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For The Real World

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Discover the Power of Forgiveness

By Larry Walker

How important is forgiveness? The greatest benefits may come from granting, not receiving, forgiveness.



A 29-YEAR-OLD POLICE OFFICER whose wife is pregnant with their first child is shot on the streets of New York. For days his life hangs in the balance. Although he lives, the shooting leaves him a quadriplegic. In Texas a young woman is brutally raped, beaten with a hammer,

stabbed and left for dead. Although she survives, the incident leaves her emotionally devastated. A 7-year-old Cleveland boy lives through the mysterious murder of his mother. His father is arrested for the crime and convicted in a sensational trial that gains national attention. Ten years later his father is freed from prison after the real murderer is located. But irreversible damage has already occurred. The boy's childhood is over, his family shattered.

The victims in these three unrelated stories have more in common than having suffered tragic, brutal crimes. All three have been able to regain control of their lives by learning the power of forgiveness.

Social benefits of forgiveness

Recent studies have shown forgiveness also provides a vitally important dimension of human life, especially for those who have been victimized by life-changing tragedies. Forgiveness has widespread social applications. Realization of its value has led to the development of the restorative justice movement, which initiates conferences between crime victims and jailed perpetrators. More than 300 such programs are now in effect throughout the United States, including a million-dollar religious-based juvenile justice initiative in Florida.

Forgiveness and health

Examples such as those related above reveal that forgiveness also promotes the emotional and physical health of victims. On the other hand, holding on to bitterness, hatred and a desire for revenge can cause serious emotional and physiological problems that compound the suffering of the victim. Those who nurture these powerful emotions fail to realize the damage that they are bringing on themselves. As one person put it, "Holding on to anger is like taking poison and waiting for someone else to die." For example a leader of an uprising against the Warsaw ghetto described the bitterness that remains in his heart over how he and his neighbors were treated by the Nazis. "If you could lick my heart," he says, "it would poison you." Researchers have discovered that this statement may indeed be true.

Recent research on the benefits of forgiveness

As recently as 1980 virtually no data existed on the subject of forgiveness. The prevailing trend in counseling and psychotherapy has long been "the talking cure." Victims were encouraged to talk about their experiences, but the element of forgiveness was lacking. So the suffering usually remained.



In 1984 theologian Lewis Schmedes wrote *Forgive and Forget*. This book caught the eye of social scientist Robert Enright, who was seeking to apply the biblical concept of forgiveness to social problems. Enright sought support for a program to teach forgiveness to prisoners, reasoning that by learning to forgive others, they might seek forgiveness from their victims. For years his attempts were scorned and dismissed. In time his efforts gained the attention of other researchers. Ironically, the world-renowned Mendota Mental Health Center recently approached him with an idea for rehabilitating prisoners by teaching them forgiveness--the same idea that Enright sought to promote years earlier.

He has since founded the International Forgiveness Institute (IFI) <http://www.forgivenessinstitute.org/> as "a source of promotion and dissemination of the most important research in the world on the topic of forgiveness."

Research on forgiveness has continued to gain momentum, catapulting forgiveness out of its native Christian setting into the mainstream of scientific research. As stated in a recent article in *Time* magazine, "there is not only a religious impetus to forgive but also therapeutic, social and practical reasons to do so. This applies to victims of crimes as well as to those who must deal with... more common misfortunes--unfaithfulness, betrayal, ungratefulness and mere insult."

"Holding on to anger is like taking poison and waiting for someone else to die."

According to the *Time* article, "A number of psychotherapists are testifying that there is nothing like it for dissipating anger, mending marriages and banishing depression. Just a few years ago, says Robert Enright, a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin and a pioneer in the scientific study of forgiveness, most secularly inclined intellectuals trashed it; they said, 'Only wimps forgive.' But now, Enright says, 'psychiatrists, M.D.s, scientists, lawyers, ministers and social workers can all be on the same page. We are really on a roll'" (David Van Biema, "Should All Be Forgiven?," *Time*, Jan. 23, 2001.).

Health benefits of forgiveness

Clinical psychologist Joseph Neuman of East Tennessee State University is currently engaged in a research project seeking to learn more about the link between forgiveness and physiological health. Dr. Neuman observed: "When I treat[ed] patients with cardiovascular diseases, I was struck with how many were bitter, angry and depressed. It clearly affected their health and their ability to heal." His experimentation seems to document the cardiovascular benefits of forgiveness. "Theologically speaking, forgiveness is an Act of God," says Neuman. "In terms of health care, forgiveness could save your life."

What forgiveness is not

An important part of this treatment philosophy "assumes that forgiveness ...be experienced and expressed in full realization that an offender's actions may not merit such benevolence." The "forgiveness" spoken of by researchers does not depend on the attitudes or actions of the offender. Neither does it imply denying, condoning, excusing or condemning them. It doesn't demand justice or compensation. Forgiveness is not equivalent to, nor does it require, reconciliation. The IFI explains that forgiveness is "one person's moral response to another's injustice." Reconciliation involves "two parties coming together in mutual respect."



Many make the mistake of assuming that forgiveness should be extended only if the offending party apologizes and makes amends for his or her actions. But to experience the benefits of forgiveness, the victim must be willing and able to let go of resentment whether or not the perpetrator seeks or deserves to be forgiven. Otherwise, the victim remains at the mercy of the

guilty party and continues to suffer from what the program calls "the cancer of bitterness." This can include mental and emotional turmoil and even degenerative diseases. According to Dr. Glen Mack Harnden, forgiveness "releases the offender from anger, rage and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high-blood pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic diseases."

What forgiveness is

Clinical psychologist Everett Worthington, Jr. offers this definition of forgiveness: "Forgiveness is when an individual who's been hurt or offended decides and practices giving up his or her desire to avoid the person who hurt him or her, or giving up the desire to exact revenge on the person, and also to seek reconciliation between the two people, if it's safe and possible" (Robert Owens Scott, "The Practice of Forgiveness," *Spirituality & Health Newsletter*).

Many researchers offer this twofold definition: "Forgiveness is releasing the other person from retaliation and wishing the other person well" (Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today*, Jan. 10, 2000). In short, forgiveness is an unconditional gift to someone who does not deserve it.

Forgiveness in the Bible

What these men have articulated is stated simply and eloquently in many passages of Scripture. In the Sermon on the Mount, the cornerstone of Christian teaching, Jesus tells us to "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you..." (Matthew 5:44).

The apostle Paul advises: "Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them... Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you... Don't try to get even... If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Don't let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good" (Romans 12:14, 17, 20-21, Contemporary English Version).

"The discovery I made was the important benefit that forgiveness is to the forgiver."

These admonitions undoubtedly appear unwise, unwarranted and unfair to a non-Christian. Even Christians have viewed this in terms of a unilateral obligation. Lewis Schmedes observed that "human forgiveness had been seen as a religious obligation of love that we owe to a person who has offended us. The discovery I made was the important benefit that forgiveness is to the forgiver." Schmedes believes that "untold pain is brought about in the world by people's unwillingness to forgive and the corresponding passion to get even."

Forgiveness is not easy. But it is the best way for all concerned. By letting go of hostile, vengeful feelings and leaving it up to God to deal with wrongdoers who have hurt us, we can move beyond our hurt to live happy, healthy lives.

The greatest example of forgiveness

Forgiveness is also at the core of the gospel. If you have difficulty forgiving someone, consider the debt of sin that God has forgiven you of if you have repented and accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.

In Matthew 18 Jesus tells us how to deal with someone who "sins against you." He enumerates a three-step conflict resolution process followed by forgiveness.

Headstrong Peter apparently found difficulty with the concept of forgiveness. He asked, "How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). Peter probably reasoned that he could grit his teeth and utter words of professed forgiveness seven times if he knew that after the eighth incident, he could take actions to get even. But Jesus told him that forgiveness must not only be unlimited, it must also be from the heart.

To put the matter into a spiritual perspective, Jesus told a story of a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One of his servants who owed a great sum of money pleaded with the king for mercy. The master was moved with compassion and forgave him the entire debt. But the forgiven servant then demanded immediate repayment from a fellow servant that owed him a very small sum of money. The debtor was unable to repay and begged him for mercy. Instead of extending the mercy he had received for a much larger debt, the unforgiving servant had the other thrown into prison. When the king found out, he was furious. "You wicked servant!" said the king. "I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" The king then rescinded his original forgiveness and demanded full payment from the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-34).

"...for international, national, and even personal issues, researchers are finding that a practice taught by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago may be our most effective tool and response."

Jesus concludes the parable with the warning, "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matthew 18:35).

Biblical perspective on forgiveness

This parable helps us understand how important God considers forgiveness. The point is not whether the other person is worthy. Forgiveness is a fundamental quality of godly love that seeks the ultimate good of everyone.

The IFI definition further explains forgiveness as going beyond the call of duty by "overcoming of wrongdoing with good" to offer "a freely chosen gift (rather than a grim obligation)." The definition correctly promises, "As we give the gift of forgiveness we ourselves are healed."

Forgiveness is fundamental

Forgiveness is fundamental to healing--physically, emotionally and spiritually. Jesus, the Master Healer, offered His life for the forgiveness of all the sins of all mankind forever. He set the perfect example of forgiveness even up to His dying breath. Never did He seek vengeance, in word or in

deed (1 Peter 2:20-25). Instead He prayed regarding those who crucified Him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Jesus knew that most people do not realize the full consequences of evil. He also understood the evil potential of the human heart that yields to hostile, vengeful emotions (Mark 7:20-23). He wanted no part of the damage--for Himself, His followers or anyone else.

As *Christianity Today* concludes, "...for international, national, and even personal issues, researchers are finding that a practice taught by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago may be our most effective tool and response."

To make sure we remember the importance of forgiveness, Jesus instituted a most meaningful ceremony to commemorate His death for our sins. When we follow His instructions and partake of the symbols of bread and the cup (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), we should remember the magnitude of God's forgiveness and seek to practice forgiveness in every aspect of our personal lives.

Let us learn, practice and benefit from the power of forgiveness.

Who Determines Right From Wrong?

By Gary Petty

All across the United States people are involved in a debate about the biblical Ten Commandments. It's ironic that while some Christians vehemently defend the posting of the Ten Commandments, many other Christians believe that these laws have no application to modern Christianity.



OUR SOCIETY IS IN THE MIDST OF A MORALITY BATTLE. The latest battle in this war is the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools and government buildings. Underneath the surface, there is a much more important issue in the Christian community than posting of the Ten Commandments. The question really being asked is "Are the Ten Commandments even relevant today?"

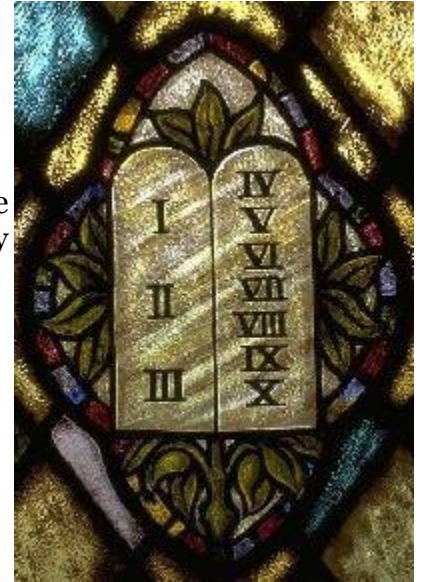
A recent survey found that most people could name no more than two of the Ten Commandments. Many of the respondents felt the commandments should be revised for modern times. They felt observing the Sabbath and honoring one's parents were outdated and suggested new commandments such as, "Thou shalt not drink and drive" and "Thou shalt care for the environment" be used as modern replacements.

New commandments

Over the last few decades various movements to create a new Ten Commandments have surfaced. In his book *The Second Ten Commandments: A Guide to Success in the Age of Consciousness*, Orion Moshe Kopelman, claims that the Ten Commandments have outlived their usefulness. He promotes commandments like "Maximize your time spent in flow and happiness" and "Act true to your inner voice and fulfill your mission." John Leo, in *U.S. News & World Report*, speculates

that if we begin to change the Ten Commandments to fit into modern ways of thinking, they might appear as:

- "Thou shalt not steal, but creative work on your tax return is okay.
- "Thou shalt not kill, except during any of the trimesters or if the Pentagon says you must.
- "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods, except in the sense that our whole economic system depends on the power of envy and wanting more.
- "Thou shalt not commit adultery, except if thou art unhappy or if personal fulfillment points thee toward the new secretary in thine office.
- "Honor thy mother or mothers, including thy birth, adoptive, step-, surrogate or same-sex-partner mothers, and honor thy father, thy mother's sperm donor or her casual inseminator, current whereabouts unknown."



Anti-Commandments movements

One of the most powerful anti-Commandments movements of our time is the New Age movement. Shirley MacLaine, a queen of New Age philosophy, promotes two modernized commandments in her book *Dancing In The Light*: "Know that you are God" and "know that you are the universe."

Jesus Christ participated in the typical first-century Jewish debates over Old Testament law, which included the Ten Commandments. When asked to state the most important law, Jesus simply reiterated two laws from the Old Testament: love God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31).

Wrong freedom

A second type of resistance to the Ten Commandments arises from the ever-increasing secularizing of America. This movement is based upon a belief that personal liberty, defined as "nobody can tell me how to live my life," is the most cherished freedom. Of course, the problem with commandments that restrict cheating on your income tax, committing adultery with your neighbor or lying to get ahead is that that they also restrict personal freedom to do whatever feels good at the moment.



Confusion reigns

A third force of resistance is in Christianity itself. Since the early days of Catholicism--and in the relatively shorter lifetime of Protestantism--there has been a struggle in defining the relationship of God's grace to God's law. Many churches openly denounce the keeping of the Ten Commandments as unnecessary for Christians. Others give lip service to them but only keep the

ones they like. If Christians accept the validity of the Ten Commandments, then they must face some hard questions about their own religion.

There are profound differences between the belief that there is a Supreme Being with knowledge of right and wrong, and possessing the right to enforce His reality on His creation, and the belief that each person is a god or goddess with only his or her own thoughts and feelings as determinants of right and wrong. This confusion leaves most professing Christians so bewildered that they base their religious convictions on vague concepts of morality devoid of any real guidelines for conduct.

Why have millions of people been killed in wars fought in the name of Jesus Christ? Why do Christians cheat each other or dishonor their parents? Why do they pray to statues and images in their worship of God, though this is plainly forbidden by the second of the Ten Commandments?

Many churches openly denounce the keeping of the Ten Commandments.

Are the Ten Commandments relevant today, or can we trivialize them to the same level as "use a good day planner to maximize your time"? Are they simply Ten Suggestions the Creator wanted to pass on to His children? Are they laws that only applied to an ancient people but have little application to modern life? If they are applicable today what is the price we pay both individually and collectively for breaking them?

Building relationships

In his 1996 *U.S. News & World Report* article, "Thou Shalt Not Command," John Leo wrote, "It's possible to put together a modern, pro-impulse set of commandments based on advertising slogans--'Just do it,' 'Just be,' 'Sometimes you gotta break the rules,' 'Peel off inhibitions,' 'Find your own road.' The National Parenting Center asked children to suggest additional commandments. Among their ideas: 'No bombing for the heck of it,' 'Thou shalt not address people by their color' and 'No grabbing.'"

Someday Jesus Christ will usher in a society in which the Ten Commandments will be the backbone of a New World order. These ten basic laws will serve as the guidelines for relationship not only between God and His creation, but in every interpersonal relationship on the human plane. In fact, Jesus Himself pointed out the critical role the Ten Commandments play in our lives now, and in the future. "So He said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments'" (Matthew 19:17).

If Christians accept the validity of the Ten Commandments, then they must face some hard questions about their own religion.

For an Internet listing of stations and times or to download radio programs, go to www.ucg.org/radio. While on line you can also order the booklet offered on this program "[The Ten Commandments](#)."

How Can You Counter a Degenerating Culture?

By Ralph Levy

As a reader of Virtual Christian Magazine, you are probably disturbed by many of the values of the culture around you--and with good reason. How can we counter the degrading influence of much of popular culture?



CULTURE: IT'S A WORD WE HEAR A LOT ABOUT THESE DAYS. But what does it mean? One dictionary defines culture as "the particular system of art, thought and customs of a society."

Author Robert Dugan offers a broader definition. He defines culture as "the ways of thinking, living and behaving that define a people and underlie its achievements. It is a nation's collective mind, its sense of right and wrong, the way it perceives reality, and its definition of self. Culture is the morals and habits a mother strives to instill in her children. It is the obligations we acknowledge toward our neighbors, our community, and our government... It is the standards we set and enforce for ourselves and for others: our definitions of duty, honor and character. It is our collective conscience" (*Winning the New Civil War*, 1991, p. 169).

Does popular culture--and our attitude toward it--matter?

The Bible contains a disturbing prophetic glimpse of culture in the last days of human civilization. The apostle Paul was inspired to write of the last days as "perilous times" (2 Timothy 3:1). He describes that age as a time when "men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (verses 2-4).

Could Paul have been writing of *our* culture, that of the Western world in 2003? He certainly seems to describe a culture bent on pleasure, entertainment, vanity, greed and utter selfishness at the expense of stable marriages, families and other relationships.

Consider a lesson from history. Sociologist and historian Carle Zimmerman, in his 1947 book *Family and Civilization*, recorded his observations as he compared the disintegration of various cultures with their parallel decline of family life:



"Eight specific patterns of domestic behavior typified the downward spiral of each culture Zimmerman studied: Marriage lost its sacredness [and] is frequently broken by divorce; traditional meaning of the marriage ceremony is lost; feminist movements abound; there is increased public disrespect for parents and authority in general; an acceleration of juvenile delinquency, promiscuity and rebellion occur; there is refusal of people with traditional marriages to accept family responsibilities; a growing desire for, and acceptance of, adultery is evident; there is increasing interest in, and spread of, sexual perversions and sex-related crimes" (quoted in *Confident Living*, November 1987, p. 34).

Values-neutral philosophy

A major change over recent decades is that Western culture has become what sociologists call values-neutral. Advocates of this approach argue that we should not adopt any system defining right and wrong and expect all to adhere to it, because no one has a right to impose his values on others.

A former U.S. senator from Indiana, Daniel Coats, reported: "I recently saw the story of a high school values clarification class conducted by a teacher in Teaneck, New Jersey. A girl in the class had found a purse containing \$1,000 and returned it to its owner. The teacher asked for the class's reaction. Every single one of her fellow students concluded the girl had been 'foolish.'

"Most of the students contended that if someone is careless, they should be punished. When the teacher was asked what he had said to the students, he responded, 'Well, of course, I didn't say anything. If I come from the position of what is right and wrong, then I'm not their counselor. I can't impose my views'" (*Imprimis*, September 1991). But if figures in authority won't--or can't--teach standards to children, where will they learn them? In all too many cases, from the popular culture around them.

The Bible contains a disturbing prophetic glimpse of culture in the last days of human civilization.

Tragically, most Americans no longer believe in the concept of absolute moral truths. A George Barna poll conducted late in 2001 found that only 22 percent of American adults--and a minuscule 6 percent of teenagers--believed that "there are moral absolutes that are unchanging." Sadly, only 32 percent of those who described themselves as Christians believed in absolute moral standards, and only 26 percent cited the Bible as the source of their moral principles.

Impossible without faith in God

How are we to establish an ethical and moral cultural base for our societies and families? Other articles have highlighted the biblical foundation of true values and the fact that, when the United

States was founded, its leaders unashamedly accepted many of the principles of Scripture as the basis for its laws and culture.

Reminiscent of such long-abandoned values, columnist Georgie Anne Geyer wrote: "I have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to have a moral community or nation without faith in God, because without it everything rapidly comes down to 'me,' and 'me' alone is meaningless.

"Today Americans have... stopped acting on what they knew was right--and 'me' has become the measure of everything. However, *moral societies are the only ones that work*. If anyone thinks there is not a direct and invaluable relationship between personal integrity in a society and that society's prosperity, that person has simply not studied history.

"And this should not surprise us. Great moral societies, built upon faith in God, honor, trust, and the law, blossom because they are harmonious; because people love or at least respect their fellowman; because, finally, they have a common belief in something *beyond themselves*... Alexis de Tocqueville said it best when he realized even at the very beginning of our national life, 'America is great because America is good. If America ceases to be good, she will cease to be great'" (*Bits & Pieces*, Sept. 17, 1992, pp. 23-24, emphasis added).

"I found it impossible to exist without God in one's heart. I came to that conclusion myself, without anybody's help or preaching."

Svetlana Alliluyeva, daughter of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin echoed these sentiments, when she unexpectedly defected from Russia to the United States. Why did she defect? In her own words: "I found it impossible to exist without God in one's heart. I came to that conclusion myself, without anybody's help or preaching. That was a great change because since that moment the main dogmas of Communism lost their significance for me. I have come here to seek the self-expression that has been denied me for so long in Russia" (quoted in *Morning Glory*, Feb. 5, 1994).

It is faith in God that provides the anchor for a culture. Without it we are cast adrift, lost in a sea of values neutrality or hedonism and robbed of any method of determining right from wrong. The result is a culture that staggers like a drunkard unable to find the wall.

Crumbling morality threatens a nation

The dramatic effects of the Western cultural shift are best illustrated by contrasting social trends. Consider some changes over a 50-year period:

"In New York City in 1943, 3 percent of all births were illegitimate. There were 44 homicides by gunshot. In 1992, 1,499 people died of gunshot [wounds, and] 45 percent of births in 1993 were illegitimate. Nationwide, nearly 30 percent of all babies today come home fatherless, 68 percent in Washington, D.C." (Gary Bauer, Family Research Council letter, Nov. 4, 1993).



William Bennett, former U.S. secretary of education, published a book in 1999 titled *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*. Here are a few of the statistics he presented, comparing life in 1997 with 1960:

- Violent crime increased by 467 percent.
- Illegitimate births were up 461 percent.
- Divorces rose by 100 percent.
- Children living in single-parent homes increased more than 200 percent.
- Teenage suicides were up more than 100 percent.
- SAT scores dropped by almost 60 points.

Finally, consider the result of a survey conducted in 1988 by the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center. About 1,700 students between the sixth and ninth grades attended adolescent assault-awareness classes conducted in schools across the state. Each boy and girl was asked whether a man should have a right to force a woman to have sexual intercourse if he had spent money on her.

The shocking results? Nearly 25 percent of the boys and 16 percent of the girls said, "Yes." Sixty-five percent of the boys and 47 percent of the girls in the seventh through ninth grades said it is permissible for a man to force a woman to have sex with him if they have dated for six months or longer (James Dobson and Gary Bauer, "Children at Risk," *Word*, 1990, pp. 258-259).

Influence on Christians?

Let's not carelessly assume these trends have no effect on those who describe themselves as Christians. The Community Impact Seminar: Focus on the Family reported that two out of every five self-identified Christians say you may do anything you want just as long as you don't hurt anyone else.

In New Testament times, the grinding effect of a permissive, anything-goes popular culture was illustrated by the story of the Church of God congregation in the Greek city of Corinth. Located on a natural harbor and at the intersections of several major trade routes, the city was quite prosperous.

But tragically, like the city of Sodom centuries before (Genesis 13:13; Ezekiel 16:49-50), Corinth had allowed its wealth to lure many of its inhabitants into immorality. So legendary had this city become that it even gave its name to the term *corinthianize*, meaning to act in an immoral way.

Christians are not immune to their cultural surroundings. The Corinthians reflected the loose, values-neutral backdrop of their city in their own moral carelessness. The recorded story of the congregation in Corinth tells us of a man who was cohabiting with his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5:1), a sin that was tolerated--or perhaps even condoned--by many in the church (verse 2). The values of Corinthian society had affected them to the point that they would tolerate this kind of degeneracy--much to their shame.

*Yet your concern
needs to be not
what people think,
but what your
Creator thinks.*

You can also read of their tendency to allow their contentions to boil over in lawsuits (1 Corinthians 6) and their failure to remain faithful to their marriage vows (chapter 7). A sectarian, individualistic spirit (chapter 3), and drunkenness at the solemn occasion of the Passover (1 Corinthians 11:17-22), were among the many spiritual weaknesses of the Corinthians.

Paul had to sternly correct these sins and several others. No, these Christians were not immune to the corroding influences in their culture, just as Christians today aren't immune to *their* culture.

Countering the culture

So what can you do? First, you have to *recognize the influence of popular culture* on all aspects of your life. What manner of person would you have been if you had been born in another place and another time? Familiarizing yourself with the history of your culture and its changing value systems will allow you to begin to appreciate the impact of the time and place of your birth.

Second, you must *develop moral and ethical convictions*. What do you allow yourself to do? What has shaped your standards and morals, your values? Do you recognize there is a cause and purpose much greater than you, much greater than life itself?

There are indeed proper definitions for the terms *right* and *wrong*, *sin* and *righteousness*. Those definitions are provided in the Word of God, the Holy Bible. By studying this book you will learn God's definition of right and wrong.

Third, *diminish your concern about what others will think*. There is no point in worrying about them, because convictions never bring universal approval. Those who accept a moral code derived from the Holy Scriptures will find themselves opposed by many (though not by all). Yet your concern needs to be not what *people* think, but what *your Creator* thinks.

Finally, *stand up for what you believe*. Remember the saying: If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything. The courage to stand up for what's right may carry a price tag in the short term, but it will reap valuable returns in your character over the course of this life and into eternity.

Recommended reading

Can you find a proven source for lasting standards and values? God revealed the heart of His standards--the Ten Commandments--long ago at Mount Sinai. But what sets them apart from man-made rules and guidelines? What do they reveal about the nature of God Himself? Discover the answers in your free copy of [The Ten Commandments](#).

Children of Divorce Aren't Doomed to Failure

By Cecil E. Maranville

Are children of divorce destined to be drawn into a "social black hole" of drug abuse, promiscuity and their own failed marriages? In spite of strong pressures to the contrary, the encouraging answer is "not necessarily."



ONE OF THE PREEMINENT VALUES of the Christian community is that marriage should last a lifetime. As Jesus said, "what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6). Because Christians live in a society that appears intent on loosening and compromising this value, they are understandably defensive about the subject of divorce. They often appropriately speak in favor of the permanence of marriage and against divorce, citing the benefits of the former and the bane of the latter.

Nonetheless, divorce occurs often, and when it does, the consequences are far-reaching, not only for the adults involved, but especially for the children. "Over 40% of American marriages will end in divorce and more than 50% of the children will live in a separated or divorced family prior to the age of 18. And, although divorce is trying for everyone, children suffer the most" ("Protecting Children from Divorce," <http://www.trueamanlaw.com/protecti.htm>, page 1).

Of course, Christians should say nothing that could be construed as encouraging the current trend to choose divorce. On the other hand, should not Christians find some way to encourage the children, who are involved in the divorce through no fault of their own?

The purpose of this article is to bolster the hopes of these unwilling participants in divorce and to encourage all adults in ways that will support

*Children of divorce
are not doomed to
failure.*

and help children whose parents divorce.

Statistics can be viewed two ways

In 1989, psychologist Judith Wallerstein released a report that demonstrated how divorce can bequeath lifelong negative repercussions on the children involved. She recently released a follow-up report, a 25-year study of the impact of divorce on 130 children from 60 middle-class families.

She finds the now adult children of divorce tend to have:

- Lower-paying jobs and less college than their parents.
- Unstable father/child relationships.
- Bitter memories of a legal system that forced them into custody and visitation plans.
- A fear of commitment, a fear of divorce.
- A vulnerability in adolescence to drugs and alcohol.

("Split Decision on How Divorce Affects Kids," by Karen S. Peterson, *USA Today*, Feb. 2, 2000, page 1). These findings do not appear to offer much hope.

Some Disagree

Some authorities object to the negative approach taken by Ms. Wallerstein in her 1989 report. In *The Good Divorce*, researcher and family therapist Constance Ahrons wrote: "Although Wallerstein accurately reports that two-fifths (41%) of the children were doing poorly, she nevertheless focuses almost exclusively on this minority... Why don't we hear about the majority, the almost half of her sample who came through without scars?" (ibid., page 2)



Wallerstein herself admits in her book *Second Chances*, "I do not argue that children have no chance of health or happiness after divorce, and I give instances where children have done well" (ibid.).

Praising Wallerstein's study for its value, Judith Primavera adds that her own study of a group of 80 adolescents and young adults from divorced families showed positive results. These young people "did not show signs of any major difficulties; they were doing well in high school in college. They did not show any major signs of depression" (ibid. page 2). Ms. Primavera is a psychologist at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut.

Author Ashton Applewhite opines, "Wallerstein's study is invaluable, but it is wrong to extrapolate that divorce invariably dooms children to a lifetime of unhappiness" (ibid.).

Choices for children of divorce

"Children of divorce are not destined to have emotional problems later" ("Kids in divorce," Robert Lovinger, *New Bedford Standard Times*, Oct. 1, 1995, page 1). What factors make the difference between those children whose life stories provide statistical grist for the mill of negative reports and those children who lead successful lives? That is what I would like to focus upon here; it is not to imply support for divorce, but to supply support for those captured in its net.

Almost all of those who counsel children of divorce stress the need to reassure the child that the parents' divorce is not his or her fault. They also stress the point that the child could have done nothing to prevent it.

Those who have researched the effects of divorce upon children note that the many losses suffered are so significant as to trigger a grieving process. "When parents get a divorce, their children often feel alone, angry and upset. The unfortunate truth about a divorce is that afterward, things with your parents can never be the same. And that fact scares many children. Growing up, their family was the only real foundation they recognized and a divorce threatens the idea of that. Most don't know how to deal with that loss" ("Children of Divorce," Tonoccus McClain, <http://www.channelone.com>, pages 1-2).

McClain, himself a child of divorce, is well acquainted with the loss suffered by children. It is important that these children understand they will have emotional repercussions, but that there are adults trained to support and encourage them as they go through the grieving process.

Natural responses to their loss can include "lying, oppositional behavior, underachieving at school, sabotaging relationships, and not taking responsibility for their actions" ("Helping Children of Divorce & Adopted Children with Emotional Problems," Dr. Michael M. Katz, <http://www.helpforkids.com>, page 1). Dr. Katz points out that the emotional problems these children experience cause them to not respond well to typical disciplinary measures.

"Children learn [how to overcome these problems] much quicker if they can see, feel and experience what is being worked on. If these problems are not worked on and resolved in childhood and adolescence, they will adversely affect adulthood relationships, including relationships with spouses and children" (ibid.).

Children need to be able to talk

It is potentially damaging to attempt to shut off or deny the grieving process. "Children should know that their feelings are normal, but don't tell them what their feelings should be. 'Tell the child, 'You may feel sad or mad or worried, or your tummy might hurt,' ' suggests Mary Bettley, a licensed clinical social worker and family therapist at New Bedford Child and Family Service... The goal is to convert emotion into words rather than acts" (Lovinger, page 1).

"The biggest problem that many children--especially teenagers--have is that they are afraid to open up, when in fact that is exactly what they need to do. Whether it is to a counselor or friend or teacher, it isn't good to bottle up emotions because one day you will explode. In time, talking about what you're going through will help you get into the next part of your life" (McClain, page 3).





A 16-year-old girl wrote to McClain: "Hey I'm so glad I found this site. Right now at this very moment my parents are considering a divorce. My dad is living at my Nana's grandma's [sic]. He's over here right now. Supposedly he came over to talk but that's not what it sounds like. I've been really upset lately for many reasons, this just being one of them. My mom tries to get me to talk about it but for some reason I can't. I really need someone to talk to so now I've turned to my friends. Hopefully they can help me! I think that me [sic] finding this site at this very moment was a message from God saying that there are people out there that want to listen and talk about it. I just need to find them and open up more" (ibid., page 7).

"A Kid's Guide to Divorce" says, "All feelings are acceptable." The article acknowledges that some may have difficulty talking with a parent about feelings and counsels children to "find someone else to talk to, maybe a teacher or neighbor or grandparent, and talk about how you feel. It's tough to let it out, but it really can help" (<http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/divorce.html>, page 2).

Children need not stumble when parents divorce

There is no arguing that God designed the marriage union to last a lifetime. In addition, no argument can stand against the Creator's own words that, although divorce was later permitted, "from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8). That is, divorce flies in the face of the essential design of the family unit. When people live contrary to the way their minds, emotions and spirits were fashioned by their Maker, there cannot help but be negative consequences for all involved.

God did say that mistakes made by parents would affect their children, sometimes for generations. "For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Exodus 20:5). (I do not mean to imply that there is sin every time a marriage ends in divorce, or to deny that sin can be involved.)

When parents get a divorce, their children often feel alone, angry and upset.

God's thoughts continue unbroken in Exodus 20:6 (translators divided the text into verses) reflecting His nature and His inclination to enable all humankind to live successful lives--"but showing mercy to thousands [of generations], to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

Is one generation doomed to reap the crop sown by the one that comes before it? Do parents set in stone what will happen to and with their offspring? Of course, parents have a profound affect on the future happiness and the future challenges of their children. However, they cannot take away their children's chance to make good.

God stirred an ancient prophet to take issue with a common perception of his day, and our day: "the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

God stirred an ancient prophet to take issue with a common perception of his day, and our day: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezekiel 18:2). This is a poetic way of implying that parents make mistakes and their children end up paying for them. This section of Scripture addresses and answers a question that speaks to the fearful thoughts of millions of children of divorce: "Am I doomed to a life of trouble and heartache because of my parents' decision to divorce?"

God's answer could be paraphrased, "Absolutely not! I give all a chance to stand or fall on their own decisions, their own life choices. Children do not have to pay for the mistakes of their parents." The decision depends on how

well they apply God's Word in their lives. The prophet Ezekiel pointed out this timeless truth when he wrote: "Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the guilt of the father?' Because the son has done what is lawful and right, and has kept all My statutes and observed them, he shall surely live" (Ezekiel 18:19). Children of divorce are not doomed to failure!

Resources for adults and children

Recommended reading for adults includes "Focus on Kids: The Effects of Divorce on Children," an eight-page publication produced by Human Environmental Sciences in the state of Missouri. The information is presented for five age groups: infants, toddlers, preschoolers, early elementary, preteens and adolescents. For each age group there are three segments: "What the child understands," "Possible child reactions" and "Strategies for parents." As the introduction explains, "children often find themselves caught in an emotional whirlpool... Instead of protection, they need support and reassurance. This guide will help you understand the stress that children often feel when their parents divorce" (<http://muextension.missouri.edu/xplor/hesguide/humanrel/gh6600.htm>, page 1).

Another practical aid is titled "Parent Guides to Help Children Deal with Divorce," by Dr. Robert Hughes, Jr. of the Department of Human Development & Family Science at Ohio State University. Introducing his eight-booklet series, Dr. Hughes writes, "We believe that children in all types of families can live happy and healthy lives" (<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/divorce/pguides> page 1).

In addition to the two-page overview introduction, the eight titles are: "Helping Children Feel Good About Themselves," "Helping Children Understand Emotions," "Helping Children Cope With Loss," "Helping Children Deal With Anger at Friends," "Helping Children Manage Anger at Their Parents," "Helping Children Get Along With Friends," "Helping Children Learn About Kindness" and "Helping Children Adjust to Changes."

A third resource for children, particularly teens, is "Your Parents Will Be Crazy for a While: It Gets Better," by Thea Joselow and Beth Joselow (<http://www.divorce-online.com/articles/f32177.html>.) It's humorous at the same time as it meaningfully addresses how teens can successfully deal with the emotional issues of divorce.

*Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial***Christianity--A Way of Life**

By Tom Damour



IN THIS MONTH'S ISSUE OF *VIRTUAL CHRISTIAN MAGAZINE*, we are pleased to bring you several articles that we hope will lead you to a deeper walk with Christ (Ephesians 5:2; Galatians 5:16; Colossians 1:10). After all, is this not the purpose for which God calls people? When the Bible speaks of "walking" with God, it is a rhetorical method of describing the ongoing relationship each of us must be developing in order to recapture that childlike attitude Jesus spoke of.

Forgiveness

In our lead article, [Discover the Power of Forgiveness](#), Mr. Walker addresses a vital subject which each of us as Christians must understand and apply if we are to "be imitators of God as dear children" (Ephesians 5:1). That subject is the necessity of forgiving those who sin again us.

Mr. Walker writes: "Forgiveness is not easy. But it is the best way for all concerned. By letting go of hostile, vengeful feelings and leaving it up to God to deal with wrongdoers who have hurt us, we can move beyond our hurt to live happy, healthy lives." The truth contained in these simple sentences, if put into practice, would produce revolutionary changes in our lives. Sadly, only a few have learned the power of forgiveness and, therefore, have not "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

Right from wrong

For thousands of years humanity has debated the value of the Ten Commandments. Today many people feel these ancient laws are outdated and in serious need of revision. In his article, [Who Determines Right From Wrong](#), Mr. Petty points out the fallacy of modern man's attempt to take of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Thousands of years of human suffering have not yet convinced humanity that God knows what is best for us.

Mr. Petty points out that the same debate was raging during Christ's earthly ministry as well. "Jesus Christ participated in the typical first century Jewish debates over Old Testament law, which included the Ten Commandments. When asked to state the most important law, Jesus simply reiterated two laws from the Old Testament: love God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31)."

Contained in these simple, yet eloquent verses is the answer to solving the fundamental problems facing modern culture. The simplicity of this truth belies the depth and power behind these profound words. Someday soon humanity will learn the stupidity of taking on the godly prerogative of deciding what is right and wrong. Sadly, this realization will not take place until an ocean of tears is shed as people learn they cannot improve on God's Ten Commandments.

Sick culture

In our next article, [How Can You Counter a Degenerating Culture](#), Dr. Levy asks, "How can we counter the degrading influence of much of popular culture?" As you read this article, it will become clear that lacking knowledge of the importance of the Ten Commandments in everyday life produces a culture which is quickly losing its sense of right and wrong. Mr. Levy writes: "A major change over recent decades is that Western culture has become what sociologists call values-neutral. Advocates of this approach argue that we should not adopt any system defining right and wrong and expect all to adhere to it because no one has a right to impose his values on others."

Children of divorce

It should be clear to you that these articles have a common theme. Namely, confusion, suffering, and death are the result of living contrary to the laws of God. It has been said that a nation is only as strong as its families. The fruits of mankind taking to itself the godly prerogative of deciding good and evil can clearly be seen in the demise of the family. In his article, [Children of Divorce Aren't Doomed to Failure](#), Mr. Maranville points out the devastating effects divorce can have on children. He also reminds us that its victims are not doomed to failure. Children do not have to pay for the mistakes of their parents.

As a child of divorce myself, I can identify with the pain and terrible confusion divorce brings into a young person's life. I can also attest to the truth that children of divorce are not doomed to repeat the failings of their parents. Having come to understand God's wonderful truth, I have learned how to weave the Ten Commandments in my life.

As you read this month's issue of the *Virtual Christian Magazine* keep in mind that God's way works. True Christianity is a way of life, not just another religion (Acts 18:26; 2 Peter 2:21). The world is full of religions, but short on understanding the proper way to live. That is the mission of the *Virtual Christian Magazine*. So as you read these articles don't read just for knowledge, but read for understanding. As you do, you will also learn to weave the truth of God into your life.

Letters to the Editor

Extending Our Hand to the Grieving



I make sure I have a copy of each of the articles for our announcement table. There are several who don't have a computer. It's proven to be very helpful. Especially this last one.

The niece of one of our members was killed by a car when she stepped off a curb in Utah. Quite a shock to the whole family. The article on grieving was very helpful. I think she, our member Darlene, was going to share it with her sister, the mother of the girl who died. Thanks for your loving help!!

A Personal Experience of Prayer



I don't quite know how to start this message. I wasn't exactly looking for someone called Kim McQueen when I went searching the internet for a bird family called "Cordivae" However, though the answer I was looking for was not provided by Kim's story, I was entranced. I LIVED her experience, and though I have yet to see a live lyrebird in the wild, I now have a good idea of the utterly overwhelming attitude with gratitude that would follow. 'Specially if you ASKED for it to happen. Perhaps prayer has power, perhaps not. But I LIKED your story, and maybe it's time for me to ask the man upstairs for something. As they say, "ain't got nuffing t' lose." Thanks for the story. I REALLY liked it.

But You Look So Healthy!



Dear Mr. Bellefeville, Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I really appreciate your writing that article. I have MS and struggle with a lot of the same debilitating, but hidden problems. I only wish more people could understand and be supportive of people who are disabled by less than

obvious illnesses. Maybe you could write more about this subject for Church members in the future?

-- Dottie Kimes

What Disability Can't Do to You



I wish to thank you for such a tremendous message. I am a physical therapist by profession and though I work with people experiencing various levels of disabilities, I cannot help but hang my head in concerned shame at my own limited appreciation for the special people that I am fortunate to work with.

We are given so many opportunities and experiences in our personal lives to develop the character of God and I continue to marvel at how often I reflect back over my day or week or month and come to realize a squandered opportunity to not only benefit a person's life but to grow from their service to me via their handicap.

Thank you for your service of love to the Church of God via your ministry and maybe more importantly via your handicap.

-- Ralph Redline

Home Is Where Our School Is



I am from Wheeling, West Virginia, and I read your article and I wanted to thank you for writing it. I have been trying to make this decision for two years now and just today I finally decided to teach my children at home. Your article was very helpful to me. I have two children ages 8 and 10, and we were considering placing them in private schools, when I realized that for a lot of the same reasons I was wanting them out of public schools those reasons were still in the private ones as well. THANK YOU.

-- Melissa Ritchie

Too Many Treasures?



Great article! It was a great read and really neat that you included your daughter's thoughts. Our children really do listen, don't they. Do they hear our preaching at home and at church or do they mimic our daily faith? I think all three, but I bet we underestimate the power of our daily walks and talks with God.

You are both right, Becky and Heather, God alive in our lives is the most prized possession.

-- Frank, Valerie, and Laurel (just turned six)

Thanksgiving Day, Not "Be Thankful" Day



Thank you, Mr. Hooser for taking the time to point out an important distinction in your article in VCM. I appreciate the thoughts and the clarity and brevity (in keeping with the "net" medium).

-- D & J U.

Serving as a Congregation



Wanted to comment favorably on the article by Marilyn Braley. I plan to use it in a sermon illustration tomorrow. Lawton, Oklahoma, has strong ties with Dallas South. It will be most meaningful. My thanks to MB for preparing the material and to you for posting it.

-- Guy Burke

General Comments



My family and I very much enjoy your Web site and VCM. We are glad that you reach out to others and seem to care very much. There is a great lack of love in the world, and sometimes, in the church. We have been members of United since its inception. Thanks for all you do.

-- Rich and Robin Mackowiak



Hi, I'm struggling in an area spiritually. I've accepted Jesus into my life, and everything seemed to be going fine first, but now it seems like I have this awesome relationship with the Father, but I just don't see Jesus and the Spirit in the same way. They just don't seem present in my life like they used to, and it's driving me crazy. Would you suggest any books for me or have any word of advice? Thanks for your time.

-- Haniel

Haniel, you might want to go to www.ucg.org and look into some of the booklets offered and subscribe to the Good News Magazine. These booklets are all free for the asking and are all very informative and helpful.



I truly need help. I wish there was some way to receive answers to our spiritual questions. I have struggled through and it is just not worth it. I just don't understand. I have been in a difficult marriage for four years. The other day I asked my pastor if it is possible to know if we are doing God's will or not. He said that he didn't even know if he was doing what God wants him to do. If that is true, then to me the whole "Christianity" thought process is a joke. What about a "personal relationship"? I am frustrated and struggling. I cannot go on much longer, each day just gets harder. Is there help? Are my beliefs of any value, or is it just a "hope" mechanism? I need a foundation. I need something real.

-- Holly

We feel for our readers going through various trials. That's why the United Church of God offers personal answers by E-mail at info@ucg.org. There are biblical answers that provide hope.

Letters may be edited for length and clarity.