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# FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

by

**Jonathan M. Menn**

**B.A., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1974**

**J.D., Cornell Law School, 1977**

**M.Div., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2007**

**Equipping Church Leaders East Africa, Inc.**

**714 S. Summit St., Appleton, WI 54914**

**+1-920-2846841 (mobile and WhatsApp)**

**jonathanmenn@yahoo.com**

**www.elea.net**

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Forgiveness and reconciliation are at the heart of Christ's ministry to us, and are to be at the heart of our approach to others. This course deals with the important Scriptural bases of forgiveness and reconciliation. It discusses what forgiveness and reconciliation are and what they are not as well as how reconciliation differs from forgiveness. Practical reasons why forgiveness and reconciliation are discussed and practical models for how to forgive and how to reconcile are included. Also covered are the relationship of forgiveness and repentance and the issue of forgiving oneself.

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## FORGIVENESS

### Important Scriptural References<sup>1</sup>

#### **I. Forgiveness is part of the essence of God's nature**

##### ***A. Forgiveness is integral to God's nature and character***

1. God himself declared this:<sup>6</sup> *Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; <sup>7</sup> who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."* (Exod 34:6-7)

2. This was recognized by others: (Num 14:17-19; Ps 103:2-3; and Ps 130:3-4).

3. God's forgiveness of our sins demonstrates his faithfulness to us: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

##### ***B. Forgiveness is part of the essence and mission of Jesus Christ***

1. Christ himself declared that he had the authority to forgive people's sins:<sup>3</sup> *And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. <sup>4</sup> Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying. <sup>5</sup> And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." <sup>6</sup> But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, <sup>7</sup> "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" <sup>8</sup> Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? <sup>9</sup> Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk'? <sup>10</sup> But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the paralytic, <sup>11</sup> "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home." <sup>12</sup> And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone, so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this." (Mark 2:3-12)* The parallel accounts of this event are Matt 9:2-8 and Luke 5:17-26. See also Luke 7:48-50: Christ's authority to forgive was noted by others; Luke 23:33-34: Christ forgave others even from the cross.

2. Christ's forgiveness of people's sins was and is an integral part of his mission on earth; it goes to the essence of the Gospel, was proclaimed by the apostles, and is to be proclaimed by us:

a. **Acts 5:29-32:**<sup>29</sup> *But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. <sup>31</sup> He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."*

b. **Acts 13:36-39:**<sup>36</sup> *For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; <sup>37</sup> but He whom God raised did not undergo decay. <sup>38</sup> Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, <sup>39</sup> and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.*

c. **Col 1:13-14:**<sup>13</sup> *For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

d. See also: Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:38; 10:43; 13:38-39; 26:15-18; Eph 1:7; 1 John 2:12.

#### **II. We are commanded by Christ—as a central part of what it means to be Christian—to forgive others**

**A. The Lord's Prayer requires us to forgive others, just as we have been forgiven:**<sup>9</sup> *Pray, then, in this way: "Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. <sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." <sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will*

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<sup>1</sup>All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard version unless otherwise noted.

also forgive you. <sup>15</sup> *But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.* (**Matt 6:9-15**) The parallel passage is **Luke 11:2-4**.

1. Note that *the only portion* of the Lord's Prayer which *Jesus specifically emphasizes and comments on* is the portion of the prayer regarding *forgiveness*.
2. Note also that *unforgiveness* is a *sin*.
3. Note finally that Christ makes it absolutely clear that God's forgiveness of us is directly related to our forgiveness of others: God *will* forgive us if we forgive others; but God will *not* forgive us if we do not forgive others. As D. A. Carson points out: "People disqualify themselves from being forgiven if they are so hardened in their own bitterness that they cannot or will not forgive others. In such cases, they display no brokenness, no contrition, no recognition of the great value of forgiveness, no understanding of their own complicity in sin, no repentance." (Carson 2002: 79)<sup>2</sup>

**B. Jesus' longest parable in Matthew<sup>3</sup> is about the necessity of forgiving others:** <sup>21</sup> *Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"* <sup>22</sup> *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.* <sup>23</sup> *For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.* <sup>24</sup> *When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.* <sup>25</sup> *But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.* <sup>26</sup> *So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.'* <sup>27</sup> *And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.* <sup>28</sup> *But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.'* <sup>29</sup> *So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.'* <sup>30</sup> *But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.* <sup>31</sup> *So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.* <sup>32</sup> *Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.'* <sup>33</sup> *Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?'* <sup>34</sup> *And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.* <sup>35</sup> *My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."* (**Matt 18:21-35**)

**C. Jesus' longest parable in Luke (and in the Bible) is about forgiveness and restoration:** <sup>11</sup> *And He said, "A man had two sons.* <sup>12</sup> *The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me' So he divided his wealth between them.* <sup>13</sup> *And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.* <sup>14</sup> *Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished.* <sup>15</sup> *So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.* <sup>16</sup> *And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.* <sup>17</sup> *But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!'* <sup>18</sup> *I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight;'* <sup>19</sup> *I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.'* <sup>20</sup> *So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* <sup>21</sup> *And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* <sup>22</sup> *But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet;'* <sup>23</sup> *and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;'* <sup>24</sup> *for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'* <sup>25</sup> *And they began to celebrate.* <sup>26</sup> *Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing.* <sup>27</sup> *And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be.* <sup>28</sup> *And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and*

<sup>2</sup> Randy Alcorn puts it like this: "We harm no one through bitterness as much as we harm ourselves. Someone told me, 'Bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.'" (Alcorn 2009: 425)

<sup>3</sup> Jesus' parable concerning the two slaves (**Matt 18:21-35**) consists of 245 words in the Greek text, including Peter's question of how often we should forgive others' sins against us, which was the occasion for the parable, and the words which introduce Jesus' parable, "Jesus said to him." Jesus' second longest parable, the laborers in the vineyard (**Matt 20:1-16**), consists of 241 words in the Greek (including two words of doubtful originality); all of those words, however, are the words of Jesus himself. (Aland, et al. 2001)

sound.’<sup>28</sup> *But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him.*<sup>29</sup> *But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;’*<sup>30</sup> *but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’*<sup>31</sup> *And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours.’*<sup>32</sup> *But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.’”* (Luke 15:11-32)

**D. Jesus directly links our forgiveness with our love:**<sup>36</sup> *Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.*<sup>37</sup> *And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume,*<sup>38</sup> *and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume.*<sup>39</sup> *Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.”*<sup>40</sup> *And Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he replied, “Say it, Teacher.”*<sup>41</sup> *“A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.*<sup>42</sup> *When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?”*<sup>43</sup> *Simon answered and said, “I suppose the one whom he forgave more.” And He said to him, “You have judged correctly.”*<sup>44</sup> *Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.*<sup>45</sup> *You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet.*<sup>46</sup> *You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume.*<sup>47</sup> *For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.”*<sup>48</sup> *Then He said to her, “Your sins have been forgiven.”*<sup>49</sup> *Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this man who even forgives sins?”*<sup>50</sup> *And He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”* (Luke 7:36-50)

**E. Jesus specifically links our forgiving others with our prayer life and with God’s forgiving us:**<sup>23</sup> *“Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea’, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him.*<sup>24</sup> *Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.*<sup>25</sup> *Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.*<sup>26</sup> *But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.”* (Mark 11:23-26)

1. Note that Jesus made this statement after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, shortly before he was crucified. Although everything said by Jesus is important, words said in contemplation of death have an added poignancy.
2. Note also that in this statement Jesus has repeated the words he said when he emphasized and commented on the importance of forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer. Statements are repeated in order to emphasize their importance.

### III. The apostles tell us to forgive others, both by precept and by example

**A. Paul commands us to forgive:** *And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you* (Eph 4:32; see also 2 Cor 2:7; Col 3:13).

Carson comments regarding this verse: “The idea is not simply that we have been forgiven, and therefore we ought to forgive, but that God *himself*, in Christ, has forgiven us, and therefore our debt is incalculable. No matter how much wretched evil has been done against us, it is little compared with the offense we have thrown in the face of God. Yet God in Christ has forgiven us. If we know anything of the release of this forgiveness, if we have glimpsed anything of the magnitude of the debt we owe to God, our forgiveness of others will not seem to be such a large leap.” (Carson 2002: 80-81)

**B. Paul modeled forgiveness:**<sup>10</sup> *But whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ,*<sup>11</sup> *in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes.* (2 Cor 2:10-11)

1. Note that Paul’s forgiving others was for the sake of the church (“your sakes”). Further, he was constantly aware that what he was doing (i.e., whether he was being forgiving or unforgiving) was being

done “in the presence of Christ.”

2. Note also that *unforgiveness* would allow Satan to “take advantage of us.”

3. What was true for Paul is certainly true for us, especially those of us who (like Paul) are in positions of leadership in the church:

a. *Whether we are forgiving or unforgiving affects the church, for good or for bad.*

b. *Although we may not see him or sense him, everything we are doing (including forgiving or not forgiving the wrongs done against us by others) is being done in the presence of Christ—and we will be judged by Christ if we are unforgiving.*

c. *Our unforgiveness gives Satan an opportunity and advantage to work through us, and against us, both in and against the church.* Our unforgiveness will cause others to follow our bad example and become unforgiving themselves—the church will thereby become divisive, divided, and bitter; Satan will be the only one who prospers. On the other hand, if we have a forgiving spirit, the members of the church will tend to emulate our example. If we are forgiving we will be able to preach and teach on all of the Biblical passages cited above in the power of the Spirit, without being hypocrites. In that case, Satan will not have the opportunity and advantage to work through us or through the church.

**C. Stephen, the church’s first martyr, gave us the supreme example (after Christ himself), by forgiving those who murdered him, even as he died:** <sup>59</sup> *They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”* <sup>60</sup> *Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60)*

## Understanding and Applying Forgiveness in Our Lives

### I. What Forgiveness Is NOT<sup>4</sup>

**A. Forgiveness is NOT “calling a wrong a right,” minimizing the hurt, tolerating the wrong, saying “what you did is no big deal,” or “it doesn’t matter,” or being “indifferent” to the wrong or the wrongdoer**

1. Forgiveness is recognizing and acknowledging that what the other person did to us IS wrong. Indeed, what the other person did to us is so wrong that Christ allowed himself to be tortured and killed for that very sin (as well as for our very wrong sins).

2. To say that a wrong is a right, or “is no big deal,” or “doesn’t matter” is abandoning the truth—it therefore cuts us off from God and Christ, because: God is truth (**Exod 34:6; Pss 25:5, 10; 33:4; 40:10-11; 43:3; 57:10; 86:15; 89:14; 117:2; 119:142, 151; 138:2; Isa 65:16**); Christ is truth (**Matt 22:16; Mark 12:14; John 1:14, 17; 3:21; 8:45-46; 14:6; 18:37; Eph 4:21**); and we are expected to be truthful in ourselves, before God, and with others (**Pss 51:6; 86:11; 145:18; Prov 3:3; 16:6; 23:23; John 4:23-24; Eph 4:25**).

3. Forgiveness is not sentimentality. When we forgive someone that does not mean we are tolerating what he did, or inviting him to hurt us again, or intending to let it happen again. Forgiveness requires a clear eye to know the difference between right and wrong, and to call them what they are—because you can only forgive a “wrong,” indeed, a wrong that is significant enough to hurt you.

**B. Forgiveness is NOT weakness—to forgive does NOT mean that you lose your “dignity” or your “manhood”**

1. To forgive someone for a wrong he has done against you is one of the toughest things you will ever have to do in your life. The greater and more hurtful the wrong, the tougher is the act of forgiving the wrongdoer.

2. It takes strength—strength of body, of mind, of will, of character—to be able to forgive a wrongdoer who has harmed you greatly. However, Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit; we have his power to be able to forgive, just as Jesus himself was able to forgive us (and others) for our sins and for murdering him. When we walk in obedience to God, in the truth of his Word, and in the power of his Spirit, he will give us the faith and ability to do the tough thing, because it is the right thing—forgive those who have hurt and harmed us deeply (**Rom 4:19-22; 14:4; 1 Cor 10:13; Eph 3:20-21; 6:10-16; Heb 2:18; 7:25; Jude 24**).

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<sup>4</sup>This section is based largely on Jeffress 2000: chs. 3 and 7; Smedes 1984: ch. 5; Smedes 1996: chs. 2-3; Enright 2001: ch. 2; and Klassen n.d.: “Definitions.”

3. One might think that forgiveness places *too much* responsibility on the person who was wronged, rather than on the wrongdoer. However, as Jeffress points out: “God doesn’t exempt us from tasks just because they’re unfair or difficult. For example, consider these famous words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.

And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. [Matt 5:38-41]

Notice that in each situation that Jesus mentions here, He places responsibility not on the offender, but on the offended. The offended is to turn the other cheek, offer his coat as well as his shirt, and walk the second mile.” (Jeffress 2000: 45; see also Sande 2004: 148-49; and Worthington 2003: 68, “We do not forgive because it is easy, but because it is right and is a response to God’s love and forgiveness of us.”)

4. If you think that forgiving someone who sinned against you causes you to lose your “dignity” or “manhood,” consider this: Is that what you think about Christ? Is he somehow less “dignified” or “less a man” because he forgave you?

### C. *Forgiveness is NOT forgetting*

1. “Forgetting is a *passive* process in which a matter fades from memory merely with the passing of time. Forgiving is an *active* process; it involves a conscious choice and a deliberate course of action” (Sande 2004: 206).

2. You cannot forgive what you have forgotten. However, once we forgive we *can* forget because we have been healed.

3. Various passages suggest that God “forgets” our sins (see Ps 103:12; Jer 31:34; Mic 7:19).

a. Those verses, like the Bible’s references to God’s “eyes” (2 Chron 16:9), his “ears” (1 Pet 3:12), his “hands” (Exod 24:11), and his “feet” (2 Sam 22:10) are probably “anthropomorphisms,” i.e., attempts to explain an infinite God to finite man using human analogies. It does not make sense to believe that an omniscient God suddenly develops amnesia when he forgives us and completely forgets what his creatures have done.

b. In fact, the Bible makes clear that *all* of our deeds, and our motives, both good and bad, will be judged by the Lord to determine our eternal rewards (Matt 16:27; Luke 8:17; 12:2-3; Rom 2:1-16; 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:12-15; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:11-15; 22:12). That indicates that God must retain memory of our deeds in order to judge justly.

4. “The verses in the Bible that speak of God’s forgetting sin are attempts to express the completeness of God’s judicial forgiveness of our sin. When we receive God’s forgiveness, we no longer have to fear the eternal consequences of our sin” (Jeffress 2000: 129). That fact is clearly indicated in Rom 4:7-8 (which quotes Ps 32:1-2): <sup>7</sup> *Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered.* <sup>8</sup> *Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.*

Jeffress explains: “Our sin creates an indebtedness to God. We owe God for the transgressions we have committed. But Christ’s death paid our sin debt in a transaction that Paul explains in Colossians 2:13-14: ... having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When you become a Christian, God takes the debt you owe Him, nails it to the cross, and declares it ‘paid in full.’ But it is possible to *forgive* a debt without *forgetting* a debt.” (Jeffress 2000: 130)

5. To put it another way, to say that God “forgets” our transgressions is to say that he feels about us the way he would feel if he had forgotten. Or, “when God says that he ‘remembers your sins no more’ (Isa 43:25), he is not saying that he *cannot* remember our sins. Rather, he is promising that he *will not* remember them. When he forgives us, he chooses not to mention, recount, or think about our sins ever again.” (Sande 2004: 206)

### D. *Forgiveness is NOT excusing*

1. Excusing is the opposite of forgiving. We *excuse* people when we understand that they were *not* to blame for something they did, or for bad results that inadvertently happened from actions they intended for good; we *forgive* people when we understand that they *are* to blame for something they did—something that was wrong and inexcusable—including those bad acts with which they intended to harm us.

2. “Forgiveness says, ‘we both know that what you did was wrong and without excuse. But since God

has forgiven me, I forgive you.’ Because forgiveness deals honestly with sin, it brings a freedom that no amount of excusing could ever hope to provide.” (Sande 2004: 206-07)

**E. Forgiveness is NOT the same as “accepting people”**

1. We *accept* people for the *good* that they *are*; we *forgive* people for the *bad things* that they did to us.
2. Forgiveness requires a *bad act*. We cannot “forgive” someone’s bad “character” or “nature,” any more than we can forgive their race, sex, tribe, or the fact that they are left-handed. Similarly, we do not “forgive” differences of opinion. We only “forgive” wrong, sinful acts that wound us.

**F. Forgiveness does NOT “ignore justice” and does NOT “absolve” people of their sins, but it does NOT necessarily remove all of the consequences of the wrong**

1. Forgiveness is for personal relationships and for resolving the hurt within yourself as a result of a wrong done against you—forgiveness, when practically applied, is something we do within our own heart and mind and soul. It is done in obedience to Christ, and primarily brings about *our own healing*. *Justice* in society is the responsibility of the civil and criminal justice system and is for the purpose of settling the wrong committed against society. Our forgiving someone does not mean that they are not “guilty” and may not be held legally liable; it does not eliminate or supersede the judicial consequences of the state’s civil and criminal judicial system, because a wrong committed against us may also be a wrong affecting the state, and society or humanity as a whole.
2. You forgive a wrong done to you; you cannot forgive someone for a wrong done to someone else, or done against the state or humanity as a whole—that is *absolution*. If someone harms my child, that may also harm me, because I love my child. I can forgive the wrongdoer of my anger, bitterness, and other harm done to me as a result of what he did to my child, but I cannot forgive the wrongdoer *on behalf of my child* for the wrong done *to the child*. My child himself or herself will have to work through the process of forgiving the wrongdoer for the harm done to him or her.
3. Understanding the effects of sin should help us understand why we are much worse sinners than we realize—one sin affects far more people than we can ever imagine. That is also why we need *Christ* to forgive *us*—because he bore *all* the sin onto himself. When we understand the depth of our own sin, and the extent to which Christ has forgiven us, we should much more readily be able to forgive others for the wrongs they have done to us.
4. Final justice will take place in God’s final judgment; that is not our responsibility. Our forgiving a wrongdoer does not absolve the wrongdoer of his guilt before God and does not alter the justice that God will deliver at the last judgment.
5. Forgiving does not minimize the evil of evil acts.
  - a. *“There is no real forgiving unless there is first relentless exposure and honest judgment”* (Smedes 1984: 79). Each person feels his pain all by himself; his level of pain is not increased because a person has harmed dozens, or hundreds, or thousands, or even millions of others—each victim feels the full measure of his pain even though millions of others also have been hurt.
  - b. *To say that some “monsters” are beyond forgiveness ironically gives them what they want—it elevates them to “superhuman” status, like Satan.* Paradoxically, that removes them from even the *need* to be forgiven, or from human accountability, because they are beyond humanity. That results in the perverse irony that the victims must forever live with their hurt and pain, because they can never heal that pain through forgiveness. Seeing “monsters” (mass murderers, political tyrants of history, etc.) as somehow “different” from the rest of us, “bigger” than us, diminishes us and is contrary to the truth. The fact is that “very ordinary people do extraordinary evil” (Smedes 1984: 81).
  - c. *Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recognized: “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”* (Solzhenitsyn 1985: 75)
6. When you forgive someone who wronged and hurt you, you are not necessarily cancelling the consequences of the wrong for the wrongdoer.
  - a. *“The natural consequences of actions have been pretty well designed by God to lead us to be the persons we ought to be. To blunt their lessons may be to harm those we would help.”* (Willard 1997: 262) For example, when David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her



husband, Uriah the Hittite, murdered, although God forgave David’s sin, God nevertheless provided that: *“the sword shall never depart from your house . . . I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your companion, and he shall lie with your wives in broad daylight. Indeed, you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun. . . [and] because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.”* (2 Sam 12:7-14)

b. *“The offender is not ‘off the hook’ when we forgive; we discover that we are ‘off the hook’ when we forgive”* (Klassen n.d.: n.p.). He adds, *“When I forgive I set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner is me”* (Ibid.).

7. Similarly, when you forgive someone who wronged and hurt you, you are not necessarily cancelling the consequences of the wrong for yourself. For example, *“I can forgive the man who blinded me, but my forgiveness does not restore my sight”* (Klassen n.d.: n.p.). However, it is crucial to recognize that, although *“forgiving does not take away the pain, . . . forgiveness helps us to carry the pain”* (Ibid., emph. added). Further, God *uses our forgiveness* (which is our obedience to him) to change us—to make us more Christlike, to draw us closer to himself, and to give us insight, compassion and humility. Through the process (and it might be a long process—indeed, a life-long process), as we come to see his purposes in the hurt and his working in our lives through the hurt and through our forgiveness, he will transform the pain and thereby take it away.

### G. *Forgiveness does NOT mean that you have to trust the offender, or continue to be friends, or in relationship, with him*

1. Forgiveness is given; trust is earned. Friendship requires mutual trust and respect. Respect, like trust, is earned.

2. It only takes one person to forgive; it takes two people to reconcile. Forgiveness is something that *“happens inside the person who does it”* (Smedes 1996: 25). Smedes adds, *“We do our forgiving alone inside our hearts and minds; what happens to the people we forgive depends on them”* (Ibid.: 177). It is not the same thing as reconciliation, although it is a part of reconciliation—forgiveness precedes reconciliation:

a. *Forgiveness is one person’s moral response to another’s injustice;*

b. *Reconciliation is two people’s coming together to restore a relationship whose trust was broken* (abolishing the moral hindrance to fellowship).

3. It is true that we are to “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44); “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27); and “love your enemies, and do good” (Luke 6:35). Jesus said that the commandment, *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself,”* along with loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, was the basis for *“the whole Law and the Prophets”* (Matt 22:37-40).<sup>5</sup>

a. *Note that Jesus did not say that that we are to “like” our enemies.* He recognized that we will, indeed, have enemies who will persecute us. Nevertheless, we are to “love” them. He even added that, *“if you [only] love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same?”* (Matt 5:46)

b. *The definition and essence of such love is this:* *“To love one’s neighbor, one’s enemies . . . should not necessarily be taken to mean doing that which will please them, but choosing to show them favor and goodwill. . . . One should realize the need of people to be changed through Christ’s grace, and to do everything possible to bring them to a knowledge of the Lord. This may involve expressions of benevolence or even discipline and punishment, all as the outworking of love. . . . With reference to God’s love [which we are to emulate], it is God’s willful direction toward man. It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires.”* (Zodhiates 1993: *agapāō; agāpē*)

c. *Thus, to love is to not hate the wrongdoer, even though he has hurt you, but to act for his wellbeing, to show him kindness and goodness, to be self-sacrificing.* Loving includes forgiving. Through this, God may in fact change your feelings toward the offender, even as he transforms

<sup>5</sup>His reference to *“the whole Law and the Prophets”* is a reference to *the entire Bible* (Old Testament)—i.e., God’s entire revealed word for how we are to live. Paul likewise said, *“the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”* (Gal 5:14). The statement *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself”* is from Lev 19:18.

and takes away the hurt you feel as a result of the offense.

**d.** *Loving your enemy or your neighbor does not mean that you must always let him have his own way, or that you must trust him after he has proven himself to be untrustworthy, or that you must remain in business with him after he has proven himself to be a poor businessman or a cheat, or that you must live with him if he is abusive or dangerous to you.* To do those things would perpetuate the person's sinful habits. That certainly is not in his best interest; nor would perpetuating sin glorify God. It may be possible to rehabilitate the relationship and reconcile with the person—but doing so will require your and the other person's *mutual efforts* at reconciliation, not merely your forgiving him for a bad act he did.

## **II. What Forgiveness IS**

### **A. *Forgiveness described: Forgiveness is a form of grace—it is the pardoning of a debt***

Forgiveness is:

1. Acknowledging that a wrong has occurred;
2. Recognizing that the wrong created an obligation for repayment; and
3. Voluntarily choosing to release the offender from that obligation and cover the loss yourself (Jeffress 2000: 49; see also Willard 1997: 262, “We forgive someone of a wrong they have done us when we decide that we will not make them suffer for it in any way”). Thus, forgiveness is a form of grace. Grace is a deliberate decision to *give something good* to someone who *does NOT deserve it*. It is like when God chose to forgive *you*. Don't ever forget that you were forgiven *only* by God's grace; you did NOT deserve it.

### **B. *Forgiveness explained: Forgiveness is an emotional experience that involves all aspects of our being***

1. Each person is a complex being who has at least three major aspects to his or her nature (in addition to the physical body). Those aspects are the person's: (A) *Cognitive* capacity (i.e., the ability to think, reason, know, and understand things); (B) *Volitional* capacity (i.e., the ability to make choices and act upon those choices; the use of the will); and (C) *Affective* capacity (i.e., the emotional component; the ability to “feel”). If the essence of forgiveness is the pardoning of a debt, forgiveness can only be made “real” and lasting if the affective, as well as the cognitive and volitional, aspect of our being is involved in the process of forgiving.<sup>6</sup>
2. Unforgiveness occurs when: (A) A transgression occurs; (B) We perceive that transgression as a hurt or offense; (C) The hurt stimulates the “hot” (immediate) emotions of anger and fear (of being hurt again); (D) Over time we mentally replay and dwell on (i.e., ruminate on) the transgression, the transgressor and his motives, and the consequences of the transgression; (E) This leads to unforgiveness, which includes the “cold” (delayed, long-term) emotions of resentment, bitterness, residual anger, residual fear, hostility, and stress. Emotions themselves are more than just “feelings”; they are whole-body experiences that involve our brain, neurons, neurochemicals, muscles, hormones, and gut.<sup>7</sup>
3. Forgiveness, therefore, is not merely the cognitive acknowledgement that you have been wronged plus the volitional choice to pardon the debt and bear the loss yourself. Instead, forgiveness is a profound act which realizes that being wrongfully hurt by someone is a deeply emotional experience that affects us at the core of our being. Forgiveness is an “emotional experience” because it is an *emotional replacement*. Forgiveness replaces the “hot emotions” (hate, anger, and fear), the unforgiveness, and the “cold emotions” (resentment, bitterness, residual anger, residual fear, hostility, and stress that come from ruminating about the wrong), by *substituting* “positive emotions” such as unselfish love, empathy, and compassion for the wrongdoer.<sup>8</sup> Only this “emotional forgiveness” truly “heals the heart” (Worthington 2003: 44-45).
4. When we forgive, we release the desire to avoid the offender or seek revenge against the offender. Instead, forgiveness replaces evil with good. Forgiveness replaces thoughts that dwell on the wrong, and thoughts that wish harm on the offender, and replace them with thoughts that wish the offender *well*.

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<sup>6</sup>Worthington indicates that there are really two types of forgiveness (or, perhaps better stated, two aspects of forgiveness): (1) *forgiveness as a decision* (“decisional forgiveness”—the “pardoning of a debt”); and (2) *forgiveness as emotional replacement* (“emotional forgiveness”) (Worthington 2003: ch. 2).

<sup>7</sup>This and the next two subsections are based on Worthington 2003: 30-45.

<sup>8</sup>Smedes puts it similarly; the fundamentals of forgiveness involve three stages: “[1] We rediscover the humanity of the person who hurt us. [2] We surrender our right to get even. [3] We revise our feelings toward the person we forgive.” (Smedes 1996: 6-12)

Thus, forgiveness truly is a *gift* that embodies grace, love, and freedom (our freedom from the enslavement of hatred, anger, fear, evil thoughts, living in the past, dwelling on wrongs and hurts). We recognize that the offender does not have a right to these gifts (just as *we* had no right to *God's* forgiveness).

**5.** You cannot psychologically *experience* true forgiveness—even though you have been truly forgiven—until you change your emotions. Even if you change your thoughts, your will, and your actions, you will not *experience* forgiveness until your emotions change—but *changing your thoughts, your will, and your actions should lead to your emotions changing.* “Forgiveness does not replace hurtful memories; it replaces the negative emotions attached to those memories” (Ibid.: 133).

**6.** Forgiveness is a *paradox*, something like “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35) or “whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt 5:39-42; Luke 6:29-30).

With forgiveness we recognize that: (A) an offense occurred that was wrong and unfair and always will be wrong and unfair; (B) we have a moral right to be angry; but (C) we are voluntarily giving up that “right” as an act of mercy and love, a gift to an undeserving offender, in obedience to Christ. Thus the paradox: to be free of anger and resentment, give the person who hurt you the gift of forgiveness and free yourself.

### **III. Practical reasons why we must forgive those who wrong us**

#### **A. *Forgiveness is the obligation of the forgiven*<sup>9</sup>**

**1.** “Throughout the Bible there seems to be an inseparable link between receiving and granting forgiveness” (Jeffress 2000: 57). That is why both Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer (**Matt 6:9-15**) and Paul (**Eph 4:32**) command us to forgive.

**2.** Even the pagans in Jesus’ parable of the two slaves recognized that there is a link between being forgiven and forgiving others. That is why they were “deeply grieved” when the slave who had been forgiven so much by the master did not forgive his fellow slave who owed him so little; therefore, they reported that unforgiveness to the master (**Matt 18:31**).

**3.** Our purpose in this life is “to become conformed to the image of His Son” (**Rom 8:29**), to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (**Matt 5:48**). Since forgiveness goes to the very heart of the Father’s and Christ’s nature and mission, our forgiveness is an important mark of our *sanctification*. It is a sign of the Holy Spirit’s working in us to conform us into the image of Christ and perfect us. That is why Christ linked forgiveness with love (**Luke 7:36-50**) and with prayer (**Mark 11:23-26**). As Carson says, “Those who know they are forgiven are the same people who forgive. One of the marks of growing spirituality in a Christian, Whitney argues, is that he or she is becoming a ‘quicker forgiver.’” (Carson 2002: 80)

**4.** Forgiveness is more than merely a simple “obligation” but involves the basic focus of one’s life—i.e., whether or not one is essentially focused on God and living to please him and be like him.

**a.** *This applies equally to forgiveness and reconciliation:* “Focusing on God is the key to resolving conflict constructively. When we remember his mercy and draw on his strength, we invariably see things more clearly and respond to conflict more wisely. In doing so, we can find far better solutions to our problems. At the same time, we can show others that there really is a God and that he delights in helping us do things we could never do on our own.” (Sande 2004: 20)

**b.** *Sande describes practical tips for keeping one’s focus on the Lord:* “One of the best ways to keep your focus on the Lord is to continually ask yourself these questions: How can I please and honor God in this situation? In particular, how can I bring praise to Jesus by showing that he has saved me and is changing me? Seeking to please and honor God is a powerful compass for life, especially when we are faced with difficult challenges. Jesus himself was guided by these goals [see **John 5:30; 8:29; 17:4**]. . . . When displaying the riches of God’s love and pleasing him is more important than holding onto worldly things and pleasing yourself, it becomes increasingly natural to respond to conflict graciously, wisely, and with self-control. This approach brings glory to God and sets the stage for effective peacemaking.” (Sande 2004: 34)

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<sup>9</sup>This section is based largely on Jeffress 2000: 57-58; Smedes 1996: 65-69; and Sande 2004: 20, 34.

**B. *Forgiveness is necessary for our own wellbeing***<sup>10</sup>

**1. Forgiveness is often the only way to settle a debt.** As Jeffress points out, in Jesus' parable, "The slave owed a debt that he could not possibly repay in a thousand lifetimes. So what alternative to forgiveness did the king have?" (Jeffress 2000: 51) Punishing and torturing the offender would not result in the repayment of *even one cent* of the debt. In fact, most such "debts" we are owed are really *worthless*: the offender may have died; he may have moved away; he may not care about us at all. Further, most offenders cannot repay their debt in any case: What payment or punishment can really compensate for your child killed by a drunk driver? Or your reputation slandered by lies? Or your marriage betrayed by adultery? Or innocence stolen by rape? The fact is that only forgiveness can free *you* from the worthless debt you hold.

**2. Forgiveness frees us from being in bondage to our past and to the offender.** Forgiveness frees us to get on with our life. Forgiveness sets us free from invisible, but very real, chains that bind us to our past—past wrongs, hurt, and evil—chains that prevent us from living in joy, and peace, and freedom. **Heb 12:1-2** tells us that we are to "lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us," and to "run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus." Unforgiveness prevents us from doing that, because unforgiveness itself is both an encumbrance and a sin, and keeps our focus on a wrong and an injury rather than on Jesus. Forgiveness frees us to be able to run our race unchained and fix our eyes upon Jesus.

**3. Forgiveness frees us from needless suffering.**

**a. *Unforgiveness can consume you.*** Ruminating on the wrong done to you, nursing a grudge, is like picking at an open wound, refusing to let it heal. Our continuing to ruminate about the offense, our wallowing in self-pity, hateful thoughts, our fantasies of revenge, do absolutely no harm to the other person, and do us absolutely no good—they only make us miserable.<sup>11</sup> Such thoughts "shrink our soul" (so to speak), and make us more *unlike Christ* rather than drawing us closer to Christ. Indeed, since we really can never "get even" anyway, unforgiveness, ruminating on the hurt, and nursing a grudge perversely take their worst toll on the spirits of the people *who have already suffered the most*. Although hatred may give us a form of "instant energy," in the long run it turns its power against the hater.

**b. *Chronic unforgiveness is associated with increased heart problems, increased blood pressure, increased nervous system arousal, and possibly immune system problems.*** On the other hand, forgiveness is associated with decreased psychological problems, decreased levels of anger, and increased emotional maturity (McCullough 2000: 43-55; Witvliet, et al., 2001: 117-23; Enright 2001: 45-67).

**4. Unforgiveness adversely affects our relationships with others.** By making us sour, hardened people, who focus on ourselves and the wrongs done to us, unforgiveness separates us from other people.

**5. Unforgiveness adversely affects our relationship with God.** Sin, including the sin of unforgiveness, separates us from God (**Isa 1:10-15; 59:1-2; Mic 3:4**). This separation from God affects our life in this world. Further, as Carson points out: "The emphasis [in Scripture] is on the *eternal* benefits of being right with God. And in the light of some texts (e.g., the parable of the unmerciful servant referred to above), there is enormous personal and eternal danger in *not* forgiving others. For nothing, nothing at all, is more important than being assured of the forgiveness of God." (Carson 2002: 80)

**6. Forgiveness fits faulty people like us.** Most people are not entirely sinned against; we are not simply victims. Rather, we sin against others, too; we are also offenders. In the "real world" forgiveness is a way of life—when you hurt a close friend through an improper remark or act (and we all do that), our close friends typically will take the hurt and let it go. Thus, cancelling the debt and letting it go is a way of life. Life would be unbearable if people did not regularly forgive.

**7. Unforgiveness is a choice, just as forgiveness is a choice.** We tend to be selective in who we forgive and what we forgive: we forgive only "little" hurts, and only those inflicted by people we are close to. However, Jesus did not give us the option to be selective in the hurts, or the people, we are to forgive. He said that we are to forgive "up to seventy times seven" (which is Jesus' symbolic way of saying an "infinity" of times, not just 490 times) (**Matt 18:22**); we are to love our *enemies*, not just those who love us (**Matt 5:38-48**). Jesus is very tough on sinners (like us) who refuse to forgive other sinners,

<sup>10</sup>This section is based largely on Jeffress 2000: 50-57; Smedes 1984: 125-51; and Smedes 1996: 55-74.

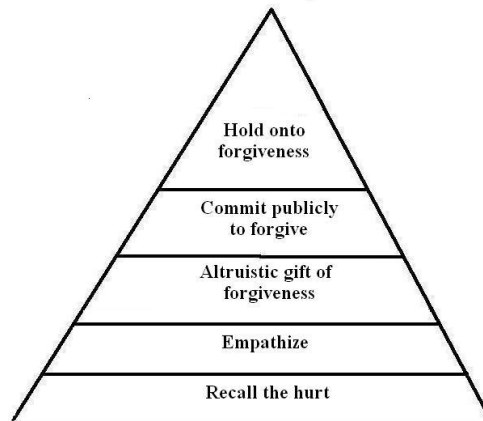
<sup>11</sup>As the late American comedian, Buddy Hackett, said, "I've had a few arguments with people, but I never carry a grudge. You know why? While you're carrying a grudge, they're out dancing." (Jeffress 2000: 53)

because we are *all* sinners. Smedes, commenting on Jesus’ parable in **Matthew 18**, puts it well: “He [Jesus] is tough because the incongruity of sinners refusing to forgive sinners boggles God’s mind. He cannot cope with it; there is no honest way to put up with it. So he says: if you want forgiving from God and you cannot forgive someone who needs a little forgiving from you, forget about the forgiveness you want. Take away the eloquence of King James English and you get Jesus saying something like this: if you refuse to forgive other people when you expect to be forgiven, you can go to hell.” (Smedes 1984: 150)

#### IV. How to forgive<sup>12</sup>

##### A. Worthington’s *REACH* model of the process of forgiveness

Worthington has a five-step model, which he envisions as a pyramid, based on the acronym REACH (Worthington 2003: 73):



**1. Recall the hurt (R).** In order to forgive someone for a wrong done to us, we first have to be honest with ourselves about the wrong and the hurt.

**a.** *We may deny or minimize a hurt because it cuts us so deeply. Or, we may overreact to relatively minor slights and hurts; we may think that the offender did far worse than he actually did to us, or we may think something like, “If only this hadn’t happened, I’d be happier, more successful, more fulfilled in life” (Enright 2001: 110). We need to honestly evaluate the nature of the wrong, its effect on us, and how we have been reacting to it (see Sande 2004: 80: “As you examine your role in a conflict, it is helpful to look for two types of fault. First, you may have an *overly sensitive attitude*, which causes you to be offended too easily by others’ behavior. Second, you may have contributed to the conflict through your own *sinful behavior*.”).*

**b.** *Worthington suggests certain techniques to help us in recalling the hurt. We should begin with prayer, praying for the presence of the Lord as our protector and invoking the Holy Spirit as our comforter. We should monitor ourselves as we recall the hurt and the details surrounding it, to make sure that we are not slipping into rage, fear, or depression. Try to recall what happened, but also how you felt about what was happening; accurately label your emotions (try to be as precise as possible). Control yourself by taking calming, slow, deep breaths. Try to see things from the other person’s point of view. It will probably help to work on forgiving smaller hurts before instantly jumping to the huge, monstrous injustices that sometimes happen. All of this may be painful, but it is the first step on the road to healing and wholeness.*

**c.** *“The pain that someone sticks us with asks us a simple question: What are you going to do with me? We did not want to get it, and we want to be rid of it. But we are stuck with it. We have to own it. And we begin to own our pain when we respond to its question.” (Smedes 1996: 135) We have only two options: “We can try to forget it, stuff it into our subconscious where it will become a mole and do its mischief beneath the surface. Or we can forgive it and heal it. . . . Which we chose is up to us. . . . We begin to take responsibility for our pain when we listen to its question. We begin to heal our pain when we give the right answer.” (Ibid.)*

**2. Empathize (E).** To empathize with the offender is to understand his humanity, i.e., what he was

<sup>12</sup>This section is based primarily on Worthington 2003: chs. 4-8; and, secondarily, on Smedes 1996: chs. 15-20; and Enright 2001: chs. 4-12.

thinking, the effect of the event on him. To empathize is to truly see that, if you would have been in his shoes, you yourself likely would have done exactly as he did. To empathize is to start to see him as God does: as a human being (much like yourself), not as a “thing.” This is probably the hardest part of achieving “emotional forgiveness.” We aren’t capable, under our own power, of loving our enemies. In our own power, we often want to hurt our enemies, to see them pay for what they did to us, to see them suffer as we suffered. We want to call down fire from heaven on them. Yet Jesus says to us to call down blessings from heaven on our enemies. We cannot love our enemies the way Jesus admonishes us to do in our own strength—only with God’s help. Even if we cannot empathize, we can learn ways to sympathize and experience compassion for those who have harmed us—and ultimately to love our enemies. True, lasting, life-changing forgiveness depends upon your *feeling differently* about the person who hurt you.

**a.** *Between 1985-1995 Worthington and his colleagues studied more than 1000 couples or individuals and compared two types of forgiveness: self-benefit forgiving (i.e., “forgiving for getting”—forgiving to feel better, to be able to move on with life, etc.) and empathy-based forgiving (i.e., “forgiving for giving”—forgiving because you, the victim, are the only person who can give the offender what he needs: forgiveness).* His findings are remarkable: “People who forgave in the self-benefit group achieved more forgiveness right away than did those who forgave in the empathy-based group. . . . One hour or eight hours—forgiveness for one’s own benefit was modest. For those who forgave for the other person’s benefit, one hour produced little forgiveness. Eight hours produced a lot of forgiveness—over five times as much forgiveness as one hour and three times as much as the self-benefit condition.

Furthermore, when we checked in with people six weeks later, the level of forgiveness in the self-benefit group had dropped to half as much as had been granted at the end of treatment. In the empathy-based group, the level of forgiveness stayed high even after the intervention was complete.” (Worthington, 2001: 13-14) Worthington concludes: “Forgiveness does benefit us. But if we forgive mainly to get, we get just a trickle of all those benefits. If we give a gift of forgiveness to a needy perpetrator, though, we receive freedom, peace, and perhaps health and relational repair. Forgiveness gushes like water from a fire hose. It washes us clean. It frees us.” (Ibid.: 14)

**b.** *Empathy is experienced at three levels: (1) Understanding (i.e., you understand the point of view of the other person); (2) Emotional identification (i.e., you feel and think *with* the other person); and (3) Compassion (you feel compassion *for* the other person, as well as understanding him and emotionally identifying with him).* To achieve deep, lasting forgiveness, you need to reach the deepest level of empathy: compassionate empathy.

**c.** *Considering several facts can increase our understanding of, and empathy with, the other person: (1) “Soft emotions” (e.g., fear, stress, worry, and hurt) often underlie anger, hostility, and attacks by a person; (2) People are influenced by their circumstances, conditions, and situation; (3) People are “hard-wired” for survival (and thus react automatically to what they perceive to be threats); (4) People are conditioned by past experiences (they may react in fear and anger now because of the way they were raised, or other experiences that happened to them long ago); (5) People often act without thinking things through (this is especially true when people are, in fact, *reacting* because *they’ve* been hurt or, rightly or wrongly, perceived a threat); (6) We must never forget that we are Christians (and, therefore, by God’s grace, and drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit, we will react to an attack or hurt by someone else by putting off the old self, being truthful and loving, and putting on the “mind of Christ” whose mind we, in fact, have (see **Eph 4:15, 20-32; 1 Cor 2:16**).*

**d.** *Various techniques can help us to empathize with the other person: (1) Pray for the gift of empathy; (2) Write a descriptive letter as if you were the person who hurt you, explaining your offender’s motives, thoughts, and feelings from his point of view; (3) Write a letter of apology from the offender’s point of view; (4) Talk to an empty chair, telling the offender what you think and feel, as if the offender were actually sitting in the chair—then reverse roles and sit in the chair yourself, pretending to be the offender, explaining what drove you to do the things you did, and apologizing for what you did; (5) Talk to a friend or participate in a group of fellow-believers to help each other work through forgiveness issues; (6) Make or do something to symbolize your tender feelings for the other person; (7) Meditate upon Christ’s compassion for people like the other person; (8) Pray for the other person [not that the fire of heaven consume him, but that God would draw near to him, and bless him, and would transform him into a*

Christ-like person, even as you pray that those same things would occur to you]; (9) Meditate on your own many sins, weaknesses, how you have hurt, manipulated, used, slighted, ignored, and otherwise offended people.

**3. Altruistic gift of forgiveness (A).** Studies indicate that if people do not feel empathy, they probably will not forgive. However, even some people who develop empathy for an offender do not forgive.

**a.** *Christians need to meditate on their own sins which have been forgiven by God and the wrongs we have done which have been forgiven by other people.* Coming to deeply understand our own humanity and humility makes it much more likely that we will forgive those who have wronged us. First remembering our guilt and shame for specific wrongs, we then should remember the deep sense of freedom and gratitude that has come when we have been forgiven for those wrongs. Humility and gratitude are the key Christian virtues that make us others-centered.

**b.** *Altruism is others-oriented love; it is giving without expecting anything in return. One of the greatest gifts we receive is the gift of being forgiven—it is freeing; it is uplifting; it can be life-changing.* It is the gift that Christ has given us and the gift that other people have given us. Forgiveness is the “ultimate power” of love. Thus, although hate may give us “temporary power for surviving today’s brutality . . . hate lacks staying power to create a fairer future beyond revenge. It is forgiveness that supplies the healing stream of the long-term tomorrows. For long distance, forgiving is stronger than hate.” (Smedes 1984: 146) The deepest Christian is a person of deep gratitude; the grateful person cannot help but give the gift of forgiveness that has so benefited him.

**4. Commit publicly to forgive (C).** You forgive, first and most importantly, within yourself—in your heart, mind, and soul; you commit publicly to forgive after you have already made at least “decisional forgiveness,” if not “emotional forgiveness,” within your own heart and mind.

**a.** *Committing publicly to the decision you have already made privately helps to reinforce that decision and combats the doubts about whether you’ve “really forgiven” the offender, which may arise in your mind later, when you think bad thoughts about the offender or the event.* As such, committing publicly to forgive is something like being baptized or participating in the Lord’s Supper—it is the “outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace” of the forgiveness you have already granted.

**b.** *There are several techniques to help you publicly commit to forgive:* (1) Discipline your mind to not criticize the other person when negative thoughts occur (tell yourself to “let it go,” to “stop finding fault”; “change the mental subject” when negative thoughts intrude). Similarly, meditate on, rehearse, even write down, the *positive* aspects of the other person. (2) Symbolize your forgiveness. Write the transgression on your hand; with repeated washings and activity it will fade away. Or, hold a large rock in your outstretched hand (like the “first stone” Jesus invited the men of the city to throw at the woman caught in adultery [**John 8:7**]); let the stress and pain you feel from holding the rock represent the stress and pain you feel from unforgiveness—when the weight of the desire for revenge becomes so great that you don’t want to hold it anymore, let the rock fall from your hand as a symbol of your forgiveness. Or, write down the transgression on a piece of paper, and then burn it and scatter the ashes. Or, write down the transgression on a piece of paper and nail it to a wooden cross, or leave it at or under a cross at your church. In doing all of these things, remember also that you are giving your unforgiveness, and your pain, over to Jesus—he now is bearing them; you no longer have to. (3) Write out your forgiveness. Write out a formal “certificate of forgiveness” which you can keep to assure yourself in times of doubt that you have, in fact, fully forgiven the other person. (4) Tell someone about your forgiveness. Tell God, yourself, your spouse, a trusted friend, your pastor; all of these other people can help you in times of doubt. (5) Act toward the other as if you had fully forgiven him. As your behavior becomes habitual, it will reinforce the decision to forgive which you have made and your emotions of compassion and love.

**5. Hold onto forgiveness (H).** Thoughts and feelings of unforgiveness can naturally arise in us (just as other sinful thoughts—lust, greed, pride, hatred, etc.—can arise in us). Seeing the other person, being in a particular place, hearing something, an anniversary date, some other circumstance, or when we are tired, lonely, or depressed, may cause unwanted thoughts and feelings of unforgiveness to arise within us. It is in times like these that we need to hold onto the forgiveness which we have *already granted* and to which we have *publicly committed*.

**a.** *There are several techniques that can help us hold onto forgiveness during such times:* (1)

Realize that the pain of a remembered hurt is not the same as unforgiveness (unforgiveness requires rumination; don't give in to vengeful rumination); (2) Don't dwell on negative emotions (actively distract yourself—sing, pray, praise the Lord, do some physical activity—rather than dwelling on the hurtful or hateful thoughts and emotions); (3) Remind yourself that you have forgiven the other person (and remind yourself of the times you have publicly committed to that forgiveness); (4) Seek reassurance from a partner or friend (someone with whom you have discussed your forgiveness should be able to help you through times of doubt or stress); (5) Use the documents you have created (read the “certificate of forgiveness,” letter, or other writing that you have made which documents your forgiveness); (6) Look over, think through, and practice again the REACH model of forgiveness.

**b. Become a more forgiving person.** This takes a lifetime, but it helps to mold your character into one more like Christ's. Further, the process of becoming a more forgiving person helps you make “real,” and hold onto, the forgiveness you have granted to someone as a result of some particular transgression. *There are several techniques to help you become a more forgiving person:* (1) Reflect on why you want to be more forgiving. Ask the Lord to search your heart: are your motives self-centered, or because you want to be obedient and self-controlled, or are they based on gratitude, love, and compassion? (2) Identify your greatest wounds from the past and forgive them. The more past transgressions you are able to forgive and learn from, the easier you will be able to forgive wounds that arise in the future. (3) Forgive one wound at a time. Strive for both decisional and emotional forgiveness of each transgression; as you work through the REACH model, check off your progress for each transgression to demonstrate that you are making progress. (4) Identify heroes of forgiveness. Reading about, or talking with, people who have successfully forgiven much can be a great inspiration and encouragement. (5) Examine yourself. Unforgiveness can become a bad habit, so be honest with yourself and keep short “forgiveness accounts.” (6) Reduce negative traits and cultivate virtue. Consciously strive to become more virtuous in areas beyond just forgiveness. *Be specific* about not just what you will *avoid* doing but what you *will do* to become a more virtuous person. For example, determine which character traits you should develop and then write down what you will do to demonstrate that trait: e.g., “If I were more (*loving*) I would (*compliment people, try to understand them, listen to them*) more often.” (7) Change your experience of the past. Use your empathy and imagine Jesus comforting the person who hurt you. This will help to change your perception and memory of the hurtful past event. (8) Plan a self-improvement strategy. Try to approach your life consciously and conscientiously, giving yourself time to meditate and pray, to plan and relax. Lives that are overwhelmed with busyness tend to be more difficult to control, and our forgiveness, compassion, and love for others usually suffers as a result. (9) Practice forgiving under imagined conditions. Practicing forgiveness in advance concerning situations that may arise may help you when actual circumstances that require forgiveness actually occur. (10) Practice forgiving day to day. As you plan your day, think about the people you will be dealing with that day. Hold them in prayer, and when hurtful situations occur, model forgiveness promptly. (11) Seek help from someone you trust. Friends you trust, pastors, and others who are trained and experienced in the Scriptures and in the art of forgiveness can provide invaluable counsel and help. (12) Start a campaign to love your enemies. Either individually or, better, with a church-related group, pray, plan, and implement strategies to actually do *good* to your enemies. Be pro-active in demonstrating Christ's love to the unlovable.

## **B. Telling the offender “I forgive you”**

**1. Actually telling the other person “I forgive you” should be done with care; it is not always appropriate or necessary.** Doing so can be used as a weapon against the offender, or may be done too soon, causing the offender to react defensively and add new injuries to the old. Further, one must be careful in situations where your going to the other person to express your forgiveness of him might expose you to the risk of physical harm or violence from that person.

**2. Smedes suggests that, before forgiving, you should:** a. *Think* (come to as much clarity as you can about what happened); b. *Evaluate the situation*; c. *Talk with a friend or counselor*; d. *Feel* (be able to understand exactly what you are feeling and why); and e. *Pray* (forgiving is a tough act to perform—we need to be honest with God, admit our need for his help, ask for it, and use it when it comes). Then, when you have decided to actually tell the other person that you have forgiven him or her, you should: a. *Take your time*; b. *Size up the risk*; c. *Wait for a signal*; d. *Do it obliquely* (talk about other things



first; listen for awhile; do it almost as an afterthought); e. *Do it after you have begun the conversation by honestly, and with conviction, wishing the other person well*; f. *Don't claim holy motives*; g. *Improvise*; h. *Make it short*; i. *Keep it light*; and j. *Give the other person time* (change the subject if he is not yet ready to talk about it; let him think about it; let him go at his own pace). (Smedes 1984: 138-39, 145-46)

**3. Most appropriate cases of actually saying the words of forgiveness to the other person fall into the following circumstances:**<sup>13</sup>

- a. *The offender has apologized and asked for forgiveness.* The offender may be ready to hear those important words before you are ready to give them. Remember, forgiveness cannot be forced—it is your free act. Your honest response may be, “I want to forgive you, but give me some time, OK?”
- b. *The offender has neither apologized nor asked for forgiveness, but guilt has been established beyond a reasonable doubt.* You may offer the offender forgiveness in the hopes that he will offer an apology (which he may be withholding because of his shame) after he receives your forgiveness; if he nevertheless remains unrepentant, you can still walk away from the situation knowing that you have done all that was possible.
- c. *The relationship between you and the offender has been broken, and both sides are angry.* The more *innocent* party can usually begin the process of reconciliation by *apologizing* first, which can lead the other party to express his sorrow, which then opens the door for you to offer forgiveness.
- d. *The offense happened a long time ago, and the offender is no longer a part of your life.* The opportunity may not arise to express forgiveness to the offender if that person is dead, or no longer available for other reasons. Nevertheless, you can express your forgiveness symbolically (as indicated earlier), or express your forgiveness to a member of the offender's family, clan, tribe, or church, or use family, clan, tribe, or church, or other intermediaries to initiate a forgiveness meeting.
- e. *The offender has no idea that you are even offended.* One must bring up old issues tactfully; as was noted earlier, you must consider whether bringing up the issues will cause more harm or more good to the other person as well as to yourself.

### C. *Other guideposts on the road to forgiveness*

1. You forgive freely, or you don't really “forgive” at all. You can't be “made” or “forced” to forgive.
2. Forgiveness is a choice; forgiveness involves all of you; forgiveness is a process; forgiveness takes time (maybe a lifetime); forgiveness takes work (it may take great effort over a long period of time); forgiveness is change (you will be changed; down the road you will see, Christ will see, and others will see, how much more like Christ you have become as a result of the often long, hard, slow, process of the work of forgiveness). In fact, Klassen goes so far as to say this: “In a surprising way, unforgivable injuries present you with one of life's rare opportunities: *to change fundamentally*. The experience of being wounded may force you against your will to alter your dreams, myths and expectations. Where else, but in this deep grief, can we experience an elemental confrontation so rare. To be able to test one's essential beliefs is an opportunity of a lifetime. To do it well is an art. . . .

It is in the process of forgiving that the new person emerges. While most people would not wish this upon themselves and would, if given the choice, likely say, ‘I don't need to know so much.’ The truth is that it is not an option; we are not given the choice. It is a way of being given another chance, another opportunity. To be wounded, in a mysterious way, is to be given a gift.” (Klassen n.d.: “Restoring the self”)

3. You may expect to be confused; you may expect to have anger left over; you may expect to not fully understand what is happening; and you may expect set-backs along the way. Forgiveness may be likened to a child learning how to walk. The child first takes little baby steps. He falls down. He doesn't want to walk but wants to be carried by his mother. However, over time he takes bigger steps. He gains confidence and eventually he can run. He is *free*.

4. Our ability to forgive may be helped by truly understanding that harm is inevitable. Hurts, wounds, offenses, and transgressions, some minor, some major, are an ever present potential. Human beings are self-serving. Most care about others but look out for themselves first and are fortunate just to be able to get through their own lives. If you truly understand that, it makes it easier to accept other people's

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<sup>13</sup>This subsection is based primarily on Enright 2001: ch. 11.

mistakes and offenses as well as your own. As Klassen points out: “[Harm] is just another part of life, like love, work and fun. Some harm you can control, and some is beyond our control. Once one accepts that harm happens and most cannot be controlled, then it is only reasonable that forgiveness needs to be built into a way of life; and almost nothing can be unforgivable again.” (Klassen n.d.: “The forgiveness principle: *Injuries happen*”)

## V. Forgiving Yourself<sup>14</sup>

### A. *It is possible to forgive yourself*

1. Smedes says, “It seems to me that only two persons are authorized to issue us a self-forgiveness license. One of them is the person we wronged. The other is the God who feels sorrow when we wound his children.” (Smedes 1996: 96-97) He adds, “When a person asks us to forgive him, he is also asking permission to forgive himself” (Ibid.: 97).
2. If the person whom you wronged has forgiven you, why can you not forgive yourself? If you have done everything you can to apologize, make restitution, feel remorse, and ask for forgiveness, but the other person refuses to forgive you, your being able to forgive yourself should then be dependent on *God’s* forgiveness of you, rather than on the sin of unforgiveness of the other person.
3. If God has forgiven you, who are you not to forgive yourself for the wrongs, sins, and crimes you have done—and for the hurts and heartaches you have caused others and yourself? If you do *not* forgive yourself, you are putting yourself *above God*, who has forgiven you. If anything, that constitutes a sin of pride.

### B. *Although perhaps more complicated than forgiving others, you should forgive yourself when it is appropriate to do so*

1. Typically, only one who has been wronged has the authority to forgive the one who has wronged him; to “forgive yourself” places you in both roles at the same time. However, we frequently transcend ourselves in a similar manner: we laugh at ourselves; we lie to ourselves; we congratulate ourselves; we hurt ourselves; we blame ourselves. Why should we not also forgive ourselves?
2. We can forgive ourselves similarly to the way we forgive others. We need to be honest with ourselves, understand the wrong we did, confess our sin and repent (turn from) our evil ways. Thus, forgiving oneself is somewhat different to our freely forgiving even those who wronged us but who refuse to repent; forgiving ourselves is more like God’s forgiving us—just as God’s forgiving us is designed to restore right relationship between ourselves and God, so our forgiveness of ourselves is designed to restore our wholeness (a “right relationship with ourselves”). Consequently, repentance and contrition are appropriate in self-forgiveness.
3. Like other forms of forgiveness, we forgive ourselves for the bad acts we have done, the acts for which we blame ourselves and for which we are blameworthy, not for who or what we “are.” We can follow the same REACH process that we use to forgive others in order to forgive ourselves. Further, there should be no hesitancy in telling yourself that “God forgives you and so do I.” We can repeat that to ourselves when times of doubt arise. We can enlist our spouse, pastor, or trusted friend to help us with our own forgiveness. We can act the part of a forgiven man or woman, and stop beating ourselves over the head for something which God himself has forgiven and for which we have done everything in our power to make amends and seek forgiveness from the person we wronged.
4. Forgiving ourselves may have the additional benefit of giving us a clearer picture of our true nature apart from Christ. We often find it hard to admit that we’ve done wrong—sometimes great moral wrong. We deceive ourselves into believing that we are not like the “evil people” who can lie, cheat, steal, rape, murder, or do all sorts of other evil. We should know better (see **Matt 5:21-32; Mark 7:14-23**). Coming face-to-face with the evil in our own heart helps us to have a truer understanding of ourselves, helps to eliminate our pride, and helps us on the path of humility. Just as forgiving others may be seen as an “outward and visible sign” of the inward and spiritual forgiveness that Christ has granted us, so forgiving ourselves may help to make Christ’s forgiveness of us “real” in a personal and emotional way.

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<sup>14</sup>This section is based on Worthington 2003: 222-25; Smedes 1984: ch. 8; Smedes 1996: ch. 12; and Jeffress 2000: 183-84.

## VI. Forgiveness and Repentance<sup>15</sup>

### A. *Repentance always deals with the offender (the one who receives forgiveness) not with the victim (the one who grants forgiveness)*

1. “Repentance” involves not only a feeling of remorse for the wrong one has done but a “change of mind” or “turning about.” In other words, repentance is turning away from the wrong direction one had been going in order to follow the new, right path (Zodhiates 1993: *metanoōō; metánoia*).
2. At its deepest level, repentance “means sincerely regretting the fact that what you did was morally wrong, regardless of whether or not you must suffer unpleasant consequences. It involves a change of heart—which is possible only when you understand that sin is a personal offense against God himself (**2 Chron 6:37-39; cf. Jer 31:19**). Godly sorrow will not always be accompanied by intense feelings, but it implies a change in thinking, which should lead to changes in behavior.” (Sande 2004: 118-19, emph. added)
3. Repentance involves four levels, and “we must pass through all four levels before we are finished” (Smedes 1984: ch.7). Those four levels are as follows:
  - a. *Perception:* You first must see your actions through another’s eyes. You perceive that their feelings about what you did are true.
  - b. *Feeling:* You move from perception to pain. You feel the pain you made someone else feel. You share the hurt that you inflicted.
  - c. *Confession:*
    - (1) Confession is not merely admitting that you did something but hurting with the other person, putting yourself helplessly in the other’s hands. You tell the person you hurt that what you did was intolerable and that you share their pain.
    - (2) Where it is possible to do so you should make restitution to demonstrate the truth of your confession. A good example is Zaccheus, who spontaneously and voluntarily said, “half my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much” (**Luke 19:1-10**) (see Sande 2004: Appendix C, “Principles of Restitution”).
  - d. *Promise:* If your repentance is sincere, it necessarily will conclude with a passionate desire not to hurt again and a sincere intention and promise not to do so.
4. Repentance is essential in four situations:
  - a. *Repentance is essential to receiving God’s forgiveness.* We are saved only by God’s *grace*. However, our repentance is the *channel* through which God’s grace is received. There is a difference between *divine forgiveness* and *interpersonal forgiveness*. This difference is seen in the difference between God and man, which is reflected in the Scripturally different requirements between being forgiven by God and forgiving each other. Worthington says: “People are not God. God can know people’s motives; humans can’t. God can look into our hearts and require repentance. I cannot look into another person’s heart and know his or her true motives. (I can’t even know my own true motives.) So interpersonal forgiveness, throughout Scripture, does not require repentance of the offender. . . . In Scripture we see a division between divine and interpersonal forgiveness. Fred DiBlasio . . . tallied Scriptures concerning forgiveness by God and people. Most that deal with divine forgiveness make forgiving by God conditional on repentance. . . . The New Testament is full of references to interpersonal forgiveness. Such forgiveness, according to the verses listed by DiBlasio, is based on humility. Humans cannot know the motives of the transgressor’s heart. So the victim should be merciful and humble, willing to grant forgiveness without requiring repentance.” (Worthington 2003: 51-52)
  - b. *Repentance is essential to reconciliation with another person.*
    - (1) Because forgiveness is essentially something which you, the victim, do within your own heart, mind, and soul, the other person is not required to repent as a condition for your granting forgiveness. If repentance required the other person to repent first in order for you to forgive, it would be *impossible* or you to forgive, *even if you wanted to*, if the offender had died, moved away, become incapacitated, or simply refused to repent. In fact: “People are required to forgive, and we’re held accountable if we don’t (Mt 6:12,

<sup>15</sup>This section is based largely on Jeffress 2000: ch. 4; Worthington 2003: 51-52; Smedes 1996: ch. 11; and Smedes 1984: ch. 7.

14-15; Lk 6:37-38). If repentance of the offender were required before we could forgive, then *we* would be damned if a perpetrator refused to repent. Yet surely God would not hold us accountable for something not under our control.” (Worthington 2003: 51)

(2) On the other hand, to forgive someone does not mean that you have to be in relationship with him: to unconditionally forgive a business partner who cheats you does not mean that you have to remain in business with him; to forgive a person you live with (including your husband) who beats you, does not mean that you have to continue to live with him. To *restore a relationship* is the essence of reconciliation. That requires the re-establishment of *trust* and the re-establishment of the *trustworthiness* of the offender. The offender must *earn back* the right to relationship. That is why repentance is not required for you to forgive someone but is an important part of the process of reconciliation with that person. As was stated earlier: *It only takes one person to forgive; it takes two people to reconcile.*<sup>16</sup>

c. *Repentance is essential to restoration to a position.* This is a variant of reconciliation. Although personal transgressions against you, the individual, are to be forgiven unconditionally, such sins may have consequences. Consequently, although you are to work through the REACH process of forgiving the person who stole money from you, or raped your daughter, or caused you any other harm or injury, your forgiving that person does not exempt him from the legal consequences of his act; indeed, he may have to pay severe consequences (execution, prison, fines, restitution, shame, dismissal from position, etc.) for what he has done. Thus, in **Matt 18:15-20, 1 Cor 5:1-5, and 2 Cor 2:5-8** Jesus and Paul affirm that members of the church who

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<sup>16</sup>That may be another reason why God requires us to repent in connection with his forgiving us: his forgiveness inherently does not leave us alone, in a state of being forgiven but nevertheless outside of relationship with himself; rather, his forgiveness restores us to right relationship with him. That involves his choosing us, adopting us, redeeming us, giving us an inheritance, and sealing us with the Holy Spirit (**Eph 1:3-14**). As Smedes points out, “when people want to be forgiven by God, they want to be reunited with him at the same time. But God wants reunion with integrity. And repentance is nothing but simple honesty about what we did to break our connection with God. This is why a person cannot *expect* to be forgiven by God unless he first repents.” (Smedes 1984: 92-93)

The comprehensiveness of God’s forgiving us—which includes his restoring us to right relationship with him—was graphically brought out by Sande in a conversation with his counselee, Rick, who was having great difficulty truly forgiving (and reconciling) with his wife, Pam (who had committed adultery): “I could see the weariness in his face. ‘I’m sure both of you are in terrible pain, Rick. But I don’t think divorce is going to end it. You’ll just trade one kind of pain for another. There is a way to keep your marriage together and to truly put the past behind you. But you won’t find it with the empty forgiveness you’ve offered Pam.’”

“What do you mean, ‘empty forgiveness’?”

“Rick, imagine that you had just confessed a serious sin to God, and for the first time in your life he spoke to you audibly: ‘I forgive you, Rick, but I can’t ever be close to you again.’ How would you feel?”

After an awkward pause, he replied, “I guess I’d feel like God hadn’t really forgiven me.”

“But isn’t that exactly the way you are forgiving Pam?” I asked.

Rick looked at the floor, wrestling for an answer.

In a softer voice, I continued, “Imagine instead that God said, ‘Rick, I forgive you. I promise never to think about your sin again, or to dwell on it or brood over it. I promise never to bring it up and use it against you. I promise not to talk to others about it. And I promise not to let this sin stand between us or hinder our relationship.’”

After a long silence, tears began to fill Rick’s eyes. “I would know I was completely forgiven . . . But I wouldn’t deserve that kind of forgiveness after the way I’ve treated Pam.”

“Would you ever deserve it?” I asked. “God’s forgiveness is a free gift purchased for you by Jesus’ death on the cross. He doesn’t forgive you because you’ve earned it. He forgives you because he loves you. When you truly understand how precious and undeserved his forgiveness is, you will want to forgive Pam the same way he has forgiven you.” (Sande 2004: 202)

Thus, as was indicated above, just as there is a difference between God and man, so there appears to be a difference between divine and interpersonal forgiveness. However, the interconnectedness between forgiveness and reconciliation is also apparent: Rick’s understanding the nature of God’s forgiveness of him led him to ask Pam to forgive him for the bitterness and coldness he had exhibited against her despite his claim to have “forgiven” her. (To use Worthington’s terms, Rick initially only had articulated “decisional forgiveness”; when he asked Pam to forgive him for his own bitterness and coldness, he had reached the state of “emotional forgiveness” as well.) That, in turn, caused Pam to pour out her own feelings of guilt, shame, and fear, and ultimately led to a restored marriage (Ibid.: 203).

sin are subject to discipline (but ultimately a restoration process) by the church when their sin has affected the church.

**d.** *Repentance is essential to relief from guilt and shame.* Both shame (the subjective experience and feeling of wrongdoing, disgrace, disconnection) and guilt (the objective fact of being in the wrong, a transgressor) will not begin to leave the transgressor until he acknowledges, confesses, and repents of his guilt. He can then begin the process of being restored to the people and community from which he is disconnected; his shame, as well as his guilt, can thereby be relieved or removed.

## **B. Scripture does not require repentance as a condition of interpersonal forgiveness**

1. Several passages (e.g., Mark 1:14-15; 6:12; Luke 13:3; 24:47; Acts 2:37-38; 1 John 1:9) link forgiveness with repentance. However, all of those circumstances are discussing *God's* forgiveness, salvation, and restoration of sinful man into right relationship with God. None of those passages purport to require that an offender confess or repent before he can be forgiven in interpersonal situations. Further, they all deal with people who want to *be* forgiven, not with people who need to *do* the forgiving.

2. Two passages, in particular, are sometimes appealed to as making repentance a condition for interpersonal forgiveness: Matt 18:15-20 (“if your brother sins, go and reprove him . . . if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer”); and Luke 17:3-4 (“If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”). Sometimes the parable of the prodigal son, **Luke 15:17-21** (“*Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son*”), is similarly cited. None of those cases, however, requires that the offender repent before you forgive him:

**a.** *One must be careful to distinguish what is being described from what is being prescribed.*

**Luke 15** and **17** describe a situation where the offender repented. They do *not* say that the person who was wronged should forgive “if, but only if” the wrongdoer repents. Likewise, they do *not* say that the person who was wronged should *not* forgive if the offender does *not* repent.

**b.** *In Luke 15, note that, although the prodigal son “came to his senses” and expressed repentance, the father manifestly forgave him before the son could even utter words of repentance to the father (Luke 15:20).*<sup>17</sup> Note also that the father in the parable manifested both “decisional forgiveness” and “emotional forgiveness” (Worthington 2003: 53-54).

**c.** *The context of Matt 18 appears primarily to involve the issue of church discipline, sin affecting the church, and/or restoration to fellowship or position.* Ellingworth states that Jesus’ reference in **John 20:23** “is certainly to discipline within the believing community, not to the refusal to forgive personal wrongs,” and **Matt 16:19** and **Matt 18:18** “are similar, but probably refer more generally to decisions about what is to be permitted and prohibited within the community rather than to forgiveness alone” (Ellingworth 1992: 242). As such, repentance is a valid, necessary, and an important part of the restorative process. The distinction between that and individual, interpersonal forgiveness is indicated by the very next passage, beginning at **Matt 18:21**, where Peter asked “Lord, how often shall my brother sin *against me* and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Christ did *not* require that the offender first repent in order to be forgiven “up to seventy times seven” (**Matt 18:22**).

**d.** *Finally, we must keep in mind the difference between receiving forgiveness and granting forgiveness.* “The issue of repentance is vitally important to accepting forgiveness, but irrelevant to giving forgiveness” (Jeffress 2000: 73). **Luke 15** and **17** dealt with individuals who *wanted* to be forgiven; they expressed their repentance as a part of their *receiving* forgiveness.

## **C. Forgiveness cannot be “earned” by repentance, but unconditional forgiveness demonstrates realism, power, freedom, respect, and love**

1. Many think that “if a person who wrongs us does not repent, he doesn’t deserve to be forgiven.”

Smedes profoundly answers this: “Of course, he does not *deserve* to be forgiven. Nobody does. And all

<sup>17</sup> To the extent that the father in the parable represents our heavenly Father, repentance is necessary, as previously discussed. Even so, observe that it was the *father* who took the initiative by *running* to meet his son, even while the son “was still a long way off.” Similarly, our heavenly Father takes the initiative in saving us. See, e.g., **John 1:12-13; 6:37, 44; Eph 2:8-9.**

the tears in Neptune's ocean do not earn him the right or make him deserving. Forgiving under any circumstance is only for people who don't deserve it. Being sorry for the wrong we did does not earn us a right to be forgiven. How could it? There is no such thing as a right to be forgiven. Forgiving flows always and only from what theologians call grace—unearned, undeserved favor. Grace that is earned is not grace at all. In an odd way, if we deserved to be forgiven, we would not need to be." (Smedes 1984: 90-91)

**2. There is always a deficit between what the offender owes the person he hurt and what he is able to pay.** In the case of the prodigal son (**Luke 15**) even when the son said, "Father, I have sinned," he did not repay the money he had taken or the years of heartache he had caused; indeed, the son had squandered his share of the estate. Even the sincere repentance of a rapist will not restore lost innocence; the sincere repentance of a murderer will not restore a life; the sincere repentance of one who has put out your eye will not restore your sight. Repentance does not "even the scales"; it is an illusion to think it does. It is therefore unrealistic to demand that the offender repent before you forgive him.

**3. You can never make anyone repent anyway.** The offender may be dead, or gone, unable to repent, unaware that he has offended you, or simply doesn't care. Unconditional forgiveness takes that into account. It does not make your forgiving someone dependent on a repentance that is beyond your control.

**4. Unconditional forgiveness is an exercise of power.** It places you in the position of deciding to grant or withhold forgiveness yourself. To require that the offender first repent before you forgive him shackles you to him. Perversely, that makes you dependent on the one who hurt you. To require that the offender first repent before you forgive him gives the offender the power to control your heart, mind, and will.

**5. Unconditional forgiveness frees you from the offender.** It frees you from your enslavement to the past, to evil, to hurt, and to wrong. It frees you from your state of dependency. It enables you to heal and move on with your life.

**6. Unconditional forgiveness shows respect to the other person.** To forgive the other person without requiring that he repent demonstrates that you view him as someone *capable* of changing. It might actually motivate him to change.

**7. Unconditional forgiveness is a high expression of love.** As was discussed earlier, one of the key "hot emotions" that leads to unforgiveness is fear. Yet the Bible says that, "there is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear" (**1 John 4:18**). As Jeffress states: "if repentance is a requirement to granting forgiveness then that means that we must confront every person who wrongs us before we can genuinely forgive him. . . . But do we really want to spend our lives demanding repentance from everyone around us? Aren't we ensuring that people will run for the hills when they see us coming if we're always needing to 'talk about a personal matter'? And more importantly, doesn't such a confrontational lifestyle contradict the essence of Christian love, a love that 'keeps no record of wrongs' (1 Corinthians 13:5, NIV)." (Jeffress 2000: 80)

**8. Unconditional forgiveness follows the example of Christ.** Jesus forgave us even before we confessed and repented of our sins (see **Mark 2:3-12; Luke 7:36-48; 23:33-34; John 8:1-11**). Therefore, we should be willing to forgive others even before they confess and ask for forgiveness.

## **VII. Receiving forgiveness for your own sins against God and other people**

### ***A. Receive and experience God's forgiveness of you***<sup>18</sup>

**1. Since we are to forgive others because we have been forgiven, it is important first to receive God's forgiveness of us into our heart, mind, soul, and being.** Jeffress says, "you can't give away what you don't possess" (Jeffress 2000: 143). In this regard, it is important to "feel" or "experience" our forgiveness from God. Smedes adds, "The linkage between feeling forgiven and the power to forgive is the key to everything else" (Smedes 1984: 120). We need to see our own great *need* for forgiveness. We need to have a proper understanding both of God and of ourselves—of God's absolute and perfect holiness and goodness, and of the sin that lies at the heart of each of us and which corrupts every part of our being (e.g., **Gen 5:1-3; Ps 51:5; Jer 17:9; John 8:31-34; Rom 3:9-18; 6:6, 20-21; 7:14-25; Eph 2:1-3; Titus 3:3; 2 Pet 2:18-19**).

**2. We need to meditate on how much we have been forgiven—that thought should constantly be a part**

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<sup>18</sup>This section is based largely on Jeffress 2000: 143-55; Smedes 1996: chs. 8, 14; and Worthington 2003: ch. 3.

of who we are and how we see ourselves. This understanding of ourselves, and of our need for, and the depth of, our own forgiveness, makes it much easier to forgive others (and would make us extreme *hypocrites* if we do not forgive others). As Christ indicated, the person who is forgiven much loves much, and the person who is forgiven little loves little (**Luke 7:47**).

**3. We need to understand the nature and extent of God’s forgiveness of us. God has forgiven us completely and forever—without qualifications, reservations or exceptions.**

**a. *The Bible uses several metaphors to show us how completely, and without reservations or hidden qualifications or exceptions, God’s forgiveness of us truly is:***

(1) **Ps 103:12:** “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

(2) **Isa 38:17:** “Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back.”

(3) **Isa 43:25:** “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins.”

(4) **Mic 7:19:** “He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities underfoot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”

**b. *Christ’s sacrifice of himself for us has resulted in the forgiveness of our sins permanently:***<sup>12</sup> *but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God . . .*<sup>14</sup> *For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified . . .*<sup>17</sup> *and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.* (**Heb 10:12, 14, 17**)

**c. *If we truly understand the depth of our sinfulness, the magnitude of God’s grace, and the extent of our forgiveness, our response should be gratitude, love, humility, and forgiveness.***

“Because God acted first in love, mercy, and justice, the Christian response to God’s initiation was gratitude. In Christianity, God is always the initiator. Some people have argued that gratitude is the basic Christian emotion (Ps 50:14, 23; 1 Thess 5:18).” (Worthington 2003: 63)

**d. *God’s forgiveness of our sins and wrongs is the model by which we are to forgive others: completely and permanently, without qualification, reservation, or exception.***<sup>19</sup>

## **B. Seek the forgiveness of others**<sup>20</sup>

**1. If we truly see and understand our own neediness and sinfulness, the amount and depth of God’s forgiveness of us, and our continual need for his forgiveness of our ongoing sins, we should naturally be motivated to seek the forgiveness of other people whom we have wronged and hurt.** In fact, our seeking the forgiveness *from* others is probably one of the best motivations for extending forgiveness *to* others. After all, how can we withhold forgiving other people when we not only go to God, but *to other people*, for forgiveness?

**2. Seeking forgiveness is the first step toward reconciliation (the mending of a relationship that has been broken by transgression).** Seeking forgiveness should be done soon after you have offended someone—that way, there is less time for the other person to “harden” against you and for the whole-body, emotional state of unforgiveness to form in the other person.

**3. Seeking to be forgiven involves a series of steps:**

**a. *Determine that you need to ask for forgiveness.***

(1) Just as we only “forgive” the bad acts (including speech) of those who have wronged us, so we are only to seek forgiveness from those whom we have wronged by our words or conduct. Merely *thinking* hurtful, lustful, or other wrong thoughts about someone does not and should not warrant our seeking forgiveness from that person. Sande points out, “Whether a sin should be confessed to other people as well as to God depends on whether it was a ‘heart sin’ or a ‘social sin.’ A heart sin takes place only in your thoughts and does not directly affect others. Therefore, it needs to be confessed only to God.” (Sande 2004: 127)

(2) In determining whether we need to seek forgiveness, we should not deny our guilt or pretend that what we did wasn’t all that harmful. We should consider such things as:

<sup>19</sup>One helpful way to think of forgiveness of others is the way the Anglican Catechism in *The Book of Common Prayer* describes the sacraments: “The sacraments are *outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace*, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace” (*The Book of Common Prayer* 1979: 857). That view of forgiving others is certainly borne out by Christ’s admonitions concerning the interconnectedness of divine and human forgiveness in **Matt 6:9-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25-26; and Luke 7:36-50.**

<sup>20</sup>This section is based largely on Jeffress 2000: 155-64; Enright 2001: ch. 14; and Chapman and Thomas 2006: *passim*.

(A) *Are we ashamed of what we did?* (B) *Do we feel remorse for what we did?* (C) *Do we go over and over the event in our mind (perhaps trying to justify it)?* (D) *Do we compare ourselves with the person we hurt (perhaps saying to ourselves, “he’s just as bad as I am—or worse!”)?* (E) *Have we lied to cover up what we did because of shame?* (F) *How has our life been changed because of what we did (even in such “subtle” ways as making us more “callused” or “harder”)?* (G) *Do we yearn to be free from the shame and guilt of our offense?* (H) *Have we confessed our sin to God and experienced his forgiveness (in which case, we should likewise seek forgiveness from the actual person we wronged)?*

(3) The case of a wrong against someone who is *unaware of your actions (such as an adulterous relationship you had with someone, although your spouse is unaware of it) can be trickier.* Jeffress suggests at least three questions to ask in such a case: (A) *Is restitution necessary?* If the other party has suffered a loss, but doesn’t know exactly who caused the loss, it is your obligation not only to apologize and seek forgiveness, but also to make good the loss; indeed, making good the loss demonstrates the sincerity of your apology and desire for forgiveness. (B) *What are the chances your offense will be discovered?* An affair thirty years ago may never come to light in your marriage now, whereas a relationship six months ago likely will come to your spouse’s attention, and hearing the news from someone else would be more hurtful than hearing it from you. (C) *Will your confession help or hurt the other party?* He adds, “This is the bottom-line issue. Sometimes our desire to ‘confess’ can be very self-centered. While we may feel relieved after unloading our garbage on our spouse, he or she may be devastated. Sometimes sacrificial love entails our willingness to bear our own burdens instead of asking someone else to share the load.” (Jeffress 2000: 158-59)

**b. Ask for forgiveness.**

(1) Remember that “requesting forgiveness is asking the person you’ve wronged to do something: to release you from your obligation” (Jeffress 2000: 161). Requesting a personal meeting is the preferred method of communication—speaking in person with the other person enables him or her to hear the tone of our voice, see our facial expressions, gauge our body language, and ask follow-up questions, all (or many) of which are prevented or inhibited by speaking by telephone or by letter.<sup>21</sup> Further, meeting in person helps to show the seriousness of the occasion, and thereby demonstrates the sincerity of your desire for forgiveness. That is especially true if, because of the distance you have to travel or other circumstances, it will cost you something to meet in person. As Jeffress points out, “The time and sacrifice required for such an effort may seem high, but it is negligible compared to the joy of a clear conscience” (Ibid.).

(2) Asking for forgiveness involves more than just saying a perfunctory, “I’m sorry.” It includes accepting the pain of humiliation which occurs when we admit that we were in the wrong. That may be especially acute where someone of relative authority and power (e.g., a husband, parent, or employer) has to humble himself and ask for forgiveness from someone of relative dependency or subordination (e.g., a wife, child, or employee). Nevertheless, “If we want to be free, we must accept the pain associated with this humiliation” (Enright 2001: 254).<sup>22</sup>

(3) Jeffress identifies four aspects of asking someone to forgive you: (A) *Refuse to blame others.* Even if a third party, or even the person from whom you are seeking forgiveness, is largely responsible for the conflict, you need to concentrate on *your own* offense. (B) *Identify the wrong you’ve committed.* Don’t try to minimize what you’ve

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<sup>21</sup>There may be specific or unique mechanisms in particular cultures or societies for arranging forgiveness meetings, such as the use of extended family members, village elders, clan or tribal leaders, church leaders, or others as “go-betweens” or facilitators. The church has a role it could play or develop in bringing about forgiveness.

<sup>22</sup>We should remember (and draw comfort from) this: We are being obedient to Christ. Further, Christ experienced the *public shame and humiliation* of being mocked, beaten, and crucified naked for the sins that *other people* had committed; when we ask someone for forgiveness, we are merely experiencing a *private* humiliation (unless we committed a public offense, in which case our confession should be public) for a sin that *we personally* committed. Truly, “*a slave is not greater than his master*” (John 13:16; see also Matt 10:24; Luke 6:40; John 15:20).



done or speak only in general terms. The other person is already aware of what you've done; now he or she wants to know that *you* are fully aware of it. (C) *Acknowledge the hurt you've caused*. The other person wants to know that you understand the pain he or she has suffered because of your actions. Your acknowledging that (or even saying that you "can't imagine the hurt [or grief, or embarrassment] this may have caused you") will make the other person much more likely to forgive you. (D) *Ask the other person to forgive you*. You should not simply confess the wrong you have done, but end your discussion by asking the other person to voluntarily release you from the debt you have incurred to him as a result of your offense. You cannot demand forgiveness; nor can you not imply that the other person should forgive you for his own benefit. Instead, Jeffress suggests asking for forgiveness by saying something like: "I realize that I've wronged you by \_\_\_\_\_. I'll do my best to see that I never do this again, though I realize there's nothing I can do to erase the deep pain I've caused you. What I did was wrong, and I can blame no one but myself. I'm coming to you today asking if you could find it in your heart to forgive me for what I've done." (Jeffress 2000: 163)

(4) Chapman and Thomas follow a similar, five-step, format for apologizing and requesting forgiveness: (A) *Express regret* (e.g., "I am sorry"); (B) *Accept responsibility* (e.g., "I was wrong"); (C) *Make restitution* (e.g., "What can I do to make it right?"); (D) *Genuinely repent* (e.g., "I'll try not to do that again"); and (E) *Request forgiveness* (e.g., "Will you please forgive me?") (Chapman and Thomas 2006: *passim*).

(5) Sande has a seven-step formula, which he calls the "Seven A's of Confession": (A) *Address Everyone Involved*. Confess your sins to every person who has been directly affected by your wrongdoing; (B) *Avoid If, But, and Maybe*. The word "if" (i.e., "I'm sorry if I've done something to upset you") ruins a confession because it implies that you do not know whether or not you did wrong. Similarly, saying such things as "*perhaps* I was wrong," "*maybe* I could have tried harder," "I shouldn't have lost my temper, *but* I was tired," and "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, *but* you really upset me," neutralizes the rest of the "confession" and destroys the ability to convey sincere repentance; (C) *Admit Specifically*. The more detailed and specific you are when making a confession, the more likely you are to receive a positive response; (D) *Acknowledge the Hurt*—you need to show that you understand how you hurt or affected the other person; (E) *Accept the Consequences*. To explicitly accept the consequences of your actions, including trying to make restitution, demonstrates genuine repentance; (F) *Alter Your Behavior*. Tell the person you offended how you plan to change your behavior in the future; (G) *Ask for Forgiveness (and Allow Time)*. To have sincerely done the preceding steps allows you to explicitly ask to be forgiven. Asking for forgiveness then shifts the responsibility for the next move to the other person. However, one must not pressure the other person to make a quick decision. The offended person may need time to think, pray, and "process" the offense and your confession. (Sande 2004: 126-34)

(6) It may be that the person from whom we seek forgiveness is dead, no longer available, or refuses to speak with us. Or, the person may either respond to our request for forgiveness ambivalently, negatively, or even with hostility. Although that is unfortunate, if we have truly, and sincerely, done all we could to regret and accept responsibility for what we did, have made restitution, repented (changed our ways), and sought forgiveness and closure, we can nevertheless have the clear conscience of "knowing that neither God nor any other person can accuse you of a wrong you have never attempted to make right" (Jeffress 2000: 164).

c. *Grow in Christ, and become a better person, as a result of your experience.*

(1) Enright suggests that, as a result of our offense and our seeking forgiveness, we should: (A) *Look for meaning in our failures and mistakes* (our successes rarely teach us as much as our failures); (B) *Recognize that we are stronger because of what we have experienced* (because of the courage it takes to admit a wrong and face the person we have harmed, we will be stronger and more able to face future failures without fear); (C) *Realize that we are not alone* (i.e., we may need support to go through this

process,<sup>23</sup> and we realize that we are like other people—we thereby may no longer be so prideful or disdainful of others); (D) *Make the decision, and take the necessary steps, to not repeat the offense*; and (E) *Experience the freedom from guilt, remorse, and shame that confession of sin and accepting forgiveness bring*. All of these things should draw us closer to Christ and make us more Christ-like in the future.

(2) The same five things that Enright suggests we discover after receiving forgiveness are just as available to us if, through no fault of our own, the other person cannot or will not grant us forgiveness. If we have fulfilled *our* responsibilities, the freedom and growth that come from apology, restitution, and repentance cannot be denied us because *someone else* cannot bring himself to forgive.

(3) Sande suggests that we can find freedom from our sin by “work[ing] with God to change [our] attitudes and behavior in the future” (Sande 2004: 134). He notes that God is eager to help us grow and change and that no sin or habit in our lives cannot be overcome by his grace. Our responsibilities are to: (A) pray; (B) delight ourselves in the Lord; (C) study; and (D) practice what we are learning (Ibid.: 134-35).

## RECONCILIATION

### Important Scriptural References

#### **I. God has reconciled us to himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:16-21):**

<sup>16</sup> *Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer.* <sup>17</sup> *Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.* <sup>18</sup> *Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,* <sup>19</sup> *namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.* <sup>20</sup> *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* <sup>21</sup> *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*<sup>24</sup>

#### **II. God has abolished all barriers that prevent reconciliation among even the most divided peoples (Eph 2:11-22):**

<sup>11</sup> *Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands—<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.* <sup>13</sup> *But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.* <sup>14</sup> *For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall,* <sup>15</sup> *by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace,* <sup>16</sup> *and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.* <sup>17</sup> *“And he came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near”;* <sup>18</sup> *for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.* <sup>19</sup> *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household,* <sup>20</sup> *having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,* <sup>21</sup> *in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,* <sup>22</sup> *in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.* (See also **Rom 10:12; 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11**)

***A. The greatest division between different peoples in the Old Testament, and the only one with theological significance, was the division between Israelites and Gentiles; in Christ that division no longer exists; therefore, all types of people are equal before God***

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<sup>23</sup>Because forgiveness is central to Christianity, the church should see part of its role as supporting and facilitating the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. Indeed, research indicates that “people receiving support from friends in church groups report being able to forgive more than church people who do not participate in groups” (Worthington 2003: 70).

<sup>24</sup>The noun translated “reconciliation” is *katallagē*, which refers to “a change or reconciliation from a state of enmity between persons to one of friendship” (Zodhiates 1993: *katallagē*; see also Danker 2000: *katallagē*, “reestablishment of an interrupted or broken relationship, *reconciliation*”). The verb translated “reconciled” is the similar *katallassō*, which refers to “the exchange of hostility for a friendly relationship, *reconcile*” (Ibid.: *katallassō*).

Because the greatest enmity and the largest dividing wall between people have been abolished in Christ, smaller enmities and dividing walls likewise have been abolished; consequently, in Christ there exist no barriers to reconciliation among any groups or peoples.

**B. Christ's purpose is that we all be "one new man" and be at peace; therefore, our being as one and at peace with each other is an "outward and visible sign" that we are, in fact, in Christ**

**C. What God did for us (described in the above passage), should make reconciliation between us and other people central in our lives (as Paul discusses in the rest of Ephesians)**

Sande describes how our response as reconcilers and peacemakers must flow from our having been reconciled to God through Christ: "Paul's letter to the Ephesians focuses heavily on peacemaking. The first three chapters provide a glorious description of God's plan of salvation. In the fourth chapter, Paul begins to explain how we should respond to what Christ has done for us. Not carefully what Paul places at the top of his list of practical applications of the gospel: 'As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (**Eph. 4:1-3**). The Greek word that is translated 'make every effort' in this passage means to strive eagerly, earnestly, and diligently. It is a word that a trainer of gladiators might have used when he sent men to fight to the death in the Coliseum: 'Make every effort to stay alive today!' So too must a Christian agonize for peace and unity. Obviously, token efforts and halfhearted attempts at reconciliation fall far short of what Paul had in mind." (Sande 2004: 52)

### **III. Our being reconciled to each other has spiritual importance and is related to our worship of God**

**(Matt 5:21-26):** <sup>21</sup> "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. <sup>23</sup> Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. <sup>25</sup> Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup> Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent."<sup>25</sup>

**A. In this passage Jesus makes clear the interconnectedness between our being reconciled with other people and our being reconciled with God**

**B. This passage demonstrates the importance that God places on reconciliation between people—it is a reflection of having a "kingdom heart"**

Dallas Willard describes how profound the principle of **Matt 5:23-24** is: "You are with the Temple officials before the altar, about to present your sacrifice to God. It is one of the holiest moments in the ritual life of the faithful. The practice was that nothing should interrupt this ritual except some more important ceremonial matter that required immediate attention.

Suddenly, right in the midst of it all, you remember a brother who is mad at you. Realizing how important it is for his soul to find release, and pained by the break between yourself and him, you stop the ritual. You walk out of it to find him and make up. *That* illustrates the positive goodness of the kingdom heart.

To get the full impact of this illustration we have to imagine ourselves being married or baptized or ordained to some special role, such as pastor. In the midst of the proceedings, we walk out to seek reconciliation with someone who is not even there. That pictures the kingdom love that is kingdom rightness." (Willard 1997: 156)

### **IV. Christians are commanded by Christ and the apostles to do all they can to live in a state of peace and reconciliation with each other and with all people**

**A. Christ commanded us to be at peace with one another (Mark 9:50): Salt is good; but if the salt becomes**

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<sup>25</sup>The word translated "be reconciled" in **5:24** is *diallassomai*. It similar in meaning to *katallassō*, i.e., "to be restored to normal relations or harmony with someone, *become reconciled*" (Danker 2000: *diallassomai*).

*unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.*

**B. “Every Epistle in the New Testament contains a command to live at peace with one another”** (Sande 2004: 51)

**1. Rom 12:18:** *If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.* (See also **2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 5:13**)

**2. Rom 15:5-7:** <sup>5</sup> *Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus;* <sup>6</sup> *that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* <sup>7</sup> *Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.*

**3. 1 Cor 1:10:** *Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

**4. Col 3:15:** *And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.*

## **V. Both Christ and the apostles demonstrated reconciliation in their own lives**

**A. Christ demonstrated reconciliation in his earthly life (Rom 5:8-11):** <sup>8</sup> *But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* <sup>9</sup> *Much more then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through him.* <sup>10</sup> *For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.* <sup>11</sup> *And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.*

**B. Christ continues to demonstrate reconciliation in his role as our high priest (Heb 7:23-25):** <sup>23</sup> *And the former priest, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing,* <sup>24</sup> *but he, on the other hand, because he abides forever, holds his priesthood permanently.* <sup>25</sup> *Hence, also, he is able to save forever those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.* (See also **Rom 8:34; 1 John 2:1**)

**C. The apostles demonstrated reconciliation in their lives:** compare **Matt 20:20-24** with **Acts 1:13-14; Acts 15:36-40** with **2 Tim 4:11**; see also **Phlm 10-18**.

**VI. “When we are unable to resolve a conflict on our own, God commands the local church to step in and bring its wisdom, resources, and authority to bear on the problem (Matt 18:16-17; Phil 4:2-3; 1 Cor 6:1-8)”** (Sande 2004: 14).<sup>26</sup>

**A. Because the church is one body, consisting of many different “members” who possess different gifts, it is important to identify and train respected, wise, mature, godly men and women in the church who can serve as counselors, mediators, or arbitrators to facilitate reconciliation among the other members of the church (and among nonmembers as well)**

**B. “Reconcilers can play a variety of roles in a conflict”** (Sande 2004: 191)

Sande states that these roles can include: 1. helping people in conflict make the decisions needed to restore peace; 2. facilitating communication by encouraging both sides to listen more carefully to each other; 3. helping determine the facts by listening carefully themselves, by asking appropriate questions, and by helping people in conflict obtain additional facts; 4. giving advice on how to deal with the problem (as implied by **Matt 18:17** and **1 Cor 6:1-8**); 5. encouraging repentance and confession on either or both sides by pointing out any behavior that has been inconsistent with what is taught in the Bible; 6. facilitating biblical solutions to material issues by directing the parties in conflict to relevant principles and examples in Scripture; 7. drawing on their own knowledge and experience to propose practical solutions to specific problems (Ibid.).

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<sup>26</sup>Appendix F to Sande’s *Peacemaker* is about “cultivating a culture of peace in your church.” His organization, Peacemaker Ministries, contains information about reconciler training, educational, and conciliation services. Contact information for Peacemaker Ministries is as follows: address—P.O. Box 81130, Billings, MT 59108, U.S.A.; telephone—(406) 256-1583; email—mail@HisPeace.org; website—www.HisPeace.org.

## Understanding and Applying Reconciliation in Our Lives <sup>27</sup>

### **I. Distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation**

**A. *Forgiveness is one person’s moral response to another person’s injustice; reconciliation is two people coming together to restore a relationship whose trust was broken (i.e., abolishing the moral hindrance to fellowship)***

“It takes one person to forgive. It takes two to be reunited.

Forgiving happens inside the wounded person. Reunion happens in a relationship between people.

We can forgive who never says he is sorry. We cannot be truly reunited unless he is honestly sorry.

We can forgive even if we do not trust the person who wronged us once not to wrong us again. Reunion can happen only if we can trust the person who wronged us once not to wrong us again.

Forgiving has no strings attached. Reunion has several strings attached.” (Smedes 1996: 27)

### **B. Comparison of the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation**<sup>28</sup>

	<u>Forgiveness</u>	<u>Reconciliation</u>
<i>Who?</i>	One person	Two or more people
<i>What?</i>	Gift granted	Earned, not granted
<i>How?</i>	Emotional replacement	Behavioral replacement
<i>Where?</i>	Within your body	Within your relationship
<i>How to?</i>	Pyramid model to REACH forgiveness	Bridge to reconciliation

### **II. Why reconciliation is pragmatically important**

**A. *Reconciliation is a witness of God’s power, and demonstrates our obedience to the most important commandment Christ gave us on the night before his crucifixion***

1. On his last night on earth before he was crucified, Jesus said this: A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

2. Without reconciliation we fail to show the world the *single most important evidence* of our being Christ’s disciples.

**B. *Reconciliation empowers us to resist the attacks of the enemy***

1. Negatively, the failure for believers to reconcile divides and isolates them, thus making them easy prey for the enemy’s attacks.

2. Positively, believers living peacefully and in harmony with each other possess the unity of a mighty army, able to succeed in the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged (**Eph 6:12**), so that the gates of hell shall not be able to overpower the church (**Matt 16:18**).

**C. *Our living harmoniously with, and blessing, others will result in God’s blessing us (1 Pet 3:8-9):*** <sup>8</sup> *To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit;* <sup>9</sup> *not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.*<sup>29</sup>

### **III. How to Reconcile**

**A. *Reconciliation does not occur instantaneously, but takes time and requires a number of stages***

1. Jeffress describes four stages in the reconciliation process (Jeffress, 2000: 115-23).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup>This section is based primarily on Worthington 2003: chs. 9-12; Jeffress 2000: ch. 5; and Smedes 1996: ch. 3; and secondarily on Enright 2001: ch. 15.

<sup>28</sup>The tabular comparison is from Worthington 2003: 171, Table 9.1.

<sup>29</sup>The “blessing” we receive from God is clearly related to “the righteous conduct Peter commands [believers] to manifest in vv. 8-9a” (Grudem 1988: 147). Although some commentators hold that the “blessing” referred to is one’s final salvation, a strong case also can be made that what Peter means is that living a harmonious life and blessing others in return for evil will bring blessings from God in this present life (cp., Michaels 1988: 178-79, with Grudem 1988: 148-49).

<sup>30</sup>Sande has a similar four-fold model of the restoration process: (1) repentance; (2) self-examination; (3) confession; and (4) personal change (Sande 2004: 118-35).

**a. Repentance.** Although one can forgive a person who never admits that he caused an injury, in most cases reconciliation of a relationship will require willingness to admit the wrongs done and acknowledging the pain caused; so that interpersonal, relational healing can occur and the relationship can be set on a new, stronger foundation.

**b. Restitution.** Trying to restore that which was taken from, or broken in, a relationship demonstrates the sincerity of one’s repentance and earnestness of the desire to achieve relational wholeness. Restitution helps to “level the playing field,” so that both parties can begin to renew their relationship on an even basis (see Sande 2004: Appendix C, “Principles of Restitution”).

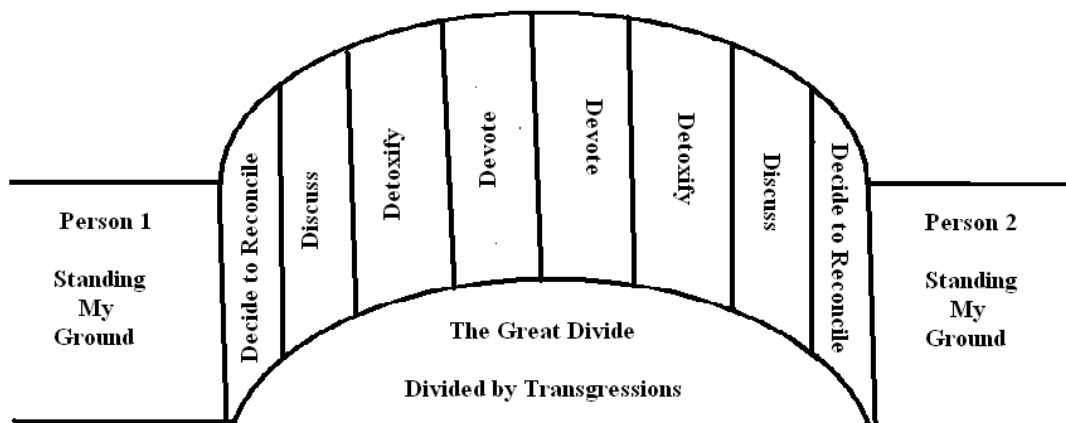
**c. Rehabilitation.** In order to reestablish a relationship with someone who has wronged us, it is important to have assurance that our offender has truly changed so that we aren’t victimized again. That is why genuine repentance is evidenced by changed behavior.

**d. Rebuilding of Trust.** Often many people may be needed to help restore a relationship (see Gal 6:1). Changed attitudes will result in changed words and deeds toward the other person; eventually, the other person will see our sincerity. It may take longer to reestablish broken trust that it was to establish a trusting relationship in the first place. By God’s grace, however, and the mutual acts of both parties, it can happen.

**2. Perhaps the most practical model for how the reconciliation process is applied is that of Worthington.** Although he uses different terminology from Jeffress and Sande, the “repentance, restitution, rehabilitation, and rebuilding of trust” of which Jeffress speaks, and Sande’s “repentance, self-examination, confession, and personal change,” are implicit in Worthington’s model.

### B. Worthington’s bridge model of reconciliation

Worthington has a four-step model, which he likens to a bridge, consisting of four steps or events: decision, discussion, detoxification, and devotion (Worthington 2003: chs. 9-12):



**1. Decide.** First comes the decision of whether or not to reconcile. Reconciliation requires movement on *both* sides, so either party can block it at any stage. Reconciliation involves time, effort, humility, and the risk of being hurt again or taken advantage of by the other person.

**a. A person might not want to reconcile if:** (1) he likes being apart and sees no reason to reopen the relationship; (2) it is unhealthy or unsafe to do so (there is a risk of physical or other harm); (3) one person has repeatedly violated trust and shows little or no true contrition and remorse; (4) the hurt and pain, at least now, are too great; (5) the other person is dead, unavailable, or for some other reason it is not possible to reconcile.

**b. People decide to reconcile because:** (1) they do not like to accept failed relationships; (2) they value each other and the relationship; (3) they have invested much in each other and in the relationship; (4) they are not willing to return to the *status quo* but desire a better, stronger relationship; (5) they believe that pursuing reconciliation is likely to have more positive outcomes than doing nothing.

**c. We must decide how to reconcile. Reconciliation occurs in two ways:**

**(1) Most reconciliation comes about implicitly, without the parties explicitly discussing reconciliation.** Implicit reconciliation consists of: stopping hostilities; coming together (i.e., for a common task); joining together with (or being joined together by) a third person for various activities; being positive and complimenting each other; recognizing our oneness in Christ, which can help to break down our mental and emotional “walls

of division” (**Eph 2:14-16**).

**(2) Explicit reconciliation occurs when the parties come together to specifically deal with the problem and restore the broken relationship.**

**(A)** *Although some people think that **Matt 18:15-20** is some type of “law” that requires that we must always talk personally and privately with someone who has offended us before we can ask others to get involved in the situation, that is not so. Jacob (**Gen 32-33**), Abigail (**1 Sam 25:18-35**), Joab (**2 Sam 14:1-23**), and Barnabas (**Acts 9:26-27**) all intervened on behalf of others, or employed others to intervene, in order to bring about reconciliation before the parties with the broken relationship met personally.*

**(B)** *In determining how to begin the explicit reconciliation process: “Personal conversations are often best, but in some cases involving other people right away will be even better. There are several situations in which this may be true today:*

When you are dealing with a person who comes from a culture or tradition in which it is customary to resolve problems through intermediaries such as family representatives or trusted leaders;

When going to someone personally and privately is likely to make them lose face in the sight of others;

When either of the parties might feel intimidated by the other person, perhaps because of a difference in verbal skills or differing positions of authority or influence;

When one person was abused by the other and there is a possibility that the abuser will use a private conversation to manipulate or silence the person who has been abused;

When there is a third party who has a much closer relationship than you do with the person who may be caught in sin, and that third party is willing to raise the issue with the offender.” (Sande 2004: 146-47)

**d.** *We must decide when to reconcile.* Decisional and emotional forgiveness can sometimes happen quickly; reconciliation almost always requires a period of time. Christians should look for opportunities to initiate the reconciliation process. Before initiating *explicit* reconciliation, we need to assess our own motives and mental and emotional state (are we very stressed? angry?—it is probably better to pray and deal with those things first). We need to assess the other person and the circumstances, praying for God’s guidance. However, we should always act in a Christ-like manner consistent with (and which facilitates) *implicit* reconciliation.

**2. Discuss.** Once the decision has been made to pursue reconciliation, the parties need to get together and discuss their relationship, the division that has arisen between them, and how to restore friendship or a good relationship.

**a.** *The best approach in meeting and talking with the other person is to change your attitude—develop a “soft attitude.” A soft attitude helps you to talk softly, and that is vital to reconciling with the other person. A soft attitude is characterized by empathy and humility.*

**b.** *Research indicates that in many cases, regardless of what may “objectively” be true, both parties see themselves as the victim and the other party as the perpetrator; both parties may come prepared to forgive the other, but are completely unprepared to be forgiven (Worthington 2003: 191). In such cases, both parties are usually wrong. Often, the person who is *less at fault* (but who wants to restore the relationship) can initiate the reconciliation process by going to the other person and confessing his own sins that have harmed the relationship (the person more at fault may be too ashamed to initiate the process). Regardless of who initiates the process, talking about your own contribution to the problem does two things: (1) it follows Jesus’ teaching in **Matt 7:3-5** to “take the log out of your own eye” before you deal with the “speck in your brother’s eye”; and (2) “your confession will sometimes encourage the other person to admit sins” (Sande 2004: 158). Sande calls this the “Golden Result,” which is a corollary to the Golden Rule (which calls us to do to others as we would have them do to us): “The Golden Result says that *people will usually treat us as we treat them*. If we blame others for a problem, they will usually blame in return. But if we say, ‘I was wrong,’ it is amazing how often the response will be, ‘It was my fault too.’” (Ibid.: 78)*

**c.** *If your confession prompts the other person to make at least a “half-hearted” admission, you*

*might pick up on that, reflect it back to the other person or ask questions to bring out the issue in more detail.* In response to a half-hearted admission like, “I guess I sort of lost my temper, too,” or “Well, it wasn’t all your fault,” Sande suggests such responses as: “I appreciate your admitting that you lost your temper, Bob. May I explain how that made me feel?”; “I appreciate your saying that. What do you think you did wrong?”; or “Why do you think I was frustrated?” (Ibid.: 158).

**d.** *In discussing with the other person, you consciously will have to forbear lashing out.* Try to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Summarize what he says so that both you and he are sure that you are properly understanding him. Be fair in your expectations (remember: reconciliation may take a lot of time and effort). Affirm the positive aspects of the other person and indicate that one reason you were hurt was because the other person does not usually act that way. Try to avoid falling into the trap of denying that you did anything wrong, of justifying all of your actions, and of blaming the other person—that will just lead to a further argument. Listen to the other person’s explanations and, when you say why you did what you did, try to avoid blaming the other person (instead, describe that you were angry, or hurt, etc., without adding that your anger was justified because the other person was so mean and that he “had it coming”).

**e.** *Ultimately, you will want to move to forgive and accept each other’s forgiveness.* You will want to focus on changing your own behavior, not the other person’s. You will want to agree on a plan to restore the relationship.

**3. Detoxify.** When a relationship is broken because of some betrayal or other hurt, it is like poison entering the body.

**a.** *We need to rid ourselves and the relationship of that poison.* Thus, we need to deal with ourselves and eliminate the bitterness in our soul as we confess it; if God has forgiven us, and taken our sin and bitterness upon himself, we no longer need to carry that burden and should no longer carry that burden.

**b.** *We likewise have to remove the poison from the relationship.* Research indicates that marriages (and other relationships) tend to deteriorate in four predictable steps: (1) Criticism: first mental, then verbal; (2) Defensiveness: first mental, then verbal (this is characterized by “snapping back” at the criticizer, and leads to arguments); (3) Contempt: whereas criticism and defensiveness tend to be specific acts or qualities of the person, contempt is directed at the other person himself or herself; (4) Stonewalling or war: to avoid being hurt the person withdraws and turns his or her heart into a “stone wall,” or else open war, designed to hurt the other person (mentally, emotionally, or physically) erupts. (Worthington 2003: 227)<sup>31</sup>

**c.** *Research also indicates that there is a direct relationship between the strength and happiness of a marriage and the ratio of positive to negative interactions.* If a couple has 10, or 7, or even 5 positive interactions to every negative one, they are usually happy. At 5:1, however, an abrupt transformation occurs: above the 5:1 level, people generally see the relationship positively; below that level they generally see the relationship negatively. Further, if a couple has a ratio below 5:1 it is usually not 4:1, but dramatically falls off to 1:1 or even 1:2. (Worthington 2003: 227-28)

**d.** *The idea of detoxification is to reverse the process: i.e., consciously work on behaviors, words, and thoughts that move in the direction from stonewalling or war back to contempt; from contempt back to defensiveness; from defensiveness back to criticism; and from criticism back to normalcy.* In doing this we can look for signs that tell us whether we are poisoning, rather than detoxifying, the relationship: (1) we bring up past hurts, rather than merely dealing with the current hurt; (2) we are overly harsh in reproaching the other person; (3) we attack the person, rather than sticking to the issue; (4) we hear bitterness in our voice; (5) we cannot let go past hurts.

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<sup>31</sup>This progression is consistent with Sande’s view that the root cause of conflict is “unmet desires in our hearts,” which also follows a four-step process: (1) I Desire—conflict begins with some kind of desire (which, in itself, may be either a legitimate or illegitimate one) which desire is unmet; (2) I Demand—the unmet desire is fixated on, and is transformed into a demand “that must be met in order for us to be satisfied and fulfilled,” and can lead to bitterness, resentment, and self-pity when it continues to be unmet; (3) I Judge—when others fail to satisfy our desires and live up to our expectations, we criticize and condemn them in our hearts if not with our words; (4) I Punish—the judgmental attitude then leads to our deliberately or unconsciously finding overt or covert ways to hurt or punish people so that they will give in to our desires. (Sande, 2004: 102-09)



**4. Devote.** We finally can reach the stage of restoration, which involves devotion to the other person and to the relationship.

**a.** *We achieve this when we stop obsessing over the wrong; instead, we resolve our grief by learning lessons from the hurt.* We see how this has changed us and, in fact, has made us a better person. We reach the level of devotion when we build love. We understand how the other person would perceive both being devalued and being valued, both being unloved and being loved. We then do those things to not devalue the other person, but to positively value him or her and demonstrate our love to him or her. Thus, we decrease the negative and increase the positive interactions among us, trying to see those interactions from the other person's point of view.

**b.** *Increasing the ratio of positive to negative interactions requires knowing the other person well and requires empathy.* It requires knowing how the other person best senses or experiences being loved. The methods of demonstrating love can include: (1) words of love and affirmation; (2) physical touch and affection; (3) spending time with the person; (4) acts of loving service; (5) loving gifts. (Chapman, 1995: *passim*) We utilize those expressions of love which the other person particularly values. In short, through the process of reconciliation we come to consciously understand the other person, and to live the way we as Christians, with the mind and Spirit of Christ, naturally should understand people and live, all the time, in all of our relationships.

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## APPENDIX

### A Decision-Based Forgiveness Model for Restoring Marriage and Family Relationships<sup>32</sup>

The following model is designed for Christian couples. However, it could be adapted for Christians who are experiencing problems in other relationships. It may be helpful for non-Christians, but that is less likely since it is based on explicitly biblical premises which non-Christians might not accept.

The forgiveness session involving the counselor and the couple is lengthy (at least three hours) and includes 13 steps. The steps are organized into three sections: **(1) defining and preparing (Steps 1-3)**, which involves a discussion between the couple and counselor; **(2) seeking and granting forgiveness (Steps 4-12)**—after one spouse completes all the steps between 4-12 the other spouse takes a turn; and **(3) the session concludes with a ceremonial act (Step 13)**. The couple probably will require future counseling sessions after the forgiveness session, but successfully completing the lengthy forgiveness session should decrease the number of future counseling sessions.

**Step 1:** *Definitions of forgiveness are discussed.* The counselor obtains permission from the counsees to talk about forgiveness, since it is central to the faith. They all talk about what forgiveness means. The counselor discusses what the Bible has to say about forgiveness and love. The counselor focuses on a decision-based approach. The counsees' must agree that the decision to forgive includes not only a cognitive letting go of resentment and the need for vengeance, but also includes self-denying acts of forgiveness and love just as Christ has done. Drawing the couple to the Scriptures is important, since most Christians want their thoughts, words, and actions to be in line with Scripture.

**Step 2:** *The focus on each person having the opportunity to seek forgiveness for his/her wrongful actions is established.* The spouses have the opportunity to confess their wrongdoing to each other in the presence of the counselor. Their focus is not to defend their actions, or attack their spouse's wrongs, but to concentrate on their own culpability and repent of their wrong. The counselor can say something like: "We need to set a guideline to direct the session. Couples often bring many concerns to the counseling about the hurtful behavior of the other, but seldom do they automatically concentrate on their own wrongdoing. If you decide to proceed in the session, are you willing to focus on your own contribution to problems when it is your turn to go through the steps and give up expectations of what your partner should be confessing? If your partner does not bring up the issue that is important to you, we can address that later in the session."

**Step 3:** *Introduction to the forgiveness treatment and decision whether or not to proceed.* It is usually best to begin with the spouse who has committed the more serious offense. Each spouse should decide on a few things for which they want to seek forgiveness. The counselor can determine if they have a common theme. The counselor might say: "The structured forgiveness session does not resemble a typical marital counseling session. If you agree to proceed [Spouse A] will go through steps 4-12 in sequence, and then we will give [Spouse B] a

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<sup>32</sup>This model is based on drafts of the following articles: Frederick A. DiBlasio, "Scripture and Forgiveness: Interventions with Christian Couples and Families," *Marriage and Family: A Christian Journal* 2 (1999): 247-58, and Frederick DiBlasio and Robert Cheong, "Christ-like Love and Forgiveness in Marital Counseling: Theory and Practice" (submitted by the authors to *Marriage and Family: A Christian Journal*, in press).

Additionally, ECLEA has available on its website ([www.eclea.net](http://www.eclea.net)) both the *Leader's Manual and Guide*, and *Participant Manual* for Everett L. Worthington's course for promoting forgiveness, *Experiencing Forgiveness: Six Practical Sessions for Becoming a More Forgiving Christian*. Dr. Worthington has granted permission for these course materials to be downloaded, printed, and used for free.

turn (the counselor can hand out a printed copy of the steps and briefly summarize them). I will play an active role in the session, keeping the session on track and making decisions, with your help, as to what information will be fruitful to pursue during the forgiveness session and what might be saved for a later time.”

**Step 4: *Statement of the offense.*** The spouse should clearly state their own hurtful behavior. It needs to be stated in a way that shows awareness that it was wrong, hurtful, and that it was not justified. Many times a spouse may include in his or her statement something about the other spouse’s actions (e.g., a husband seeks forgiveness for verbally criticizing his wife in public because of her erratic and volatile nature). Including his perception of the wife’s actions takes away from his own culpability and increases defensiveness on the part of the wife. The counselor must therefore help the spouse to include only his/her part of the problem. It is helpful to ask the spouse, “Was this offense wrong?” If the spouse hesitates, the counselor should point that out and have the spouse either pick an offense that he believes is wrong, or reconsider. In many cases, the statement of an offense may bring a host of other issues into play.

**Step 5: *Offender provides explanation.*** The counselor begins this step by getting permission from the offended person to try to get at the reason for his/her spouse’s offense (getting permission enlists the offended spouse as an active participant in understanding the hurtful behavior). The counselor makes clear that most offenses in marriage have explanations, but those explanations are sometimes lost because of the hurt and pain that is experienced by both parties. The counselor should caution that the explanation will not be considered an “excuse” but is part of a search for information that will allow a thorough assessment of the offense. Searching for reasons behind an offense may lead to considering behavior patterns that pre-date the marriage. This, in turn, can cause the spouses to have a greater understanding of, and empathy for, each other.

**Step 6: *Questions and answers about the offense.*** The couple must strive for understanding of each other. However, many questions they ask are often used to “make points” rather than seek understanding and elicit information. The counselor can say: “As strange as this may sound, couples seldom get objective answers to their questions because of the defensive atmosphere around the offense. Questions tend to be asked harshly or asked in a way to make a point. This is the time to get the information in a spirit of love. Let’s all work together to really understand this problem by asking questions. [Spouse B] do you have any questions for your [wife/husband]?” Giving answers and facts is cleansing for the offender and makes it easier to forgive. The counselor can play an active role in helping to frame questions and keeping the couple on track.

**Step 7: *Offended person gives emotional reactions.*** Intimacy can come only when the couple is able to connect at the emotional level. The offended person wants the offender to hear and understand the hurt and feelings but may have difficulty fully verbalizing his or her feelings. Again, the counselor may have to play an active role and must promote a spirit of non-defensiveness. The counselor may say: “Although it may be necessary for [Spouse B] to express his hurt because he is afraid of causing you heartache, will you [Spouse A] grant him permission to fully speak his heart to you about his hurt?” (When spouses give permission for the other to express feelings, they shift from a self-protective to a receiving mode.) The offended spouse can express how he felt at the time, but also how he feels now in light of what he has learned at the counseling session.

**Step 8: *Offender shows empathy and remorse for the hurt he/she has caused the other.*** Having the offender thoughtfully paraphrase the hurt and distress gives acknowledgement that the spouse’s suffering is understood and appreciated. This, in turn, leads to empathy and aids in emotional forgiveness. Many spouses may be very self-centered and find it difficult to feel or express empathy for the other. The counselor can help this by asking questions such as, “When your wife said that she hurt so badly that she woke up crying in the night, what do you think that feels like?” The counselor can also ask each spouse to summarize the remorse and empathy expressed by the other.

**Step 9: *Offender develops a plan to stop/prevent behavior.*** For someone to truly seek forgiveness means that the offender plans to stop the offensive behavior and prevent it from happening in the future. Forgiveness is facilitated when corrective action is planned and a system of accountability is established. The plan needs to be specific and mostly created by the offender with help from the spouse and counselor. The counselor might pray for the Holy Spirit to bring ideas to mind and may say: “Why not start with any commitments that you want to make, and perhaps as you are making them ideas will come as to how to insure that the commitment will be lived out?” The counselor makes a written record of each part of the plan and stresses the importance of the couple keeping the written plan in an accessible and safe location.

**Step 10:** *Offended spouse shows empathy for the offender's hurt.* Marital problems usually involve significant hurts for the transgressor as well as for the offended spouse. The transgressor's behavior may be in part explained by previous hurts in the relationship and/or hurts experienced in the past. Further, the offender must now also deal with the shame and guilt of having brought pain to his/her spouse. The counselor might say to the offended spouse: "I realize that your wife's offense has brought significant hurt to you, but now we see that she is also hurting. Could you put into words the feelings that she is experiencing?" As in step 8, the counselor helps the spouse to gain an empathetic understanding.

**Step 11:** *Emphasis on choice and commitment involved in letting go.* The counselor reminds the couple of the discussion in step 1 concerning love and forgiveness and the decision-based approach to forgiveness. If the offended spouse chooses to forgive, he/she commits purposely to let go of the offense and not use it as a weapon in the future. That does not necessarily preclude discussing the offense; in fact, working through the issue in counseling may be needed. Discussion should therefore take place about how to avoid ruminating about the offense and how to deal with angry and resentful thoughts that may occur in the future (see the discussion concerning committing publicly to forgive and holding onto forgiveness in section V. "Forgiveness and Reconciliation," above).

**Step 12:** *Formal request for forgiveness.* To make the forgiveness clear, the spouses should put into words the request and the granting of the request. The counselor may say: "Now it is time, if [Spouse A] is willing, for him to ask formally for forgiveness in front of me as a witness. [Spouse B] may then respond whether or not he/she will grant the forgiveness." The formal request in front of a witness reinforces that a concrete decision has been made for forgiveness. Many couples may cry, hold hands, or get on their knees to emphasize repentance and remorse over the offense. After the forgiveness is granted, the counselor notes the exact date and time and asks the couple to record it in a special place. The counselor may say: "Forgiveness was sought and granted at 11:32AM on this date. Please consider recording this date and time in a special place because this time is holy before the eyes of God. If there are any questions as to whether or not you have asked for or granted forgiveness, please refer to the time and date or feel free to call me as a witness."

**Step 13:** *Ceremonial act.* An outward, ceremonial act between the spouses reinforces the forgiveness they shared and helps to cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually make their decisions concrete and permanent. The counselor may ask: "How can you celebrate the forgiveness that has occurred here—something to symbolically represent the forgiveness—something ceremonial?" The couple might choose to write their offenses on a piece of paper and then burn the paper, plant a special plant, write and exchange love letters to each other, exchange gifts, or do something else meaningful to them that will symbolize their forgiveness and the beginning of a new life together. The entire session can be a redemptive, life-changing experience which affects the persons individually, affects the marriage relationship, and draws them together in increased intimacy with Christ.

### THE AUTHOR



Jonathan Menn lives in Appleton, WI, USA. He received a B.A. in political science from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with honors, in 1974, and was inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. He then earned a J.D. from Cornell Law School, magna cum laude, in 1977, and was inducted into the Order of the Coif legal honor society. He spent the next 28 years practicing law, as a civil trial attorney, in Chicago and then as a partner at the Menn Law Firm in Appleton, WI. He became a believer and follower of Jesus Christ in 1982. An increasing love for theology and ministry led to his pursuing a Master of Divinity at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. He received his M.Div. from TEDS, summa cum laude, in May 2007. Between 2007-2013 he was the East Africa Director of Equipping Pastors International. Now Jonathan is the Director of Equipping Church Leaders-East Africa ([www.eclen.net](http://www.eclen.net)). His extensive written teaching materials on biblical subjects are available at [www.eclen.net](http://www.eclen.net). Jonathan may be contacted at: [jonathanmenn@yahoo.com](mailto:jonathanmenn@yahoo.com).