

Special Section: Love: The Most Excellent Way

Beyond Emotions: The Healing Power Of Love

Harmonious relations don't happen by accident among sinful people. They have to be worked at with the guidance of Scripture.

By Richard A. Fowler

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Romans 14:19) IN A RECENT counseling setting, Jennifer Bates revealed struggles and frustrations she was experiencing. Her story, sad to say, is too common in Christian circles today.

Jennifer, along with her sister Joy was brought up in a God-fearing home. Their parents were active members in the church, with daily devotions a part of their lives. Reflecting on her childhood, Jennifer indicated a family atmosphere centered around the Bible and the things of God.

Life went along well for the family. Both children married Christians and were involved in the things of the Lord, a situation many Christian parents would like to claim.

Three months ago, however, Joy broke the news to Jennifer that she had decided to end her five-year marriage. Joy had become romantically involved with her employer, and over a period of time concluded he could “meet” her needs better than her husband could. Ignoring Jennifer’s counsel to reverse her decision, she filed for and received a divorce. As she made plans to marry her new lover, she asked Jennifer to be maid of honor for her.

Jennifer recalled, “When Joy asked me that question all I could think about was what I had been taught—the biblical value system that denounces divorce and all that she had been involved in. I couldn’t, with a clear conscience, be a part of her sin. My heart ached, but I could not have her or the world think I was condoning her action. So after tears and prayer, I told her I would not be a part of the wedding—I could not even attend it.”

Joy reacted in anger. “If you really *loved* me,” she said, “you would be a part of my wedding.” The anguish and frustration for Jennifer became magnified even more when their mother took sides with Joy, telling Jennifer in no uncertain terms that by not attending the wedding, *she* was causing disunity in the family.

In the following months Jennifer struggled with many questions. “Was what I was taught as a child merely an ideal? Should I just accept this as part of today’s life style? Am I to negate biblical absolutes when it affects my family? How can I forgive my family for compromising? Why does it seem that the tables have turned, and now I am considered the trouble maker of the family?” And finally, “Now that she has remarried, am I supposed to forget what happened and seek a reconciliation to our relationship? If so, how? And on what grounds?”

WHAT IS LOVE?

These were tough questions with no easy answers. The whole issue of how the Christian

ought to respond to a brother or sister in sin, the prerequisites for reconciliation, and the power of love in the restoration process all need to be seen objectively. We should not fall into the trap of viewing the issue from the human perspective—which focuses on rationalization and emotion. This is like looking through a knot hole in the fence—it narrows our perspective and prevents our seeing many of the implications of our decisions. Rather, we should attempt viewing the process of forgiveness from the heavenly perspective—so that we see the whole valley from the mountain top of Scripture.

The power of love is an essential ingredient in healing a relationship. Love, however, must not be interpreted in terms of the humanistic definition which legitimizes behavior if it brings pleasure. Too often we get the idea that love is some warm, mushy feeling toward someone. But feelings fluctuate too much to be classified as real love. So what is love? The New Testament gives us the answer.

“And this is love:” John wrote; “that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love” (2 John 6). Again John said, “But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:5; 1 John 2:6). Similarly, Paul wrote, “Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Cor. 13:6; 1 Cor. 13:7).

Love, then, is that which desires the ultimate best for another within the confines of God’s Word.

When Joy said, “Jennifer, if you really loved me you would be a part of my wedding,” we must first consider her definition of love. In our Western culture, love is primarily an emotional response, a feeling. The Eastern view of love, however, comes closer to the biblical definition. This view involves more of a commitment to another and an honoring of vows.

A friend of mine from India recently returned there to marry his bride, whom he had never seen. When I asked if he were a bit apprehensive about the situation, his reply was, “I have committed myself to her. Love (or the emotion) will follow.” In the same way, the love involved in the reconciliation process encompasses more than a feeling. It is sometimes a lengthy process with no shortcuts. This process involves three dimensions that must be viewed together in order for genuine reunion to take place. An overemphasis on any one of these dimensions to the exclusion of the others will result in distortion and more problems.

LOVING BY REPROOF

Reproof is an action taken in response to sin for the purpose of bringing someone to repentance.

No one likes to be reproved. It is not in our human nature to accept criticism and correction in a positive spirit. Neither are most of us very comfortable *giving* reproof. Yet Scripture abounds with examples of reproof and admonitions both to accept and to administer reproof when necessary.

The Old Testament confrontation between the prophet Nathan and King David is an example of godly reproof (2 Samuel 12). Nathan showed David—in parable form—the wrongness of his relationship with Bathsheba. He helped David take an objective principle of righteousness and apply it to his own life. This should be the goal of anyone who sees the need for godly reproof. Not that we must go around speaking in parables, but we do need to be careful to attack the problem and not the person.

In the New Testament we read of a confrontation between Paul and Peter (Galatians 2). Paul undoubtedly respected Peter’s role as a church leader and loved him as a brother in Christ.

Instead of his respect and love holding him back from confronting Peter, they emboldened him to “speak the truth in love.” And God honored his words and used them to open Peter’s eyes to important spiritual truth.

Sometimes reproof must come in a more corporate form when an incident involves or reflects upon Christ’s Body as a whole. A missionary pilot told me of a tribal incident that occurred several years ago. At one point, a believer in the tribe began to slip back into his old ways. In keeping with the biblical command of confrontation, the elders of the church admonished him to change and come back to God. This he did not do. The elders then went to step two admonishing him in front of the congregation. Change still did not come. The missionary pilot observed that the elders then turned to a similar situation Paul had faced in Corinth, where he said:

. . . hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? . . . But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. . . . God will judge those outside. “Expel the wicked man from among you.” (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Cor. 5:6; 1 Cor. 5:11; 1 Cor. 5:13)

Taking this passage literally, the tribal church refused to associate with this man. Because of true, committed love, action had to be taken, in hope of encouraging the brother’s repentance. The impact of this isolation had its desired effect, and not too long afterward, the man came to a genuine repentance.

Love demonstrated through this kind of action is not a “get even” or “punishment” philosophy, like that practiced by many legalists. It can be defined better as “discipline” or “reproof” that stems from a sincere desire to get a loved one back on course.

David pointed this out by saying, “I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me. May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant” (Psalm 119:75; Psalm 119:76). The remarkable idea in these two verses is that as God in faithfulness afflicts us, He also comforts us with loving kindness. These concepts seem to be almost fused together in the mind of the Psalmist. And rightly so. Truly love is as much reproof when it is needed as responding to someone with comforting loving kindness when it is needed. This is how God’s love is demonstrated to us. This is how we demonstrate God’s love to others—faithful reproof and comforting loving kindness.

As with any deep truth in God’s Word, these concepts of discipline and loving kindness go hand in hand throughout the Old and New Testaments. For example, in Psalm 23, David says of his Shepherd, “. . . your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). The Hebrew for “rod” is the same word Solomon used when he wrote, “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him” (Proverbs 13:24). Each reference incorporates the same four dimensions that can also define *agape* love. The shepherd’s rod was used to guide, to protect, to rescue, and to correct. The shepherd, the parent, and other believers in the Body of Christ are all responsible to display *agape* in this way (see Proverbs 27:6; Proverbs 6:23; Hebrews 12:5–11).

RECONCILIATION IN LOVE

The word “reconciliation” in Scripture carries various shades of meaning. The Apostle Paul

stated that due to Christ's work on the Cross we have been reconciled with God (by pardon for our sins through Christ's satisfaction of the demands of God's justice, paying our debt to God) and thus brought back into relationship with God (Ephes. 2:16). The word also implies the forgiveness that takes place when repentance occurs.

The key to reconciliation is our attitude. Three facts to keep in mind as we work toward reconciliation are: 1) Humility is essential in forgiving; 2) Forgiveness is necessary even without reconciliation; and 3) There may be times when we are forced to agree to disagree.

Loving Humility Brings Forgiveness

To have a forgiving spirit we must pardon with humility. Phil. 2 is a chapter worth meditating on. It shows how much humility is intertwined with love. We cannot truly love others and at the same time carry a proud spirit.

As I sit in my office counseling people who have fallen into deep sin, I must have an attitude of forgiveness that keeps the picture in focus. I realize that, except for the grace of God, I could be in their shoes. Thus the forgiving spirit does not excuse sin, but rather it allows us to view others from the perspective of eternity. As the Apostle Paul, once a murderer and persecutor of Christians, wrote:

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:13; Phil. 3:14)

Paul was also deeply aware that the right attitude is the number one ingredient in the reunion process:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephes. 4:31; Ephes. 4:32)

In contrast, an unforgiving spirit and bitterness go hand in hand with pride.

Just as we have humbly accepted God's gift of forgiveness in Christ, now we must humbly reach out to those who need our forgiveness. No two people had more to hold against others than did Joseph and David. In spite of his brothers' having despised him, plotted against him, and sold him into slavery in a far country, Joseph was able to forgive them lovingly. He not only met their needs, but showered as much good on them as they had showered ill on him.

David also met with ill will from King Saul, yet willingly forgave him and continuously sought reconciliation. When he could easily have killed Saul, he declared, ". . . my hand will not touch you" (1 Samuel 24:13), and begged Saul to be reconciled with him.

Both David's and Joseph's attitudes and actions displayed the essence of true love. Each could have retaliated at an opportune time. Yet when that time came, each reached out to his antagonist in loving humility. Each went the extra mile to respond as God wanted them to. The only alternative is to face life with a bitter and angry heart and to end up hurting ourselves far more than anyone else.

Forgiveness with Reconciliation

Sometimes, however, for our own physical and spiritual well-being, and for the well-being of the Body of Christ, we must forgive and begin working at a healing reconciliation even when repentance is not totally evident. This work toward reconciliation involves three important parts:

First, we determine with God's help to respond to that person with a positive attitude of love. Second, we determine with God's help to live in the present as we interact with this

person. Give the individual the benefit of the doubt and purpose not to perceive current behavior in the light of past experiences. And third, determine to pray continuously for that individual. This is by far the most important ingredient. When we carry someone to the Throne of Grace, genuinely asking God's daily blessing and help for him, it becomes very difficult to carry on a bitter and unforgiving spirit toward him.

Such was the case for Jennifer after Joy remarried. She began to realize that for her own good and that of her family, she needed to forgive Joy. Even though Joy was not outwardly repentant, Jennifer came to the conclusion that God is the One to repay sin and not we as human beings. The attitude taken by Stephen in his request that God forgive those who stoned him (Acts 7) is a case in point.

Agreeing to Disagree

Because of the imperfect world we live in, once in a while the best way to reconcile a problem between two people may be simply to part ways as agreeably as possible. (The only time this is definitely not an option is in marriage, which carries specific scriptural directives of its own.)

Two examples of this type of solution for a relationship in trouble are found in the account of Lot and Abraham in the Old Testament (Genesis 13; Genesis 14), and the account of Paul and Barnabas in the New Testament (Acts 15). In both instances, those involved found it necessary to part company. Yet in each case we see a continued attitude of support demonstrated by both parties.

A modern situation comes to mind here. We are friends with a couple who moved from the West Coast about four years ago. Upon arriving in our city, they carefully sought a church for their family and became actively involved. Unfortunately, the more involved in the inner workings of the church they became, the more they saw problem after problem emerging. Instead of pulling out, they determined that they would do all they could to help the church and especially the pastor, whose personality was the cause of much of the trouble. With much prayer they continued their involvement, speaking the truth in love, and seeking to edify their brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet the more they spoke the truth—however tactfully—the more trouble arose. At last, after much prayer, they went individually to the pastor and others they were close to, explaining with love and concern the reasons they felt they should leave. In this way they kept the gossip and hard feelings to a minimum and, even though they now attend another church, they have been able to maintain friendships and good will with many members of their former church because of their wise and loving behavior.

RESTORATION THROUGH LOVE

There is a misconception in many Christian circles that restoration automatically erases the past when it involves our service in Christ's Body and in other relationships. This is far from the reality stated in Scripture, which teaches that we "reap what we sow." Our actions may produce a handicap when it comes to service, even though forgiveness has been offered and accepted. Therefore, along with restoration, there may come a redefining of roles within the Body of Christ.

In my counseling, I have used the following example to illustrate this point. Suppose Ed, a college football student, is involved in a careless prank on teammate John. Unfortunately, Ed gets seriously injured in the process and his left arm must be amputated. Ed will never again be able to participate on the gridiron. John—the other end of the destructive prank—can forgive Ed, and may even be able to edify, build, and encourage him—but he can never bring the arm back! And so it is in spiritual terms.

Joy had to learn to operate with a handicap that grew out of her sin. Her child from her first marriage developed severe self-image problems. Because her new husband was not interested in spiritual things, she could no longer be involved in the choir and other church activities. The wear-and-tear of the past is causing a high degree of stress in her life as she attempts to cope with the reality of her behavior. Jennifer, on the other hand, like the recipient of the college prank, not only had to demonstrate an attitude of forgiveness toward her sister, but also needed to be part of her rebuilding process.

As Jennifer discovered, her commitment to this process in Joy's life included keeping in close touch with Joy, sharing a good book or article, and being willing to listen without being critical. It also meant seeking to edify Joy in any way she could and at the same time guarding against a display of spiritual superiority.

Was this not the intent of the Apostle Paul? He wrote:

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1; Galatians 6:2)

A Vietnam veteran told me a story that further illustrates this point. He recalled a time when his platoon was involved in extensive training that included five and ten mile walks in full gear. His platoon always received a poor rating because of one soldier who could not keep up with the rest. What happened, though, was quite interesting. As the platoon was on a daily training mission, the men following the weak soldier began taking weighted objects out of his backpack without his knowing it. And by lightening the load, the straggler was able to keep up with the others. In a spiritual sense, then, the restoration process is a time when strong Christians can assist a brother or sister by lightening the load—action that includes encouragement, forgiveness, concern, and discipleship. Thus restoration becomes synonymous with responsibility.

In an article dealing with this issue of forgiveness (*Christianity Today*, Jan. 7, 1983), Lewis Smedes wisely concluded, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. Reconciliation is the personal reunion of people who were alienated but belong together. We must begin where we are, not at an ideal place for reunion."

In sum, true healing grows out of true love—love that is committed to God's best for an offending brother or sister. And it also grows out of speaking—even if that means the necessity of godly reproof. ". . . speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Ephes. 4:15).

Here are a few practical steps you can take when called upon to speak the truth in love in a difficult situation:

1. Ask God for wisdom—not only for guidance in what you should say, but also for wisdom as to the proper timing of the reproof. Many times we confuse our preferences with biblical absolutes—God's wisdom will help us discern the difference.
2. Be careful not to come across with a "holier-than-thou" attitude. This will defeat even the best intentions.
3. Stay in the "rational" rather than the "emotional" during any confrontation.
4. Remember that true healing grows out of true forgiving, and determine to truly forgive the other person.

Suggested Reading: Jerry and Mary White, *Friends & Friendship—The Secrets of Drawing Closer* (NavPress, 1983).

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