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AVOIDING THE DANGERS OF SUPERFICIAL FORGIVENESS

by Ken Ellis

When we learn of a moral scandal among ourselves, it's easy to add our own mistakes to an already difficult problem. Sometimes we condemn fallen brothers or sisters and try to dodge the shared embarrassment by pushing them out of our lives. On other occasions we move too quickly through issues of apology, forgiveness, and restoration.

In the following pages, Ken Ellis, a professional counselor and Christian layman, describes a process to avoid the pitfalls that can make a bad situation worse.

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Printed in USA

AFTER THE FALL

In Super Bowl III, the Baltimore Colts were heavily favored over what the “experts” viewed as the outmanned and outgunned New York Jets. On the field, however, the game still had to be played. Despite all the hype about the superior strengths of the Colts, the Jets prevailed, 16-7. To this day it remains one of the most stunning upsets in National Football League history.

In the 30 plus years since Super Bowl III, analysts have scrutinized the game and come away with an almost universal evaluation of the upset—the Colts overestimated themselves and underestimated their opponent. They lost because they thought they were invincible. They failed because they thought they were beyond failure.

Life off the playing field is also marked by unexpected failure. In many cases the results are far more serious than losing an athletic contest.

The news media remind us almost daily of public scandals not only in government and business but also in the church. The reports are not limited to any one denomination. They occur broadly across Christendom and remind us that followers of Christ are not immune to personal failure, bad judgment, or a betrayal of public trust. Just as important, the stories that surface in the public press are only the tip of the iceberg. Followers of Christ are as vulnerable as anyone else to a wide spectrum of mental, emotional, and behavioral problems.

Cover-up and denial do not make a problem go away. Problems that are swept under the rug only

multiply the eventual damage. Avoidance or minimization of the facts only assures that when the problem does surface, more people will be hurt and

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disillusioned by behavior that has been allowed to go on without timely response.

When spiritual leaders or members of their congregation are guilty of financial misconduct, marital unfaithfulness, dishonesty, or cover-up, they have an influence that goes far beyond themselves. When they fall, they bring

others down with them. Those who have looked to them for guidance often stumble and lose their own way. They harm everyone in their circle of influence. They compromise the credibility of the ministry they represent. And worst of all, they damage the reputation of Christ Himself.

AVOIDING COMMON PITFALLS

People in Alcoholics Anonymous have a saying: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” We can be our own worst enemy if we keep repeating mistakes of the past.

When it comes to apologies and forgiveness, there is a danger of walking well-worn paths into some common pitfalls. For

example, we can misunderstand what constitutes genuine repentance and forgiveness. This results in conflicts being smoothed over but not really resolved. Or in a desire to “forgive and forget,” we can fail to lovingly follow through with

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necessary accountability. This can result in the offenses being repeated over and over—and the pain and disappointment being repeated with them.

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patterns of past mistakes, we need to be more thoughtful about where we have been and where we are going.

CONSIDER PAST MISTAKES

The following actual cases will illustrate not only the scope of the problem but the complexity that needs to be weighed and worked through in matters of serious spiritual failure. The names and circumstances have been changed to protect confidentiality.

The Workaholic.

Hank grew up on a dairy farm with a stern and demanding father. His dad woke him up at 4:30 every morning to do milking before leaving for school. There was no time after school to play or visit with friends. The cows had to be milked again, then it was time for supper, homework, and back to bed.

Eventually he married a beautiful woman named Mary whom he met at Bible college. She was willing to support him in his desire to become a missionary. After being assigned to work for an international mission, Hank became known for his fortitude, persistence, and long hours. His personal drive kept him on whatever task was needed until it was accomplished.

Hank's co-workers and mission administrators saw his drive as a highly valued strength. Invisible to him, though, was Mary's growing loneliness and dissatisfaction. She would plead with him to limit his activities so he would have time for the family, but to no avail. Her increasing resentment and depression only made Hank want to stay away longer. She finally became emotionally broken to the point of

suicidal despair. So they had to leave the field.

Back home, Mary was prescribed medication and counseling. Hank was confronted by the mission director for not paying more attention to Mary's needs, so he quickly asked for Mary's forgiveness and agreed that he would spend more time with her and the children.

It didn't take long, however, before he was busy traveling around the country doing important work for the mission and becoming known as a successful recruiter at Christian colleges.

Mary seemed to respond rapidly to medication and counseling. But with essential work to be done back on the field, Mary terminated her counseling early. She and Hank began preparing for their return to their country of service.

Not surprisingly, it was

just a matter of months before Mary's depression returned. One day, she took an overdose of medication and villagers found her alone and unconscious.

Hank's case does not include the usual sins of sexual indiscretion, substance abuse, physical abuse, or other dramatic moral failures. Mary undoubtedly had issues of her own, but the problems this couple had are as deeply rooted in Hank's spiritual and emotional state as they may be in hers. Until he is called to a more sincere form of repentance, he is bound to fail over and over again. Hank needs to thoroughly examine and change his workaholic lifestyle. He also needs to see the unresolved pain from his own personal history and make a deeper commitment to the relational needs of his family.

The Gambler. Bernie was considered by everyone to be the most visionary man on the church board. They knew that before coming to Christ he had struggled with a gambling addiction that had resulted in bankruptcy and the loss of his business. After his conversion, some Christian men had helped him to get started again in a small business, which was now flourishing.

Over time, Bernie was given access to church funds because he had business contacts who promised a high rate of return on the church's money. What Bernie didn't tell them is that he had agreed with a broker friend to invest the money in some high-risk stock-market trades. He convinced himself that this was going to be the Lord's way of enabling the church to take on a new building project.

Bernie lost half the church's money one day on a bad decision and an unexpected downturn of the market. To cover it up, he made an even worse decision the next day that completely destroyed all the monetary assets the church had.

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Bernie was tearfully apologetic when his actions were uncovered. The elders of the church were deeply troubled by the loss. But in a spirit of forgiveness, they made no change in his duties. Unfortunately, Bernie's gambling addiction re-emerged and became

worse as he engaged in online casino betting and covert visits to the race track. He eventually lost his business, his home, and almost his marriage.

The Abuser. Sara had a voice that was clear and sincere. When she sang, it was as if angels were hovering over the sanctuary. But no one knew that her marriage was unraveling and her children (ages 8, 5, and 2) were afraid of her. Her temper tantrums would rage on into the night over such small matters as her 8-year-old son playing video games after homework rather than practicing the piano. When a teacher reported bruises on the boy's arm to Protective Services, Sara claimed they were from playful roughhousing on the floor. Besides, what right did these nonbelievers have to question her duties as

a Christian mother? The pastor didn't believe that Sara would ever abuse her children, so he backed her up. Two weeks later, the police filed charges when the 2-year-old was brought to the hospital unconscious. Little Tory never woke up from the violent shaking he had received after soiling his pants.

In each of these three case studies, the stakes are high. For their own sakes, and for the well-being of those who depended on them, Hank, Bernie, and Sara needed more than a slap on the wrist. They also needed more than loving words or bitter condemnation. With an eye on the dangers of superficial apologies and forgiveness, we'll take a look now at the kind of restoration process that gives such fallen brothers and sisters the best opportunity for real change.

KEEP OUR GOAL IN VIEW

The process of restoration referred to in this booklet is rooted in the scriptural command found in Galatians 6:1.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

We will be defining restoration in the following pages as “a process whereby mature followers of Christ help those who have betrayed the trust of their immediate family, church, or local community to understand and acknowledge their wrongs and the damage they have done to themselves and to others, resulting in such an inner change that they will be reconciled to God and to those they have harmed.”

If those who are offered such help refuse to cooperate with this process, the church may need to formally disassociate from them until they show an honest change of heart (1 Cor. 5:11). Only when the wrongdoer agrees to participate can the process of loving restoration begin.

A Process Of Support And Accountability Needs To Begin.

Regardless of whether fallen persons are ever again considered for leadership or significant responsibility, they remain members of Christ's family and need to be given the same consideration we would want for ourselves in a similar situation. They need to be loved and respected through a difficult period of correction, growth, and change. As they once led others, they now must be led in the spirit and

principles of Christ through an appropriate and carefully addressed process of accountability and restoration. Holding them responsible for their actions and for the harm

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than a quick fix.*

they have done to others is what they need. Taking their wrongs seriously will also help those who have been hurt by their actions. If the process of correction and restoration is going to be effective, the wrongs done need to be faced honestly by both the offending person and those affected.

Mature People Need To Be Enlisted.

Those who are called on to

help with correction and restoration must be people who can do so lovingly, patiently, and firmly. They must know how to listen with care and discernment to both victims and offenders. They need to be people who want to help rather than condemn. In their own lives, they need to have been humbled by their own weakness and failings. Without such maturity, those who try to intervene and restore can end up doing more harm than good.

To bring a helpful attitude to the process, they must be people who have shown a pattern of relying on the Spirit of God to do through them what they cannot do for themselves. They must be people who have learned to trust God for daily guidance, empowerment, and the motivation to truly love others. Only if they

understand what it means to be broken and humbled before God and others will they be able to help a fallen brother or sister through the painful process of meaningful confession, forgiveness, and restoration.

With the need for restoration in view, and the awareness that the process needs careful thought and follow-through, let's take a closer look.

SUPERFICIAL APOLOGIES AND FORGIVENESS

In theological circles, the subjects of confession and forgiveness have been studied for many years. But more recently, the secular world of counseling has awakened to the therapeutic use of forgiveness as a technique of treatment. Members of the mental-health

community have been discovering the benefits of meaningful apology, forgiveness, and restoration. All too often, however, both secular and religious communities have made the same mistake of moving too quickly to the benefits of forgiveness.

THE DANGER OF SUPERFICIALITY

In the past, many secular counselors viewed the spiritual practice of apology and forgiveness as a simplistic and overly-religious ritual that should be avoided in the process of helping people to deal realistically with their problems. Such practitioners believed that the act of forgiving others was really a psychological defense to deny anger. Many counselors believed that this defense kept underlying rage from ever being fully expressed or resolved.

In many ways, the secular community was right. The casual repentance and forgiveness that is often encouraged in religious circles is more likely to be a part of the problem than a part of the solution. What passes for forgiveness (or an apology) is too often marked by superficiality. Instead of honestly dealing with

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the roots of the problem and the resulting damage, the parties often use a shallow understanding of what the Bible says about forgiveness to smooth over their conflict.

THE DANGER OF DENIAL

There are at least six areas of denial that can occur when someone wrongly wounds another person or persons. The counselor or any other caregiver would do well to keep these areas in mind for two reasons:

- Denial can occur in the wrongdoer, the person or persons wronged, or both.
- Denial can undercut the sincerity and meaningfulness of either the apology or the forgiveness by trying to smooth over the reality of what happened.

If both parties are willingly seeking a genuine reconciliation, the wrongdoer and the person wronged could be brought together at an appropriate time in the healing process to address these issues in parallel. If only one party seeks to

apologize or to forgive, each of these six areas of denial should still be addressed.

When God forgives, He addresses truth in each of the following:

I. Denial Of Reality. When a wrong has occurred, what actually happened? Like a news reporter, we should honestly and completely investigate the who, what, when, where, why, and how. When children are confronted with a wrong, all too quickly they try to get away with such excuses as, “It didn’t happen,” or “It didn’t happen that way,” even though it did! Sometimes even when we are the ones wronged, we don’t admit to ourselves that it has really happened. I’ve heard women explain their bruises or black eyes as an accident rather than admit their husband really did viciously attack them.

Forgiveness and

apologies are not about brushing away the truth and pretending something didn't happen. God's Word commands each of us to "put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor" (Eph. 4:25). Even when it reveals our guilt, the beginning point to restoration is truthfully admitting what actually occurred.

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2. Denial Of Wrongdoing. Most, but certainly not all, acts that wound another physically, emotionally, or spiritually

involve some attitude of the heart that says, "I matter and you don't." Jesus' Golden Rule, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk. 6:31), establishes the moral principle that others do matter, just as we do.

Too often we are quick to say, "I did it because . . ." or "It wasn't so bad," when we don't want to admit we are guilty of violating an ethical or moral standard—whether it's a scriptural principle, a civil law, a personal agreement, or the innate sense of justice that God has written in our hearts. Honesty demands that the wrongdoer admit he or she did the wrong. The Bible tells us that God expects us to confess our sins to Him (1 Jn. 1:9). So a true confession demands that we admit it was a choice to do wrong, not something that couldn't be helped.

Personal responsibility is essential. Otherwise, continued repetition of the wrong is likely.

3. Denial Of Pain.

When a wrong has been done, both the wrongdoer and the person wronged may try to minimize the hurt. “He’s just too sensitive,” “That didn’t hurt that bad,” or some personal insult such as, “You big baby!” are often ways of denying the physical or emotional pain that the wounded person is really experiencing.

People get really good at denying their pain when they are children because they are often told by adults to stop crying and grow up. Physical damage can often heal fairly quickly, but people can be broken inside for a lifetime. They may not even admit it to themselves, but they may have anxiety or depression because of a broken bond of trust, a poor

model of authority when they were young, divisiveness in an organization, or any of many other ways that people can become both externally and internally wounded.

In the end, one thing is clear—the pain we are seeking to ignore is undeniably real.

4. Denial Of Anger.

Religious people often use this defense as a means of maintaining their own sense of moral superiority. “I’m not angry” is often a way to hide the vengeful rage that is harbored inside the person who is wronged. “You shouldn’t be so angry!” is a not-so-subtle way of blaming the victim.

Anger is a God-given emotion that can energize us to confront wrongdoers and seek justice. As creatures made in His image, we all have a reflection of His

emotional character within us. This includes anger. Paul's admonition "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath" (Rom. 12:19) assumes that we feel an urge to do just that. He later wrote, "In your anger do not sin" (Eph. 4:26).

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We must all face the reality that when we are wronged, we have a longing to see the other person hurt to at least the same degree that we experienced our own pain. The truth is, however, we all need and deserve God's anger and correction.

The person who wounded us is certainly deserving of punishment. But we must remember that in our stead, God's wrath was redirected toward the Innocent One, the Lord Jesus Christ, in His death on the cross.

Although we can rightly be angry, it is not our job as believers to seek vengeance (Rom. 12:19).

5. Denial Of Mutual Humanity. In our rage toward a person who hurt us, or in our contempt of ourselves when we were the wrongdoer, there is often the assumption that someone in the conflict is all good and the other is all bad.

Author and counselor Lewis Smedes states that the first step in forgiving another person is rediscovering the humanity of the one who hurt us. This is not in any way minimizing or justifying the wrong done or the

personal responsibility of the wrongdoer. Nor does it diminish the justice of getting what we deserve. It does, however, reveal the universal dependence we all have on the mercy of God as well as the mercy of one another. None of us can honestly claim to be completely innocent all the time.

This understanding of our common human frailty can help us practice empathy—the act of putting ourselves in the place of the other person. Empathy is essential for not only the healing of the person who did the wrong but also for the person who was wronged.

Christian researcher and counselor Everett Worthington teaches that this empathy is the most essential part of forgiveness—and the hardest. It is the willingness to look at

the act of someone who has done something terrible to you, and see it from that person's point of view. It reminds us that we are likewise capable of mistreating others—and sometimes do. We all need God's (and one another's) forgiveness of our "debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt. 6:12).

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6. Denial Of The Potential For Further Abuse. "Forgive and forget" is an attempt to create the false illusion that once forgiveness is offered, everything is instantly okay and should immediately go

back to the way it was. This only fosters continued destructive behavior patterns on the part of both the wrongdoer and the one wronged.

In Hebrews 12:4-11, we read of the Lord's discipline of the one He loves (v.6). This is distinct from God's wrath and punishment. In healthy restoration, the focus is not on past wrongs but on future change. It brings life, not death.

In 1 Samuel 19, there is an interesting example of how David avoided future abuse by King Saul. David had been anointed to be the next king by the prophet Samuel, but he had not yet been crowned. Saul, the current king, called David to his palace, saying that he wanted David to soothe him with the harp. But Saul's real desire was to slay David out of jealousy because the people were praising David more highly than they were

their king. David did not stay around to accept this abuse. Instead, he escaped from Saul's men who had been commanded to seize him.

At that moment in time, Saul continued to have the divine authority of kingship, but David did not submit to this potential wrongful and dangerous abuse. Yet, neither did he act out of revenge. He repeatedly walked away from opportunities to kill Saul and his men (1 Sam. 24:5-7; 26:9).

David's self-preservation by fleeing in the face of real danger, while at the same time refusing to yield to the urge to retaliate, could be a model for dealing with abusive people in our own relationships. David clearly saw the implications of raising his hand against God's anointed, yet he refused to allow Saul to continue with his destructive behavior.

Deep and profound change would have been required of Saul before any reconciliation could have been considered. But he eventually died without ever sincerely repenting of his wrongdoing.

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Unfortunately, each of these areas of denial carries with it two things: (1) the inability of correcting wrong behavior, and (2) the probability of prolonging the acts of wrongdoing. Denial may appear to be the path out of pain, but it is not. It is a road blanketed in fog and confusion.

When we are wronged, we must find a better way—

a way that begins to put our feet on the road to healing and restoration.

FOLLOWING A BIBLICAL MODEL OF FORGIVENESS

A character on a television drama had lived through the anguish of the murder of his mother. Because of this, a friend asked him if he approved of capital punishment. The question was put this way: “Would you want the government to kill your mother’s murderer?” His response was calm, but calculated. “No,” he said, “I would want to do it myself.”

When we are wronged, our natural tendency is to desire revenge. We may call it justice, but far too often we are really seeking vengeance.

That may be what we want, but it is not a

solution that brings healing to our devastated hearts. How can we move out of our human tendencies and into Christlike responses?

THE CHALLENGE OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

Up to this point, some may think we have relied more on psychological insight than Scripture. They could fairly ask, “Wait a minute! You talk about denial and other issues, but didn’t Christ clearly and directly teach us to forgive those who sin against us? Didn’t He tell us in Matthew 6:15 that if we don’t forgive others, neither would His Father in heaven forgive us?”

This is a common view of Christ’s words, and it raises serious questions that force us to consider our responses to mistreatment:

- If Christ told us to forgive, how can we talk about holding out

for a change of heart?

- If we do withhold forgiveness, how do we resolve the feelings of anger and resentment that remain?
- If we don’t forgive, how can we keep from being eaten up by our own bitterness?
- And, at the very heart of the issue, what really is biblical forgiveness anyway?

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We must allow these questions to drive us to the Scriptures. It is there that we find the answers and the comfort offered to us by the true Shepherd of our hearts.

THE CHALLENGE TO UNDERSTAND THE SCRIPTURES

A good place to begin is by reading one of our Lord's own statements about forgiveness. In Luke 17:1-4, Jesus said to His disciples:

Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, "I repent," forgive him.

With all the previous questions still fresh in our minds, this text raises two very basic questions that are vital to our practice of

biblical forgiveness and genuine restoration.

The Question Of Confrontation And Conditional Forgiveness.

First, if our Lord wanted us always to unilaterally forgive those who harm us, then why did He say in this teaching, "Rebuke [lovingly confront] him, and if he repents, forgive him"? If we can set aside, for the moment, the question of how to get rid of our anger when the offending person doesn't have a change of heart, it is clear that Jesus' teaching here is consistent with other scriptures. Notice:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the

testimony of two or three witnesses.” If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Mt. 18:15-17).

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This isn't seen just in the teaching of Christ. According to the Bible, God's own example is to forgive us when we acknowledge our wrongs and express our trust in His Son. Look, for example, at two important areas of God's dealings with people:

The Conditions For Salvation. “The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man . . . went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk. 18:13-14).

Jesus' parable of the tax collector is a reminder that only when we acknowledge our spiritual failure can forgiveness of sins occur.

The Conditions For God's Forgiveness. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9).

The apostle John affirmed that sins that disrupt our personal relationship with God can be resolved only by

confession—agreeing with Him about our wrong actions and turning from them.

In both cases, God's forgiveness is *conditional*, dependent on the acknowledgment of wrongdoing by the sinning individual.

This principle is clearly seen in what Jesus said to one of the two criminals who was crucified alongside Him. One of the criminals mocked and taunted Jesus. The other acknowledged his sins and asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom. It was to the second man that Jesus offered comfort and forgiveness when He said, "Today you will be with Me in paradise" (Lk. 23:43). No such hope was offered to the unrepentant criminal.

The Question Of Unconditional Love.

Second, if God's offer of forgiveness is conditional,

does that mean His love is conditional as well? Here the answer is clearly no. While God has a special affection for those who repent of their sins, He loves everyone unconditionally. This is the wonderful assurance that Jesus used when He taught His disciples to love not only their friends but also their enemies.

Repeating this point, Jesus said:

Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets. But I tell you who hear Me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone

who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” lend to “sinners,” expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful,

just as your Father is merciful (Lk. 6:26-36).

The words of the Savior are a reminder of the very nature and character of God the Father. While unconditional love is the heartbeat of His passion for people, God’s perfect character also requires that sin be resolved—not glossed over or excused. It was this same passion that made Him willing to send His Son to the cross to make true forgiveness possible. *That* is unconditional love.

This unconditional love is the key to all that follows here. Seeking the highest good of another is the test for deciding when to forgive and when to lovingly withhold forgiveness, when to forgive and move on, and when to confront and go deep—deep into the heart of the one who did the wrong as well as deep into the heart of the one who was wronged.

STARTING POINTS FOR BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

It has been said that we are never more like God than when we forgive. If this is true, then it is not enough just to go through the motions. We must engage ourselves in the task of forgiveness with the same tenacity and the same priorities that God Himself exhibits.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Country singer Rebecca Lynn Howard, in her hit song titled “Forgive,” sings in response to being hurt and betrayed by her lover. She rejects his plea for forgiveness with blunt honesty: “Forgive. That’s a mighty big word from such a small man—and I don’t think I can.”

In our own strength, we can’t. It is very hard to forgive, especially if we

intend to pattern our forgiveness after God’s model. The basis for practicing this difficult but meaningful approach to forgiveness, however, can be found in a value system born in the pages of the Bible. These values give us a place to begin.

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Forgiveness Always Begins In The Heart Of God. He is the ultimate example of what it means to move beyond vengeance toward the one guilty of causing harm. It is God who takes the initiative to remove debts that are no longer owed.

Even for God, such

forgiveness would not be right and just if it were not for His plan to accept the shed blood of Christ as full payment for the legal debt of a repentant wrongdoer. This principle is seen in Hebrews 9:22, which says:

The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

In order to truly forgive another person in a way that pleases and honors God, we must identify with Christ and His forgiveness, be motivated by His love, and be willing to follow His model of self-sacrifice. This forgiveness involves two different kinds of motivation that come from the heart:

- The primary motivation to forgive should be faithful trust in God (Mt. 18:21-22; Lk. 17:3-4; Eph. 4:32).

- The secondary motivation should be a loving concern for the wrongdoer.

On the basis of God's own example, we are asked to offer forgiveness to one another in response to a confession of wrong (Lk. 17:1-4, 1 Jn. 1:9). This is what godly love inspires. Releasing offenders from the wrong they have done allows them to move past their guilt and the alienation they have caused.

Such forgiveness does not rule out accountability and follow-through. Nor does it release us from actively participating in a process of restoration aimed at fostering meaningful change in relationship and growth in character. It merely tries to deal with wrong in a way that reflects the loving concerns of the heavenly Father.

Forgiveness Should Not Be Limited To Sparing The Wrongdoer From Pain.

Godly correction and restoration are often very painful. In the book of Hebrews, we are given a lengthy but vital reminder of how the love of the Father is often expressed in pain—pain that is designed to bring us to correction and right choices.

You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined

(and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:5-11).

Some might ask, “If God really loves us, wouldn’t He seek to protect us and shield us from pain?” The answer is, “Not necessarily.” Because He is both infinitely wise and

thoroughly good, He knows that sometimes it is in the classroom of pain that we learn life's most valuable lessons. God's chastening is not done out of capriciousness or mindless anger. It is done because it is needed to benefit and correct wrongdoers, not to destroy them.

Forgiveness Brings Benefits To The One Who Forgives. When healthy and appropriate forgiveness is offered, it brings significant benefits to the person who forgives and to the one being forgiven.

Recent research by Robert Enright reveals that there are measurable and long-lasting emotional improvements resulting from the meaningful forgiveness of a wrongdoer. There is additional research demonstrating that there are also significant physical benefits when people learn how to truly forgive.

If, however, forgiveness is offered only to gain these benefits, it merely becomes another form of selfish manipulation.

There are significant physical benefits when people learn how to truly forgive.

It could be compared to volunteering to serve at a downtown mission just to get a free meal for yourself. There is nothing wrong with eating the free meal, but love and concern for the needy should be the paramount motivation.

Selfishly motivated forgiveness is not rooted in *agape* love. *Agape* love, a reflection of God's perfect love, seeks the welfare of

the person loved—even when it means entering into painful honesty.

THE PROCESS OF RESTORATION

In the popular movie *Back To The Future*, George McFly spent his entire youth being bullied by Biff. As an adult, he continued to allow himself to be a walking punching bag—and punchline—to those he knew. When asked why he submitted to such abuse, George meekly responded, “I can’t stand confrontation.”

Very few people can. There are not many people who enjoy confrontation. It is just plain hard.

In spite of that, confrontation is absolutely necessary to a scriptural process of correction and restoration. When there has been a profound betrayal

of trust, there must be a willingness to lovingly confront. We cannot afford to pass lightly over the important issues of

Confrontation is absolutely necessary to a scriptural process of correction and restoration.

confession of wrong, sincere regret, acknowledgment of the need for forgiveness, a desire to change, and specific steps to begin carrying out that change.

What does the process of restoration look like?

Step 1: We Must Love Enough To Take A Risk. The process will not be easy. It will require the assistance of wise, loving, and courageous

people—people willing to risk getting involved. It also requires that we surrender our will to the timing and work of the Holy Spirit.

Step 2: We Must Care Enough To Test The Heart. Sincere forgiveness (as we have described it) is a response to the apology of wrongdoers and their longing for a renewed relationship.

Healthy forgiveness also involves forsaking all six areas of denial (see pages 12-18). It acknowledges the wrong and our own natural desire for revenge, and then turns that longing over to God and replaces it with loving concern for what is best for all.

Sincere forgiveness is willing to enter into a process of correction for the wrongdoer as long as it does not give that person the opportunity to perpetuate the wrong.

Step 3: We Must Be Obedient Enough To Follow The Biblical Pattern. When denial in all its forms is forsaken, and vengeance has been replaced by love, forgiveness and apologies can begin to be genuine and meaningful. This then

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leads to church and family discipline, which, when done scripturally, is an act of love and concern for the wrongdoer.

Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, described His pattern for correction in Matthew 18:15-17.

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that “every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.” If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

This process is designed primarily to restore the wrongdoer in the following three areas:

- First, to full fellowship within a local body of believers.
- Second, to his or her immediate family.

- Third, and most important, to a right relationship with Christ.

These are ultimate goals, not short-term Band-Aids. A restored relationship with those who have wounded us is possible, but it can only be achieved by a love that is faithful enough to apply the wisdom of the Bible to the hearts of those who hurt others.

Step 4: We Must Be Committed Enough To Maintain Accountability. Those who are the subject of a restoration process need to be willing to be accountable to someone over them.

No plan or process provides an absolutely sure way to get someone back on the path of spiritual growth and ethical living. Nor can we assure the restoration of broken and hurting relationships. We can only provide a means

by which we can begin to move toward these ends under the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is as much a spiritual journey for those doing the correction as it is for the one being restored.

Restoration is as much a spiritual journey for those doing the correction as it is for the one being restored.

The pattern is clear: Real love longs for the betterment of another person. This causes a person to care enough to get involved in practicing Christ's process of correction and then holding the wrongdoer accountable for future choices. Suddenly, there is the opportunity for what has been broken to be made whole.

WHY DOES GENUINE RESTORATION MATTER SO MUCH?

The Bible makes it clear that we have been created for relationship—with God and with one another. When the relationships that form our lives are broken because of wrongful acts, genuine confession and loving forgiveness are the first steps toward repairing those relationships. This requires us to be honest with ourselves and with each other. It can be difficult—but genuine love can settle for nothing less.

Why? Is the path of pain so necessary in such cases of hurt and heartache? Yes, it's important to see broken relationships healed. It's also critical that we see hearts set free from

bitterness (when having been hurt) or guilt (when having hurt others).

There is another reason, however. As members of God's family, we are called to represent Him in the world. The apostle Paul put it this way:

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20).

As His representatives, we are to model His character and His ways in our dealings with one another—including an honest and genuine means for restoring broken relationships.

When we do this, we do more than heal the hurting and bind the wounded. We do more than absolve guilt or relieve bitterness. In fact, we put God's perfect love on display—a love that

is deep, fair, just, and determined to move us toward His good desires for us.

Though Paul's words are in the context of evangelism, it is significant that they are also in the context of reconciliation. That is the point. When we engage in a ministry of restoration, we act as God's ambassadors and reveal His love to a watching world.

The vocal group 4Him, in their song "Visible," expressed this privilege and responsibility this way: "To make You known, to make You seen, to be Your hands, to be Your feet. I want to be a revelation of love. I want to make the invisible God visible."

We must be committed to making God visible as we live out His model for genuine restoration.

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