

## APOLOGY – saying “I’m sorry!” just isn’t enough

When I was quite young, waaaaay back in the 1970s, a popular movie called ‘Love Story’, included the famous line, **“Love means never having to say you’re sorry”**, and as a child I really liked all the cute cartoons, greeting cards and posters that flowed from this sentiment.

But while it sounds nice, this saying misses the mark. We don’t live in a perfect world, we all make mistakes and real love does include apology to restore and build our relationships.

Robert Fulghum in his best-selling book, ‘All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten’, simply suggests to us, **“Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody”**.

If you love someone, and you hurt them, it’s the right thing to do to say, “I’m sorry!”.

Easy, right?

In my family, we were taught as young children to say sorry, but I know we often didn’t sound very sincere, or sometimes understand why we were saying the words “I’m sorry”.

Even as I got older, I sometimes felt confused and frustrated that my apology wasn’t well received, or on the other hand, I felt even more hurt and angry AFTER I’d received what was offered as an apology from someone else.

So, why isn’t it enough sometimes to just say “I’m sorry!” **What’s missing?** Let’s see what the Bible has to say ....

Hmm, the word ‘apology’ does not appear in the Bible at all ... however apology is a key part of repentance and forgiveness, concepts which are throughout the Bible and familiar to us as Christians.

The Lord’s Prayer (especially in verses 14 & 15 of Matthew chapter 6) is a commonly cited link between our forgiveness from God, and our willingness to forgive other people. Verse 12 is admitting our failures and seeking forgiveness, capturing the essence of apology.

<sup>9</sup>“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup>Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

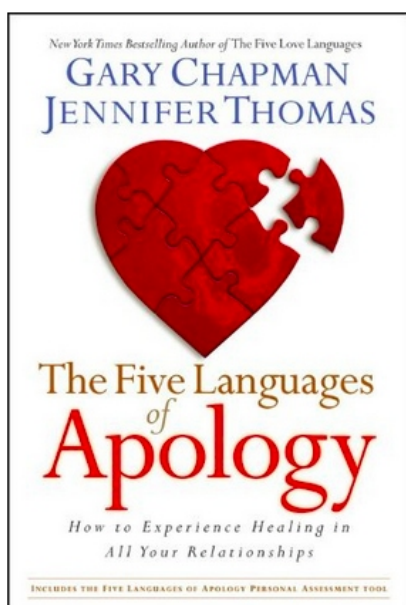
<sup>11</sup>Give us this day our daily bread,

<sup>12</sup>**and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

<sup>13</sup>And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

<sup>14</sup>**For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,**

<sup>15</sup>**but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.**



Apology is integral within the repentance/forgiveness process. But how do we apologise? A few years back I discovered this book, “The Five Languages of Apology” which was written by well-known Christian author Gary Chapman and psychologist & counsellor Jennifer Thomas.

I’ve found it incredibly helpful in identifying the Five **languages** (or key components) to an apology plus it contains lots of helpful examples of what works and what doesn’t, and why.

### 1. Language number 1 from this book is Expressing regret – this is saying “I am sorry”!

As small children, most of us learned to say “I’m sorry” to our siblings, although we often didn’t express this with much sincerity back then.

Yet what people are primarily looking for when we say “I’m sorry” is sincerity.

Sincerity is expressed through

- Our words, which can convey that we are regretful, feel guilt, shame and pain. Being specific about what we have done that we are sorry for is helpful.
- Our body language – tone of voice, posture etc.

Obviously yelling “I’ve already said I’m sorry” doesn’t convey sincerity at all.

Here’s a helpful hint from the book:

Sincerity avoids the “but ...”

Saying “I’m sorry, but ...” and continuing with excuses or reasons for our bad behaviour negates our apology by shifting the blame to the other person.

When we verbally shift the blame, we move from an apology to an attack.

We can correct our actions after we’ve done the wrong thing, but it’s relationship building to promptly express our regret by firstly saying “I’m sorry”, sincerely.

### 2. Apology language number 2 is accepting responsibility – saying “I was wrong”

Sometimes we grow up thinking that to admit we’ve done something wrong makes us a “bad” person so it’s easy to develop the habit of making excuses, not just for doing the wrong thing but for not apologising either. How often do we hear children say “It’s not my fault” or even blame an inanimate object for their mistake? As adults we need to be beyond this behaviour. We need to be humble enough to accept that we really did make a mistake, admit it and own it.

Sometimes there are valid reasons for the feelings that are behind our wrong behaviour. It can be helpful to use the “agree/disagree” approach, for example, “I agree that I have valid reasons for feeling hurt, angry, frustrated etc” “but I disagree that I have the right to hurt someone else by my words or behaviour because of how I’m feeling”.

We don’t choose our feelings, but we can choose our behaviour, and this is described perfectly in Ephesians 4:26 which advises us to “Be angry, but do not sin!”.

Another helpful hint is to avoid the word “if ...” because this can deny or invalidate the other person’s feelings. If I say “I’m sorry IF I upset you ...” I’m probably ignoring the fact that you’ve already made it clear that you ARE upset.

Learning to say ‘I was wrong’ or rather ‘I did something wrong’ is the key to this step.

With God’s help, we’re all capable of change, and part of that is choosing new ways to respond.

### 3. Language number 3 is Making restitution – the “What can I do to make it right?” aspect:

“Making things right” is embedded in our human psyche and within our judicial system, which requires criminals to not only serve jail time, pay fines, but also meet reparative damages. These damages are sometimes made directly to the victim of a crime in an effort to make up for the wrong done to them, or other times to programs to assist victims of similar crimes. It is part of what we know as justice.

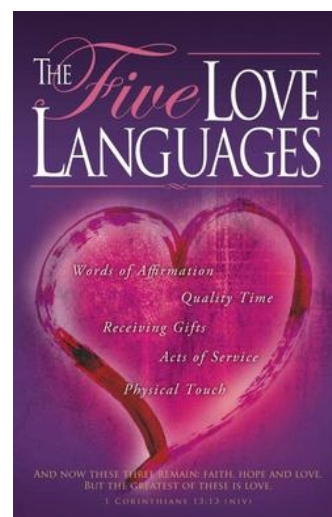
Similarly, in personal relationships, restitution needs to be relevant to the one who was wronged. When we are wronged in any personal relationship, our need for restitution is often based on the question “Do you still love me?”

So, it’s important for the person who has done the wrong thing to find what is meaningful when planning restitution. Of course, there’s no ‘one size fits all’ for this.

Gary Chapman’s other book “The Five Love Languages” is helpful here!

We can use:

- Words – and these need to be words that affirm to other person that you love them, including words express specifically what you love about them
- Gifts – flowers may be an option, or replacing or an item if you’ve broken or damaged it (even accidentally)
- Actions – doing thoughtful, kind acts that help the other person
- Time – spending quality time together, with your undivided attention, can be reassuring
- Physical touch – receiving warmly a hug from the other person, when they are ready to forgive and make up (it’s important to let them initiate this).



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If you’re not sure what will bring restitution in your situation, the authors suggest that you can ask what would be meaningful or helpful **and** listen carefully to their answer.

#### 4. Language 4 is showing genuine repentance – which is generally expressed as “I’ll try not to do that again”

The word ‘repentance’ means ‘to turn around’ or ‘to change one’s mind’ and this brings to mind a person driving along and then doing a 180 degree turn to go in the opposite direction. Repentance is taking responsibility and saying, “I want to change and do things differently in future” and this is a Bible principle we’re all familiar with.

Of course, making change is hard and we may have setbacks or failures along the way, so we will need to start our apology over again – say sorry, show regret, make restitution, repent and ... repeat.

A hint from the book is ... to invite the person who we’ve offended to help us come up with a plan for change. This is often the best way to a more effective and successful change as we plan and deal with the issue together and are accountable to each other.

#### 5. Language 5 is Requesting forgiveness – “Will you please forgive me?”

This is something many of us forget to do. We’ve said sorry, and just assumed that the other person will forgive us, but actually asking them is very important, especially if they are feeling very hurt.

Requesting forgiveness is a clear indication that you want to restore your relationship with the other person, and don’t want to just sweep what happened under the carpet. It acknowledges that what I did or said wrong has created a barrier between us, and I not only take responsibility but also want your help in removing that barrier. It’s important to ask this question as a request; forgiveness cannot be demanded.

This aspect of apology is the hardest sometimes, because we may fear the answer to our question. What if the other person says no, or I'm not ready yet? We may feel uncomfortable about not having any control in this situation and fear their rejection or judgement. Those are real and valid fears, however without asking the other person "will you please forgive me?" a barrier may remain between us.

Quite often, it's what we do AFTER we've done the wrong thing that can make or break our relationships, both our human relationships, and our relationship with God.

Sometimes just saying "I'm sorry" isn't enough, but I hope this review and the FIVE 'languages' of apology may help you to grow in your ability to apologise!

I'm still learning about apology ... and practicing ... too!

Judy Palmer

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