

Repentance and Forgiveness in Marriage

RICK MILLER

When couples get married, their love is deep, and they joyfully anticipate the prospect of spending the eternities together. They enjoy having endless talks, going for long walks, and spending time together. It is a wonderful feeling being with someone you love so deeply.

Unfortunately, for many couples the bliss of deep love and immensely satisfying companionship that was present when they first got married doesn't last. Long talks become replaced with frequent arguments, and when not spent fighting, their time together is characterized by angry silence.

Many of these couples divorce. Others manage the hostility by emotionally withdrawing from the relationship. The spouses become distant from each other, and they keep their interaction to a minimum. President Spencer W. Kimball described these couples when he said:

There are many people who do not find divorce attorneys and who do not end their marriages, but who have permitted their marriage to grow stale and weak and cheap. There are spouses who . . . are in the low state of mere joint occupancy of the home. [In *Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book,

1981), 44–46; adapted from Kimball, “Marriage and Divorce,” BYU devotional address, 7 September 1976]

How do these couples go from ecstatic levels of love and happiness to frequent conflict, bitterness, and, in many cases, eventual divorce?

A number of reasons have been identified by researchers, but lately I've been thinking that most of these reasons can be boiled down to two fundamental factors: a lack of repentance and a lack of forgiveness.

It is important to note that these principles of repentance and forgiveness apply to all relationships, not just to marriage. They apply to roommates, family members, and colleagues at work. So, no matter what one's marital status is or what the prospects in the near future are, these principles are important to all of us.

In most cases we are married for only a short time before we hurt our spouse's feelings. Whether it is intentional, based on selfishness, or just inadvertent mistakes, we all end up doing things that create hurt in our spouse.

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The remedy is pretty straightforward. We say, “I’m sorry.” We feel badly that we hurt our spouse, apologize, learn from the experience, and do our best not to make the same mistake again. We repent, and, assuming that the problem wasn’t too major, the issue is over.

Elder Joe J. Christensen said:

To develop a solid marriage, we must be able to admit we are sorry for the mistakes we make. . . . When conflicts in marriage arise, we should be swift to apologize and ask for forgiveness, even though we may not be totally at fault. True love is developed by those who are willing to readily admit personal mistakes and offenses. [One Step at a Time: Building a Better Marriage, Family, and You (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 39]

In order to be effective, an apology must be sincere and heartfelt. There needs to be evidence that you are truly sorry and that you are remorseful that you have hurt or offended your spouse. A flippant “sorry” rarely helps heal hurt feelings. In addition, a sincere apology includes taking responsibility for your mistake or offense. Too many apologies are poorly masked attempts to shift the responsibility for the problem to your spouse. “I’m sorry that you took my comments the wrong way” or the classic “I’m sorry that you can’t take a simple joke” are not really apologies. Instead, they are clumsy ways of manipulating the situation in order to place the blame on your spouse.

Making excuses for mistakes is another good way to avoid taking responsibility. Even though the excuse may be valid, including it as part of your apology undermines your sincerity. Saying “I’m really sorry that I snapped at you this morning, but I didn’t get much sleep last night” doesn’t work very well because you are passing responsibility for your poor behavior to a lack of sleep. Just apologize. If you want to provide some justification for your subpar behavior, do it later, after the hurt feelings have been smoothed over.

I have found that effective apologies usually come in complete sentences. A simple “sorry” or the far more eloquent “sorry about that” rarely provides the necessary evidence that you feel remorseful and that you are taking appropriate responsibility for your actions. Even the current fad of saying “my bad” (with the dutiful patting of your chest) is usually inadequate—unless, I guess, you are in the middle of a coed intramural basketball game. It is much more healing to say: “I’m sorry that I didn’t do the dishes last night like I agreed to. It wasn’t right, and I apologize”—two full and complete sentences. A full and complete apology that comes packaged in complete sentences will do wonders in healing hurts.

Sometimes it is necessary to apologize more than once. When an offense is especially hurtful, one apology usually isn’t enough. It is so healing for the offended spouse to hear sometime after the initial apology, “I’ve been thinking about it, and I realize that I really blew it. Please accept my apology.” When working with couples who are dealing with a difficult issue, I have heard countless people say to me, “I have already apologized. Why doesn’t my spouse just get over it?” I explain to them that it sometimes takes several apologies before the sincerity of the apology sinks into the wounded heart of an offended spouse.

Besides a sincere apology, repentance includes striving to forsake our shortcomings and weaknesses. We strive to keep our promises to do the dishes. We focus on not being grumpy and not snapping at our spouse. We endeavor to become better listeners and less judgmental. As we continually repent, we constantly try to improve ourselves. We strive to overcome our weaknesses and develop more Christlike qualities. By doing so, we become a better person and a better spouse.

In my experience, there are two things that often stand in the way of saying “I’m sorry” and repenting. The first thing is that we sometimes don’t know that we have done

something hurtful or offensive to our spouse. It is hard to apologize when we don't know that we actually did something wrong.

A number of years ago I did marital therapy with a couple who had been married about 10 years. Over the years she had built up resentment in the relationship because of hurts and perceived injustices that she had experienced in their marriage. She was fed up with the relationship and was seriously considering getting a divorce. The husband still loved his wife and wanted the relationship to work, but her level of resentment toward him had risen to the point that she didn't feel any love for him.

She had a whole list of grievances. I thought the first one that she gave was especially interesting. When she was having their oldest child, she was in the final stage of labor. It had been a long, difficult labor, and she was physically and emotionally exhausted. While she was putting every ounce of strength that she had left toward giving birth, her husband said, "Will you please hurry up and have the baby? The football game is on TV today, and it is going to start in a few minutes." Shortly thereafter the baby was born (hopefully before the game started!). In all of the excitement of holding their new baby and becoming new parents, his unkind words were seemingly forgotten. Nothing was said, and they moved on with life. But *she* remembered what he had said, and his words festered in her for nearly 10 years. She grew more and more resentful over his incredibly insensitive and selfish statement, and it was the cornerstone of the emotional wall that she had built between herself and her husband.

The interesting thing, though, was that he had no idea that what had happened during the birth of their first child many years earlier was a problem. He was surprised when she presented it at the top of her list of grievances; he could barely even remember that it happened. When she brought it up during our therapy session—and it was obvious that

she was deeply hurt by what he had said—he quickly apologized. He was a little more mature now, and he realized that he had said a very insensitive, selfish thing to his wife. His apology was sincere; it even had complete sentences. But it was too late. Her wall of resentment had reached the point where she didn't want to try anymore in their relationship. After another therapy session or two, she made the final decision to get a divorce.

I have often wondered what might have happened in their marriage if the wife had overtly dealt with the incident soon after the baby was born and given her husband the opportunity to apologize and make it right.

The Savior clearly taught how we are to respond when our spouse offends us:

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. [Matthew 18:15]

When our spouse does something that hurts our feelings, we need to let him or her know in order to give them the opportunity to apologize and repent. That doesn't mean that we point out every tiny weakness and mistake; to do so would violate the fundamental requirement in marriage to nurture and lift each other. But if we find that something that our partner said or did creates negative feelings that start festering and won't go away, then it is important that we speak with our spouse and then let them know that they did something that was hurtful.

The second major obstacle to repenting of our sins and mistakes in marriage is pride. Apologizing and repenting requires us to look inward, be humble, and take responsibility for our mistakes and weaknesses. Pride is the antithesis of these virtues.

In his great talk on pride in 1989, President Ezra Taft Benson taught:

Selfishness is one of the more common faces of pride. “How everything affects me” is the center of all that matters—self-conceit, self-pity, worldly self-fulfillment, self-gratification, and self-seeking. . . .

The proud do not receive counsel or correction easily. . . . Defensiveness is used by them to justify and rationalize their frailties and failures. . . .

Think of the repentance that could take place with lives changed, marriages preserved, and homes strengthened, if pride did not keep us from confessing our sins and forsaking them. . . .

The antidote for pride is humility—meekness, submissiveness. . . . It is the broken heart and contrite spirit. . . .

We can choose to humble ourselves by receiving counsel and chastisement. . . .

We can choose to humble ourselves by confessing and forsaking our sins and being born of God. . . .

Let us choose to be humble. [“Beware of Pride,” Ensign, May 1989, 6–7]

The essence of repentance is trying to change *ourselves* in ways that will make us better people. On the other hand, the foundation of pride is the desire to cover up our own weaknesses and focus on changing *our partner’s* behavior and weaknesses. May we follow President Benson’s prophetic counsel to humble ourselves so that we are willing to look inward and learn to recognize our faults and shortcomings. As we become humble, we will desire to improve our lives and take responsibility for our weaknesses. We will be willing to apologize and to strive to become better people, which is at the core of repentance.

In order for a marriage to be successful, there needs to be more than repentance; there also needs to be forgiveness. These two gospel principles are complementary, and both are necessary in order to progress spiritually. Similar to other gospel principles—like faith and works and justice and mercy—repentance and forgiveness are most effective when they are understood and practiced together.

President Gordon B. Hinckley said:

I recall listening at length to a couple who sat across the desk from me. There was bitterness between them. I know that at one time their love was deep and true. But each had developed a habit of speaking of the faults of the other. Unwilling to forgive the kind of mistakes we all make, and unwilling to forget them and live above them with forbearance, they had carped at one another until the love they once knew had been smothered. . . . I am satisfied that had there been even a small measure of repentance and forgiveness, they would still be together, enjoying the companionship that had so richly blessed their earlier years. [“Of You It Is Required to Forgive,” Ensign, June 1991, 4]

I am convinced that resentment is one of the most lethal poisons in marriage. Resentment doesn’t ruin a marriage overnight; rather, it is like tooth decay that gradually and silently damages your teeth. Forgetting to brush your teeth one time doesn’t ruin your teeth, just as eating one candy bar does not lead you to a life of wearing dentures; however, with numerous instances of neglect over many months and years, tooth decay, if not properly treated, will destroy your teeth. Likewise, resentment gradually accumulates, often without us even noticing it. If left untreated, resentment builds up over a number of years to the point where it destroys love.

Just as repentance washes away our sins and weaknesses, forgiveness washes away the hurts and emotional injuries that are inherent in being married to someone who is imperfect. Forgiveness is the perfect antidote for the poison of resentment. Forgiveness completely neutralizes resentment and makes room in our heart for feelings of love to flourish and grow.

President Boyd K. Packer taught:

All of us carry excess baggage around from time to time, but the wisest ones among us don’t carry it for very long. They get rid of it. . . .

Often . . . the things we carry are petty, even stupid. If you are still upset after all these years

because Aunt Clara didn't come to your wedding reception, why don't you grow up? Forget it. . . .

If the bishop didn't call you right—or release you right—forget it.

If you resent someone for something he has done—or failed to do—forget it.

*We call that forgiveness. It is powerful, spiritual medicine. ["The Balm of Gilead," *New Era*, August 1979, 39]*

Relating his comments specifically to marriage, we might echo his statement by saying: If you are still upset after all of these months because your spouse didn't take you to your favorite restaurant on your birthday, forget it. If your spouse continually doesn't load the dishwasher correctly despite your best instructional techniques, leave it alone and move on. If your spouse spent the entire evening at his or her mission reunion speaking a language that you don't understand, get over it. As President Packer said, "We call that forgiveness." Our marital relationship is too important for us to clutter our minds and hearts with resentment that is created by dwelling on the faults and weaknesses of our spouse. We need to forgive and move on.

What do we do when we simply can't forgive, forget, and move on? There are some offenses, because of their seriousness, that are difficult to get over. There are some hurts that run deep—very deep. Sometimes a spouse has a difficult time forgiving something that others might consider trivial. In other cases, a spouse realizes that their level of resentment has reached such an overwhelming point that they simply can't forget it and move on. In all of these situations, the person comes to realize that they can't forgive on their own: they need help.

In these cases we need to rely on the healing power of the Atonement. If we carefully read in the scriptures about the Atonement, we learn that the Atonement heals much more than the wounds of those who have sinned.

The great prophet Isaiah wrote:

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. [Isaiah 53:4–5; emphasis added]

In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Alma taught:

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. [Alma 7:11; emphasis added]

In modern times, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

Since not all human sorrow and pain is connected to sin, the full intensiveness of the Atonement involved bearing our pains, infirmities, and sicknesses, as well as our sins. ["Not My Will, But Thine" (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 51]

Thus the healing power of the Atonement extends beyond those who repent; it also heals those who sorrow, grieve, and are in pain. Certainly that includes those who sorrow and grieve because they have been wronged and hurt by the selfishness of their spouse. During the process of the Atonement, the Savior took upon Him all of the pain, sorrow, and grief that we will experience in this life. Because of His atoning sacrifice, He shoulders the pain that we experience, which gives us the ability to overcome these hurts and enables us to heal. Consequently, through the Atonement He lifts from us sorrow and pain, which then gives us the capacity to forgive our spouse when he or she has seriously offended us.

President James E. Faust eloquently said:

Our Redeemer took upon Himself all the sins, pains, infirmities, and sicknesses of all who have ever lived and will ever live. [See Alma 7:11–12.] No one has ever suffered in any degree what He did. He knows our mortal trials by firsthand experience. . . .

*The Atonement not only benefits the sinner but also benefits those sinned against—that is, the victims. By forgiving “those who trespass against us” (JST, Matt. 6:13) the Atonement brings a measure of peace and comfort to those who have been innocently victimized by the sins of others. The basic source for the healing of the soul is the Atonement of Jesus Christ. [“The Atonement: Our Greatest Hope,” *Ensign*, November 2001, 19–20]*

A few years ago I had the wonderful opportunity of serving as the bishop of a BYU married student ward. It was a marvelous experience being able to associate with hundreds of wonderful couples. As I was getting close to being released, my stake president asked me a question that he asked all of the bishops at the end of their service.

He asked me, “What is the most important thing that you learned while you were a bishop?”

I quickly responded, “The incredible healing power of the Atonement.”

I had fine young people come into my office in the depths of despair because they had done things that had greatly offended their spouses as well as God. As part of our conversation they would often ask, “Bishop, how can I ever be forgiven for what I have done? How can I ever make it right with God and with my spouse?” We would then talk about the Atonement and its ability to cleanse each of us from sin if we sincerely repent.

I had wonderful people come into my office devastated because they had been terribly hurt by the actions of their spouse. Through their tears they would ask, “Bishop, how can I ever forgive my husband (or my wife)?” We would

then talk about the Atonement and its ability to heal broken hearts and to give us the ability to forgive.

I had couples come into my office who were bitter toward each other. In just a few short years the interactions between them had deteriorated to the point where they were characterized by power struggles, bickering, angry accusations, and fighting. They felt hopeless that their relationship would ever improve. They would ask, “Bishop, is there any possibility that our marriage can be fixed?” We would then talk about the Atonement and the hope and healing that it brings to spouses who sincerely repent and who strive to forgive each other.

I saw miracles while I was a bishop. I saw individuals repent of their sins and earn back the favor of God and the trust of their spouse. I saw brokenhearted spouses find peace and the ability to forgive. I saw couples who were on the verge of divorce turn from destructive patterns of constant fighting to humbling themselves, looking inward, taking responsibility, apologizing for mistakes, and striving to forgive each other. Every one of these miracles was made possible by the healing power of the Atonement.

May we be willing to take responsibility for our own sins and weaknesses that create stress and hurt in our marriages. May we use the healing power of the Atonement to overcome our sins, imperfections, and weaknesses. May we use the power of the Atonement to heal our hurts and sorrows so that we can fully forgive.

I testify that the Atonement not only heals broken souls, it also heals broken hearts. I also testify that the Atonement heals broken relationships. I testify that the Atonement brings hope to each of us and our marriages. I testify that as we are quick to repent and quick to forgive, our lives and our marriages will be blessed throughout the eternities. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.