GRACE AND FORGIVENESS

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by James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

For more than three decades, Dr. James Dobson has been America's leading authority and advocate for the family. Taken from the bestseller, *Dr. Dobson’s Handbook of Family Advice*, this Special Report is full of helpful information for families at all stages. Let’s read along now as Dr. Dobson discusses the importance of Grace and Forgiveness:

**Great Cup of Tea**

Have you noticed that children sometimes try to be helpful, but it only makes your life more complicated?

I heard a story about a mother who was sick in bed with the flu. Her darling daughter wanted so much to be a good nurse. She fluffed the pillows and brought a magazine for her mother to read. And then she even showed up with a surprise cup of tea.

“Why, you’re such a sweetheart,” the mother said as she drank the tea. “I didn’t know you even knew how to make tea.”

“Oh, yes,” the little girl replied. “I learned by watching you. I put the tea leaves in the pan and then I put in the water, and I boiled it, and then I strained it into a cup. But I couldn’t find a strainer, so I used the flyswatter instead.

“You what?” The mother screamed.

And the little girl said, “Oh, don’t worry, Mom, I didn’t use the new flyswatter. I used the old one.”

When kids try their hardest and they get it all wrong in spite of themselves, what’s a parent to do? What mothers and fathers often do is prevent their children from carrying any responsibility that could result in a mess or mistake. It’s just easier to do everything for them than to clean up afterward. But I urge parents not to fall into that trap.

Your child needs his mistakes. That’s how he learns. So go along with the game every now and then...even if the tea you drink tastes a little strange.

**You Always Bite the One You Love**

Isn’t it curious how in the midst of a nasty family argument we can shake out of the bad mood the instant the telephone rings or a neighbor knocks on the door?
Sometimes those we love are treated the worst, and kids are quick to notice this hypocrisy. Have you ever been brought up short by a small voice questioning this sudden turn to peaches and cream after twenty minutes of fire and brimstone?

The late Mark Hatfield, a longtime senator from Oregon and the father of four kids, said his wife stung him once by saying, “I just wish you were as patient with your children as you are with your constituents.”

He isn’t alone. We’re all guilty at times of what I call “split vision,” treating certain people with forbearance while heaping contempt on others under our own roof. We assume the worst; we pounce on every shortcoming. We never miss an opportunity to deliver a corrective harangue. And in the process, we wound the people we care about the most.

Isn’t it time to cut one another a little slack at home? If, in fact, we love our spouses and our children and our parents as much as we say we do, one way to show it is to give them the kind words we bestow on our casual acquaintances.

The Only Cure for Bitterness

Have you noticed how difficult it is to forgive those who have wronged us? It’s even harder when the offenders are our parents.

When we are young, our emotions are so intense that any wounds and injuries may stay with us for a lifetime. The pain is immeasurably worse when the one who wronged us was a parent. Perhaps a mother rejected us instead of providing the love we needed. Maybe an alcoholic father was sexually abusive in the midnight hours. Little victims of such horror may still be consumed by resentment and anger many decades later.

Psychologists and ministers now agree that there is only one cure for the cancer of bitterness. It is to forgive, which Dr. Archibald Hart defines as “giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me.” Only when we find the emotional maturity to release those who have wronged us, whether they have repented or not, will the wounds finally start to heal.

Jesus said it like this: “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:25). Note that Jesus said nothing about who was right and who was wrong. Forgiveness, like love, must be unmerited and unconditional. Forgiveness begins the healing process.
Love Is Having to Say “I'm Sorry”

Many people have a hard time saying that they’re sorry to anyone, let alone to their children, but there are times when it’s the only thing to do. Apologizing when we’re wrong provides opportunities to teach valuable lessons to our sons and daughters.

I remember one evening after a very hard day of work when I was especially grouchy with my ten-year-old daughter. After going to bed that night, I just felt like I hadn’t treated her right and that I needed to ask her for forgiveness. So before she left for school the next morning, I said, “Honey, I know that you know that daddies aren’t perfect, and I have to admit that I wasn’t fair with you last night. I want you to forgive me.” She put her arms around my neck, and she shocked me down to my toes. She said, “I knew you were gonna have to say that, Daddy, and it’s okay. I forgive you.”

Like my daughter, most children are very resilient, and they’re eager to reconcile. Although you may have to sputter out the words, asking a child for forgiveness when you’re wrong shows that you have flaws and imperfections like everyone else. And it models apologetic behavior for them.

In the family where no apologies are offered, problems are often swept under the rug. But by saying “I’m sorry” you can bring a world of healing and calm to an irritable and stressed-out household. It’s a humbling experience, to be sure, but we can all stand a little unscheduled humility.

Forgiveness in Paducah

You probably remember the tragedy in the small town of Paducah, Kentucky. A fourteen-year-old boy named Michael Carneal opened fire on a group of students who had gathered in prayer. Within seconds, ten of them had been wounded, three of them fatally.

Who is this Michael Carneal, and what do we know about his earlier years? Well, he wasn’t into drugs, crime, or cults. He was a solid B student who seldom got into trouble—either in school or at home. Still, there were signs. The theme of his school essays revealed that he felt “small and powerless.” Friends say he was always angry about being teased in school. That has become a familiar pattern among those who commit acts of unprovoked violence.

While we need to understand more about Michael, I’m more interested in the other young men and women of Paducah. These kids showed a remarkable willingness to
forgive. Placards began appearing at the high school, reading, “We Forgive You, Mike.” Kelly Carneal, Michael’s sister, was not only embraced by her peers but also asked to sing in the choir at the slain girls’ funeral. And during the town’s annual Christmas parade, a moment of silent prayer was lifted up on behalf of Michael and his family.

One young girl said it best, “I can hate Michael and bear the scars of what he did for the rest of my life. But I choose to forgive him and get beyond it.”

What impressive maturity from teenagers under fire.

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