Forgiveness in Marriage:
Its Synergy with Humility, Justice, and Reconciliation

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Keynote Talk given at the Evangelical Theological Society
Atlanta, GA
November 19, 2015
Let’s Look at the Parable Jesus Tells: ESV

30 Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’”
Let’s Look at the Parable: ESV

- I am interested in this relationship. The Samaritan, who is not a priest, is really, boots-on-the-ground “doing church.” He helps the needy person. He recognizes his own limitations. He takes the person to a helper with different gifts and skills, and leaves him there for longer-term care and healing.

- So, there is a parallel between the THEOLOGIAN who informs pastoral preaching and care, and the PSYCHOLOGIST, who informs counselors, psychotherapists, pastoral counselors and caregivers. This seems like an apt parallel. Different professions work together, expend resources of different sorts, and yet together help the person.

- Thank you for allowing me—one of those psychologists—to partner with you in ministry to needy couples.
Talk Objectives

By the end of this talk, you will be able to

1. Know what the research on marriage says about the cause of a good marriage.
2. Describe what forgiveness is, particularly in marriage.
3. Outline a five-step method to REACH Forgiveness.
I will draw on my marriage books
I will draw on my forgiveness books
State of the Clinical Science in 1997

- **Gottman ratio**: 5 to 1 positive to negative. Many assumed: The *cause* of a poor marriage is too low a ratio—i.e., poor communication and conflict management.

- Many therapists
  - Tried to increase the ratio.
  - Focused on couple patterns of communication and conflict resolution.

- Researchers tried to show that Gottman’s 5:1 ratio was over-simplified.
What We Know NOW

- The 5:1 ratio is NOT the cause of a good marriage; it is the effect of a good marriage.
- It’s not skills, communication, conflict resolution *per se*.
- It’s ability to *control and limit negative emotional climate* (and restore a positive emotional climate).
- Main cause of good couple relationships: Couples can *form, maintain, strengthen*, and (when emotional bonds are damaged) *repair* the emotional bond.
I don’t try to do professional theology here. You all are the pros at that. I hope to provide some understanding about forgiveness from psychology. This is complementary to what Scripture says, not contradictory. Metaphors:

- There is a harmony there, or
- It as a dance that we do together yet with the partners having different roles, or
- It is a marriage in which partners have different roles and behaviors.

I will draw some theological implications, but you can treat them mainly as points of discussion. I’ll leave formal theology to the theologians.
Injustice Gap

Size of injustice gap is proportional to difficulty forgiving. Thus,

- Reduce injustice gap
  - Apologize
  - Offer Restitution
  - Observe Suffering and Remorse

Revenge

We Have Lots of Biblical Options

- There are many ways to deal with injustice consistent with Scripture

See Justice done


Turn it over to God

- Who will enact Divine justice (on MY behalf)
Turn it over to God

- To relinquish it from my control to God’s control
Forbearance

Effortful attempts to ignore or accept the transgression without making a negative response for the sake of maintaining harmony within the group.

Accept and move on

- Stuff happens


"Sure, I can learn to accept things as they are. How are they?"
Forgive

- One of those options for dealing with injustice is to forgive
  - especially when we have let injustice turn into unforgiveness.

"I appreciate your memo calling for more tolerant and forgiving parents. Now, what did you do this time?"
Historically, there has been a lot of conflict over how forgiveness is defined.
Historically, there has been a lot of conflict over how forgiveness is defined. (Here are two forgiveness researchers discussing their definitions.)

← Me (before the unfortunate bulimic episode)
g. What Forgiveness Is NOT

- Not Forbearance
- Not Condoning
- Not Reconciling
- Not Forgetting
- Not Justifying
- Not Getting Justice
- Not Excusing


h. What forgiveness IS

- Two SEPARATE things:

(1) Decisional Forgiveness

An intention statement stating one’s intent to forswear revenge or avoidance and treat the person as a valued and valuable person

We might decide to forgive and still feel Emotional Unforgiveness. A complex combination of negative emotions (i.e., resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, and fear).
Emotional forgiveness is defined as the emotional replacement of unforgiving emotions by positive other-oriented emotions.


What are the Positive other-oriented emotions?

- Empathy
- Sympathy
- Compassion
- Agape (altruistic) love
- Romantic love

Facilitated by Positive Non-Self-focused Emotions

- Gratitude (for having been forgiven)
- Humility (recognition that I, too, have erred)
- Hope (toward the future)

Reminder: Don’t Confuse DF, EF, and Reconciliation

Reconciliation:
restoration of trust in a relationship where trust has been violated

DF=decision
EF=emotional experience
Both occur within our skin

Forgiveness can promote reconciliation
Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness are not Reconciliation

Please, PLEASE, forgive me!
Forgiveness Might Depend on Humility

- Humility Defined
  - Accurate view of self, including awareness of one’s limitations (including the awareness that there is one God and it isn’t us).
  - Modest self-presentation.
  - Orientation toward others shown as power under control to lift others up and not squash them down.
Biblical Forgiveness: Some Speculative Implications

- Matthew 6:12, 14-15 (New International Version, NIV)

  - 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
  - 14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

- Note, this is not conditional.

- What kind of forgiveness? Decisional.
Our Forgiveness of Other Humans Is Meant to Be Unconditional

- **New International Version**
  “So watch yourselves. ‘If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them.’”

- What if they don’t repent?
  - Forgive them.
Forgiveness and spirituality in psychotherapy: A relational approach


Forgiveness has a spiritual dimension depending on our relationship with God, which is especially important to religious people.

Most (but not all) religious people (on average) forgive more than most non-religious people.
Five Steps to REACH Emotional Forgiveness of the Partner
REACH Forgiveness

(see www.EvWorthington-forgiveness.com)

- Define
- Decisions
- REACH Emotional Forgiveness
  - R = Recall the hurt
  - E = Empathize
  - A = Altruistic gift
  - C = Commit
  - H = Hold onto Forgiveness
- Apply to other hurts

People Can Be Helped to Forgive
Can People Be Helped to Forgive?


- Studies: Two games in town
  - REACH Forgiveness \( (n=22) \) = Process \( (n=23) \) = All others \( (n=22) \)
  - Randomized Clinical Trials (RCTs) Qualifying completely for the study: REACH Forgiveness \( (n=18) \) = Process \( (n=20) \) = All others \( (n=14) \)

- Findings:
  - Treatment > Alternative > None
  - Of treatments: REACH = Process = Other
  - Efficacy is proportional to time in treatment. Time counts more than model or modality!!
  - Effect size = 0.1 Standard Deviations per hour
  - Individual = couple = group

Forgiveness in psychoeducational groups: Hour for hour, all forgiveness treatments that have been investigated have been found to be equal—about 0.1 SD change per hour of treatment.

Take home point: REACH Forgiveness and Enright’s process model are used most.
Other Outcomes Besides Forgiveness

- Depression ($k = 10$), ES = 0.34, 95% CI [0.17, 0.52]. Compare forgiveness in this same group of studies, ES = 0.60, 95% CI [0.26, 0.94] ($p = .09$).

- Anxiety ($k = 7$), the aggregate effect size for anxiety was 0.63, 95% CI [0.0003, 1.26]. Compare forgiveness ES= 1.34, 95% CI [0.55, 2.12] ($p = .21$).

- Hope ($k = 6$), the aggregate effect size for hope was 1.00, 95% CI [0.38, 1.62]. Compare forgiveness ES = 0.94, 95% CI [0.16, 1.73] ($p .96$).

Conclusion

- When people participate in forgiveness interventions, their depression and anxiety get better but at a reduced rate relative to the forgiveness experienced (about half the effect size), but hope gets better about the same rate (equal effect size).

Take home point: Forgiveness interventions help people’s mental health, too! Depression, anxiety reduced. Hope increased.
Workbooks
Work, Too

The Path to Forgiveness:
Six Practical Sections for Becoming a More Forgiving Person

Self-Directed Learning Workbook
An Intervention to Promote Forgiveness

- Secular groups: ES = 0.1/hour
- Workbooks
  - Harper et al. (2014)
    ES = 0.5/6 hours = 0.08/hour
  - Greer et al. (2014) (Christian)
    ES = 1.3/6.7 hours = 0.2/hour
  - Lavelock et al. (under review)
    ES (trait) = 0.5/6 hours = 0.08/hour


Take home point: There are lots of evidence-based practice ways to deliver REACH Forgiveness—including working through workbooks.
Self-Condemnation and Self-Forgiveness


We Can Mess Up—as Partners and as Parents

- We might experience guilt, shame, self-blame, and self-condemnation.

- Self-condemnation can interfere with both positive couple relationships and positive parenting.
A True Story
Rodrigo Mendoza

The Mission (1986 film), 1986 film by Roland Joffé
What does this movie teach?

- People cannot (perhaps should not) forgive themselves until some moral repair is experienced.
  - The most damaging hurts can be to those closest to us (80% of people who tried to forgive themselves had hurt a family member, romantic partner or close friend; Griffin et al., 2015).
  - Making amends is crucial but not sufficient.
  - Forgiveness from God is the only way to take care of our moral guilt, but there are still consequences.
    - Recall David and Nathan: David said, I’ve sinned against God. Nathan said, “God has forgiven you.”
    - There were still psychological and social consequences.
    - Psalm 51 shows that David still felt self-condemnation.
  - Forgiveness from others can help us forgive ourselves.

- After moral repair, emotional self-forgiveness can occur. → Two-factor Model of Self-forgiveness
  - Self-forgiveness = Reaffirmation of Values + Positive Self-regard
Six Steps to Self-Forgiveness

- **Responsibility**
  - Step 1: Receive God’s Forgiveness
  - Step 2: Repent and Repair Relationships
  - Step 3: Reduce Rumination

- **REACH Emotional Self-Forgiveness**
  - Step 4: REACH Emotional Self-forgiveness

- **Repair of Self**
  - Step 5: Realize Self-Acceptance
  - Step 6: Resolve to Live Virtuously
A Brief Reflection

- Transgressions—whether (1) others inflict them or (2) we inflict them and must deal with our own wrongdoing—create pain and suffering.

- There is nothing noble about pain and suffering.

- The way we deal with them can help redeem the pain and suffering by forming our character.

- As David Brooks says, “Most people shoot for happiness but feel (that our character is, *sic*) formed through suffering” (Brooks, 2015, p. 93).
A Brief Reflection (cont.)

- Suffering pushes us into new unexplored dark spaces of character.

- If we explore instead of letting events just carry us with the winds, suffering can have (along with inevitable destructive effects) some good effects:

  - It can help us understand:
    - Ourselves, our limitations, our ultimate lack of control, and our dependence on God.
    - Our solidarity with others who suffered through the ages.
    - Our gratitude for the help of others.
    - Our calling to respond morally, spiritually, meaningfully, and with holiness to the suffering.
The redemption of transgressions and suffering depend on **humility** before God and before others.

- Humility = accurate self-appraisal, modest self-presentation, and orientation to build others up

- We don’t heal *unscarred* from transgressions. We are not *healed* so much as we are *different*. Forgiveness is not forgetting; it is remembering differently.

- Transgressions are potentially devastating, but they can be a “dreadful gift”—that forms more clearly in us a character of Christlikeness.
Summary

1. The injustice gap determines ease of forgiveness.

2. Forgiveness (decisional and emotional) is one main way that couples can restore damaged emotional bonds and perhaps reconcile.

3. Theologians, psychologists, pastors, counselors, and lay helpers can work together to promote forgiveness.

4. We can (together) help people forgive by using the REACH Forgiveness method.

5. We can help people forgive themselves responsibly by promoting both moral repair and self-restoration.

6. Humility (before God and people) affects relationships, forgiveness, and self-forgiveness.
Forgiveness, justice, and humility do not constitute a panacea for human suffering.

They are strands in Blake’s Golden String.