



## **Sometimes Words are not Enough**

### **Leslie Vernick**

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I promise, I won’t do it again”, sobbed Cory, a nine-year-old who was on his way to his bedroom for the evening after hitting his little sister, again. As parents, we’ve all been there. A ninth hour apology made to avoid the consequences of parental punishment. As gospel-believing, grace-filled parents, what do we do? Do we forgive, forget, and encourage little sister to forgive and reconcile with her brother? Do we believe Cory’s half-hearted apology mitigates the sin of what he’s done to his sister, especially since this isn’t the first time? Or, are there important lessons Cory must learn in order for him to understand that hitting his sister is always unacceptable, even if he’s really mad or tired or hungry, even if she bugs him or takes his video game or sticks her tongue out at him?

As a biblical counselor, how would you counsel Cory’s parents who ask you how to help their son manage his explosive emotions? In addition to speaking to Cory about loving his sister, most of us would encourage Cory’s parents to implement tough consequences the next time he loses control or hits his sister so that he begins to connect the dots – you reap what you sow – if you hit your sister, you lose certain privileges that you enjoy when you don’t retaliate or hit your sister.

So then why are we so reluctant to embrace this same biblical principle of sowing and reaping when it comes to serious marital sins especially when the sins are repetitive and there is no clear evidence of repentance? Even when the one who sins cries again and again, “I’m sorry,” tears of sorrow do not necessarily indicate a sincere change of heart or habit.

Like nine-year-old Cory did, when someone sobs “I’m sorry” it’s more often due to the pain they’re in or the pain they fear rather than any genuine remorse for the pain they’ve caused another person. After having said “I’m sorry” often the destructive spouse believes he or she is now entitled to amnesty, forgiveness, and full restoration of marital privileges without ever having to make amends, suffer long-term consequences or work

hard to repair and rebuild trust. Sadly, sometimes as counselors we've colluded with such unrealistic and unbiblical thinking, placing the injured and sinned against spouse in a precarious position.

If she's not yet ready to forgive or refuses to grant amnesty or restore full marital privileges until she sees evidence of repentance, she risks being labeled as ungracious, ungodly, rebellious, and hard-hearted. The focus of counseling begins to shift from the one who sinned to the one who was sinned against. Instead of being supported and validated for the pain she's in, she now feels pressured, scolded, shamed or scared for her "unbiblical" stand or refusal to fully reconcile. I have personally worked with several women who have been formally disciplined by their church for such a stance. Yet the spouse, who committed the sins that broke the marriage, was never disciplined in any way simply because he said he was sorry and wanted their marriage to be reconciled.

The Bible has some strong things to say about words that aren't followed up with matching actions. For example, John said, "But if anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:17,18).

Jeremiah warns the people of Israel not to trust in deceptive words that offered them cheap grace. He said to them, "You trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name and say, 'We are delivered – only to go on doing all these abominations?'" (Jeremiah 7:8,10).

When someone says they're sorry but they don't back their words up with real and lasting changes in their behaviors, sorry becomes meaningless. It is not enough. John the Baptist says it best when, challenging the religious talk of the Pharisees he said, "Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God" (Luke 3:8).

"I'm sorry" is important, but it is only a first step. When Zacchaeus, the tax collector, repented of his love of money and extortion of his fellow Jews, he not only felt sorrow, his change of heart moved him into a critical change in behavior. Zacchaeus offered financial amends to the poor and made financial restitution to those he had harmed by his greed (Luke 19).

Often it takes time to see evidence of the fruits of repentance develop in a sorrowful heart. Like Joseph from the Old Testament did with his brothers, an injured spouse may extend forgiveness, but still not be able or willing to offer trust or reconciliation to their

spouse until they see evidence over time of changed actions and reactions, especially when tested. (See Genesis 42-46.)

Instead of taking someone's words at face value, especially in areas of repeated serious sin, let us encourage them to show their sorrow, instead of merely telling their spouse they're sorry. It is in the showing that the marriage has the best chance of being restored and rebuilt. To pressure a wary spouse into premature reconciliation can be harmful to her, to her spouse, and to their marriage and family. We do not love well when we collude with someone's self-deception that all is well – when it is simply whitewash.

What are some of the fruits of repentance that you look for to see genuine change occurring?