

FORGIVING WHO?

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, **forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**" Ephesians 4:31, 32

Introduction

In the introduction to *Forgiving Our Parents, Forgiving Ourselves*, Dr. Paul Meier says that "all too often the process of forgiveness is either left out or distorted. I'm thrilled that Dr. Stoop and Dr. Masteller have restored it to its central role in the process of our healing." Forgiveness is indeed a crucial concept for every committed Christian. Unfortunately, this book is another distortion of what God intended His children to experience and practice.

My critique of this book will be limited in scope to the issue of forgiveness, which is the primary theme of the book. There are other errors in it, such as the authors' understanding of anger, and their psychologizing of the early families of the Bible. For example, they say that "we are not trying to read more into the stories of Abraham and his sons than is actually in the Bible." Truthfully, they read **much** more into those accounts than is stated in Scripture, superimposing a psychological viewpoint on God's Word. They ignore important theological concepts such as God's sovereignty and election in achieving divine purposes. However, I will do no more than note that other problem areas exist in the book which will not be covered in depth at this time.

I wish to express my indebtedness to Dr. Jay Adams for his excellent book, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*. This book, based thoroughly on Scripture, exposes the theological flaws underlying the psychologized understanding of forgiveness which has been made popular, not only by these authors, but many others. Reading Dr. Adams' book helped me enormously in developing a biblical view of forgiveness and makes this critique one of the easiest I have written.

Forgiveness is central to the life of every Christian. God's forgiveness, offered through the death and resurrection of Christ, reconciles man to God. God's child, set free from the bondage and eternal consequences of his sin, is commanded to extend that same kind of mercy to others. It is tragic that this critical concept has been so seriously distorted by the psychologizers,

particularly those who profess a faith in Jesus Christ. While I do not question the authors' profession of faith, or their motives in setting people free, I take serious issue with their understanding of forgiveness.

Selfish Ambitions

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." Philippians 2:3, 4

We are indeed fortunate that God's forgiveness is not modeled after that of modern psychologists. If it were, it would render inoperative the challenge articulated by Paul in his words to the church at Corinth:

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

God does not forgive in a vacuum, without our knowledge or repentance. When He does forgive, He reconciles us to Himself for eternity. Forgiveness restores broken relationships, beginning with the horizontal relationship between man and God. God's forgiveness brings glory and honor to Him, and it also brings eternal salvation to **us!** It is not an isolated act in which we have no part.

However, when psychologists begin to examine our forgiveness of one another, they see it primarily as the "key to resolving the pain of the past," and they say: "We'll see that its greatest value lies in what it does **within us**, and that forgiveness need not have anything at all to do with those who have hurt us until later--if, indeed, it needs to involve them at all. Forgiveness is for **us**. It sets us free." This statement of purpose, this selfish motivation, emerges repeatedly throughout the book. The concern expressed is for the person who forgives--for his own sake--and little, if indeed any, for the one who committed the sin. This is diametrically opposed to the Scriptural command to

forgive "as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:13).

The authors do make a weak attempt to wiggle out of their selfishly focused sphere of concern when they say, "If we are going to take a loving concern for others, we must also take a loving concern for ourselves. Selfishness says, 'Me first; who cares about you?' Appropriate self-care says, 'I am going to take care of me so that I can take care of you.'" Self-love and self-concern, according to Scripture, are inherent:

"After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church." Ephesians 5:29

Nowhere can we find scriptural support for this take-care-of-self-first attitude that characterizes modern psychology. In fact, the person who fails to love others--never mind whether he loves himself or not--is said to be **nothing**:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Selfish ambition is particularly glaring when we note the authors' techniques to "confront" and "forgive" persons who are no longer living. The authors say that we need to confront our parents "as they were then." Their techniques include going to gravesides to speak to dead parents, speaking to empty chairs or portraits, and writing letters to those who are dead. Such methods are obviously motivated purely by selfish concern, since dead people cannot repent or respond. Similar methods are recommended even for those who are still alive but supposedly do not need to be involved. There is a failure here to consider the welfare of these others or their need to be restored. The focus is on seeking "relief" rather than the restoration of real people and real relationships.

The authors do recognize that forgiveness is not deserved, that it doesn't settle all questions of blame or justice but often evades them. They say that forgiveness "allows relationships to start over," yet their selfish motivations continue to be transparent: "It may be true that this person does not 'deserve' your forgiveness, but the real question is whether **you** desire

mental and physical health." In their counseling, forgiveness is "something we do all by ourselves, whether or not the one we are forgiving even knows or cares we are doing it." It is a "unilateral process" which has no "if he" or "until he" conditions attached. This is such a distortion of the biblical concept! Forgiveness is indeed not deserved, but is to be offered in graciousness, kindness, and tenderheartedness. It is by no means "unilateral." There **are** "if" and "until" clauses pertaining to the *granting* of forgiveness, though not to the command to maintain a forgiving *spirit*. This distinction will be discussed more as we proceed. God does not automatically grant forgiveness to all persons without their knowledge, repentance, or confession of sin. If He did, there would be no lost souls; salvation would be universal. Forgiveness is **not** a unilateral process undertaken merely to seek "relief" for self. It is not a matter of striking a bargain with God, forgiving others in order to seek a benefit for oneself; God discerns that kind of selfish motivation. The Christian must forgive, responding in gratitude to God's outpouring of love on the Cross. He owes his life, his eternal soul, to God's gracious granting of forgiveness. The authors mention that "an important part of our being able to work out our own forgiveness is drawn from the forgiveness that God Himself has shown us." However, forgiving others "for God's sake" is noted only as a *secondary purpose*, tacked on to the authors' primary purpose of forgiving for the sake of self. They also fail to acknowledge that more than a mere "part" of our forgiveness is drawn from God's forgiveness. Our reason to forgive, and our model for forgiveness, both arise out of the mercy God first extended to us.

The authors are clearly off in their purposes for recommending forgiveness. They are also flawed in their definitions, their emphasis on feelings, their views of reconciliation, their timing, and other key issues.

Forgiveness: What It is, What is Isn't

Time for definitions. One can hardly discuss forgiveness adequately without first defining it--what it is, what it isn't.

Let us look first at what forgiveness is **not**. Here the authors have some truth, although their reasons are not necessarily biblical. Forgiveness is not ignoring the sin, excusing it, or acting as if nothing had happened. A good look at the cross shows us that God doesn't ignore our sin, but rather takes it quite seriously. Forgiveness is not "forgetting" in the

sense of being unable to recall the event. God, who knows all things, is not literally erasing His **memory** of our sins. Forgiveness is not covering up another's sin while continuing to boil inside with anger, hatred, and bitterness. That clearly violates the gracious, tenderhearted spirit of forgiveness commanded by our Lord. It also is not the world's substitute: "I'm-sorry-that's-OK," an apology followed by what amounts to nothing more than excusing. An apology is actually a *defense*; real repentance is an honest recognition of having sinned, with *no defense*. Forgiveness--real forgiveness--is the very opposite of "that's OK." Sin is never "OK." The authors rightly mention excusing as a "social convention to smooth ruffled feathers" which is not true forgiveness. Their reasons, however, are lacking. Their stress is on "working through the feelings" as a necessary prerequisite to forgiveness. More will be said later about this feeling-oriented approach, but for now, we can note that the authors correctly state what forgiveness is not, yet for unbiblical reasons.

So then, what **is** forgiveness? The authors basically define it as the cancelling of a debt, releasing the other party. They say that "often it helps to make the act of forgiveness take some concrete, tangible form." Both forgiveness and reconciliation, they teach, are "free actions" which cannot be earned. Forgiveness is a form of love which "accepts others as they are."

Is this correct? Partly, but their explanation is in some ways incomplete. In other ways, they add burdens that God never intended. Forgiveness does cancel the debt, just as God promises not to count our sins against us (2 Corinthians 5:19). However, it is more. It is a **promise**--a promise to "remember no more" the sin of another. This must not be confused with the passive activity of forgetting. It is a positive action, a refusal to count that sin against the other. If you forgive another, you promise to "not remember." You won't bring up that sin to that person, or to others, or even to yourself. The debt is indeed cancelled, and you actively promise not to reactivate it. The authors add to the process, as we will explore later, by their insistence on a lengthy process of "working through the feelings." A promise can be made and kept regardless of emotions. Nowhere does Scripture allow us the luxury of holding sin against another who has repented and requested our forgiveness:

"So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." The apostles said to the Lord,

"Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" Luke 17:3-10

Forgiving the same person for the same sin seven times in one day does not allow the time consuming "work-through-the-feelings" approach of these psychologists! The authors also err in stating that forgiveness "accepts others as they are." Forgiveness is indeed a form of love, but real love does not simply leave others in their sinful state. Christ's death on the cross is a demonstration that God **does not** simply accept us in our state of sin! God's forgiveness is conditioned on that agonizing death of our Lord. He loved us far too much to accept us as we were. Real love offers a helping hand to the one caught in sin, restoring him in gentleness and humility (Galatians 6:1, 2). Although we are required to maintain a forgiving spirit, ready at any moment to grant forgiveness, we may not actually make that promise to "remember no more" until the other person repents. This is not so that we might hold bitterness or seek vengeance. It is for the sake of that other person, who may require loving rebuke, godly counsel, or other assistance in order to help him change.

The authors do mention the most crucial issue in forgiveness, and that is God's forgiveness of us. They say that "our forgiveness flows from our forgiveness." God "does not say, 'Forgive or else.' He says 'Forgive others as I have forgiven you.'" Our response to God's grace, not the number of times another has hurt us, or whether he deserves our forgiveness, is the main issue. The authors cite Jesus in Luke 7:37-38, 44-47:

"When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind Him at His feet weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them." Luke 7:37, 38

"Then He turned toward the woman and said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give Me any water for My feet, and she wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give Me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing My feet. You did not put oil on My head, but she has poured perfume on My feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.'" Luke 7:44-47

The point of all this, they say, is "that we are **all** people in need of God's mercy--indeed, we are all people who have **received** God's mercy." These comments are basically correct, except that unbelievers have **not** received God's mercy. However, their selfish motivations, their focus on feelings, and other errors reveal that they fail to recognize the full impact of God's forgiveness. Consider the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35. His debt to the king was ten thousand talents--millions of dollars. This was an impossible amount to pay. So is our debt of sin before a God who is holy, righteous, and just. Having been forgiven by the king, this servant proceeded to demand the payment of a hundred denarii from a friend (a few dollars--pocket change). Jesus uses this great contrast to teach us that "this is how My Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35). Forgiveness is serious business. It isn't to be drawn out over time as we "work through the feelings" or conduct archaeological digs into the Freudian "unconscious." Forgiveness truly does flow from our forgiveness, and we must never forget that. As God has given to us in graciousness and tenderhearted mercy, when we owed a debt we could never pay, so we must extend that same love to others.

Forgive...And "Forget?"

The authors devote significant space to the relationship between forgiveness and forgetting. Their basic theme is that *remembering* is a vital requirement in order to forgive. They say that we *need* to remember in order not to repeat painful mistakes. In their six steps of forgiveness, the very first is to "recognize the injury." They consider this to be somewhat difficult: "Often we are aware of pain and hurt, but we have buried the cause of those feelings deeply." Also, "we have a hard time remembering what actually happened because part of us doesn't really want to remember." They claim that "the power lies in the fact that we forgive even as we remember. If we really forgot, we could not forgive. How could we forgive an offense we are not even aware

of?" They use the popular term "denial" to describe the attempt to forget painful memories without dealing with them, instead placing them in an "emotional deep freeze." This is dangerous, they teach, because "the fact is that very often the harmful effects of past injuries stay with us *whether or not we consciously remember the injuries themselves.*"

"Forgiveness has nothing to do with forgetting," the authors state emphatically several times. They point out the fallacy of "trying to forget," which we can agree does not work. Instead, "forgiveness begins with remembering and accepting what has happened in the past. Acceptance is an act of integration." Forgiveness doesn't change the facts of what happened in the past, but rather changes the meaning of those facts. The authors mention God's promise to "remember no more," but they apparently equate this action with erasure of an event from one's ability to recall: "But it never says that we are to do the same. We cannot. Only He can. One reason why God can forget is that there is nothing He needs to learn by remembering."

There are significant problems with this analysis, which has more basis in Freud than in the Word of God. The authors' focus on "denial," and their teachings to force one's memory, are rooted in Freudian speculations about the "unconscious" and its supposedly enormous power to motivate adult behavior. This is typical of the Minirth-Meier Clinic orientation, where these authors practice their psychological counseling. Forgiveness must obviously require some memory of a sin committed, but it is dangerous and unbiblical to assume that the sins of others have such a powerful impact on current behavior. That leads much too quickly to blame-shifting and irresponsibility, despite the authors' assertions to the contrary.

The authors also err in their understanding of God's promise to "remember no more," which was discussed earlier. God **does not** forget in the sense of being unable to recall. He actively promises not to count our sins against us ("remember"). Our forgiveness **is** to be fully modeled after His, as we make similar promises to others who have sinned against us. It is disturbing that these psychologizers are more concerned that we remember the sins of **others** in order not to repeat past mistakes, rather than soberly remember **our own sins** and the astonishing reality of redemption.

One final note: Honoring the promise to "remember no more" will in time lead to a fading of the memory of another's sin. Forgiveness truly does not mean that we *must not or cannot* recall;

here the authors are correct. However, keeping one's promise not to dwell on that sin or bring it up to other people...facilitates, in time, a forgetting. One might say "forgive **to** forget," rather than "forgive **and** forget."

How Long Does It Take?

Early in the book, authors Stoop and Masteller describe the workings of the so-called "dysfunctional" family and its impact on the individual. They say:

"Once we start to understand the dynamics at work in our family system, and begin to grasp the potential for change, we are able to consider the crucial step we must take if we are to find freedom from the effects of the past. That step is forgiveness."

Consider? Are we only to *consider* forgiving others? The authors sympathize with the person who finds it difficult to forgive: "Once people have a clear picture of the harm that others have caused them, it's easy to see why forgiving those people might not be the first thing that comes to their minds." But have these authors truly considered the sin against **God** committed by their counselees, and have they attempted to put it into proper perspective? Probably not, considering the counsel they give:

"We understand why you are reacting the way you are. We know that in your hurt and anger, forgiving the ones who have damaged you may be the last thing you feel like doing. In fact, we **don't** expect you to forgive them 'just like that.' Forgiving others is not an easy thing. It takes time and effort. But we think you will come to see that ultimately you **must** forgive if you are to be truly free."

This summarizes their viewpoint quite well, and it contrasts *sharply* with the biblical view of forgiveness. The laxity, the slowness of this approach is rooted in a focus on feelings and the selfish motivations discussed earlier. It finds no support in God's Word, and fails to gratefully consider Christ's work of grace on the cross.

Strangely enough, the authors indicate that forgiveness is an act of the will which may be accomplished even though we may not "feel like it." But they reveal their unbiblical focus when they explain that "I decide to work toward releasing you from the 'debt' you 'owe' me." Work toward? Jesus would have loathed this

attitude; note once again the passage from Luke 17, commanding a faithful repetition of forgiveness, even seven times in one day. The authors don't understand the attitude of Christ:

"Sometimes we have to work through our feelings before we can even take the initial step of deciding to cancel the debt. Often we find that even **after** we have made the decision to forgive, our emotions rise up again and make us want to re-impose the debt."

Their recommendation?

"But now I have to work through all of my feelings about what has happened. I give validity to my loss. I accept the reality of my feelings--I am hurt by your carelessness. I am angry at the loss of something important to me. I am saddened over the fact that the vase is gone. I need to 'work through' these feelings a number of times before I can really let go of my anger and feel like I have completely forgiven you."

Wrong! Nothing remotely like this view can ever be found in Scripture. This is selfishly motivated and truly an affront to the God who so graciously delivered us from the wrath we deserve:

"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulation, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross."
Colossians 2:13, 14

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we dead in transgressions; it is by grace you have been saved."
Ephesians 2:1-5

Focus on Feelings

The authors clearly take a "slow-boat-to-China" approach to forgiveness. They admit briefly that there **is** a way to deal with conflict quickly which is a sign of maturity, but unfortunately, they never describe that "way" for those who might wish to become mature in Christ. Instead, they claim that speed in handling conflict is normally **not** a sign of maturity. Underlying their perspective is an exaltation of emotion that emerges from the broken cisterns of modern psychology--but finds no support in Scripture.

The first "step" in forgiveness was described as "recognize the injury." The second and third "steps" of the six are these: Identify the emotions involved, then express your hurt and anger. The authors say that "forgiveness--true forgiveness--takes time. It is a process you must not short-circuit. When you forgive too quickly, without adequately working through what has happened and how you feel about it, your forgiveness is incomplete." They define the decision to forgive as "choosing not to hold onto an emotional 'debt' against another person. Forgiveness as a process means working through our own inner reactions until what was done to us no longer dominates us." Notice the term "emotional debt," a concept foreign to the Bible. Note the "working through our own inner reactions," a selfishly motivated process also foreign to Scripture. Along the same wavelength, the authors describe forgiveness as a **gradual** change in attitude and feelings, rather than a moment of truth or sudden realization. Biblically, forgiveness is **not** a feeling, does **not** require that we "feel like it," and is **never**, in any verse, described as a "gradual change." The authors' viewpoint simply does not coincide with Scripture in terms of this emotional orientation. Nevertheless, they describe in some detail the emotions they believe must be "worked through."

Several key emotions are noted. One is fear. Another is guilt/shame, particularly what they term "false guilt." They attempt to distinguish guilt and shame by stating that "guilt has to do with what we have done, and shame has to do with who we are." They caution that "we need to be careful not to let sinful actions lead to shameful self-definitions." Biblically, guilt is man's rebellion against God and disobedience to His commands. "False guilt" is not a scriptural concept, nor a helpful one. The account of Adam and Eve describes their very real guilt, and the resultant shame before God. Whereas the authors see shame as a culprit that lowers one's view of self wrongfully, the Bible sees it as an appropriate response to real sin. God provided a

solution to both guilt and shame on the cross. He also rebuked those who had lost the ability to be rightfully ashamed:

"'Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when I punish them,' says the Lord." Jeremiah 6:15

Furthermore, a "shameful self-definition" in the face of a Holy God is **needed** in order to receive and appreciate salvation. Man is inherently sinful, born in a condition of sin. That truth is not popular in psychological circles today. If mentioned at all, it is whitewashed. Nevertheless, note the reactions of Job and Isaiah, men called by God--before His throne:

"My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."
Job 42:5, 6

"'Woe to me! I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'" Isaiah 6:5

Probably the most emphasized emotion here is anger. The authors recognize that "anger is not necessarily a bad thing. There **is** such a thing as righteous anger." However, rather than distinguish God's righteous anger from man's unrighteous, selfish anger, they say that "it is often an entirely appropriate reaction to having been damaged." This is **not** an imitation of God's righteous anger, but instead is self-focused, one of the very problems with this book. Nevertheless, the authors see anger is a *required condition* which must precede forgiveness:

"Without anger, most forgiveness is superficial."
"Genuine forgiveness almost always includes anger."
"In most cases, we cannot really forgive until we have dealt with our anger."

"Dealing with" that anger brings us to the authors' counsel to ventilate and express this destructive emotion: "'Expressing' our destructive emotions is important because it gets them 'out of our system' so that they cannot poison us any longer." Such "expression" can take the form of talking to others (the Bible calls this gossip, or slander), talking to empty chairs, and writing letters that will never be mailed. The authors also recommend "healthy self-talk," or making positive affirmations to self, such as "I am a worthwhile person because God loves and

accepts me. I am working on forgiving my parents and getting free of the hurts of my past." They say that anger can be used or expressed in ways that are right and healthy, or wrong and unhealthy. It can, they claim, alert us to set boundaries *in order to protect self*. Four basic responses are described: repression, ventilation, feeling but deciding to postpone expression, or confession to a trusted person (gossip/slander again). Particularly disturbing is the claim that "vengeful feelings" are a "normal by-product of the healing process," part of what must be "worked through on the road to forgiveness."

It is beyond the scope of this writing to fully critique the authors' unbiblical position on anger and its expression. That has been done elsewhere, in my own critiques and also by Martin and Deidre Bobgan in *Psychology I* (Eastgate Publishers). Briefly, however, their position is founded on Freudian speculations and is diametrically opposed to the biblical teachings to *put off* anger and to *put on* compassion, humility, and kindness:

"But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Colossians 3:9, 12, 13

Anger is to be "put off," not "expressed" in a variety of unbiblical ways. Such ventilation is more like pouring gasoline onto a raging fire than cutting a poison out of one's system. However, this should not be taken as a recommendation to harbor bitterness in the heart while merely pretending to be tenderhearted and kind. The person who wrestles with unrighteous anger has a better way out. He can confess that sinful attitude to God, who is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, including unrighteousness anger (1 John 1:9). As indicated earlier, a recognition of Christ's sacrifice, and the magnitude of the debt God has canceled on our behalf, bring about a perspective in which the sins of others pale by comparison.

Scripture never conditions forgiveness on a "working through" of feelings. It is possible to both grant forgiveness and maintain a forgiving spirit in obedience and gratitude to God. Ungodly emotions can be "worked through" privately with God through repentance, confession, and prayer, avoiding the traps of sinful ventilation, gossip, slander, and other unrighteous actions.

Sorting Out Responsibilities

Forgiveness must involve a biblical sorting of responsibilities. Who has sinned, against whom, and in what way? In this particular area, the authors' view is reasonably consistent with Scripture, in that they basically discourage blame-shifting. They state that what we do **today** is more important than what has happened in the past. We must take responsibility and respond to the past in a manner that helps us rise above its negative influences. This attitude is correct, although the authors do not delve into the biblical view of how to overcome evil with good, or the concept of God's sovereignty and ultimate justice.

The book contains a section on what is termed the "blame game." The authors say that:

"People who grew up in dysfunctional families often feel that everything that goes wrong in the world is their fault. Understanding how you have been victimized is important. So is learning to take responsibility for your life, and not blaming all of your problems on others."

They point out rightly that "blaming other people for our problems doesn't solve our problems, even if we're right." They define "blaming" as "shifting onto others the responsibility that should be ours, or using the fact of others' guilt to excuse ourselves from having to respond in healthy ways to what was done to us."

So far, most (not quite all) of this is fairly biblical. Scripture teaches us about our individual responsibility before God for our own sins:

"The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him." Ezekiel 18:20

"Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...." Hebrews 9:27

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." 2 Corinthians 5:10

Unfortunately, the analysis steers us away from Scripture when the authors say that "remembering" feels the same as blaming, and that "for a little bit of time, we need to blame someone else" because of our supposed tendency to blame *ourselves* for what happened to us as children. They say that we need to lift the "false blame" from ourselves and to place it properly: "We need to clearly see that it was not our fault, that we really were victims of someone else." Responsibilities must, of course, be sorted out according to the standards of Scripture, so that we can respond biblically. That includes, most importantly, recognizing our own sin so that we can repent, confess, and seek forgiveness from God and others we have sinned against. It also involves discerning the sins of others for *their* sake, so that once the "log" is removed from our own eye, we will see clearly to gently and humbly confront and restore the other person. These authors, in tune with many other psychologizers, place too much emphasis on the supposed tendency to blame oneself. They fail to properly acknowledge the innate tendency of man to shift blame, see himself in a biased manner, and protect self. This is true even when it *appears* that the person hates and/or excessively blames himself. It is terribly important here to bear in mind the biblical view of the nature of man--the heart is "deceitful and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). The authors repeat their erroneous view when speaking of the "caretaker/enabler." They state:

"It is absolutely crucial that such people be able to see that it is **not** their fault, that **someone else** is causing their pain. It is the indispensable first step in coming to forgive that person, which is the only path to freedom, health, and sanity."

This perspective is typical of the "codependent" movement, whose heretical presuppositions are beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be noted that this superficial reasoning fails to look deeply into the heart and examine the motives underlying this supposed self-blame. Such examination is possible only through the Holy Spirit, using His Word (Jeremiah 17:10, Hebrews 4:12).

The authors are to be commended for their emphasis on personal responsibility, apparent throughout *most* of their discussion in the area of blame-shifting. However, we must view with caution their tendency to stress self-blame, along with the implied view that man is more fundamentally a **victim** than a **sinner** in desperate need of redemption.

Reconciliation, Repentance, and Restoration

In sending Christ to die for our sins, God has reconciled us to Himself. This forgiveness has reconciliation as a **major** purpose:

"Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." Romans 5:9-11

"For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit." Ephesians 2:14-18

"For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation." Colossians 1:19-22

What could be more clear? Once enemies of God, we are reconciled to Him and made His own children. Our forgiveness is to be modeled after His example. In this important area of reconciliation, and the related issue of restoring the offender, the authors stray many miles from Scripture. This is undoubtedly rooted in their self-oriented view of forgiveness.

It was noted earlier that the authors list six "steps" in forgiveness:

1. Recognize the injury.
2. Identify the emotions involved.
3. Express your hurt and anger.
4. Set boundaries to protect yourself.
5. Cancel the debt.
6. Consider the possibility of reconciliation.

We have discussed the first three in earlier sections. The fifth step is the actual act of forgiveness, in their analysis, and we have noted how they stretch out and postpone obedience to God's commandment to forgive. It is the fourth and sixth steps that concern us in this section.

The authors claim that "our personal boundaries were often violated," and therefore, "in many cases, setting boundaries means that we need to physically stay away from other family members, either for a time or for good." This cuts at the very heart of Christ's forgiveness--its spirit, its purpose. This attitude is blatantly self-oriented. It defies Christ's order to deny self in order to serve Him and love others. It mutilates the whole Christian concept of forgiveness.

The concept of "boundaries" has been critiqued elsewhere in more depth. For our purposes here, note the selfish motivation and the short-circuiting of God's commandments to be reconciled, forgiving one another in tenderhearted kindness and love.

The **last** step of the six is to **consider** the possibility of reconciliation. While the authors do say it is the "ideal outcome," they are quick to say that:

"Forgiveness is unilateral. It is something we can do all by ourselves. Reconciliation requires the participation of another person. We cannot 'make it happen,' no matter how hard we try."

They do place some value on reconciliation, but again with a selfish orientation in mind: "Reconciliation is immensely valuable to us, and should be pursued whenever possible--but it isn't always possible" (emphasis added). It was noted earlier that forgiveness is **not** unilateral, except in the sense that God commands us to maintain a forgiving **spirit**, which is a willingness to grant actual forgiveness immediately when requested. Reconciliation is more than something to be *considered*, a sort of "fringe benefit" or afterthought. God explicitly commands it, particularly of those who belong to Him:

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."
Matthew 5:23, 24

"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny." Matthew 5:25, 26

There is a small kernel of truth in what the authors are saying: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18). While God commands us to maintain a forgiving spirit, and to do all that is possible to live in peace and be reconciled to others, on occasion it may not be possible. This can particularly be a problem with unbelievers, who cannot understand or model God's teachings on forgiveness and repentance. However, this gives no reason to consider reconciliation an afterthought or a side issue to forgiveness. Rather it is an opportunity to share Christ with that unbeliever and **show** him the kind of love that God demonstrated on the cross. When the person who sins against you is a brother or sister in Christ, much more can--indeed **must**--be done to bring about reconciliation and restoration:

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each others' burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."
Galatians 6:1, 2

This passage brings us to a crucial issue related to reconciliation, and that is the restoration of the offender. The authors do mention both superficial reconciliation and superficial repentance. Superficial reconciliation may include: overlooking the pain caused, denial of being hurt, excusing of inexcusable behavior, and fear of losing the relationship by speaking up. These are wrong responses, but the **biblical** reasons they are wrong is that they fail to fully consider the welfare of the offender. Motives in confrontation of sin are extremely important. The authors appear to agree here:

"Sometimes, going to those who have harmed you and 'clearing the air' can be helpful. But before you confront, you must

carefully discern your motives and assess your expectations. You must also understand that you can, and should, forgive others even if you cannot be reconciled to them."

They admit that "retaliation, revenge, retribution, and spitefulness" are improper motives, and that "most people, when they think of confronting others, are thinking mainly of themselves." Looking at their view of "superficial repentance," they say that "in a close or ongoing relationship, it can sometimes be appropriate to press someone who has wronged us and only expressed superficial repentance." Real repentance is evidenced by an acknowledgement of having done wrong, a decision to repair the wrongdoing (the Bible calls this restitution), and asking forgiveness. Unfortunately, a full reading of this book reveals basically self-oriented motives in confrontation. For example: "Though it sounds callous to say it, confrontation works best when we expect little or nothing to happen as a result." In context, they are saying that one must expect no response from the other person, but undertakes the confrontation for the sake of self. Biblically, our motives in confrontation must be obedience to God and real loving concern for the welfare of the offender. Our expectations are not to be self-focused, but focused on the honor of Jesus Christ and the restoration of the one who has sinned. The authors focus on "relief," on "bringing closure to a painful relationship from the past that would continue to fester if it was not openly discussed and dealt with." The authors also say that efforts to reconcile are not always wise because the person may still be dangerous to us, or too fragile: "Confronting them with the past might devastate them." This is a distorted view of concern for the other party. As Christians, we bring the power of Jesus Christ into the picture. He has fully dealt with our sins by His sacrificial atonement. It is an affront to Him to suggest that "confronting them with the past might devastate them." Such "devastation" might be exactly what is needed to bring that person to true repentance and faith in Christ. Real love confronts in gentleness and absolute humility, offering brotherly counsel, prayer, and help in overcoming the sin that caused the problem.

The authors also note that the offender must "apologize" and "work through the process of repentance," but not attempt to earn forgiveness by "buying back" the relationship with an impossible act of restitution, or seeking to be punished in some "unhealthy way." As noted earlier, apologizing is actually a *defense* and is the world's substitute for biblical forgiveness. Attempts to "earn" forgiveness demonstrate a misunderstanding of Christian

doctrine and require admonition such as given by Paul in Galatians to the early Christians who sought salvation through the law.

Reconciliation, the authors claim, requires "mutual forgiveness" and "mutual acceptance." Such "acceptance" includes the accepting of **self** and acknowledging that "it is not easy for people to receive unconditional love." These comments reveal a misunderstanding of both forgiveness and reconciliation. Reconciliation does involve a "mutual forgiveness," as both parties confess sin and extend forgiveness. However, this does not equate with unconditional acceptance. Forgiveness--at least the actual granting of it--**does** have conditions, and it is the very opposite of simply "accepting" another's behavior. Furthermore, an unconditional "acceptance" of oneself has no place in Scripture. The Bible requires us to continually examine our hearts before God, judging ourselves according to biblical standards:

"But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment." 1 Corinthians 11:31

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23, 24

The biblical doctrines of forgiveness and reconciliation are intimately related. It is only by psychologizing forgiveness, and pursuing it with selfish motivations, that reconciliation can be relegated to the place of an unessential afterthought, tacked on when it is suited to selfish purposes. Think of it this way: Suppose **you** are the one who has sinned against another. How would **you** want to be treated? Would you want to be forgiven only for the "relief" of the other person, or would you prefer that the other person came to you in a spirit of tenderhearted love to help you overcome your sin? Suppose that **God** forgave you just to get "relief," then cast you into hell? Surely the one-sided view of forgiveness presented in this book is not a representation of Christian love modeled after God's forgiveness!

Forgiving **WHO?**

I have saved the very worst for last! As indicated in the title, this book teaches, and in fact *stresses*, the forgiveness of oneself. This kind of false teaching is a serious misunderstanding of biblical forgiveness. In fact, it is so very, very far removed from Scripture that heresy is hardly too strong a

description. Not even one verse commanding the forgiveness of self can be located in all of the Bible. Not even **one!**

The beginning of the chapter on this issue may sound logical:

"You and your parents may have been 'partners in crime' in perpetuating harmful family dynamics. You need to accept responsibility for the ways you may have contributed to your own pain--and then learn to forgive yourself and go on."

If that last phrase were omitted, this would sound like a call to properly sorting out responsibilities for sin (a word which is rarely found in psychological literature, however). So what is the problem? Why is self-forgiveness **not** a biblical concept? Where did it originate?

This dangerous self-doctrine grows out of a related, highly popular teaching, that of self-love. The authors say that "if we hate our parents, it is likely we will struggle with self-hatred. If we love our parents, it is likely we will feel better about ourselves." Here again, forgiveness is seen from a selfish perspective: We forgive and/or love our parents in order to "feel better about ourselves." Not only is self-**love** promoted, but also self-**acceptance**: "We need to learn to accept ourselves, with all our limitations, feelings, and vulnerabilities, just as we learn to accept others." But one must wonder: How can repentance, confession of sin, and redemption ever come about if we are taught to **accept** self as is? This is never explained by psychologists.

The authors speak about the Scriptures commanding love of God, and then others as oneself. They make a significant admission: "Actually, Jesus does not so much teach that we *should* love ourselves as He *assumes* that we *do* love ourselves" (emphasis in original). That is absolutely correct, yet inconsistent with the rest of their teaching, particularly on self-forgiveness. They note that many people struggle with loving self, because it sounds so selfish. They attempt to distinguish self-love, which acknowledges our worth and dignity as God's children, from narcissism and self-glorification. Self-destructive behaviors are listed (drunkenness, overeating, self-starvation, and such) with the recommendation that "now we must consider protecting ourselves from ourselves" because "these behaviors themselves **cause** us injury and, as a result, further self-loathing." Also, "the onset of such destructive behaviors can alert us that there is a need for self-examination and self-forgiveness." Self-examination? Yes! Self-forgiveness? **No!** "Self-loathing" is not the real problem. These destructive behaviors are sins against **God** (1

Corinthians 6:19, 20) and are motivated by **too much love of self, not too little.** Genuine self-examination should lead to repentance and the request for forgiveness from **God, not from self.**

Not only do the authors teach self-forgiveness, they tell us that it is *difficult*, even *more difficult* than forgiveness of others!

"For many of us, the most difficult person to forgive is ourself. As hard as forgiveness is to learn, most of us have a much easier time learning to forgive others than we do learning to forgive ourselves."

This is especially true, they claim, for those coming from "dysfunctional" families in which they blamed themselves for everything that happened. Abuse victims, they teach, see themselves as "unworthy, unlovable, and unforgivable," and "often have to struggle with the belief that something is inherently wrong with them." (Something really **is** "inherently wrong," because of man's sinful condition [Psalm 51:5]). For incest victims, shame may be intensified by the experience of physical pleasure amidst the pain:

"This apparent betrayal by their own bodies can be one of the hardest things for them to forgive--especially when it is compounded by the ingrained belief that if they tell anyone what happened, they will only receive more blame and condemnation."

The authors say that forgiveness is not modeled in "dysfunctional" homes, and **therefore, self-forgiveness** is difficult. The abuse continues in adult life, they claim, if we continue to accept blame, if we accept guilt for what happened to us in childhood, if we continue to accept pain, guilt, or shame, or if we refuse to treat ourselves with love, compassion, and forgiveness. In this supposedly important step of self-forgiveness, the authors caution that "the aim is not to heap scorn on ourselves, or to blame ourselves--we have done enough of that already! The aim is simply to get clear on what happened so that we can deal with it cleanly." Also, "in taking this step, we need to be especially careful to take responsibility only for those things that **are** our responsibility." They go so far as to teach that we sometimes must **excuse** ourselves rather than forgive ourselves, when we made mistakes but could not have done things differently because we didn't know how at the time. Improper responses to past hurts are

said to include: denying that an injury has occurred, making excuses for our parents, putting blame on ourselves, superficial forgiveness, or attacking those who suggest that we need to forgive. The authors claim that it is not dishonoring to our parents to acknowledge that they have hurt us, because we do so in order to forgive them. (This comment **might** be somewhat appropriate were it not for the selfish motivations in their views of forgiveness.) However, they believe this may be difficult:

"Once they are dead, we want our parents to be sheer light, with no darkness at all; and we feel a little foul if we allow shadows to darken our memory. We don't want them to need forgiving; because if we forgive them, we must have found fault with them first, maybe even hated them."
(Quoting Lewis Smedes)

As in forgiving others, the authors stress feeling the hurt, "just as we felt it in childhood, in order to let it go." (Note: It would be helpful to review the anger and depression of Jonah here. It was his unrighteous, sinful anger against **God** that led to depression--not anger against **self**.)

It is mentioned once again that "our forgiveness flows from our forgiveness. Nowhere is this more true than in forgiving ourselves." This is because "no matter how unloved or worthless we may feel, God loves us" and "He gave each of us infinite worth and value by creating us, and by sending His Son to die for us. If God Himself is able to forgive us, how can we withhold forgiveness from ourselves?" They do caution, however, that self-forgiveness isn't a license for irresponsibility, or letting yourself off the hook by assigning blame to someone else.

No matter how logical this sounds, it represents a serious misunderstanding of the biblical view of human nature, and it is a dangerous detour around the cross of Jesus Christ. They bring up the very serious issue of childhood abuse, and there is no intent here to minimize the seriousness of that problem or to lack compassion and mercy for true victims. However, the universal, innate tendency of man is to see himself in a highly biased manner, to shift blame, and to look away from his own sin. That began with Adam and Eve, and it hasn't changed. Victims must look honestly at the sins committed against them, and respond in a manner that glorifies God. The Bible teaches us how to accomplish that, and doing so properly distinguishes the child of God from the pagans (Matthew 5:43-48). However, victims are also fundamentally sinners who *respond* to abuse in a sinful manner. Examination of one's own heart is crucial. The authors seemingly

acknowledge this, but they draw the person away from the cross by recommending self-forgiveness. It is *God's forgiveness* that accomplishes redemption and cleansing. One cannot do that for himself, nor is he commanded--anywhere in Scripture--to attempt it. This teaching is not only unbiblical. It is dangerous!

Conclusions

The purpose of this critique has been to provide a comparison of the psychological view of forgiveness with the biblical view of forgiveness. The views expressed by authors Stoop and Masteller are typical of Christian psychologists, and there is no intent to single them out in particular for attack. In fact, my purpose is not one of "attack" but discernment of false teachings. Christians must continually test what they hear against the Word of God, in order to walk in victory with the Lord.

A brief comment should be made on the final chapter of the book, which promotes the increasingly popular Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as a method of "recovery." The authors note that "recovery" from "alcoholism" differs from the "recovery" of those from "dysfunctional" (ungodly) homes, who tend to be self-condemning. They note, with some justification, that the steps as originally written do not include instructions on how to respond to the sins of others. However, they believe the steps can still be used. For example, the victim must admit to being "powerless" over the past. This ignores Paul's words in Philippians 3, where he counts all things "rubbish" for the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. The "moral inventory" in the fourth step is expanded to include an inventory of sins committed against us. It seems that this pagan program, which has been critiqued at length elsewhere, must be adapted to fit every human problem in existence.

I want to leave the reader with a brief summary of the **biblical view** of forgiveness, which includes the following:

- * God **commands** us to forgive as He has forgiven us in Christ.
- * Forgiveness is a promise to "remember no more," that is, to not count that past sin against the other person. It is a promise not to bring the sin up again to the offender, others, or oneself.
- * Forgiveness is extended for the honor of God and the benefit of the **other** person, not for selfish motivations. The one who

forgives may indeed benefit, but that is a by-product and not the primary purpose.

* Forgiveness is conditional. It must involve the person who sinned and has now repented. However, God commands us to maintain a forgiving **spirit**, a willingness to forgive at any and all times.

* Forgiveness is not dependent on feelings, nor must one express hurt and anger in order to forgive. It is a promise which can--**must**--be kept regardless of feelings.

* One of the major purposes of forgiveness is reconciliation, which also involves loving, humble attempts to restore the other person.

* Forgiveness is not equivalent to forgetting, in the sense of being unable to recall. However, keeping one's promise to "remember no more" will very likely result in fading memories over time.

* Forgiveness of self is an unbiblical concept which is not commanded in Scripture. The person who sins must confess to God and others, receiving forgiveness from them, not giving it to himself.

* Most importantly, forgiveness is a response to God's love and forgiveness offered through the cross of Christ. Since He has forgiven us an impossible debt and graciously given us eternal life, we must never, never withhold forgiveness from others--whose sins against us are mere "pocket change" by comparison.

Forgiveness is central to the Christian faith. Here, of all places, proper doctrine is critical--"that the man of God might be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16 and 17). The answers you need to understand forgiveness are all contained in God's Word, which has "**everything** we need for life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). Stand solidly on that rock, and escape the sinking sands of psychological theory in this most crucial area of Christianity!

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FORGIVING *WHO?*

**Critique of *Forgiving Our Parents, Forgiving Ourselves*,
by Dr. David Stoop and Dr. James Masteller**

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