From Gridlock to Repentance and Forgiveness
(With Scriptural Examples)

1. Most relationships wherein there is an offender and offended have high degrees of anger/mistrust; low degrees of connectedness. Relationally this pattern constitutes gridlock.

2. The offender, once his/her offense is known, may often intentionally “add insult to injury” by taking a defensive stance wherein he/she blames the other while defending him/herself (Genesis 3:11–13). Continued refusal to accept some measure of moral accountability leads to further breakdown and eventual relationship death.

3. The injured party, during this initial defensiveness, often feels a great deal of anger in the hurt of betrayal. The injured party’s goal is to “be angry and sin not” (Psalm 4:4)—though this decisional point is by no means immediate, nor should it be.

4. Further, the injured party needs to hold the wrongdoer accountable for his/her actions by looking for change; perhaps including even separating from the wrongdoer until he changes (Genesis 42:18–21, 33–34).

5. The injured party may be so hurt that he/she refuses to forgive. While forgiveness should not be rushed, continual refusal to forgive brings painful consequences, including:
   - harm to self (Genesis 16:14)
   - harm to others (Genesis 16:5–6)
   - harm to future generations (Genesis 16:9–12)

6. Especially during the painful, difficult early days of attempts to reconcile, unilateral repentance or unilateral forgiveness may sustain a relationship (Romans 5:6–8, Romans 12:18); for a powerful account of how unilateral forgiveness restored a relationship see Genesis 37, 42:1–45:14).

7. At times unilateral forgiveness or repentance is as far as the relationship can go. In these instances the unilateral action arises out of the integrity of the offended (or offending) party. It is motivated by feelings of compassion and empathy toward the other (Matthew 18:26–27, Luke 15:13–20).

8. The full power of mutual forgiveness/repentance in a relationship, however is seen in Biblical restoration through relational justice (Matthew 5:23–24, 18:15–17). This restoration is composed of nondefensive, heartfelt confession and repentance by the wrongdoer (Luke 15:17–20), and forgiveness by the injured party (Luke 15:21–24).

9. Particularly early-on, but most of the way along, the work of repentance/ forgiveness requires a sense of personal integrity that keeps each party on track whether or not the other party recognizes and credits every act. Out of this personal integrity each party does his/her particular work, and maintains connection to the other (for a detailed example see John 13:1–12).
   - The wrongdoer may have to maintain nondefensive acceptance of the wrong, often in the face of continued hurt and mistrust by the other.

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1 These concepts were adapted from points presented by Dr. Virginia T. Holeman in an article in Marriage & Family: A Christian Journal (Vol 2, 1999).
• The forgiver may have to carry both her own hurt and a willingness to forgive in the face of the other’s defensiveness and/or refusal to acknowledge certain aspects of the offense.

This personal integrity is extremely difficult to practice. Our clinical experience suggests that such integrity is impossible for a mere mortal without support from others (see Mark 14:32–37).

10. Finally, for a powerful illustration of how forgiveness turned deceit and relational tragedy into a redemptive, restorative experience, see Genesis 37–50.

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