

DO YOU NEED TO APOLOGIZE FOR YOUR APOLOGY?

*First go and be reconciled to your brother;
then come and offer your gift.*

Matthew 5:24

Jesus was crystal clear: before we offer worship to God we should first make things right with our brothers and sisters. When we have hurt or offended someone, the first priority is to be reconciled to the one we have offended. We can't hope to be right vertically with God if we are wrong horizontally with one another!

But what happens when I apologize and seek to make things right but my effort only makes matters worse? Why is it that sometimes my apologies do more harm than good? The truth is that offering an apology is harder than you think! Sometimes what sounds like an apology is, in reality, a subtle form of self-justification. We need both wisdom and courage if our apologies are going to heal wounds rather than inflict them. Here are a few reasons why apologies fail.

VAGUENESS. One reason many apologies fail is that the offense is never named. "I apologize for whatever I did that may have hurt you," "I'm sorry for what happened" or even the incomplete, "I'm sorry" are illustrations of this kind of apology. These expressions seek to restore the relationship without acknowledging responsibility for what damaged it. A humorous illustration is found in a *Blondie* cartoon. Mr. Dithers decides to apologize to Dagwood for calling him a "dimwitted, noodle brain." "Dagwood," he says, "I'm sorry you're a dimwitted noodle brain."

THE PASSIVE VOICE. In one of his "apologies" to the Nation for misconduct with an intern in the White House, President Clinton famously said, "mistakes were made." Though this may sound like an apology, it clearly isn't. It is rather a subtle evasion of responsibility.

MAKING THE OFFENSE CONDITIONAL. Often the little word "if" nullifies any positive benefits sought by an apology. Singer Janet Jackson, in speaking of her indecent exposure during the halftime show at the 2004 Super Bowl, said "I am really sorry *if* I offended anyone." This "apology" implies that the real problem may be in the audience's perception, not the performer's behavior. The victim is the guilty party, not the perpetrator!

ADDRESSING THE WRONG PARTY. When heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson was reprimanded for biting off part of Evander Holyfield's ear (!) during a match, his apology was directed to his family, MGM, promoter Don King, the city of Las Vegas and the judge who was responsible for his probation. Tyson wanted to apologize to everyone except the one he had hurt! His desire to reconcile was directed only toward those who had the power to punish him.

Few things in all of life have more redemptive power than an apology... rightly delivered. Once we know how *not* to apologize, hopefully, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can learn to do it rightly. If you have offered an apology that did more harm than good, then perhaps the best place to start is by apologizing for your apology!

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