

## **MOVING ON**

R.C. SPROUL – “Even the best marriages have problems. Often the difference between a healthy marriage and a defective one is not the number and severity of problems encountered, but in the way problems are dealt with.”

TIM KELLER (The Meaning of Marriage, 163, 168) – “The two most important skills in marriage: forgiveness and repentance...I don’t know of anything more necessary in marriage than the ability to forgive fully, freely, unpunishingly, from the heart.”

WINSTON SMITH (Marriage Matters, 5) – “Every marriage has these moments – moments marked by frustration, disappointment, anger, or sadness – when you want things to be better but you’ve no idea what to do next or how to do things differently. We aren’t perfect, and we don’t marry perfect people.”

How do marriages get into deep trouble? It can happen in a variety of ways, but the following is a common pattern of slow but steady drift toward marital failure.

Sin or struggle or disappointment that is common to every marriage can blow up into conflict, or even worse, be swept under the carpet (problems don’t just go away – plus you miss opportunities to grow). Pride and selfishness can spark anger and hurt feelings; it does hurt to be sinned against or to have expectations dashed. Failure to resolve differences gives way to low-grade unforgiveness, discontent and distance.

When that cycle gets repeated many times in a marriage, hurt piles up, unforgiveness becomes more tangible and bitterness sets in. Like a wound that hasn’t healed – when touched it causes pain - each new conflict (even relatively minor ones) brings along the weight of all the previous ones that were never resolved. One may gradually withdraw mentally, emotionally or physically hoping to protect themselves against being hurt again. Or, one may lash out aggressively, criticize, reject, hurt back. The marriage slowly crumbles and hope for restoration wanes.

Maybe you have never entered into this cycle. Maybe you are in the early stages. Maybe you are deeply enmeshed. In any case, understanding Biblical forgiveness will be both preventative (sound a warning) and curative.

### **MATTHEW 18:21-35**

This is not a difficult parable to understand. The king represents our heavenly Father and the first servant represents each of us. Our heavenly Father graciously forgives our unpayable debt. This forgiveness was gracious – the master was under no obligation to forgive the debt, there was no benefit to the master (in fact

there was cost – he lost money) and the servant didn't deserve to have the debt forgiven. The second servant represents a fellow human being (perhaps your spouse) who may have sinned against you in some way. The lesson - let your treatment of your fellow human beings be motivated by and modeled after your heavenly Father's treatment of you. The warning is that to not do so meets with your Father's resistance and with subsequent torment - bitterness is the torment of unforgiveness.

These two realities – God's grace and God's forgiveness – are to be the basis for our relationship with others and more specifically our relationship with our spouse. They will both prevent and cure the vicious cycle.

## **I. GRACE and MERCY – the servant was in need and without merit**

**Ephesians 2:4-5** But God, being rich in **mercy**, because of **the great love with which he loved us**, <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by **grace** you have been saved—

**Psalms 103:10 (NIV)** He does not deal with us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities.

### **1. Grace**

Two things need be highlighted about grace – it is unmerited and it takes the initiative.

Grace is God's unmerited favor; in fact it is not just unmerited but contrary to merit. We are not in a neutral place but in a place where we have actively rebelled against God, hated God and merited His wrath and punishment. But...He does not treat us as our sins deserve. Instead, He loved us and showed us favor even when we were rebelling against Him. Even when we hated him.

Grace takes the initiative to bless – “But God...even when we were dead”. Grace reaches to meet dead men and women and makes them alive.

If you ever get to the place in your marriage where you are operating on a merit system, your marriage is in trouble. If your marriage ever gets to a place where you are waiting for your spouse to make the first move, your marriage is in trouble.

In marriages that are struggling, initiating unmerited favor is absolutely essential to breaking the cycle, to being able to move on. If you are struggling with your spouse, be the one to initiate unmerited favor and don't treat him or her as you perceive they deserve. And even if you aren't struggling, make it your habit to continually initiate unmerited favor toward your spouse as a preventative to future trouble.

WINSTON SMITH (Marriage Matters, 48) – “The attitude of earning love is disastrous in marriages and leads to anger and insecurity. Spouses who believe they’ve earned or deserve love angrily demand it or toil anxiously to avoid losing it.”

## 2. Mercy

The idea of mercy is slightly different from grace. The emphasis on grace is favor toward the **undeserving**. The emphasis of mercy is compassion for the **needy**.

Every person, by virtue of being a human being living in a fallen world, is needy in some way. They are weak in some ways. Limited in some ways. Immature in some ways. Your spouse is no exception (and neither are you!!). And they always will be in some state of need, weakness, limitation and maturity until Jesus returns. The fall made marriage hard because it’s hard for two weak, limited, needy, in-process sinners to become one flesh.

The Lord’s mercy is based on His knowledge of this human frailty, this human neediness, this in-process state.

**Psalm 103:13-16** As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. <sup>14</sup>For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. <sup>15</sup>As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; <sup>16</sup>for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

God extends mercy as a Father to children. We extend mercy based on our kinship with one another. We are in the same boat. We stand with the same need. We must constantly bear this in mind when relating with others. You are married to an in-process sinner and a human being. You must take into account your spouse’s maturity, circumstances, limitations, humanity, sinfulness, etc., and extend grace and mercy to him or her.

How do we do that? The more you are aware of your own need for grace, the easier it will be to be aware of the same need in others. The more you are aware of your own need for mercy the more you will be aware of the same need in others. And the more gracious and merciful you will become. This is why an ongoing understanding of the gospel is critical. The self-righteous question – “What’s the matter with you?” - becomes rhetorical. The answer is the same thing that’s the matter with me - sin and humanity that needs God’s grace and mercy.

What a picture vs. 28 portrays. Your marriage will turn a huge corner when you stop (figuratively) choking your spouse and demanding payment.

Any husband or wife who is struggling with their spouse must choose to show mercy to him or her as a fellow sinner, a fellow struggler and not continue in self-righteous anger and compassionless demands. And those who aren't struggling can make it their habit to continually show mercy toward their spouse as a preventative to future trouble.

## II. FORGIVENESS

WINSTON SMITH (Marriage Matters, 181) – “Forgiveness can be a challenge in any relationship, but it can be especially difficult in marriage. The intimacy of marriage makes us more vulnerable to the sins and weaknesses of the other.”

The tangible effect of the king's heart of grace and mercy was forgiveness.

**Matthew 18:32-33** I forgave you all that debt...<sup>33</sup>And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’

In even the best of marriages you are going to have conflict, you are going to be sinned against. How will you respond? Will you be gracious and merciful and forgive just as God has been gracious and merciful in his forgiveness toward you? What Jesus told in parable form, Paul clearly teaches...

**Colossians 3:12-13** Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; **as the Lord has forgiven you**, so you also must forgive.

### A. The Motive for Forgiveness

The motivation for forgiving others is God's forgiving you.

KEN SANDE (The Peacemaker, p161) – “Because Christians are the most forgiven people in the world, we should be the most forgiving people in the world.

For a Christian, unforgiveness is not an option (v. 13 - “YOU...MUST”) even when forgiveness doesn't seem easy. Again this is where the gospel is critical. The more we understand the forgiveness we have received, the easier it will be to forgive others.

Please also note, the effect of this is not just that we more easily forgive but that we are less easily offended. If you are easily offended – critically judge others, hold proud expectations of how you should be treated (“How could they treat ME like that?”) - it may be that you lack an understanding and experience of God's grace.

A rejoicing, grateful, humble heart (which is always the effect of thinking much of the gospel) has little room for criticism and offense. It is full of grace and mercy and eager to forgive should forgiveness be necessary. Nothing is more necessary to producing a forgiving soul than living with the constant realization that you are a forgiven soul.

## **B. The Model for Forgiveness**

The model for forgiving others is God's forgiving us.

**Colossians 2:13-14** And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, <sup>14</sup>by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

### **1. Undeserved**

Our forgiveness is not based on the merits of the person who has sinned against us. We forgive because God forgave us and commanded us to do the same – it is without reference to the person who sinned against us (“IF ANYONE”), their contrition, or the frequency or grievousness of their sin. When someone sins against us, the normal human response is “he must pay!” When asked to forgive, to seemingly let him off the hook, the normal human response is “that’s not fair?”. But that’s the point, it’s not fair its gracious, just like the cross was not fair but gracious.

### **2. Unlimited**

**Colossians 2:13** having forgiven us ALL our trespasses

But what do we do when patterns of sin are repeated over and over again? We help the person try to change, but we forgive each time. This is where patience and forbearance come in. We can’t forgive someone on the condition that it will never happen again.

It is also where your understanding of God’s regular forgiveness of you for the same sins comes in. When you think of your own life, how many times has God forgiven your pride, your selfishness, your complaining, your impatience, your laziness, your failure to do the good you ought?

MATTHEW HENRY (commenting on Matthew 18) – “If that is the measure of the forgiveness the disciple has received, any limitation on the forgiveness he shows to his brother is unthinkable.”

### 3. Unrecorded

**Colossians 2:14** This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

**Psalm 103:12** as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

This does not mean that He forgets they happened. God is all knowing. It simply means that He will not bring them up and use them against us again. Once it is forgiven the particular sin does not affect our relationship in the future. It never gets thrown up in our faces again. He doesn't put us on probation, He pardons us.

Sometimes you have to fight to pardon like this. You have flashbacks. You think about the sin, the offense, and you begin to feel some of the same feelings of anger, hurt, resentment, etc. This is not unusual but neither is it acceptable. You must reaffirm your forgiveness in such situations, not necessarily to the person but to God. You must fight to hold onto forgiveness, remembering that forgiveness is a choice not an emotion.

All of this doesn't mean that there might not be some things to work out relationally. When sin has been either grievous or long-term – a history of lies, abuse, adultery, for example - trust must be rebuilt. The injured spouse needs to extend trust gradually without communicating, "I'll only trust you when you prove yourself completely."

We can forgive someone before God yet still need to work on being reconciled with that person. It takes two to reconcile but only one to forgive. Forgiveness is the first step to reconciliation, not the final one. Once we genuinely forgive then we can begin to take steps to reconcile – talk through the issue, what happened, how it affected us, how it can be avoided in the future, etc.

Any husband or wife who is struggling with his or her spouse must forgive, and, having forgiven wholeheartedly enter into a process of rebuilding and reconciliation.

### C. Asking for Forgiveness

PAUL TRIPP (What Did You Expect?, p73) – "Confession is the doorway to growth and change in your relationship.

**Proverbs 28:13** Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

KEN SANDE (The Peacemaker, p94) – "Confession...is one of the most liberating acts in life. Unfortunately, many people do not experience the freedom that comes

through confession because they have never learned how to confess their wrongs to others honestly and unconditionally.”

Effective confession starts with Holy Spirit-empowered self-examination. What specific actions, words and heart motivations were involved in this sin? How has your sin affected your spouse? You would be wise to not only examine yourself but to ask your spouse for perspective on how he or she has been sinned against or areas where growth is needed.

Once you have determined the specific nature and extent of your sin, confession should include:

1. Confessing honestly, clearly and completely what your sins were. (to the best of your ability – we don’t judge confessions)
2. Expressing sorrow for what you have done. Your sins have hurt/affected your spouse. Let them know that you are grieved not only by what you have done but how that has affected him.
3. Describing the lessons you have learned and how you have changed – this will give your spouse hope for future change.
4. Asking for forgiveness.

Long-term problems can present a unique challenge to couples as they begin to come to grips with them and make necessary changes. Asking forgiveness is only the first step in rebuilding not the last. One of the most common challenges is discouragement in the midst of the rebuilding process. Make sure you...

- Maintain hope.
- See the progress.
- Don’t go back to zero – “nothing’s changed!!!”)
- Don’t settle for less than the best.

TIM KELLER (The Meaning of Marriage, 26) – “Studies demonstrate that two-thirds of those unhappy marriages out there will become happy within five years if people stay married and do not get divorced.”