



Compassion and Forgiveness in Our Families

Our relationships with loved ones can improve as we allow the power of the Savior's Atonement to work in our lives.

By Andrea Lystrup

As a marriage and family therapist, I frequently have people come to me asking for advice on how to improve their relationships. I once had a client tearfully list her grievances against her husband. She told me how he wouldn't listen to her. He would come home from work and go straight to the computer. As I listened, I could see that she was in a lot of emotional pain. We talked about some of her goals, but at the end of our session she said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, all that sounds great, but what are you going to do to fix my husband?"

The fact is we can't make anybody change. If the thought of changing family members sounds appealing, then consider applying these therapeutic gospel principles.



Compassion before Change

In order for change to happen in our family relationships, we often need to do the opposite of what we're inclined to do. Instead of seeking to alter the other person, we need to love those around us for who they are. Paradoxically, this kind of compassion can ultimately lead to change.

Jesus Christ modeled compassion before change when the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman to Him who had committed adultery. Christ said to them, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:7). The scribes and Pharisees realized that they were not without sin and left one by one. The Savior then said:

"Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?"

"She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:10–11).

When conflict arises in our families, perhaps we may find ourselves casting figurative stones at our loved ones. Our stones usually take the form of criticism: "You never appreciate me." "You always nag me." How many times do we try to change people by condemning or arguing with them? We need to recognize that change comes through love.

When the woman was presented to the Savior, He didn't point out all the things she had done wrong in her life. Instead, He gave her compassion and love, and then He invited the woman to take action and stop sinning.

Why does compassion need to come before change? Partly because when we're constantly criticized, our sense of self-worth diminishes, along with the hope that we can improve our lives.

When we come to Jesus Christ in our weakness and seek the blessings of His Atonement, does He reply with, "It's about time" or "While you're at it, can you change this about yourself too"? Of course not. He meets us with love. Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, "The invitation to repent is rarely a voice of chastisement but rather a loving appeal to turn around and to 're-turn' toward God [see Helaman 7:17]."¹

Forgiveness

Extending compassion conveys to those around us that they are worthy of love as they are. Forgiveness takes it a step further and communicates that we have stopped feeling angry toward them. Forgiveness replaces bitterness with love and allows us to move on. Sometimes others hurt us in such a way that it seems impossible to stop feeling bitter and angry. This is where we must let the power of the Savior's Atonement work in our lives.

President James E. Faust (1920–2007), Second Counselor in the First Presidency, taught: "The Atonement not only benefits the sinner but also benefits those sinned against—that is, the victims. By forgiving 'those who trespass against us' (JST, Matt. 6:13) the Atonement brings a measure of peace and comfort to those who have been innocently victimized by the sins of others. The basic source for the healing of the soul is the Atonement of Jesus Christ."²

Not only do we find a measure of peace and comfort by forgiving others, but we are also commanded to forgive: "I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men" (Doctrine and Covenants 64:10).



However, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gave the following caution: “[Christ] did *not* say, ‘You are not allowed to feel true pain or real sorrow from the shattering experiences you have had at the hand of another.’ *Nor* did He say, ‘In order to forgive fully, you have to reenter a toxic relationship or return to an abusive, destructive circumstance.’ But notwithstanding even the most terrible offenses that might come to us, we can rise above our pain only when we put our feet onto the path of true healing.”³

I’m sure many of us may think in our hearts, “I really want to forgive this person, but I don’t know where to begin.” I use a four-step guide to forgiveness with those I counsel, and I’ve seen it bring about dramatic improvements in their relationships.

Step 1: Choose forgiveness as an option.

Sometimes we withhold forgiveness because we are hoping that it will motivate someone to repent and change his or her behavior. You might say to yourself, “If I forgive them, who is holding them responsible for the mess they caused?” or “How can I forgive someone who hasn’t apologized yet or even acknowledged they’ve done wrong?” The problem with this mind-set is that you are only prolonging your hurt. You cannot control the repentance process of others.

So how do we choose to forgive? When Alma taught about how to increase our faith in Jesus Christ, he said, “If ye will . . . experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you” (Alma 32:27). I believe this same principle applies to forgiveness. If we desire to forgive and let this desire work in us, then the Lord will help that desire to grow until we are able to forgive.

Step 2: Communicate your feelings of hurt and anger in non-hurtful ways.

Joseph Smith received revelation counseling us to persuade each other with long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and love (see Doctrine and Covenants 121:41). How do we keep our conversations gentle and meek and still let our feelings be known?

A basic rule of communication skills training is to speak in “I feel” statements. For example,

instead of saying, “You never spend time with me,” a wife might say to her husband, “I feel lonely when you come home from work and spend the evening on your computer.”

When you make your feelings the focus of communication, you open up the invitation for others to comfort you. On the other hand, when you make the focus of communication the wrongdoings of others, you open up the door to defensiveness. Think of how much better your relationships could be if you continually opened the door of comfort and compassion instead of defensiveness and anger.

Step 3: Recognize your own role in your relationship problems.

This is the hardest step to do because it requires us to move past our pride. In his great talk on that topic, President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) taught:

“The proud do not receive counsel or correction easily. . . . Defensiveness is used by them to justify and rationalize their frailties and failures. . . .

“Think of the repentance that could take place with lives changed, marriages preserved, and homes strengthened, if pride did not keep us from confessing our sins and forsaking them.”⁴

As you humble yourself, you are more open to hearing another’s perspective on how you may have contributed to the problem at hand. This allows you to shift your perspective from hoping the other person repents and changes to working together to improve your relationship.

Step 4: Change how you treat the other person.

If you’ve gone through all the previous steps but still feel that you haven’t forgiven someone, then practice acting like you *have* forgiven them.

How would you behave toward your husband or wife if you did forgive them? Probably with more affection, trust, expressions of appreciation, and encouragement. Even if it starts with forcing yourself to act that way, soon you will find that the feelings of forgiveness, love, and trust follow.

I have seen time and time again that relationships do not improve without the broken heart and the contrite spirit that we hear about so often in the scriptures (see 3 Nephi 9:20; Doctrine and Covenants 59:8). These conditions can be achieved by accepting and forgiving our loved ones and will allow us to begin making the small steps that lead to increased peace and love in our lives. ■

The author lives in Washington, D.C., USA.

NOTES

1. Neil L. Andersen, “Repent . . . That I May Heal You,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 40.
2. James E. Faust, “The Atonement: Our Greatest Hope,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2001, 20.
3. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Ministry of Reconciliation,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2018, 79.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* (2014), 236, 237.

