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# *Righting Wrongs*

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**I**n a perfect world, there would be no need for apologies. However, because the world is imperfect, we cannot survive without them. My academic background is the field of anthropology, the study of human culture. One of the clear conclusions of the anthropologist is that all people have a sense of morality: Some things are right, and some things are wrong. People are incurably moral. In psychology, it is often called the conscience. In theology, it may be referred to as the “sense of *ought*” or the imprint of the divine.

It is true that the standard by which the conscience condemns or affirms is influenced by the culture. For example, in Eskimo (or Inuit) culture, if one is on a trek and runs out of food, it is perfectly permissible to enter the igloo of a stranger and eat whatever is available. In most other Western cultures, to enter an unoccupied house would be considered “breaking and entering,” an offense punishable as a crime. Although the standard of right will differ from culture to

culture and sometimes within cultures, all people have a sense of right and wrong.

When one's sense of right is violated, that person will experience anger. He or she will feel wronged and resentful at the person who has violated their trust. The wrongful act stands as a barrier between the two people, and the relationship is fractured. They cannot, even if they desired, live as though the wrong had not been committed. Jack, whose brother swindled him years ago, says, "Things have never been the same between us." Whatever the offense, something inside the offended calls for justice. It is these human realities that serve as the basis of all judicial systems.

### **A CRY FOR RECONCILIATION**

While justice may bring some sense of satisfaction to the offended person, justice does not typically restore relationships. If an employee who is found stealing from the company is caught, tried, and fined or imprisoned, everyone says, "Justice has been served." But the company is not likely to restore the employee to the original place of leadership. On the other hand, if an employee steals from the company but quickly takes responsibility for the error, reports that misdeed to the supervisor, expresses sincere regret, offers to pay for all inequities, and pleads for mercy, there is the possibility that the employee will be allowed to continue with the company.

Humankind has an amazing capacity to forgive. I remember a number of years ago visiting the town of Coventry, England. I stood in the shell of a cathedral that had been bombed by the Nazis in the Second World War. I listened as the guide told the story of the new cathedral that rose beside the ruins. Some years after the war, a group of Germans had come and helped build the new cathedral as an act

of contrition for the damages their fellow countrymen had inflicted. Everyone had agreed to allow the ruins to remain in the shadow of the new cathedral. Both structures were symbolic: the one of man's inhumanity to man, the other of the power of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Something within us cries out for reconciliation when wrongdoing has fractured a relationship. The desire for reconciliation is often more potent than the desire for justice. The more intimate the relationship, the deeper the desire for reconciliation. When a husband treats his wife unfairly, in her hurt and anger she is pulled between a longing for justice and a desire for mercy. On the one hand, she wants him to pay for his wrongdoing; on the other hand, she wishes for reconciliation. It is his sincere apology that makes genuine reconciliation possible. If there is no apology, then her sense of morality pushes her to demand justice. Many times through the years, I have observed divorce proceedings and watched the judge seek to determine what was just. I have often wondered if sincere apologies would have changed the sad outcome.

I have looked into the eyes of teenage rage and wondered how different life would be if an abusive father had apologized. Without apologies, anger builds and pushes us to demand justice. When, as we see it, justice is not forthcoming, we often take matters into our own hands and seek revenge on those who have wronged us. Anger escalates and can end in violence. The man who walks into the office of his former employer and shoots his supervisor and three of his coworkers burns with a sense of injustice—to the point where only murderous revenge will right the wrong. Things might have been different had he had the courage to lovingly confront—and others had the courage to say, “I was wrong.”

Christian is encouraged to release the person to God for justice<sup>5</sup> and to release one's anger to God through forbearance.<sup>6</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great theologian who was martyred by the Nazis in a concentration camp in 1945, argued against the “preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.” He referred to such forgiveness as “cheap grace . . . which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner.”<sup>7</sup>

Genuine forgiveness removes the barrier that was created by the offense and opens the door to restoring trust over time. If the relationship was warm and intimate before the offense, it can become loving again. If the relationship was simply one of casual acquaintance, it may grow to a deeper level through the dynamic process of forgiveness. If the offense was created by an unknown person such as a rapist or a murderer, there was no relationship to be restored. If they have apologized and you have forgiven, each of you is free to go on living your lives, although the criminal will still face the judicial system created by the culture to deal with deviant behavior.

### **THE FIVE-GALLON CONTAINER**

When we apologize, we accept responsibility for our behavior, seeking to make amends with the person who was offended. Genuine apology opens the door to the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. Then we can continue to build the relationship. Without apology, the offense sits as a barrier, and the quality of the relationship is diminished. Good relationships are always marked by a willingness to apologize, forgive, and reconcile.

Sincere apologies also assuage a guilty conscience. Picture your conscience as a five-gallon container strapped to your back. Whenever you wrong another, it's like pouring a gallon of liquid into

your conscience. Three or four wrongs and your conscience is getting full—and you are getting heavy. A full conscience leaves one with a sense of guilt and shame. The only way to effectively empty the conscience is to apologize to God and the person you offended. When this is done, you can look God in the face, you can look yourself in the mirror, and you can look the other person in the eye, not because you are perfect but because you have been willing to take responsibility for your failure.

We may or may not have learned the art of apologizing when we were children. In healthy families, parents teach their children to apologize. However, many children grow up in dysfunctional families where hurt, anger, and bitterness are a way of life, and no one ever apologizes.

### **WHAT REAL LOVE LOOKS LIKE**

The good news is that the art of apology can be learned. What we have discovered in our research is that there are five fundamental aspects of an apology. We call them the five languages of apology. Each of them is important, but for some people, one or two of the languages may communicate more effectively than the others. The key to good relationships is learning the apology language of the other person and being willing to speak it. When you speak their primary language, you make it easier for them to hear your sincerity and to genuinely forgive you.

Understanding and applying the five languages of an apology will greatly enhance all your relationships.

In the next five chapters, we will explain the five languages. In chapter 7, we will show you how to discover both your own and another person's primary apology language and how this can make

your efforts at apologizing most productive.

Love often means saying you're sorry—over and over again. Real love will be marked by apologies by the offender and forgiveness by the offended. This is the path to restored, loving relationships. It all begins by learning to speak the right language of apology when you offend someone.

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*TALK ABOUT IT*

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*Here are a number of questions designed to spark interaction and stimulate thought. Share these with your spouse or close friend or in a small group, or use them for personal reflection.*

*Discuss the author's observation, "People are incurably moral." Agree? Disagree?*

*Share a story you've heard or experience you've had showing humankind's "amazing capacity to forgive."*

*Those we care about most are those most affected by our apologies. Who are the people in your life who will be most affected by your learning in the area of apology?*

# *“I’m Sorry”*

## EXPRESSING REGRET

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It starts really early. Little Ava or little Oliver pushes another child at preschool. The kid cries. The teacher comforts them and then turns to the small perpetrator. “Tell William you’re sorry.” Ava or Oliver looks down and mumbles, “I’m sorry.” The kids go back to their play. Crisis averted.

But is it enough?

Maybe not always, as we shall see. But it does form the basis of our first language of apology: *expressing regret*. Expressing regret is the emotional aspect of an apology. It is expressing to the offended person your own sense of guilt, shame, and pain that your behavior has hurt him deeply. It is interesting that when Robert Fulghum wrote his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, he included as one of the things he learned: “Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody.”<sup>1</sup> Expressing regret is fundamental to good relationships.

Apology is birthed in the womb of regret. We regret the pain we

have caused, the disappointment, the inconvenience, the betrayal of trust. Regret focuses on what you did or failed to do and how it affected the other person. The offended one is experiencing painful emotions, and they want you to feel some of their pain. They want some evidence that you realize how deeply you have hurt them. For some people, this is the one thing they listen for in an apology. Without the expression of regret, they do not sense that the apology is adequate or sincere.

### **SAYING THE MAGIC WORDS**

A simple “I’m sorry” can go a long way toward restoring goodwill. The absence of the words “I’m sorry” stands out to some like a very sore thumb. Quite often offenders will not realize that they have left out some “magic words,” but you can be assured that the listener is scanning the silence for those missing words.

Let me (Jennifer) share a personal story. Last spring, I was part of a group of women who received end-of-the-year prizes for each having led a small group. I selected my prize from a sales consultant’s catalog and was eagerly awaiting the arrival of my thank-you gift. The summer came and went with no delivery of my product. I began to wonder, *Where is my order?* When the end of the year came with no package, I concluded that my order was not likely to come. I actually decided at that time that it was not worth pursuing the issue with anyone. I reasoned that I had enjoyed leading the group and put the item out of my mind with the refrain, “Easy come, easy go.”

Imagine my surprise when I received a telephone message from the consultant the next spring. She said that she had been cleaning out boxes and found my order! She closed the phone message by saying simply that she wanted to arrange to get the item to me. For

my part, I was pleasantly surprised to be in the position to receive that which I had let go. However, something was nagging at me. I replayed her message and confirmed my suspicion: She had failed to say, "I am sorry for my mistake," or to express any sort of regret. I would have quickly embraced such an apology.

As it was, I pondered the issue in my mind long enough to write it down and to wonder how often I might do the same thing. Do I correct problems, yet not assume responsibility or express regret? The magic words "I'm sorry" would have made a world of difference to me.

### **"I WANT HIM TO UNDERSTAND HOW HE HURT ME"**

Many people can identify with Jennifer's experience. Melissa has been married to her husband, Pete, for twenty-seven years. When I asked her, "What do you look for in an apology when Pete has wronged you?" her immediate response was, "Most of all I want him to understand how he hurt me and why. I want him to see things from my perspective. I expect to hear him say, 'I apologize. I am really sorry.'

"It helps if he gives an explanation of how his actions have hurt me. That way, I know he understands. If it's something really bad, I expect abject misery and want him to really be sad about the pain he caused me."

I asked, "When you say 'really bad,' what kind of things do you have in mind?"

"Like the time he took a woman at the office out to lunch without telling me. I heard it from a friend, and I was really hurt. I think if he had tried to justify it, I would have never gotten over it. You see, my husband is not the kind of man who takes other women out to lunch. I knew he had to have a little fascination for her or he would not have done it. He admitted that I was right and told me how sorry he was.

He said that he knew that I would never go out with another man and that if I did, he would be deeply hurt. He said that he regretted what he had done and wished he had never done it. I knew he was sincere when I saw tears come to his eyes.” For Melissa, the heart of an apology is a sincere expression of regret.

### **WHAT DOES YOUR BODY SAY?**

It is important that our body language agree with the words we are saying if we expect the offended person to sense our sincerity. Melissa mentioned Pete’s tears as evidence of his sincerity. Listen to the words of another wife who said, “I know when my husband sincerely feels sorry for something he’s done, because he becomes very quiet and his physical mannerisms become introverted. He apologizes with a soft voice and a bowed head. This shows me that he feels really bad. Then I know it’s genuine.”

Robert and Katie have been married for seven years. When I asked him, “How do you know that Katie is sincere when she apologizes?” his answer was, “Eye contact. If she looks me in the eye and says ‘I’m sorry,’ I know she’s sincere. If she says ‘I’m sorry’ while passing through the room, I know she’s hiding something. A hug and a kiss after the apology also let me know that she’s sincere.”

Robert is illustrating the reality that sometimes our body language speaks louder than our spoken language. This is especially true when the two contradict each other. For example, one wife said, “When he screams at me, ‘I said I’m sorry!’ but his eyes are glaring and his hands are shaking, it’s like he’s trying to make me forgive him. It seems to me he is more concerned about moving on and forgetting it than truly apologizing. It’s like my hurt doesn’t matter—let’s just get on with life.”

## **SORRY FOR WHAT?**

An apology has more impact when it's specific. LuAnn captured this idea when she said, "I expect the apologizer to say 'I'm sorry for \_\_\_\_' and then be specific about what they are sorry about." When we're specific, we communicate to the offended person that we truly understand how much we have hurt him or her. Specificity places the focus on our action and how it affected the other person.

The more details we can give, the better. If I (Jennifer) stood someone up for a movie, I wouldn't just say, "I'm sorry I didn't make it to the movie." It would mean more to the person if I could list all the ways my action affected her. "I know that you left your home on time; you stopped what you were doing. You made it down here during rush-hour traffic; you had to wait and be concerned about my well-being. I know that you like to see the entire picture, and for you, my neglect may have made you unable to enjoy the movie since you missed the beginning. I can imagine how upset I would have been if a friend had done this to me. You have a right to be angry, disappointed, frustrated, and hurt—and I want you to know that I am sincerely sorry for my irresponsibility."

The details reveal the depth of your understanding of the situation and how much you inconvenienced your friend.

## **"WHAT KIND OF AN APOLOGY IS THAT?"**

Sincere regret also needs to stand alone. It should not be followed with "But . . ." Rodney, who has been married three years to his second wife, Simone, says, "I know that my wife means it when she says, 'I'm sorry. I know that I hurt you by yelling at you.' Then she does not go on to accuse me of causing her to get upset. My first wife always blamed me for everything."

Numerous individuals in our research made statements similar to this. “She apologizes, but then turns it around and blames her actions on something *I* did.”

Brenda remembers well one of her husband’s failed attempts at apologizing—it happened the night before they would attend one of my marriage seminars. Her husband went to a coworker’s fiftieth birthday party, leaving Brenda at home with their four children. Because her husband normally worked a 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift, she had hoped for valuable evening time together.

“Even though I was angry, he left and said that he would be back in an hour,” Brenda recalls. “Two hours later when we were all in bed, he shows up. He apologized but added that I was acting like a baby, and he has a right to go out.

“So whatever words he was saying to apologize weren’t helping, since he was putting me down. I also prayed that when he got home, I wouldn’t have a bad attitude. But I was so filled with anger that it didn’t work.”

Anytime we verbally shift the blame to the other person, we have moved from an apology to an attack. Attacks never lead to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Megan is a twenty-nine-year-old single who has been in a committed dating relationship for three years. She said, “Anytime an apology is followed by an excuse for the offense, the excuse cancels out the apology in my mind. Just own up that, intentionally or not, you hurt me or didn’t meet my expectations. Don’t apologize and then make excuses for your offense. Leave it at the apology.”

As sisters, Juanita and Jasmine were often in conflict. They each wanted to have a better relationship, but neither seemed to know how. When I asked Jasmine, “Does Juanita ever apologize when she

loses her temper?" Jasmine said, "Oh, all the time, but then she'll say something like, 'I just wish you would stop putting me down. I know I'm not as educated as you, but that doesn't mean that you can treat me like dirt.' What kind of an apology is that? She puts all the blame on me."

### **APOLOGIES THAT DO NOT MANIPULATE**

An expression of sincere regret should not manipulate the other person into reciprocating. Natalie and George have been dating for two years and are going through some rough waters. She said, "George has at times said he was sorry. But then he expects me to say it back, even if I don't feel like I should have to because *he* was the cause of the fight in the first place. That just doesn't work for me. I want him to say he's sorry and not expect anything in return. That would mean that he is truly sorry."

Sometimes we hurt people and don't realize it. It was certainly not intentional. Good relationships are fostered by expressing regret even when we did not intend to hurt them. If I bump into someone getting out of an elevator, I murmur, "I'm sorry," not because I intentionally bumped him but because I identify with his inconvenience or irritation with my unintentional bump. The same principle is true in close relationships. You may not realize that your behavior has upset your spouse, but when it becomes apparent, then you can say, "I'm sorry that my behavior caused you so much pain. I didn't intend to hurt you."

Regret focuses on dealing with one's own behavior and expressing empathy for the hurt it has caused the other person. Insincerity is also communicated when we say "I'm sorry" simply to get the other person to stop confronting us with the issue. Rhonda sensed this when

she said, “Early in our marriage, my husband did something really damaging. He absolutely refused to be sorry or change. Then eventually he said that he was sorry, but it was only to get me off his back. His actions spoke more loudly than his words, indicating ‘Drop it! I want to get out of this trap.’ He didn’t see that what he had done was wrong and how much he had hurt me.”

### “I HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE ME”

Writing a letter of apology may help to underscore your sincerity. To put your apology in writing may give it more emotional weight, because your spouse or friend can read it again and again. The process of writing may also help you clarify your regrets and verbalize them in a positive way. Here is a letter that one of my (Jennifer’s) clients received from her husband. She has given me permission to share it.

*Dear Olivia,*

*I want to apologize for being late tonight and for not letting you know as soon as I could anticipate that I would be late again. I know this was an awfully difficult day for you with the kids. I wish so much I could have been here to help, or at least been on time to relieve you. My heart broke when at 6:30 p.m. I got your message from 4:45 p.m. with your cry for help and request that I be home on time. I hated to think that every moment from then on you must have been listening for my return. I really regret that my not setting good boundaries with my boss forced you to carry an extra burden today. I will strive to be more reliable. I am sorry, and I hope you can forgive me.*

*With contrition, your loving husband,*

*Jon*

Olivia wrote at the bottom of the page, "Forgiven," and the date. Obviously, Jon's expression of regret got through to Olivia. She sensed his sincerity and was willing to forgive him.

### **THE POWER OF "I'M SORRY"**

Look at what the following people had to say about apology language  
#1: *expressing regret*.

"My husband had made comments in front of our friends about my being overweight and eating too much. I was so hurt. Later that night, he said that he knew the situation was very uncomfortable for me and he was sorry for what he had done to create the situation by his hurtful words. I forgave him because I felt he was sincere."

—Paula, age fifty-three, married eleven years to her second husband

"I want an apology that comes from the heart, that is truly sorry for the action that caused my hurt. In other words, I want them to feel bad for making me feel bad."

—Lily, age twenty-six and single

"He came home late one night, but he apologized for disappointing me. I told him it was okay; I understood. He continued by saying that he still did not like to disappoint me; that made me feel really good."

—Marina, age twenty-eight, married two years

"[It's a genuine apology] when she expresses true feelings of regret, expresses understanding of my feelings, and acts like she is sorry that she hurt me."

—Charles, age forty, married for ten years

“I want to see that they feel guilty for what they did or said and are truly sorry.”

—Todd, age thirty-four and single

For these and many others, the language of expressing regret is extremely important in the process of healing and restoration. If you want these people to sense your sincerity, then you must learn to speak the language of regret, which focuses on their pain and your behavior and how the two are related. It is communicating to them that you feel hurt because you know your actions have hurt them. It is this identification with their pain that stimulates in them a willingness to forgive.

If you are willing to express regret, here are some statements that may help you do so.

## **STATEMENTS OF REGRET**

*I know now that I hurt you very deeply. That causes me immense pain. I am truly sorry for what I did.*

*I feel really bad that I disappointed you. I should have been more thoughtful. I'm sorry that I caused you so much pain.*

*At the time, obviously I was not thinking very well. I never intended to hurt you, but now I can see that my words were way out of line. I'm sorry that I was so insensitive.*

*I am sorry that I violated your trust. I've created a roadblock in our relationship that I want to remove. I understand that even after I apologize, it may take awhile for you to venture down the road of trust with me again.*

*You were promised a service that we have not provided. I am sorry that our company clearly dropped the ball this time.*

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*TALK ABOUT IT*

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*Have you had childhood experiences similar to those described at the beginning of this chapter? Is there anyone from your past that you would like to say "I'm sorry" to?*

*Have you ever hurt someone without realizing it? What did you do when you became aware that you had hurt someone? What would most people say they are looking for in an apology?*