

Reconciliation  
Matthew 5:23-24  
May 19, 2019

We live in an age where we can communicate with friends and loved ones across the country and around the world with a few clicks of a mouse or taps on a smart phone screen. However, despite advances in communication technology, we are lonelier than we have ever been. That loneliness is more acutely experienced by the elderly than any other age group.

I am not saying that the people in other age groups do not experience loneliness. Many people do, regardless of their age. However, when it comes to seniors, the loneliness is more intensely experienced.

As we age, our social circles begin to shrink. Friends, spouses, significant others and family members move or pass away. As we outlive more and more of our friends, we experience deeper loneliness. Even those who still live close by may not be accessible due to limited mobility. Many of them don't drive anymore.

Age-related changes, such as hearing loss and low vision, can make communication very difficult even with smart phones and computers. For some, using those devices is intimidating.

Another factor is that many older adults need to carry oxygen tanks or use mobility aids, such as walkers, wheel chairs, or scooters. Some have to use both oxygen tanks and mobility aids, which makes it very difficult to get together or keep in touch on a regular basis. As a result, they feel isolated and lonely.

On top of that, a significant amount of seniors are estranged from their own family. The estrangement might have happened a long time ago, well before they became old. They haven't seen their children or grandchildren for many years or even decades.

Estrangement is not an issue that is just for the elderly. If parents are estranged from the children, obviously the children are estranged from the parents. It goes both ways.

Estrangement is experienced by all age groups. One U.S. study found that more than 40% of the people they surveyed experienced family estrangement at

some point in their lives.<sup>1</sup> But when estrangement is added to the age-related loneliness, the sense of isolation and lonesomeness becomes almost unbearable.

Estrangement among family members seems to be far more common than most people realize. Family estrangement is found in every society regardless of their ethnicity, culture, religion, wealth or education. Although there are hardly any statistics available on family estrangement, counsellors and therapists report that there is a tremendous increase in the number of family members who do not communicate with each other.

There are many reasons why people end up being estranged from their own families. It could be abuses of all kinds – physical, verbal, emotional, or psychological.

Another reason could be parent's disrespect of an adult child's spouse. When parents do not respect the spouse of an adult child, they would not be able to have a good relationship. This can happen among the siblings, too. If a brother or sister disrespects my wife or husband, then I probably don't want to get together with my brother or sister.

Another reason could be parent's refusal to apologize for a past incident. Something happened in the past, perhaps a long time ago, that hurt the child deeply. It could be something they did or something they said, but the parents never apologized or totally ignored the child's pain and hurt. A funny thing is when the child or adult child mentions it, the parents don't even remember it. Yet the child carries the pain.

Another reason could be value difference between the parents and the adult child. They always end up arguing and cannot have a meaningful discussion.

Another reason could be ignoring boundaries. I am sure there are many others.

Estrangement is such a painful issue for the involved parties that often, people do not wish to talk about it. If you have someone who has been estranged from you for whatever reason, do you wish to keep that distance or do you want to reconcile with the person? I am not sure if anyone truly wants to keep that estrangement without ever reconciling with the person when that person is family.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20190328-family-estrangement-causes>

I would like to invite you to think of a person who is estranged from you. As you think of the person, see if there is anything that you did or did not do that you regret. I am sure it wasn't just you who caused the separation, but is there something that you did or did not do, or something you said or didn't say that you regret? If there is, what is it that you regret? Have you apologized for what you did or did not do? How sincere was your apology?

If the estrangement happened because of what the other person had done, what was it that hurt you so much? Was it something he/she said or should have said but didn't? Or was it what he/she did or didn't do? Perhaps you want to forgive the person; but because the pain was and still is so severe that it is difficult for you to forgive. Has that person ever apologized to you?

Either way you hold and carry the past, and experience that pain even today. Someone once said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." Resentment hurts only you. Because the other person may not even remember what he/she did or did not do. The word "resent" is a compound word. It is a combination of "re" and "sent". "Re" means "again," and "sent" is from Latin word "*sentire*", which means "to feel". To "resent" is to feel and to experience the pain all over again.

In many cases, people do not forgive because the person who offended them didn't apologize or the person's apology was not sincere.

I don't want to talk about forgiveness today. That is a subject for another day. I want to talk about apology. How do you handle sin or offense when it is your fault? How do you handle it when you are the one that has done wrong to someone else? If you ask for forgiveness, how do you apologize?

Did you know that there are only a very few instructions in the Bible about apologizing? Perhaps it is assumed. There are many instructions in the Bible about our need to forgive one another; but not about our need to apologize.

I am not talking about confessing our sins to the Lord. I am talking about apologizing to the persons that we have offended. I only found two passages that are somewhat related.

One is our text this morning, in which the Lord said that we needed to reconcile with others before we worship the Lord. Jesus said, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your

brother; then come and offer your gift.” He said to “go and reconcile.” That could be understood as a reference to apologize to someone whom you have offended. It could also be understood as an instruction to reconcile with someone who has a grudge against you, whether that grudge is from what you did or not. Someone might have a grudge against you for whatever reason. You may not know why. In that case, you need to clarify some misunderstandings instead of apologizing. Anyway, this passage has some reference to apology.

The other passage is James 5:16 which states, “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed...” “Confessing your sins to one another” could be understood as apologizing to each other. Or it could be understood as a public confessing of your sins. Either way, these two passages are the only ones that have some reference to our need to apologize.

Even though there is very little instruction about our need to apologize, I find it to be very important especially when you are dealing with estrangement. So I want to suggest a couple of things.

One, let your apology be focused on the person’s pain and hurt. Say something like, “I regret that I hurt you. When I think of my actions and my words, I can see how you must have been hurt. I should not have done what I did. I should not have said what I said. I am sorry. Knowing that you are hurt, I am deeply regretful. I will do things differently next time. I am sorry.” The offended person deserves a sincere and heartfelt apology from you.

But we tend to see the other person’s fault in any situation, even when it is our fault. I guess that is a pride issue. In her book, *Why Don’t You Apologize? Healing Big Betrayal*, Harriet Lerner talks about her relationship with her husband. She writes, “With my husband, Steve, ... I like to apologize for exactly my share of the problem – as I calculate it, of course – and I expect him to apologize for his share, also as I calculate it. Needless to say, we don’t always do the same math.”<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of what the other person does or does not do, we need to apologize sincerely.

Two, do not add your excuses to your apology. Benjamin Franklin once said, “Never ruin an apology with an excuse.” The person who is hurt is not interested in knowing why you did what you did, or why you said what you said. That person wants to know that you recognize that you hurt them.

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Lerner, (Touchstone: New York, 2017), p.2

When we apologize, we say we are sorry for what we have done, and we don't stop there. Instead of stopping there, we say, "I did that because ...". Sometime explanation is called for and is helpful, but in many occasions that is not what is needed.

Do not rationalize or justify your actions! There is nothing more irrational than rationalizing our offenses. Just approach the person and say "What I did was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. I am sorry." If you are truly sorry, you must change your behavior.

When a genuine apology is given, whatever anger and resentment that have been harbored for many years can melt away. Even after many years of estrangement, I believe, it can be healed with a genuine apology and changed behavior. If we need to take some steps, I hope and pray that we become courageous enough to take those steps.