When Sorry Isn't Enough

MAKING THINGS RIGHT WITH THOSE YOU LOVE

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To Karolyn, who has accepted my apologies
and extended forgiveness
many times through our four decades
as husband and wife

To my parents, Jim and Frankie McCain,
thank you for the blessings of life and love

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Introduction

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

"My daughter is late over and over again," a woman said to me. "She's a wonderful young woman, but she's just habitually late—to our house for dinner, to church, you name it. It isn't a huge deal, but I wish just once she would say she was sorry."

Another woman I'll call Lisa said, "I love my husband dearly, but I'm tired of repeated apologies without behavior change, especially when it comes to chores. Don't just say 'I'm sorry I forgot to mop the kitchen floor.' Remember to do it!"

Jack, fiftyish, is estranged from his brother because years ago his brother swindled him out of some money. "Never has he told me he feels bad about what he did. I don't really care about the money, but I feel like he should make it right somehow," he said.

Michelle is recently divorced from her husband, Sam. However, she recognizes her part in the disintegration of their marriage and God is leading her to seek reconciliation: "Deep down, I believe that God is saying it is worth it to pursue this often nontraveled road." These offenses range from annoying to life-shattering—but in every case, a relationship

needs mending. A wrong needs to be righted. Where do we start?

Sara was wondering the same thing when she came to one of my marriage seminars. Before the conference started, she came up to me and asked, "Are you going to deal with the importance of apologizing?"

"That's an interesting topic," I responded. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, all my husband says is 'I'm sorry.' To me, that's not an apology."

"So what do you want him to say or do?" I asked.

"I want him to admit that he is wrong and to ask me to forgive him. I also want him to assure me that it won't happen again."

Dr. Jennifer Thomas and I have conducted extensive research on the importance of apologizing effectively, and what we have learned has convinced us that Sara is not alone in her desire to deal with issues of admitting wrong and seeking forgiveness. *Apology*, however, is not a word that means the same thing to everyone. That is because we have different "languages" of apology.

"I have seen this often in my counseling," Jennifer said. "One spouse says, 'If he would only apologize,' and the other says, 'I have apologized.' So they get into an argument about what it means to apologize. Of course, they have different perceptions."

I have observed numerous couples in my office exhibiting similar behavior. It was obvious they were not connecting with each other. The supposed apology was not having the desired effect of forgiveness and reconciliation. I also remember occasions in my own marriage when Karolyn would apologize but I considered it rather weak, and other occasions when I would apologize, but she'd have a hard time forgiving me because she felt that I was insincere.

We believe that going beyond a quick "I'm sorry"—learning to apologize effectively—can help rekindle love that has been dimmed by pain. We believe that when we all learn to apologize—and when we understand each other's apology language—we can trade in tired excuses for honesty, trust, and joy.

All of us are painfully aware of the conflict, division, anger, and strife

in our world today, from Washington, DC, to the Mideast to the streets of our inner cities to seemingly safe New England villages. We will conclude, therefore, with a chapter that some may see as ethereal but we believe holds great potential: What would the world be like if we all learned to apologize effectively?

Join us as we explore what it means to be truly sorry—and to move toward true forgiveness.

—Gary Chapman, PhD
—Jennifer Thomas, PhD

Chapter 1

Righting Wrongs

In a perfect world, there would be no need for apologies. But 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.

People are incurably moral.

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.

The desire for reconciliation is often more potent than the desire for justice.

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."

CAN YOU FORGIVE WITHOUT AN APOLOGY?

Genuine forgiveness and reconciliation are two-person transactions that are enabled by apologies. Some, particularly within the Christian worldview, have taught forgiveness without an apology. They often quote the words of Jesus, "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."[1] Thus, they say to the wife whose husband has been unfaithful and continues in his adulterous affair, "You must forgive him, or God will not forgive you." Such an interpretation of Jesus' teachings fails to reckon with the rest of the scriptural teachings on forgiveness. The Christian is instructed to forgive others in the same manner

When a pastor encourages a wife to forgive her erring husband while he still continues in his wrongdoing, the minister is requiring of the wife something that God Himself does not do.

that God forgives us. How does God forgive us? The Scriptures say that if we confess our sins, God will forgive our sins.[2] Nothing in the Old or New Testaments indicates that God forgives the sins of people who do not confess and repent of their sins.

When a pastor encourages a wife to forgive her erring husband while he still continues in his wrongdoing, the minister is requiring of the wife something that God Himself does not do. Jesus' teaching is that we are to be always willing to forgive, as God is always willing to forgive, those who repent. Some will object to this idea, indicating that Jesus forgave those who were killing Him. But that is not what the Scriptures say. Rather, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."[3] Jesus expressed His heart of compassion and His desire to see His murderers forgiven. That should be our desire and our prayer. But their forgiveness came later when they acknowledged that they had indeed killed the Son of God.[4]

Forgiveness without an apology is often encouraged for the benefit of the forgiver rather than the benefit of the offender. Such forgiveness does not lead to reconciliation. When there is no apology, the Christian is encouraged to release the person to God for justice[5] and to release one's anger to God through forbearance.[6]

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."[7]

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 their eyes; 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 a particular individual, 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 genuinely forgive you. When you fail to speak their language, it makes forgiveness more difficult because they are not sure if you are genuinely apologizing.

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

In the next five chapters, we will explain the five languages. And 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.

Talk About It

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?