

## **SESSION #1 - LOVE and LOVE LANGUAGE.**

### **Love Language**

#### **Concept**

1. There are many different ways to express love. You can buy a present, say "I love you" out loud, be romantic and tender physically, abide by your loved one's wishes, and so on. For centuries, thinkers have discerned forms of love: affection (storge), friendship (phileo), erotic love (eros), and service (agape). Refer to "Catalogue".
2. All of these forms of love are necessary, and none are to be ignored, but all of us find some forms of love to be more "emotionally valuable" to us. They are a "currency" that we find more precious, that delivers the message of love to our hearts with the most power. In other words, some types of love are more thrilling and fulfilling to us when we receive them. Why? a) Sometimes a particular "language" is more valuable because some significant person (in your family, or your present spouse) was particularly inept at it. b) Sometimes a particular "language" is more valuable because some significant person was particularly adept at it. So now, that is how your heart is convinced that someone values you.
3. Because often love is being "sent" in a marriage, but it is not "received". In the same way, a radio signal may be sent out on one frequency, but the receiver does not respond if it is tuned to another. For example, the husband may be sending "I love you" by being very sensual and romantic toward his wife, but he doesn't listen sympathetically to her when she wants to talk about the things that discourage her. She insists "I don't feel you love me!" He insists: "But I do love you!" He is "sending" his love on a frequency that she is not tuned into.
4. God is concerned to send messages in modes which the receiver can understand. In Deuteronomy 18:16-18, God changes his channel of communication so the Israelites can understand. The covenant form in the Old Testament adapted to the international treaty form of the ancient Near East. Jesus himself is a message "in our own language". (John 1:14).

#### **Communication**

All of us need all of these forms of love. However, each person has a greater need for some of these forms than others. We must communicate love in the way our spouse needs it. Here are some principles.

1. Realize you have a "filter" on. You tend to only "hear" certain kinds of love language. For example, your spouse may be working hard to provide you with material things, but you wish he were more verbal. There is a tendency to say "He doesn't love me!" because he is not communicating love in your most valuable language. Take off your filter and recognize the love your spouse is giving you.
2. Learn to think of some of the running conflicts you are having in a whole new light. See them as "love language conflicts". That can soften your attitude and change your strategy. For example, a husband and wife may be having an intractable conflict over child-care responsibilities. But it could be that he is thinking: "if you loved me like my mother loved my father, you'd not ask me to change diapers" and she could be thinking: "if you loved me like my father loved my mother, you'd volunteer." Instead of thinking about the other person: "he (she) is so selfish" each should think: "he (she) is feeling particularly unloved."
3. Learn the primary languages of your spouse and send love in those channels, not in your favorite channels. We tend to give love in the channels that we like to receive it. A husband may enjoy sexual channels as his primary love language, but his wife may desire spending time together. He continues to be "romantic" and wonders why she claims he doesn't love her.

4. Remember that improper love languages can be heard in reverse. If you deny your spouse love in his or her desired language and, instead, send it through a channel he or she does not value, then your spouse may "hear you in reverse". For example, giving material things to a person who wants some other form will say, "You are trying to buy my love!"
5. Never abuse the primary love language. Never use it to hurt the other, for the hurt will go deep. A man who greatly values the respect of his wife in public cannot take her cutting remarks. A woman who is a verbal-language person cannot take, "I don't love you any more!"

### **Love Language Catalogue**

References:

Ed Wheat, *The Love Life*. Judson Swihart, *How Do You Say, 'I Love You'?*

#### **1. The category of "Affection" or "Romance".**

##### *a. Touching.*

Love can be expressed through physical contact. Eye contact, caresses, sitting near closely together, holding hands. This must not be done simply as preparation for sex or it loses its integrity as a way of showing affection. See Wheat, pp. 184-187, "Twenty-Five Suggestions for Touching". See Swihart, pp. 55-58.

##### *b. Creating loving climates.*

Love can be expressed through creatively finding situations which make focused attention easier. Walks, fireplaces, drives, picnics--making efforts to arrange these are important. Also, we can work on our own personal appearance as a gift to our spouse. Playfulness and fun are part creating romantic climates as well. See Wheat, pp. 84-95, "Romantic Love--The Thrill Factor".

##### *c. Edifying and Blessing.*

Love can be expressed verbally by expressing our love in strong, personal, accurate, and fresh ways. We must also find the strengths and gifts of our partner and communicate honest praise, appreciation, and thankfulness for him/her. This means refraining from harsh, critical words. We do all of this through words, notes, cards, thoughtful expressions on anniversaries, etc. See Wheat, pp. 190-191, "Nine Ways to Edify". See Swihart, pp. 49-54.

##### *d. Giving gifts.*

Love can be expressed through (often surprise) thoughtful, personal, useful gifts. Personal growth gifts (books, tape, records) personal comfort gifts (tools, appliances, etc.) See Swihart, pp. 19-26.

#### **2. The category of "Friendship".**

##### *a. Spending time together.*

Love can be expressed by spending "quality" time together. That means 1) doing something you both enjoy doing and 2) doing something that enables you to communicate while doing it. Doing (especially) relaxing activity together is quite important. Doing common work tasks bonds you together, but provides less communication. Above all, show your spouse that time with him or her has priority in your life. See Swihart, pp. 35-40.

##### *b. Sharing worlds and responsibilities.*

Love can be expressed through showing supportive loyalty for, as well as interest and pride in, the work worlds of your spouse. The man must show the same support and help for the woman in her responsibilities as she must in his. It may entail the man changing diapers or helping with the sweeping without being asked. See Wheat, pp. 187-190, "A Creative View of Sharing". See Swihart, pp. 27-34.

*c. Becoming of one mind.*

Love can be expressed by sharing each others' mental world. Reading books together (even aloud), discussing changes in one's thinking, studying a subject together--all these are included. The couple must develop a "practical oneness" about their lifestyle and philosophy of childrearing, and so on.

*d. Creating a climate of trust.*

Love can be expressed through both listening and opening up to the other. Friendship is above all a relationship in which it is safe to share fears, hurts, and weaknesses--an emotional refuge. Listening takes concentration. Some people are good at listening but not at opening up themselves, and vica versa. Trust is also built by following through on commitments, being reliable. See Wheat, pp. 96-117, "The Gift of Belonging". See Swihart, pp. 41-48.

**3. The category of "Service".**

*a. Being on the same side.*

Love can be expressed by conveying to the other that we are for him or her. You must show loyalty and appreciation for your spouse before family and friends by treating him/her with respect, by standing up for him or her, and so on. See Swihart, pp. 59-64.

*b. Bringing out the best.*

Love can be expressed by seeking to develop the gifts and potential of the other person. We must, without an kind of competition, seek to recognize and use your spouse's abilities. See Swihart, pp. 65-70.

*c. Growing together spiritually.*

Love can be expressed by studying the Bible and praying together, by "stirring each other up to love and good works". See Wheat, pp. 148-150, "Touching--Spiritually".

*d. Changing.*

Love can be expressed through a willingness to change attitudes and behavior that annoys or weakens your spouse. There must be an ability to take correction and to be accountable for real concrete changes.

*e. Allowing "space".*

Love can be expressed by allowing your spouse privacy, either for brief or longer periods, depending on emotional needs. There can be no excuses for shutting one's spouse out of one's life, but different people have different capacities and needs for time alone or outside interests.

#### 4. The category of "Erotic" love.

Loving sexually.

##### Love Language Inventory

	A (You)	B (Spouse) your guess	C (Spouse) actual
1. By giving me things--thoughtful gifts, material needs and wants.	_____	_____	_____
2. By helping me with chores, with children, with work. Giving priority to helping me accomplish my responsibilities.	_____	_____	_____
3. By listening to me when I wish to talk. Being understanding. Concentrating on me. Sympathy.	_____	_____	_____
4. By talking to me and letting me know what you are really thinking and feeling; your joys, hopes, worries, fears.	_____	_____	_____
5. By being physically warm, tender, affectionate and even playful. And not just when interested in sex. Romantic. Touching. Creating loving climates.	_____	_____	_____
6. By <u>telling</u> me what you like about me. Affirming my strengths; helping me find my gifts.	_____	_____	_____
7. By standing up for me in front of others. Not joking at my expense. Showing real respect, especially in front of others.	_____	_____	_____
8. By changing habits, attitudes and other things that bother me or make you unattractive. Being open to my criticism.	_____	_____	_____
9. By spending time with me doing and sharing activities I like. Sharing each others worlds. Growing together: intellectually, spiritually.	_____	_____	_____
10. By giving me freedom & "space" or privacy to pursue outside interests. Not possessive.	_____	_____	_____

**Instructions:** Under “A” rate which of the ways of receiving love is more important and which ones are less so. Rate "1" the most important, "2" the next important, down to "10" as the least important to you. Then under “B”, rate which ways you think your spouse or partner is rating these same items. After you are finished, look at your spouse’s “A” and copy it down on your sheet under C. Finally, notice the places where A and C differ the most, and where B and C differ the most.

**Evaluation:** 1. Are there any great divergences (1 to 10, 2 to 8) on any item between columns A and C? This indicates a significant personal difference in how emotionally valuable that love language is. It is very possible to make errors in judgment about the positive joy that would result from the use of that “language”, or the negative pain that would result from the lack of it.

2. Are there any great divergences on (1 to 10, 2 to 8) any item between columns A and B? This means you seriously misguessed your partner's love language. In other words, the errors in judgment are already happening in this area. Talk about this.

**Application:** Choose your partner's 3 best "languages" and ask him or her for a list of several concrete ways to show love in those favored channels. You have a right to propose items. Then work the plan.

## **SESSION #2 - COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

**Introduction: Underlying purposes for communication.**

### ***1. Know your goal.***

More important than communication “techniques” is the goal of the message. We are not asking just what is being said, but what is the goal of what is being said? In general, the goal must be a “ministry” goal. Your goal should always be to build your spouse up, helping your spouse to grow, giving your spouse love. (See more below.) If instead you communicate at the moment with a goal to punish, then all the “correct” techniques in the world will be useless. It won’t matter if you are speaking calmly and clearly and so on. On the other hand, if you have the right goal, techniques tend to come naturally.

### ***2. Change yourself first.***

Matthew 7:3-5 says that we must “remove the log from our own eye before we can remove the speck from the other’s eye”. This means first, that a sin in ourselves should look far larger to us than does the same or commensurate sin in your spouse. Thus the best way to change your spouse is to change yourself. Find what hurts or disappoints your spouse and work on it with relentlessness and discipline. That makes your criticism to him or her far more credible when it comes. Another way to put this is-- don't expect communication to solve all your troubles! Often when we start changing ourselves, our spouse will spontaneously become self-critical, without a lot of communication.

Also, the metaphor of the log and the speck likens criticism to the removal of a particle from someone’s eye. Think of what Jesus is trying to convey. You can only do that with the utmost care, without any quick or broad or strong motions at all. It is a perfect image. We do remove things from the eye of our spouse--we do talk about his or her faulty vision; but we only do so with the most tremendous sensitivity.

## **A. SENDING RULES.**

### **1. 1st, decide whether to express anger/hurt/upset/concern or not.**

#### Analysis

It is not good or necessary to communicate every time something upsets you. Prov.29:11 says “love covers a multitude of sins”. The balance of truth and love (Eph.4:15) that we all need means that we must be neither conflict lovers nor conflict avoiders. (If we are either, it is probably due to a lack of “emotional wealth” as we discussed in Week 2. If you are too insecure to ever displease the other person or too insecure to ever “forgive without a word” it is a very bad sign. How should we determine this?

- a) Ask yourself "what goal of mine is being blocked, that it makes me feel this way?"
- b) Ask yourself if the goal is inordinate, something that you are making all important, at the expense of the relationship. For example is your goal just to look good or to have your schedule go just right? Is your goal to have complete certainty about the future? Are you trying to get your spouse to give you something only God can? (Again these things were mentioned in Week 2. Without a layer of “grace” truth and love cannot hold together.)

#### Choosing

If the anger/hurt/upset is due to a) a “trampled” love language by the other person, or b) due to significant broken commitment, or c) a repeated pattern of behavior (Gal.6:1) then communicate. Consciously choose a ministry goal (see #2 next).

If the anger/hurt/upset/concern is arising clearly from your own emotional poverty and lack of grace, and if it is not a repeated pattern of behavior, then “cover” it and don’t communicate. Refer to Week 2 on ways to quickly forgive in your heart. Don’t hold on and hold it against the other person.

Finally, if you know that your anger/hurt/upset/concern is inordinate, yet you know you are too upset to “cover” it, then communicate as per below, but start with some repentance of your own. Admit your side of it, and ask for forgiveness for being so upset. Be very careful not to make this punishing or manipulative.

### **2. 2nd, analyze your goal and choose (if necessary) how to communicate.**

#### Analysis

Before you send a message, ask: “why am I sending it? What am I trying to accomplish?” In particular--what is the effect you are trying to produce in the other person? Here are some possible goals:

- a) to punish, to make the other person feel bad, to get even,
  - b) to manipulate, to try to get the other to back down, not freely but out of embarrassment or coercion,
  - c) to win the argument, to show that you are right.
- (Note: these are of course overlapping purposes, but it helps to think through them so as to “catch yourself” better.)

#### Choosing

Ministry goals also overlap, but it helps to think through them so as to better focus your words. You will seek:

- a) to try to understand--to really get new information, to check out your evaluation of the situation,
- b) to express first respect and commitment along with any critique afterward, c) to help the other understand how his/her behavior affects you,
- d) and/or to remove the distance you put there previously by being cold or sharp.

### **3. Take time to clarify and be specific. (Prov. 24:26)**

- a) Don't hint. Say. Don't say, "I like that", when you mean, "I want us to buy it". Avoid "backdoor messages".
- b) Don't guess. Ask.
- c) Don't generalize. Be pointed. If you feel your wife is not having sex with you frequently enough, don't start growling that she isn't keeping the house neat. Don't focus on peripheral issues. Ask: "if this issue went away, would you be happy with the other?"
- d) Don't send double-bind messages. This is the saying of two conflicting things at once. Usually, it is saying words that mean one thing with non-verbal cues that say another, so that the sender cannot be pinned down as to real meaning.
- e) Never refuse to talk about an issue, though you can ask for a postponement for a definite period.

### **4. Share feelings as well as ideas. (Eph. 4:26-27)**

In other words, integrate yourself with your message. Be self-revealing. Let tones of voice and facial expressions reveal real meanings.

- a) Real meaning is not conveyed unless you transmit both ideas and the effect they are having on your heart. For example, you hear someone say, "I wish you wouldn't call me that". But does the person mean that he will divorce you if you do it again, or that he will just be mildly annoyed? Sharing feelings is threatening, especially for men, but it is necessary if communication is to get beyond the cliché level.
- b) One of the main ways to do this is to provide direct information about your feelings by using "I" statements--sentences that begin with "I" and describe the impact of the other person on the speaker. Example: Not "You always notice the work Bill does instead of mine" but rather, "I feel that none of my good work gets appreciated".

### **5. Avoid questions that are not really questions.**

Real questions seek information. Phony questions seek to control. Avoid:

- a) The leading question. An attempt to limit or restrict the possible responses of a person. "Isn't it really true that...?"
- b) The punishing question. A question that can't be answered without humiliation. "Why did you forget that again?" "How could you have done this?"
- c) The screened question. Fearing to show his real desire, the questioner hopes the other will suggest what he really wants.
- d) The Command question. Demanding something in the form of a question. "When are you finally going to...?"

### **6. Speak with respect for the listener.**

Avoid the following attacking or scorning techniques.

- a) Dragging in the past.
- b) Making criticisms without any proposals of alternatives.
- c) Exaggerating the other's position and responding to that. "So, you are saying I'm a bad housekeeper?"
- d) Counter accusations. "Well, you aren't much at maintaining the house yourself."
- e) Attacking the person, not the problem. Not, "You're so thoughtless!" but "How can we help you remember the kids' birthdays?"
- f) Getting harsh, loud, sarcastic, dramatic (as opposed to warm, respectful, courteous, reserved).
- g) Using "gunpowder" words (those phrases or subjects which, over the years, you learned displease the other person).
- h) Saying "you always" or "you never".

### **7. Check your message with the listener routinely. "**

Did you understand what I meant?" "What does it sound like to you that I am saying? Tell it back to me, please."

## **B. RECEIVING RULES.**

### **1. Concentrate on the present conversation.**

Do not muse on what you will say next.

Do not interrupt: a) to correct details, b) to finish sentences or thoughts, c) to cross-examine.

Give eye contact and attention.

Look at non-verbal communication in order to get the meaning.

### **2. Make it safe for the other to answer candidly.**

Silence is not listening. It unnerves the speaker and does not encourage more communication! Active listening means not speaking too much or too little.

Register acceptance and understanding, to encourage the person to get out the whole of his message. The concept of "acceptance"--it is different than approval. Approval says, "I think you are right". Acceptance says, "I'm glad we can talk about this, and I care about you even if we don't agree about this". The concept of "understanding"--it is different from "analysis". Analysis says, "I see your trouble; now sit down and let me tell you".

Understanding says, "I see what you are going through. Are you feeling like this?" Here are several ways to not make it safe: Don't

a) Apologize quickly ("You're right. It was all my fault...")

b) Advise quickly ("Maybe you should just...")

c) Explain quickly ("Well, the whole reason I said that was...")

d) Analyze quickly ("What you really mean is..")

e) Scorn ("You are silly to feel like that!")

f) Attack ("That's just not true! You don't...")

In each of these cases, the listener's response is rejecting the feelings of the speaker. By moving to respond too quickly, you are communicating that the person's feeling is not crucial. Beware of answering a feeling with a fact. Instead:

### **3. Slow your evaluation and conclusions.**

Respond in ways that both show understanding and acceptance (which keeps the tone of the conversation civil) and gathers lots more information (so you can be sure you aren't jumping to conclusions and will have to apologize for being a fool later!) Respond with:

a) exploring questions or responses ("I guess you felt like this when I..."),

b) understanding questions and responses ("I guess if I were in your shoes I would...").

For example, if someone is saying that she is scared of failing a test, don't say, "Don't be silly! You'll do fine!" Instead, "Sounds like you are pretty worried about it". If she is unusually scared, she will open up. If she is not, she'll laugh and dismiss it.

### **4. Check your evaluation with the speaker routinely.**

After you have drawn the speaker out and communicated acceptance of his or her feelings, draw some conclusions and check. Not, "Why are you so angry with me?" but "I think you are saying.... Is that right?" If you are right, then it may be appropriate to apologize, explain, or advise.

### **Simplified Rules (for posting and following):**

1. Each person allows the other to talk without interruptions.

2. Each person restates the feelings and message of the other before responding.

3. Each person stays on the subject and moves off only with the permission of the other.

4. No one can attack the other person, only the problem. When it happens, say, "I feel attacked". The speaker must change behavior without an argument.

## C. FEEDBACK LOOPS

The term “feedback loop” is taken from the phenomenon where a sound system amplifies its own amplification, creating overload and breakdown. We use the term to mean a “vicious circle” in which two behaviors mutually aggravate and amplify each other to distortive, destructive extremes. The following two “loops” are examples.

### 1. Suspicion - Hiding Loop

**Wife:** Gets very suspicious, with lots of cross-examining statements/questions. Why? Belief that “he’ll take advantage” or “get worse”, because “it didn’t work before when I was trusting and understanding”.

**Husband:** Is not honest or forthcoming with information. Why? Belief that “she’ll go ballistic” and get so despondent or angry that there won’t be a civil or rational conversation about it.

Though I put “Wife” first, this is a circle. A lack of disclosure and forthrightness from Husband also leads Wife to respond with suspicion, a lack of understanding and generosity and flexibility, and so on. This loop is broken when Husband comes forward with information that he knows Wife might not like, and Wife then responds with equanimity and a moderate expression of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, instead of “20 questions” or intense anger.

### 2. Guiltin- Passivity Loop

**Wife:** Uses guilt-producing statements/tactics to get compliance. Wife might respond to a sudden change in Husband’s schedule by saying, “you always...” or “you never...”

**Husband:** Responds by not taking initiative, only complying. Husband would then respond by doing the very minimum that Wife asks, and then with a begrudging attitude.

This loop is broken when Husband takes initiative to pray with her or spend time with the family, and when Wife responds by not laying guilt on Husband to get things done.

### 3. Breaking feedback loops

a) *Recognizing.* Identify or recognize it as such. You may have noticed the behaviors on each side, but you hadn’t considered their parasitic relationship to one another. Sometimes the very naming and recognition of a feedback loop diminishes it or even stops it.

b) *Relenting.* Next, there is the use of the *pragmatic* motivation for changing your behavior--namely because your spouse will only become what you want when you stop doing “X” (the behavior that contributes to the circle). You now see that the best way to get a particular change in your spouse is not to directly demand it but to changing yourself. But this motivation can only go so far. It is essentially selfish, and all by itself will not truly change you. You will only make your own adjustments to the degree you get what you want, and as soon as the other person “misbehaves” you’re own changes will evaporate. You have to add the third.

c) *Repenting.* Last of all, there is the use of *principled* motivation for changing your behavior--namely because your spouse feels used and unloved by you when you do “X” (the behavior that contributes to the circle). You will only change superficially if you make alterations just in order to control the other person. But you will change deeply if you consider your spouse’s need for love and if you consider how violated and alienated he or she feels when you fail here. The paradox is--only if you change *regardless* of the desired-reaction of your spouse will you change deeply enough to bring about the desired-reaction.

d) *Forgiving.* Refer to Week 2. If there are long-term underlying issues of resentment, then feedback loops will continue, regardless of technique. There is a need for grace if truth and love are to live together.

## Communication Jammers Inventory

Rate (don't rank). Put a "1" in the slot of the barrier he or she uses often, "2" for those used sometimes, "3" for those used seldom and "4" for those used never.

	<b>You</b>	<b>Spouse</b>
A. Clamming up; not talking or denying that there is a problem	_____	_____
B. Hinting; "backdoor messages"	_____	_____
C. Being very slow to admit when wrong	_____	_____
D. Problem-centered, not solution-centered (refusing to be consoled or try solutions)	_____	_____
E. Exaggeration ("You always", "you never" "so you think I'm a failure?")	_____	_____
F. Defensive (being very quick to make excuses, reject criticism)	_____	_____
G. Rabbit punching (using statements designed to hurt the other)	_____	_____
H. A know-it-all air (being quick to analyze, to say "I told you so")	_____	_____
I. Jumping to conclusions (without checking for the real meaning of the sender)	_____	_____
J. Interrupting (cross-examining, not letting the other finish)	_____	_____
K. Double bind ("Yes, I said you could go bowling, but you knew I wanted us to go to a movie!")	_____	_____
L. Aborting communication with an early apology.	_____	_____
M. Bringing up the past; changing the subject	_____	_____
N. Cold shoulder; withholding affection	_____	_____
O. Belittling feelings ("Cheer up" "Simmer down" "Let's stop the hysterics, shall we?")	_____	_____
P. Using scare tactics ("If I broke up with you, where would you be?")	_____	_____

### SESSION # 3- FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

#### Introduction

One of the most basic skills for building a strong and intimate relationship is the ability to forgive. If we are going to have either a romantic relationship or a good friendship, we will need to know how to forgive both the small, daily "rubs" as well as the more significant and major let-downs.

## **A. The Resources for Forgiveness.**

### **1. We need enough humility.**

Jesus ties our ability to forgive to our ability to repent. (*"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"* Matt.6:12.) This doesn't mean that God forgives our sins because we forgive others. It means that in general we are as forgiven by God as we are forgiving to others because unforgiving people are unrepentant people. The more we hold grudges the less we see ourselves as having done wrong and needing forgiveness; the more we see ourselves as needing forgiveness, the more likely we are to forgive others. Why? Resentment requires a person to sit in the position of Judge (Rom.12:19-20). We can only hold grudges if we feel superior to the other person. Jesus very directly and bluntly tells us that, if we hold a grudge against another person, we are ignorant of how much we owe God. So the first thing we have to see is our own need for forgiveness. We need enough humility to forgive.

*Transition:* But this is not enough! Because though pride is one reason that we cannot forgive, emotional insecurity is another. So in addition:

### **2. We need enough "emotional wealth".**

Why is it that we can forgive some wrongs easily but not others? It is because everyone draws a sense of self-worth (a sense that we are worthy of love and respect) from certain objects. No one can "validate" themselves. We all look to certain ones or things to convince us that we are significant. The more certain we are of this, the more "emotionally wealthy" we are--confident, poised, at peace. What are the things that we look to? Steven Covey calls them "personal centers" and Victor Frankl calls them your "meaning centers". They may be career, possessions, appearance, romance, peer groups, achievement, good causes, moral character, religion, marriage, children, friendships--or a combination of a several. However, this means that these things are things that we absolutely must have, or we face emotional "bankruptcy" and death. And all our most powerful feelings are connected to them. We respond in deep guilt if we fail to attain them, or in deep anger if someone blocks them from us, or in deep anxiety if they are threatened, or in major drivenness since we must have them, or in despair if we ever lose them completely.

For example. A husband and a wife discovered that a school teacher had been emotionally abusive to their daughter and had fairly ruined her academic year and sent her into counseling. They are both angry at the teacher, but the husband has less trouble "getting past" the anger than the wife. Why? Is the husband a less angry person. No, in general he tends to be more angry temperamentally. Does he love his daughter less? No. The issue is that the wife has tied her own self-image and sense of self-worth to her daughter's progress and happiness (while the husband does this with his career). As a result, her anger is far deeper, since she is going "bankrupt". She feels "if my daughter doesn't turn out well, what good am I?" So her anger toward the teacher is powerful. Sum: Ironically, it is both a sense of superiority or a sense of inferiority that makes it hard for forgive. Paradoxically, the two can often go together. We often deal with our own inferiority and insecurity by taking a superior, judgmental position toward someone else.

## **B. The Character of Forgiveness.**

**A definition.** What *is* forgiveness, specifically? When someone has wronged you, it means they owe you, they have a debt with you. Forgiveness is to absorb the cost of the debt yourself. You pay the price yourself, and you refuse to exact the price out of the person in any way. Forgiveness is to a) free the person from penalty for a sin by b) paying the price yourself.

**The ultimate example.** We are told that our forgiveness must imitate God's forgiveness in Christ. *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you* (Eph.4:32). a) How did God forgive? We are told that he does not

'remember' them. That cannot mean that God literally forgets what has happened--it means he "sends away" the penalty for them. He does not bring the incidents to mind, and does not let them affect the way he deals with us. b) How did God forgive "*in Christ*"? We are told that Jesus pays the price for the sins. "*It is finished*" means "It has been paid in full" (John 19:30). The Father gave up his Son, and the Son gave up his life. God absorbed the cost in himself.

### **C. Practical Steps for Forgiveness.**

#### *1. Distinguish between granting and feeling.*

Realize that forgiveness is granted (often for a long time) before it is felt. Forgiveness is granted first, and felt later (Luke 17:3-10). Forgiveness is not primarily a feeling, but a set of actions and disciplines. In summary, forgiveness is a promise not to exact the price of the sin from the person who wronged you. This promise means a repeated set of "payment" in which you relinquish revenge. It is hard and (for a while) constant. If this promise is kept actively, eventually the feeling of anger subsides. It is critical to realize at the outset, then, that forgiveness is not the forcing or denying of feelings, but a promise to make and to keep despite our feelings.

#### *2. Determine to never exact the price, but to pay the price ourselves.*

*"[Forgiveness] is to deal with our emotions by sending them away--by denying ourselves the dark pleasures of venting them or fondling them in our minds...."*

*"Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her...but [only] in small sums over a year...[They were made] whenever I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past, whenever I renounced jealousy and self-pity, whenever [I saw her] with another man, whenever I praised her to others when I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments--but she never saw them. And her own payment were unseen by me...but I do know that she forgave me....[Forgiveness] is more than a matter of refusing to hate someone. It is also a matter of choosing to demonstrate love and acceptance to the offender...Pain is the consequence of sin; there is no easy way to deal with it. Wood, nails and pain are the currency of forgiveness, the love that heals."*

-- Dan Hamilton, *Forgiveness*

#### *3. Take two inventories: of ways to exact the price; of ways to pay the price.*

This quote shows us that there are numerous ways that we can "exact" and take payment from the offender, but each time we refrain, we are absorbing the cost ourselves and "making payments". Below are the ways in which we tend to try to exact payments:

##### a) In our dealing with the offender:

- (1) We can make cutting remarks and drag out the past.
- (2) We can be far more demanding and controlling with the person than we are with others, all because "they owe us".
- (3) We can punish with self-righteous "mercy" which makes them feel small.
- (4) We can avoid them, be cold or to them in overt and/or subtle ways.
- (5) We can actively seek and scheme to hurt or harm them, taking from them something valuable to them.

##### b) In our dealing with others:

- (1) We can run them down to others, under the guise of "warning" people about them.
- (2) We can run them down to others, under the guise of seeking sympathy and sharing our hurt.

c) In our dealing with ourselves:

- (1) We can replay the tapes of what they did to us, to justify our anger and hostility.
- (2) We can "root" for their failure or fall or pain.

Forgiveness is a promise, to not "bring the matter up" to the person, others, or even ourselves. At each point when we are tempted to exact payment, we refuse, and though it hurts, that is a payment:

a) With the person

In our dealings with the person we are courteous and warm as possible. If the person is repentant, we seek to restore the relationship as much as possible. Why say "as much as possible?" If the person has done grievous wrong, it may mean the trust can only be restored in degrees. If the person is continuing in a hostile manner, you must not make it easy for them to sin against you. And there are other circumstances. (e.g. If the person is a former "love interest", then to re-create the same relationship may be inappropriate.)

The speed and degree of this restoration entails the re-creation of trust, and that takes time, depending on the nature and severity of the offenses involved. Part of real repentance usually means asking: "what could I do that would make you trust me?" and being willing to accept the answer. Part of real forgiveness means being open to the possibility of lasting change in the offender and being truly unbiased and willing to offer more trust little by little.

b) With others

We must not criticize the offender to others. We should be careful, when seeking support for our "burdens" (Galatians 6:1-6) that we aren't using them as an excuse to get others to justify us by agreeing how horrible the other person is! We must be reasonable. This is not to say you can never say anything that casts a bad light on someone else, but you must watch your motives. If the person stays in a hostile and unrepentant mode, it may be necessary to "warn" someone about him or her, but again, motives must be watched.

c) With yourself

What does it mean to "not bring it up yourself"? It means not to dwell on it in the heart, and not to re-play the "videotapes" of the wrong in your imagination, in order to keep the sense of loss and hurt fresh and real to you. It means, when you are ready to do so, you should pray for the person and yourself, remind yourself of the cross (see below) and turn your mind to other things.

4. "Will the good" of the other, not only for his/her sake but also for yours!

Notice that on the cross Jesus says, "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*" (Luke 23:34) He doesn't actually say "I forgive you". He does forgive, of course, but by turning to the Father and praying for them, he shows us an important method of forgiveness. He admits that they are sinning (otherwise they would not need forgiveness!) but he sees them as needy and weak (*they don't know*). He seeks their enlightenment and forgiveness from God. He prays for them.

When we identify "evil" too closely with the "evildoer", we get pulled into the same cycle of hurt pride and revenge and self-absorption and then more hurt pride and more revenge. The secret of overcoming evil is for us to see "evil" as something above and distinct from the evil doer. When we do that, there are two results: 1) The spread of evil is checked toward us. Its hatred and pride does not infect us. Consider this--the only way to truly "beat" the ill-will of the other is to forgive him/her. Why? If you don't, you are still being controlled by the other. Even if you are reacting against them, you are still being dominated and affected by them. 2) The spread of evil may be checked in the evildoer. He or she may be softened and helped by our love. We don't know that for

certain, but it is almost the only way that can happen. This is, then, an act of the will. We determine to wish them good and will their growth and healing. We determine to pray for them.

**Note:** It needs to be said here that in general, it is not loving to let another person go about sinning and doing wrong. Forgiveness does not therefore mean you cannot criticize, or oppose, or contend against continued destructive behavior. Forgiveness that turns away from confrontation is not loving at all--it is self-serving. The ordinary approach is to a) stay angry inside (exact payment) and b) say nothing on the outside. That lets evil spread in both your life and the life of the other. Instead, the right thing to do is a) completely forgive inside (make payment) and b) confront lovingly on the outside. That checks the spread of evil all around. Also, it is impossible to speak lovingly and winsomely to a person doing wrong unless you have gotten control of your anger through forgiveness steps. The model for this is Christ, of course, who spoke out enough to get crucified, but who forgave his crucifiers every step of the way. The result of his perfect conformity to this model was the triumph of grace both in his own life and in that of his crucifiers.

#### **D. Pre-conditions for Forgiveness.**

##### **1. Getting Humility.**

The Bible is explicit in telling us to forgive as God in Christ forgave you (Eph.4:32). There is no better way to get the humility necessary for forgiveness than to accept what the gospel says about us. It tells us that we were made by God and owe him therefore everything--we owe it to him to put him first in our life. Even religious people ordinarily only relate to God when we need him in times of trouble. None of us love him as we owe--"with all our heart, soul, strength and mind". Jesus himself shows us vividly how to do this in Matthew 18:21-35. When Peter asks about forgiveness, Jesus tells the parable of a servant who is forgiven a debt of an infinite sum (*10,000 talents*--roughly equivalent to about \$300,000,000 dollars) but who then refuses to forgive a debt to him of a few dollars. Jesus calls the servant "*wicked*" and says, in effect, to him, "*shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?*"(18:33) This is a challenge to us. We must compare our debt to God with people's debts to us AND we are to compare his Christ's payment for our forgiveness to our payment for their forgiveness. We are to say, "Lord, you did not exact payment for my debts from me, but Jesus paid for them with his life. Now what right to I have to exact payments for their debts to me? And for me to forgive would not take a payment anything like Christ's payment!"

Paul in Romans 12 shows us another way to think of resentment and forgiveness. He says, "*Leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: 'vengeance is mine...says the Lord'*" v.19. What \*we are being reminded is that all resentment and vengeance is taking on God's role as judge. It is playing God. But (1) only God is qualified to be judge (we are imperfect and deserve judgment ourselves) and (2) only God knows enough to be judge (we don't know all about the offender, what he/she has faced and deserves) and (3) Jesus took the judgment of God. So Paul is saying: "Think this! Either these persons you are angry at will repent some day and Jesus will take their judgment, or they will not and God will deal with it. But in either process, you are not involved." "Pride won't allow forgiveness; forgiveness won't allow pride". If you cannot forgive, it is because you are sure that you are not as sinful as the person you are mad at.

##### **2. Getting "emotional wealth".**

Anger is the result of love. It is energy for defense of something you love when it is threatened. If you don't love something at all, you are not angry when it is threatened. If you love something a little, you get a little angry when it is threatened. If something you love is an "ultimate concern", if it is something that gives you meaning in life, then when it is threatened you will get uncontrollably angry.

When anything in life is an absolute requirement for your happiness and self-worth, it is essentially an “idol”, something you are actually worshipping. When such a thing is threatened, your anger is absolute. Your anger is actually the way the idol keeps you in its service, in its chains. Therefore, if you find that, despite all the efforts to forgive (using 0.-4. above), your anger and bitterness cannot subside, you may need to look deeper and ask, *“what am I defending? what is so important that I cannot live without?”* It may be that, until some inordinate desire is identified and confronted, you will not be able to master your anger.

Here is a real example. A woman in her late 30’s had never married. Her family and her part of the country believed that there was something radically wrong with any woman of that age that was still single. She wrestled greatly with shame and unworthiness, and she also had tremendous unresolved anger against a man she had dated for many years but who had not married her. She went to a counselor. The therapist rightly told her that she had taken her to heart her family’s approach to personal value and worth. They taught that a woman had to include a husband and children if she was to have any value or worth. She was bitter against this man only because he had come between her and the thing she felt she needed to have to have value. The counselor then proposed that she throw off such an unenlightened view and throw herself into a career.

About this time she was going to a church where she was clearly hearing the gospel for the first time. She heard that the gospel is *not* that we live a worthy life and then give it to God and then he owes us, but that in Jesus Christ he has already lived a worthy life (he lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died) and that when we believe, he gives it to us. Then we are completely accepted and loved by the only One in the universe who counts. This gives us the ultimate “emotional wealth”, a sense of being loved so deep that we can afford to forgive anyone. She realized that the well-meaning counselor was asking her to throw off a politically incorrect system of works-righteousness for a politically correct one! She said, “why should I leave the ranks of the many women who make ‘family’ their worth and value to join the ranks of the many men who make ‘career’ the same thing? Would I not be as devastated then by career setbacks as I have been by romantic ones? No. I will receive the righteousness of Christ, and learn to rejoice in it. Then I can look at males or career and say, ‘what makes me beautiful to God is Jesus, not these things.’ Only then will I have power and freedom. And power to forgive” She found the “pre-conditions” for forgiveness.

**Note:** It will become clear that one of the most typical “idols” we can have is our spouse! We may need his or her approval and respect in idolatrous ways--we may look to the other person to be a “savior”, the source of our self-worth. No human being can bear that pressure however. Your spouse is a finite human being with limitations. He or she *cannot* love you consistently. And if you try to get from your spouse what only the Lord can give, you will be locked in a vicious cycle. You will not be able to forgive your spouse for his/her failures unless you find a Spouse whose love is perfect and whose forgiveness is perfect too.

### **E. Steps for Repentance.**

Why wait until now to talk about repentance? And why give it so little space? Repentance and forgiveness are really different ways of looking at the same thing. We could just as easily spent the lion’s share of this essay on repentance, and then added this note on forgiveness. Both are the same in all of these ways: 1) The pre-conditions are identical. (Both are blocked by pride and emotional bankruptcy. Both require humility and emotional wealth.) 2) The character is identical. (Both are just ways of saying, “I am willing to absorb the payment for what I have done.”) 3) Even the steps are nearly the same. See below.

**1. An honest admission of just your part of the wrong.** Maybe in the disagreement you are only 10% wrong, or 30% or 80%. You just confess your part without any blame-shifting or excuses. Even if the other person believes you are more guilty than you think

you are, admit the truth. Only offer to analyze and describe the part of the mess that you are responsible.

**2. Make no excuses.** Do not explain it away as blame-shifting. Treat other “triggering” factors as occasions not causes. Your own selfishness or insensitivity etc. was the real cause, and what other people did to you only released those things out into the expressions that you did. If you don’t do this, your repentance can actually be a way to not repent at all.

**3. Be willing to listen to a realistic account of what your wrong cost the other.** It is possible to use repentance to say “shut up” to another person. How? a) If your repentance is very over-dramatic and emotional, you are saying, “look how bad I feel-- don’t tell me anything more about how I made you feel” or even “look how bad I feel-- don’t you want to take back what you said?” b) If your repentance is very quick and analytical, it may make the other person feel that she or he cannot share what he/she was feeling. It can be a way to say, “I’m not interested in hearing how you feel at all.”

**4. Provide “fruits” of repentance, rather than just an expression of sorrow.** a. Offer to make changes that would restore or remunerate in some way for the damage done. b. Offer to make changes in behavior that would make it very unlikely for the incident at issue to happen again. If you can’t do this, your partner has the right to think you haven’t repented.

If competent repentance and competent forgiveness coincide, the experience is almost a joyful revival of your relationship each time. It is a bit like a conversion experience, with the reality and sweetness of your relationship appreciated in new ways. You see the marriage as a gift, and you find new emotional wealth, since the love of the other person actually points you to the forgiving Lord himself. But if your spouse is not repenting, you a) *should* still forgive, since it is the only way to keep evil from spreading in you both (see above) and you b) *can* still forgive if you meet the pre-conditions (see above).

**Discussion Question: Share a conflict that keeps coming up. Consider: a) is it because one or both of you are not forgiving well? b) is it because one or both of you are not repenting well? Agree on 2 or 3 practical steps you could do to improve.**