

6 Keys for Apologizing

Being perfect would be nice. We'd never do anything wrong. We'd never make mistakes. We'd never hurt anybody. But, we aren't perfect. So when you've made the mistake and hurt somebody, what needs to happen next? You need to apologize. You need to make amends.

Do you remember what Jesus said in **Matthew 5:23-24**? "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (ESV).

We often say this is about reconciling with a brother or sister before worshipping God. However, I think that misses the real point. Why would an Israelite offer a sacrifice? In order to receive forgiveness. The sacrifice was an attempt to be reconciled with God. Jesus explains that before we try to reconcile with God, we need to reconcile with the one we sinned against. We cannot sin against people all day long and then think a nightly prayer of confession will wipe our slate clean.

Sadly, many of us are adept at saying the words "I'm sorry," but terrible at making real apologies. Have you said something like the following or been told something like the following, "I'm sorry I did _____ to you. It's just that when you did _____, I couldn't help myself. You need to really think about _____." Sure, the words "I'm sorry" are in there. But this is no apology. There is no sorrow in this, no remorse, no penitence. This is excuse-making, rationalizing, and justifying.

How then do we really apologize? Here are 6 keys that will help you apologize, really apologize when you've wronged somebody, setting you free to also be reconciled with God.

Key #1: Own Your Side of the Street

I have no doubt that the other person in the relationship did something wrong. We all do. But unless you want to revert back to acting like a 6-year-old telling the recess monitor "he hit me first," you have to own your own side of the street. That is, you have to take responsibility for your actions. God teaches us to treat others the way we want to be treated, not the way they treated us (**Matthew 7:12**). He also teaches us to turn the other cheek when wronged (**Matthew 5:39**). When we are wronged, we are not given the right to wrong in return. No matter what someone else has done, we must take responsibility for our actions.

An apology that places the blame on someone else is not an apology at all. Offer your apology without reference to the other person's actions. They are not to blame for your wrong-doing. Only you are.

Key #2: State the sin/wrong/hurt

Don't sugarcoat your actions. I often want to gloss over what I've done by apologizing in vague generalities. Sometimes I even leave the door open that maybe I didn't do anything wrong. "I'm sorry *if* I hurt you." That almost leaves the taste that I didn't do anything wrong, it's your fault for being hurt.

Don't gloss over what you did. Think it through. State it plainly. "I'm so sorry. I did _____ and it was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. I hurt you and that was wrong." This validates the other's hurt and anger. Further, it demonstrates real remorse. You have thought about what you did. You have examined your own actions. You know what you did wrong and are willing to state it.

Key #3: State that it was a sin

This takes Key #2 to the next level. Certainly, sometimes we have hurt people but we didn't sin. I'm not suggesting every mistake we make or every hurt we give is sinful. If not, don't add this in just to make people feel better. But if you did sin, and often you will have, make sure you say so. If I'm not willing to call a spade a spade and a sin a sin, I'm not really reconciling. I'm not really making an amends.

Key #4: Don't demand an apology from the other

No doubt, in many cases sins and hurts are reciprocal. That is, someone sinned against me so I sinned against them or vice versa. Obviously, if someone has sinned against you, you have the right to let them know and seek their apology and reconciliation. However, in the midst of your apology is not the time. Demanding their apology in the midst of yours is not making amends for your wrongdoing. Rather, it is manipulation to get something out of the other person. Further, you should be willing to make your amends before the other person. Holding out for them to apologize first denies the very thrust of **Matthew 5:23-24**.

Key #5: Ask for forgiveness

When we've wronged others, we do need to apologize, but we need to take it a step further. Reconciliation is a two-way street. We've recognized our wrongdoing, now we need to give the other person the opportunity to reconcile. We need to ask for forgiveness. Put the ball into their court.

As much as it depends on you, you are to be at peace with all people (**Romans 12:18**). That means recognizing your wrongdoing and seeking the amends. But it doesn't all depend on you. Don't just apologize and move on. Seek the forgiveness that you need to keep the relationship whole and healthy.

Key #6: Don't act like forgiveness is owed

I know this is tough for us Christians. When we've asked for forgiveness, we like to throw around **Luke 17:3-4**. "Jesus said you had to forgive me." Yes, Jesus did tell His followers to forgive when forgiveness was sought. But as the person seeking the mercy, that is not your business. That is between them and Jesus, not between them and you.

When you are asking for forgiveness, you are asking for mercy. You are asking for something that is not deserved and is not owed. If it were owed you, it would not be mercy. Since they don't owe you, you can't demand it. Too often, we are like little children being taught to say, "Please." Each of my kids went through a phase where they thought that simply saying the word please meant they were supposed to get what they asked for. It just doesn't work that way.

If we ask for forgiveness from one of God's children and they are unwilling to offer it to us, far from throwing a Bible verse in their face, accusing them of sin, and demanding they forgive us, we should rather offer another apology. In addition to the sin we committed, we have also cast a stumbling block in their way, sinning in such a way that they are struggling to forgive us.

Wrapping Up

We are all going to make mistakes. We will all sin. We will all sin against other people. What really demonstrates that we are God's children is not so much whether or not we make these mistakes, but what we do with them when we realize it. Before seeking reconciliation with God, make sure you are seeking reconciliation with others. Make amends. Make apologies. Make real apologies.

--Edwin L. Crozier