

Restoring the Rebellious Child
by Tim Kimmel

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When the time comes, be there to help your kids come in from the cold.

A life of rebellion can pull children into a web of regret. Once they are in it, it is hard for them to get out. We need to be there with a well-thought-out plan, ready to help them find their way back into the bosom of the family. It should be our aim, regardless of what our children have done to us, to do everything we can to help restore them to fellowship with God and harmony with their extended family.

Paul says in Philippians 2:1-2, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."

We are called to be peacemakers (see 1 Peter 3:7). Our government sometimes sends out our armed troops to some hot spot in the world to serve as peacekeepers. Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are the peacekeepers." He said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Peacekeepers are simply people with bigger guns and more money in their pockets to keep a rebellion from getting out of hand. Peacekeeping doesn't solve the rebellion; it just keeps it in check.

A peacemaker helps bring rebellion to an end. That's what we're called to do with members of our family who have chosen a life of rebellion. Peacemaking isn't about avoiding conflict or trying to placate someone's anger. In fact, sometimes being a peacekeeper requires you to initiate a confrontation. Peacemaking is about using whatever means is beneficial to bringing another person to a point of reconciliation and restoration. It might mean working to avoid a conflict, instigating a conflict, or bringing a conflict to an end.

If you feel God is leading you to take steps to restore a rebellious child, I want to suggest a few principles to follow when acting on God's lead:

Talk things out with God before you discuss them with the rebellious child. You want to make sure your heart is right before you attempt to get your child's heart right. God may need to change you first. He probably will have been teaching you things all along. Allow Him to continue to teach you. Talk with Him, but also listen to Him.

Don't be afraid to voice your own despair and frustration to God. You may have a good deal of anger of your own to ventilate with Him. Speak what is on your heart respectfully to Him. But speak it!

God speaks very clearly to us through His Word. Put the Scriptures before you and meditate on them. Ask God to reveal to you the unmet needs in your son or daughter that might have stirred him or her to anger. God may wait days, weeks, or months before He gives you the calm assurance that you are ready to make your approach. Wait for His peace. In the meantime, God may not only be changing your heart; He may also be changing your son's or daughter's heart, too.

Take the first step. You may have been on the receiving end of a lot of dishonor. Your fragile ego tells you, "It's my kid's job to take the first step. She's the one that administered the bulk of the pain. She should have to initiate peace."

Don't let your flesh do the talking or allow your wounded heart to call the shots. Let God's Spirit take the lead. And remember that holding back only hurts you. The Bible says that refusing to deal with unresolved conflict will block your prayers.⁴

Put forethought into when and where you want to talk with your child. Avoid meeting with him when either of you is unusually fatigued or hungry or in a hurry. Ask God to show you a quiet place that will complement the quiet spirit you want to bring to the rendezvous.

Identify with their pain. People don't get angry and rebel for no reason. There may be a lot of pain churning inside them. Listen more than you speak. Ask questions. Ask feeling questions, such as "How did that affect you emotionally? How did you feel when that happened? How has that altered your attitude?"

Go with the goal of sympathizing before attempting to find solutions. The author of Proverbs reminds us, "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense." I not the time to rehearse the hurts or try to clarify the mistakes your child has made. Nor is it the time to remind him just how much pain he has dished out.

The key at this stage of the restoration process is to communicate that your child has tremendous value to you. Her opinions matter, her feelings matter, and her wounds matter. They all matter ... to you. The Living Bible says, "We must bear the 'burden' of being considerate of the doubts and fears of others . . . Let's please the other fellow, not ourselves, and do what is for his good" (Romans 15:2).

You may have to listen to some accusations and unfounded assaults. Don't get into defending yourself. Let your child get the bile out of his system. When he sees that you aren't rationalizing, explaining, or arguing, it will show him that you are more interested in him than in yourself. And remember, if you have to take some insults you don't deserve, you'll be doing the same thing for your son or daughter that Christ had to do for you.

Own up to the negative part you played. No parent is perfect. And if you got caught off guard by a child's rebellion, you may have done or said things you shouldn't have. Because your child has been so close to you, you may have unintentionally let him down.

Don't try to explain why you did what you did or said what you said. Just ask for forgiveness. Jesus said, "First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5).

Your attitude of humility and contrition can play a huge role in changing your rebellious child's attitude. It's like opening an exhaust valve on her heart. It diminishes her desire to attack you.

Be thorough, humble, and gentle as you confess the part you played in her decision to turn her back on God's best plans. Ask for forgiveness.

Deal with the problem, not the person. It is very important that you go into this time not accusing your children or convincing them of things they did wrong. God will reveal that to them. This is not the time to attach blame to their actions or to rehearse your hurt.

The book of Proverbs reminds us that "a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). Your tone of voice, your posture, and your facial expressions can communicate so much that is in your heart. Just let your child see God's grace and mercy in your eyes and feel it in your voice. The Bible says, "The wise in heart are called discerning, and pleasant words promote instruction" (Proverbs 16:21).

Regardless of whether they use sarcasm, put-downs, condescension, or insults, don't give back in kind. Paul said, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29).

Figure out how you can cooperate rather than compete. You may have to eat some crow and swallow some pride. It's not that you are compromising on absolute principles but rather looking for some common ground where you and your child can both agree. The key here is that you're not trying to win a battle. Your goal is unity, not victory.

Don't aim at resolving; aim at restoring. There's no way both sides of a major conflict are going to agree on everything. Don't even try. Reconciliation isn't about evening scores and fixing all the problems that have occurred. Your goal is the restoration of the relationship between you and your child, not in resolving every difference of opinion. When hearts are brought back together, many of the differences between them become irrelevant.

Not even the best of friends and the healthiest married couples see eye to eye on everything. That's not the goal of love anyway. Grace has room for different perspectives and different interpretations of a situation. Concentrate on bringing your hearts back

together and deal with the differences in the future, once God has brought healing to your relationship.

About the Author:

Tim Kimmel is the Executive Director of Family Matters™ whose goal is to equip families for every age and stage of life. Tim has also spoken for Promise Keepers, Focus on the Family's Life on the Edge Tour, and he and his wife, Darcy, are speakers for FamilyLife's Weekend To Remember conferences. In addition to speaking, he has authored several books, including: Little House on the Freeway, Powerful Personalities, and Raising Kids Who Turn Out Right.