When Relationships Are Wounded

Walking Toward Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Healing

In one recent six-month period, I found myself sitting with a number of people whose closest relationships had become places of deep pain.

One man was walking through a divorce and wondering what it would mean for his children. A married couple was living on separate floors of the same house. Parents were estranged from their son, daughter-in-law, and grandson. A mother and her adult daughters had become divided. A home fellowship group was struggling to survive a breakdown in relationships.

There were moments when I did not know what to say. I am not a counselor, and I do not have easy answers for wounds that may have formed over many years. Often, the most helpful thing I can do is listen, ask a few questions, and help someone consider what a faithful next step might look like.

Their circumstances were different, but the ache beneath them was painfully familiar. So many people are carrying the weight of relationships that have become strained or broken. Those conversations kept bringing me back to something Denise and I tried to teach our own children.

When our son Jonathan left for college, I asked him to do two things. The first was to learn how to think, not merely what to think. The second was to earn what I called his “PhD in relationships.”

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As he entered a new setting, he would need to learn for himself how to listen, work through disagreement, speak the truth with love, ask for forgiveness, and repair relationships. I believed those lessons would matter in his work, marriage, family, friendships, and faith.

Jesus placed our relationships at the very center of our witness.

> *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*
>
> **John 13:35 NIV**

Psalm 133 describes how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity and says that God commands His blessing there.

Relationships are not a secondary part of the Christian life. They are the primary places where our faith becomes visible.

Following Christ does not mean we will never experience conflict. It means we can learn to walk through it in a way that reflects His heart. God can teach us when to let something go, when to speak, how to take responsibility, and how to pursue reconciliation while entrusting the outcome to Him.

Begin with What Is Happening Within Us

When a relationship is wounded, our attention naturally turns toward what the other person did. Sometimes the wrong is real, and the harm is serious. Yet even then, there is value in allowing God to show us what the conflict may be uncovering within us.

Certain accusations can provoke a strong reaction in me. If I think someone is calling me naïve, unintelligent, or lacking in integrity, I may feel an immediate impulse to push back.

At other times, I have avoided a difficult conversation until frustration built up inside me. I might withdraw and then attack, or attack and then withdraw.

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Those reactions have taught me to pause long enough to ask:

Why am I reacting this way? What is happening inside me that God may want me to see?

The answer does not necessarily mean the other person is right. It may show me that the conflict has touched a fear, an old wound, a desire for control, or an expectation I never expressed. If I rush past that inner work, I may address the outward problem while missing what God wants to do in me.

During six months of premarital discipleship, Denise and I learned to take responsibility for our own lives. Jesus' picture of the beam and the speck has stayed with us: before trying to remove the speck from someone else's eye, I need to let Him show me what may be obstructing my own vision (Matthew 7:3–5).

Looking honestly at my part does not excuse what another person has done or transfer their responsibility to me. Whatever genuinely belongs to me, however limited it may be, is mine to acknowledge.

We have not done this perfectly, but that practice has continued to bring us back to grace and to each other.

Should I Overlook It or Address It?

After I have examined my own heart and taken responsibility for my part, the next question I like to ask is:

Is this something I need to address, or can I overlook it?

Scripture reminds us that not every offense needs to become a confrontation.

> *"A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense."*
>
> **Proverbs 19:11 NIV**

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Someone may have spoken carelessly, forgotten something important, or responded out of fatigue. Love can make room for ordinary human weakness. Sometimes the healthiest response is simply to release the matter and continue loving the person.

To overlook an offense is to place it before God and decide that this particular wrong will not be allowed to shape the way I see or treat the other person. If I say I have overlooked something but continue replaying it, retelling it, or allowing it to affect the relationship, I probably have not released it.

After bringing my own heart before God, I try to discern what love requires. Can I release this without becoming distant or resentful? Would remaining silent allow the relationship to deteriorate or a harmful pattern to continue?

Sometimes a single act is too serious to leave unaddressed. At other times, smaller offenses are repeated until they begin wearing away trust or causing harm. Silence may eventually stop being an expression of grace and become permission for something unhealthy to continue. If I cannot release the offense freely—or if remaining quiet would leave real harm unaddressed—it may be time to speak.

Overlooking can be an expression of grace, but it should not become a spiritual-sounding name for avoidance. Nor should confrontation become an acceptable way to vent our anger. The real question is not merely what we want to say. It is what love requires.

Learning to Make Peace

This is Denise sharing in her own words.

One of my deepest prayers was that my children would become best friends and encourage one another in the Lord. I did not often see that modeled in the culture or even in families. I realized this would require an intentional way of teaching them to listen to one another’s hearts, work through offenses, know each other deeply, and build healthy relationships.

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So I created what became known in our family as the Peacemaking Couch. Whenever the children had a conflict, we went to that designated place. The child who had been hurt or offended would share what had happened without being interrupted. Then the other child had the same opportunity to respond, but not simply to defend what they had done. I guided the conversation with questions until each child felt heard and knew that the other understood what had happened and how it had made them feel.

Instead of stopping with a simple “I’m sorry” while the hurt remained, they learned to name the offense, ask for forgiveness, help heal one another’s hearts, and deepen their relationship. It was important to me that they put the offense into words: “I understand how what I said or did made you feel. Please forgive me.” A genuine apology begins with honest ownership.

Once the child who had been hurt offered forgiveness, that child would ask if they could pray for the other child’s heart. Together, they were learning to repair what had been damaged, listen to one another, and address an offense before it could take root. The Bible warns us about the little foxes that spoil the vine (Song of Songs 2:15). I wanted to teach our children how to work through hurt and offense to restore whatever had been broken.

Hurt happens in every relationship and can lead to offense. It is important to work through that hurt as soon as possible because it can grow into a root of bitterness (Hebrews 12:15). We can allow hurt to divide us, or we can learn to forgive, restore what has been damaged, and build healthier relationships. Eventually, our children began resolving conflicts on their own and truly became best friends.

One day, one of my children came to me and asked, “Mom, can you meet me on the Peacemaking Couch?”

I smiled and said, “Absolutely!”

That was one of those parenting moments I will never forget. Conflict had become an opportunity. Instead of allowing it to divide us, we were learning to walk out repentance, forgiveness, and restoration and grow into healthy relationships with each other.

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Moving Toward the Other Person

Jesus places a high value on taking the initiative when a relationship is strained.

In Matthew 5:23–24, He tells us that if we remember someone has something against us, we should go and seek reconciliation. We do not have to wait until the other person makes the first move. The person who recognizes that the relationship has been wounded can begin.

This guidance should never be used to keep someone unsafe. Abuse, threats, violence, or serious danger should not be handled as an ordinary private conflict. Seek help from qualified professionals and the proper authorities. No one is required to confront an unsafe person alone.

When it is safe and appropriate, Matthew 18:15–17 describes what to do when another person has sinned against us. The first step is a private conversation.

I go to the person rather than building a case with friends, family members, or colleagues. I do not begin by recruiting people who agree with me. I speak directly, honestly, and as gently as I can. Jesus says the hope is to win the brother or sister—to recover the relationship rather than win an argument.

If that conversation does not resolve the matter, Jesus tells us to return with one or two others. These should not be allies brought along to apply pressure. They should be mature and trustworthy people who can listen carefully, help establish what is true, and encourage everyone involved to take responsibility.

If the person still refuses to listen and the matter is serious, Jesus says it may need to be brought before the church. This is not permission for gossip or public humiliation. It recognizes that persistent, harmful, and unrepentant behavior may require the wisdom and authority of spiritual leaders. They may need to protect those being harmed, call the person to account, and clarify how the relationship must change.

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The hope at every stage is restoration. Yet restoration cannot be forced. Sometimes the process brings people back together. At other times, it reveals that reconciliation is not presently possible.

Even when we approach conflict wisely, the outcome may still be different from what we hoped.

When the Outcome Remains Incomplete

When Denise and I purchased our home, we raised a concern about the septic system before closing and understood that the problem had been addressed. Within a week after we moved in, wastewater began surfacing in the yard. We learned that the property needed a new leach field, which would require a substantial and unexpected expense.

I contacted the seller and asked him to pay for the repair. He did not believe the expense was his responsibility. I then offered to divide the cost equally, but we were unable to reach an agreement.

After considering legal action, we both agreed to take the matter through a voluntary conflict-resolution process offered by our church. At the end of that process, the seller chose to contribute a portion of the repair expense. The amount was substantially less than the full cost or the equal division I had proposed, but we accepted it and considered the formal dispute closed.

We did not believe the result fully reflected what would have been appropriate or equitable. Even so, the process had ended, and Denise and I had to decide what we would do with the disappointment the conflict had produced within us.

The following Christmas, Denise baked a holiday loaf, and we gave it to the seller at church. We were not trying to reopen the disagreement or pretend that the outcome no longer mattered. Giving him the loaf was simply another step toward becoming free from the hurt.

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The loaf did not repair the septic system, and the relationship did not return to what it had once been. But God was doing something important within us. Forgiveness did not require us to change our understanding of what had happened. It allowed us to release the resentment and choose a different response.

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Trust, and Healing

That experience helped me understand why forgiveness, reconciliation, trust, and healing should not be treated as though they are the same.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness begins between us and God. We bring Him the offense, the pain, and whatever we believe is still owed to us. With His help, we release the person and the outcome into His hands, even when no apology has been offered and no repair has been made.

Paul tells us to forgive as the Lord has forgiven us (Colossians 3:13). Forgiveness does not ask us to forget what happened or call something acceptable that was clearly wrong. It may not change our feelings overnight. It asks us to stop feeding resentment and trust God with justice.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation requires both people. Each must be willing to face what happened, take responsibility for what belongs to them, and begin moving toward the other. We can keep our hearts open to reconciliation, but we cannot accomplish it alone.

Trust

Trust needs time. A heartfelt apology may open the door, but trust returns as words and actions begin to agree. When harm, manipulation, or abuse continues, love may require firm boundaries. Forgiveness never requires us to ignore danger or pretend that trust has been restored.

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Healing

Healing can also take time. A painful memory may return even after we have sincerely released an offense to God. That does not mean our forgiveness was false. God often heals us in layers and reaches deeper places as time passes.

Paul's counsel in Romans 12 has helped me: bless rather than curse, refuse to repay evil for evil, and—as far as it depends on us—live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:14, 17–18). Denise and I have often tried to answer hostility with kindness and accusation with humility and truth. Wise boundaries may still be necessary. Even then, I can refuse to let another person's actions decide the spirit in which I respond.

The words "as far as it depends on us" have brought me great comfort. I am responsible for my heart, my words, my choices, and my obedience. I cannot control how another person responds, but I am still called to love.

A Lifelong Education in Love

When I think again about the people I met with during that six-month period, I know that only God can reach the deepest places of pain and bring the healing none of us can produce on our own. Some relationships can be beautifully restored. Others may require time, wise counsel, or new boundaries. Some may take a different form from what they once had.

I still like the idea of earning a "PhD in relationships," but the longer I live, the more I realize that none of us ever graduates. We remain lifelong students, and the Holy Spirit is a patient teacher. Every relationship gives us another opportunity to learn the way of love.

Our relationships are where God's love becomes visible. We listen, humble ourselves, tell the truth, ask for forgiveness, repair what we can, and release into His hands what we cannot change. We may never master relationships, but we can keep growing. We do what belongs to us and entrust the rest to God.

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Questions for Reflection

1. What might God be showing me about my own heart through this relationship or conflict?

2. What part of the situation belongs to me, and how can I take responsibility for it?

3. Is this an offense I can genuinely release, or is something harmful happening that love requires me to address?

4. If a conversation is needed, how can I approach the person with humility, truth, and a sincere desire for restoration?

5. Is there anything I need to confess, ask forgiveness for, or help repair?

6. What can I release to God now, even if reconciliation or restored trust is not yet possible?

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Companion Resources

> *Four Invitations of the Heart* considers how woundedness and self-protection can give way to vulnerability, beloved identity, openness, and fuller engagement.

> *The Box* is a short story about the walls we can build around pain and what it may take to begin moving toward freedom.

> Watch *The Power of Community* for a fuller reflection on why we need one another and how life together helps people grow.

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For Further Reading

These books have helped shape my understanding of forgiveness, reconciliation, and emotional healing. The distinctions and applications in this resource reflect my own synthesis unless otherwise noted.

- Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson, Resolving Everyday Conflict
- Peter and Geri Scazzero, Emotionally Healthy Relationships
- David A. Seamands, Healing for Damaged Emotions

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