

## DEALING WITH PAST HURTS IN YOUR MARRIAGE

You might have heard about the husband who complained that his wife “gets historical.” “You mean hysterical” his friend corrected him. “No,” he said “historical – every time we have an argument she brings up things that have happened in the last 30 years!”

It can be very annoying to have our past ‘sins’ thrown in our face all the time. Why do we need to deal with the past? We can’t change it or undo it so why don’t we just forget about it and move on?

The problem is that the past can and often does affect the present. The history of our relationship can affect us (and therefore our current relationship) in two ways:

- Guilt
- Unforgiveness/resentment/bitterness.

### **1. GUILT**

Guilt can be extremely debilitating if it is not dealt with properly. We can begin to see ourselves as worthless and inferior to others. It carries with it a sense of shame that somehow I’m bad or dirty and therefore need to hide what I’m really like from others. These feelings will dramatically affect our relationships especially marriages. Because of the shame, we have this fear of being exposed and so will often become defensive or withdraw and close down. Another unhelpful fallout of guilt is when, because we feel bad about what we have done, we simply yield to our partner on every issue and feel like we always owe them.

#### **So what is the answer to this guilt?**

Firstly it is important to distinguish between real guilt and false guilt.

We can often feel guilty about things when we have not done anything wrong. For example I might feel guilty that ‘I don’t earn more’ or that “I’m not slim like my husband’s sister” or that ‘I’m not a fun loving party animal like my spouse’.

The rule of thumb is this: Have I broken God’s law?

I might have disappointed people by not pursuing a career which is financially lucrative but I have not disobeyed God.

So the first step if you are feeling guilty is to identify the source of guilt and if you find that that issue does not clash with God’s standards then you are not guilty and you must declare yourself so.

### **i) Real Guilt**

However there are many times when our feelings of guilt come from those things we have done that are wrong and do break one or more of God's laws. All of us sin and fall short of this standard. Denying this fact does not help us, it simply hides the problem.

### **ii) Confession**

The way we deal with real guilt is to be honest about it. If we have broken God's law we need to confess that to him. Thankfully God does not treat us as we deserve and He will forgive us if we ask Him. So confess without minimizing the sin or excusing ourselves and then receive or accept His forgiveness.

### **Confess to Partner**

If we have sinned against our spouse, then we need to confess that to them. They may or may not forgive you – but that's their responsibility. Yours is to own up to your own wrongdoing. We often say or do things in our marriages because our spouse has hurt us in some way. In that case we may want to confess only if they confess or we confess with the expectation they will now own up to their own wrongdoing. However, your partner's actions or responses are not in your control. What is in your control is to confess those things that you know you did wrong.

### **iii) Repentance**

If we are to save ourselves from the endless cycle of sin-confess-sin then there needs to be real and permanent change in the area of wrongdoing. For this to happen we need to not only confess our sin but repent from it. There is a difference between repentance and remorse. Remorse is when we are sorry about the situation that we have caused. It is possible to admit to our wrongdoing and even feel terribly sorry and full of remorse but for no real change to take place in us or our behaviour. Real change happens when we repent. Repentance may start with remorse but it must go further. Repentance involves a realisation that we have sinned against God (as well as our partner) and therefore that our sin has jeopardised our relationship with Him. This realisation motivates us to turn away from the sin itself and not just try to avoid the consequences.

## **2. UNFORGIVENESS/BITTERNESS**

The other way that the past affects us is, if there is unforgiveness displayed by one or both of the partners. Unforgiveness breeds resentment and bitterness.

### **How do these things affect us?**

Bitterness colours our view of that person. It's like wearing tinted glasses, we see everything through that event, and in our mind they are always like that. In other words, it affects our thinking and as we ruminate and obsess about their crime. Anger turns to deep resentment and bitterness. This can easily turn to hate.

It is hard to feel loving and tender towards someone that you resent. This in turn means that bitterness will then influence our choices. How can you work on restoring your relationship when you are feeling bitter and resentful

Perhaps most importantly, our bitterness affects our relationship with God. We cannot expect God to forgive us while we refuse to forgive others especially our spouse. In fact Jesus told us quite plainly that He will not.

### **How do I forgive?**

If we are to forgive we must understand what forgiveness is and is not. There are many myths that surround the subject.

### **WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT – MYTHS OF FORGIVENESS**

- Forgiveness does not mean not getting angry.

Anger itself is not the problem – it is what we do with it that counts. Many people believe that forgiveness means I must simply push down these feelings of hurt and anger – just push them down and put a lid on them. The Bible tells us to ‘get rid of anger’ and you do not get rid of it by stuffing it down! We get rid of anger by expressing it. I do not believe we can truly forgive until we have expressed our true feelings about the event. Be angry, but ensure you are in control of your anger not your anger in control of you.

- Forgiveness does not mean condoning the wrong done to you.

Forgiveness does not mean having to say “well it was okay for you to do that”. We can sometimes minimise the sin as a way of dealing with the pain that we feel. This simply buries the pain rather than facing it and getting it out of our system.

- Forgiveness does not mean never talking about the issue.

Because of the guilt involved, the perpetrator can become defensive and angry if the subject is raised. He/she may say “why are you raising the issue – I thought you had forgiven me?”

However forgiveness is about the past – which does need to be forgiven but often there are things that need to be spoken about and resolved regarding the future.

If a wife goes on a spending-spree that puts the couple into debt, the husband must

forgive her. However, it would be important to talk about their budget and agree limits on her future spending.

- Forgiveness does not mean the same sin must be tolerated in the future.

If an argument escalates and results in the husband losing control and hitting his wife – the wife would need to come to a place of forgiveness but that would NOT mean she is saying that it would be alright if it happened again. As in c) a discussion would need to take place in which the wife could lay down very clearly the consequences should it happen again.

- Forgiveness does not mean there will not be consequences.

Where a husband has physically abused his wife. She forgives him once – but if he does it again – she would need to forgive him again (70 x 7 Jesus said) but she would probably need (as discussed) to separate from her husband to protect herself and her children. She forgives but there are consequences.

- Forgiveness is not conditional
  - If he/she apologises or shows they are sorry I'll forgive
  - If he/she changes I'll forgive
  - If he/she makes amends I'll forgive.

Forgiveness is about you, the one who has been wronged – it must not be dependent on the attitude or actions of your partner. Remember you only have control of yourself not your partner.

### **Forgiveness is not a feeling**

Forgiveness is an act of the will, it's a decision you must make. Very often we don't feel like doing it and even once we've made the decision we still have moments when we feel the same – hurt and angry. However, you must remember you have been wounded by someone close to you. It will take time for that wound to heal. Every time these feelings return – make the decision to forgive again. It is a decision – but it is also a process. As you repeatedly choose to forgive you will heal slowly and begin to feel better.

### **Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.**

There are some behaviours which will destroy a relationship. These are what Dr Phil McGraw calls 'Deal Breakers' – things like physical and sexual abuse, continued unfaithfulness, drug and alcohol addiction. These can and do destroy relationships. However, even these we are obliged to forgive.

But if the spouse refuses to acknowledge their wrongdoing and does not do something to change (repent) then reconciliation becomes impossible. Forgiveness and reconciliation are often confused and sometimes a spouse knowing they must forgive has taken that to mean they must go back into the relationship. It will not work. Love them, forgive them but don't go back into the relationship, until there are definite signs of lasting repentance by the other partner.

### **So what is Forgiveness?**

When we are wronged, our sense of justice comes to the fore. Our sense of justice that says – 'they owe me – they should pay for what they have done – they should pay for the hurt and pain they have caused,' and this is exactly right of course. People should pay for what they have done.

However: Forgiveness is when we forgo what is due, it is to wipe the slate clean; to release the debt; to cancel the punishment; to give up all claims on the one who has hurt you, it is to give up resentment.

Forgiveness means to give up or give away your rights: the right of reaction; the right to get even, no matter how much you feel revenge is justified.

To forgive means to give mercy, not to demand justice. The offender owes you – forgiveness lets them off that debt.

So forgiveness is a costly business. We pay for what they did. Just as with Jesus, it cost Him His life to pay for our sin. So it will cost us to forgive others as we pay the debt for their sin against us.

We make a decision to forgive but our feelings are not necessarily going to change overnight – the wound is still sore. So rather than act on those feelings, we must decide to forgive again, and again and again. As we do this the wounds heal and our feelings subside and begin to fall in line with the decision we have made.

So forgiveness is an act of the will (not our feelings), it is a decision, but it is also a process that takes time.

Earlier I said forgiveness does not mean NOT getting angry. There is another side however, forgiveness also means that having felt and expressed our hurt and anger it is vital that we then let it go. It's when we hold onto our anger that it leads to bitterness. Sometimes far from suppressing our anger we feel it is our right to be angry. This makes us a victim and unable to move on or heal.

Finally forgiveness is choosing not to remember. It is deciding not to think about it. God says "he remembers our sins no more". This does not mean he pushes the delete button and wipes the data from his memory banks. Rather it is a file he chooses not to

open. When we continue to think and ruminate about the hurtful event it can grow in our minds.

Forgiveness means deciding not to dwell on the event.

Here are five steps that will take you through the process:

a) Be honest about the sin, the extent of it and the hurt that it has caused you. Do this without:

- Taking on any unjustified blame
- Minimising; or
- Avoiding.

Find ways to express the anger that you feel. Writing a journal, speaking confidentially to a trusted friend or counsellor, and prayer are some ways to express what you feel in a healthy and safe way.

b) Be realistic about your own part in the event. Did you have a part to play? Are you reacting out of unresolved issues? Does your anger come out of unreal expectations?

c) How might your spouse view the event? Try to understand their perspective.

2) The next step is to confront your spouse if you have not already done so.

Having worked out the answers to 1a, b, and c above you can express these in a clear and controlled way. It is important that you do this without any expectation of how they must or should respond. That way you avoid being let down and hurt even further.

3) The third step is to make the decision to forgive. Even if your spouse does not acknowledge the wrong or express any remorse. Decide to release them from any debt and let go of your anger. Release them into God's hands so that the matter now lies between God and them. And remember He is just.

4) Go to God to bring healing for your hurt and to meet your unmet needs. If you have been rejected, He can give you His acceptance. If you have been abused or ill treated – look to Him for His love and care and so on.

5) Work through this process (Steps 1 – 4) of forgiving as often as you need to.

### **Aids to Forgiving**

1. Remember you also need forgiveness (Matt 18:21)

2. Jesus has been there and knows what it is like to be rejected, deserted and betrayed so remember he does know what you are going through.
3. Ask for the Lord's help. He will give you the grace you need.
4. Remember God is just and we can safely leave all injustices to Him to settle (Romans 12:19).
5. Rather than take revenge. Choose to love your spouse, in spite of what they have done. Return good for evil. This is not easy but it does change you from being a victim to being an agent. You change from being a person who is giving rather than someone who is owed something. It changes you from a position of helplessness (you cannot change or undo the past) to a position of power whereby you are making a difference to the future.
6. Finally, it will help you to forgive and let go of the demand that your spouse come through for you, to know that ultimately it is only God who can give you the love, security and sense of value that you so badly need.