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# The Travail of Tiger Woods — Lessons Not to Be Missed

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The travail of Tiger Woods entered a new chapter over the weekend as Accenture, a global consulting firm, severed all ties with the world's most famous golfer. In doing so, Accenture became the first of Woods's major sponsors to end its relationship with him. It is not likely to be the last.

Tiger Woods's fall from public favor happened with breathtaking speed. In a matter of days, a minor vehicle accident in the middle of the night mushroomed into both private and public catastrophe. Even as Woods and his famously protective handlers sought to avoid or limit the controversy, the golfer's eventual admission of marital infidelity has forever changed the way the public looks at the world's most highly compensated athlete.



This story is far from over. Even as Tiger Woods has announced that he is taking an “indefinite” leave from professional golf in order to give priority to his wife and family, his future as both professional athlete and public figure is very much in question. Some believe that Woods will return to his exalted position after a necessary period of contrition and public withdrawal. Others suggest that, given the mental demands of professional golf, Tiger Woods will have a very difficult time returning to top form. And, what about Tiger Woods the brand? On these questions time will have to tell. Nevertheless, the travail of Tiger Woods already provides lessons that are not to be missed.

## **Lesson One: Acts done in private can and will have public consequences.**

Interestingly, the scandal surrounding Tiger Woods appeared to be of low voltage in its opening chapter. Indeed, some of the most interesting public debate of this first phase was over the question of whether the unfolding scandal was of any public consequence at all. A good number of observers, including Peggy Noonan, appearing on the “This Week” program on ABC News, argued that the scandal was a private matter, since Tiger Woods is a professional athlete and not a politician. Writing in *Newsweek* magazine, Julia Baird made a similar argument. “He is not a politician, priest, or morals crusader. He is an athlete,” Baird declared.

She continued:

*Why do we even pretend that sportspeople are models of propriety? Or rather why do we need them to be? They are physically gifted, driven, and disciplined. That's what you need to excel in sport. Not moral strength, courage, decency, or fidelity. These virtues are admirable, but are a bonus: they should not be an expectation. Yet we continue to project an irrational desire for the physically perfect to be spiritually strong.*

That is a rather amazing argument. Moral strength, courage, decency, and fidelity are “admirable,” but not necessary for athletes? Clearly, the American public was not buying that argument — and for good reason.

Tiger Woods may not be a priest or a politician, but he has transformed himself into a public figure. Indeed, most of his income is derived from selling himself as a brand, an advertising symbol, and an image. The glare of publicity was not forced upon Tiger Woods — he has actively and quite successfully cultivated this publicity for his own purposes. There is

no inherent fault in this, but the American people are not buying the argument that his adventures in serial marital infidelity, combined with two late-night 911 calls, are matters of purely private concern between Tiger Woods and his wife, Elin Nordegren.

Charles McGrath made this point clear in an essay published in *The New York Times*:

*[Tiger] Woods has become a public figure not just in the way that most great athletes are public figures, but also in a way probably unparalleled in the history of publicity itself. He has made far more money from selling himself, or his image, than he has made from playing tournaments. That image, partly genuine and partly sculptured, has been one of decency, modesty, filial devotion and paternal responsibility, and not of mysterious car crashes and evasive explanations.*

Private actions lead to public consequences. This is not true at the same scale for everyone. As Charles McGrath pointed out in his essay, if the accident that sparked this scandal had happened to most people, “it wouldn’t have merited more than a line or two in the local weekly.” But whatever the context, private sins never stay as private as sinners expect, and the consequences are never limited to those privately involved. While the greatest injury is to Tiger Woods’s wife and children, he has also done great damage to the sport he has represented for so long. The damage spreads far beyond the sports world.

### **Lesson Two: The public still believes that adultery is a big deal.**

There is no question that America’s moral landscape has been transformed in recent decades. This is especially true when it comes to the morality of sex and sexuality. Our contemporary society is marked by a breathtaking pattern of moral renegotiation that has led to the virtual evaporation of many moral stigmas, a rebellion against all rules, and the increasing legitimization of any number of sexual practices, lifestyles, and forms of expression. A spirit of moral revolution and moral relativism when it comes to sex has been in the air at least since the 1960s.

At the same time, marriage has been increasingly marginalized as an institution, with no-fault divorce and any number of other assaults serving to undermine marital stability and the place of marriage in society. Our contemporary mores have shifted to permissive extremes when it comes to matters such as premarital sex, pornography, and the ubiquitous use of sex in entertainment and advertising.

Still, it appears that Americans draw the line at adultery. The scandal surrounding Tiger Woods is essentially a scandal about adultery. In their own way, Americans have made clear their instinct and assumption that adultery is objectively wrong, deserving of moral censure, and not to be taken lightly.

The force of public outrage directed at Tiger Woods’s admission of marital infidelity indicates that the American public conscience remains more deeply rooted in its biblical origins than many secular observers would expect or appreciate.

A fascinating angle on this issue is provided in an article by Roger Blitz published in *The Financial Times*. Blitz argues that Tiger Woods is likely to escape much damage to his reputation because “while Mr. Woods and his advisers have built his image around many values, such as his diversity, his connection with young people, ... and his well-spoken demeanor, Christian morality is not one of them.”

In other words, Blitz asserts that those who are not publicly committed to Christian morality are not held to this standard by the public. Evidently, someone forgot to tell the American people. Virtually no public figure has come forth to argue that what Tiger Woods has done is of no significant moral consequence. No major figure has argued that marital infidelity is morally inconsequential. While Americans may be confused about any number of moral matters and questions about sexuality, marriage exists as a fundamental moral firewall, and the public outrage over this scandal is, in its own very important way, a testimonial to this fact.

### **Lesson Three: A fall from public favor can happen in an instant.**

Just a matter of days ago, Tiger Woods was at the very top of his profession, one of the most admired public figures of the sports world, and a man known primarily for his exquisite discipline and absolute mental focus. All that has evaporated (for now, at least) in an almost instantaneous burst of scandal.

“What Tiger Woods has caused to happen to himself and his image over the past two weeks is the sports world’s most remarkable fall from grace, ever.” So wrote Christine Brennan in *USA Today*. She continued: “No athlete has ever held a perch so high in our culture — right up there with President and Mrs. Obama, and Oprah — and fallen so far so fast.” All that changed in a matter of mere days. “Today, that man is in disarray, his family life a shambles, his golf future a question mark, with much of what we thought we knew about him now laughed at and doubted.”

Of course, no one knows where the scandal will end. Tiger Woods must already deal with accusations of adultery, his own admission of guilt, and a growing swarm of salacious details, rumors, and speculations. He has added to his public challenge by attempting to script every admission for limited impact. Even as he has, to his credit, used words such as “transgressions” and “infidelity,” he has not come forth with a compelling account of his behavior. Add to this his refusal to appear in public to make any comment. While this strategy is understandable, he will eventually be required to say something in a public forum.

Tiger Woods now finds himself in a disastrous crisis of his own making. There is no one else he can blame for his trouble and there is no public account that can undo the past. In a truly breathtaking reversal, Tiger Woods has gone from being one of the most universally respected figures in sports to one of the most widely discussed subjects of scandal. Clearly, it does not take long to fall from a pedestal.

In one of his advertisements for Accenture, the image of Tiger Woods appears along with the words: “It’s what you do next that counts.” Much now depends on what Tiger Woods does next. If the American people are truly scandalized by his adultery, they must now hope and pray that this marriage and family can be rebuilt and sustained. Something of far greater consequence than an illustrious career in sports is at stake here. Tiger Woods the human being is of infinitely greater value than Tiger Woods the brand.

For Christians, there is an even deeper concern. The current travail of Tiger Woods points far beyond his need for marital recovery, career consultation, or brand management. Tiger Woods needs a Savior. I am praying that this devastating experience, caused so classically by his own sin, will lead Tiger Woods to understand that he is not so self-sufficient as he thinks. Tiger Woods now faces a problem that he cannot solve. Though he can do much to repair his marriage, his family, and his public image, he cannot atone for his own sins. My prayer is that there is someone who can reach Tiger Woods with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the end, all this must remind Christians of the universal need for the Gospel. We must remember our own sin and our utter dependence upon the grace and mercy of God made ours in Jesus Christ. Without question, this is the most important lesson drawn from the travail of Tiger Woods.

On his deathbed, Martin Luther offered these last words: “We are sinners, it is true.” Tiger Woods is one of us, after all.

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