



TAKING OUT THE TRASH

Part 5 of Real Marriage

Pastor Mark Driscoll | February 12, 2012

INTRODUCTION

So, who takes out the trash at your house? In our house, it's Grace, unless it's really, really stinky, and then it's one of my sons. Every house has trash, and the key is to take it out. If you live in a home, you're going to have trash. You need to collect it and take it out. So it is in any relationship, but particularly a marriage relationship. You're going to sin against them. They're going to sin against you. Trash is going to accumulate. If you don't know how to take out the trash, it's going to stink up the whole relationship, and that's the analogy that we use.

Sometimes you'll hear married couples say, "We never fight." Oh, really? That's not true, right? What that means is, "We don't talk, because we live parallel lives." Or what that means is, "We're roommates, not soul mates." Or what that means is, "We're lying." Because every time you have an intimate relationship, a friendship, you're going to have some conflict. You're going to have some disagreement, some strife, and occasionally you're going to have a fight. So, the question is not, are you going to fight? The question is, are you going to have a good fight or a bad fight?

So, for those of you who are married or engaged, for the rest of the sermon here's what I'm going to ask you to do. Hold their hand, your fiancé or your spouse. And if you say, "I refuse," then you really need this sermon. This is one you'll really enjoy. So, go ahead and hold their hand, your fiancé or your spouse, and we'll begin the reconciliation process.

HOW NOT TO FIGHT

Now, here's how not to fight. Here's how not to fight. There's a researcher named John Gottman. He has studied marriages, and he has been able to predict divorce with a 91 percent success rate. He says there are a few variables. He calls them four horsemen, using apocalyptic language to talk about marriage and relationships. And he says when these things are present, the fight is going to go very bad, and usually the marriage will end in divorce. Additionally, I would say for other relationships—friendships, roommates, family relationships—if these things are present, the same kind of painful ending to the relationship is common.

He says it begins with a harsh start-up. Do you know what a harsh start-up is? Somebody's angry, tempers are flaring, plates are flying. She's got her hands on her hips. He's immediately got that look. It starts bad. It starts harsh, it starts intense, it starts with raised voices, starts with a conflict, a harsh start-up, and then it proceeds through this pattern.

1. CRITICISM

Number one, horseman number one is criticism. This is where you attack the person, not the problem. When you attack the problem, you say, "Okay, okay, we have this issue. It's a problem. Let's talk about this. Let's work on it." In criticism, the person is the problem, and this is where you start criticizing the person. "You always . . . You never . . ." As soon as you hear that language, you're going down the wrong route. And what you're doing is you're pushing them away, not drawing them in. You're fighting with them as a foe, rather than welcoming them as a friend. It starts with criticism; the point is to hurt the person, to belittle them, to shame them, to make them suffer and pay.

2. CONTEMPT

The second horseman, then, is contempt. This is where you're just disgusted by them, and you don't even pretend to hide it. "You are disgusting. You are so immature. You are so out of control." It's very condescending, and it's contemptuous. This is, in every way, trying to shame them, to belittle them, to defeat them, to control them. "You make me sick. It's amazing I even put up with you. You know, no one else would put up with you. You're lucky to have me, but you have no idea how hard it is for me to be here with you." Contempt.

3. DEFENSIVENESS

Number three, horseman number three, defensiveness. This is where the Holy Spirit is convicting you of sin. Maybe they're saying, "Hey, that's not nice. You're being harsh. You're being mean. That's out of line. That's out of order." And rather than repenting, you defend yourself: "Well, of course I'm angry. You made me angry. Of course I'm arguing with you. Who wouldn't argue with you? Oh, you want to talk about my problems? No, let's talk about your problems." Defensiveness. Some of you have never heard your spouse apologize, never. Or when they do apologize, it's, "I'm sorry that you made me mad," which isn't really an apology. Some of you grew up in homes where your parents—maybe it was even your dad, he tends to be the most common—never apologized, never said he was sorry. It was never his fault. Maybe you even had those parents who said, "Do as I say, not

as I do.” That’s defensiveness. “I’m not the problem; you are. You could say I’m the problem, and I’m going to try and convince you that this really isn’t my responsibility in any regard.”

4. STONEWALLING

Number four, horseman number four, stonewalling. This is when it’s escalated, it’s heated. Somebody’s hurt. Maybe there are tears. It’s not going well. And stonewalling is when you ignore the other person. This is when you turn up the TV. This is when you raise your voice to drown them out. This is when you literally turn your back and walk away, maybe get in the car and drive away. You refuse to engage. You refuse to resolve. You’re stonewalling. Now, do you think it’s more common for men or women to stonewall in an argument? Men. Eighty-five percent of the time, it’s the man who stonewalls. He’s the one who turns up the TV, gets on the phone, surfs the Internet, turns his back, walks away, gets the keys, drives away, so that you can’t work on it. It’s over, it’s over.

That’s how not to fight. In marriage, that results ultimately, often, in divorce, because you go from being one to being two, from being allies to being enemies. And the principles for this sermon are true for all relationships, right? Your friends, your family, your coworkers, your neighbors, your own children. These are relationship principles that have specific application to marriage, in light of our series, but the truth is, single or married, these are principles for us all.

Well, if that’s how not to fight—some of you say, “Man, he’s got really good examples. Where’d he get those?” From his life and his hypocrisy.

HOW TO FIGHT TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND THE GOOD OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Now, how to fight to the glory of God and the good of your relationship, how to have a good fight. You’re going to fight, so you may as well have a good fight.

1. RECOGNIZE SIN

Number one, we want you to recognize sin. Sin is a violation of the character of God. God is loving, gracious, truthful, just, merciful, and kind. Sin is what’s contrary to the character of God. Sin is what’s contrary to the Word of God. That’s what 1 John says, that sin is the transgression of the Word, the Law of God. And if it all gets confusing, just think about Jesus; and anything that’s not like Jesus, that’s sin.

The Bible says it rightly in 1 John 1:10, “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” We’re all sinners. You need to know this: in any relationship, but particularly marriage, it’s two sinners. You know, one sinner plus one sinner does not equal zero sin. Two sinners coming together are going to have to continually deal with sin. Again, it’s like living in a house. You’re going to have trash. You’ve got to pack it up. You’ve got to take it out. Two sinners, living, dwelling together in a relationship, particularly a friendship and/or a marriage, there’s going to be sin. You’ve got to learn how to pack it up and take it out.

If either of you should say, “I’m not the sinner; you are. I’m the holy one; you’re the unholy one,” you’re saying God is a liar, because God says we’ve all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We all need to be humble. We’ve all got stuff to work on, and none of us has the résumé of Jesus. We’re all works in progress, so we’ve got to be patient, and considerate, and affectionate, and tender with one another, even when we’re frustrated.

So at Mars Hill, it’s really important that you know that we use the language of sin because that’s the language the Bible uses. It’s not just a moral failure or a mistake. It’s a sin, and that means it not only is implicating and affecting the person that we’re in relationship with, it also includes God. It includes the Lord. Because when we sin, we sin against the Lord. That’s what the psalmist says. “Against you only Lord God have I sinned.” And we sin against the person we’re in relationship with.

This is what distinguishes Christian relationships from all other relationships. It was interesting. Grace and I were doing a recent media interview around the book, and we’re dialoguing. It was a cool interview. It was fine, but with some non-Christian sex therapists, which is just a weird thing to do on TV in front of everyone. And they said, “Well, you know, we kind of like the book, but the word ‘sin,’ boy, that’s a really inappropriate word.” “No, it’s a word that God uses, and it’s a word that we want to use.” And their argument was, “Because sin denotes something really bad.” Right. God died for it—his name is Jesus—so it’s a big deal. It’s that big of a deal that God had to die for sin. “And we don’t like the word, because it can produce shame.” Well, it could produce shame or it can produce conviction that leads to repentance, that leads to forgiveness, because Jesus went to the cross, and he scorned our shame.

Because, see, the argument is, basically, if you use the word “sin,” people are going to feel bad. Here’s the big idea: if you’ve done bad, feel bad; otherwise, you’re a sociopath, right? We don’t want you to say, “I did bad, but I feel good.” Well, okay, then you have some serious issues. Sometimes we feel bad because we’ve done bad. And what that is, that’s not condemnation. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.” It’s conviction. It’s the Holy Spirit showing us our sin, not to destroy us, but to motivate us to destroy the sin before it destroys the relationship.

2. REPENT OF SIN

So, number one, recognize sin. Number two, repent of sin. James 5:16 says, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” You’re struggling in your relationship. You’re having a hard time trusting one another, loving one another, being considerate with one another, you’ve got to talk.

Confession is talking about it, talking about your sin with God, talking about your sin with the person whom you’ve sinned against, and praying for one another. This is what Christians do. “I need you to pray for me. I’m going to pray for you. We need to get God involved,” right? The Bible says that

a cord of three strands is not easily broken. It's you, that person, and Jesus.

And what's going to happen is the sin is going to come between you, or Jesus is going to come between you. If the sin comes between you, it's going to destroy your relationship. If Jesus comes between you, that's going to reconcile your relationship. And if you're struggling in your relationship today, the answer is Jesus. The problem is sin; the answer is Jesus. And confessing it means talking about it with Jesus and the person you're having the strife with—you confessing your sin, them confessing their sin, praying for one another, and Jesus will show up and heal your relationship.

REPENTANCE

And this is repentance, and repentance is essentially what it means to be a Christian. The Protestant Reformation was kicked off with basically a manifesto called *The 95 Theses* that was penned by Martin Luther, and it was nailed to this door at a place called Wittenberg, and this manifesto began with this statement: "All of a Christian's life is one of repentance." You repent of sin to become a Christian. You repent of sin to grow as a Christian. You repent of sin to reveal Christ to others. All of a Christian's life is one of repentance. The prophets keep saying, "Repent, repent, repent."

Repentance is three things. It's confession, it's contrition, and it's change. That's ultimately what it is.

1. CONFESSION

Confession includes your mind and your mouth. When you become a Christian, and you're being renewed by the Holy Spirit, and you're studying the Word of God, the way you think about yourself and your sin starts to change. That's why the Bible says in Romans 12, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." You think differently.

So, it begins with confession, saying, "I see where I've sinned. I see it. My mind thinks differently about my behavior." Some of you used to do things that you used to brag about or boast about, and now you're ashamed of. That's confession that comes out of conviction, and the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, so that we might confess it.

Jesus said in John's Gospel he'd send the Holy Spirit, and part of his ministry would be to convict us of sin. I know that the Holy Spirit will give to each of us, myself included, something, some issue, some instance, some relationship, and he will bring that to the forefront of our minds, and he will be compelling and propelling us to deal with that. What is that for you? Don't check your phone. Don't say, "Boy, I really hope this sermon ends soon." Don't start thinking about all the people who need to hear this. Hear it, acknowledge that, identify that, allow God to do a work in your life today.

2. CONTRITION

Repentance proceeds from confession to contrition. Confession is your mind and your mouth. Contrition is ultimately inclusive of your emotions and your expressions. Somebody who is really contrite, they not only know categorically that they have done wrong, but they feel emotionally that they've done wrong. You feel it.

Have you ever seen someone apologize? And you could just tell they're sincere. They mean it. They're contrite. This really bothers them. "I don't need to shame them, pile on, or push them. They're already there. I need to love them, forgive them. I don't need to in any way make them feel this, because they already feel it." It's your emotions and your expressions. That's contrition.

For those of you who are parents, you can help develop your children in relationships by, when they sin, name the sin. Don't just say, "You sinned." Tell them, "Okay, here's what you said or did, or didn't say or do. Here's what it was. Now I want you to go to that person, and I want you to look them in the eye, because friendship is all about face-to-face, and I want you to tell them you're sorry, and I want you to ask them to forgive you for this specific sin."

Otherwise, what happens, when you're kids, parents are like, "You sinned. Say you're sorry." "Sorry!" They're not. But I tell you, you put two kids together. You make them look one another in the eye. "I'm sorry. I sinned. Here's what I did. Please forgive me." Then there's the awkward silence, and the other one says, "I forgive you." The emotions and the expressions change. Because when you're looking someone in the eye, and you see that you've hurt them, it affects your heart, and you realize, "Man, sin is not just breaking God's Law, it's also breaking God's heart, and it's breaking the heart of others."

3. CHANGE

So, it is conviction, it is contrition, and it is change, and change, that's your will and your works. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you say, "I don't want to do that anymore. I don't want to say that anymore. I don't want to be like that anymore. I want to be like Jesus. I want to get beyond this. I want this to die, since Jesus died for it. I want to put it to death."

And ultimately, by the grace of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, you change. You stop doing that. You stop being like that. And maybe it's all at once, and it's radical. Maybe you have some failures along the way, but you repent and come clean, and you seek the help that you need, and you confess it to your spouse, and you ask for prayer, and by the grace of God, you do change.

Friends, this is the key to all relationships, but particularly Christian marriage. Gary Thomas, he's a good Christian author. He says, "Couples don't fall out of love so much as they fall out of repentance." You want to have a good friendship, you want to have a long relationship, you want to have a long marriage that is enduring and endearing, you want to celebrate your fiftieth wedding anniversary holding hands? Repent, repent, repent, so that sin is no longer between you, but Jesus is. And couples will say, "Well, you know, we've fallen out of love." No, you've fallen out of repentance, because it is

difficult to remain loving, trusting, and intimate when you or they are unrepentant. But when you're both repentant, the love flows freely, and the trust grows daily.

WHAT REPENTANCE IS NOT

Now, a couple of things on repentance and what it is not.

Number one, repentance is not getting caught, but coming clean. How many of you, you've not really told the truth to your spouse? There's sin in your life that they are unaware of. Maybe what you would consider secret sin, hidden sin, God sees and knows all. So, don't wait to get caught, come clean. Don't live under the anxiety of being exposed. Repent. Invite God and whomever you've offended or are sinning against in to see that sin and your desire to repent of it, so that there might be healing, and hope, and help.

Number two, repentance is not blaming others for our sin, denying our sin, excusing our sin, or diminishing our sin. It's not, "Oh, it's their fault. You made me mad. It's my genetics. My personality type is J-E-R-K. You know, I had a hard day." It's instead saying, "I'm guilty. It's my fault. I'm sorry." Just be honest.

And number three, it's not worldly sorrow. Paul tells the Corinthians not to practice worldly sorrow, because non-Christians can feel bad, but they don't repent. You can cry, and say you're sorry, and say you'll never do it again, but the truth is there's not going to be that deep change in nature and desire until you've given the sin to Jesus and received his righteousness, and become a new creation in Christ, born again as a Christian. A non-Christian can feel bad. A non-Christian can seemingly stop sinning outwardly, but only a Christian can start worshiping inwardly.

MARRIAGE GETS BITTER OR IT GETS BETTER

The big idea is this: marriage gets bitter or it gets better. All marriages are on a continuum sliding toward getting bitter or getting better. Every marriage is sliding one direction or another, and I would say the same is true for friendships and other relationships. They're sliding toward getting bitter or getting better.

So I want to share with you from Ephesians 4:25-32. In my fifteen years of pastoral ministry at Mars Hill Church and a lot of counseling, I have used this section of Scripture more than all other Scriptures. Biblical counselor David Powlison says, quote, "In a pinch, you could do all your biblical counseling from the book of Ephesians."

This is at the heart of Ephesians, and this is at the heart of God's intent for our relationships. And he says it this way: "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth." So, the first thing is you need to be honest about your sin; and if they've sinned against you, you need to be honest with them. Don't blame shift. Don't lie. Don't diminish. Don't excuse. Don't ignore. Don't make it a bigger deal than it is, and don't make it a lesser deal than it is. Tell the truth. Be honest.

"Be angry and do not sin." Now here's what it doesn't say: "Never get angry." There is some erroneous teaching that says, essentially, there are emotions that are godly and emotions that are ungodly. The truth is God has all emotions and expresses them in holy ways. All emotions, therefore, are potentially good, though they could lead us to sin, if we don't control them, but we allow them to control us.

Now, this is something, to be honest with you, that's been an issue for me my whole life. I grew up seeing a lot of injustice and a lot of abuse, and there's a righteous defender/protector anger in me; but sometimes that anger is out of control, meaning, I'll get angry. I'll say something I shouldn't. I'll be difficult. And more and more, the Holy Spirit is convicting me. Yeah, the anger can be really good: defend, protect, provide. It can also be, you know, selfish, bullying, mean-spirited. That's what he's talking about.

You may be angry, and you may even have a good reason for your anger, but don't let it lead you into sin, because then what you're doing is you're saying, "They sinned against me; I'm going to sin against them." That doesn't make it any better; that only makes it bitter. What are you angry about? Who are you angry at? And how are you using that anger to glorify God? Or are you allowing it to lead you into sin?

And "do not let the sun go down on your anger." In a day that was an agrarian society, and people were fishers and farmers, when the sun would come up, you would get up, when the sun would go down, you would go home, because your day was over. What he's saying here is deal with the sin quickly. Don't let days go by. It's okay, if you're frustrated and angry, to say, "I'm going to go for a walk, pray, clear my head, calm down, and figure out how to say this." That's okay. But if you're leaving time, you're leaving, he says, an opportunity for Satan.

"And give no opportunity to the devil." Again, if the sin comes between you, then Satan has come between you, and the longer you wait, the worse it gets and the more he destroys.

You say, "Well, we're supposed to talk. How should we talk?" "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion." When you go to tell the truth, you've got to remember, "I want words that build you up, don't break you down, words that invite you in, don't push you away, words that give you hope, don't cause you to lose hope."

And you can tell what these issues are. And some of you say, "Well, I'm doing pretty good, but every once in a while, I blow up." It's because there's an issue of unforgiveness somewhere, right? There's a grenade in your life. The pin is pulled, and it's sitting there. And every once in a while, you get near it, and it just blows. The conversation blows up. The four horsemen show up. You go into the crazy cycle. All of a sudden, it's just right back to the same conversation, the same flaring tempers, the same sad emotions, the same hurt feelings, no resolution. "We've done this over and over. What we

try to do now is just walk around the landmine. Don't talk about that." The key is to watch what you say in those moments, to watch what you say in those moments.

Some of you say, "How am I going to do that?" Well, he continues, "That it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." God the Holy Spirit inspired and empowered the ministry of Jesus. He indwells and empowers the believer. He wants to help you control your tongue. The Bible says that life and death are held by the power of the tongue. You could bring life or death to that relationship by the words you choose, and the Holy Spirit wants you to have truthful words, not lying words, but words that are gracious, words that are life giving, not death causing.

So you may even need to stop in those moments and say, "Okay, okay, I want to talk about this. I want to keep going. What I'm about to say is not the Holy Spirit. Let me pray. Let me ask him to help. Let me listen," right? "Let me," throughout the course of the conversation, "Holy Spirit, help me. I want to say this right. I want to have the right tone. I want to have the right words. I want to help. I don't want to be an instrument of the enemy to destroy our family."

If you don't, here's what happens: bitterness. Bitterness. See, the sinner is supposed to repent of sin; the victim of sin is supposed to forgive. If the victim of sin does not forgive, you become bitter. All you need to do to become bitter is not forgive. So, he goes to bitterness. "Let all bitterness—" And see, what happens with bitterness is it grows. It's like cancer in a body. It continues to grow, and multiply, and manifest until it causes death.

So, what starts with bitterness grows into "wrath." This is where you're angry, and frustrated, and you're starting to feel emotional about it. And "clamor." Now you're conflicted. And "slander." It means you're arguing with them, or maybe you're speaking ill about them, gossiping, "to be put away from you, along with all malice." And this is different ways that we hurt each other. "I'm going to make you suffer. I'm going to make you feel it. I'm going to make you pay." And all of that is a denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Well, didn't he suffer? Wasn't he shamed? Didn't he die? Hasn't he already paid?" "Yes, but that's not enough. I'm going to make them pay, as well." And that's what bitter people do. Relationships, marriages, they invariably get bitter, or they get better.

I would say this is the one issue that affected our marriage most negatively for the longest period of time, that I felt sinned against by Grace. And rather than forgiving her, I was bitter. I was bitter. This was the one thing that hurt our marriage the most for the longest period of time. As I've said before, and I'll say it again, it affected my tone. The bitterness would come out even in preaching and teaching, on how sometimes I would speak about women. I'll always regret that. I deeply grieve that. I ask your forgiveness for that. And it was bitterness.

At the time, what I would've said is, "Well, something bad was done, and, yeah, I'm bitter, but, you know, something bad was done." And I didn't realize that my not forgiving was also a sin and that I wasn't just one who had been sinned against, but I was one who was sinning, and that it wasn't just a problem I had with Grace, it was a problem I had with Jesus, and that's exactly where Paul goes.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted—" It's going to take the Holy Spirit to do that in a fight, right? "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Here's what happens for those of us who struggle with bitterness— and I can tell you this, today. The reason we put this in the book, the reason I'm telling you this today is I'm not bitter. Okay? And it is better. Grace has repented of her sin, and I've repented of my sin of bitterness. Jesus died for it, so we don't need to kill one another. Jesus scorned the shame for it, so we don't need to shame one another. Jesus rose from death, and so there's new life for us.

I want you to have a relationship that's better and not bitter. And having been someone who was bitter, I can tell you it is death causing. And you can be biblically sound, and serving the Lord, and even fruitful, and still bitter. Ultimately, those who are bitter, they, generally, have been sinned against. So, if you go to a bitter person, and you say, "I think you're bitter." They'll say, "Oh, yeah, I'm bitter, and here's what they did, and here's what they said, and here's what they didn't do, and here's what they didn't say." All of a sudden, the archaeological dig kicks in, and they're pulling up all the ancient artifacts to show, "Well, here's all the evidence. Of course I'm bitter."

You may have been sinned against. You may have a reason to be angry. You may have a reason to feel hurt. Oftentimes, it's not because of the degree of the offense, but the proximity of the offender; meaning, if a total stranger does something terrible, in ten years, you're probably not going to be obsessing over it every minute of every day. But if it's somebody that you loved and trusted and gave access to your heart and life, and they do something that is perhaps not that grievous, it hurts more deeply, because you love them more intimately.

So, we're most likely to become embittered against the people that we love the most; and, yes, friends, this can include God. Now, bitterness against God, we know, theologically, is a sin, because if we're bitter against God, what we're saying is, "God, you're evil. You've sinned against me, and I don't forgive you." Theologically, we know, okay, God's not a sinner. God is good, not evil; light, not darkness. God doesn't apologize, because God doesn't do wrong. But, emotionally, we can feel that way. And sometimes Satan will even come in and try and trick you, and he'll take things that sinners did, or that he did, and blame it on God, so that you'll become bitter against God. Don't. Repent of bitterness as a sin; particularly repent of bitterness against God as a sin.

Some of you say, "Why? They did a horrible thing." Ah, "as God in Christ forgave you." Aren't you glad that Jesus didn't come to the earth with a mission to execute vengeance out of bitterness? Are you glad that, right now, high and exalted, resurrected from death, seated on a throne, the Lord Jesus Christ is not making plans to destroy you out of bitterness?

Jesus comes, and he lives without sin, and no person who's ever walked the earth was sinned against more continually, grievously, and wrongly than Jesus. He goes to the cross, and what he says is, "Father, forgive them. Father, forgive them." And then Jesus makes forgiveness possible. He suffers, he's shamed, he bleeds, he dies, he's the one who forgives. And as a Christian, it's hypocrisy to say, "Jesus, forgive me of my sin; but, Jesus, I won't

forgive them of their sin. Because, Jesus, my sin against you is not nearly as bad as their sin against me.”

To receive forgiveness and not give forgiveness is the essence of hypocrisy, and it’s putting yourself, friends—take it, as one who’s guilty, okay, who has been guilty—it puts you in the seat of God. “Forgiven. Not forgiven.” That’s God’s job, not ours. Our job is to forgive and leave them to the judgment of God, not to judge them as God. Who are you bitter against? What are you bitter about? Who have you not forgiven? What have you not forgiven? And I’m not saying this is easy, but I’m saying it’s vital.

Even just before this sermon, I was talking to a woman whose husband was a Christian leader, and committed adultery, and ran off, and married another woman, and destroyed the family, and she has to deal with this every day. She said, “I’m bitter.” Okay. Then journal it out, think it out, talk it out, pray it out. Write a letter to him. Have it soaked in tears. Even if you never send it, prayerfully, carefully, work it through with Jesus. Talk it through with Jesus. Who do you need to forgive?

It takes a sinner to repent. It takes a victim to forgive. It takes two people to reconcile. The only way your relationship is going to be enduring and endearing is if repentance of sin and forgiveness of sin are practiced; otherwise, it will not get better. It will get bitter.

FORGIVENESS

Now, for those of you who have questions about forgiveness, there are three that I get most frequently, and I’ll answer them.

Number one, forgiveness is not waiting for someone to acknowledge their sin, apologize, and repent. Some of you say, “I will forgive them as soon as they say they’re sorry.” They may never. They may die and never apologize. And so your forgiveness is not predicated on their repentance. In forgiving them, you’re leaving them to God’s judgment, and you’re guarding your own heart against bitterness.

Number two, forgiveness is not a one-time event. It’s not like, “Well, I forgave them, and now we’re done.” The truth is they may do it again. The truth is you may forgive them, and then something triggers emotionally those feelings again of betrayal, or hurt, or loss. And you realize, “Wow, it’s kind of coming back. I’ve got to forgive them again.” You may still feel it on occasion. If you’re obsessing over it, you’re probably still bitter. But if it comes up once in a while, that doesn’t mean you’ve not forgiven them. It just means that you need to forgive them again.

Some of you say, “But doesn’t God forget our sin?” Well, the Bible says in the Old Testament that God remembers our sin no more. But what that doesn’t mean is that God has a bad memory. God is all knowing. He remembers everything. He’s omniscient. It’s one of his attributes. When it says that God remembers our sin no more, it means that he doesn’t deal with us in light of them, but in light of Jesus, and he doesn’t cause that to be our identity. Instead, he loves and pursues us.

And, number three, forgiveness is not reconciliation. If they’ve abused you, and they’ve not repented and gotten help, you can’t trust them. If they’ve not apologized, are not willing to work on it, then you may have your hand of friendship extended, but until they have repented, reconciliation is not possible. Repentance takes one. Forgiveness takes one. Reconciliation takes two.

So, the goal is to do your part, to pray for them. And you know you’re not bitter when you want good for them. When you’re saying, “Man, I hope they come around. I hope they change. I hope their future is better than their past,” then you know that you’re not bitter, but you really have forgiven them, and you love them, and you want good for them, as God in Christ has been good to you.

Hebrews says it this way. Hebrews says to dig up the root of bitterness, to dig it up. So, today, if you’re here with someone you’ve sinned against, repent to them. If there’s someone that God brings to mind that you’ve sinned against, and they’re not here, find them and repent to them. If you’ve been sinned against, forgive them, forgive them. And that is the process by which we dig up the root of bitterness, so that the fruit of the relationship would be life and not death.

Q&A WITH GRACE

What we’ll do at this point is we’ll do some specific applications. And so I’m going to go get my friend, my wife, Grace, and we’ll take some of your questions. All right, you ready? I guess it doesn’t matter at this point.

Grace: No.

I think, I think, theologically, these things make sense, and then with people there are practically some variables and issues and complexities, and so we’ll see if we can help and answer some questions. So, we’ll start with the first one.

“How do I bring up my sin without starting a fight?”

You should answer that. I think you’re better at that than me.

Grace: I think just doing that—I think, for me, I’ve learned to always pray before I bring anything up, whether it’s my sin or someone else’s sin, and just ask the Lord to give me a soft heart and not an accusatory heart or a bitter heart, and that God the Holy Spirit would actually guide my words and give me the words, because I don’t need to necessarily always say what’s on my mind, everything, but I need to ask for the things that would be the most helpful and give grace to the person that’s hearing. Talking about our sin is really that clear. I think sometimes we like to make it more difficult than it actually is, because it’s pretty humbling to talk about our sin, but I would start even just saying, “I’d love to have a conversation, because my sin is troubling me, and I’ve been praying about it, and I

have felt like I need to come to you and talk to you about this. So, I want to tell you my sin and see how I've hurt you." Ask questions so that they can feel free to respond, and be willing to listen. I think that's something important that I had to learn was I couldn't just put my sin out there and then not let Mark respond to it, even if it was hard to hear sometimes in those initial phases of learning how to talk about sin. I still needed to receive that and be willing to see that there was some pain that I caused, and I needed to repent of that, as well, not just the sin itself, but the pain that I caused through that sin.

How about preparing for that conversation? So, okay, there are things I want to say, and I want to say them right. What's a good way to prepare?

Grace: Like I said, praying, and, for me, I journal out either my sins or my fears, and confessing the sin. Sometimes I have to journal those out, as well, because that can be a sin for me, is fear of man instead of doing what the Lord has asked me to do in repentance. So, journaling helps me have kind of more directives, as far as what I want to discuss.

I would say, too, pick a time and a place that's private. You know, if it's late at night, probably not the best. If the kids are running around, probably not the best. It's finding a place where there's time and place that's a little more safeguarded and protected, so that you can have an honest conversation without a lot of disruption or being hurried. And so depending upon the severity of the issue, it's even planning that, saying, "Okay, I need to talk to you about something. So, when's a good time, and where could we do that, and how could we do that?" Because sometimes the fight comes out of, "Man, the kids are in the room. We just got home. We've only got fifteen minutes. You just dropped this bomb, and it's a little hard to pick it up right now." And so even being considerate, because sometimes when we're feeling convicted, we want to talk about it, and we want to get it out there, and sometimes we just need to; but sometimes the best thing is to say, "Okay, let's get there. What's the best time and way to have this conversation?" And then prepare for it.

So, we'll go on to the next one, sweet.

"What should I do, as a wife, when my husband just keeps saying, 'Sorry,' but never shows any visible change?"

Grace: Well, I mean, it's a good analogy of what you talked about. You can either choose to be bitter, or you can choose to keep forgiving, as Christ has done, and it can be a very painful thing to see that someone isn't really sorry for their sin, and they just keep repeating it. I mean, I know that you've had that experience with me, and I've had that experience with you through our years of marriage, almost twenty years of marriage, so that we've had a lot of those years where we just think, "They keep saying they're sorry, and they're not changing." For me, I know I had to grow in my prayer life, and also I had to ask myself, "Do I really trust God to change this person? And in the process, am I willing to change, so that I can be a safer place for this person to repent, so that you can trust me and trust that I'm going to forgive you, if you do choose to repent, if your heart does soften?" So, for me, it was God saying my heart needed to be softened, and I needed to forgive, no matter what. For me, also, the twist was that somehow I saw Mark's sin as worse than mine. And so God dropped that bomb on me, when he said, "Wait a second. Your sin is just as ugly to me as you think his sin is." And then I kind of fell to my knees at that point. It was a big transition in my view of repentance at that point. And when I started to see that, that my sin is horrid to the Lord, but, yet, he still forgives, if I'm willing to repent, then I had a different heart for Mark's sin and for other people in my life.

I would say, too, this is part of the beauty of being part of a church, is that the woman can say, "Honey, I know you say you're sorry. I want you to talk to godly men in the church, or a Community Group leader, a pastor, an elder, one of the leaders. You know, I agree that this is a problem. I acknowledge that you've said you're sorry. I'm not going to judge your heart. I think you're sincere, but it seems like it keeps happening, and we're stuck. And maybe I'm not the most helpful. Maybe another man would be helpful, a guy who could, you know, speak the truth, and get to the bottom line, and be a friend, and provide accountability in a real loving, not a legalistic way."

And this is where your marriage is in the context of a church, and part of the blessing of being in the church is that other people can help. And sometimes the husband will hear men differently than he hears his wife, and sometimes the wife will hear the ladies differently than she hears her husband, and this is where Community Groups, and friendship, and community, and honesty, and even leadership in the church can be really helpful. And so for the men for whom this is their situation or story, talk to other men. They could be helpful. And for the wives, not naggingly, but just lovingly saying, "Is there a good godly man that you could talk to that could be helpful? Because we need help, and I'm here to help, but I think a man would be helpful, too." And that would be my encouragement, for sure.

Let's do another one, sweet.

"How do you forgive when someone is actively pursuing to hurt you? When there is no rest?"

Yeah, and that's where I would say there's a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Like I said, forgiveness takes one. Reconciliation takes two. And if they're still doing evil, and sinning, and maybe even dangerous, you're not saying it's okay. You're not agreeing with it. You're not excusing it. You can forgive someone and call the police and have them arrested. It's not neglecting justice. You can forgive someone and testify in court that they've committed a crime.

I mean, so forgiving someone is not saying, "I trust you, and I agree with you, and I'm vulnerable to you," at all. It's simply saying, "I am choosing to forgive, as God in Christ has forgiven me, and I'm going to leave you to the Lord. I might leave you to the law, the authorities. I might go get a restraining order. I want good for you. I want you to change. I don't trust you, and I don't feel safe with you, and I'm not going to be vulnerable with you, but that doesn't mean I'm bitter against you." See the difference?

And it's hoping, trusting, and praying that in the grace of God they do change. But I think sometimes the naivety in Christianity is, "Well, if I forgive them, then they need to be close to me." No, no. I mean, if this is your abuser, or they've harmed your kids, just because they say they're sorry doesn't mean they're yet safe. And if they've never said they're sorry, they're definitely not safe. And so forgiveness comes in a moment. Trust and reconciliation takes time, depending upon how dangerous the person is and how bad the situation is.

Yeah, I don't know if you'd add anything to that. Okay, next one.

"If my husband and I are struggling through serious sin resulting in very little intimacy, is it better to not be together and wait patiently, trusting God, or better to be together anyways?"

It's the wife asking the question, so— *laughing* That's one you can have.

Grace: Thanks.

You're welcome.

Grace: You probably would say different than me. I mean, it really depends. I mean, I think you can take too long of a break; yet, there is Scripture that does say, you know, take time to forgive and work things through, but then come back together—

Yeah, 1 Corinthians 7, yeah.

Grace: So that the enemy doesn't get a foothold. So, it really depends. I mean, if it's something that's been going on a long time in your marriage, you don't want to just let that be the crutch that says we're not going to be intimate, because we just don't want to work it out. But on the other hand, you don't want to just be together in a fake way. I think, for us, we learned to pray together a lot, when we're really struggling with each other. And even when we haven't fully reconciled, we've learned to pray through those times and ask the Lord to use intimacy and whatever, forgiveness, and repentance to really connect us in a way that wouldn't otherwise happen. I think if we're willing to give the Lord that opportunity, it is amazing to see what he does in those moments.

Yeah, and I would say, not to punt on the question, but it kind of depends on the issue, and the couple, and the circumstances. You know, if it's porn use, or it's adultery, or spousal sexual assault or, you know, something like that, and you're not feeling safe, then that's one thing. If it's, "We really annoy each other, and we're trying to work on that," well, maybe that person's annoying, but not dangerous; or maybe you're annoying, but not dangerous; or maybe you're both annoying, but not dangerous. And I would say then this is where, when you can't resolve something, this is where you bring in someone else to help mediate, and this is where a pastor, a godly, biblical counselor comes in, and says, "Okay, let's look at all the variables. Let's ask the questions. Let's see what's going on. Let's pray and open the Word of God, and let's see if there's a wise answer here and some good counsel."

So what I would hate to do on a question like this— because it calls it "serious sin," so we can assume it's a big thing. Now, all sin has seriousness, but sometimes the implications of sin can be a little more devastating, and so to best serve someone like this and a couple like this, I would say schedule a meeting with one of the elders in the church, or get a referral to a good, solid, biblical counselor, and let's look at what the issue is, and let's see all the circumstances, and let's get the husband and the wife in the room, because Proverbs says everyone seems right until the other side is heard, and the worst way to do marriage counseling is meet with one person in the marriage. Get them both in the room. Get the whole truth. Get both sides. Figure out the facts, and then give some counsel. So, not to in any way fail to serve this question, but I think the best way to serve these people is to invite them to meet with leadership, and for the leaders to lovingly involve themselves and care and help. And so that would be my counsel.

Let's do one or two more, depending on time. We'll make this the last one.

"I know God forgives, but I cannot forgive myself. What do I do?"

This is a very common statement that many people make. "I know that Jesus died for my sin. I know that he forgives me, but I can't forgive myself." Maybe you comment on it, and then I'll close it.

Grace: I know this is how I felt, and it kept me from repenting, because I didn't want someone else—I didn't want you to know what I had done, because, certainly, I needed to make up for my sin somehow before I could actually repent of it, which is the opposite of the gospel of grace and forgiveness. So, it can keep you from repenting. And deep down inside, it was pride. "Somehow, I can do something better than God can do to forgive myself, so that he can forgive me." It's a very twisted way of thinking, I realized, and so pride was the core of it, that I could be better than God's forgiveness somehow by figuring a new way. Really, it's a matter of getting on your knees and praying that God would humble you and show you that his death on the cross was enough. It was more than enough, and we didn't deserve it, and we still don't; but, yet, we can continue to go to the cross and get on our knees and ask for that same forgiveness. So, it's really a change of theology and how we view God.

And it usually contributes to a false gospel, meaning, "I know Jesus suffered, but I need to suffer, too. I know Jesus was shamed, but I need to be ashamed, too. I know that Jesus wept, but I need to weep, too. I know that Jesus was rejected, but I need to be rejected, too." And what it's saying is, "Jesus, I really appreciate it, but that wasn't quite enough." And what it's saying is, "Jesus, I know you forgive me, and I know you're the Lord, but above you there's another lord: me. And though you would forgive me, I don't forgive myself, because I'm the highest lord in my life." And so you need to see, theologically, it's evil. Like Grace said, it's pride. It's saying, "Jesus didn't do enough, and he's not the highest authority. So, I need to do

some more and exercise my own authority.” And to think that somehow there’s humility in that, that there’s the gospel of grace, as you said, sweetheart, in that, it’s just not there. It’s just not there, but it’s a lie that Satan will tell you. Jesus says, “Know the truth, and the truth sets you free.” The truth is you’re forgiven by the highest Lord, and he suffered, and he was rejected, and he was shamed, and he bled, and he died, and you don’t need to, because he already did, and he loves you. He really loves you.

And so—thanks, hon. I thank you for forgiving me of being a—

Grace: It changed our marriage.

It has changed our marriage. I grieve that, but I celebrate that that’s not where we’re at, and I hope others can enjoy that.

REPENT AND FORGIVE

So, for those of you who are now hearing this, you need to do something with it. Are you a Christian? Have you ever repented of your sin to Jesus and received his forgiveness? If not, you need to do that. Become a new person, not just a better person, but a new person.

If you’re here with someone that you’ve sinned against or you’re bitter against, you’ve got to confess those sins and forgive one another, and like James 5:16 says, to pray for one another. If they’re not here, you need to pledge before God, “I’m going to follow up with them, and I’m going to repent or forgive.” If you don’t know who your abuser is or where they’re at, and you’re bitter, journal it out, pray it out, write it out, think it out, work it out, cry it out, so that at least there’s some closure for you. We’d encourage that.

We’re going to give of our tithes and offerings. This is one of the ways we say we want this message of forgiveness to go out to everybody. We want everybody to know about Jesus and receive forgiveness and new life and have Jesus in the midst of their relationships.

We’ll take Communion as well, and that’s where we remember the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. That’s how we’re forgiven. And when we take Communion, we’re acknowledging, “I’m a forgiven sinner, and by the grace of God, I want to be a forgiving sinner, as well.”

Then we’re going to sing and celebrate. It may seem odd, but we celebrate and sing because we’re forgiven, that the final word is not condemnation, but salvation. Jesus didn’t just die, he also rose, and he hears prayer. He forgives sin. He reconciles people to himself and one another. And as we sing, that’s what we celebrate.

And so as they’re collecting the offering, we’re going to show you a testimony, a very brave testimony of what this looks like in someone’s life, and I’ll pray for us right now.

Father God, I do pray against the enemy, his servants, their works and effects. Father God, I thank you that Grace and I are Christians. I thank you that we can repent of sin and forgive sin, and that because of Jesus, our marriage has gotten better instead of bitter. God, I regret and confess and apologize for the times that I was not a good, loving head, and I was not leading in a gospel-centered direction. But, God, I thank you that you have come between us, and where there was sin and bitterness, there is now Jesus, and forgiveness, and life. I thank you that Grace and I are really near and dear friends. I thank you that we really enjoy each other and that there isn’t bitterness between us today and that we’re happier than we’ve ever been. And I thank you that we’re learning to repent better and forgive quicker. God, I pray for those who would hear this, that it wouldn’t sound like a religious lecture from people who got it right, but humble sinners who got it wrong and enjoy Jesus’ grace and want that for everyone. And so, God, I pray that the tears that are shed and the conversations that are had would be healing, and holy, and helpful. And I’m reminded of Ecclesiastes, God, where it says that a sad face is sometimes good for the heart. And so we thank you for that, in Jesus’ good name. Amen.

THE TESTIMONY OF PASTOR THOMAS AND ANGELA

Angela: We were in love and there was nothing—I had never met a man like him.

Pastor Thomas: We were non-Christians through all this. And so, for us, we wanted something more than what we saw the world offering to most people. We wanted to be a part of something dramatic, and unique, but the truth is, when sort of the parties ended, and the friends went home, and it was just her and I, it was just hard to be married. You know, when Angie and I got married, I know for myself, I was my own god. Our marriage really is disintegrating, and I’m not looking for anything other than sort of worldly fixes to fix it. But then, all of a sudden, I get assigned this story, as a photographer, to go cover this pastor at Mars Hill Church, and I ended up spending a couple of weeks with Pastor Mark Driscoll, and, clearly, God was doing a work and had orchestrated this moment for me to come to Christ, and it was very profound.

Angela: It was at the exact same time that Thomas got assigned to follow Pastor Mark around that I began having an affair. I really felt that I wanted a divorce, but wasn’t strong enough to go through with it. I mean, I was telling him lie, after lie, after lie. And he would ask me, “Are you having an affair? Are you having an affair? I could forgive anything, but that.”

Pastor Thomas: I was meeting with Pastor Mark on a regular basis, just to work on this particular issue, because he knew, clearly, that there was an issue in our marriage, and he was trying to help me through that. Angela wouldn’t respond to really all of the pursuits that I was trying to come at her with. And so I got an opportunity to go to Iraq for a month, and I just went to Angela, and I said, “You know, I love you. I want to be your husband. I want to work through our marriage, but if you don’t, I can’t make you. And I’m going to Iraq for a month, and after I get back, we’ll see where the marriage is at.” And it was really as easy as coming home and going,

“Where are you at? Do you want a divorce or not?”

Angela: I had decided to stay in the marriage, and Pastor Mark had given us kind of a layout of, “These are some things you can do to begin working on your marriage.” It involved going to church together, praying together, reading some books. And I picked up one of the books that was recommended, and I just couldn’t put it down. I was soaking up what I was reading about what God intends for marriages. Fast forward to a year and a half. I went to a Mars Hill women’s retreat, and one of the pastor’s wives spoke about sexual sin, and I felt God talking to me right then that I have to confess my sin, no matter what happens. I was nine months pregnant with our first. And I knew probably I was going to be a single mom. I pretty much knew. He had told me he would forgive anything but that.

Pastor Thomas: And so she just confessed it, and I did not handle that well. The truth is I wanted someone to—I wanted to harm somebody. When I was sitting there with Mark and telling him about it, yeah, I said, “I want blood for this.” And Pastor Mark said, “You’ve already got blood for it. It’s the blood of Jesus.” And that was very sobering. I mean, it was so hypocritical for me to sit there and say, as a Christian, “Well, there’s one thing that I can’t forgive.” I mean, that’s really what it was for me. I mean, it was really a rubber meets the road with my faith.

Angela: I came home and dropped a bomb on him, and yet I felt so free. I felt that I was just—I had confessed all my sins, and I was so happy and filled with the Holy Spirit, but there was still a lot of really hard road to walk through, and the ups and downs of forgiveness, and walk with him in this cycle of forgiveness and really what that means, but being able to trust God the whole way and know that this is his plan.

Pastor Thomas: You know, I think a lot of people will hear about our testimony and somehow think that we’re unique, that God’s done something for us or in us that he won’t do for other people, and I think that’s a real mistake. And the truth is that it’s the gospel that redeems us. It’s the blood of Christ that redeems us, and it is a day-in, day-out desire to want to love Jesus more than we love ourselves, and then to offer the same type of forgiveness that God gives us every day. From the moment of that day, it really has been just a constant pursuit of Jesus. I mean, there’s no other way to describe it. And it has sometimes felt long and hard, but, you know, God’s story for us, I mean, he continues to have a plan. And, you know, only a few years ago I was a photographer, and suddenly God leads me into being the lead pastor at Mars Hill Bellevue, and I never had a desire for ministry. I could’ve never assumed that God would have a calling on me for that. And Angie and I are a part of a wonderful, wonderful church, and we’re fortunate to be able to get to share our story with others.

Note: This transcript has been edited for readability.