

The courage to apologize, the heart to forgive

By Beverly Goldsmith

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The young bicyclist mounted the footpath and cut right across in front of my husband and me as we were out on an evening walk. With only inches to spare, he swerved past me and through a gate onto the local school sports ground. I was shaken by his action and blurted out, "That was too close!"

Looking over his shoulder, the young man shouted, "What was I supposed to do?" "You could have waited," I called back.

Returning home from our walk, we saw him running laps at the school. He jumped a railing and ran over to us. "I just want to apologize for what I did," he said sincerely. "I misjudged my timing. I thought I could ride through the gate before you got there. I'm sorry."

I was astounded. For this young man to approach a couple of strangers and admit that he'd done the wrong thing took courage and humility. So I said, "Thank you so much for saying you're sorry. I really appreciate it." I took his hand and shook it warmly. "Your apology means a lot." It was a modest incident, but very significant to me. I loved this young man for the good grace his apology showed.

This encounter got me thinking about the importance of saying, "I'm sorry" – and receiving forgiveness. Could people be healed of hurt if they just received a heartfelt apology? Is it possible to quit holding a grudge – or to ask for forgiveness? It may not be easy to do, but offering apologies and graciously accepting them are within our range. These actions are made possible by genuine humility and love.

I found this out in senior high. I had changed schools and found myself ahead of the class in French. The teacher was delighted with me at first. Halfway through the year, however, the other students caught up, and I started falling behind. The teacher then began picking on me during every lesson. She constantly accused me of misbehavior, and often sent me out of her class, even when other students admitted to the bad behavior and said I was innocent.

Finally, in tears one Friday evening, I told my mother what was happening. She told me we needed to pray, and that I needed to change the way I was thinking about the teacher and start loving her as the child of God's creating. I couldn't believe she was suggesting that I love *the teacher*. The teacher, I was sure, was the one at fault.

Then I remember recalling some words in *Science and Health*: "Self-love is more opaque than a solid body. In patient obedience to a patient God, let us labor to dissolve with the universal solvent of Love the adamant of error, - self-will, self-justification, and self-love, - which wars against spirituality and is the law of sin and death" (p. 242). I saw that I hadn't been doing my best in class and that I needed to climb down off my high horse. I asked God to help me love this woman in the same way that I knew He loved both of us. As I prayed, I became willing to change my attitude toward this teacher and love her.

The next Monday morning in French class, the teacher picked on me again. This time though, instead of reacting, I prayed along these lines: "Father, help me to be calm. We are Your children. You love us both. I can love her and she can love me."

Immediately I saw what I needed to do. At the end of the lesson, I went to the teacher. I told her sincerely that I was really very sorry for my behavior and that I would work harder. For a moment she just looked at me. Then she said she was sorry, too, and that she would like us to work together. She even told me I was a good student and that she liked me. Next day in class we smiled warmly at each other, and from then on, we were on the best of terms. My classmates were astonished at the change in our relationship.

That was an unforgettable step in my learning the power of grace and forgiveness, and it helped me years later. My father, who lived in another Australian state, was hospitalized. My brother called me and said, "Dad doesn't know that I'm phoning you, but I think you should telephone him." I didn't know if I could do it. My father had treated me badly during my teens, and hadn't spoken to me in more than 20 years. I wondered what we could possibly say to each other. As far as I knew, his attitude toward me had never changed. So I prayed. And as I looked at the situation honestly, I found that I was still carrying a grudge. I hadn't forgiven him. I yearned for an apology from him, but I realized that whether I received one or not, I could relinquish the hurt I held inside and forgive him.

I made the call. As soon as my father heard my voice, he wept. He thanked me for calling him, expressed remorse for the way he had treated me, and asked me to forgive him. I did so. A day later he passed on, and I was so grateful that we had said those things.

The giving and receiving of forgiveness opens the door to reconciliation and healing. It makes room for contrition. It also allows individuals to resolve past hurts and move on with their lives.

God is merciful. His grace is with us all. He has given us a spirit of generosity that acknowledges the suffering caused to another and seeks to restore goodwill. I recently noted evidence of this when New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark apologized to several groups for injustices committed against them over the years. And again, when the Australian Council of Safety and Quality in Health Care encouraged doctors to apologize to patients when they'd made a medical mistake. Also when the Presbyterian Church in America adopted a resolution apologizing and seeking forgiveness for its history of involvement in racism and slavery.

The desire to address wrongs done and make amends is a divine impulsion. God is Love, and he made us in His likeness – he made us tenderhearted toward each other. That is the basis for advancing reconciliation and peace here and now. Each of us has the capacity to love – to forgive and forget. And yes, even to say a heartfelt, "I'm sorry."