

From Broken to Beautiful
A Primer on Marriage Counseling
Week 4 – Foundations of Reconciliation

Introduction:

Last week we started the process of trying to clear away the rubble of a couple's past conflicts in the hope of rebuilding something new and Biblical in its place. The process centers around the dual concepts of forgiveness and repentance. Notice the following diagram:



This process is vital to real Biblical reconciliation. The longer two people allow themselves to think of an offense the more likely they are to edit the past to make themselves right. They use the memory to refine their arguments in preparation for the next fight. They over emphasize the faults of the other and they tend to grow angrier over time.

Question:

Forgiveness is hard because the only time we need to do it is when we have been sinned against. Therefore, what unanswered questions do you have concerning the commands and processes of forgiveness and repentance?

[Allow for Questions]

Homework:

- Forgiveness - Part 2
- Other assignments as needed

Each spouse will potentially have a list of three things that they believe need to be addressed before they can move forward and clear away the rubble of the past. That, obviously, means they may have six significant and painful issues to address. It may take time to work through these. Encourage each spouse:

- Don't delegitimize the other person's issue.
- Refuse to fight. You're trying to work as partners toward the goal of glorifying God.
- Pray for a humble and contrite heart that's ready to change.

Fundamentals of Reconciliation:

Principle #1 – Make Confession Biblical (Ken Sande’s 7 A’s of Confession, The Peacemaker, chp.6)

1. **ADDRESS** everyone involved.
2. **AVOID** words like “if,” “but,” and “maybe.”
3. **ADMIT** your sins specifically.
4. **ACKNOWLEDGE** the hurt your sin has caused others.
5. **ACCEPT** the consequences that your sin has purchased.
6. **ALTER** your behavior (i.e. change the problematic behavior).
7. **ASK** for forgiveness.

I try to avoid putting words in people’s mouth, but a biblical confession should sound something like this, “I realize that when I [clearly name the sin], I sinned against God, I sinned against you and I hurt you. I’m deeply sorry about that. I have asked God for forgiveness, and I need your forgiveness. Will you please forgive me?”

- If forgiveness is granted, then I would encourage a conversation centered on formulating a repentance plan that leads to a genuine and long-lasting change of heart and change of action.
- If forgiveness is not granted, then I would, as the counselor, gently warn the unforgiving spouse about the dangers of unforgiveness, and I would encourage the offending spouse to share how they are going to embark on a process of change and to ask what they could do to prove change has taken place.

Principle #2 – Reconciliation is Key

The early stages of marital counseling are often focused on reconciliation, which can be defined as the **RESTORATION** of a relationship to a state of harmony or peace after a conflict. Reconciliation is always founded on the **GOSPEL**.

¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:10-11)

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

The word translated “reconcile” means to change or to exchange. It speaks of changing one’s state from hostility to peace. How is that accomplished? Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus was made to be sin so that we could become the righteousness of God through faith in Him.

As Christians and Biblical counselors, we have the privilege and responsibility to help others navigate the often-difficult waters of conflict resolution.

Unforgiven sin stands **BETWEEN** the unbeliever and God prior to salvation. In human conflict it stands between the warring parties. It must be **REMOVED** for the change in relationship to be accomplished.

Principle #3 – Glorifying God is the Goal (Robert Jones, Track 7, BCTC)

Most people have the same fundamental rule to life. Do everything that I want you to do and nothing that I don’t want you to do and that will make me happy and, therefore, pleased with you. That’s the natural law of the human heart. It’s self-glorification.

⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. (2 Corinthians 5:9)

¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)

The failure to please God is the root of all conflict. For those of you who attended this summer ABF in 2023, you’ll remember the “Y-Diagram.” Every temptation, or pressure-filled situation, is a choice between pleasing self or pleasing God and, ultimately, we make that choice out of the desires in our heart.

In Christ, the goal of glorifying God is always **ACHIEVABLE**. It keeps us focused on Him and not on the **FAULTS** of the other person. It motivates one spouse to do what is **RIGHT** over time even if the other spouse refuses to change.

The goal isn’t to have a good marriage. The goal is to glorify God. If both spouses share this goal, then reconciliation can happen, and a good marriage will be the result. But if happiness is the goal, then we will stop doing what’s right when it doesn’t deliver the happiness we were after.

Question:

How would you coach a couple in conflict on the ways in which they can glorify God in their conflict and in the process of reconciliation?

To walk by the Spirit. To guard their hearts and their tongues. To communicate in Biblical ways. To desire God’s glory more than getting their way or winning the argument. To guinely confess sin and commit to walk through the process of confession and repentance and avoid short cuts and substitutes.

Principle #4 – Seek to Make Peace Rather Than Just Keep the Peace

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9)

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. (John 14:27)

Question:

What would you say to a couple that has come to you already living apart? What would you say to a couple contemplating separation? What data would you need to gather before you could answer?

How long? What specifically brought about the separation? Remember, forgiveness doesn't equal trust – no where in the Bible are we commanded to trust another human being. Is there violence or domestic abuse present in the relationship? What is the plan for "re-homing"? Trust must be earned over time. In the case of abusive behaviors, until the covenant-breaker becomes a covenant-keeper, it is not safe to rehome the separated spouse. And in the case of abuse, rehoming should be the presumed outcome of counseling – more about this next week.

The danger with separation is that for one spouse, the tension that was present in the relationship is immediately lifted and life becomes, in part, better for them. This can make true reconciliation harder in the long run – but not impossible. Therefore, I would caution people to generally move slowly to separate. I would also recommend that the separated spouse does not "re-home" too quickly. There needs to be a thoughtful plan.

Peace, in the Bible, is more than just the absence of conflict. It is more often the idea of Shalom or **HARMONY** where everyone is living in accordance with and embracing their God-given **DESIGN**.

Conclusion:

The purpose of Biblical reconciliation is not to get two people back to a former state of behaving or relating to one another. It is to help them get to a **BETTER** place where those former sins or problematic behaviors are no longer a problem. Therefore, change has to be fundamental to the process.

"If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got."