

For Men Only

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Healing through Godly Sorrow

Won't she ever forget what I did?

See if you can relate to the following scenario: Your wife and you disagree about some seemingly minor issue, say, for example, your reluctance to stay in the kitchen to wash the dinner dishes as you hear Hank Williams Junior's resonant voice announcing the beginning of Monday night football. Despite your best efforts to apply logic to the situation – perhaps even offering to do the dishes the rest of the week – the argument seems to escalate out of control. The next thing you know she is reminding you of every inconsiderate, selfish act that you've committed since 1986. You want to throw the yellow flag, "Unfair! What does that have to do with washing the dishes one lousy night of the week?!"

For years I dealt with the maddening process of hearing Elvira bringing up all of my past failings, usually accompanied by the anger-inducing ending, "You're never going to change!" The intensity of the argument seemed to predict how far back into our history she would dig to remind me what a jerk I had been. It felt like a life sentence – that I would continue to pay for past indiscretions until I lay on my death bed. Apparently my apologies and pledges to never repeat certain behaviors fell on deaf ears. This pattern continued for twenty years in our marriage, until I began to understand the workings of a woman's heart and the power of true confession and forgiveness.

Unhealed hurts will stay in a woman's heart and ***she will not forget them!*** It doesn't matter if two weeks have passed...or two decades. There is, however, a wonderful and proven process that will lead to true healing of those hurts and will release both of you to experience deeper intimacy in your relationship. I'll use a situation from our own marriage to explain the process.

Elvira and I dated for only five months before we eloped on New Year's Eve, 1977. You would think that I couldn't have made too many blunders in that short time, but I hurt Elvira very deeply through one of my selfish acts. There were several Saturday date nights when we would end the evening at my condominium. I would often give Elvira the line, "I really don't want you driving back to your house this late" or "Just stay here tonight. We're not 'doing anything' except 'cuddling.' That's o.k." She would inevitably protest that "It isn't right" or "What kind of Christian witness is that for your neighbors, particularly if they see my car outside overnight?" I would often wear her down with my "logic" and a bit of pouting. The next day, however, was always a bit tense. She would be convicted that our behavior was absolutely wrong and would tell me so. Sometimes I agreed and sometimes I would simply ignore her. I would allow the issue to blow over...for a couple of weeks and then I would fall into the same pattern.

In my mind I "repented" and fixed the situation when we got married. Never again would I put Elvira in the compromising position of doing something against her will and better judgment. End of story...or so I thought.

Periodically, when we would be in the midst of a disagreement, Elvira would blurt out something like, “You’re being controlling and manipulative just like you were when we were dating!” My mind would scream, “Where did *that* come from?” Our disagreement would then inevitably degrade to a shouting match and end up with both of us withdrawing in total frustration.

About twenty years into our marriage, in a small group environment through our church, we began to study the *Intimate Encounters* (Intimacy Press, 1997) marriage curriculum written by Dr. David and Teresa Ferguson. A key tool to which we were introduced was the concept of “confession and forgiveness.” The first time that Elvira and I attempted to work through the process, we addressed the obvious and recent hurts that we had inflicted upon one another. We felt the resultant changes in our depth of intimacy, but inherently knew that there had to be something more. Eventually we “got serious” about the process and it changed our marriage beyond our wildest dreams.

Unlike the worldly approach to apologies with emphasis on a meaningless “I’m sorry,” true confession and forgiveness begins with our relationship with God. When we’ve hurt another through our actions, words, or neglect, we have also hurt the heart of God. Often we carry guilt and the offended person may bear anger and bitterness. The following steps will lead to new levels of healing in your relationships:

1. Accept Responsibility. Our normal tendency is to try to explain away or to rationalize our behaviors when we are caught in a hurtful action. Often our apologies are accompanied by phrases such as “..., but...” or “If you hadn’t..., I would not have...” Accepting responsibility means looking only at our part in the hurtful act. “What I did was wrong.” Period. No words of explanation or justification.

2. Reflect. Take the time to reflect on the ways in which you have hurt your spouse and marriage. Prayerfully consider the *specific* ways, not generalities, that your behaviors or words have inflicted pain on your loved ones. Ask God to reveal both the obvious and the subtle pain for which you are responsible.

3. Confess to God. Before going to your spouse or loved one, confess your sins before God and ask for his forgiveness. He is quick to forgive our sincere hearts. There is great personal healing in the process of confession and asking for God’s assistance to become the person that he wants us to be. Godly sorrow touches our heart when we feel the pain that we have inflicted upon another. Godly sorrow causes us to seek God’s way rather than our way.

4. Confess to the Other. Confess the wrong that you committed to your spouse. As stated above, that confession must be without qualifications, explanations or any other wording that minimizes the impact of a repentant heart. Be specific. And the key to healing a woman’s heart is describing *how* the wrong must have made her feel. Even if you don’t hit the exact emotional descriptors, her sense that you have begun to understand the depth of the hurt that she experienced will help her to conclude, “I believe this guy has a clue. If he truly understands how he hurt me, then I can believe that he will not hurt me in that way again.” This sets the stage for her to make the *decision* to forgive – to “let it go.” Ask for her forgiveness.

5. Implement a New Behavior. Having experienced Godly sorrow and the healing process of confession and forgiveness, you will be compelled to create new ways of interacting with your spouse to avoid similar pain in the future and replace it with deeper intimacy.

When Elvira and I sat down to heal all of the hurt that we had allowed to accumulate over the two decades of our marriage, I was immediately convicted to address the hurt that I had inflicted during our dating. After confessing my sin to God, I approached my wife.

“Elvira, the pressure on you to spend the night with me while we were dating was wrong. I realize that my behavior hurt you. It probably made you feel conflicted and used and untrusting of me. I imagine you were looking to me to provide spiritual leadership for us as a couple and I betrayed that faith in me. I now understand the things I did also hurt the heart of God. I commit to never hurting you in that way in the future and I will truly try to honor you in all ways. Will you forgive me?”

Twenty years of hurt came forth in Elvira’s sobbing cries as we held one another. I cried with her and we both experienced incredible healing as she extended her forgiveness to me. The situation has never again come up in our discussions or disagreements. It was healed.