

The Counseling Zone: A View from the Counselor's Chair

by Pastor Blake Shaw

I invite you to join me on a journey. It is a journey into, perhaps, one of the most precious topics that we as believers can explore. The topic: forgiveness! What a precious, precious word. It's that one issue that we as believers love, and love it we should. And we must understand the biblical view of forgiveness. Forgiveness is essential to the unity of the family, the unity of the church, and even the mental stability of humans. The fact is: we sin against one another. We disappoint one another. We do things and say things that hurt and cut one another. We overlook things and misunderstand one another. Leaders do things that hurt both, other leaders and non-leaders. Non-leaders do things that hurt leaders. Teenagers do things that hurt other teens. Worship leaders and musicians do things that hurt worshipers and non-musicians. Administrative minded people do things that hurt those not so inclined. Pastors hurt parishioners and parishioners hurt pastors. Any time there are people there is opportunity for hurt and the church is clearly no exception. In fact, the church is possibly the place where some of the greatest hurt takes place because it is, in all reality, a family.

Your Theology of Forgiveness

There isn't a person who walks the halls of our church who hasn't been in the need for forgiveness. Only One person has ever been on that side of the fence and His name is Jesus. All of the rest of us have needed forgiveness and have needed to forgive. When it comes to counseling (i.e., living the Christian life), we must have a theology of forgiveness. Christian, what is your theology of forgiveness? There are many hard questions that come up when we discuss forgiveness. For example, one might ask: "What is the basis for forgiveness? What if the other person never asks for forgiveness? How do I overcome the hurt from being wronged? What if the person asks but I don't believe they are sincere or they don't say the right words in asking for forgiveness? What if they don't ask for forgiveness but simply say that they are sorry? What if the person asks for forgiveness but then repeatedly does what she did in the first place? How do I go about forgiving someone and yet I can't trust them? Does it mean that I haven't forgiven them if I don't trust them? Why should I forgive? Those are just a small sample of some of the questions that arise whenever we begin a discussion on the issue of forgiveness. So let's begin the journey.

What is Forgiveness?

There are numerous definitions floating out there within the corridors of Christendom, each offering a general idea to us what is meant by this precious word. For my article here, I will offer a definition that I believe encapsulates what God's Word means when it uses the term. Forgiveness is a lifting of the charge of guilt from another, a formal declaration of that fact and a promise (made and kept) not to hold the wrong against him in the future. As we consider Scripture, we could say that forgiveness is a promise to: 1) Not dwell on the incident mentally; 2) Not bring up the incident again and use it against the person; 3) Not talk to others about the incident; and 4) Not allow the incident to stand between you and the other person or hinder your personal relationship with him/her.

Once we are confronted with this definition, it becomes obvious that forgiveness is not an easy thing to pull off. Forgiveness is not a popular concept. Forgiveness is easier to talk about than it is to actually practice. But, that is why we need Christ. I don't know about you, but I don't have my own internal ability to pull off forgiveness. I need Christ. I am

desperate...daily! You see, when God asks us to forgive others, we are basically being asked to do something that is virtually impossible to do...on our own. But this isn't something new to the 21st century or to the believers in our culture. Even the disciples were faced with the hard sayings of Jesus related to forgiveness.

Take Heed

In Luke 17:3-5, Jesus put forward some incredibly hard words for the disciples to follow. Jesus said, "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

If you truly ponder these words you will most likely struggle. I believe Jesus knew full well that what He said was hard for His disciples to hear. That is likely when He began with, "Take heed to yourselves." It is my firm belief that Jesus used that statement because of what He had said right before verse 3, related to causing a younger one to stumble (Luke 17:1-2), but also because He was going to tell the disciples that they need to do something that was brutally hard to do. Jesus, in essence, tells the disciples, "Men, you watch out. You watch out for you. Take heed to yourselves."

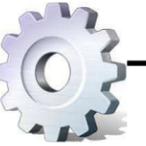
Jesus then unfolded the specific instruction regarding what one is supposed to do. He tells the disciples that if someone sins against them, they are to confront that person and if that person repents, they are to forgive. The issue of confrontation ties in with Matthew 18:15 where Jesus said that if a brother sins, one is to go to him in private and confront him. Confrontation should always begin in a private conversation. So, Jesus says that we are to rebuke the brother who sins against us. This is hard for us to do. Who likes to confront? I have yet to meet someone who finds incredible joy in confronting another person. Only godly love (or an ungodly love for power and control) can motivate one to truly follow through on what Jesus directs us to do.

The Brutally Hard Command

Most people though will say that if the person repents after the first offense, it is relatively easy, at least in most cases, to grant forgiveness. Yet this is where the words of our Lord get really hard. Jesus continued, telling the disciples that if the person sins against them seven times in one day and each time returns saying, "I repent" then the disciples are to forgive. There are two reasons why doing this is hard. First, being sinned against seven times in one day could challenge any of us to really want to forgive the offender. But secondly, Jesus amps this up by saying that the person returns and says, "I repent." In other words, the person doesn't prove his repentance, he simply says, "I repent." Practically speaking, this is where the person would seek forgiveness for the wrong and even possibly say that they don't want to do what they did, but then over and over throughout the same day they repeat the sin and, instead of proving the genuineness of their repentance, they do quite the opposite. They sin against the person seven times. Ugh! Do you feel the weight of what Jesus is saying? This is brutally hard to pull off. You know it. I know it. The disciples knew it. That's why they said in response to Jesus, "Increase our faith." In other words, the disciples heard these hard words from our Lord and they recognized full well that they did not have the capacity, in and of themselves, to do what Jesus had just commanded. Neither do you or I. We need Christ.

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Food for Thought BY PASTOR BLAKE SHAW

The central theme in Scripture is the glory of God in salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. In Matthew 1:21 we are told that the son born to Mary and Joseph would, "...save His people from their sins." For centuries this truth has been embraced as a source of great hope for many believers. Yet sadly, far too many believers have only seen this truth from a limited perspective. Many of us think of Jesus as the One to save us from the penalty of sin; and He certainly does. But there is so much more to the truth of Jesus saving His people from their sin. What about being saved from the power of, the practice of, and the presence of sin? As believers, Jesus truly has saved us from the penalty of sin - what a glorious reality. But, He has also saved us from the power of sin; He is daily saving us from the practice of sin; and one day He will save us from the very presence of sin. It is this current, on-going salvation from the practice of sin that is the focus of this article and articles to follow.

Who is Your Savior?

Think with me for a moment: Who is your savior? Oh, I know the normal, spiritualized answer that most believers dole out, but when it comes down to the nitty gritty moment-by-moment living of life, who (or what) do you truly see as your savior. It is my observation, of my own heart and of thousands of people over the years that we all deal with a common temptation. When Paul wrote that our temptations are "common to man" (I Corinthians 10:13), it's my proposal that there is one temptation that most, if not all of us experience. It is true that the sins that tend to nag at your heart may be very different than what nags at me or others in the church, but it seems that one sin that is universal in its reach is disbelief. What I have in mind is that there is a universal sin that we battle and that is the sin of turning to someone or something else for salvation other than the Lord Jesus Himself.

It's not that we turn to other persons or things to save us from the penalty of sin. We are dialed-in on what Scripture tells us about Who will save us from that. Yet, we know the world is a mess. And, we know that we have our own internal problems. We experience loneliness, a lack of meaning and fulfillment, and a lack of satisfaction and direction. We often have longings and desires that no person or experience in this world can satisfy. That reality tells us that we were made for another world. As the world spins out of control, we find ourselves looking for a "savior" of sorts. You don't believe it. Keep reading.

A man struggles with lust and he pursues marriage hoping that marriage will provide him the relief from the inner turmoil he experiences. A woman desires security, love, attention and other things that can accompany married life. She believes that a husband will be a protector, a provider, and a continuous source of love, attention, and affection.

Another woman gets married believing that the missing element of her life is being a mom, and so she walks through the horrific pain of childbirth believing that the beautiful baby she has brought into this world will silence the restless longing of her soul. A father beams with pride as he watches his first-born son score the winning touchdown to secure the conference championship. The son's future seems bright as he excels in sports. A sense of satisfaction wells up within the heart of the father as he ponders his son's future. Yet, in all of these cases (and many others) there is still a simmering search for something more. It's really the search for a "savior"—an all-satisfying savior.

Jane and Tim

Jane and Tim have been married for 19 years. They got married for various reasons, but the ones explained above were at the core of their desires. Tim is a hardworking husband. He has diligently provided for Jane and their two children. But Tim will admit that marriage didn't silence the lust that would ravage his heart. One year into married life, Tim began to struggle with the temptation to look at pornography. Oddly enough, he's very satisfied with the sexual intimacy of his married life. After 19 years, the battle still rages. Tim confesses that he looked to Jane to be his savior, but Jane couldn't do what she was never created to do - be a savior.

Jane too admits that she married Tim believing he'd be more than a provider. She looked to him to be more than a great father to their kids. She now realizes that she married Tim because she longed for an intimate relationship. She married Tim thinking that he would be a spiritual leader, a protector, a constant source of security, love, and attention. She was told throughout her single life that she deserved such a man and, while dating Tim, it appeared that she had found the perfect source to fulfill her desires. Jane now sees that she married Tim for the wrong reasons, hoping that he could serve as her functional "savior."

Tim and Jane are now experiencing the consequences of having substitute saviors. Even their children, as they reached their teen years, have become a source of heartache for Tim and Jane. The athletic son burned out from the pressure to perform in sports year-round. He went from super-star status to your average, run-of-the-mill athlete. Tim battled disappointment with his son while always trying to provide some level of encouragement, but he was shot through with disappointment. The cute, fun-loving daughter has now begun to spurn her parent's counsel, listening instead to the deafening counsel of the wicked. Her choices devastate her parents. Sadness and disappointment rule the hearts of Tim and Jane.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: The Community of Grace Biblical Counseling Ministry and the editor of the monthly newsletter welcome letters from the readers. Letters may be edited if the editorial team deems it necessary to do so to fit the space allowed or due to unbiblical communication practices. We encourage the reader to write with edification in mind. Letters must be signed. Names withheld upon request. If you have a question about counseling that you would like to ask in future publications - feel free to submit those questions to Pastor Blake Shaw.

Food for Thought [Continued from cover page]

You get the idea. Tim and Jane are really not much different than you or me. It does seem like it is a cry of the human heart to desire a savior. We know things are not right. We know that something is amiss in this world. We recognize that there is an internal problem as we experience loneliness, heartache, great disappointment, and a lack of satisfaction. We find within ourselves this constant nagging for something more, something better, something that will ultimately satisfy and bring ultimate sustaining happiness. The human dilemma is that we search for something or someone to save us from ourselves.

The Search for a Savior

Consider the various ways that we humans look for a savior. A husband and wife look to each other for some form of salvation. Teenagers and college students look for the acceptance from their peers. Single people look to dating as the savior from loneliness. Abused people look to a protector (understandably so). The lonely person looks to others for friendship. The citizen looks to his government. The sick person looks to medication or alternative medicine. A church-goer looks for certain feelings from a church service. A church-goer looks to other believers, hoping that they will fill what is missing from the soul. A church-goer

looks to the church leaders hoping that they will take care of all of their self-defined needs. Athletes and fans look to winning a championship. A person struggling with issues in life looks to a counselor. A person who battles supposed mental problems looks to a prescriptive medication. An empty soul looks to a substance. A pleasure-driven-man looks to pornography. A bored, pleasure-driven-woman looks to shopping. And a conquering-driven man looks to a rifle or bow or some big-boy-toy. You get the idea.

We humans are perpetually turning to others hoping to find a savior. It is no wonder we stagger about with disappointment, anger, bitterness, anxiety, stress, and conflict. We look to people and to objects, thinking they can save us when only One can truly do so. Jeremiah speaks of God's people who turned to broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13). Anyone or anything other than the Lord Jesus Himself is a "broken cistern." Our true Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, offers us Living water that will quench our thirst (John 4:13-14). As we consider the Savior who came to save His people from their sins, let's be alert to our tendency to turn to false messiahs, hoping - just hoping, that they can save us from ourselves. In doing so, we can truly avoid a life of much disappointment, conflict, and disunity.

Q&A with Guest Writer: Julie Gossack

Sometimes conservative Evangelicals avoid the topic of feelings and emotions and even go so far as to portray them as a bad thing. Could you address the issue of feelings and what role they play in our lives?

This is Part 4 of a 6-part series to answer this question. So far we have defined feelings and discussed the first and second of these biblical principles: 1) feelings are a component of the heart from which we live, 2) feelings are not inherently wrong, 3) feelings can be sanctified, and 4) feelings must be directed by God's Word. In this edition of The COG we will consider Principle 3.

Principle 3: Feelings can be sanctified.

Sometimes we wonder if feelings can be brought under the control of God. We wonder if feelings can really be sanctified and made holy. The good news is that feelings can be sanctified!

In Part 3 we learned from biblical anthropology that mankind was created as an emotional being in the image of an emotional Godhead; because of this fact, feelings are not inherently wrong. With that said, it does not take much observation of humanity to notice that we do not always have righteous feelings. We might wonder why we have sinful feelings if they originated with God and are inherently a good part of our created being.

Fallen Man has Fallen Feelings

Sinful feelings began when mankind "fell," or chose to disobey God in the Garden of Eden (See Genesis 3; cf. Romans 5:12, 18-19a). Up until that time, mankind manifested righteous emotions, accurately reflecting the image of the emotional Godhead. After that time, mankind's heart was utterly fallen. Our thoughts, desires, and feelings became wretchedly sinful (Jeremiah 17:9) and so did our behavior (Romans 3:10-18, 23). Consequently, sin rendered us unable to accurately reflect the pure emotions of the Godhead. This is a sad reality, yet all is not lost.

All is not lost because God is a God of compassion; His mercy and His kindness know no end (Psalm 86:13, 15; Lamentations 3:22; Ephesians 2:7; Titus 3:4-6). He is a God who manifests great love, even to those who hate Him (Romans 5:7-10; Ephesians 2:4-5). This love was displayed when God the Father

sent Jesus the Son to bear the punishment mankind justly deserves for sin (II Corinthians 5:21; I Peter 2:24; I John 4:14). Since Jesus experienced God's wrath, we can be forgiven of sin and obtain the gift of salvation.

When we accept God's gift of salvation, we become regenerate, with a new and redeemed heart that is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5; II Corinthians 1:21, 5:17; Ephesians 1:13-14). Through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the Word of God we are able to cultivate righteous thoughts, desires, and emotions which lead to righteous behavior (II Corinthians 3:18; John 17:17; Ephesians 4:26-27; Hebrews 4:12). Thus, through salvation and the process of sanctification, mankind has the ability to reflect the pure emotions of God as we are conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29).

Scripture teaches that feelings are just as fallen and predisposed to sin as the other components of the heart. God accuses the *whole* human heart (thoughts, desires, and emotions), and He also redeems the *whole* human heart (thoughts, desires, and emotions). Therefore, feelings are redeemable and can be sanctified, just like thoughts and desires.

Are Feelings controllable?

Sometimes we think that feelings can't be sanctified because they seem so uncontrollable. It is helpful to differentiate between the three *types* of feelings in order to understand if feelings are controllable. You may remember the three definitions of feelings discussed in Part 1: 1) the perception of touch. For example, "The cloth feels rough on my skin." 2) a physiological sensation not associated with the senses of touch, taste, sight, hearing, or smell. For example, "I feel warm, sick, tired, or hungry." 3) to be emotionally affected. For example, "I feel sad or angry." This third type of feelings, also called "emotions," is the type that we are discussing.

Now it is important to make a distinction between the *third* type of feelings (emotions) from the *second* type of feelings (a physiological sensation) since using these terms interchangeably can cause confusion. Although these two types of feelings are distinct (emotions and physiological sensations), they are also *interconnected* as part of the human condition. They are connected in that some of our physiological responses (feelings, according to definition number two) are a by-product of the thoughts, desires, and emotions in our hearts.

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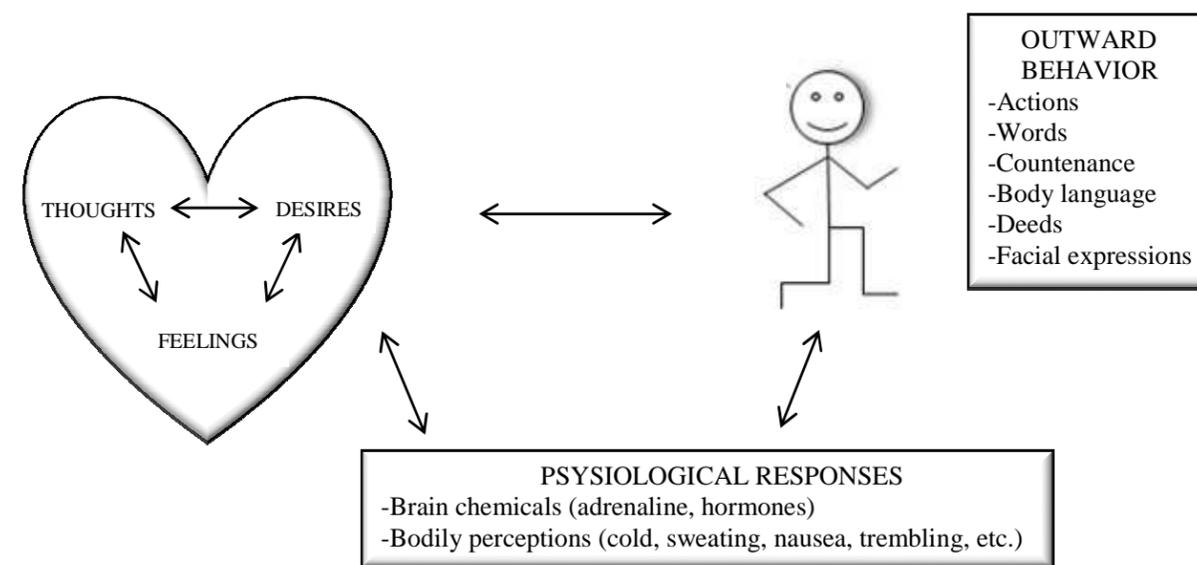
Q&A Continued from facing page

For example, if we have anxious thoughts in the heart, our physical bodies may automatically respond with a rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, or nervous shaking. If we have sexual thoughts and desires in our heart, our body will automatically respond with hormonal stimuli. If we are fearful in our hearts, we may experience adrenaline rushing through our bodies or we might become nauseated. These physiological responses, or feelings (according to definition two), are automatic; we have no control over them. It is how our bodies were created by God. (Certainly not all physiological responses are a by-product of the heart.)

Scripture acknowledges the relationship between our heart attitudes and the physical body as evidenced in statements such as: *A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones* (Proverbs 17:22), and *Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. . . my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away* (Psalm 31:9-10).

Not only can heart attitudes affect the physiological responses of the body but those physical responses can also reinforce the attitudes of the heart. Specifically, we may have anxious thoughts that lead to nervous shaking or a rapid heartbeat. That nervous shaking and rapid heartbeat can, in turn, cause our hearts to have more anxious thoughts, desires, and emotions. Furthermore, the nervous heart attitudes and physiological responses can cause our behavior to change so that we behave in an even more nervous manner (perhaps pacing or wringing the hands or crying). In turn, this nervous behavior can cause more anxious thoughts and physical responses; one response leads to the other, and vice versa. Scripture acknowledges the influence behavior has on the attitudes of the heart (Genesis 4:7; John 13:17; Psalm 40:8). Certainly, the interaction between the heart, our physiological responses, and our outward behavior is interconnected as each influences the other. Figure 3 illustrates this concept.

Figure 3: The Connection between the Heart, Outward Behavior, and Physiological Responses



We need to understand this relationship between the heart, physiological responses, and outward behavior as well as the differing definitions of feelings to help clear up our confusion about the ability of feelings to be sanctified. To be specific, when we talk about feelings as a physiological response, it is accurate to say that those types of "feelings" cannot be controlled. Physiological responses are part of the body's autonomic nervous system and cannot be controlled. However, when we speak about feelings as a component of the heart (emotions, according to definition three), we know that those types of feelings can (and must) be controlled through the power of the Holy Spirit and God's Word. With that said, it should be noted that physiological feelings can be moderated through the thoughts, desires, and emotions of the heart.

Biblical anthropology and the hope of the Gospel teach us that feelings can be sanctified. Feelings are no more fallen than thoughts and desires, making them unredeemable or uncontrollable. They are a component of the human heart that is redeemed through Christ and can be made holy. In the next edition of The COG we will examine the principle that feelings must be directed by God's Word.

¹ Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996) 706.

² Anatomica's Body Atlas, (California: Laurel Glen, 2002) 242-244, 431.

³ Anatomica's Body Atlas, (California: Laurel Glen, 2002) 242-244, 431.

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