

CHAPTER I

THE HABIT AT THE HEART OF YOUR CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: *FORGIVENESS*

Adam and Eve sinned and placed a wall between all mankind and God. Forgiveness of sins was the only way to break down the barrier between God and mankind. Again and again, the essential importance of forgiveness is mentioned throughout the Old and New Testaments. The entire substance of the Christian faith is forgiveness. Hence, Christianity may appropriately be called the **good news of forgiveness**.

Just as forgiveness is at the center of Christianity, forgiveness is at the heart of a happy marriage. The Bible has nearly 125 references to the importance of forgiveness for interpersonal relationships. The entire substance of the Christian faith is forgiveness, and likewise the “glue” for every marriage is apologizing and forgiving. A satisfying marriage contains two spouses with humility and courage because it is humbling to apologize and takes courage to forgive. Hurts or sins occur within every Christian marriage. When spouses have the momentous goal to apologize and forgive one another for marital hurts or sins, these two actions will significantly increase the probabilities for a gratifying Christian relationship.

No marriage is perfect because married life is a combination of Christlike actions coupled with sinful words and behaviors.

Like all couples, you will not always have ideal communication, agreeably resolve all your disagreements, and be on the same emotional wavelength. At times, heartache and heartburn happen within every healthy relationship. Whenever you experience a hurt or disappointment, you probably have some degree of resentment or ill will. Over time, such bitterness can build an emotional wall in your marriage. The only avenue for resolving any marital frustration is forgiveness.

One of the main contributors to divorce is an absence of willingness to apologize to one another and forgive each other. The apostle Paul encourages every spouse: “Be kind and helpful to one another, tender-hearted [compassionate, understanding], forgiving one another [readily and freely], just as God in Christ also forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32 AMP). Hence, this chapter focuses not only on specific godly behaviors, but it also provides an essential understanding of the apologizing and forgiving process. Without forgiveness, it is almost impossible to have a satisfying long-term relationship.

1. UNDERSTAND WHY FORGIVENESS IS THE “GLUE”

On a human level, the central tenet of the Christian faith is interpersonal restoration through forgiveness. Jesus said, “But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:15 NLT). Even while being crucified on a cross, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34 NIV). *Forgiveness* is always beneficial because it alone can repair relationships—with God, others, and your spouse. Forgiveness is a lifelong essential ingredient for maintaining a gratifying marriage. Forgiveness of sins is truly the greatest blessing for every couple.

If a marriage is broken, only forgiveness can *glue* the relationship back together. Without forgiveness, you and your spouse will build an ever-growing wall between the two of you. I use three analogies to help couples understand the damage done by

unforgiven wrongs, as well as the benefits associated with healing those wounds.

First, think of marital harmony like a lush fairway on a golf course. *Apologizing* and *forgiving* is like replacing a divot after a golf shot in the fairway. While playing golf, whenever a divot is made, the polite action is to either replace the divot or place sand with grass seed in the divot. If divots are not repaired, the golf course will turn into all dirt and no one will want to play on that course. However, when divots are repaired, the golf course remains green and lush and is an attractive place to enjoy friendship and God's creation.

Likewise, just dealing with day-to-day life issues, every so often, *marital divots* will unfortunately occur. When you do not replace your divots by apologizing and forgiving, the likelihood of a satisfying marriage is diminished because your "marriage golf course" will become more and more barren.

For a second analogy, think about what it would be like to try to wallpaper a room that's filled with steam—certainly an impossible task. You can try to wallpaper that room until Jesus returns, but the walls will be so damp and moist that the wallpaper will never stick and it will keep sliding down. You will need to open the door and let the steam out of the room, so the walls can dry. Then, you can beautify the room with wallpaper.

Similarly, if your heart or your spouse's heart is filled with the steam of bitterness and resentment, you can demonstrate all the nice actions in the world, but you will be unable to beautify your marital hearts because of the negative steam. Apologizing and forgiving one another allows the steam of bitterness to leave your heart. Healthy words and actions now have the opportunity to beautify your relationship once again.

Let's look at the third example. Let's say that tonight you have spaghetti for supper and you do not wash your plates but instead set them on the kitchen counter. Tomorrow night, you have barbecued chicken. You eat off those same two dirty plates and once

again do not wash them. Then, the next night you eat chicken fried steak with cream gravy on those dirty plates, and once again you do not wash them and return the plates to the kitchen counter. By repeatedly eating off dirty plates, eventually with the bacteria buildup, you will contract food poisoning.

A poisoned relationship is what happens when unforgiven wrongs exist in your marriage. Relational bruises and emotional injuries will create “dirty plates.” Yet, apologizing and forgiving washes your dirty plates to prevent the poisoning. By eating off clean plates each day, you take no chances with hurting your relationship.

If your marriage has numerous unrepaired divots, hearts filled with the steam of resentment, and dirty plates, your relationship will probably be stressed and tense. I hope these mental pictures will help you understand why apologizing and forgiving are the *glue* for every healthy relationship. Definitely, *apologizing and forgiving* are always the first steps in restoring a broken marriage.

2. REPENTANCE, NOT JUST REGRET

Only *repentance* will benefit your marriage, *never just regret*. I define regret as merely a whimsical wish, but not a strong commitment for changing unhealthy words or behaviors. Regret is basically more of a feeling or just verbal expression of a hopeful change. Examples of regret are: “I wish I would stop being unfaithful”; “I wish I could stop calling my spouse names”; “I wish I would control my compulsive spending habits”; “I wish I would cease my controlling ways”; etc. Simply, *regret is a meaningless repent* because the offense is going to be repeated. If either of you believe regret is sufficient, that will be poisonous for your marriage.

On the other hand, *repentance* is a strong desire for a behavioral improvement, an absolute 180-degree turnaround in a positive direction for a godly change of action and attitude. In Ezekiel

18, God tells us to “repent and live.” Likewise, a marriage will not have life without repentance. *Repentance* is a clear commitment to never again demonstrate the unhealthy words or behaviors that damaged your relationship. Without repentance, it is almost impossible to restore your relationship because only through continual improvements with wholesome words and behaviors can you have a rewarding relationship.

Repentance is comprised of three parts: *emotional*, *mental*, and *behavioral*. *Emotionally*, the offending spouse feels remorse, sorrow, and sadness resulting from the pain caused by their wound. Repentance is simply heartfelt sorrow for a marital injury. *Mentally*, an offending spouse makes a cognitive decision, a sincere change of mind, to never commit that wrong again. Although repentance begins in the heart, it is a mental decision to return once again to godly living. *Behaviorally*, with God’s help the offending spouse makes an honest effort to never do that wrong another time. So, a repentant spouse has such sorrow that there is a new determination with a promise to never allow that marital wound to ever happen again.

An example of regret is a wife I counseled who had experienced physical abuse for years from her husband. Often in abusive relationships, the mistreatment escalates over the years from verbal and emotional abuse to physical abuse. In her initial appointment, she reported physical injuries that placed her in the emergency room. Similar to previous abusive episodes, her husband expressed regret over his actions and even told her, “I hope you do not upset me again because I don’t want to hit you.” Yes, like too many abusers, he did not accept responsibility for his damaging actions.

I encouraged the wife to forgive her husband but not return home until she was confident that he was absolutely repentant and not just regretful. She agreed with me on forgiving him but did not agree with my idea of confirming his repentance. In less

than a month, he sent her to the emergency room, but this time the injuries were so severe she spent several days in the hospital.

Again, I stressed the importance of forgiving her husband. I also pleaded with her to take their children and live with her parents until she was absolutely confident that her husband would seek professional help. I never mentioned the word *divorce* but only stressed safety for her and their children. I advised that unless he learned cognitive and behavioral coping skills for effectively handling his damaging words and behaviors, further verbal and physical abuse would not only occur, but probably escalate. She not only did not agree with me but went back home with her husband and ceased to attend future counseling sessions. I never heard if her injuries continued, but I pray that she learned the difference between regret and repentance. Understanding the importance of repentance is absolutely essential with abuse because harmful words and behaviors are never condoned by God or a healthy spouse.

In addition, understand there is a window of time associated with *repentance* versus *regret*. In other words, there needs to be a period of time where the offense is not committed again. For example, if you call your spouse a harmful name today, then in a positive manner immediately apologize, seek forgiveness, and your spouse forgives you, such wholesome apologizing and forgiving would normally restore your marital connection. However, if tomorrow and nearly every day thereafter, you continue calling your spouse toxic names—that is only regret. Even if you apologize and seek forgiveness, such ongoing horrible name-calling really defines regretful behavior and not genuine repentance.

On the other hand, when you are *repentant*, there is a lengthy space of time between offenses. Perhaps both of you will define that window of time differently. Hence, if you call your spouse a harmful name today, then repent, apologize, seek forgiveness, and are forgiven by your spouse, hopefully at a minimum, that toxic name-calling will not occur for several months or even

longer. However, with serious offenses like adultery or physical abuse, there is no window of time because an absolute change of ways must occur so that those destructive behaviors NEVER happen again for your entire marriage.

Repentance, a change of ways in a godly direction, is what leads to restoration of your relationship. Without genuine repentance for every marital offense, a relationship will probably never be satisfying. A significant goal for each of you is a strong desire for repentance for your harmful words and behaviors.

3. UNDERSTAND WHY FORGIVENESS IS SO DIFFICULT

Forgiveness is extremely difficult for all of us. Forgiveness required atonement for sin, the sacrifice of God's only Son, Jesus Christ. John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (NIV). Our heavenly Father lovingly sent His only begotten Son to pay the price for the sins of the world on that rugged cross. If forgiveness required the ultimate sacrifice from God, His only Son, will forgiveness ever be an easy step for you?

No one is born with the talent of forgiveness because, sadly, an unforgiving spirit is actually part of our humanity. Hence, almost every spouse needs pragmatic direction on how to apologize and forgive. And acquiring the skill of forgiveness can only be learned through repetition. Since forgiveness is an unknown competency and unquestionably the most difficult action in the universe, it is no wonder that most marriages lack apologizing and forgiving skills. So why do we battle with the most significant component for a rich, rewarding marriage? Due to a number of reasons, *apologizing and forgiving* are significant challenges for most spouses.

Pride is usually at the inner fight with possessing a forgiving spirit. Proverbs 11:2 states, "When pride comes [boiling up with

an arrogant attitude of self-importance], then come dishonor and shame, but with the humble [the teachable who have been chiseled by trial and who have learned to walk humbly with God] there is wisdom and soundness of mind” (AMP). “Knowledge makes people arrogant, but love builds them up” (1 Corinthians 8:1 GW). I believe that a prideful spirit is at the core of all sins. The sin of pride is an inward focus on self and a refusal to submit to God’s ways. Proverbs 13:10 declares, “Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found in those who take advice” (NIV). Pride produces disharmony as Romans 12:16 declares, “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (NIV).

When pride makes apologizing difficult, a spouse has a superior attitude, and that self-righteousness blocks both an apologizing and forgiving spirit. Thus, a prideful spouse does not view the other partner as equal, and rarely if ever, does a prideful spouse believe their partner deserves an apology or forgiveness. Pride often is manipulative, as even the thoughts behind a forgiving spirit could be motivated by self-centeredness. Proverbs 16:18 warns, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (AMP), and that “fall” is many times into the abyss of unhappiness or even divorce.

Like most beliefs and behaviors, example is both the greatest teacher and the only teacher. Hence, more things are caught than taught. Did you observe your parents, stepparents, or even grandparents apologizing and forgiving one another? After asking that question of thousands of spouses, I estimate that less than 2 percent of spouses responded “yes.” So unfortunately, you may struggle because like most individuals you never learned as a child how to apologize and forgive.

Another contributing factor is low self-esteem. If you lack self-confidence, apologizing will be a challenge, because you may feel like a defect for even making a mistake and needing

to apologize. Or when your spouse apologizes and you forgive them, due to low self-worth you may feel like your spouse is the superior partner. Yet, when you regularly apologize or forgive, you can actually enhance your self-esteem.

At times, you may resist forgiving because you possess the same shortcoming within yourself. For example, if your spouse apologizes for being impatient, your hesitation to forgive may come from your own personal impatience. And by withholding forgiveness, you are trumpeting to your spouse your own inner shortcoming of impatience.

Retaliation and revenge are never workable solutions for a satisfying marriage. It really makes no difference why forgiveness is problematic. Ultimately, just understanding the aforementioned obstacles associated with forgiveness may provide you with insights into the challenge. When either of you makes a mistake, you need to apologize in writing or verbally within twenty-four hours. And whenever your spouse apologizes, you need to forgive in order to heal your relationship and restore your oneness. Without *forgiveness*, it is nearly impossible to have personal happiness, and that usually results in relationship unhappiness as well.

4. SPONGES AND TEFLON

Please understand that frequently a difference exists between men and women when it comes to forgiveness. Books have been written about the gender differences between men and women. On the whole, men and women will view hurts and disappointments in contrasting ways. Generally speaking, a majority of women are *feelers* while most men are *thinkers*.

Being thinkers, most men are more like *Teflon* and think through “marital cuts” (See Lesson 5). For example, if I were to call a guy a “big dummy,” but within a short period of time say, “I am sorry for calling you a big dummy, will you please forgive

me?” after responding, “I forgive you,” most men would not remember the next day that I even called them a “big dummy.” A guy, in Teflon fashion, would wash the Teflon pan, turn it sideways, letting the water run off, and the pan would be dry in thirty minutes. Being called an unkind name would almost be a thing of the past.

However, being *feelers*, most women are like *sponges*, and that is why I have heard husbands state numerous times, “I can’t believe what my wife remembers from the past.” Using my previous example, let’s say I call a woman a “big dummy.” Again, within a short period of time I apologize with, “I am sorry for calling you a big dummy, will you please forgive me?” After saying, “I forgive you” or “With God’s help, I will work at forgiving you,” the very next day, most ladies would still remember that I called them a “big dummy.” A lady once told me that most women would not only recall the next day being called a “big dummy,” but ten years later would still remember what I was wearing when I called them that harmful name.

When a marital “cut” occurs from a husband, most wives throw the *sponge* in a pail of water where it becomes sopping wet. After the husband apologizes and the wife responds with forgiveness, the sponge is pulled out of the pail and squeezed, but it still remains wet. The sponge will need to be squeezed many times before it is even somewhat dry. Forgiveness for *feelers* takes much more effort.

Certainly, this does not mean women are better than men due to an excellent memory, nor does it mean that men are better than women because they have a shorter memory. However, it does point out that men and women will handle forgiven wrongs in a different fashion.

Personally, whether you are *Teflon* or a *sponge*, please remember the promise in Lesson 9: Once the “I forgive you” is pronounced, it is very unhealthy to bring the forgiven wrong up to your spouse ever again. For a satisfying marriage, both of you

must agree that “letting go” is an essential attribute of a healthy Christian spouse.

5. SCRATCHES, CUTS, AND LACERATIONS

Too often I have counseled spouses where hurts and disappointments are broken into two categories: minor violations or major felonies. Such dichotomous or good-bad thinking can quickly damage a marriage, because that would mean every hurt or disappointment must be addressed—but this is not true.

Hence, dividing marital injuries into three categories can make a significant difference with relationship happiness. I use a medical model to explain the different types of hurts and disappointments within a relationship. Begin today to view marital hurts as *scratches*, *cuts*, and *lacerations*. Everyone has their own “personal” dictionary, so realize what is a *scratch* to one spouse may be regarded as a *cut* to the other partner.

A *marital scratch* is similar to scratching yourself while working around your house. You probably do not immediately treat the scratch, but instead just let it go. You realize that a scratch is very insignificant, will only leave a faint scab, and heal quickly on its own. *Don't stress over scratches!*

Likewise, your marriage will have numerous scratches that you will need to overlook, so let the scratches go. Stressing over scratches will only diminish your happiness. Even in gratifying marriages, scratches or minor irritations regularly occur. Every spouse has minor flaws and will accidentally *scratch* a spouse or marriage. By being lenient, merciful, and recognizing *marital scratches* as little annoyances, you avoid being a complaining nagger and daily dealing with problems. However, if you scratch the same skin area over and over again, that will now create a cut. So repetitive scratches cannot be ignored in a relationship but must be handled as cuts.

While physical scratches are not significant, physical cuts do require treatment. If you cut yourself while working in the yard, you will probably care for the cut with ointment and a bandage to prevent an infection. A cut is usually not only somewhat painful, but a lack of action can lead to an infection. For the sake of good physical health, you treat a cut, and similarly you will also want to care for *cuts in your marriage* through the apologizing and forgiving process.

In life, you will rarely receive a laceration. My definition of a laceration is a deep cut that requires stitches by a medical doctor. The stitches pull the skin together, similar to the way that apologizing and forgiving pull your relationship back together. Some examples of *marital lacerations* would be adultery, physical abuse, or severe verbal abuse. Lacerations and some cuts often leave scars, but thankfully when healing has occurred, that pain is part of the past.

Like physical cuts and lacerations, the good news is that *marital cuts* and *lacerations* can be healed through an apologizing and forgiving process. However, just as a medical doctor needs knowledge to treat physical lacerations, couples require knowledge for healing *marital lacerations*. Sadly, I estimate that 95 percent of spouses do not have that specific know-how to treat *marital cuts* and *lacerations*. However, I have great news: This chapter will provide the two of you with the necessary apologizing and forgiving wisdom to heal those cuts and lacerations.

6. REGULARLY LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Physically, a mirror can be utilized to show whether our face is dirty or what needs to be done to enhance our appearance. Likewise, Christians need to daily look in a *biblical mirror* at how thoughts, words, and actions may trespass against God's commandments. A *biblical mirror* is often referred to as the Law of God. Galatians 3:19 states, "Why, then, the Law [what was its

purpose]? It was added [after the promise to Abraham, to reveal to people their guilt] because of transgressions [that is, to make people conscious of the sinfulness of sin]" (AMP). Although difficult, acknowledging sin is always the first step. Such a gaze into the "mirror of God" can expose ungodly or sinful behaviors and words. Without recognition of wrong, a repentant spirit will not be present, but that must happen before a confession or apology to God.

Likewise, a *marriage mirror* illuminates and brings to awareness damaging words and behaviors. If your spouse has made this comment about you, "You rarely say you are sorry for anything," your relationship will struggle. Wholesome spouses regularly look in the *marriage mirror* to see how their words and behaviors may have negatively impacted their spouse. A daily, honest self-appraisal creates an environment for valuable improvements leading to a rewarding marriage.

However, as a spouse, one of your most significant challenges will be to gaze in the *marriage mirror* at your comments and behaviors. It is essential that both of you are capable of evaluating your words and actions. If either you or your spouse cannot assess your harmful words and actions, it will be extremely difficult for your marriage to experience growth and satisfaction.

Answering two key questions can help you look in the mirror. One: "What would I LIKE about being married to myself?" And two: "What would I DISLIKE about being married to myself?" Don't just think about your responses, but actually write down on paper the enjoyable and distasteful aspects of being married to yourself.

In my practice, numerous spouses have done this exercise. The results have been eye-opening for many partners. I had one husband astonishingly state, "I could not find even one thing I would like about being married to me." Was it any surprise that his wife wanted to end the marriage?

So daily, enhance your relationship by *looking in the mirror*. Without each of you having the willingness to both gaze into a *marriage mirror* and then recognize any “dirt,” hope for a gratifying marriage is lessened. Always show respect to your spouse by identifying your hurts and wrongs through a *marriage mirror*.

7. UNDERSTAND GUILT, SHAME, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Genuine guilt is an emotional reaction to a specific word or behavior that offended your spouse. Guilt is usually associated with something said or done, although there can also be guilt over a sinful or wrongful thought. On the other hand, *shame* is more of a feeling that impacts our self-worth. Healthy shame helps us be humble, but most often shame causes a feeling that we are a “mistake,” a “defect,” or a “bad person.” Spouses frequently confuse guilt and shame, creating an unhealthy atmosphere in the relationship. Distinguishing properly between *guilt* and *shame* is an important awareness for a satisfying marriage.

From a biblical perspective, disobeying any of the Ten Commandments should create a feeling of guilt. *Guilt* stems from either sinning against God or one’s neighbor, and for a married individual, one’s spouse is the closest neighbor. One of the best ways to help a marital relationship is for you to define together what violates God’s laws and your marital rules so that you only address genuine guilt not shameful feelings. Having real *guilt* means accepting responsibility for one’s wrongs.

From a secular perspective, *guilt* arises in a marriage when a spouse does something morally wrong to their partner or when a spouse does not meet reasonable expectations within a marital relationship by not demonstrating the same loyalty, support, and kindness shown to them. In a healthy marriage when a legitimate wrong has been committed, the offending spouse will experience guilt and apologize. When both of you are able to recognize

and admit guilt for genuine offenses, you are on the road to a gratifying relationship.

From a practical perspective, guilt can only be addressed through apologizing and forgiving. For a gratifying marriage, having guilt for sinful or hurtful words and actions is a must. A wife once told me, “Frequently, my husband messes up, but he has no idea how he hurt me and our relationship.” Certainly, you understand how dangerous that was for the future of their marriage.

Apologizing and forgiving addresses true *guilt*, not *shame*. If unhealthy shame is the culprit, it is not necessary for a spouse to repent and apologize. *Shame* is a feeling that “I am bad,” rather than “I have done a bad thing,” which is *guilt*. Shame sends a false message to the heart of our self-worth that we are failures in nearly every aspect of life and never acceptable to our spouse and others. Shame-based spouses generally: are excessively self-less; are people pleasers; have trouble accepting compliments; lack an ability to create emotional closeness; and have a difficult time nurturing a partner. A shame-based spouse must work hard to overcome dangerous shameful feelings, otherwise, the marital relationship will struggle in many aspects.

A healthy spouse will be *personally responsible* for wrongful words and actions and have genuine guilt feelings. Such legitimate guilt will initiate the apologizing and forgiving process. Just as important, a partner without toxic shame will hold their spouse accountable when experiencing hurts and disappointments. *Personal accountability* and *spousal accountability* are both essential for a satisfying marriage.

In the book of Genesis, we read just how difficult *personal accountability* was for Adam and Eve. When God approached Adam, rather than accept responsibility for his sin, Adam blamed God by saying, “The woman whom You gave to be with me—she gave me [fruit] from the tree” (Genesis 3:12 AMP). Likewise, Eve blamed her sin on Satan by saying, “The serpent beguiled and deceived me” (Genesis 3:13 AMP). Blaming your spouse for your

unwholesome behavior rather than accepting responsibility for a harmful word or action is a detrimental weakness of a troubled marriage.

Just like God with Adam and Eve, you need to *hold your spouse accountable* for their marital injuries. After Adam and Eve sinned, God confronted them with their trespass. Likewise, when you experience marital sorrow, always let your spouse know your heartache. When you do not hold your spouse accountable, you only store up bitterness that can erode away your emotional connection.

I saw a Christian couple who faithfully worshiped every Sunday morning with their children. Everyone in their church felt they were the ideal Christian couple and family. However, this Christian husband was gone four nights per week, Monday through Thursday, almost year-round. During the summer, he was in two pickleball leagues and two golf leagues. During the winter, he was in two volleyball leagues and two bowling leagues.

This husband spent more time with his recreational sports activities than he did with his wife and children. They felt abandoned and neglected by his absence. The husband had neither guilt nor shame. The wife never shared her deep disappointment and pain, believing that her husband needed to recognize his selfish behaviors (see Lesson 47) on his own. Unfortunately, his wife found a coworker who gave her attention, spent time with her, and made her feel special. Sadly, their emotional friendship led to a physical affair and eventual divorce.

The husband was blind to his extreme selfishness, and the wife never held him accountable for his irresponsible, damaging behaviors. I am not excusing the wife's affair, but this is a prime example for this lesson. Had both spouses understood the importance of the *mirror for personal accountability* and *holding one's spouse accountable*, I truly believe that their divorce would never have happened.

First, always *accept personal responsibility* for your harmful actions by *looking in the mirror* at your harmful words and behaviors. Then make an authentic commitment to overcome your damaging words and behaviors. By being personally accountable, followed by an appropriate apology, you enhance your marriage and allow for a fresh start each morning.

Second, you must *hold your spouse accountable* when you are hurting on the inside from damaging actions. To withhold that you have been wronged will often create resentment and begin building a grudge wall. Often, your spouse is simply not aware how their actions have broken your heart. By holding your spouse accountable, you allow them to make the appropriate changes that can ensure a satisfying relationship, thus building up your marriage, not tearing it down.

So, when either of you lacks an understanding of *genuine guilt* or possesses *toxic shame*, emotional closeness will probably be absent. And just as damaging, when either of you is unable to look in the *mirror for personal accountability* or *hold your spouse accountable*, your relationship may be permeated with bitterness.

8. WHOLE CIRCLE OF FORGIVENESS: ALL THREE COMPONENTS ARE NECESSARY

The daily life of a Christian includes confessing to God for sins in thoughts, words, or actions. 1 John 1:9 states, “If we [freely] admit that we have sinned and confess our sins, God is faithful and just [true to His own nature and promises], and will forgive our sins and cleanse us continually from all unrighteousness [our wrongdoing, everything not in conformity with His will and purpose]” (AMP).

When a spouse does not have the habit of regularly repenting to God, what is also probably lacking is the habit of regularly apologizing to their partner. By daily confessing your sin to God, you develop an attitude of not wanting to sin against our Lord

God and your spouse. A godly, repentant attitude almost always carries over into your marital relationship. If both of you do not appropriately apologize and forgive one another, your marriage may be in a danger zone.

Three elements comprise the forgiveness process. All three components are essential for healing hurts and disappointments that will occur in even satisfying marriages. If any of the three are not utilized, your marriage will often struggle with varying degrees of emotional and relational suffering.

The first step is to say, “*I am sorry I hurt you by . . .*” I think it is good to use the word “hurt” when apologizing to your spouse because that indicates compassion as well as a desire to heal the broken relationship. It is also extremely important to be *specific* with your apology. For example, “I am so sorry I hurt you by calling you a name.” No matter what, it is extremely important to develop the healthy habit of saying “*I am sorry I hurt you by . . .*”

You may also begin the forgiveness process through a note of apology with those same words. But if you apologize in writing, it is essential that you follow up with a verbal apology. An insight: To apologize is difficult for all of us, but it is particularly challenging for an insecure spouse.

Very few spouses even use the first step: “*I am sorry I hurt you by . . .*” Unfortunately, if you only say, “I am sorry,” there is a tendency to be flippant and insincere with your tone of voice. Even when you don’t agree that you committed a wrongful word or action, it is still important to apologize. In those situations, you apologize for hurt feelings. For example, if your partner believes you don’t compliment enough, you would say, “*I am sorry I hurt your feelings by not being appreciative,*” even though you may not agree. Then per chapter 6, discuss together your viewpoint regarding lack of compliments.

It is equally important to never use the word *but* because *but* is an eraser. When I say to someone, “You are a wonderful Christian person, but . . .” I just erased the initial comment:

“You are a wonderful Christian person.” Unfortunately, I have frequently heard one spouse tell their partner, “I am sorry I hurt your feelings, but you did XYZ.” Certainly, that is not a sincere apology.

The second step is seeking forgiveness with “*Will you please forgive me?*” Seeking forgiveness requires a great deal of courage and humility. Humility is *not* thinking about yourself, but only about your spouse and how you can heal your marriage through a loving request for forgiveness. Often, in a troubled marriage, the word *please* is omitted. The “*Will you **please** forgive me?*” indicates a repentant attitude and lets your spouse know that you are making a commitment to change.

Finally, God’s Word says we are to *always forgive*, and that is the third step. Every spouse does well to follow Jesus’ example in Luke 23:34: “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’” (NIV). Hence, the Bible tells us to forgive no matter what, even if there is no repentance or even a request for forgiveness.

When your spouse has asked, “*Will you please forgive me?*” always reply with the word *forgive*. It is absolutely essential that you use the word *forgive* and not just say, “That’s okay,” or “I’m over it,” or “No big deal,” or “Whatever.” To hear your spouse say either “*I forgive you*” or “*With God’s help, I will work at forgiving you*” completes the whole circle of forgiveness.

An apology for a cut may only necessitate an “*I forgive you.*” However, when there is intense suffering and pain from a laceration, after an apology the response may be “*With God’s help, I will work at forgiving you.*” A betrayed spouse whose partner was sexually unfaithful may find it extremely difficult to even utter the phrase, “*With God’s help, I will work at forgiving you*” much less to say, “*I forgive you.*” Thus, the phrase “*With God’s help, I will work at forgiving you*” will still allow the process of forgiveness to take hold because hearing the word *forgive* completes the whole circle of forgiveness.

Only God can forgive and remember sin no more. So unbelievably God absolutely forgets! Isaiah 43:25 declares, “I, only I am He who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (AMP). As humans, we do forgive, but we remember and almost never forget.

For every spouse, apologizing and forgiving can often be an exhausting, demanding journey. However, your efforts will create a caring, compassionate heart and a strong marital connection. And most importantly, your marriage will be happier because both of you are experts at implementing the whole *circle of forgiveness*:

1. “I am sorry I hurt you by . . .”
2. “Will you please forgive me?”
3. Forgive by saying:
 - a. “I forgive you” or
 - b. “With God’s help, I will work at forgiving you.”

9. FORGIVENESS IS A GIFT, A PROMISE, AND A PROCESS

A GIFT

Romans 6:23 tells us that “the free gift of God [that is, His remarkable, overwhelming gift of grace to believers] is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord” (AMP). Through faith in Jesus Christ, Christians are forever forgiven and receive God’s *gift* of eternal life. Likewise, forgiveness is absolutely the best *gift* that you can ever give your spouse. However, forgiveness is also the most difficult gift you will ever give your spouse. And forgiveness is perhaps the last gift on your mind after you have experienced a hurt. In every marriage, grace or undeserved kindness must abound because sometimes you will need forgiveness and other times you will need to grant forgiveness to your spouse.

Almighty God hates sin, and to forgive sin He had to give the ultimate *gift*, sacrificing the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Son of

God was beaten, a crown of thorns placed on His head, and then Jesus was nailed to the rugged cross. If it is that hard for our heavenly Father to provide the gift of forgiveness, will it ever be an easy task for you to forgive your spouse? Of course, the answer is an absolute NO.

Nonetheless, due to Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, God forgave the sins of the world. Thus, God gave the world the greatest gift ever, and that wonderful *gift*, the forgiveness of sins, leads to eternal life in heaven. In your marital relationship, forgiveness is a *double gift*, since you also grant yourself a gift by not dwelling on the offense.

After your spouse has apologized and sought your forgiveness, for the sake of Jesus Christ you can give them a *gift* of forgiveness, the greatest *marital gift* you will ever give your partner. Hopefully, by thinking about God's costly gift for you, that concept will make it somewhat easier for you to say either "*I forgive you*" or "*With God's help, I will work at forgiving you.*" When your spouse apologizes and seeks your forgiveness, and you declare, "*I forgive you,*" you truly begin understanding the grace, mercy, and everlasting love of God for you.

A PROMISE

Forgiveness is a spiritual and verbal function, not a biological or mental function. When you forgive your spouse, you almost never forget the offense because only almighty God forgives and forgets! In Psalm 103:12 we are given the thought: "As far as the east is from the west—that is how far he (God) has removed our rebellious acts from himself" (GW). However, for us as humans, forgiveness is *promising* not to bring up the forgiven wrong to your spouse ever again.

For example, I could ask you to forget the terrorist attacks in New York City on September 11, 2011. However, it is absolutely impossible to erase that painful memory from your mind. The traumatic images of those planes flying into the Twin Towers,

the fires, numerous individuals in chaos, all are deeply engrained in your brain. Hopefully, you have forgiven the terrorists for their confused, unhealthy thinking that led to the deaths of thousands of innocent people, but you will never forget the horror. Likewise, once your spouse has repented, asked for forgiveness, and been granted your gift of forgiveness, you agree never to bring up that forgiven wrong again.

Develop a short memory and absolutely avoid grudges by *promising* yourself that you will not dwell on the forgiven hurt. Once you have forgiven your partner, commit to never again either reminding them of or using that offense against your spouse. In addition, you *promise* to not tell family or friends about your partner's offense. Thus, you are *promising* not to ever use the forgiven hurt against your spouse in any way.

A PROCESS

When you forgive your spouse, especially for a laceration, your forgiveness is really a *process* that may last a lifetime. Forgiving a laceration may feel like a grinding, uphill, rocky journey that seems to go on forever.

When adultery, physical abuse, or extreme verbal abuse occurs, and even after your spouse repents and commits to never repeating that offense again, it will be difficult to forgive your spouse and move forward in the marriage. For the rest of your life, it may be a daily *process*, where you find it necessary to say to yourself every morning, "With God's help, I am working at forgiving you, and I am moving forward in our relationship."

Forgiveness for your marriage is like lubrication for your car. Without forgiveness, friction would eventually kill your "marriage engine." Forgiveness greases all the hurts and disappointments throughout your relationship, allowing your "marital car" to run smoothly.

Philippians 3:13 declares, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (ESV). Hence, with the

process of forgiveness, it may be necessary to say to yourself, “It is okay to look back, but I will not stare because I have forgiven my spouse.” While driving your car, if you stare in your rearview mirror rather than look forward through the windshield, you will probably crash your car. Likewise for *lacerations*: Recognize that forgiveness may be a lifelong, daily *process*. When you forgive, you are focused on the future for a more satisfying relationship.

10. FIRST REPENT, SECOND INCREASE TRUST

As explained in Lesson 2, in order for reconciliation to occur, a spouse must always repent and begin making changes in a positive direction. So, *repentance* always happens first, and that allows the next step of *rebuilding trust*.

Proverbs 3:5 declares, “Trust in and rely confidently on the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight or understanding” (AMP). You can have 100 percent trust in God, complete trust in all of God’s promises in the Bible, and through faith in Jesus have confident trust in your heavenly home.

However, no spouse ever has or ever will be 100 percent trustworthy. King David was a “man after God’s own heart” (see Acts 13:22), and he committed adultery and murder, major lacerations to his marriage. After a serious marital cut or a laceration, sadly I have heard hundreds of times, “I thought I could trust my spouse 100 percent.” Belatedly, those spouses realized that such a faulty assessment of trust led to serious trouble.

Trust actually falls on a continuum from 1 percent to 99 percent. For almost every happy marriage, *trust* is usually in the 90th percentile, and of course, the closer to 99 percent, the better it is for your marriage.

Having a forgiving spirit with spousal offenses is a Christlike behavior. As explained in Lesson 9, forgiveness is a gift that you freely give to your spouse. Almighty God desires every spouse to always forgive, but complete reconciliation is optional,

depending upon repentance, a change of ways, as well as *words and actions that rebuild trust*. Forgiveness does not equal trust, and thus forgiveness may not necessarily restore your relationship. Thus, you need to always forgive your spouse, but a spouse must earn *trust* through restorative actions in order to renew a marital relationship.

For example, if Paul commits adultery but does not ask for forgiveness, Pam would be a healthy spouse by following Jesus' example and forgiving Paul. However, Pam's forgiveness will probably not restore the marital relationship until Paul repents, changes his ways by breaking off the affair, and begins to rebuild *trust*. After a laceration like adultery, *repentance must occur*, and *trust must be earned* before a marriage can have a fresh new start. Hence, Paul repents by changing his unfaithful ways, and then rebuilds the broken *trust through restorative words and actions*.

It is a good idea for Pam to make a specific, written list of actions and words that could rebuild her *trust* in Paul. Only when Pam is 90-plus percent confident in trusting Paul's faithfulness will their marriage have a chance for reconciliation. Hence, *repentance* and *trust* must be present for the possibility of reconciliation, as explained in Lesson 11.

11. RECONCILIATION: THE ULTIMATE GOAL

The Bible encourages reconciliation for our relationships, primarily with God but also others. 2 Corinthians 5:18 states, "Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (NKJV). *Reconciliation* is the positive behavioral result, while apologizing and forgiving initiates the healing process. The only avenue for resolving hurts and disappointments is the apologizing and forgiving process that concludes in reconciliation. Without *reconciliation*, the two of you will have difficulty restoring your emotional connection for a satisfying marriage.

Again, the components that produce the restoration of a broken marital bond are *repenting* or a change of ways, *apologizing*, *forgiving*, and rebuilding *trust*. In your marriage, when an offender repents and changes their ungodly ways, and the offended offers forgiveness, a rewarding restoration is generally the result. *Reconciliation* provides that fresh start, a new beginning, for a rich, rewarding marital relationship.

Unfortunately, *reconciliation* may not always be the outcome following apologizing and forgiving. For example, the crucifiers of Jesus did not apologize, much less repent by removing the nails, and so there was no reconciliation. Likewise in a marriage, restoration of the relationship may not be possible for several reasons. For example, the offending spouse may be unaware of inflicting pain on their partner; extreme verbal abuse may be constant; domestic violence may be ongoing; the offending spouse may refuse to make positive, godly changes; and a pattern of damaging behavior may continue on a regular basis.

Before reconciling your marital connection, wait for repentance and a lengthy pattern of truthful words and honest actions by your spouse. Full *reconciliation* is not possible, nor is it recommended, if *repentance* and *trust* are not present. Hopefully, in your marriage, the two of you will always be able to repent, apologize, forgive, and rebuild trust, so you can open the *reconciliation* door for a happy, satisfying relationship.

12. TWO REPENTANT, FORGIVING SPOUSES EQUAL ONE GRATIFYING MARRIAGE

Mistakes happen in every satisfying marriage! Yet every happy Christian couple resolves heartaches and painful experiences through *repenting*, *apologizing*, *forgiving*, and rebuilding *trust*, for a positive reconciliation outcome resulting in a stronger relationship. The Bible states, “Blessed [spiritually calm with life-joy in God’s favor] are the makers and maintainers of peace” (Matthew

5:9 AMP). A peacemaking spouse is intent on reconciliation in order to maintain marital satisfaction.

So, be like Jesus and take a compassionate, merciful view of your spouse, realizing that everyone is an imperfect sinner. God looks at us through love in Jesus Christ, likewise look at your spouse through kind and patient eyes so that you are continually developing your forgiving spirit.

Every satisfying marriage is a union of two wonderful *forgivers*. As long as you are able to *repent*, *apologize* to one another, and *forgive* each other, the probabilities for a satisfying marriage increase immensely.

Your marriage will only be gratifying when both of you strive to understand the concepts and process of *reconciliation*, which initially flows from a heart of *forgiveness*. At times, you will be the one needing to receive mercy and grace, while other times you will need to bestow mercy and grace upon your spouse. When you and your spouse are able to apologize and forgive each other, you significantly increase the probabilities for a glimpse of heavenly bliss.

I have never seen even one satisfying marriage that did not have *two spouses willing to apologize and forgive to heal hurts*. Hence, gratification equals *two awesome apologizers* as well as *two fantastic forgivers!* By always apologizing and forgiving each other, your hurts will be healed, and your relationship will be restored. Develop the skills discussed in this opening chapter, and you most likely will not need to worry about your marital future.