

# LOOKING for **FORGIVENESS**

finding real forgiveness after an affair

written by  
Tim Tedder, LMHC, NCC



# Looking for Forgiveness

## *Finding Real Forgiveness After an Affair*

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## Preface

Many of the clients I work with struggle with finding forgiveness, especially after suffering deep wounds of betrayal in a relationship. But forgiveness is not a thing that comes easily to most of us; we have to find our way to it.

This ebook is a compilation of 7 articles I've written on the subject of forgiveness. The first five articles deal with forgiving an affair, although the principles apply to any situation in which an offense has been committed. Each article describes a unique approach to forgiveness, but only the last two (Decisional Forgiveness and Completed Forgiveness) provide a healthy model.

The final two chapters address two reasons why an act of forgiveness may be rendered powerless. Part 1 addresses an inadequate response of the forgiveness-seeker. Part 2 considers ways in which the forgiveness-giver thwarts the process.

In each chapter, I attempt to point you in the direction of a better way... toward the kind of forgiveness that brings freedom and new beginnings. I hope you'll find it.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tim Tedder". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

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TimTedder.com  
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## Forgiving an Affair: Premature Forgiveness

I believe it is a good thing when a person moves toward forgiving a spouse's affair, but I become a bit suspicious of forgiveness that is offered too quickly. That kind of premature forgiveness reminds me of my childhood encounter with the Neighborhood Bully.

My grade-school friends and I were playing by the side of the road when he came riding by on his bike. I knew Bully only by reputation and so had no idea why he stopped, letting his bike fall to the ground as he walked purposefully toward me. Before I could make any sense of the circumstance, and without speaking a word of warning, Bully punched me in the face.

In those few seconds after the hit, my rattled brain scanned its memory data in search of anything that might be useful in issuing an appropriate response. The only retrievable information came from Sunday School lessons: "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies." So, while Bully's glare was daring me to fight back, I focused on my feet and mumbled, "I forgive you."

"What?!"

"I forgive you."

I figured God was really happy with this response; perhaps even pleased enough to send a couple invisible angels to protect me. Or maybe Bully would just back away in awed confusion, overcome by my forgiving spirit.

Instead, he punched me again.

Since forgiveness failed, I tried something else: playing dead. Maybe he figured it wasn't much fun punching a kid whose face was planted in the dirt but, whatever the reason, Bully got on his bike and rode away.

My next days were filled with revenge fantasies. I imagined every way a normal-me or a superhero-me might make Bully pay for his offense. My forgiveness had just been a temporary reaction, not a genuine response. It had been premature.

Forgiveness is a good thing. It's God-like. It frees us. It heals.

Some of the clients have offered premature forgiveness for their spouse's affair. Soon after the affair was discovered, these spouses were quick to declare, "Oh, I've already forgiven," only to return days or weeks later, confused by how angry they had become and how strongly they wanted justice.

Forgiveness is a good thing. It's God-like. It frees us. It heals. But if you try to offer it before you become completely aware of the offense, your forgiveness will be superficial. Eventually, you will either have to back up and start over, or move into a kind of fake forgiveness (pretending to forgive, but not really).

Small offenses, of course, require small forgiveness. But when you experience the "knife in the heart" kind of hurt an affair inflicts, make sure you take the time to truly understand what happened. Then, out of this awareness, find your way toward forgiveness that is more honest, more sustainable, more mature. ■

## Forgiving an Affair: Fake Forgiveness

*Another Saturday night. Jake sat at the table with a group of friends, sipping at his wine while inwardly bracing himself. His wife, Marci, had started in again with the jokes—the thinly-veiled criticisms—told at his expense. Ever since her affair, she seemed to slip more easily into these demeaning and embarrassing comments. Friends laughed, some of them glancing at Jake to check his reaction. He pretended to join them in the fun.*

*Driving home, Marci felt uncomfortable in the familiar quiet. "Don't take it so personally, Jake. I was just joking around. Nobody took it seriously." Jake remained quiet. "Com'on, you're not really going to be mad about this, are you?"*

*He measured his response. "I'm not mad. It's okay. We don't need to talk about it anymore." Marci, satisfied enough, slumped against the passenger door. Jake stared at the road as he drove home. All forgiven. All forgotten.*

Not really.

Fake forgiveness is offered with a smile covering clenched teeth. It's an attempt to gloss over an offense and pretend everything is fine when, in truth, unresolved hurt and resentment remain. Whereas premature forgiveness is soon cast aside, fake forgiveness is usually held onto as though it were the real thing.

Sometimes people get so good at being Fake Forgivers they don't even realize they're doing it. They profess forgiveness, but find themselves experiencing feelings of anxiety, anger, or depression they cannot explain. Their hidden resentments are often expressed in passive-aggressive behaviors (e.g., "Oh, I'm so sorry I forgot to do that for you.").

Why do people fake forgive an affair? Some do it because they are afraid of the conflict they would have to endure if they really tried to resolve their sense of betrayal. Others believe forgiveness is always required so they need to "just do it." Regardless of the reason, fake forgiving inevitably fails to provide genuine healing after an affair. Instead of allowing the injury to be cleaned out so that it can heal properly, fake forgiveness simply slaps a bandage over it and pretends everything is fine. While things look good on the surface, the injury continues to fester.

Fake forgiveness is offered with a smile covering clenched teeth. It's an attempt to gloss over an offense and pretend everything is fine...

To make sure you are offering genuine forgiveness for an affair, keep these things in mind:

- **Fake forgiveness ignores or minimizes the hurt.**

**Genuine forgiveness can only be offered after your hurt from the affair is acknowledged.** If you are not honestly recognizing and admitting your hurt, then you are not honestly recognizing or admitting the offense. If it is not truly acknowledged, it cannot be truly forgiven.

- **Fake forgiveness is quickly stated with the expectation that you simply declare it and then move on.**

**Genuine forgiveness is usually a process, not an event.** Small offenses, like small cuts, can be easily mended, but major wounds require more time. An affair is a major wound, and so it will take more time. If forgiveness comes, it will likely be offered and then repeatedly reaffirmed as healing progresses. ■

## Forgiving an Affair: Bartered Forgiveness

Bartered forgiveness is offered under the condition that the offender lives up to certain expectations. These expectations are often unstated and may have nothing to do with the affair. As long as the offended partner remains content in the relationship, there is no mention of the past affair. But whenever conflict or discontent reaches a high enough level, the affair is once again used as a weapon against the offender.

I knew a mother who was going through a difficult period of struggle with defiant her teenage son. One afternoon, in the heat of an argument, her son picked up a BB pistol, aimed it at her head, and pulled the trigger. He assumed the gun was empty, but it was not. A BB shot out of the gun and into the flesh between her eyes. Blood poured down her face and onto her sweater. It was a frightening event, but the emotional damage was worse than the physical. Soon afterward, the son expressed sorrowful regret and his mother readily forgave him.

But imagine a different outcome.

Imagine the mother proclaiming her forgiveness and then hanging the bloodied sweater in a closet. A week later, in the middle of another argument, Mom stops yelling, walks to the closet, reaches for the stained sweater, and puts it on. Her son is silenced. She learns that whenever she wears the evidence of his shame she regains control. The shirt becomes her go-to strategy at the cost of her son's increased resentment and the deterioration of their relationship. Even if she puts the sweater back into the closet each time, her forgiveness isn't real; it's just a bargaining chip.

Most of us would be appalled by this kind of manipulation, but how many times do we go back to the closet and pull out some past offense? How often do we hold up the evidence of past hurts in order to gain control by shaming the offender? When have we found more value in holding on to someone's wrongdoing instead of letting it go, even though we once claimed to forgive them?

How often do we hold up the evidence of past hurts in order to gain control by shaming the offender?

Affairs cause deep hurt, so it may take time to reach a place of real forgiveness, and it may require effort as you continue to affirm it, but *the purpose of forgiveness is to leave the affair in the past*. Genuine forgiveness does not allow you to run back and drag the affair into the present each time it seems useful again.



Are you a bartering forgiver? Here are some things you might want to consider doing:

- Get help from someone who can help you move toward forgiveness.
- Remember the times when you experienced real forgiveness (from others, from God) and consider what it means to know your offenses have been left in the past.
- If the affair is over and the offender genuinely asked for your forgiveness, do something to demonstrate the fact that you are willing to finally let it go. You might want to write a long letter describing every detail of the hurt you've experienced and then burn it once and for all. That won't make the pain disappear, but it can be an act of your intent to no longer let the affair maintain its power over you. Whenever you're tempted to reach back to the offense again, remember your action of letting it go.
- Admit your bartering forgiveness to your spouse, and ask him/her to forgive you.
- Use resources (books, recordings, etc.) to learn more about forgiveness. ■

## Forgiving an Affair: Decisional Forgiveness

Some people consider forgiveness an all-or-nothing proposition. It's a bit like bungee jumping; you can either stand frozen or you can take the step, but you can't go just half-way down. Combine this thinking with the idea that forgiveness is always the best choice and you will eventually find yourself in a dilemma: How can you completely forgive someone who shows no remorse for hurting you?

In my opinion, personal forgiveness is always the best choice, even if the offender doesn't deserve it. I should admit that I have not been ultimately tested in this belief. For example, if someone intentionally caused great harm to any member of my family, I'm not sure what I'd do. I hope I would, even then, find my way toward forgiveness because I've seen the fruit of unforgiveness and I'd rather not taste it.

Does that mean I would give up on seeking justice? Not necessarily. Does that mean I would trust that person around my family again? Probably not. But what it *does* mean is that even if a person is not repentant for a wrong done against me, it is better for me to release my hands from around their neck and let go of my desire for personal vengeance.

If your spouse has betrayed you, moving toward forgiveness is in your best interest. But how do you do this if your spouse is unremorseful or absent? What if he/she has left you (physically or emotionally) and shows no interest in coming back? Or what if they come back to you wanting everything to be "over" but give little indication that they really care about understanding your anger or pain? How can you be expected to forgive in a situation like this?

Maybe by *deciding* to forgive.

Decisional forgiveness chooses to let go of personal retribution while accepting the fact that you might never realize the emotional healing that would come if you experienced the offender's remorse. This kind of forgiveness can happen when you stop focusing on things that are out of your control (the offense or the offender) and, instead, give attention to what is within your ability to change. You are not responsible for the hurt, but you are responsible for your healing. You may never trust them again, but you can still forgive.

Decisional forgiveness chooses to let go of personal retribution while accepting the fact that you might never realize the emotional healing that would come if you experienced the offender's remorse.

What can you *decide* to do?

- **Talk it out.**

If you haven't done so already, you need to fully acknowledge the pain caused by the affair. Talk about it with someone you trust. Get advice on whether or not it would be beneficial to communicate your hurt to your spouse and, if so, the best way to do it.

- **Drop your weapon.**

In whatever way you carry around the idea of revenge, let it go. Give up on the idea that you are personally responsible for satisfying justice. If action is required, leave retribution to a higher authority: God or the law.

Give up on the idea that you are personally responsible for satisfying justice.

- **Start looking in the opposite direction.**

One definition of forgiveness goes something like this: "Forgiveness is giving up on trying to change the past." Instead of obsessing and ruminating about the past, turn around and look at your future.

I know this is easier said than done, but the truth is you can change how you think. Start by giving attention to what you feed your thoughts. Get rid of bad mental foods (bitter conversations, revenge movies, anything that feeds anger or causes you to focus on the past) and find better input (Scripture, inspiring songs, encouraging friends, anything that promotes peacefulness and a focus on the future). If you cannot escape obsessive thoughts, talk to someone who can help.

- **Search for empathy.**

If you become too focussed on our pain, your perspective will be limited and your emotional responses will be restricted. You will find it easier to forgive if you can (1) gain some understanding of your spouse's perspective, even if it is just an acknowledgment of ways they've been damaged, (2) be willing to acknowledge ways you contributed to relationship problems, and (3) remember the times when you were forgiven by others. ■

## Forgiving an Affair: Completed Forgiveness

Completed forgiveness is realized when, in addition to the decision to forgive, the forgiver experiences a full emotional release from the pain of the offence. The deeper the offense, the greater that pain will be.

Completed forgiveness brings restoration to the whole person: mind, body, spirit. It is the kind of forgiveness that most of us long for. It takes us beyond just a decision to a place where we experience healing on an emotional level. We actually feel the release and freedom that comes from forgiving or being forgiven.

Here's how it works in my marriage. When Sharon and I get into conflict my analytical mode shifts into overdrive as I argue my case. After all, I assume I'm probably 60-90% right and everything will be settled as soon as she finally listens to me. In the moment, this strategy seems reasonable even though decades of experience provide clear and compelling evidence to the contrary. The result, of course, is that we become more distant; I back away to leave her feeling alone, hurt, and angry.

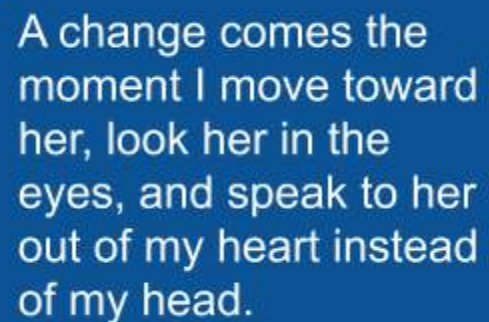
Since I'm not a complete idiot, I eventually figure out I did something wrong. I admit this to her and ask her to forgive me. Because she genuinely loves me, she is quick to grant it.

But I've learned that when I simply say to her, "I'm sorry for that," the sting often remains even after she puts the offense behind her. She no longer holds it against me, but she still feels the hurt because I simply used words without becoming emotionally involved in the forgiveness process. A change comes the moment I move toward her, look her in the eyes, and speak to her out of my heart instead of my head.

When I am honest about my disappointment in myself and show genuine remorse for hurting her, she softens. The sting is removed. Completed forgiveness comes.

That "softening" is, I believe, the mark of full forgiveness following an affair. It is a compassionate, humble, empathetic response from the betrayed spouse toward the husband/wife who cheated on them. Without it, they have to settle for something a little less.

Experiencing empathy for a spouse who had an affair should not be required or expected in every circumstance. If you recently found out about your spouse's affair, any suggestion that you should empathize with him/her likely seems absurd. But if you do want to fully forgive, you need to be willing to eventually move toward that kind of compassionate response. How?



A change comes the moment I move toward her, look her in the eyes, and speak to her out of my heart instead of my head.

In order to realize compassionate empathy for a spouse who betrayed you, one of these experiences must be true:

**1. Your spouse is emotionally involved in the process of forgiveness.**

If your spouse is able to express honest sorrow and remorse for their affair, then you have an opportunity to let down your guard and allow your feelings to soften. You may not get this chance if no regret is shown, or if he/she offers a kind of apology that falls short of real contrition.

Even if your spouse does show genuine remorse, you will not be able to move toward an empathetic response if you hold on to vengeance. You will have to let go of your demand for personal justice and be willing to step out of your own experience and into the sorrow of your offender. This provides an opportunity for both of you to experience healing.

But what if your offender does not engage you at this emotional level? What if they do not offer genuine remorse? Some counselors believe that the best you can hope for in that circumstance is a kind of decisional forgiveness because, they assert, complete forgiveness can only be achieved if/when the offender is an active participant in the process. But I believe there is another way, although it is difficult as well.

**2. You fully acknowledge your offenses against others, your own need for forgiveness, and out of the grace that has been given to you, you completely release your spouse.**

I hesitate in writing this second option because it can be so easily turned into some sort of moral or spiritual dictate that becomes a "requirement" if you are a truly good person. Let me be very clear: good people do not always fully forgive. And at the risk of inviting an argument, I'd say that even God does not fully forgive every offender. There is a place for justice.

Some people are so aware of their own need for grace and forgiveness, and how they've received these in the past, that they are able to truly forgive an affair even when the spouse is not asking to be forgiven. This kind of forgiveness amazes me and I don't think I'm very good at it, but I have witnessed it on occasion.

Honestly, it seems to me that Christians have a bit of an advantage in this second point. We believe that if we got what we truly deserved, we'd be in a mess of trouble, but that God took it on himself to pay the price that justice demanded for all our wrong-doing. If we really see ourselves that way, as undeserving recipients of God's gracious forgiveness, then we

Some people are so aware of their own need for grace and forgiveness... that they are able to truly forgive an affair even when the spouse is not asking to be forgiven.

should find it easier to move with compassionate empathy toward those who have offended us (Colossians 3:13). That's the way it should be, at least. In practice, it often is not.

Forgiveness is personal. Forgiveness is hard, maybe even nearly impossible sometimes. But I do believe it is always the goal worth moving toward. Lewis Smedes once wrote, "We talk a good forgiving line as long as somebody else needs to do it, but few of us have the heart for it while we are dangling from one end of a bond broken by somebody else's cruelty." If you're dangling, I hope you'll find your heart. ■

## Powerless Forgiveness

### Part 1: Selfish Apologies

We accept the belief that forgiveness is a necessary component of a healthy, satisfying relationship. But if that's true, why don't apologies always work? Why are offended people sometimes unsatisfied after an apology has been offered? Why are the words "I said I'm sorry. What more do you want?!" so familiar? Because *motive makes all the difference*. An apology can be filled with all the right words but remain powerless if it is offered for the wrong reason.

An effective apology is motivated by a desire to correct an offense against someone else; to bring resolution to the hurt we've caused them. But apologies are too often used as a quick fix for our uneasiness. When we focus more on our own discomfort than on the distress of the other person, our apology is selfish, and selfish apologies are usually ineffective.

I once stayed up late three nights in a row playing video games with my 19-year old daughter. My wife, Sharon, prefers me going to bed the same time she does, but doesn't begrudge our late night game play.

On the fourth night, when I was tired and ready to go to bed at her earlier time, she informed me that she was taking work off the next day and so was hoping we could stay up together for a while.

Aware of her disappointment, I stood across the room and explained that I was ready for sleep. She looked dejected and hoped I'd change my mind, but I was honestly tired and wanted to go to bed. And so I did. She decided to do the same.

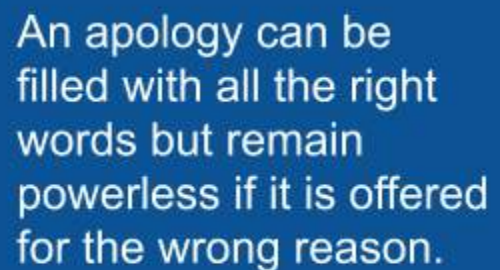
The conversation continued as we sat in bed. Sharon explained her anticipation of spending some casual time with me that night and the hurt of realizing I did not want the same.

"I'm sorry you feel disappointed," I finally said.

Her response was quick. "I hate it when you apologize for how I feel."

"Well, I don't think I did anything wrong. I thought going to bed earlier tonight would actually be a good thing. I didn't realize your plans had changed. If you think I did anything wrong, we can talk about it. But the fact is, I didn't intent to hurt you and I'm sorry if you feel that way."

That pretty much ended the conversation and I soon fell asleep.



An apology can be filled with all the right words but remain powerless if it is offered for the wrong reason.

But the next morning, I woke feeling unsettled. I pictured my wife sitting sadly on the couch the night before and this question immediately came to mind: Whose relief were you most interested in? The answer was obvious. Despite the fact that everything I had said in my defense was true, and even though I honestly regretted her sadness, my apology to her was powerless because from the very moment I was aware of her hurt, my responses were primarily driven by a desire for my own relief (from tiredness, from feeling guilty, from having to spend too much time trying to comfort her, from potential conflict). In those moments, I had actually been moving away from my wife, not towards her.

If I had been concerned about her relief, not just my own, I would have probably returned to the couch to be close to her while we talked. I would have touched her. I would have assured her that time with her was important to me, too, and maybe suggest protecting our weekend to make sure that would happen. Maybe I would have even suggested watching a 30-minute show we'd both enjoy. The specific solution would not have mattered as much to her as my intention to provide comfort.

Maybe that question is a good one for you to consider when asking for forgiveness. Whose relief are you most interested in? Yours, or theirs? It's not wrong to want relief for yourself, but the power of your apology will be measured by how much you focus on what the other person needs from you.

By the way, failure never has to be the end of our story. Once I realized the inadequacy of my response, I talked to Sharon about it. I admitted that I had been more focused on my relief than hers. I said I was sorry I wanted to keep figuring out how to love her better. That time, the apology worked. ■



## Powerless Forgiveness

### Part 2: Penitence Without Pardon

In *Part 1: Selfish Apologies*, I pointed out that an apology lacks power when the offender is more interested in gaining relief for his own discomfort than providing relief to the person offended. A self-focussed apology is seldom satisfying to the recipient. But forgiveness-seekers aren't the only ones who can sap the power out of forgiveness; **forgiveness-givers can be selfish, too.**

We hesitate when it comes to pointing out the shortcomings of an offended person. After all, why should anything be required of the victim? Shouldn't the offender carry the full responsibility for making things right?

Absolutely... if the only concern is for justice or recompense. But if there is to be genuine forgiveness, the offended individual must be willing to consider the offender's burden of shame and give them permission to let go of it.

I hear the objections: What if the offender doesn't ask for forgiveness? What if there is no remorse? What if the offender isn't even around anymore? What if the offense was huge (extreme abuse, acts of violence, etc.)? Those are fair questions that demand thoughtful consideration, but this article deals with a very specific condition: the need for forgiveness in intimate relationships. Intimacy requires forgiveness, and forgiveness requires compassion.

Of course, compassion is not the first response that rises when we are hurt by someone we love. On the contrary, most of us react by either attacking or retreating. Our acts of self-protection are likely to continue until we believe the offender feels enough remorse. But it is at this very point that we may get stuck, especially when the wound feels deep. In response to our pain, we may limit our vulnerability by requiring ongoing penitence without offering hope for pardoning. We punish by withholding our forgiveness.

A married couple once came to see me because they had not been able to move past the husband's affair that had occurred over 10 years ago. I was the latest in a series of counselors they had seen. After a few sessions, it became clear that the wife had no intention of granting forgiveness to her husband. Despite the fact that he had confessed, repented, and never returned to that behavior again, she continued to focus on his betrayal. Her unforgiveness allowed her to stay in control and minimized the risk of being hurt again. But they were miserable; their marriage was full of conflict and void of intimacy.

Our acts of self-protection are likely to continue until we believe the offender feels enough remorse.

I finally asked her, "What could your husband say or do that would allow you to begin moving toward forgiveness?" She just stared at me, expressionless, and finally said, "Nothing, because he can't undo the past." At least she was being honest, but her marriage was doomed.

This pattern of requiring penitence without granting pardon can show up even when the transgressions are relatively small. Little offenses build up into big resentments, and the relationship gets stuck if the offended spouse never grants a pardon. Instead of giving the message, I'm willing to let go of this and leave it in the past, the hurt spouse communicates any of the following:

- *Withholding forgiveness is a good way to punish you.*
- *I'll let you know when you've done enough to earn my forgiveness.*
- *Forgiving you just gives you the right to hurt me again.*
- *I'll forgive, but I won't forget... and I'll keep reminding you of that.*
- *In future conflicts, reminders of past offenses are fair weapons for me to use against you.*

Is it okay to want to see contrition? Of course. Can it take time to truly forgive? Yes, and deep hurts often take more time to heal. But consider your partner's relief, not just your own. Don't get stuck in your pain. Find your way to *I forgive you*. ■

## About the Author

Tim Tedder is a licensed counselor who specializes in helping individuals and couples heal from the wounds of infidelity. He and his wife, Sharon (also a counselor), are the owners of Currents Counseling Services in Winter Park, Florida. When they're not counseling, you may find them in a co-op game on Xbox, saving the world from zombie hordes or raging dragons. If you knew them, this would make perfect sense.

Tim has created several websites, each focussing on a different aspect of his recovery work:

### [AffairHealing.com](http://AffairHealing.com)

Created in 2009, this site has become a popular resource for affair recovery stories and articles. In 2015, the AH Community was added ([community.affairhealing.com](http://community.affairhealing.com)), an online, interactive forum for sharing experiences, ideas, and resources.

### [CurrentsCounseling.com](http://CurrentsCounseling.com)

Promotes the counseling services offered by Tim and Sharon Tedder from their offices in Winter Park, Florida (just north of downtown Orlando).

### [MarriageICU.com](http://MarriageICU.com)

Information and application for retreats offered to couples who need help in their affair recovery.