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Beverly Stout
Andrews University

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The Anatomy of an Apology

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

An apology is often the beginning of a process toward healing and forgiveness. It is not always a long process, since the situation may be remedied by the apology.

While our homes should be homes of peace and healing, and we desire to live by biblical principles, it is sometimes all too easy to let our selfishness, upbringing, gender differences, personal choices, and lack of knowing how to handle conflict well stand in our way.

Some believe Christian couples and families should never have trouble getting along. But, even with the best of intentions, our humanness gets in the way.

“Part of reaching Christian maturity is accepting the reality of our imperfection while striving to become holy. Truth is, we will never perfectly understand another person this side of heaven, even when we are doing all the right things. The important thing is to take responsibility for your own behavior, even when your partner [or family member] doesn’t seem to want to get along.”¹

Ephesians 4:29 reads, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

The truth is, in all intimate relationships there is some conflict. When there is conflict, we often shy away from it or try to solve the problem immediately, often deciding our way is best.

Two concepts seem central: “Seek first to understand and then to be understood” and “Begin with the end in mind.” Beginning with the end in mind gives extraordinary opportunities to make meaningful apologies.

A dictionary definition of the word apology is “An expression of regret offered for some fault, failure, insult, or injury.” An apology is *not* saying “I’m sorry.” An apology is when we assume responsibility for our actions, our own behavior. It is based on truth, not lies. We

state our own intention or motives (our dark side) and also an intention to repair. An apology is not for score-keeping in a relationship.

Consider these five steps in making a meaningful apology:

1. We acknowledge specifically what happened. This takes the burden of fear from the other. It is a gift of generosity.
2. We acknowledge that we owe the other person an explanation. We may say, “This isn’t the person I want to be,” or “This is not how I want to behave.”
3. We express genuine remorse. This involves exposing our motives; it is not to make an excuse.
4. We state intention to repair. We may say, “I want to be in relationship with you. Will you accept my apology?” This sometimes involves dialogue.
5. We accept the other person’s acceptance of our apology. And we choose to let go.

I believe that when we don’t heal hurts of the past, we just bleed into the future. God desires us to live lives of joy and continued growth. R.T. Kendall shares, “Relinquishing bitterness is an open invitation for the Holy Spirit to give you His peace, His joy, and the knowledge of His will.”²

Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

1. Stanley, S., et al. (1998). *A Lasting Promise: a Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

2. Kendall, R.T. (2002). *Total Forgiveness*. Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House.

