

How to Restore a Wounded Relationship

I. RECOGNIZING WHEN THE SPIRIT OF A RELATIONSHIP IS WOUNDED

- A. A relationship is like a garden that must be cultivated by *watering it* (adding components that nurture it) and *weeding it* (addressing the factors that hinder it). We must do our part, and then God will do His part in blessing and healing our relationships.
- B. A relationship can be wounded at various levels, from being slightly injured to deeply broken. The *spirit of a relationship* can be injured without the people themselves being deeply wounded. In other words, the trust and open communication can be injured between two good people who are not emotionally devastated or dysfunctional.
- C. Be alert for the signs of a wounded relationship—they include having a ***closed spirit*** (no longer receptive), ***being guarded*** (unwilling to share freely), ***strained communication*** (defensive, argumentative, sarcastic) and ***resisting touch*** (a spouse or child with a wounded spirit often resists being touched or hugged). We should be alerted if we see these signs.
- D. A relationship is wounded long before it is broken, and a broken relationship requires much more skill and attention to heal. If we address the relational weakness, or “infection,” at the early stages, we can avoid allowing “gangrene” to set into the relationship. It is better to be proactive in the maintenance of our relationships, because an *ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*.

II. THE POWER OF OUR SPEECH IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS

- A. The most common way to wound the spirit of a relationship is through perverse, or corrupt, speech; this includes speech that is crooked (perverse), instead of being straight.
⁴A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit. (Prov. 15:4)
- B. Corrupt speech injures relationships, rather than imparting grace to the one being corrected. Such words grieve the Spirit, as well as grieving both the speaker and the recipient of the words.
²⁹Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 4:29-30)
- C. Perverse, or corrupt, speech includes ***unfair criticism*** (accusatory), ***sarcasm*** (insulting), “***sitcom humor***” (jokes about faults), ***anger*** (with rejection), ***being condescending*** (self-exalting), etc.
²¹Death and life are in the power of the tongue... (Prov. 18:21)
- D. We are to be careful with our words and diligent to repair any damage that we cause with our words, knowing that it is more difficult to win a brother once he is offended (Prov. 18:19). The “offended brother” often includes those with whom we are in a familiar relationship, such as a spouse, child, sibling, extended family member, good friend, or a co-worker, etc. It requires wisdom, effort, and patience to get inside a fortified city and “win” our brother.
¹⁹A brother offended is harder to win than a strong [fortified] city... (Prov. 18:19)

- E. **Complaining**: We are warned not to allow our complaining to injure a relationship. Continual complaining makes others want to discontinue or draw back from the relationship, and can cause children to leave home prematurely (Prov. 14:1; 17:1; 19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24). This principle applies to all people in many different types of relationships, not just women in their homes.

⁹*Better to dwell in a corner...than in a house shared with a contentious woman [spouse, parent, etc.]...¹⁹*Better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman. (Prov. 21:9, 19)**

¹*Better is a dry morsel with quietness, than a house full of feasting with strife. (Prov. 17:1)*

¹³*The contentions of a wife [or spouse, parent, friend] are a continual dripping. (Prov. 19:13)*

III. BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES IN RESTORING AN INJURED RELATIONSHIP

- A. **Make a godly appeal**: What do we do when a relationship is wounded? We make a godly appeal. Since the wound occurred over a period of time, the healing of the relationship will often take time too, involving a process of godly appeals and more. We must not be naïve in thinking that a wounded relationship will heal by itself over time. If we do not take action to heal the relationship, it will grow worse over time as we get more familiar with each other.

- B. We are to do all that we can to restore relationships, as far as it depends on us (Rom. 12:18).

¹⁸*If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. (Rom. 12:18)*

- C. Jesus taught us to go to our brother to make an appeal, both when they have *something against us* (Mt. 5:24) and when we have *something against them* (Mt. 18:15-16).

1. **Someone has something against you**: We are not to present our gifts to God in worship without attempting to heal broken relationships (Mt. 5:23-24). Our union with Jesus in worship is deeply connected to the way that we honor others in the Body of Christ.

²³*“If you bring your gift to the altar, and remember that your brother has something against you...²⁴First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Mt. 5:23-24)*

2. **You have something against another**: When someone mistreats or sins against us, Jesus commanded us to go to them privately to share our concern honestly with them.

¹⁵*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone...¹⁶*If he will not hear, take with you one or two more...²⁰*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” (Mt. 18:15-20)***

- a. **Go and tell him**: When we meet face to face with a brother, the Lord intervenes in surprising ways, and we often experience the early stirrings of the bonds of love. We are often changed by the process, gaining new insight about them and ourselves.
- b. **Alone**: Do not share your concern about your brother with others. We often feel more affection and mercy for him when we talk *to* him (rather than *about* him to another).

- D. We are to make our appeal in the right *tone, timing, spirit,* and *ratio* of affirmation to correction.
- E. **Tone:** The tone of our communication is a most important issue in restoring a relationship. We are to make our appeals in a spirit of gentleness, aware of our own failure and deficiency.
- ¹If a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. (Gal. 6:1)**
1. A *soft response* diffuses anger in the one to whom we speak; a harsh tone will stir it up.
¹A soft answer turns away wrath [anger], but a harsh word [tone] stirs up anger. (Prov. 15:1)
 2. A *negative tone* includes anger, defensiveness, lack of patience (rushing people to answer), or a tone of lecturing (instructing them without listening), etc.
 3. *Expressing our appeal with anger*—sarcasm, sighs, huffing, slamming doors, etc.—hinders the ability of others to hear our concern. The tone of the communication involves our body language and facial expressions, including making eye contact.
- F. **A right spirit:** When solving a relational tension, it is important to wait until both parties are in a place of peace, or have a happy spirit, instead of being angry, agitated, annoyed, or pressured.
- G. **Ratio:** A healthy family relationship requires about ten positive statements to one negative one. We cannot drive a “ten-ton truck” of correction over a relational bridge that can only bear five tons. We must not speak more about someone’s failure than their virtues and desire to do right. We are to be grateful for the good they do and seek to do, not just critical of their faults.
- H. **Ask the Lord:** We ask for insight about how our own lack of sensitivity and deficiency in love contributed to the wounded relationship, instead of only asking God to change the other person.
- I. **Ask the person:** Ask them for information about what they were thinking, feeling, doing, or wanting in the situation, instead of starting with statements of complaint or correction. For example, ask them, “*What were you thinking or feeling when you told me...?*” Try to hear their pain. Ask them for help, “*Help me understand what you felt when I said...*”
- J. **Tell them what you feel:** It is good to share how you *feel* about what they did or said, instead of just making statements about their faults. For example, say something like, “*I felt rejected (or pained or disappointed) when you said....or did...*”
- K. **Active listening:** Listen to discern their *unspoken* words, pains, disappointments, and fears. Then speak back to them what *you heard* them say. For example, “*It sounds like you are saying...*” This gives them the opportunity to clarify what you heard. We honor people by patiently listening to their point of view in the conflict, even if their view is not 100% accurate.
- ¹⁹But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. (Jas. 1:19)**

- L. **Be non-defensive**: A defensive manner hinders communication and the restoration process. See people who criticize us as a “free research team,” giving us insight into our blind spots.
- M. **Confess our faults**: Our confession is our “love offering.” Do not say, “I’m sorry *if* I offended you.” Rather say, “I repent, *because* I sinned against you” (by coming up short in love, etc.).
¹⁶Confess your trespasses to one another...that you may be healed. (Jas. 5:16)
- N. It is God’s wisdom to have an understanding heart with a peaceable and gentle spirit and to be eager to hear and to be helpful in restoring the relationship.
¹³Who is wise and understanding among you?...¹⁷The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy...and without hypocrisy. (Jas. 3:13, 17)
1. **Willing to yield**: We are to be willing to yield to their appeal to do things “their way,” even if it is not the absolute best way.
 2. **Full of mercy**: Be merciful with their failure in the relationship. To be “full” of mercy includes not requiring that their perspective of the conflict be 100% accurate.
- O. **The whole truth**: Some people say, “I just want the truth to come out.” They must remember that the “whole truth” about someone includes their *virtues*, not just their *failures*. Remember that God doesn’t tell any of us the whole truth about all our shortcomings, as it would overwhelm us.

IV. PRACTICAL ADVICE

- A. **Winning**: We must remember that the one *who loves most* is the one who *wins* in God’s court.
- B. **Set boundaries**: Come to new agreements about the “trade-offs” in the relationship, i.e., what you agree to give each other in terms of time, service, communication, etc.
- C. **Get an arbitrator**: An arbitrator can be very helpful in solving long-term conflicts. An arbitrator helps both people listen to each other (instead of interrupting). They ask questions of both parties, highlighting things which the people in the conflict easily lose sight of.
- D. **Pick your battles wisely**: Don’t spend all your “relational equity” on small things. Be willing to lose a battle to win the war, and to give up smaller things to gain the most important things.
- E. **Proverbs**: Read Proverbs every day together with your spouse and/or with your children. The book of Proverbs focuses on communication skills (Prov. 15:28). Proverbs has 31 chapters, so you can read the chapter that corresponds to the date on the calendar.
²⁸The heart of the righteous studies how to answer... (Prov. 15:28)

V. QUESTIONS FOR SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION (e.g., FCF FRIENDSHIP GROUPS)

1. Identify one point that inspired or challenged you. Why? What will you do differently to apply it?
2. Identify one point that you want to impart to a younger believer. Why? How will you approach this?
3. Identify one point that you would like to gain more understanding of. How will you seek to gain it?