

# When Relationships Are Wounded

## *Walking Toward Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Healing*

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*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. I had lunch with another couple whose tension was so apparent that conversation felt difficult. Parents were estranged from their son, daughter-in-law, and grandson—even though everyone involved professed faith in Christ. 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 faithfulness might look like in the next step.

These were not isolated situations. 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. People may be capable and successful in many areas of life, yet struggle deeply when their most important relationships become difficult.

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.”

As he entered a new setting, he would need to learn how to apply for himself many of the things we had tried to teach and practice in our home—how to listen, understand others, work through disagreement, speak truth with love, ask for forgiveness, and repair relationships. I believed that learning to do these things would contribute immeasurably to his success in work, marriage, family, friendship, 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). 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 what they did is real and 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 believe someone is suggesting that I am 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.

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 tell me that the other person is right. It may reveal, however, that the conflict has touched fear, pride, insecurity, a desire for control, an old wound, 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. That may be one of the greatest gifts conflict can give us: the opportunity to see something within ourselves that we might otherwise have missed.

One of the most important lessons Denise and I learned during six months of premarital discipleship was the importance of taking 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.

Across more than thirty-eight years of marriage, Denise and I have continued learning the value of examining our hearts, acknowledging our wrongs, and asking one another for forgiveness. We have not done this perfectly, but the practice has repeatedly brought us back to grace and to each other.

## **Should I Overlook This—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 tells us, "A person's wisdom yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense" (Proverbs 19:11).

Many offenses do not need to become confrontations. 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. Confrontation should not become a respectable name for releasing our anger either. The real question is not merely what we want to say. It is what love requires.

## Learning to Make Peace

One of Denise's deepest prayers was that our children would become best friends for life and would always encourage one another in the Lord.

We also knew that conflict is inevitable in every family. We wanted a way to help our children work through their disagreements honestly so that they could grow, become best friends, and draw closer to God. Denise created what became known in our family as the Peacemaking Couch.

Whenever there was a conflict, the children went to the couch. The child who had been hurt was allowed to explain what had happened without being interrupted.

“You ran through the room with the dog and knocked down the house I was building.”

The other child listened. Denise then asked questions until both children understood not only what had happened, but how their actions had affected the other person.

They learned to go beyond a hurried, “I’m sorry.”

*“I understand why you felt hurt and angry when I knocked down your house. I’ll be more careful next time. Will you please forgive me?”*

*After forgiveness was extended, the child who had caused the hurt would ask, “May I pray for you?” Then they would pray for one another and for their relationship.*

There was one final step. Together they rebuilt whatever had been damaged.

Sometimes it was a toy. Sometimes it was a block tower. Whatever had been broken, they worked together to restore it. Reconciliation became more than words. Whenever possible, it included repairing the damage.

At first, this process took time. Eventually, something beautiful happened: the children began resolving conflicts on their own. One day, one of them came to Denise and asked, “Mom, can you meet me on the Peacemaking Couch?”

She smiled and said, “Absolutely.”

What began as a way to address childhood disagreements helped them learn to listen before defending themselves, understand another person’s pain, take responsibility, ask for forgiveness, and

participate in restoration. Those are not merely lessons for children. Many of us are still learning them as adults.

James tells us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry (James 1:19–20). That kind of listening does not come naturally when we feel threatened. Yet a relationship often begins to heal when someone feels genuinely heard.

A genuine apology begins with honest ownership. I tell the person what I did without explaining it away, listen carefully to how it affected them, and ask for forgiveness. Whenever possible, I also help repair what my actions damaged. The purpose is not to relieve my discomfort as quickly as possible. It is to care for the person I have hurt.

## 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.

In Matthew 18:15–17, Jesus describes what to do when another person has sinned against us. The first step is a private conversation.

That means 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. The purpose is not to win an argument. Jesus says the hope is to win the brother or sister—to recover the relationship.

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.

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.

There is an important caution here. Jesus' instruction to begin privately does not require someone facing abuse, threats, violence, or other serious danger to confront the offender alone. Such situations call for immediate help. A trusted church leader, a qualified counselor, law enforcement, or another appropriate authority may need to become involved from the beginning. Seeking protection does not demonstrate a lack of faith or an unwillingness to forgive. It acknowledges the seriousness of what is happening and may help prevent further harm.

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. The seller assured us that the problem had been repaired.

Shortly after we moved in, the system failed, and wastewater began surfacing in the yard. We soon learned that the promised repair had never been completed. Installing a new leach field would cost approximately \$7,000.

The seller was a fellow believer from our church, which made the situation more personal. We spoke with him directly, but we could not reach an agreement. Eventually, we asked church leaders to help us work through the matter.

The reconciliation process resulted in a decision that the seller would contribute \$1,000 toward the new leach field. We appreciated the effort to help and the contribution, but the resolution still felt incomplete to us. It did not seem to reflect the full circumstances or the expense we now faced.

The elder who presided over the process made the decision he believed was appropriate at the time. Years later, after reflecting further, he told us there were aspects of the situation he wished he had handled differently. I appreciated his humility in saying that.

Although the formal process had ended, the deeper work within our hearts had not. We could not alter the decision or recover the remaining cost. What remained was the more personal question of whether we would continue carrying the disappointment or entrust it to God.

That following Christmas, we baked a loaf of holiday bread and carried it to the man who had sold us the property. We were not trying to reopen the matter or pretend that the outcome no longer mattered. Bringing the bread was simply another step in becoming free.

The loaf did not repair the septic system, and the relationship did not return to what it had once been. But God was repairing something in us.

Forgiveness did not change our understanding of what had happened. It changed what we allowed the hurt to keep doing within our hearts.

## **Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Trust, and Healing**

Forgiveness begins vertically—between us and God. We bring Him the offense, the pain, and whatever we believe is still owed to us. Then, with His help, we release the matter and the person into His hands.

This inner work does not wait for the other person to agree with our understanding of what happened. It takes place between us and God,

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 may not change our feelings overnight. It does not ask us to forget what happened or call something acceptable that was clearly wrong. It invites us to stop feeding resentment and to trust God with the judgment, justice, and outcome.

Reconciliation moves horizontally—between two people. It requires both people to participate. They must be willing to face what happened, take responsibility for what belongs to them, and begin moving toward one another again. We can keep our hearts open to reconciliation, but we cannot accomplish it alone.

Trust must then be given time to grow. A heartfelt apology may open the door, but trust returns as words and actions begin to agree over time. In situations involving continued harm, manipulation, or abuse, loving someone may require firm boundaries. Forgiveness never requires us to ignore danger or pretend that trust has already been restored.

Healing can also take time. A painful memory can return even after we have sincerely released an offense to God. That does not necessarily indicate that our forgiveness was false. God often heals us in layers, allowing His work to reach more deeply as time passes.

During that healing, Paul's counsel in Romans 12 is especially helpful: 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 found that, in most situations, the faithful response is to move in the opposite spirit of what we are experiencing—to answer hostility with kindness, accusation with humility and truth, distance with an open heart, and evil with good. This does not mean overlooking harm or abandoning wise boundaries. It means refusing to let another person's actions determine the spirit in which we respond.

The words as far as it depends on you have brought me great comfort. I am responsible for my heart, my words, my choices, and my obedience. I am certainly not able to ensure that another person responds well, but I am always 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. Yet He has not left us without a way forward. As we align ourselves with His wisdom and allow Him to work within us, some relationships can be beautifully restored. Others may require time, wise counsel, new boundaries, or a form different from what they once had.

The good news is that God can teach us to live with one another in a way that reflects His love. Over time, we can learn to listen without immediately preparing our defense. We can become more honest about our contribution to conflict and more patient with the weaknesses of others. He can give us the wisdom to release smaller offenses and the courage to address those that are causing real harm.

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.

Perhaps this is why our relationships matter so much to God. They are where His love becomes tangible—in our willingness to listen, humble ourselves, tell the truth, ask for forgiveness, repair what we can, and release into His hands what we cannot change. As we learn to live this way, unity becomes more than something we value. It becomes something others can see and experience among us.

We may never master relationships, but we can keep growing. We do what belongs to us, continue walking in love, and entrust the rest to God.

## Questions for Reflection

- What might God be showing me about my own heart through this relationship or conflict?
- What part of the situation belongs to me, and how can I take responsibility for it?
- Is this an offense I can genuinely release, or is harm occurring that love requires me to address?
- If a conversation is needed, how can I approach the person with humility, truth, and a sincere desire for restoration?
- Is there anything I need to confess, ask forgiveness for, or help repair?
- What can I release to God now, even if reconciliation or restored trust is not yet possible?

## For Further Reading

The following works have helped inform Jerry's understanding of forgiveness, reconciliation, and emotional healing. The distinctions and applications in this paper are his 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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