

I. THE MEANING OF FORGIVENESS

Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

--Leviticus 19:17-18

Then came Peter to him [Jesus], and said, "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?" Jesus saith unto him, "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

--Matthew 18:21-22

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.

--Colossians 3:12-13

II. PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND DEFINITIONS OF FORGIVENESS

Much of the continually expanding collection of literature and research on the subject of forgiveness is found in Christian journals, according to a review of the PsychLit computerized database (available online and on CDs) between 1995 to 1998.¹ For that reason, much of the material in this paper discusses the work of Christian behavioral science researchers or practitioners, although because secular researchers are increasingly interested in the subject, some of them are included as well.

An interesting commentary on psychology's study of forgiveness is presented by Terry D. Hargrave, Ph.D., marriage and family therapist and professor of Behavioral Studies at Amarillo College in

Texas.² He suggests that the growth of behavioral science research efforts on this topic can be likened to human developmental stages, from childhood through to adulthood.

The “Infancy/Childhood” Stage of Forgiveness Research.

Prior to and during the mid-1980s, most behavioral scientists and people helpers considered forgiveness to be a “religious” concept, and criticized early researchers for its study application in therapy to be “unscientific” and not appropriate to be addressed in psychotherapy sessions. In the era when assertiveness training was popular, one popular author wrote that a person who forgives is excessively polite and “conciliatory,” subjecting him/herself to the possibility of further abuse by the offender.³ An online review of that writer’s book, *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life* commented:

In an excellent chapter entitled, “You Don't Have to Forgive,” Dr. Forward argues that forgiving is not only nonessential for recovery but can actually impede recovery. She says that forgiveness is a trap which undercuts one's ability to let go of one’s repressed feelings. Forgiveness covers up one’s unfelt feelings and she believes that one can’t get better until feelings are confronted. Perhaps forgiveness can be made at the conclusion of therapy, she writes, but never at the beginning. You've got to feel the hurt and the anger first, she says. Still, forgiveness is only an option. She explains that it is not a necessary step.⁴

The author (Dr. Forward) does present some truth—that forgiveness can be part of therapy—in the midst of her radical, secular humanist ideology, but she evidently does not comprehend the Christian concept and practice of forgiveness. Other theorist-practitioners, including the late Viktor Frankl,⁵ who was a psychiatrist and university professor as well as a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust, aim to harmonize psychology and religious or moral philosophy by presenting a more healing-oriented approach.

Theologian and ethicist Lewis Smedes, in his book *Forgive and Forget*,⁶ seeks to integrate religion and psychology in this key area. The same approach is seen in David Augsburger’s *Freedom of Forgiveness*,⁷ and Henri J. M. Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*.⁸

Because of this diversity of thought, researchers’ definitions of forgiveness during the 1980-90s varied widely regarding what the forgiving person must do:

- Release resentment or anger (Davenport, 1991⁹; Fitzgibbons, 1986¹⁰)
- Release the right to revenge (Cloke, 1993¹¹); Hope 1987¹²)
- Repudiate shame (Halling, 1994¹³)
- Refuse to keep a record of wrongs (DiBlasio, 1992¹⁴)

The complete definition used by Professor Frederick DiBlasio, Ph.D., who has authored numerous research studies about forgiveness, reads as follows:

Forgiveness is conceptually defined as the letting-go of a record of wrongs and a need for vengeance and releasing associated negative feelings such as bitterness and resentment.¹⁵

Professor Robert D. Enright and others in the Human Development Study Group (1991) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison developed this definition:

Following North (1987), we define forgiveness as a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, condemnation, and subtle revenge toward an offender who acts unjustly, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her.¹⁶

Dr. Enright and the Human Development Study Group, in a 1994 study, added:

Forgiveness is... a gift and... does not include overlooking, excusing, forgetting, or condoning the offense.¹⁷

Dr. Hargrave notes that he and others in the mid-1980s “were interested in ideas about forgiveness and tried to apply these ideas in mostly therapeutic settings. We wanted to know if our ideas worked... [D]uring our early development there was an effort among researchers and writers to talk about forgiveness in terms that would be acceptable to both religious and non-religious professionals...”¹⁸

The “Adolescent” Stage of Forgiveness Research. As research projects became more sophisticated, they aimed to “measure” forgiveness in terms of reliability and validity, and to demonstrate the practical benefits of forgiveness. A paradox was revealed: healthcare professionals who excelled in therapy generally did not care to do research, while exceptional researchers were not especially skilled as therapists. Dr. Hargrave challenged people in both “camps” to improve their skills were needed, so that high-quality research and therapeutic work in forgiveness can continue.

Clinical research in forgiveness has focused on adolescents, incest survivors and people who are beset by guilt. But, Dr. Hargrave wrote, future studies of forgiveness will probably receive increased

attention in the behavioral sciences—and will ultimately prove to be of practical value to people who need help—if researchers show interest in entering new territories of study, such as:

- Are certain types of personalities more likely to forgive than are others?
- Is significantly different brain chemistry or activity produced when a person forgives than others?
- Are any identifiable health benefits produced with forgiveness?

David B. Simpson, a therapist at the Psychological Studies Institute in Atlanta, recommends other areas for future research:

- The physiological effects of failing to forgive
- Readiness to forgive as a factor in marital satisfaction
- Attitudes toward forgiveness in newly married couples; in a family through several generations; between males and females
- Continuing to examine the steps of forgiveness, to seek a specific process to be used
- Comparing “the differences between a process that requires repentance prior to the granting of forgiveness and a process that does not require repentance... for biblical and therapeutic consideration.”¹⁹

The “Adulthood” Stage of Forgiveness Research. Research is just now entering this phase of maturity. Dr. Hargrave comments, “We have learned much about the ‘how-to’ of forgiveness.... What... will we do with what we know?” He suggests that the mental health profession will “mainstream” forgiveness as an intervention wherever therapy is practiced, and adds:

I suspect that we will never completely or fully articulate the mystery of this profound truth of forgiveness. We as clinicians and researchers will do well to remember our roots in theology and philosophy and never forget to marvel and ponder at this mysterious and powerful tool.²⁰

III. THE PROCESS OR STAGES OF FORGIVENESS

Secular medical and psychological research studies have found that withholding forgiveness is costly to one’s health. A University of Tennessee study on the effect of forgiveness on a person’s psychological and physical stress levels discovered that “low forgivers” (those who hold grudges) experience high blood pressure, which can lead to stroke, kidney or heart failure, or death. But “high forgivers” (those who can easily forgive) had lower blood pressure when at rest and smaller increases in

blood pressure under stress than those who hold on to grudges. In addition, they needed fewer doctor visits for physical problems. The head researcher at U.T., psychology professor Kathleen Lawler, reports that “Forgiveness might enhance health by reducing the excessive physiological burden that comes with unresolved stressful experiences, like the hurt and offense attributed to others.” She suggests these steps to facilitate forgiveness:

- Face the pain. Experience the emotions that betrayal generates rather than denying or avoiding them.
- Try to understand what led to the offender’s actions.
- Make the choice to forgive. Gather all of your strength to “let go” of the hurtful event, so you are free to move on with your life.²¹

What does psychology teach us about the process of forgiveness, and what specific steps must people take in that process? As we have seen earlier, the behavioral sciences have only recently begun to study this topic and have not established a unified understanding or a “standard” approach to its application in treatment. Researchers present a wide assortment of steps or therapeutic procedures.

Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1996) found that “the processes [involved in forgiveness] do not comprise a rigid, step-like sequence, but instead a flexible set of processes.”²² Their study discovered great individual and cultural differences in the ways people forgive: some may bypass whole “units” (segments included in a phase); others might keep repeating units. But Enright’s group identified four main phases of forgiveness that include a total of 20 steps or units:

- *Uncovering*. Unit 1: The person discovers emotional pain, looks at the denial defense that is used for his or her protection. Unit 2: Acknowledging anger—usually needed before the person can decide to forgive. Unit 3: Facing one’s shame. Unit 4: Spending large amounts of emotional energy—which can be exhausting. Unit 5: Mentally replaying what the offender did that was hurtful. Unit 6: Comparing one’s injured state to the offender’s “better” state. Unit 7: If an irreversible injury or loss has occurred, regret or anger is heightened, leading to (Unit 8) attitudes such as “All people are unfair.”
- *Decision*. Unit 9: In an important step toward forgiving, the person determines (“change of heart”) to change the “difficult situation” that has drained his/her energy, since to do otherwise is not helping resolve matters. Unit 10: Forgiveness is considered an option. Unit 11: Commitment to forgive the offender.

- *Work*. Unit 12: “Reframing” the offender in new ways, trying to understand that person’s past experience. Unit 13: Empathy toward the offender. Unit 14: Compassion toward the offender. Unit 15: Accepting and absorbing the pain brought by the offense.
- *Outcome*. Unit 16: Finding meaning for self and others in the suffering and in the forgiveness. Unit 17: Realizing for one’s self that he/she needed forgiveness from others in the past. Unit 18: Understanding that the individual is not alone. Unit 19: Realizing that there may be a new purpose in life because of the injury that was suffered. Unit 20: Improved psychological health.²³

Virginia Holeman, psychologist, marriage and family therapist, and associate professor of counseling at Asbury Theological Seminary, compared the definitions used in the forgiveness models of psychologist Frank Worthington and theologian-author David Augsburger:²⁴

Worthington

Forgiveness is an altruistic gift to an offender; it is a motive within an individual. Reconciliation is earned re-establishment of trust through mutually trustworthy behavior; it is interactive behavior within a relationship.

Augsburger

Forgiveness is a relational process in which the offended offers release, restoration, and pardon and the offender offers an authentic apology, repayment, and restitution. The goal of forgiveness is relationship reconciliation.

The types of forgiveness in the two models are as follows:

Worthington

Reconciliation without forgiveness (“hollow forgiveness”).

Forgiveness without reconciliation (“silent forgiveness”).

Revenge (“seeking peace through Justice”).

Reconciliation through forgiveness (“relational safety is restored and reconciliation becomes possible”).

Augsburger

Denial (“neither person contributes anything. No active work at reconciliation from either side”).

Forgiveness (“the offended makes peace in generous, one-way release”).

Revenge (“the offender is required to suffer the full cost of the injury, to make all reparation efforts”).

Authentic reconciliation (“both contribute to the reconciliation”).

These two approaches seem quite similar. Each proposes reconciliation as the highest form of forgiveness, but also sees unilateral forgiveness (the offended forgives the offender, without reconciliation) as valid. Much could be written about the other two types, in which (1) neither person moves toward forgiveness or (2) the “goal” of forgiveness is for justice to be served.

Ellen J. Langer, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Harvard University, suggests that there is a step between “blame” [or seeking revenge] and forgiveness.²⁵ She suggests that the offended person evaluate what happened without pre-judging the offender so that, instead of nursing hurt feelings and focusing on self-righteousness, he or she can move away from blaming and try to understand the reasons behind the other’s behavior.

Secular therapist Janis Abrahams Spring uses forgiveness as a “tool” in counseling and finds it to be very helpful in working with couples who have experienced infidelity. She states:

The basic assumption that we should forgive, or that forgiveness is good for us—these are assumptions that are woven into the fabric of society and culture, and the assumptions aren’t always true.... The burden is put on the hurt partner to forgive and trust again. But it’s not their job to trust and forgive. It’s the job of the unfaithful partner to earn the trust and forgiveness.... Forgiveness isn’t something that’s done by one person; it’s a two-person project.”²⁶

Ms. Spring uses a “covenant agreement,” in written form, to help the couples apologize to each other for failing their relationship in specific ways. She concludes:

The covenant is a way of taking responsibility for what went wrong. It gets away from blaming and allows each person to apologize and take ownership for intimacy issues. It’s part of the process by which you release yourself of [sic] the pain and damage that the other person has done, and you understand their issues that led them to violate you.

Langer and Spring seem to be asking the wounded person to intellectualize his/her pain—but they seem to offer nothing to help him/her to purposefully forgive wrongs done by another person. Spring, at least, aims to involve both persons in the process of healing the relationship by dealing with the issue that caused the damage. But what concrete, practical steps can counselors and psychologists offer their clients, regarding the process of forgiveness?

IV. PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS TO FACILITATE FORGIVENESS

Private-practice psychologist David Stoop²⁷ teaches counselors to help their clients define or face the truth so they can work through to forgiveness. In his view, the unfinished business of forgiveness needs to be expressed—and will come out, with help in therapy—but he does not advocate “parent bashing” or

blaming the client's parents. Citing Colossians 2:13-14 and Matthew 18, Dr. Stoop defines forgiveness as "canceling the debt": "God forgave the debt we owe and could never pay. We need to do the same with others who have wronged us." Dr. Stoop uses this six-step process to help people define or face the truth:

- Tell yourself the truth—face the truth.
- Identify what it felt like.
- Ask the offending person "Why?" but don't expect a reply.
- Set limits, to prevent a re-occurrence of the offense.
- Forgive.
- Consider the possibility of reconciliation (if it is safe to do so).

Forgiveness, according to Dr. Stoop, must not be done quickly (see 1 John 1:9). If it is done too quickly, it is not forgiveness—it is excusing the wrong that was done, as if it was "no big deal." We forgive, he says, to free ourselves. He concludes that the person who was hurt can tell the offender, when the time is right, "Because Christ forgave me, I forgive you."

Licensed counselor Esly Regina Caralho, who practices in Quito, Ecuador, suggests that in marriage counseling the therapist should keep forgiveness and reconciliation simple.²⁸ She tells clients to:

- "Make a list of all the things that your spouse has done against you. Be specific. Think of everything in all of your time together that she or he has done to hurt you or that you felt was hurtful."
- "Once you have completed the list, have a quiet time, and read the list aloud to yourself or to God.... Don't show your list to your spouse. This list of things for which you need to forgive your spouse is between God and yourself."
- "Then set a match to the list as a burnt offering, as an act of forgiveness. Do this when you are ready to let go of all of the pain you feel the spouse has inflicted on you during these years. I don't believe that real forgiveness is cheap, since it cost God the life of His only Son.... Once the list is burned, it's offered. You can no more go back to that than you can reconstruct the sheet of paper."
- "Finally, make a list of things for which you need to ask forgiveness from you spouse—things that you feel you have done to hurt your spouse over the years... but don't show it to your spouse... bring it to the next counseling session."

Ms. Caralho then has each person "speak words of forgiveness to the other." She says that saying "I forgive you for these things," while looking into the spouse's eyes, is enough to complete the needed forgiveness. She uses the "empathy-humility-commitment" model proposed by Dr. Everett Worthington

(the first four points, below) and closes the technique with a step recommended by Worthington and DiBlasio:²⁹

- By asking forgiveness we are humbling ourselves, giving our spouse and ourselves a reality check that means, “I am willing to own up to my frailty and imperfections in order to improve our relationship.”
- By confessing specific sins, we acknowledge that we are aware of the pain and hurt we inflict.
- Asking for forgiveness is also a way of sowing commitment to the relationship. “I love you and will do whatever it takes to maintain our relationship.”
- Forgiveness is the oil of relationship. We all mess up. Without forgiveness, the “ball bearings” of the relationship grind to a halt. Forgiveness keeps a relationship going and smooths the action between the relational gears.
- Each person purposes to stop the behavior that has hurt his/her spouse, shows a remorseful attitude and turns away from the offending behavior.

“Intentional forgiving” is applied in therapy by psychologist Shann R. Ferch, Ph.D., who teaches and practices in Seattle, Washington.³⁰ He advocates working with seriously conflicted couples for 35 or sessions or more, guiding them through a seven-step treatment protocol:

- Forgiveness is a choice. It can be chosen or refused, but healing begins with the choice to forgive. Refusal to forgive involves “self-harm, resentment, and generational harm.”
- The choice to forgive is immediate, but the process of forgiveness is complex and often arduous.
- “Forgive and remember [not forget]... meaning to demand appropriate humility and responsibility on the offender’s part as a requisite to a continued relationship.”
- Forgive for one’s own sake, not for the other’s sake, “that the capacity to be an instrument of loved and healing in the world might remain open rather than closed by bitterness....”
- Forgiveness involves mercy and justice. If the wounded person forgives without holding the offender accountable for hurtful actions, the offender will likely repeat the hurtful action. “Reconciliation is an ideal following forgiveness, but it should only be reached if the other’s potentially destructive behavior and intentions change.”
- Forgiveness involves intention vs. impact. Early in therapy, the couple is taught to identify personal behaviors that negatively impact the marriage. When this is done without defensiveness, it “energizes the empathy and compassion of both partners and leads to... [asking] forgiveness for the destructive behavior and for the harmful impacts that were a result of the behavior.”
- Forgiveness is presented in therapy as viable and learnable. “Forgiveness is a very difficult task involving a continual openness to personal humility and a recurring long-term battle against pride, defensiveness, and resentment.”

Drs. E.L. Worthington, Jr. and Frederick DiBlasio, in their 1990 study of forgiveness as applied to marital counseling with “morally wounded couples,” presented the seven steps of what they call “mutual forgiveness”:³¹

- The couple meets to discuss specific issues related to the offense.
- They set an agenda to work on the issues involved in the “wounding event.”
- They “fully explore the pain and concerns related to the issue using the speaker-listener technique.”
- “The offender asks for forgiveness using authentic apology.”
- The offended person agrees to forgive.
- “The offender makes a positive commitment to change recurrent patterns or attitudes that gave offense.”
- The therapist helps the couple understand that the process of forgiveness takes time.

V. THE NEED TO FORGIVE AND THE PROBLEM OF HORRENDOUS WRONGS

Why is it necessary to forgive? What are we to do if the offending person has done unforgivable things to a person, or to hundreds of innocent persons? The extreme difficulty of forgiving heinous criminal behaviors is exemplified in a true-life situation at St. Agnes Parish in Middleton, Massachusetts, where the 28-year-old director of religious education/youth ministry was accused of molesting as many of 250 boys in the Boston area. The pastor of St. Agnes, when the community’s anger was at its highest, preached a sermon on the need to forgive. Newspapers reported that some church members and many others “rejected the pastor’s claim that forgiveness ought to be extended to the alleged perpetrator. They felt that ruthless exploitation—the premeditated, meticulously planned and repeated sexual abuse of such young human beings—is unforgivable.”³²

Christians know that Jesus instructed us in the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4) to forgive others, just as we have been forgiven, as we have memorized. But we naturally have problems forgiving sins of others that we consider “unforgivable.” We seek greater consequences for those sins that we consider greater. However, we are commanded to follow Christ, and to forgive. Are we to simply excuse the offender, or to pretend that the offense never occurred?

Forgiveness does not mean that we are supposed to give tacit approval to hurtful behavior, or “let bygones be bygones,” or try to “like” the harmful person, or act as if nothing has happened, or forsake justice, or sympathize with the criminal instead of the victim. Since “forgiveness” requires (and allows) us to set aside resentment and to give up our grudges, it is not difficult to understand why it is so easy to confuse forgiving with simply forgetting. We deliberately choose to forget petty slights because they are not important enough to disrupt a friendship. Yet genuine Christian

forgiveness is not a tactic for ameliorating social friction; it is a focused moral act based on a religious vision....

To “forgive” ...means to make a twofold decision. Negatively, it means to renounce hatred and the desire to destroy; positively, it means to will what is morally good to one who has been harmful... what is morally good for the other, not pleasures and rewards. Certainly this includes the offender’s correction. It also means, religiously, that the other be brought back to God. Far from being cheap and easy, this more demanding form of forgiveness aims not only at a change of external behavior... but... more radically, a change of heart and mind.... Christian forgiveness intends healing and transformation.... Demands forgiveness, but it also demands making sure the criminal does not harm another person.³³

The priest at St. Agnes exhorted his flock to react to evil out of moral goodness instead of responding with hatred, or what Martin Luther King Jr. called the “chain reaction of evil.” He did not advocate a simple “covering up” or denial of the evil that was done. Only with the help of the Holy Spirit are we able to practice Christian forgiveness—with its emphasis on protection of the injured person and redemption of the hurtful person. God’s standard of forgiveness is radically different from what psychology proposes, because the Spirit of God is involved, to help us to overcome our natural response to evil deeds. It is not an easy process, but it is what we are commanded in Scripture to do.

VI. BIBLICAL OVERVIEW OF FORGIVENESS AND THE WORK OF THE COUNSELOR

Forgiveness is defined in the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, as:

The act of rendering null and void the penalty owed by a wrongdoer to an offended party; hence a term having legal or quasi-legal qualities denoting a release from a debt. An essential element of forgiveness is the wrongdoer’s awareness of having offended and owing a penalty. At the same time, the offended party grants forgiveness unconditionally. In this sense the act transcends the retributive nature of punishment for a crime.

Forgiveness always has a social context. It is a transaction between God and humanity, between two or more persons, or even between two or more “selves” in the developmental history of one person. Forgiveness is not the equivalent of reconciliation, however; it is the means by which barriers to reconciliation (which may or may not follow) are removed.³⁴

Jesus taught simply and forcefully about the process of human forgiveness:

In the Lord’s Prayer, receiving forgiveness from God is joined to forgiving others (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4). Jesus’ parable of the unmerciful servant makes the point that human beings are obliged to forgive because God has forgiven them (Matt. 18:23-35). God’s forgiveness is actually said to be conditional upon forgiving others (Matt. 6:14; 18:35 Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:37). Jesus says that there ought to be no limit on the number of times that one should forgive another so long as the

offender repents and asks for forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4).³⁵

Dealing with bitterness is an essential part of biblical forgiveness. Registered Nurse Helen Grace Lescheid, who works in a retirement home for seniors, observes that “victim thinking” (harboring bitterness instead of actively dealing with it) is destructive to a person’s life and relationships:

The trouble with bitterness is that it does not stay the same. Like a cancer, it grows. It distorts reality. It keeps us chained to the past. Like bad air, it pollutes, not just the bitter person, but those who come in contact with that person. The Bible says, “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (Heb. 12:15).³⁶

Resentments and bitterness can prevent a Christian from forgiving, writes Allen C. Guelzo, associate professor of American history at Eastern College in Pennsylvania:

God forgives us because of what Jesus has done for us; but then he obliges us to forgive others because of what Jesus is doing in us.... [T]he secret truth for many Christians is that we find it infinitely easier to be forgiven by God than to forgive others.... We struggle to extend forgiveness because the wrongs done to us by others hurt so much.... To forgive, as Jesus intended the word, means willingly to throw away our resentment at being wronged. This entails not just containing or restraining our resentment, but letting go of it entirely, so we can be truly free of its influence.... [T]he power to forgive must ultimately come from God. But at the same time, it must be pursued, because the whole point of Jesus’ command to forgive dangles on the consequence he draws from forgiveness: “that your Father in heaven may forgive you.”³⁷

Lewis B. Smedes, author of *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve*, says that forgiving an offender actually frees the wounded person:

When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life. You set a prisoner free, and you discover the prisoner almost always was you.... Forgiveness is love’s toughest work, and love’s biggest risk. Our sense of fairness tells us that people should pay for the wrong they do. But forgiving is love’s power to break nature’s rule.... Vengeance is a passion to get even. The problem with revenge is that it never evens the score....

We must face up to the skeptic’s suspicion that forgiving is really a religious trick to seduce hurting people into putting up with wrongs they do not deserve. To be forgiving and intolerant at the same time is a high Christian art. The gospel of forgiving shouldn’t soften the tough intolerance of love.³⁸

Richard D. Marks, Ph.D., director of the Center for Family Ministry at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, advocates a biblical forgiveness intervention that he calls “Firststone,” drawn from Jesus’ interaction with a woman who was caught in adultery—and her accusers—in John 8:1-11:

[T]he religious rulers had the right to stone the woman.... Many clients struggling with forgiveness come to realize that when an offense has been committed against them, they have the right for vengeance and retribution.

Jesus did not answer their question regarding their *rights*... he made a statement that questioned whether they were truly capable of casting the first stone. An important principle for forgiveness [is]: Though a client may have the *right* to harm his or her offenders, he or she is not *capable*.... God says vengeance is his and that he will repay any debts owed.³⁹

Dr. Marks writes that holding on to the stones is unforgiveness, which has the “weight” or consequence of resentment, bitterness, depression and anger, because “unforgiveness hurts the offended person.” However, he says, throwing down the stones (and one’s “right” to throw them at the offender) frees the forgiving person from the “weight and burden” of bitterness and resentment.

Frederick DiBlasio, Ph.D., professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland at Baltimore, has done extensive research into the application of forgiveness in therapy, particularly from a Christian point of view. His step-by-step procedure for a specifically Christian approach to forgiveness that can be used by therapists and pastors is as follows:

- *Defining and Preparing.* Step 1: define the benefits of decision-based forgiveness, using Scripture verses on the subject and explaining the biblical perspective. Step 2: “Although required by God, forgiveness is a free-will endeavor through which each individual must struggle,” and which involves “each person’s having the opportunity to seek forgiveness for his or her wrongful actions.... It is a time for personal accountability.” Step 3: Each person has “an opportunity to voice an area in which they are seeking forgiveness. If clients are willing, the therapist offers the forgiveness intervention.”
- *Seeking and Granting Forgiveness.* Step 4: Beginning with prayer, each client has the opportunity to state an offense and sincerely ask forgiveness for specific wrongs he/she did to one other person. Step 5: The offender explains, in a non-defensive manner the reason behind the behavior. Step 6: In a safe environment, questions are asked and answered, thus clarifying what happened in the wounding behavior. Step 7: The offended person expresses his or her feelings in detail; the therapist helps the person to do so, in detail. Step 8: The offender repeats the wrong that was done; the more he/she empathizes with the wounded person, the easier it is for that person to forgive. Step 9: The offender develops a plan to stop or prevent the behavior; an accountability system is set up, perhaps with another person at the church. Step 10: The victim identifies with the offender’s hurt—understanding that we are all human and have made mistakes helps with the healing process. Step 11: The wounded person can choose to forgive or not to forgive. “The therapist should caution the forgiver that granting forgiveness means that he or she cannot use the offense as a weapon against the other in the future. With the forgiveness comes a letting go, but not necessarily forgetfulness. In fact, there may need to be many discussions about the offense, as people prepare to work on problems with the relationship.” Step 12: The offender formally requests forgiveness—

perhaps then another family member can start at Step 4. Step 13: A ceremonial act to symbolically express that the forgiveness has been granted. “God demonstrates the power of symbolism throughout the Bible as a way to communicate, commit, and bond.”⁴⁰

VI. SUMMARY

Psychological research has “discovered” forgiveness and has made significant inroads into helping people understand and apply it to their lives. As with any human endeavor, there are many diverse and contradictory views regarding the meaning and purpose of forgiveness. Some therapist/researchers continue to view the subject through “traditional” humanistic eyes—that it is akin to apologizing and might or might not be helpful in the counseling process. Others seek to uncover the biblical essence of forgiveness and explain it to therapists and clients in a way that facilitates the healing of wounded spirits and broken relationships.

My experience in reporting on forgiveness research is this: we “people helpers” have so much more to learn in this area, practically and personally. We might have significant insights from research, and we may be able to “walk” others through the process of forgiveness, but do we truly understand the heart of God regarding forgiveness? We need to keep learning—and sharing what we learn. And we need to apply forgiveness to our own lives, with God’s help.

I close this report with one writer’s exhortation to enjoy the experience of forgiveness:⁴¹

Let us enjoy forgiveness. We have been restored to a whole new life. Let’s live it. Let’s lock up the memories of past sins and embrace the glories of a sinless present. Let’s stop punishing ourselves trying to “help God out” and start enjoying our release from sin’s penalty, pollution, power, and guilt. We have been justified; let’s enjoy it. In Christ we have been sanctified; let’s savor it to the fullest. We are being glorified; let’s delight in it. Let’s stop listening to our memory circuits and reprogram our minds to enjoy our new status as forgiven and loved people.

The handcuffs have been removed. Rejoice!
The contract has been cancelled. Sing!
The debt has been paid. Shout!
God’s love has triumphed over His law. Enjoy it!
Let’s enjoy forgiveness!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ¹ David B. Simpson, "Forgiveness: What Is It and What Can We Do with It?" *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal*, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 293.
- ² Terry D. Hargrave, "The Work of Forgiveness: Miles to Go Before We Sleep." *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal*. Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 315-323.
- ³ Susan Forward, *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life* (New York: Bantam, 1989).
- ⁴ John A. Speyrer, online book review (home.att.net/~jspeyrer/toxic.htm).
- ⁵ Viktor Frankl, *The Will to Meaning: Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy* (New York: World, 1959).
- ⁶ Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).
- ⁷ David Augsburg, *Freedom of Forgiveness: 70x7* (Chicago: Moody, 1970).
- ⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. (New York: Random House, 1994).
- ⁹ D.S. Davenport, "The Functions of Anger and Forgiveness: Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Victims." *Psychotherapy*, Vol. 28 (1991), pp. 133-140.
- ¹⁰ R.P. Fitzgibbons, "The Cognitive and Emotive Uses of Forgiveness in the Treatment of Anger." *Psychotherapy*, Vol. 23 (1986), pp. 629-633.
- ¹¹ K. Cloke, "Revenge, Forgiveness, and the Magic of Meditation." *Meditation Quarterly*, Vol. 11 (1993), pp. 67-78.
- ¹² D. Hope, "The Healing Paradox of Forgiveness." *Psychotherapy*, Vol. 24 (1987), pp. 240-244.
- ¹³ S. Halling, "Shame and Forgiveness." *The Humanistic Psychologist*, Vol. 22 (1994), pp. 74-87.
- ¹⁴ Frederick A. DiBlasio. "Forgiveness in Psychotherapy: Comparisons of Older and Younger Therapists." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, Vol. 11 (1992), p. 181.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Wei-neng Lin and Robert D. Enright, "Forgiveness and Family: A Report on the Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison." *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal*, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 201-209.
- ¹⁷ Cited by David B. Simpson, op. cit.
- ¹⁸ Terry D. Hargrave, op. cit.
- ¹⁹ David B. Simpson, op. cit.
- ²⁰ Hargrave, op. cit.
- ²¹ Angela Pirisi, "Forgive to Live." *Psychology Today*, July 2000.
- ²² Wei-neng Lin and Robert D. Enright, op. cit., pp. 202-204.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Virginia Todd Holeman, "Mutual Forgiveness: A Catalyst for Relationship Transformation in the Moral Crucible of Marriage." *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal*, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 147-157.
- ²⁵ Ellen Langer, "Behind the Apology: It's Not What You Think." *Psychology Today*, January 2000.
- ²⁶ American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, *Family Therapy News*, June-July 1999, pp. 27-28.
- ²⁷ David Stoop, "Forgiveness as the Focus Point of Therapy," presented at an American Association of Christian Counselors continuing education seminar on February 27, 1999 in Norwalk, California.
- ²⁸ Esly R. Carvalho, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Keeping It Simple." *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal*, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 171-174.
- ²⁹ E.L. Worthington, Jr. and Frederick DiBlasio, "Promoting Mutual Forgiveness within the Fractured Relationship." *Psychotherapy*, Vol. 27 (1990), pp. 219-223.

-
- ³⁰ Shann R. Ferch, "Marital Forgiveness: A Case Study of Forgiveness and Multiple Extramarital Affairs." *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal*, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 158-169.
- ³¹ Holeman, op. cit.
- ³² Stephen J. Pope, "Can One Forgive a Child Molester?" *America*, November 18, 2000.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ B.H. Childs, in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Rodney J. Hunter, Ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), pp. 438-440.
- ³⁵ Barry D. Smith, "Forgiveness," an article in *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (1996).
- ³⁶ Helen Grace Lescheid, "Breaking Free from Bitterness," *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 84 (1994), pp. 28-31.
- ³⁷ Allen C. Guelzo, "Fear of Forgiving," *Christianity Today*, February 8, 1993, pp. 42-45.
- ³⁸ Bruce Buursma, "Forgiving often more help to forgiver than the forgiven, theologian says." *Orange County Register*, November 23, 1985.
- ³⁹ Richard D. Marks, "Firststone: A Biblical Forgiveness Intervention for Pastors and Counselors," *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal*, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 307-311.
- ⁴⁰ Frederick A. DiBlasio, "Scripture and Forgiveness: Interventions with Christian Couples and Families." *Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal*, Vol. 2 (1999), pp. 247-258.
- ⁴¹ Judson Cornwall, *Let Us Enjoy Forgiveness* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell, 1978), p.159.