

Bumps, Scraps, and Fractures

Ephesians 4:21-32

My opening story comes from the time I was in JrHi school. This, of course, was a long, *long* time ago—over half a century! Teachers *then*, it seemed to me at least, were different than they are now. Teachers *now* value creativity, initiative, innovation, and resourcefulness. Back then, teachers did not have these same enlightened values . . . especially my spelling teachers; they were locked into the idea that words could only be spelled one way: with the same number of letters, arranged in the very same way, every time that word was used; and when I would express the least bit of creativity on a spelling quiz, they would mark that word wrong; and before the class met the next time, I would have to write that word *ten* times, and the same rules would apply: the same number of letters, arranged in the very same way, all ten times. It's a wonder my hand is not permanently cramped from all the times I had to write out spelling words! My teachers had no appreciation whatsoever for *creative spellers* like me. For 50 years I lived under the duress of being a creative speller. Then one day—you will have never heard this story—one day, Steve Jobs gathered all his computer engineers together and said to them, "It has come to my attention that we have been caught up in a terrible cultural bias against creative spellers. As you know, here at Apple, we value creativity and innovation; and our unwitting mistreatment of creative spellers is completely out of line with our values. I want you to find a way to bless and honor and encourage creative spellers. I don't care how long it takes or how hard you have to work; get it done. So the computer engineers spread out across the Silicon Valley and worked three long years until the breakthrough came; then they came back to Steve Jobs and presented him with . . . **SpellCheck**. Now all that creative spellers, like myself, have to do is to get just close enough, and SpellCheck will produce a word, it may not be the word we want; but the word *will be* spelled correctly.

This morning, I am going to talk about **bumps, scrapes, and fractures**. I'm not talking about having a broken leg, like Evelyn Ibarra; I'm talking about bumps, scraps, and fractures between *people*—I'm talking about *relationships* that need to be mended. Like my JiHi spelling teachers insisted, there is a precise *pattern* to use; and, like Steve Jobs, we often have to take *initiative*. It takes both a *pattern* and *initiative* to repair relationships.

These days—at least here in the United States—we have become a *throwaway* society. It is often easier (and less expensive) to replace an item than to repair it. Sometimes we approach stressed relationships in the same way.

The biblical directive—whenever possible—is to work through bumps, scrapes, and fractures in order to *repair* relationships.

Today we are moving into the second half of Ephesians which, as you may recall, gives practical instructions for Christian living. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Ephesians 4, verse 26.

The first *specific* misbehavior that Paul names is interpersonal distress:

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

In verse 29, Paul cautions against hurtful speech.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs . . .

In verse 31, he names internal and external reactions in conflict.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

This kind of relational distress happens to all of us. No matter how mature or relationally-gifted we may be, we *all* get caught in *actions* and *reactions* that stress, damage, and sometimes destroy relationships.

There is a memorable quote by Ruth Bell Graham, the outspoken wife of evangelist Billy Graham. One time she was asked whether she ever considered divorcing Billy. She replied, “Divorce? No. Murder? Yes.”

Paul closes this paragraph with the *good news*: **there is a way to mend relationships**—in verse 32.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, **forgiving** each other, just as in Christ God **forgave** you.

Relationships are damaged and ruined by *sin*; they are healed by *forgiveness*.

The big question is: *How* do we do this?
How do we resolve bumps, scrapes, and fractures
before they deteriorate into anger, bitterness, slander, and malice?

For our deepest hurts, we can go to trained counselors and therapists.
For serious distresses we can talk with a pastor.
What I'm offering today is for *ordinary* bumps, scraps, and fractures—
an *everyday* remedy that we can apply, before anything else,
at the first indication of relational trouble.

This remedy is easy for JrHi and Middle School students
and, with coaching by parents, even younger children.
Yet it is so hard that it challenges even the most mature Christians.
Now that's a *riddle*, isn't it?
You'll see what I mean by the time I finish the message.

The biblical approach to mending relationships,
involves five practices, taught in the Bible from cover to cover:
confession, repentance, asking forgiveness, granting forgiveness,
and sometimes restitution—all big words, all weighty concepts.

In actual practice, the *pattern* we can use is simple.
It can be stated in plain, unadorned words:

I was wrong to . . . [name the offense].
I don't want to do it again.
Will you forgive me?
The response, hopefully, is: Yes, I forgive you.
And sometimes, we add: How can I make it up to you? [repeat]

Let's look at these phrases, one at a time.

1

First, I was wrong to [then we name whatever it was we said or did]

The Bible calls this **confession**.

The word "confession" means, literally, "agree with"

We are agreeing (or *admitting*) that our speech or behavior was wrong.

We confess first to God—as in 1 John 1:9:

“If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Then we confess to the person we have wronged as Jesus taught in Matthew 5:23-24.

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

When we acknowledge our fault,
when we admit that we messed up,
it diffuses relational distress almost immediately.

Easy, right?
Then try to get these four words out of your mouth.
Try to *admit* to someone else that you were wrong!

It is *hard* to acknowledge wrongdoing.
It damages the *persona* we have cultivated.
It is a blow to our *pride*.
Our internal resistance to *exposure* is powerful (See John 3:19-20).

You would think the five-letter word, “wrong,”
was longer than “supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.”
You would think the word was harder to pronounce than “hors d’oeuvres.”

Not only are these words hard to say,
but as soon as we say them, we usually throw in a conjunction—
if, and, but, or maybe—and keep talking.

In place of straightforward confession,
we attempt to *justify* our bad behavior.
We make *excuses*; we *downplay* the offense; we offer an *explanation*;
or we *blame* someone else.

If I had not been under such great stress. . .
but keep in mind what you did to me . . .
and lots of other people are doing this . . .
maybe what I did isn’t so bad, after all.

Conjunctions are good if you’re writing a *report* or *essay* or *paper*;
but in confession, they are not good.

In authentic confession, we rigorously adhere to the rule:
 no ifs, ands, buts, or maybes.
 We admit what we did, in plain, stark words;
 then we stop and go to the next phrase:
 "I don't want to do this again."

2

In biblical terms, we **repent**.

The words repentance means, literally, to change direction, to turn around.
 Repentance is the response that Jesus invites from us, when he says:

"The time has come," [Jesus] said. "The kingdom of God has come near.
 Repent and believe the good news!" Mark 1:15, NIV

It is the response that Peter invited from the crowd at Pentecost:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for
 the forgiveness of your sins. Acts 2:38, NIV

When we repent, we say to God and the other person:
 I *fully intend* to change this behavior.

We are *not* saying, I won't ever do this again.
 That is promise we may not be able to keep.
 We *are* saying: I don't intend to do it again.
 So the phrase we use in this pattern for asking forgiveness
 is *precisely* this: I don't want to do it again.

When our four daughters were small,
 I would read each morning from a devotional book, Keys for Kids.
 There would be short Bible passage, a story,
 and several sentences of application.
 When I got to the application, I would sometimes adjust the wording
 to fit whatever was going in our family;
 and the girls took great delight in catching me when I did this.
 One day I looked ahead to the application,
 and realized that, without any adjustment,
 it fit exactly what was going on that the time.
 All the girls got quiet, and our youngest daughter stayed quiet *all day*.
 When we were tucking her into bed that night,
 we said, "Laurel, you've been quiet today."
 There was a pause, and then she said, in a plaintive voice,
 "Oh, why did that have to apply to me?"

She was under conviction.
 So we led her through this progression.
 Dear Jesus, I was wrong to . . . (and she named what it was).
 I don't want to do it again.
 Will you forgive me?
 And, of course, Jesus forgave her.

3

As a third step in this progression,
 we ask God and the other person to forgive us.
 Again, it is important to use these words *precisely*: Will you forgive me?

What we tend to say is: "I apologize" or "I'm sorry" (which is easier).
 When we say this, people normally respond:
 "Don't worry about it," "No big deal."
 But wrongdoing that stresses relationships *is* a big deal.

When we say, clearly and specifically, what we did wrong;
 when we communicate our intention to change this behavior;
 and when we *ask for forgiveness*,
 we give the other person an opportunity to say: "Yes, I forgive you,"
 which opens the way for genuine reconciliation.

4

Hopefully, the other person *will* say: Yes, I forgive you.
 which is the fourth step in this simple, but hard, pattern.

If the person does not forgive you, that is uncomfortable, to be sure,
 because the relationship will still be strained; but that's okay.

Some relational wounds take time to heal.
 Like a sore that develops a scab, we cannot keep picking at the scab—
 or it will *never* heal.
 We remember what Paul said:

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

When have done all we can do, then we wait in hope.

5

As a fifth step, when needed,
 another question can be added to the sequence:
 How can I make it up to you?

This is a biblical concept called “restitution.”
Remember Zaccheaus?

Zacchaeus said to Jesus: “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Luke 19:8

This is when we need to be *resourceful*—and wise—to make restitution in good and helpful ways.

The biblical approach to mending relationships, when we are at fault, or *partially* at fault, or even when *someone* has to make the first move, is: confession, repentance, asking forgiveness; granting forgiveness; and if needed, restitution; and the result is reconciliation—a *mended relationship*.

When our daughter, Brooke, began to teach at Penn Treaty Middle School in Philadelphia, one of her biggest challenges was fights among the students. She made a big poster and posted it on the front wall of her classroom. She didn’t tell the students that these were the biblical concepts of confession, repentance, asking and granting forgiveness. She just posted these same phrases (that she learned growing up in our home); and when fights would erupt, she would have the combatants look up at the poster, and work through the progression to reconciliation. Fight after fight, she kept at this until one day, without any intervention by her, she overheard two girls at the back of the room, working through these phrases, one by one, to recover from a fight. They were practicing (and learning) the “life skill” of reconciliation.

This is God’s way to mend relationships, whether at home, in the classroom, in the workplace, or wherever.

Hard as it is, the biblical way to repair relationships is by direct, prompt, straightforward confession:
I was wrong.
I don’t want to do it again.
Will you forgive me?
Yes, I forgive you.

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