

“I FORGIVE YOU”

# *The Freedom of Forgiveness*

Ruth Bell Graham, wife to evangelist Billy Graham, is credited with having said, “A happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers.”<sup>1</sup> With wry smiles, we certainly agree, as we have so generously created for ourselves many opportunities to practice becoming good forgivers! Forgiveness is another *Me* characteristic in marriage. Each of us can develop and apply the principle of forgiveness to bless ourselves and our marriages.

Most couples will experience disagreements, misunderstandings, and a few arguments in their marriage. These difficulties may be particularly frequent in the early transitional years, as newly married couples are trying to navigate the merging of their old single selves with their new shared selves. In a speech given to students at BYU, Elder Marlin K. Jensen of the Seventy provided a humorous example of one of these instances from early in his own marriage:

We were living in Salt Lake City, where I was attending law school and Kathy was teaching first grade. The stress of both of us being new to the city, to our schools, and to each other became a little heavy and our relationship a bit testy. One night about dinnertime we had a quarrel that convinced me

## COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

there was no hope for nourishment at home. So I left our modest apartment and walked to the nearest fast food restaurant a block away. As I entered the north door of this establishment, I looked to my right and, much to my surprise, saw Kathy entering through the south door! We exchanged angry glances and advanced to opposing cash registers to place our orders. We continued to ignore each other as we sat alone on opposite ends of the restaurant sullenly eating our evening meal. We then left as we had entered, taking separate routes home, finally ending this utterly ridiculous episode by reconciling and laughing together about how infantile we had both been. I realize now that such little tiffs are not uncommon in the early stages of most marriages.<sup>2</sup>

Like Elder Jensen, we have had a few of those tiffs in our marriage over the years; we, too, have hurt and offended each other. In spite of our genuine intentions and efforts to follow Christ, we have our lapses; sometimes we are impatient, sometimes we are selfish, sometimes we are thoughtless, and sometimes we are abrupt in our communications. In these offending moments, we create the necessity to forgive. Dedicated practice in both asking for and giving forgiveness has made the process easier for us as the years have passed. When we were newlyweds, we had to thoroughly discuss and work through each small offense that occurred between us; the process was tedious and our efforts, in some ways, served to only prolong the strife. It seemed that in essence we were trying to get to the point where we felt the other *deserved* our forgiveness. In time, we came to understand each other's motives and intentions. This helped increase our ability to forgive each other quickly because we knew that any offense was not maliciously intended. With each successive year of marriage, our ability to quickly forgive improved. Now, we often forgive each other, let go, and move on *without* discussing the conflict or working through it with the other when the issue is of a minor nature. In other words, as we have practiced forgiveness in our marriage, we have *gained a willingness in our hearts to simply choose to forgive* without trying to decide if that forgiveness is deserved.

In this chapter, we define forgiveness—both what it is and what it is not. We discuss forgiveness in marriage as a gift of the Spirit that requires a great deal of personal effort as well as emotional and spiritual maturity. We explain that to both seek forgiveness and offer forgiveness is a choice made by each spouse individually that is foundational for the success of couples as they navigate their life together. Finally, we discuss the fruits of forgiveness and how the decision to forgive is marriage saving.

### *What Is Forgiveness?*

Forgiveness is a ubiquitous term, yet as a concept it is infrequently defined because we tend to assume everyone else thinks about it the same way we do. This assumption can limit our understanding of how to truly forgive others in our own lives. Researchers have defined forgiveness as “replacing the bitter, angry feelings of vengefulness often resulting from a hurt, with positive feelings of goodwill toward the offender.”<sup>3</sup> The LDS Church website defines forgiveness in this way: “To forgive is a divine attribute. It is to pardon or excuse someone from blame for an offense or misdeed.”<sup>4</sup> These definitions indicated that

## *Reflections*

*The past thirty-four-plus years have taught me that marriage is impossible without forgiveness. I remember being a young twenty-year-old. . . . I was so mature, prepared, in love, and ready to share everything for the rest of my life and beyond with this handsome twenty-year-old I declared to be the perfect match for me. I knew that the counsel and advice offered by everyone around me was of no use, because we were the perfect match. . . . Oh, what little I actually knew! I have had to understand a negotiation process that would become more about forgiveness than compromise. We are both children of our Heavenly Father and are committed to understanding what that means in our hourly, daily, yearly, lifetime acts; we have never had to reevaluate these commitments. What we have had to address almost continually is how to negotiate all of the little issues, the accidental words, the misunderstood glances, the tiredness, the fatigue, and the insecurities that are natural to us as human beings in this mortal state. Forgiving each other, as well as forgiving ourselves, is critical to creating and maintaining a good working relationship as well as our love connection, both of which are vital for inviting the Holy Spirit into our family.*

## Reflections

*Even though I knew that bad things happen to good people, I was never prepared to be the protagonist in a case of infidelity. I will never forget the day my husband called me at work, crying, to tell me we needed to talk. As he revealed to me that he had recently been unfaithful, following years of consuming soft pornography, my heart sunk. Why me? How could I not have seen this coming? However, as he sobbed and apologized for the mistakes he had made, the spiritual guidance I received was that I needed to stand strong with him as he went through the process of repentance and that my children needed me to work on forgiving him. The next few months were filled with humbling spiritual experiences; absolute honest communication; rereading of our journals, reminding us why we fell in love in the first place; and a beautiful understanding of how repentance and forgiveness work. As hurt as I was, I knew he was also hurting, and we both needed each other to heal. Throughout the process, I was also reminded of how strong I really am and that our Heavenly Father knows how much each person can withstand. A couple of years have now passed, and time has helped diminish the pain as we work on making our marriage stronger by practicing daily acts of forgiveness.*

in forgiveness we pardon or excuse someone for a misdeed against us. It is important to note that they don't suggest that one should approve of bad behavior or that bad behavior in and of itself should be considered okay. Forgiveness is absolving the offender from any further responsibility—or future grudges or retaliation—for the hurt they have caused us.

Researchers have identified various levels of forgiveness specificity. For example, trait forgiveness is a generally consistent attitude of forgiveness or a tendency to forgive that occurs across relationships, offenses, and situations. Dyadic forgiveness is focused on forgiveness of your spouse across multiple offenses. And offense-specific, or episodic, forgiveness is a single act of forgiveness for a specific offense within a particular interpersonal context.<sup>5</sup> Each of these types of forgiveness becomes relevant in the marital relationship as we seek to have a general Christlike attitude of forgiveness, to be willing to daily forgive the mundane, and to forgive the more difficult, significant grievances. To further explore forgiveness, it can be helpful to consider what forgiveness is *not*. Forgiveness is not just reducing hostile feelings toward the offender, or “reducing unforgiveness,”<sup>6</sup> so that one is *less hurt* or *less angry*. Forgive-

ness is not just forgetting about the offense; condoning the offense; or reconciling without addressing the offense in some way, either working through it intrapersonally or working through it interpersonally. Forgiveness is not just ignoring the offense. Nor is it offering counterfeit forgiveness to absolve our spouse of the offense by verbally offering forgiveness to them quickly without actually working forgiveness in our heart—in that, we have not truly forgiven them.<sup>7</sup> Forgiveness is not acceptance; one can accept the realities of the hurtful circumstance without “a more encompassing softening of feelings on the part of the offended spouse toward the offender, including an increase in positive feelings and behaviors toward the offender.”<sup>8</sup>

Lastly, forgiveness is not *conditional* forgiveness. Conditional forgiveness is illustrated by ideas such as “Before I can forgive others, they must apologize to me for the things they have done” and “Before I can forgive others, they must promise not to do the same thing again.” Forgiveness researchers explain that although apologies and the like can ease the forgiveness process,

if these acts of contrition are viewed as necessary conditions

## Reflections

*After having been morally unfaithful to my wife, there had to be a time of cleansing and healing. The hurt to my wife was hard to soothe. A handwritten letter beginning with the four important words “I am so sorry” was the beginning. Pride and selfishness caused the sin, and having to write the words took a great deal of humility on my part. She responded of course with tears; many tears had been shed before, but this apology seemed to be the beginning of fewer tears on my wife’s part. I felt like a terrible and worthless person. She then actually started to buoy me up. Her feelings of value as a woman had been badly hurt, and her actions to help strengthen me seemed to help her with her own feelings of self-worth. The apology was just the beginning to start to release the pain; sadness still continued but diminished over time. We had more talks about how each of us felt on a deeper level, rather than just skirting those issues. It was hard for me to do that, as it can be a “digging down” experience, and I don’t like that. She realized that it was hard for her also. Praying together for strength for each other was so helpful, partly because of the words uttered and also because of the heavenly help given. We realized that the Atonement was to help the sinner (me) but also to relieve pain for those sinned against (her).*



or prerequisites required before forgiveness can be offered, then there will likely be fewer instances of forthcoming forgiveness for that individual. This is due simply to the fact that those who cause an offense will not always fulfill such conditions, regardless of their appropriateness, and the offended party does not have the power to make them occur. Conceptualizing these responses as requirements for forgiveness also prevents access to forgiveness for those who are unable to identify whether acts of contrition are occurring, for instance, in cases where the wrongdoer is deceased or no longer present for other reasons.<sup>9</sup>

We have sought to teach true forgiveness in our own home. When our three youngest children were all toddlers trying to learn to navigate their world and their interactions with others, there was a lot of screaming and hitting among them. When one toddler hit another, we required them to serve a time-out to help them calm down, and then they had to give the offended child a hug and a kiss and say they were sorry. The injured party then had the responsibility to say to the offending sibling, “I forgive you.” This was so frequent an occurrence that our children got very good at this exchange so that even while they were still young, they were able to bestow forgiveness upon their siblings without any prompting from us. It is a heartwarming sound to hear a child say in their sweet little voice: “I forgive you.” How much more heartwarming to hear spouses say it to each other in a genuine effort to reconcile and reconnect.

In contrast to this, in our current culture, when there has been an offense the interchange often goes differently—the offending party quickly says something to the effect of “I’m sorry,” while the offended party quickly replies, with a downward glance and shrug of the shoulders, “It’s okay.” Although we all generally recognize that this exchange is made in an effort to move past a grievance, we assert that the words we use are vital and this exchange doesn’t cut it. It is not just a matter of semantics. The response “It’s okay” implies there was no problem with the person’s behavior. Yet, really, it is *not* okay. It is not okay to slight, offend, reject, deceive,

or do any of the myriad of other things we do to hurt each other. It is not okay and it is certainly not Christian. But, nevertheless, as mortals suffering the weakness of the flesh, it does happen, and, unfortunately for all of us, it happens quite frequently. We have all given offense and taken offense.

So what is the answer? The answer is that *although it is not okay, it can be forgiven*. The response “I forgive you” makes explicit the reality of the situation: “There was a problem with what you did, and it hurt me, but I choose not to let it hinder my regard for you or damage our relationship.” So offering forgiveness to another is an advanced spiritual principle in that it requires the offended party to do more than just shrug it off, perhaps attempting to make light of something that was indeed quite painful. Instead, forgiveness requires disciplined effort of the offended party to pardon the negative effects that a fault had on them personally without excusing the fault itself.

Nephi illustrates for us the concept of true forgiveness. His brothers were extremely angry with him; they had put their hands on him to beat him, they had tied him up, and they had sought to kill him. Yet Nephi stated in his record, “And it came to pass that I did frankly forgive them all that they had done” (1 Nephi 7:21). Nephi chose to “frankly,” or openly and freely, forgive his brothers of grievous offenses. They had abused him and sought to kill him, yet he did not wallow, nor did he justify and rationalize his own desire to be offended because of the grievousness of his brothers’ crimes against him. Instead, he chose the better part and gave himself the gift of forgiveness. That forgiveness also became a motivator for his brothers that prompted them to then pray to God to ask Him for forgiveness. We, too, can choose to “frankly” forgive our spouse of both the small and grievous offenses.

*Forgiveness in the Marital Relationship*

Forgiving our spouse is required by our Savior, Jesus Christ. In exchange for offering us His great mercy, the Lord imposes upon us a requirement that we in turn extend forgiveness to our fellow human beings: “I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men” (D&C 64:10). As often as our spouse sins against us, we are obligated to forgive. Our Savior taught in Matthew 18:21–22: “Then came Peter to him, 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.”

In a BYU devotional, Elder Lynn G. Robbins of the Seventy shared a story of how both repentance and forgiveness are required of us. He used the example of an abusive marriage.

In this scenario of the abused wife, we have two parties—the abusive husband and the victim-wife, both of whom need divine help. Alma teaches that the Savior suffered for both: for the sins of the man and for the anguish, the heartache, and pain of the woman (see Alma 7:11–12; Luke 4:18).

To access the Savior’s grace and the healing power of His Atonement, the Savior requires something from both of them.

The husband’s key to access the Lord’s grace is *repentance*. If he doesn’t repent, he cannot be forgiven by the Lord (see D&C 19:15–17).

The wife’s key to access the Lord’s grace and to allow Him to help her is *forgiveness*. Until the wife is able to forgive, she is choosing to suffer the anguish and pain that He has already suffered on her behalf. By not forgiving, she unwittingly denies His mercy and healing.<sup>10</sup>

We read in Doctrine and Covenants 64:8–10 that in His day, the Lord chastened those that did not forgive. President Spencer W. Kimball, in his seminal volume *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, commented on these verses:

The lesson stands for us today. Many people, when brought to a reconciliation with others, say that they forgive, but they continue to hold malice, continue to suspect the other party, continue to dis-

## Reflections

*Growing up, my family life was filled with much strife, contention, and unforgiveness, culminating in my parents' divorce when I was about twelve years old. I decided at a young age that I would choose differently because that culture invited misery rather than happiness into our lives. In my own married life today, I am often frustrated with my wife and often frustrated with myself as I sometimes emulate that early negative training of my childhood, despite my conscious choice to follow the better path. Yet I am grateful to be able to rediscover on a daily basis that only through the sweet gifts of forgiveness and mercy can peace and abundant love fill our home with the inspiration and tremendous joy that we need in our precious family! As I learn to forgive my wife daily, even "seventy times seven," I always find the sweet "peace that passeth all understanding" and joy to overflowing in my sacred relationship with her! Besides, doesn't she have to live with and forgive me of my myriad of weaknesses daily? And am I not freely forgiven hourly by a merciful Savior who gave everything for me so I could repent and learn to be like Him? This is why I choose forgiveness in my marriage, and I learn to love my wife more eternally every day!*

believe the other's sincerity. This is sin, for when a reconciliation has been effected and when repentance is claimed, each should forgive and forget, build immediately the fences which have been breached, and restore the former compatibility.<sup>11</sup>

Over the course of a lifetime together, each of us, being imperfect, will quite assuredly say or do things that will hurt our spouse. When forgiveness is applied, openness and love flow freely. In the Church, we often talk about the importance of having the Spirit. The gift of the Holy Ghost is closely linked to the marital relationship. When the relationship is going well, there is a freeing feeling about life and a closeness to the Spirit that is natural. However, when contention enters into a marriage, the Holy Ghost will often leave and, until there is forgiveness and reconciliation, the Spirit remains withdrawn.

We have experienced this many times over the years. When there is conflict between us, our spirits are uneasy, and we have little positive energy for the other things in our lives, such as caring for our children or serving in the Church. Forgiveness frees us up from bitter feelings and negativity that sap our energies. It allows us to get back to building

a life consistent with our values and allows us to reconnect with the Holy Spirit and with each other.

How do we forgive our spouse when there has been conflict or when they have hurt us? As Joseph Smith illustrated for us, he spent a long time in prayer seeking a humble heart. Once he was able to feel his heart soften, he then went to his wife to ask her forgiveness—he talked to her and sought reconciliation. This is the greatest secret to learning how to forgive: our own efforts to forgive need to work in concert with the power of our Savior. Forgiveness is a gift of the Spirit. When the synergistic partnership of our humble heart and willingness to follow God is added to His all-powerful, yet merciful, grace, it will bring about true forgiveness. Indeed, in large measure, forgiveness requires purposeful efforts such as scripture study, fasting, pondering, and prayer to access the healing that the Spirit can offer us by virtue of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Through Christ, we can forgive even the most grievous offenses we endure.

Corrie ten Boom had suffered in concentration camps during World War II. After the war, she gave lectures of her experiences, speaking of healing and forgiveness possible only through Jesus Christ. On one occa-

## Reflections

*After ten years of marriage, it still amazes me how relatively small disagreements can make me feel like I have made no progress in my marriage, like my marriage is hanging by a thread only kept from snapping and shattering on the floor by some strange stroke of luck. I often find myself in justification mode shortly after one of these encounters, recounting the many supposed grievances against me. “I didn’t get what I put in! What have I worked so hard for? How many times have I been the one to give in? My ‘score’ is so much higher!” After some time has passed, often after my wife has already moved on, I realize my shortsightedness. Did I ever really forgive anything? How could I have forgiven if I keep reliving incident after incident, feeling the anger, frustration, and hopelessness rise within me? It is in that moment that I remember my faith in the Atonement of Christ. If I can’t forgive my wife for petty infractions, can I really forgive myself? Do I really believe that there is a power that can heal and unite us in a celestial manner? I repent, try my best, and move on.*

sion she spoke at a church service in Munich, Germany. Here she encountered for the first time one of her own jailers; this man had stood guard at the shower-room door in the processing center at Ravensbrück, Germany. He approached her as the service ended:

“How grateful I am for your message, *Fraulein*[,]” he said. “To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!”

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often . . . the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.<sup>12</sup>

This deeply felt exchange beautifully illustrates the very real challenge that lies before us. Through Jesus Christ it is possible to forgive those who have abused us, lied to us, cheated on us, disrespected us, and the like. Yet, admittedly, as we saw with Corrie ten Boom, with deep pains such as these, forgiveness may be impossible if we try to rely alone upon our own efforts. We must take our Savior’s forgiveness as our own. The power of Christ and His graceful Atonement makes obtaining this type of love—this charity—possible, even for those who have severely wounded us. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf observed that when we choose to fill our hearts with the love of God, it becomes easier to love others, and feelings of anger or hatred dissipate.<sup>13</sup>

## *Avoiding Offense*

As we focus on how the Savior can help us forgive, we can help ourselves by learning to avoid offense in the first place. For example, keeping things in proper perspective can do wonders for not feeling offense in the first place or for forgiving a felt offense: “Did my spouse intend to hurt my feelings?” or “What was the motive behind this behavior?” Oftentimes through this simple evaluation we come to see that our spouse did not intend malice or try to hurt us but was simply thoughtless or careless and in the process caused us pain. It is often not difficult to forgive these types of minor, unintentional offenses. The following personal story provides an illustration.

**DEBRA:** *When Richard was called to be a bishop, we worked to set some boundaries around his service so he could serve ward members while also respecting the needs of the family. One of those boundaries was that he would not text or take phone calls at dinner time. One evening, Richard was supposed to take a babysitter home so we could sit down and eat dinner together as a family, but all of a sudden, I found him absorbed in a private phone call. As I tried to encourage him to take the babysitter home while I finished up food preparations, he waved me off and disappeared into the bedroom. This left me to take the babysitter home and eat dinner alone*

## *Reflections*

*My father sexually abused me from the age of twelve to seventeen. During and after the abuse, I never blamed God, but I blamed the closest person to me: my husband. I had a brattiness to me which helped me get through the abuse, but it did not help me in my marriage. If my husband hurt me, I wanted to get back at him; I wanted to hurt him more. I knew I was hurting him, and I didn't know how to stop because I had so much built-up emotion. Doing forgiveness work, I was able to see how truly sick my father was and came to have true empathy for him. My husband said that as I went through the forgiveness process my countenance changed. The Holy Ghost let me know I truly forgave my dad. As a result, I was able to be a kinder, nicer, softer person. I was no longer having to blame anyone or hurt anyone because of my abuse. As much as I changed and was happier, my husband was even happier! Things that would bug me or make me upset didn't make me upset anymore; he didn't have to walk on pins and needles around me. I was serving him in ways I had never done before. I was not afraid to be vulnerable, and the trust between us grew.*

*with the children—and then the cabbage was soggy. I felt angry about this but then chose to do my own work on the issue. I told myself that since Richard was pretty good about respecting the boundaries that were set around his ecclesiastical service, I would not begrudge him for choosing to follow the Spirit if he felt prompted to answer this particular call. As I worked through this, my initial instinct to give him a piece of my mind faded. I determined to give him the benefit of the doubt, let it go, and not let it ruin the evening. I decided not to say a word about it.*

*Once Richard rejoined the family, we went on as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Feeling bad about the situation, he felt a need to address it. He told me that he fully intended to honor family time and planned to call the person back later, but by mistake, he accidentally pushed the “answer” button. Realizing his mistake, he immediately hung up. However, since the call had initially connected, the caller thought he was available to talk, so they called right back. Richard felt obligated to answer it due to his mistake. When he did, immediately there was distress on the other end, and he felt, of course, the need to soothe an upset ward member. I told him that I had been initially upset about it but figured something must have happened—period. I didn’t do any more explaining. The situation was closed, having had no drama or escalation of conflict; I had forgiven the issue.*

So what do we do when our spouse does something on purpose? Forgiveness is also necessary when the offense is known to have been purposeful or is very severe. In marriage, sometimes out of their own hurt, pride, or anger, or from their own self-deception or addiction, our spouse does things that knowingly hurt us—and we must in all honesty and humility acknowledge that sometimes we may do the same to them. First, we must remember that a purposeful offense does not always mean the offense was done with malicious intent. It may be helpful to check ourselves on assuming the motive we attribute to the offense to be correct. The malicious motive or intention that we often feel is fact (for example, “They did this because . . .”) is frequently discovered not to be fact at all. Although the person admits to having done something purposefully, they often report that the reason they did it was for some other purpose than for the purpose we attributed to them (e.g., “I didn’t think through the behavior and

realize it would hurt you. In that moment, I didn't even think about how it would make you feel. I just acted out of my own focus on . . ." or "I knew it would hurt you, but I just didn't care in that moment because I was so . . ."). So we need to be very careful not to jump to conclusions.

Other strategies can also be helpful in trying to avoid being offended or in putting an offense into proper perspective to allow greater ease in forgiving and letting go. For example, reading scriptures and studying or listening to general conference talks on the topic of forgiveness can be very helpful in facilitating forgiveness. In addition, bringing our thoughts and motives into awareness through prayer, pondering, journaling, or talking with a trusted family member, friend, mentor, or therapist to work through any long-held resentments can be purging and healing. As we come to more fully understand our feelings, we can write a letter expressing those feelings (which may or may not be given to our spouse, but just writing it proves therapeutic), paint or do another artistic project to express our feelings, write down the resentments and then burn them or flush them down the toilet as a representation of the letting-go process, and so on.

These strategies generally utilize our own *Me* efforts. However, we can also work toward forgiveness as a couple (accessing the power of the *We*). There are a variety of research studies that address this issue, each with its own advocated steps toward forgiveness. One very detailed report is from a study in which researchers examined forgiveness in Christian couples. They found that one decision-based therapeutic forgiveness session with a counselor (about three hours long) was successful in promoting forgiveness, increasing marital satisfaction and decreasing depression.<sup>14</sup> This lengthy session involved thirteen steps divided into three sections: defining and preparing (Steps 1–3); seeking and granting forgiveness (Steps 4–12); and designing the ceremonial act (Step 13). To provide some specific structure about how we can work together toward forgiveness in our own

## COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

marriages, the thirteen steps are detailed below (please see original reference for thorough descriptors of each step, if desired).

Step 1: Definitions of forgiveness are discussed.

Step 2: The focus on each person having the opportunity to seek forgiveness for his or her wrongful actions is established.

Step 3: Introduction to the forgiveness treatment and decision whether or not to participate.

Step 4: Statement of the offense.

Step 5: Offender provides explanation.

Step 6: Questions and answers about the offense.

Step 7: Offended person gives emotional reactions.

Step 8: Offender shows empathy and remorse for the hurt he or she caused the other.

Step 9: Offender develops plan to stop and prevent behavior.

Step 10: Offended spouse shows empathy for the offender's hurt.

Step 11: Emphasis on choice and commitment involved in letting go.

Step 12: Formal request for forgiveness.

Step 13: Ceremonial act.

The ceremonial act is a symbolic expression that the offense has been formally and permanently forgiven (for example, writing down your grievances and burning them).<sup>15</sup>

The requirement to forgive is upon us. Therefore, we must remember that these and other intrapersonal and interpersonal efforts should be joined with the grace and mercy of our Savior, Jesus Christ, by inviting Him into our forgiveness process.

### *The Challenge to Forgive*

Most of us know that the need to forgive is an eternal truth, and we theoretically believe we *should* forgive, but sometimes we may still refuse to forgive our spouse for their offenses against us. Why do we do this when it is contrary to not only God's command but

to our own personal beliefs and values? Some in Church circles may couch the answer in terms of pride, but we believe that the more general motivation in struggling to forgive is not that oppositional in nature. We believe that this defiance is motivated by deep hurt and excruciating pain. Simply put, we hurt and we don't want to hurt anymore—and doing the *work* of forgiveness means we must face and interact with the pain which we believe will hurt us more. In other words, refusing to forgive may really be borne from a self-protective instinct.

*DEBRA: One client came to me for psychotherapy having suffered for fifteen years relative to someone's abusive behavior toward her. The trauma bled into every aspect of her life, and she suffered in misery and depression. In the latter part of our therapy work together, I indicated that to fully move on in her life she would ultimately have to forgive. This client became very resistant and openly declared she did not want to forgive this person. She wanted to stay angry and hold on—in spite of the years of agony she had felt. Forgiveness felt very threatening to her—she believed that if she forgave she would be condoning or approving the abusive behavior, thus validating the abusive behavior and condemning her own sense of worth. She wanted justice and felt holding him accountable in her mind by failing to forgive was the only way she could assert personal power and reclaim her own sense of worth. Yet, paradoxically, she also knew that by failing to do so she was going to continue to be miserable.*

*In examining forgiveness with me more closely, she realized she misunderstood the nature of forgiveness. She came to realize that by not forgiving this man and holding onto feelings of hatred, she was colluding with his evil rather than living consistent with the love she had sought to build into her life. She came to believe that forgiveness actually represented the condemnation of the behavior, not the approval of it—for if there had been nothing wrong with the behavior, then there would have been nothing to forgive. Forgiving this man, instead, represented her assertion that the behavior was wrong and that she was going to choose to rise above his darkness and bring love into her heart. Light came into her heart as she pondered, journaled, and discussed these ideas over some weeks. Forgiveness for this person soon followed, and more importantly, peace entered her heart at a*

## Gems

*“Two traveling monks reached a town where there was a young woman waiting to step out of her sedan chair. The rains had made deep puddles and she couldn’t step across without spoiling her silken robes. She stood there, looking very cross and impatient. She was scolding her attendants. They had nowhere to place the packages they held for her, so they couldn’t help her across the puddle.*

*The younger monk noticed the woman, said nothing, and walked by. The older monk quickly picked her up and put her on his back, transported her across the water, and put her down on the other side. She didn’t thank the older monk, she just shoved him out of the way and departed.*

*As they continued on their way, the young monk was brooding and preoccupied. After several hours, unable to hold his silence, he spoke out. ‘That woman back there was very selfish and rude, but you picked her up on your back and carried her! Then she didn’t even thank you!’*

*‘I set the woman down hours ago,’ the older monk responded. ‘Why are you still carrying her?’”<sup>17</sup>*

*deep soul-touching level for the first time in fifteen years. The light that came into her eyes was beautiful.*

As seen with this client, true forgiveness allows us to release any desire for justice and vengeance. In marriage, complete forgiveness also includes resisting the impulse to throw out an “I told you so!” or “Remember when you did . . .” in a strategic moment; these kinds of comments may seem innocuous but truly betray deep bitterness and resentment. Elder Neil L. Andersen related this experience: “When Parley P. Pratt, in 1835, was judged unfairly, bringing embarrassment and shame to him and his family, the Prophet Joseph Smith counseled, ‘Parley, . . . walk such things under your feet . . . [and] God Almighty shall be with you.’”<sup>16</sup> If we find that we cannot “walk such things under [our] feet” and find that we continue to think about a former misdeed of our spouse or we bring up a former hurt to our spouse during a new conflict, then we would be wise to soberly accept that our forgiveness is not yet complete—that we have more work to do. In an energetic discourse given to students at BYU, Jeffrey R. Holland described the dysfunctional relationship pro-

cesses that often occur when spouses fail to truly forgive each other:

I can't tell you the number of couples I have counseled who, when they are deeply hurt or even just deeply stressed, reach farther and farther into the past to find yet a bigger brick to throw through the window "pain" of their marriage. When something is over and done with, when it has been repented of as fully as it can be repented of, when life has moved on as it should and a lot of other wonderfully good things have happened since then, it is *not* right to go back and open up some ancient wound that the Son of God Himself died trying to heal.

*Let people repent. Let people grow. Believe that people can change and improve. Is that faith? Yes! Is that hope? Yes! Is it charity? Yes! Above all, it is charity, the pure love of Christ. If something is buried in the past, leave it buried. Don't keep going back with your little sand pail and beach shovel to dig it up, wave it around, and then throw it at someone, saying, "Hey! Do you remember this?" Splat!*

Well, guess what? That is probably going to result in some ugly morsel being dug up out of *your* landfill with the reply, "Yeah, I remember it. Do you remember *this*?" Splat.

And soon enough everyone comes out of that exchange dirty and muddy and unhappy and hurt, when what God, our Father in Heaven, pleads for is cleanliness and kindness and happiness and healing.

Such dwelling on past lives, including past mistakes, is just not right! It is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

One such type of *dwelling on past lives* often occurs in couples in which one or both spouses have struggled with pornography use. Pornography is very damaging to the marital relationship and creates high levels of distress and pain for the betrayed spouse. Spouses may struggle to forgive because the sexual nature of the discretion contrasts starkly with the high value we, as members of the Church, place on purity and sexual fidelity before and during marriage.

**DEBRA:** *One of my therapy clients shares her powerful story of working to forgive her husband for his pornography use:*

I am a mental health therapist working with spouses of individuals who struggle with pornography addiction. The main focus

## COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

of therapy is to work through the spouse's betrayal trauma. Interestingly, I, too, am a spouse of someone who is recovering from a pornography addiction. Though our stories and experiences differ, my clients and I share feelings of hurt, pain, and betrayal. For me, a majority of my negative emotions stemmed from feeling like I deserved better. I lived a chaste, pure, moral life and hated that my spouse did not do the same.

I knew about my husband's addiction prior to our marriage but did not fully understand how it would impact our relationship. Years into marriage, I recognized growing anger, contempt, and disconnection . . . coming from me! I was angry and wanted to somehow teach him a lesson or punish him. I developed walls that prevented me from connecting with him. My husband rarely relapsed (with several months to a year of sobriety at a time), yet I was actively punishing him for the choices he made one to two decades earlier. Sadly, he had no idea why I was acting in this manner.

Years later, I began my own therapy to address this anger and inability to forgive. I wanted so badly to forgive my husband of his past, but I was hesitant because I still wanted my husband to "pay." Over several months of therapy, I explored my past and how multiple dimensions of my life led me to the decisions I did or did not make. I also examined my husband's life and recognized the lack of safety, support, and healthy connections or examples. I recognized his pain. I began to see him differently. I saw how his choices growing up were a symptom of a much bigger problem in his life.

Through this process my heart changed and I began to forgive. Though occasional feelings of pain and hurt pop up, my anger is gone! My resentment towards him has faded. My walls are breaking down and we are connecting in new, deeper, ways. Our marriage is far from perfect, but forgiveness has allowed me to give myself to the marriage and allow the relationship to progress. I am no longer actively halting our growth.

*My client's story clearly illustrates for us all the negative consequences that come to us, and into our marital relationships, when we fail to forgive. These negative consequences became vital clues to her; they communicated to her a need to take seriously her own pain, as it had taken on a destructive power of its own. This prompted her to seek out assistance in order to work on the issues in a productive and healing way so she could learn to forgive her spouse, since she had been unable to do so on her own.*

*As seen here, when clues emerge in our own marriages that tell us our forgiveness work is not yet complete, it takes deep humility to accept the opportunity to work through the issue to complete the forgiveness process. This can be difficult, and it may take some time to humble ourselves enough to be willing to engage in the forgiveness process.*

*Such was my experience. While writing this chapter, I was prompted to recognize one lingering issue in our relationship that indicated a failure to completely forgive Richard. Shortly after becoming engaged, we attended a stake Valentine's dance. It was at this activity that Richard, then forty-four years old, announced his long-awaited engagement to his ward and stake members, who had been praying for many years on his behalf. I never really liked dancing, but that night I was feeling free and happy with the excitement of the engagement and danced without a care in the world.*

*Unbeknownst to me, after the dance Richard's anxiety about getting married escalated intensely; he didn't sleep and struggled with his anxiety all night. In the morning, he ended our engagement and even took back the wedding ring. Fortunately, in spite of this and other dramas, things eventually worked out and we were married. However, after many years of marriage, I noticed that I had not danced with Richard since that Valentine's activity. Since I don't like dancing anyway, my failure to fully recognize my resentment toward Richard had remained hidden; it was easy to turn down opportunities to dance without a second thought. However, as we wrote this chapter, I recognized the truth in my heart—I did not want to dance with Richard. The negativity was more toward Richard than it was toward the dislike of dancing, a significant clue to me that I needed to do some forgiveness work. Yet, in all honesty, I wasn't very humble; I didn't really want to forgive him because I was still so hurt, and I let the issue sit for many months.*

*As work on this book continued, I began to humble myself and accepted that I needed to do some purposeful forgiveness work to cleanse my heart. In an effort to work the forgiveness process, I prayed that Heavenly Father would help me to forgive Richard for hurting me so deeply years earlier. I also initiated several discussions with Richard about this experience and about dancing in general in which I expressed the sense of vulnerability and rejection I had felt. Those discussions provided an opportunity for Richard to be able to more fully explain his motivations; he assured me that the hurtful rejection had been about his own anxiety and had*

## COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

*nothing to do with my own value and acceptability as a person, or anything to do with some negative evaluation of my carefree dancing that evening. I was able to ponder on these discussions over time.*

*As the forgiveness process unfolded, I felt some concern that I still had no desire to go dancing, in spite of my purposeful work to forgive. As we counseled together, Richard suggested that my continued indifference to dancing was because I didn't like dancing in the first place and that he believed, from all we had worked through in those months, that I had, by that time, forgiven him. The Spirit confirmed that in my heart, and I felt much lighter inside.*

*Before I engaged in the forgiveness work, I knew in my heart that I did not want to dance with Richard, but now I knew I just didn't want to dance. All resentment toward Richard surrounding the Valentine's rejection was gone, and I could say I had fully forgiven him and felt blessed for my efforts to do so.*

Did you think of any unresolved issues from your own marriage as you read our struggle with forgiveness? What must you work through to allow the metaphorical air in your marriage to clear?

### *Self-Forgiveness*

Self-forgiveness is also an important concept as we talk about the need to forgive. Researchers have examined the concept of self-forgiveness and have found that it is not only important intrapersonally, for ourselves, but important interpersonally in our marital relationship. It helps both parties to resolve an issue that has a potential for ongoing negative consequences.<sup>19</sup>

Yet some people are hard on themselves and have a difficult time letting go of things they have done to offend others, particularly their spouse. Sometimes it may be easier for us to forgive a spouse who may have wronged us and caused us pain than it is to extend that same forgiveness to ourselves when we have hurt our spouse, done wrong, or contributed to our own difficulties in some way. Some of us may be particularly condemning of ourselves. President Russell M. Nelson taught:

The reality of imperfection can at times be depressing. My heart goes out to conscientious Saints who, because of their shortcomings, allow feelings of depression to rob them of happiness in life.

We all need to remember: men are that they might have joy—not guilt trips!<sup>20</sup>

We need to be mindful that using self-condemnation as a motivator to try to do better next time is not helpful and is promoted by the adversary. It will never motivate us to do better but rather will only tear us down. Elder Cecil O. Samuelson of the Seventy extended this idea, indicating “that being too hard on yourself when you make a mistake can be as negative as being too casual when real repentance is needed.”<sup>21</sup> Upon recognizing these types of negative feelings, we can turn toward our Savior, seeking healing by way of His glorious Atonement. Rather than condemning ourselves, we would do well to “seek this Jesus” (Ether 12:41) and allow “our eyes [to] wait upon the Lord our God, until that he have mercy upon us” (Psalm 123:2). His healing power will enable us to forgive as He forgives.

### *The Cost of Unforgiveness*

As we consider what we might do to forgive, it can be helpful to consider how to increase our motivation, desire, or willingness to do the work of forgiveness. One method is to consider the cost of not fully forgiving. We will discuss three costs of unforgiveness: damage to our physical health, internal or emotional suffering, and damage to our marriage relationship.

First, a significant cost of unforgiveness is damage to our physical health. Using a nationally representative data set of adults sixty-six years of age and older, researchers found that a failure to forgive can predict mortality. Specifically, these researchers found that conditional forgiveness was predictive of higher mortality. These researchers indicated that “physical health was identified as the sole unique mechanism bridging the connec-

tion between forgiveness and mortality.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, researchers have found that our cardiac health is particularly impacted by failing to forgive.<sup>23</sup>

Second, another cost of unforgiveness is the acute mental or internal suffering it causes us. Lack of forgiveness is associated with poorer mental health outcomes, such as higher levels of anger, depression, anxiety, and vulnerability to substance use.<sup>24</sup>

Jack Kornfield, a writer on Buddhist psychology, related a story about students who were taught by a great teacher that if they were suffering during meditation they were holding on too tightly. He then made this commentary: “Suffering is like rope burn. We need to let go.”<sup>25</sup>

When we hold on too tightly to our bitterness and resentment, failing to do the necessary work of forgiveness, we suffer and hurt. Unforgiveness traumatizes us, never allowing ourselves or our spouse the chance to move forward. In this unforgiveness, we create many additional problems that cause greater pain and even bring trauma into our lives. In other words, failing to forgive hurts a lot more and a lot longer than the pain of the original offense!

This cost of being unforgiving is illustrated using the psychological concepts of clean and dirty pain. Pain in life is inevitable and cannot be avoided; this is often called *clean pain*. Clean pain is the hurt of rejection, job loss, serious medical problems, difficulties with children, relationship difficulties, financial worries, and other such painful life events. *Dirty pain* constitutes dysfunctional attitudes (such as unwillingness, resistance, anger, bitterness, etc.) or behaviors (such as drinking, working long hours, picking an argument, binge eating, pornography use, etc.) that we layer on top of the clean pain because we don’t want to deal with it. This extra junk causes more pain and more problems, above and beyond the pain and problems of the original issue. Here now we have taken a difficult clean-pain circumstance and, rather than dealing with it appropriately, created for ourselves a

much more agonizing trauma with the addition of all the dirty pain.

We tend to do this to ourselves in a misguided effort to defend against the clean pain of life. We want to minimize, numb, ignore, or avoid the pain because, of course, it hurts and we do not want to hurt. Yet it is usually through those efforts of defense or avoidance that we get into the realm of dirty pain and the subsequent feelings of trauma. Steven Hayes, developer of acceptance and commitment therapy, and his colleagues have taught, "Psychological trauma is pain compounded by an unwillingness to experience the pain."<sup>26</sup> As we build things up in ourselves, they take on a presence in our lives that in no way resembles reality. These additional difficulties bleed into every aspect of our lives and onto the other people around us.

Yet, when we courageously choose to face clean pain and deal with it appropriately, with great relief we discover that the angst of dealing with the clean pain of forgiveness (or any other issue) usually proves to be much less than we had fantasized. Additionally, the clean pain is usually of shorter duration than we anticipated. If we are willing to push through the initial discomfort, we are always happier and healthier for having done the work. Our marriages will also be happier and healthier as we choose to address the necessary clean pain of the work of forgiveness.

Finally, when it comes to marriage, unforgiveness has a negative effect on marital well-being. In many ways, we put the quality of our marital relationship on the altar of sacrifice in order to indulge our pride and ego. Researchers studied couples who were in relatively new marriages as well as long-marrieds and found that wives' lower levels of benevolence and husbands' higher scores on avoidance created difficulty resolving conflicts.<sup>27</sup> One researcher commented that a "relationship may endure in the absence of forgiveness but it will not be completely restored to health."<sup>28</sup>



*The Fruits of Forgiveness*

To contrast our discussion on the costs of unforgiveness, let us now consider the marvelous physical, emotional, marital, and spiritual fruits that come into our lives and the lives of our spouses as we do the work to exercise genuine forgiveness.

The physical blessings of forgiveness have been well documented. Those that forgive report fewer health problems in general than those that do not forgive. As we discussed in the previous section, as unforgiveness puts our cardiac health at risk, forgiveness improves our heart health. Researchers have found that forgiveness impacts cardiovascular health by lowering heart rates and mean arterial pressure, particularly diastolic blood pressure.<sup>29</sup>

Forgiveness has also been found to predict a variety of positive mental health outcomes, such as reduced levels of anger, depression, anxiety, and vulnerability to substance use.<sup>30</sup>

There are many blessings of forgiveness for the marital relationship. Researchers have found that greater tendency for forgiveness predicted higher relationship satisfaction over time.<sup>31</sup> Studies have identified a variety of related positive outcomes of forgiveness in marriage, including the following: investment in marriage, marital commitment, marital longevity, dyadic adjustment, generally positive marital adjustment, positive interpersonal interactions, positive assumptions toward self and partner, psychological closeness with partner, empathy, and shared power in marriage.<sup>32</sup>

The spiritual fruits of forgiveness refine our hearts as we seek to emulate our Savior. Forgiveness is a purifying process. As we become purer, as we transform and become more like Him, it empowers us and enables us to be able to someday walk through heaven's gate. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said, "Remember, heaven is filled with those who have this in common: They are forgiven. And they forgive."<sup>33</sup>

## COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

In this process of being ultimately purified and exalted, there are also very practical fruits that come to us right now as we exercise forgiveness in our marriage. These fruits of forgiveness are available first to the one extending forgiveness and then to the one receiving forgiveness.

First, when we have been injured and we extend loving forgiveness to our spouse for their misdeed against us, we ourselves become liberated. Elder David E. Sorenson of the Seventy taught:

It can be very difficult to forgive someone the harm they've done us, but when we do, we open ourselves up to a better future. No longer does someone else's wrongdoing control our course. When we forgive others, it frees us to choose how we will live our own lives. Forgiveness means that problems of the past no longer dictate our destinies, and we can focus on the future with God's love in our hearts.<sup>34</sup>

Forgiveness eradicates the darkness of resentment, anger, and unforgiveness, and opens a space within our souls to receive a greater portion of the Spirit of God. Peace comes, sometimes for the first time in many decades. Love, within what has perhaps been a strained marital relationship, can begin to bloom again. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, [and] temperance" (Galatians 5:22–23).

Second, when, as the guilty party, we receive forgiveness from our spouse, it frees us up to better ourselves and move forward in becoming more like our Savior, Jesus Christ. We are not held captive to past errors or even past sins and are allowed to flourish, if we so choose. The story of the Apostle Paul, formerly Saul, is a good example of this principle. Saul of Tarsus severely "persecuted the church of God" (Galatians 1:13), including being present at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58). Yet he was forgiven for his grievous offenses; a name change to Paul represented the new life he began with his forgiveness and conversion to Jesus Christ. He became one of the greatest missionaries of all time, and his great testimony of Christ fills the pages of our New Testament.

The story of Paul is evidence of the power of forgiveness to propel the forgiven. It is also evidence of God's great power, mercy, and grace in forgiving, and that, in the words of Presbyterian publisher Charles Scribner, there is "no fall so deep that grace cannot descend to it."<sup>35</sup>

*DEBRA: Perhaps the best way to summarize these various fruits of forgiveness is with one word: freedom. Freedom for ourselves; freedom for our spouses. I felt tremendous freedom as I wrote to Richard on one of our wedding anniversaries: "The honest description is not that you and I have a perfect marriage; rather, it is that . . . we both try, we both forgive, and we both seek Christ's atoning power when we do share grievances. Thank you for your 'commitment to the covenant!' At this stage in our marriage I have a sense of stability I've never felt before in my life and it feels wonderful!"*

### Conclusion

The Savior, Jesus Christ, while walking the dusty roads of Judea, taught the principle of forgiveness on numerous occasions. During one instance, He reminded several accusers of an adulterous woman, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." One by one, the accusers walked away, leaving the woman and Jesus alone. With compassion, He spoke to her, saying, "Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:7–11).

The Prophet Joseph Smith understood this type of compassion and forgiveness when he said, "The nearer we get to our Heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion on [others]—we feel that we want to take them upon our shoulders, and cast their sins behind our backs."<sup>36</sup>

As we choose to forgive, we make a choice *for* the life and health of our marriage. In doing so, the influence of the Spirit is allowed into our hearts and our relationship. The loyalty and trust

cycle we discussed in chapter 2 is strengthened, and the security we experience promotes both intrapersonal and interpersonal peace, happiness, and freedom. Ultimately, it will promote our transformation into a more Christlike and charitable individual, which will make all the difference as we seek to strengthen and nurture our marital relationship.

### Notes

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## COMMITMENT TO THE COVENANT

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