

FORGIVENESS IS THE BEST FORM OF LOVE
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They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send [his wife] away.” “It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

–Mark 10:4-9

I wish you could have known Joe and Dorothy. They were quite the couple. Joe was a shoe salesman—a cheerful man with a million-dollar smile. And Dorothy, well, she was a delight to know...and she loved to talk. Each of them has now passed away, but when I first met them about 23 years ago, people spoke well of them as a couple, and theirs was the picture of a lasting marriage.

So it came as a surprise to me to find out that, years before, when Joe first asked Dorothy to marry him, she told him, “No.” As Joe told the story, they had been dating each other for several years when Dorothy’s father passed away. So when Joe popped the question and asked Dorothy to marry him, she said, “I can’t. I have to take care of my mother.” So Joe said, “I’ll take you both.” And he did.

As it turned out, it was for nearly forty years... Dorothy would often comment, “And I think that there were times when Joe got along better with my mother than I did.”

I wish you could have known them, because through the years, they learned what it takes to make a marriage work...and it showed. But I’m afraid that’s a trait that’s becoming more and more difficult to find.

What does it take to make a marriage last? How can it survive the ups and downs that come through the years? The book of Proverbs provides a clue. It says, *“He who covers over an offense promotes love...”* (Proverbs 17:9). You see, when two sinful people choose to live together in the close relationship of marriage, they’re bound to step on each other’s toes, irritate each other, and discover one another’s faults. But, *“He who covers over an offense promotes love...”* It’s all about **forgiveness**. That goes for the husband...and that goes for the wife.

Someone has said, *“Forgiveness is the best form of love. It takes a strong person to say sorry...and an even stronger person to forgive.”* I don’t know who said that, but I believe there is a great deal of wisdom—*biblical* wisdom—in those words.

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That’s true because forgiveness has the power to heal and the power to restore a broken relationship. But when people are unwilling to say they’re sorry, they forfeit the peace that forgiveness can bring.

When I was a pastor in Minnesota, our home town newspaper, the Le Sueur News Herald, ran an interesting piece on a local divorce support group. **[image of newspaper]** The article announced, “Pictures often reveal true feelings” and alongside the article were some pictures that children drew and notes they wrote when their parents were struggling in their marriages.

- One of the drawings said, **“Why did my parents even get married? Why do I have to go through with this?”** The parents are arguing, while the little girl stands there in the middle feeling helpless...
- Another kid said, **“When parents get divorced, it feels really sad. Sometimes you even feel like running away.”**
- And another one states, **“Don’t hope for your parents to get back together because most of the time they won’t.”**

To read these things...it breaks your heart.

One of the drawings in the article has always stuck in my mind. **[battle scene]** It looks it was drawn by a nine- or ten-year-old boy. Canons and mortars and tanks are shooting at each other from *Fort Mom* on the left and *Fort Dad* on the right. Their shells are bursting in mid-air like fireworks in the sky. And there in the middle of the cannon fire you see two people hanging from parachutes dropping helplessly down from the sky.

- You can't help but wonder: What is this young artist feeling inside?
- What kind of things has he been living through at home?
- How did the constant conflict impact his outlook on life as a kid, and how does it affect the way he feels about life today?

What he scratched at the top of his drawing says a lot. He titled his picture: **World War III**. **[fade in]**

It's not supposed to be that way, is it? But far too often, it is.

Some 400 years before the birth of Christ, the Lord through the prophet Malachi said, *"I hate divorce"* (Malachi 2:16 NIV 84). If you've ever experienced the pain of a broken home, you know... As a young pastor, when I met with young couples who were planning to be married, I sometimes wondered I should even bring up the topic of divorce. Would it bother them for me to talk about it—would it drag up bad memories? It turns out, I didn't need to worry. One couple looked at each other and then looked me in the eye and said, "Pastor, we've talked about this. And we want you to know: we hate divorce, too."

It hurts. And sometimes the hurt lasts for a long, long time.

So why do so many marriages fall apart? I mean, you don't go into a marriage with the idea that it's not going to work. It happens **gradually**. It begins in the heart. It begins when **what I want** and **how I feel** become all-important—more important than **what's good for the family**...more important than **what God says**. But the Lord who instituted marriage has made it clear what he wants: *"What God has joined together, let man not separate,"* he says (Mark 10:9). And he says it in love.

"But pastor," we sometimes hear, "Don't you think it's better to get divorced than to keep on arguing all the time?" It sounds reasonable. But listen to the words of Jesus. *"What God has joined together, let man not separate."* And then, listen to that argument. What's it saying? What are your choices—how many are there? **[choices??]**

- ✓ Get a divorce
- ✓ Keep on arguing all the time

You see what's wrong with that, don't you? There are never just two options—one bad and the other even worse. **[choices]** You can...

- ✓ Stop arguing
- ✓ Stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about others
- ✓ Recognize **your** part, admit what **you've** done wrong...and then take the first step and apologize
- ✓ Forgive, as the Lord has forgiven you
- ✓ Recommit yourself to your husband or your wife
- ✓ Serve one another in love

The scriptures tell us: *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."* Think about that. And the Bible goes on to say, *"If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:8,9).

And, *"the blood of Jesus, [God's] Son, purifies us from all sin"* (1 John 1:7). **Forgiveness is the best form of love.**

Look at Jesus. He was rejected...but did he lash out in anger at those who rejected him? No.

- “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).
- “When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats” (1 Peter 2:23).
- On the cross, he prayed for those who hurt him. “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

When he spoke that prayer, he was praying **for you**; he was praying **for me**. “Father, forgive them...” he said. “Forgive them for their impatience, their harsh words, and their petty anger.” And he’s still praying for us. “We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1).

“He who covers over an offense promotes love...” That’s what we need...and **that’s what Jesus does!**

Moms and dads, one of the greatest gifts you can give to your children is **the gift of your unconditional love**—for them...and for one another. If you need strength, look at Jesus: **Forgiveness—his forgiveness—is the best form of love.**

That image from the *Le Sueur News Herald* had one more feature—something I didn’t notice for a while, but when I did, it struck me. I like to think of it as **a sign of hope**. If you look carefully at the bottom of the page, you can see a road that runs between *Fort Mom* and *Fort Dad*. [arrow – fly in] During the war, it seems, that road’s not being used—maybe because everyone is so focused on the fighting. But maybe the time will come when that road can connect the two warring parties once more. That road is the road of **forgiveness**.

Even if the past cannot be undone, it’s a road that needs to stay open.

That means something—for marriages, and for all our relationships. If you want peace, somebody has to make the first move. Whether you’re in the heat of battle or you’re fighting a “cold war,” somebody has to make the first move. That’s what your heavenly Father did for you when he sent his Son Jesus to be your Savior.

And he is the one who will help you do it.

AMEN.