



Why We Must Never Forget Even When We Do Forgive Leslie Vernick

Working for over 30 years with couples attempting to recover from serious marital sin, I have often heard one of them say, “Why can’t you just forgive and forget?” or “You’re holding onto the past? Can’t we start with a clean slate?” or, “God says that we’re to forget the former things. Each day is a fresh start.”

Christian counselors are also guilty of using these same phrases with their counselees – usually when the one who has been sinned against feels stuck and is unable or unwilling to be silenced and continues to bring up past offenses or hurts in the counseling session.

There is a time for putting the past in the past, but doing so doesn’t mean forgetting the past, it means healing from it. We must never forget the past because...

1. The past is instructive. The past reminds both sinner and sinned against that sin is always painful and destructive to someone. Remembering helps both of them stay aware that they never want to return to where they’ve been. It also helps them stay vigilant so they won’t slide back into the old habit patterns that created the problem in the first place.

Tom, one of my clients, reminds himself every day that he is an alcoholic. To forget would mean disaster. One wrong decision could wreak havoc on his entire present life that he has worked so hard to rebuild. He attends weekly meetings and joined a men’s discipleship group where he remembers what it was like to be lost, drunk, hopeless and helpless, and what it feels like to be rescued by Christ. He never wants to go back to his old life. Remembering he’s an alcoholic, as well as a new creation in Christ, helps him know what to do when the lure for just one drink sings her deceitful song.

2. The past is often still the present. John swears he'll never hit Sally again and feels insulted that she won't let go of her "irrational fear". He wants her to reconcile and trust him again. It's true that John has not hit Sally for over eight months. But John continues to demonstrate attitudes and actions that are rude, selfish, and inconsiderate. He is consistently unable to empathize with Sally's feelings and unwilling to hear her dissent.

John has not allowed his past to instruct him (about himself), but Sally has learned something from it. John may have learned not hit her again (due to his fear of legal consequences), but Sally knows John's heart has not changed. He continues to minimize his offenses, refuses to follow the counselor's treatment plan, and is still ruled by his own desires rather than by Christ. Sally can't and shouldn't forget the past because if she chooses to stay with John (or is told by her counselor she must), their past as a couple will continue to be her present reality.

John demonstrates no new history (fruit of repentance) to give Sally any other data points in which to rebuild safety or trust. To trust his words when his behaviors don't match them is foolishness, not godliness.

3. Forgetting the past could put you and others in continued danger.

Recently the media has been covering a story chastising the silence of the church leadership at Covenant Life Church, and former pastor Grant Layman, because they did not report allegations of rape and sexual abuse and withheld incriminating information from the police.

We are not privy to all of the details of this case but for whatever reasons, whether to protect the church's reputation from ugly scandal or the misapplication of Biblical forgiveness and forgetting, they closed their eyes and allowed other children in their congregation to be vulnerable to a sexual predator.

Sin always, always, always has negative consequences. Sometimes the consequences are short term, but other times they are permanent. I hope if someone molested one of your children, no matter how much he or she repented, I hope you would never allow him or her unsupervised contact with any of your children or anyone else's children that you know. You may forgive him or her, but you must never forget.

When we as Christian counselors, encourage someone to forget, we are asking him or her to do the impossible. God gave us our memory for a good purpose.

Remembering keeps us humble. We need to be honest with ourselves. Remembering helps us stay alert to the places where we are weak and most vulnerable so that we invite wise people to help us change, as well as help us “see” ourselves more clearly (Hebrews 3:13).

Remembering keeps us vigilant to our blind spots so that we are less likely to repeat serious sin and trash our lives and hurt those who live with us.

Remembering keeps us wise, so we don't become repeat victims or continue to put others or ourselves in harm's way.

As a Christian counselor, when a person guilty of a terrible or repetitive sin keeps pressuring his or her partner to forgive and forget – pay attention. They are doing so because they are unwilling to do the hard work to learn from their mistakes. They are unwilling to be empathetic to the pain they've caused. Rather, he wants to be free from the pain he feels and put it all behind him. In addition, he is unwilling to be held accountable by his spouse and wise others, who know what's going on, to call him into awareness when he is getting close to the edge of repeat destructive behavior.

Forgiveness does not mean or require forgetting.