

A Proper Apology

“I’m sorry, OK? I said I’m sorry.”

“Look, I said I’m sorry. Can we just drop it now?”

“All right, fine. I’m sorry. Do you feel better now?”

The answer to all of these so called “apologies” is an emphatic, “NO.” No issue is resolved just because you said you were sorry. It’s not OK, and they really don’t feel better.

We often have this idea that two simple words have the power to absolve all offenses and heal all wounds? Where did we get the idea that we were allowed to let our tongues flap, make selfish decisions, and then simply dismiss the whole ordeal with two little words? We may have been taught to believe that these words would be enough, but make no mistake—there is no magic in them. More often than not, these words do not absolve, they do not heal, and they do not lead to reconciliation and restored relationships.

Following are some steps or aspects of a proper and hopefully effective apology. Our goal in making an apology should be to grow in our love for our Lord and our dependence to rely on Him, and also grow in our love for others. Our desire may be to reconcile with the person we’ve offended, to avert their wrath, to move on or any number of other things. But ultimately we need to focus on righteously pleasing our God and lovingly serving the other person.

Consider these steps as you approach your next apology:

1. Express regret

- a. To simply say “I’m sorry” is usually insufficient. It’s too vague and may be interpreted as “I’m sorry you were offended” or “I’m sorry I was caught.” We need to sincerely verbalize our regret for our offense by expressing whatever guilt or shame is appropriate.

2. Explain what you feel you did wrong

- a. This is more than the specific act or words. This must include the possible impact your offense may have had on the person and the consequences that they have probably experienced because of it. For example, we shouldn’t simply apologize for gossiping about a person, but also express how that not only hurt them, but broke trust, infected others with the bad report and potentially tarnished their reputation.

3. Acknowledge your responsibility

- a. Be careful to only address the things you were responsible for and not any possible influences that nudged you in that direction. Even if the other person did something to offend you first, and you were simply reacting to that, this isn't the time to bring that up. Stick to what you did to fail them. If they also bring up their offence at that time, fine, but if not, leave it for another day.

4. Declare repentance

- a. Promise to try to never repeat the offending act and describe what you would do differently if a similar situation ever comes up again. This could range from letting it go to pulling them aside some time to talk with them about it.

5. Offer to remedy the situation

- a. Consider whatever might help remedy the rift that you have created. Avoid being too certain or expect an instant positive reception for your suggestions. The offended person may not be willing at that moment to consider your thoughts. Gently offer your suggestions, and then leave them with the person.

6. Request their forgiveness

- a. Rather than simply say "I'm sorry," you should verbalize your desire to be forgiven. To ask without any expectation or demand, you should say something like, "I know I don't deserve it, and you may not be ready yet, but when you are, I'm asking would you forgive me."

Even after carefully following all of these suggestions, and though we may be granted forgiveness, we must be careful not to confuse that forgiveness with restored trust. Forgiveness is a decision that we make, trust must be rebuilt. It might not take very long in some cases, and in other cases trust is very slowly or incompletely restored. To forgive is to release the other from any resentment or desire for retaliation. To rebuild trust is sometimes like starting the relationship over again. We need to work at rebuilding the broken trust, but not demand or expect a resolution at any certain time.