



# Repentance & Forgiveness IN MARRIAGE

*How these gospel principles will strengthen your marriage.*

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**W**hen couples get married, they joyfully anticipate the prospect of spending eternity together. They often enjoy having long conversations, going for walks, and spending time together. It is wonderful to be with someone you love so deeply.

Unfortunately, for some couples the bliss of deep love and immensely satisfying companionship does not last. Long talks are replaced by frequent arguments or angry silence.

Many of these couples divorce. Others withdraw emotionally from the relationship. The spouses become distant from each other, and they keep their interaction to a minimum.

How do these couples go from ecstatic levels of love and happiness to frequent conflict, bitterness, and in many cases, divorce? Researchers have identified a number of reasons, but in my professional experience, I have found that most of these explanations boil down to two fundamental factors: a lack of repentance and a lack of forgiveness.

### **Repenting**

In most cases, we are married only for a short time before we hurt our spouse's feelings. Whether our mistakes are intentional or inadvertent, we all end up doing things that hurt our spouse. Elder Joe J. Christensen, an emeritus member of the Quorum of the Seventy, said, "To develop a solid marriage, we must be able to admit we are sorry for mistakes we make. . . . When conflicts in marriage arise, we should be swift to apologize and ask for forgiveness, even though we may not be totally at fault. True love is developed by those who are willing to readily admit personal mistakes and offenses."<sup>1</sup>

### **Apologizing Sincerely**

In order to be effective, an apology must be sincere and heartfelt. There needs to be evidence that you are truly sorry that you have hurt or offended your spouse and that you take responsibility for your mistake or offense. A simple "sorry" or the slightly more eloquent "sorry about that" rarely provides the necessary evidence that you feel remorseful and take responsibility for your actions. A thoughtful apology might sound something like: "I'm sorry

that I didn't do the dishes last night like I had agreed to. It wasn't right, and I apologize." Such an open and honest apology can do wonders for healing wounded hearts.

Sometimes it is necessary to apologize more than once, especially if the offense is particularly hurtful. I have learned over the years that it sometimes takes several apologies before the sincerity of the apology is able to penetrate the wounded heart of an offended spouse.

### **Striving to Improve**

Besides a sincere apology, repentance includes striving to forsake our shortcomings and weaknesses. For example, we keep our promises to do the dishes. We focus on not being grumpy or short-tempered. We try to become better listeners.

As we repent, we continually improve ourselves. We overcome our weaknesses and develop more Christlike qualities. By so doing, we become better people and better spouses.

### **Overcoming Pride**

Repenting requires us to look inward, be humble, and take responsibility for our mistakes and weaknesses. President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) taught: "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. . . .

"The antidote for pride is humility—meekness, submissiveness. . . . It is the



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broken heart and contrite spirit. . . .

“We can choose to humble ourselves by receiving counsel and chastisement. . . .

“We can choose to humble ourselves by confessing and forsaking our sins and being born of God. . . .

“Let us choose to be humble.”<sup>2</sup>

The essence of repentance is trying to change *ourselves* in ways that will make us better people. On the other hand, the foundation of pride is the desire to cover up our own weaknesses and focus on changing *our spouse’s* behavior. As we humble ourselves, we desire to improve our lives and take responsibility for our weaknesses. We are willing to apologize and become better people, which is at the core of repentance.

### **Forgiving**

In order for a marriage to be successful, there also needs to be forgiveness. Repentance and forgiveness are complementary gospel principles, and both are necessary in order for us to progress spiritually.

Resentment is one of the worst poisons in marriage. It doesn’t ruin a marriage overnight. Rather, it is like decay that gradually and silently damages your teeth. Forgetting to brush your teeth once doesn’t ruin your teeth; however, numerous instances of neglect over many years will. Similarly, resentment accumulates gradually, often

without us even noticing it. If left untreated, it builds up over a number of years to the point where it destroys love.

Just as our sins and weaknesses are washed away through repentance, forgiveness washes away the hurts and emotional injuries that must be anticipated in being married to someone who is imperfect.

### **Letting Go of Hurt**

Forgiveness is the perfect antidote for the poison of resentment. It neutralizes our hurt feelings and makes room in our hearts for love to flourish and grow. President Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught:

“All of us carry excess baggage around from time to time, but the wisest ones among us don’t carry it for very long. They get rid of it. . . . Often . . . the things we carry are petty, even stupid. . . . If you resent someone for something he has done—or failed to do—forget it. We call that forgiveness. It is powerful, spiritual medicine.”<sup>3</sup>

These same principles apply within a marriage, and perhaps more so. The best response to being hurt is, as President Packer implied, to get over it. Marriage is too important for us to clutter our minds and hearts with resentment that is created by dwelling on the faults and weaknesses of our spouse. We need to forgive and move on.



### Relying on the Atonement

But what if we can't simply forgive, forget, and move on? Some serious offenses are difficult to overcome, and some hurts run very deep. Sometimes a spouse has a difficult time forgiving something that others might consider trivial. In other cases, the level of resentment reaches a point where the spouse is unable to forget about it and move on with the relationship.

In these situations, we need to rely on the healing power of the Savior's Atonement. His Atonement not only allows us to repent of our sins; it also heals those who suffer and grieve. Certainly it comforts those who sorrow because they have been hurt by their spouse. During the process of the Atonement, the Savior suffered all of the pain, sorrow, and grief that we will experience in this life. Because of His atoning sacrifice, He shoulders the pain that we experience, which gives us the ability to overcome these hurts and to heal and forgive our spouse.

President James E. Faust (1920–2007) said: "Our Redeemer took upon Himself all the sins, pains, infirmities, and sicknesses of all who have ever lived and will ever live. No one has ever suffered in any degree what He did. He knows our mortal trials by firsthand experience. . . .

"The Atonement not only benefits the sinner but also benefits those sinned against—that is, the victims. By forgiving 'those who trespass against us' (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 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."<sup>4</sup>

A few years ago, I had the opportunity of serving as the bishop of a married student ward. I had wonderful

people come into my office devastated because they had been terribly hurt by the actions of their spouse. Through their tears they would ask, "Bishop, how can I ever forgive my spouse?" We would then talk about the Atonement and its ability to heal broken hearts and to give us the ability to forgive.

As a bishop, I saw miracles. I saw individuals repent of their sins and earn back the trust of their spouses. I saw brokenhearted spouses find peace and the ability to forgive. I saw couples that were on the verge of divorce humble themselves, look inward, take responsibility, apologize for mistakes, and forgive each other. Every one of these miracles was made possible by the healing power of the Atonement.

Now don't misunderstand. There are situations where forgiveness does not mean staying in a relationship that is abusive or dangerous. There are some scenarios where divorce may be the proper choice. But even in these cases, the Atonement can bring personal healing.

May we be willing to take responsibility for our own sins and weaknesses that create stress and pain in our marriages. May we use the power of the Atonement to allow the Savior to heal our hurts and sorrows to help us fully forgive our spouses. I testify that the Savior not only heals broken souls; He also heals broken hearts. If we allow Him to help us sincerely repent and freely forgive, our lives and our marriages will be blessed throughout eternity. ■

*Based on a devotional address given at Brigham Young University on January 19, 2010.*

#### NOTES

1. Joe J. Christensen, *One Step at a Time: Building a Better Marriage, Family, and You*, 39.
2. Ezra Taft Benson, "Beware of Pride," *Ensign*, May 1989, 6–7.
3. Boyd K. Packer, "The Balm of Gilead," *New Era*, Aug. 1979, 39.
4. James E. Faust, "The Atonement: Our Greatest Hope," *Ensign*, Nov. 2001, 19–20.