of fidelity and integrity. Many couples, for example, emphasized that their religious beliefs and practices motivated them to remain faithful and honest with each other. Tanner, a white Orthodox Christian husband, explained how his faith helped him resist temptation. Discussing his job, he said, “I spend two weeks a month on the road. There are temptations out there that I’ve never succumbed to, and one of the reasons is my faith gives me the strength not to do that.”

Enoch, a white Presbyterian husband, elaborated on the promises he made with his wife:



We made vows to be a couple, to be true to each other, so I have a commitment to monogamy and fidelity. I think it would be easy to rationalize out of that if a person didn't have some beliefs to base that on.

For other participants, fidelity was tied directly to [accountability](#) to God. Fu, a Chinese Christian husband, shared, "To keep your marriage holy is your responsibility to God; otherwise you are ashamed to face God. Betray[ing] your spouse is betraying God."

One white Latter-day Saint couple described the role of a covenant with God and each other as follows:

Evan: When we were married, we covenanted with each other that we would be faithful to each other and that we would also look to God ... and remember Him, and so a covenant is a very vital part of our relationship.

Tara: It's ... a three-way partnership, with God being ... a party to making this marriage work.

Coming together by remembering the promises that they made to each other before God reportedly put fidelity and integrity at the forefront of these couples' relationships.

Challenges to Integrity and Fidelity

While the majority of participants described fidelity as a source of strength, some acknowledged challenges. Orlando, an African American Christian husband, noted the pressures of living up to marital vows in a world filled with distractions and said:

This world ... has a way of testing if you mean what you said [when you got married] or were you just sitting up there 'cause everything was rosy that day ... Are you going to hold your sacred vows [when it gets hard]?

The question posed by Orlando does stimulate reflection within marriage—including (and especially) when the challenges come. If marital fidelity is defined by one question, perhaps Orlando nails it with *Are you going to hold to your sacred vows when it gets hard?*

Imperfect But Striving

The animated story of Carl and Ellie in “Up” illustrates how integrity and fidelity create a foundation for enduring love. However, the American Families of Faith project documents the experience of hundreds of couples who view these virtues as essential for marital stability and satisfaction in their own marriages. These couples have been married for an average of more than 20 years.

In a touching moment from the film, Carl says, “You’re my best friend, Ellie.” Similarly, a father in our project said of his wife’s integrity and fidelity, “She was married to marriage long before she was married to me.” The same father also wrote of his wife of more than four decades, “I can imagine no heaven without her ... and with her, even hell would be tolerable.”

The insights from the imperfect but exemplary marriages studied in the American Families of Faith project reveal that fidelity and integrity are not just ideals but lived virtues that sustain many strong marriages through a sacred sense of shared purpose. For many couples, these virtues are deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs and practices, which provide both motivation and practical tools for navigating challenges.

The imperfect but striving women and men in the American Families of Faith project underscore that fidelity and integrity are more than individual actions; they are the cornerstone of enduring, meaningful partnerships. By striving to live out these ideals, couples create relationships that not only withstand life’s trials but thrive in their shared commitment to each other.

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