

WE NEED A TURNAROUND



Gaylon Wampler

Whether we're children or grown-ups, few of us want to admit our mistakes. And that's a problem.

BY DEAN MERRILL

Your 9-year-old comes thundering in the front door, hot and sweaty from chasing up the sidewalk with his friends. He charges straight for the refrigerator, eager to grab anything icy-cold to quench his thirst. Unfortunately, his 5-year-old sister has just set up her pink Melanie's Mall playset in his path. The figurines are no match for his crashing sneakers. Pieces fly all over the room. "Mom!" comes the tearful wail. "Joshua just broke my new birthday present!" You pull your son back to the scene of the crime, lecture him once again about running in the house, and then

order him to apologize to his heart-broken sister.

"Well, she shouldn't have had her stuff in the way," he objects.

"Joshua Douglas, you broke it! Say you're sorry."

Rrrmmngh, he mumbles.

You turn up the heat. "You're not going anywhere, young man, until you apologize for what you did. . . ."

Why is it so hard to get a child to say those two simple words: "I'm sorry"? What inner force rises up to lock the jaw at that moment? What is so terrible about repenting for bad behavior?

The reason kids balk at saying "I'm

sorry" is that, in fact, they're not. They *don't* particularly regret what they did, so why act as if they do? The sentiment is not in their hearts, so why should it be on their lips?

Kids Only?

I have a theory about why this scene, well known to every parent, is so exasperating to us. It is because we don't like to apologize, either. Saying we're sorry may mean that we would have to face the consequences of our actions—or even make a turnaround.

We're like the rhinoceros I once saw on a poster, thundering straight toward the camera, his fearsome horn

leading the way. The caption read: "I may have my faults, but being wrong isn't one of them."

Maybe we learned it from John Wayne. In the old movie "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon," he intoned more than once: "Never apologize. It's a sign of weakness." We've certainly learned it from lawyers, who quickly tell their clients to shut up and admit nothing.

As famous negligence attorney Harry H. Lipsig says, "Apologies encourage lawsuits. They constitute an admission against interest." That's legalese for saying that frankness may hurt you in the end, so don't even think about it.

The one exception to this modern rule is when you can use an apology to generate sympathy. The public relations people call it "damage control." You've messed up, and if you keep stonewalling, your critics will keep hounding you, so better to stand up and say, "Look, I'm only human, and this time I happened to err; I'm sorry."

Even that is a little too straightforward, according to some politicians; they'd rather use the indirect voice, as in "Mistakes were made. . . ." By whom? Well, we don't need to go into all that, do we?

It's almost rare to have a public figure come clean the way baseball great Pete Rose did after getting caught gambling on sports. He stood before a judge in 1990 and said, "Your Honor, I'd like to say I'm very sorry, very shameful to be here today in front of you. I have no excuses, because it's all my fault."

The judge accepted his statement but still sentenced him to five months in prison, another three in a halfway house, and 1,000 hours working with inner-city youth in Cincinnati. Hopefully Pete taught the teens something about candor and honest admission after you've done wrong.

FINDING THE WORDS

Given our cultural reluctance, it is only natural that we hesitate to apologize to God. He is, after all, the ultimate Parent, and we've been hiding bad news from our parents since we were little kids ourselves.

Millions of people go through their entire lives hoping that what doesn't get discussed with the Almighty will stay buried. The fact that He already knows everything, both good and bad, without being told is ignored.

But like the toy-smashing 9-year-old boy, we really did do something wrong. Actually, quite a number of "somethings." And life cannot go merrily on without stopping to deal with the offenses. The fractured plastic pieces of our misdeeds cannot simply be scooted under the couch. We have to talk about them with God. We have to have a repentant heart.

In the poignant story Jesus told about the wasteful son (see Luke 15), the boy reached a desperate point where he wanted to return home. Sitting in the squalor of the pigpen, "he came to his senses" (verse 17) and started making plans.

He knew he could not just waltz back in the door of his father's house and go to his room. *He would have to say something.* He would have to articulate what had happened and why he felt sorry for his actions. He began rehearsing his little speech right there, before ever hitting the road.

If we are ever to be restored to God's favor, our apology has to come from a position of repentance. Getting to that point is a process that begins with recognizing God's authority and all-knowing power, reflected against our sin. In that moment of recognition, our hearts are transformed, and we determine not to repeat the sin. Such intention leads to repentance.

Only when the words "I'm sorry" are rooted in a contrite heart can we qualify for the blessings of the Father's house. Only then will He help us be the kind of honorable parents, reliable spouses and trustworthy human beings we long to be. What we experience is a change of mind, an overhaul of intention about the future.

COMING CLEAN

The apostle Paul explained it this way: "I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. . . . Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret" (2 Corinthians 7:9-10). His colleague Peter told audiences, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

None of us is too important to do this. Though the "lawyer" inside our heads keeps telling us not to confess, not to show weakness, not to give up our poker faces, life cannot go on this way. Sooner or later, we must come clean.

W. C. Fields, the famous American actor and satirist who made a career out of poking fun at religion, came down to his deathbed and was caught one day reading a Bible there.

"What in the world are you doing, Mr. Fields?!" asked his nurse in astonishment. "You've always ridiculed that book."

The old man cracked a slight smile. "I'm looking for a loophole," he replied.

There is no loophole. The only way to square our status with God is to take a deep breath and declare our intention to turn from darkness to light, from self-centeredness to Christ. And it all starts with those two irksome but necessary words: "I'm sorry. . . ." •

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