

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD:
THE CHRISTIAN VISION FOR LOVE AND MARRIAGE
APOLOGIZING AND FORGIVING:
THE 'HEART' OF A CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

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September 19, 2006

The Realities of a Marriage

Spouses manifest a combination of **Christ-like actions coupled with hurtful words and behaviors**. The apostle Paul explained the predicament this way: "For what I do is not the good I want to do, no, the evil thing I do not want to do this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19). Any relationship of two humans will have problems because humans are problems. A fundamental truth is that every marriage experiences pain and heartache. Due to sinful human nature, "fumbling" in a marriage is ordinary and commonplace. Hence, misunderstandings and disagreements are unavoidable and inevitable even in healthy, satisfying marriages.

The simple truth is that spouses do things they should not do and neglect to do things they should do. In a marriage, **normal problems occur because no couple ever communicates perfectly, resolves all disagreements harmoniously or achieves ideal emotional closeness**. Unfortunately, the most serious hurts typically happen within the context of close interpersonal relationships, creating a tragic irony of being hurt by and of hurting those who are loved most deeply. When wrongs or sins are not healed by prompt apologies and forgiveness, a couple may drift apart, experience relationship deterioration and perhaps be in danger of dissolution.

1. Based on the above information, please **circle one significant insight or reminder** that you believe will help your marriage.
2. This insight or reminder will be helpful to our marital relationship in the following way:

Faith in Christ and the Marital Relationship

Christianity may be called appropriately the good news of forgiveness. The Bible has nearly 125 references to the import of forgiveness for interpersonal relationships. Jesus said, "If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sin" (Mark 11:25). The apostle Paul declared, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another, forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). And again the apostle Paul encouraged, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other" (Ephesians 4:32). The entire substance of the Christian faith is forgiveness, and likewise, the 'heart' of a Christian marriage is apologizing and forgiving.

Christ not only gave the Church the power to forgive the sins of people but also mandated that people have the power to forgive others. Christ's spirit, simply stated, was one of giving and forgiving. The two signs of a **spiritually and emotionally healthy Christian** spouse are also giving and forgiving which mirror Christ and the Church. A Christian spouse accepts the forgiveness of God for sinful behavior, seeks or grants forgiveness, accepts the forgiveness of God, seeks or grants forgiveness, etc. Hence, the process of

forgiveness is circular not linear, since as you receive God's forgiveness, you more readily forgive others. Truly, the measure of God's forgiveness in your life corresponds to the compassionate forgiveness you impart to your spouse and others. Especially for Christian couples, **forgiveness is a powerful, healing agent for marital injuries.**

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Hurts or Sins From Wrongful Words and Actions

Even the most loving Christian spouse is an imperfect and flawed human being, capable of acting in ways that are harmful to a relationship. Christians, both intentionally and unintentionally, make mistakes, create troubles, and cause marital “scratches, cuts and wounds.” In healthy relationships, spouses differentiate between **“scratches, cuts and wounds”** because it is generally not necessary to apologize for “scratches.” Yet, “scratches” that ordinarily would not call for apologizing can become major “cuts” by sheer repetition. Unfortunately, these wrongful words and actions result in detrimental emotions such as anger, blame, bitterness, resentment, mistrust, betrayal, and hostility. Understand that unresolved hurts from childhood that have not been forgiven may produce misplaced anger in the current marital relationship.

Cuts and wounds create a crisis for a marriage because they are personal, unfair and deep, and these hurts need to be addressed quickly to prevent serious damage. The highest respect that can be shown people is to let them take responsibility for their hurtful actions. Spouses **demonstrate personal responsibility** when they apologize for their wrongful words or actions. **Just as important**, Christian spouses may enhance their marriage when they assertively **hold their partner accountable** for “cuts and serious wounds” which have hurt them personally rather than let them fester creating resentment and a “grudge wall.”

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General Thoughts On Apologizing and Forgiving

It does little good for Christian spouses to retaliate. In fact, a Chinese proverb from centuries ago confirmed that “the one who pursues revenge should dig two graves.” No form of revenge can heal a wounded spouse. Vengeance and revenge are not workable solutions for any relationship problems.

We all make mistakes, but for some reason we have problems forgiving the mistakes of others. If a **Christian possesses an unforgiving spirit** hope for a healthy marriage are generally diminished. There are several **reasons for an unforgiving spirit**: 1) Forgiveness requires a supernatural action (cross of Christ); 2) Individuals who have difficulty forgiving a spouse for a certain wrong have the same shortcoming existing within themselves; 3) Non-forgivers generally do not have healthy self-esteem; 4) In terms of forgiveness, a person may have had a lack of parental modeling; 5) Excessive pride creates the feeling of superiority, that others are below us and not worthy of our forgiveness; 6) Unrealistic expectations – Christians have a difficult time forgiving unless they surrender the high expectation that others should be perfect; and 7) To forgive another person is an unfamiliar, frightening experience and thus fear is a major barrier.

Marital relationships would be healthier if Christian spouses understood that the forgiveness of sins is a rich blessing and a true gift that they can give to each other. There is little doubt that **relationships are enhanced when Christian spouses understand the “why and how” of apologizing and forgiving.**

A relationship, like every living organism, is in constant danger of deterioration, unless there is the continuous process of daily maintenance and repair. Rather than being viewed as a one-time occurrence, apologizing and forgiving continues throughout the life of a relationship for repairing any damage that could lead to permanent destruction. Thus, **one avenue, if not the only avenue, for mending a broken marital relationship is apologizing and forgiving.** The litmus test for a healthy marriage is based on the capability and manifestation of repentance, apologies, and forgiveness on a regular basis.

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The Apologizing and Forgiving Process

STEP 1: REGRET

Regret is similar to a fanciful wish or a fleeting desire, where the offending spouse whimsically states, “I wish I had not committed that wrong,” but there is an absence of longing to change behavior.

STEP 2: REPENTANCE

Repentance is one step beyond remorse or regret. Just the opposite, repentance is godly sorrow with a feeling of sadness in having offended God and your spouse. **Repentance** is often defined as: a change of mind; a change of ways; a change of behavioral direction; or finally, turning one's back on sinful deeds and with God's help attempting not to sin again. Repentance involves three elements: **recognition** of wrongful behaviors, **sorrow** over wrongful behaviors, and **abandonment of wrongful** behaviors. Originating in the heart, repentance initiates the first step in the process of apologizing and forgiving.

After counseling numerous troubled marriages, I have observed that distressed marriages frequently are weak in the domain of repentance and short on apologies. Difficult-to-live-with spouses find it burdensome to repent and apologize to their partners because they often have not developed the practice of daily repenting and apologizing to God. Also, difficult-to-live-with spouses generally have a hard time assuming responsibility for their wrongful actions.

A repentant spirit is the healing balm to breaking the cycle of blame in a marital relationship. The entire life of a Christian is one of continual repentance. Repentance is a prerequisite for reconciliation since a change of ways has to occur to heal grievances. Thus, the question that arises within a healthy marital relationship is “How can I repent and apologize?” when I have offended my spouse.

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STEP 3: APOLOGIZING

Apologizing follows repentance, and is a verbal or written acknowledgement of the hurt or sin to your spouse. There are two sides to apologizing: the one side is an expression of wrongful behaviors, while the other is a willingness to do whatever it takes to reorient one's Christian life and be a godly Christian spouse.

A spouse who has difficulty apologizing for wrongs usually damages their integrity, suffers emotional problems and is often angry. An apology must never be an underhanded way of avoiding sincere repentance. An unhealthy apology may also be manipulative to justify actions or it may be a shifting of blame to your spouse. Thus, a sincere apology will never have the word "but" after the words "I am sorry for..."

In terms of apologizing, a key distinction between **guilt and shame** is important. A healthy spouse feels **guilty** when they **do something wrong**, while a **shameful** spouse feels they **are defective in some way**. **Shame** is a feeling that **"I am a mistake,"** rather than **"I have made a mistake,"** which is **guilt**. Shame-based spouses persistently apologize when there is no genuine wrong, which is not healthy for them personally or for their marriage.

Apologizing requires a great deal of **character strength, courage, honesty, and humility**. A complete apology will include a seeking of forgiveness to heal the relationship, with a request like, **"will you please forgive me?"** At times, a spouse may find it easier and more beneficial to first write a note of apology for the injuries rather than initially apologize verbally. Although sounding simple, apologizing is difficult, and requires much practice and regular implementation for a marriage to be satisfying and sound.

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STEP 4: FORGIVENESS

Misconceptions Concerning Forgiveness

- a. Forgiveness must not be misconstrued as forgetting, since forgiving does not erase the painful deed forever from your mind—that's impossible. Some spouses mistakenly believe that forgiving is similar to erasing the memory of the damaging wrongs from the mind as if the injury never happened. Long after you have forgiven, the wound lives on in your memory.
- b. Forgiveness is achingly burdensome, requiring an action that you may not feel like doing. You probably do many things in life that you may not feel like doing. You are not being insincere or hypocritical if you forgive your repentant spouse when you do not feel like it.
- c. Forgiveness does not numb the pain, where you suddenly feel miraculous comfort from the forgiveness act. However, forgiveness does control the reruns of pain.
- d. When you forgive your spouse for being a sinner just like you are, you are not sanctioning their wrongful behavior. You forgive your spouse because all human beings make mistakes.
- e. Forgiveness is not "giving in" to your spouse who committed a harmful act, as if the wrong did not hurt you. A forgiving spouse first holds the offender accountable for wrongs or hurts, and then waits for genuine repentance and an apology.

- f. Forgiveness is not condoning, which is to simply overlook the wrong as if no harm was intended or done. It would be highly inappropriate to condone a spouse's immoral or sinful behavior. To condone wrongs or "give in" lowers your self-esteem and undermines your integrity.
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An Explanation of Forgiveness

- a. Forgiveness can be defined as: canceling a debt, setting free, understanding, releasing negative emotions, letting go, ceasing resentment, and abandoning one's claim against a person who has done wrong. **True forgiveness is the hardest thing in the universe.**
- b. The more virtuous a person, the more likely it is that the person also possesses a forgiving spirit, since forgiveness is an act of charity. Forgivers are often described as generous, emotionally stable, flexible, adaptable, and other-centered. As a forgiver, you view others as worthwhile, accepting them as frail, feeble human beings.
- c. **Forgiveness is a gift and an act of kindness.** For the sake of Jesus Christ, God gives you the gift of forgiveness. No one deserves God's forgiveness. Likewise, give the gift of forgiveness to your spouse, who is just like you, and doesn't deserve your gift of forgiveness.
- d. **Forgiveness is a promise,** a decision, not to bring up the forgiven wrong to your spouse ever again. Forgiveness in the Bible is spoken of as "forgetting" or "remembering no more," as we read in Isaiah 43:25 and Jeremiah 31:34. Thus, forgiveness means promising to never bring up the sins forgiven to your spouse again.

Breaking the promise of forgiveness is like knocking a scab off a healing cut. If you ever break your promise of forgiveness, you become the offender and it is now your turn to repent, apologize and ask for forgiveness.
- e. **Forgiveness is a process that will take time and may last a lifetime.** Forgiveness can be described as journey of many miles over rugged terrain, grueling and seemingly endless. The more severe the offense, the more deeply imbedded it is within the heart, and the lengthier the journey.
- f. **Forgiveness is often discovery** that everyone needs forgiveness from others. When you forgive your spouse, you are saying, "I am human. I will make mistakes. When I make mistakes I want your forgiveness, and so now I grant you forgiveness in Christ."
- g. Forgiveness is a marriage's revolution against the devil and your own sinful flesh. **Forgiveness is the lubrication for friction within a marital relationship.**
- h. Forgiveness is one way to break the cycle of blame in your marital relationship. Forgiveness counteracts the power struggle that often occurs even in a healthy marriage. **As forgiveness breaks the cycle of blame,** it provides a fresh start for your relationship.

- i. Forgiveness is important not only for your marital relationship, but also for your intrapersonal well-being. **To forgive is vital for intrapersonal health** because you release the inner resentment and bitterness that can destroy you. When you forgive your spouse, almighty God heals you spiritually, emotionally, and physically.
- j. **Forgiveness works a special kind of restoration**, diminishing negative thinking, and altering your attitude in a positive direction. Forgiveness allows you to fill your mind with positive thoughts and to develop a good attitude (Philippians 4:8-9 and Luke 11:24-26). **You rid yourself of a negative spirit when you forgive your spouse, freeing yourself to demonstrate Christ-like words and actions in caring for your spouse in the future.**

1. Based on the above information, please **circle three significant insights or reminders** that you think will help your marriage.
2. These **three** insights or reminders will help our marital relationship in the following ways:
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.

STEP 5: RECONCILIATION

Generally, **forgiveness is necessary but reconciliation is optional**. For example, an abused spouse may offer forgiveness to their repentant partner, but may not reconcile until confident the destructive behavior will not happen again. There is a difference between forgiveness and trust.

Forgiveness basically benefits the forgiver, while reconciliation is a behavioral coming together. A genuine apology coupled with forgiveness opens the door for a new, more intimate marriage.

Forgiveness restores a marriage because a debt is forgiven. The process rebuilds trust and moves your broken relationship in the positive direction of care and compassion. The entire process may provide reconciliation along with the opportunity to treat your spouse as you would like to be treated.

Marital relationships often struggle with human weaknesses and wrongs, and the apologizing and forgiving process can restore and preserve your marriage. If the process does not restore your relationship, at least you will have experienced personal growth, healing, and wholeness, by sacrificially giving and forgiving just as our Redeemer and Savior Jesus did on the cross.

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