

The Christian Home (17): Confrontation

Next to good communication, fewer things are more important for a healthy marriage (home) than Biblical confrontation.

I. Confrontation

1. *The necessity of confrontation.* There are only two possible responses to an offense: we must cover it or confront it. This implies, not every offense must be confronted. "If marriage partners saw it as their solemn duty to confront each other for every offense, such a mind-set would make the marriage relationship practically impossible to endure" (MacArthur).¹ Certain offenses should be merely covered over and not confronted. "The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, and his glory is to overlook a transgression" (Prov.19:11). "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins" (Prov.10:12). "He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends" (Prov.17:9). This is what covering an offense involves. You refuse to repeat the offense. You merely cover it over without confronting or repeating. "Keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1Pet.4:8). "Real love should cover the vast majority of transgressions, not constantly haul them out in the open for dissection" (MacArthur).²

The person who chooses to forgive resolves not to remember the offense, refuses to hold a grudge, relinquishes any claim on recompense, and resists the temptation to brood or retaliate. The offended party simply bears the insult. The offense is set aside, lovingly covered for Christ's sake. For petty and unintentional offenses, this is the proper and loving way to forgive—unliterally, without confrontation and without stirring any strife.³

(1) If the offense is petty and/or questionable. This refers to behavior that's not clearly sinful or is trivial or insignificant. "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph.4:1-3). "Believers are supposed to have a sort of mutual immunity to petty offenses. Love 'is not easily angered' (1Cor.13:5). If every fault required formal confrontation, the whole of our church life (home life) would be spent confronting and resolving conflicts over petty annoyances. So for the sake of peace, to preserve the unity of the Spirit, we are to show tolerance whenever possible" (MacArthur).⁴

(2) If the offense is random and/or accidental. This refers to behavior that's neither common nor intentional. A flippant statement, sharp response, or distant disposition. If these offenses are rare or accidental, they can/should be overlooked. "Unless an offense requires confrontation, unconditional, unilateral forgiveness should cover the transgression. The offended party, in suffering the offense, is following in the footsteps of Christ, 'who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteousness' (1Pet.2:21-15)" (MacArthur).⁵

A forbearing spirit is a fine manifestation of true love. Our motives are often misconstrued. We live in a world of selfishness, cold reserve, instead of glowing confidence. Prejudice builds a wall against Christian interaction. Wounded pride would return

¹ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 120

² John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 123

³ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 122

⁴ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 123

⁵ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 123

unkindness with contempt. Resentment stirs up accusations. Disappointment kindles morbid suspicion. In contrast, love covers, overlooks, speedily forgives and forgets.⁶

2. *The nature of confrontation.* Some offenses should be confronted and not merely covered over. This may include serious, overt, and repeat offenses, as well as petty and unintentional offenses that cannot be merely covered over. Such offenses result in bitterness and unrest of soul. You've tried to cover over the offense, but it lingers in your heart and drives a wedge between you and your spouse. At this point the offense must be confronted. "Any sort of offense that causes a breach in relationships simply cannot be overlooked. Both the offense and the breach must be confronted, and reconciliation must be sought" (MacArthur).⁷ "If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him" (Lk.17:3). "We are easily tempted to confront the sins we should overlook and to overlook the ones we should confront. But whether the situation calls for forbearance or confrontation, the primary motivation should always be love for the offender" (MacArthur).⁸ "Many sins that strain relationships can simply be absorbed in the grace of the person offended. Yet, some sins need to be confronted, and, if necessary, brought before the church" (Kitchen).⁹

(1) How to confront. "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gal.6:1). "If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private" (Matt.18:15). "Confrontation should be motivated by love and desire for the offender's good. Such confrontation should never be used to gratify a thirst for personal vengeance, to punish the offender, or to fulfill any other self-aggrandizing purpose" (MacArthur).¹⁰ Confrontation should be in gentleness and in private. But what if a spouse refuses to acknowledge their offense? There are two options: cover over the offense anyways, or else, if the offense is of a serious or repetitious nature, a third party may be necessary (Matt.18:15-17).

(2) How to confess. When confronted by your spouse, don't blame shift or make excuses, but own and confess your sin. "Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness, and let him rebuke me; it shall be as excellent oil; let my head not refuse it" (Ps.141:5). Even if your spouse doesn't approach you properly (in gentleness and private), confrontation must be humbly received and not refused. Specific sins must be confessed and forgiveness sought. This is in opposition to merely apologizing or saying you are sorry. "Genuine repentance is properly expressed in an admission of wrongdoing and a plea for forgiveness: 'It was unthoughtful of me to say that. Will you forgive me?'" (MacArthur).¹¹ "For I acknowledge my transgressions. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities" (Ps.51:3-4, 9).

The ball is still up in the air when you simply say, 'I'm sorry.' The loose ends are not tied up biblically. You may both walk away not knowing whether the issue is resolved (and thus it's likely to never be truly resolved). By asking your wife to forgive you, you are securing certain commitments from her that will truly put the offense behind you both and will tie up any loose ends.¹²

Lou Priolo suggested five steps when seeking forgiveness from your spouse. First, acknowledge that you have sinned against her. "Let her know that you realize what you did was wrong. Example, 'I was

⁶ Charles Bridges, *Proverbs*, 97, 261

⁷ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 132

⁸ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 130

⁹ John Kitchen, *Proverbs*, 377

¹⁰ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 130

¹¹ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 185

¹² Lou Priolo, *The Complete Husband*, 82

wrong for not listening to you while you were talking to me." Second, identify your specific sin by its biblical name. "Using biblical terminology lets her know that you realize your sin was also a violation of God's Word and was therefore a sin against Him. For example, 'It was selfish of me not to listen to you.'" Third, acknowledge the harm that your offense caused. "Show remorse and empathy for the hurt that your sin has caused. For example, 'I really am sorry I hurt you.'" Fourth, identify an alternative biblical behavior to demonstrate repentance. "One of the best ways to demonstrate to your wife you have repented is by letting her know you have thought through a biblical alternative to the sin for which you are about to ask for forgiveness. For example, 'I should have given you my undivided attention when you were speaking.'" Fifth, ask for forgiveness. "This step puts the ball in their court by securing from them the promise of forgiveness. Example, 'Will you forgive me for being selfish and not giving you proper attention?'"

(3) How to forgive. "Forgiveness is first and foremost a *promise*. As God promised not to hold the sins of repentant sinners against them, so we also must promise not to hold the sins of those we have forgiven against them" (Priolo).¹³ Thus, forgiveness is described as covering sin (Ps.32:1), removing sin (Ps.103:12), and not remembering sin (Jer.31:34). This is what we do when we forgive someone. We promise to cover, remove, or not remember the offense. "In effect, the person who chooses to forgive resolves not to remember the offense, refuses to hold a grudge, relinquishes any claim on recompense, and resists the temptation to brood or retaliate" (MacArthur).¹⁴ "When you promise to forgive another, you promise not to remember his wrongdoing by bringing it up to him, to others, or to yourself. That means you won't talk to others about it, and you won't allow yourself to sit and brood over it either" (Adams).¹⁵

Forgiveness is a promise. You may demonstrate this promise by not doing at least three things to the person you have forgiven. First, you will not bring up the forgiven offense to the person so as to use it against him or her. Second, you will not discuss the forgiven offense with others. Finally, you will not dwell on the forgiven offense yourself but must rather remind yourself that you have forgiven your offender, 'just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.'¹⁶

(a) Forgiveness and repentance. Scripture often ties forgiveness with repentance. "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him" (Lk.17:3-4). This has led some to believe, forgiveness is contingent upon repentance. Unless or until a person repents, no forgiveness will be given. While there is some truth to this mindset, important distinctions must be made. First, as we've already seen, there may be times when we merely cover (forgive) an offense without mentioning it. "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses" (Mk.11:25). John MacArthur refers to this "unconditional" "or "unilateral" forgiveness. This simply means, we refuse to harbor any bitterness against an offender. This forgiveness is to be extended even before the offender is aware of the offense.

Second, even if the offender is unwilling to repent, you must still forgive them so as not to harbor ill-will or bitterness against them. "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away

¹³ Lou Priolo, *The Complete Husband*, 83

¹⁴ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 122

¹⁵ Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiveness*, 57

¹⁶ Lou Priolo, *The Complete Husband*, 83

from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave us" (Eph.4:31-32).

Third, even if the offender repeats the same offense, you must still forgive them without unjustly questioning their repentance. "And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him" (Lk.17:4). Many people refuse to forgive because they question the sincerity of repentance, and while there may a place for this, generally speaking, the judgment of charity should be given. "Love is patient, love is kind. It is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes al things, endures all things" (1Cor.13:4-7). "In normal circumstances, love obliges us to assume the best about those who profess repentance" (MacArthur).¹⁷

(b) Forgiveness and restoration. "Forgiveness is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. Reconciliation is the bigger picture of which forgiveness is only the initial element" (Adams).¹⁸ "Forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him" (2Cor.2:7-8). "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt.5:23-24).

Does forgiveness always entail complete and total restoration? That is, after you forgive, should the relationship return to the way it was? Yes and no. First, yes, in ordinary cases, the relationship should be fully restored. This is at the heart of forgiveness. The offense has been confessed, repentance has been evidenced, forgiveness extended, and so the sin should be covered. "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins'" (1Pet.4:8). The offense should no longer be a source of tension or division between the two parties. This doesn't deny the offended party may struggle with the offense. But these feelings must be mortified.

Forgiveness is first of all an act of the will. It is not hypocrisy to will forgiveness when the emotions are screaming for vengeance. Be obedient to the Lord regardless of how you feel. If you refuse to harbor spite or dwell on the offense, evil emotions will be starved. Moreover, the Lord Himself will set your heart right. Right emotions will eventually come if you surrender to Him. And ultimately a conscious, deliberate, willful choice to forgive is the *only* thing that can free a heart from the bondage of such emotions.¹⁹

Second, in cases where a serious offense has occurred, time may be necessary to regain trust in the offender. This doesn't mean forgiveness is withheld, it just means a reasonable amount of time may be necessary to prove the genuineness of repentance. For example, if a man watches something he shouldn't and repents, his wife should forgive him. But that doesn't deny she may wish to check his phone or computer on occasion (and the man, if his repentance is sincere will welcome this). Such consequences are compatible with forgiveness and restoration, and both parties should labor to remove them in the near future. "Continuing consequences can become a blessing, and it is the repentant believer's duty and privilege in time to turn them into a blessing to all concerned—including himself" (Adams).²⁰ This means, the repentant believer should welcome such consequences as a means to prove his repentance and strengthen his relationship with God and his spouse, and the offended believer should be willing to remove all remaining consequences in an appropriate amount of time.

¹⁷ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 187

¹⁸ Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiveness*, 68

¹⁹ John MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 191

²⁰ Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiveness*, 159