

# HEALING Family Relationships



*A Guide to Peace & Reconciliation*

ROB RIENOW



# HEALING Family Relationships

*A Guide to Peace and Reconciliation*



ROB RIENOW



BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2020 by Robert Rienow

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photo-copy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rienow, Rob, author.

Title: Healing family relationships : a guide to peace and reconciliation / Rob Rienow.

Description: Minneapolis : Bethany House Publishers, 2020. | Summary: “Every family is hurting, and the wounds that come from our relatives can be deeper than all others. Offering powerful, actionable steps, Rob Rienow presents personal stories of various families and key biblical examples that will help readers pursue peace and healing in their home” — Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019054282 | ISBN 9780764235306 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781493424900 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Families—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Families—Religious aspects.

Classification: LCC BT707.7 .R54 2020 | DDC 261.8/3585—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019054282>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations identified *kjv* are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations identified *niv* are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations identified *niv1984* are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations identified *nlv* are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Stories are shared with permission, and names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Cover design by Darren Welch Design

20 21 22 23 24 25 26 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
Healing Family Relationships • Rob Rienow

Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2020 used by permission

To John Diehl,  
my brother-in-law,  
who is home in heaven with Jesus.  
Thank you, John,  
for being a person of peace.

# Contents

Acknowledgments 11

Introduction: *Every Family Is Hurting* 13

1. The Power of Forgiveness 17
2. Healing through Prayer 28
3. Healing through Repentance 42
4. Healing through Listening 57
5. Healing through Acceptance 67
6. Healing through Spiritual Warfare 77
7. Healing through Boundaries 92
8. Healing through Compassion 108
9. Healing through Patience 118
10. Healing through Mediators 133
11. Healing through Mercy 150
12. Healing through the Generations 161
13. A Family Miracle 170

Conclusion: *Reconciliation with God* 179

Notes 188

About the Author 191

# Acknowledgments

A special thanks to my wife, Amy, most importantly for always seeking healing and reconciliation with me in and through our conflicts, but also for helping me improve every aspect of this book. Thanks also to my mother and stepfather, Angie and Jack, for their labor of love in proofreading. I am thankful that this book on family relationships has been a family project.

# Introduction

## **Every Family Is Hurting**

Every family experiences conflict, hurt, and brokenness. There are two big reasons for this reality. First, each of us struggles with sin and character problems. When multiple people with character problems live together under the same roof, you get lots of problems! Second, God created the family as the foundation of all human life and society. Satan and his demons understand this, so a tremendous amount of their firepower is directed toward breaking the relationships between spouses, parents and children, and brothers and sisters.

I believe you picked up this book because you desire healing in one of your family relationships—or perhaps for your entire family tree. There is good news! God loves your family. He intentionally put the members of your family together. He has the power to use the joys and the sorrows of your family’s journey to draw you closer to Him and to one another. In the pages ahead you will not find pat answers or quick fixes. However, you will find encouragement, hope, and principles from the Bible that will give you practical steps toward healing broken

relationships in your family and experiencing more peace in your home.

We need God's power every day in the Rienow home. Amy and I have been married since 1994, and we have been blessed with seven children. That adds up to nine sinful people living under the same roof! Let's run the math on that for a moment. There are thirty-six relationships in our house. I have a unique relationship with eight people—my wife and seven kids. My wife has a unique relationship with seven people, as her relationship with me is counted in my list. When you add it all up, there are thirty-six individual relationships. Do you know what that means? Not a single day goes by where we don't have problems, conflicts, and blowups of one kind or another. We are in daily need of mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

The struggles within our homes are compounded by challenging relationships with parents, in-laws, and extended family. Not only do we have the problems and hurts of today, but many families are feeling the consequences of past wounds and generational brokenness.

I was not born into what anyone would call a healthy family tree. My mother was my father's fourth wife. My father was my mother's second husband. Neither of them knew the Lord when I was born. When I was fifteen years old, my parents divorced due in large part to my father's infidelity. Even through all this sadness and brokenness, God's healing power has been at work. The Lord brought my mother, and later my father, to faith in Jesus. He has blessed Amy and me through all the joys and struggles of our marriage relationship and is now using us to raise the next generation to follow Him.

God is in the business of taking broken things and making them whole. He loves to bring joy out of ashes. It is not too late for my family, and it is not too late for yours. Through Christ we can be reconciled with God and reconciled with one another.



Reconciliation, however, is not a passive process. Many times, while we are struggling with family conflicts and dysfunction, we rightly *desire* for things to be better, and yet we are not taking intentional and *active steps* toward healing. It takes more than good intentions to seek healing in a relationship.

### **Be Patient**

Healing is usually a slow process—especially healing from family wounds. This is not a book of magic formulas or quick fixes. The biblical principles here will give you guidance and encouragement for what may be a long journey. Some of the chapters may not fit your specific family situation, while others may contain the exact biblical principles you need to take a step toward reconciliation. The Lord will not abandon you as you take small steps toward healing.

If you are in an active situation of abuse, abandonment, adultery, addiction, or another major crisis, please call your pastor or local Christian counselor. While the biblical principles and stories<sup>1</sup> we will explore here are meant to provide hope and help to you, I would recommend reading this book alongside other resources specifically focused on those crisis situations.

### **Read with a Friend**

God often uses friends to support us while we heal. Also, our friends can help us with needed objectivity regarding our family conflicts. Sometimes it takes someone from outside the family to offer us truth and clarity. Consider asking a friend, or your small group, to read along and pray with you through this process. Consider meeting periodically to share what God is teaching you and receive encouragement.

## **Prepare for Action**

This book is packed with Scriptures of encouragement and hope, but also action. I pray that as you read, the Lord will strengthen you and enable you to put these biblical principles into practice so that your family, and the future generations that come from it, will be blessed, be filled with peace, overflow with love, and shine for Christ.

## Chapter 1

# The Power of Forgiveness



Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:17–18

A happy, loving, peaceful home. Can you think of any earthly blessing greater than this? I want more happiness, love, and peace in my home. I believe God wants that too. Many people have told me they would trade all their money and success for loving relationships at home.

At the beginning of creation, God carefully and intentionally established the institution of the family. More recently, He carefully and intentionally created *your* family. He chose your parents for you. He chose your siblings for you. At this point, some of you are saying, “God, what were you thinking? I support your whole idea of the family, but the combination of people you put in my house just isn’t working!”<sup>1</sup> The challenges in our families are not a surprise to God. He desires to use all

those struggles and conflicts to draw us closer to Him, and to help us experience His gift of forgiveness and reconciliation.

The purpose of this first chapter is to establish some foundational points about the nature of forgiveness and reconcili-

---

**The challenges in our families  
are not a surprise to God.**

---



ation. In the chapters that follow, we will explore personal and practical ways to pursue peace and healing in our family relationships.

### **The Crucible of Family Relationships**

Your family is like a crucible. A crucible is a ceramic pot into which you put impure metal, and then under high heat the impurities separate from the metal and can be removed. Under the intense heat of family relationships our real character is revealed—the best and, far too often, the worst. Who we are at home is who we really are. Our true nature and character show up when we walk into our home and close the door. Why is it that I can easily go through a whole day at work without losing my patience with my co-workers, but then I lose my cool with the kids within ten minutes of arriving home? Because home life is real life.

Consider how great God's divine plan is. The intense heat of our family relationships draws out the things in our character that need to be sanctified. These ugly traits and behaviors come out at home with those whom God created to love us unconditionally and stick with us no matter what. Isn't that a great plan? Can you imagine if our temper, impatience, and

selfishness regularly came out at work, school, or church? We would not last long at any of those places.

By God’s design, the heat of family relationships brings everyone’s character flaws to the surface. Put bluntly, family relationships reveal a lot of sin. This is part of God’s plan that

---

If we desire greater happiness,  
peace, and love in our homes, we  
must become experts in giving  
and receiving forgiveness.

---



we might grow in faith, character, and godliness. But none of this growth will happen without an essential ingredient—*forgiveness*. If we desire greater happiness, peace, and love in our homes, we must become experts in giving and receiving forgiveness.

### **Bitter Roots**

In Hebrews 12:14–15, God tells us, “*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.*”

The call here is to “strive for peace with everyone,” and if we are to do that with our family members, we must “see to it . . . that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up.” God gives us a planting analogy for relationships and the effects of bitterness and unforgiveness. A family conflict starts with sin. It is a seed of offense and hurt. Sometimes, when we experience hurt and rejection from someone at home, we tell ourselves, “I’ll just take

the high road here and let it go. Time heals all wounds.” While there can be value in choosing not to be easily provoked, it is simply not true that “time heals all wounds.” If you got a deep gash in your arm, you would not look at the open flesh and say, “No problem. I’ll just let that go. Time heals all wounds.” With major wounds, time without treatment leads to infection and far worse.

In the same way, if you plant a seed and then walk away and forget about it, what is that seed going to do? It is going to grow roots, sprout into a plant, and eventually bear fruit. The same thing happens when a seed of hurt is planted in our hearts. Unless we specifically address it through an intentional forgiveness process, it will grow a “root of bitterness.” Notice, then, that a root of bitterness always grows up to do two things. First, what grows from that root is going to cause trouble; and second, it will defile many. To *defile* means “to pollute or corrupt.” We see that second ugly effect in our home on an ongoing basis. Two people get into a conflict, and before we know it, all nine of us are going at it! Bitter roots do indeed spring up to cause trouble and corrupt many. This is why it is so urgent that we deal with the seed and any roots before they produce their destructive fruit.

A few years ago, I was leading Visionary Family Conferences in Malaysia, and while I was there I learned Southeast Asia is home to one of the fastest-growing trees in the world. The batai tree grows so fast it has been called the miracle tree. When a seed is planted, a month may pass without any sign of life above the ground. In two months, the sprout may only be a foot high. However, the tree can grow more than twenty feet in the first season. From there it can reach as high as 120 feet.<sup>2</sup> They say you can hear it cracking as it grows. This type of tree grows very slowly in the early stages. The seed first sends out long, strong roots, gathering nutrients for its eventual burst upward.

A seed of hurt can work just like the seed from this plant. It goes in the ground, and although unseen, it immediately goes to work developing the tree's root system. Then a small sprout emerges, and before we know it we are confronted with a full-size tree. Some of our current family conflicts are the result of seeds of hurt, and roots of bitterness, that were planted long ago.

### **The Call to Forgive**

One of the most powerful Scriptures on forgiveness is also one of the shortest. God says in Colossians 3:13, "*As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*" Here God compares His forgiveness of our sins to our forgiveness of others.

Think of a specific family member with whom you have had conflict. Let's apply this passage to that relationship. Imagine an old-fashioned scale, the type of scale that balances two platforms. Objects can be placed on opposite sides, and the scale will reveal which object is heavier.

While this may not be a pleasant exercise, I would ask you to think about this family member who has hurt you. Imagine a pile on one side of the scale of all the things the person has done to wound you. On the other side of the scale, imagine a pile of all the sins you have ever committed against God. Which side is heavier? To which side does the scale tip? The point here is not to minimize the wounds you have received from your family. For some of us, those wounds are serious and grievous. However, the sins committed against us are greatly outweighed by the sins we have committed against God. In this simple verse in Colossians, God directs our attention to His extraordinary forgiveness of our sins, which He made possible through the death of His Son, and then He calls us to follow His example and forgive those who have sinned against us.

## **Forgiving My Father**

My greatest struggle in family forgiveness was with my father. Our story will be woven through the pages ahead. In the introduction, I shared with you that my father's infidelity led to my parents' divorce. As a fifteen-year-old, I was bitter and angry at what he had done to Mom and how his bad behavior had separated our family. At the time, I had some well-meaning Christian friends who encouraged me to forgive my dad. That was certainly godly counsel. The problem was, it came across to me as overly simplistic and sounded like a spiritual pat answer. While I am sure this was not my friends' intent, it felt to me as though they were saying that hatred, anger, and bitterness were little "switches" in my heart and that I should just go down there (wherever "there" is) and turn them off. I should simply choose not to be angry, bitter, and resentful. If I would just "give it to Jesus," then everything would be fine.

If anger and bitterness were just switches we could "turn off" with the force of our will, that would be an easy choice to make. But we all know reality is more complicated. I was a twisted mess of emotional and spiritual confusion. I didn't feel ready to forgive my father. He had not asked for forgiveness. I did not have warm feelings for him. He had not done anything to warrant my ever trusting him again.

God used my youth pastor, Ken Geis, to shepherd me through this dark time. Over the course of a few months, he shared with me, from the pages of Scripture, the path of true forgiveness. No pat answers. No quick fixes. No rose-colored glasses. Forgiveness is an intentional process that takes place through God's power and grace, and in it God sets us free from bitterness, anger, and hatred, preparing us for the possibility of reconciliation.

Forgiveness and reconciliation is a three-phase process, and I will summarize it here. I don't want you to be overwhelmed.



What can be written in just a few pages may take years for the Lord to accomplish in us. In the chapters ahead, we will consider the small steps God would have us take toward this vision of family healing.

### **Three Phases of Forgiveness**

#### *Phase 1—Forgiveness with the will*

If we are commanded to forgive, then forgiveness must involve a choice. It begins with an act of the will, with obedience to Christ. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. At this point, we are confronted with numerous obstacles. *I don't "feel ready" to forgive my brother. My sister has not taken responsibility for her bad behavior. My mother-in-law has not apologized and asked for our forgiveness. Even if I choose to forgive my dad, he is just going to continue with his toxic behavior.* While all those factors are important, and painful, they are not relevant to this first phase of forgiveness. In this phase, feelings are not your friends and can actually keep you from taking a real step toward healing and freedom. If you wait until you “feel ready” to forgive, you may end up waiting your entire life.

How do we take this first step toward forgiving a member of our family? I encourage you to get alone with the Lord for thirty minutes. Take out a sheet of paper and at the top write, “It hurt me when . . .” What you write on this paper will only be for you and the Lord. In fact, when you are done you will throw the paper away.

Ask the Lord to bring to your mind specific things your family member has done or said over the years that have hurt you. As those things come to mind, write them down. It doesn't matter if your list is long or short. Just write down events and moments that hurt you. When your list is complete, choose through prayer to forgive him or her for each individual item.

My prayer regarding my father sounded something like this: “Lord, I know you want me to forgive my father. Honestly, I don’t feel ready to do it. He has not asked for forgiveness or acknowledged how much he hurt me and our family. But I know you want me to forgive him so that my heart will be free of hatred and bitterness. So . . . I choose to forgive him for cheating on Mom. I choose to forgive him for putting random women ahead of our family. I choose to forgive . . .”

When you are done, throw the paper away (or burn it if that makes you feel better!).

Here is what happens when we take this first step of forgiveness. Imagine an old wooden bucket. Over the years, your family drops in glops of thick mud. These are the hurts and wounds you have experienced. Now, because your bucket is filled to the rim, any time someone in your house drops in another glop—*boom!* You are so filled with hurt and resentment from the past that any new offense causes everything to overflow. When we make the choice to forgive, it is like taking a hammer and smashing a hole in the bottom of the bucket. When we tear the hammer out, a nice big glop of mud comes out with it. Now, instead of 100 percent full of past hurt and resentment, we are only 95 percent full. As I have counseled hundreds of people through this process, many experience an immediate lightening of their spirit. While it may be only 5 percent, they sense a bit of emotional breathing room, something they haven’t felt for a long time.

But we still have a problem. We still have 95 percent of our old bitterness and anger in the bucket. That leads us into phase two.

### *Phase 2—Forgiveness with the heart*

In Matthew 18:35, Jesus calls us to forgive our brother “from the heart.” The heart is God’s territory. He is the one who has the power to change our hearts. So if we want our hearts changed,

we have to ask God to do it. If we want that old bucket drained of all that bitterness, anger, and resentment, we must open our hearts to Him.

The second phase of forgiveness is a daily prayer. Your prayer may sound something like this: “Lord, I have chosen to forgive my dad. It was not easy to do, and I still don’t have anything close to warm feelings toward him. I am afraid to do this because I don’t want to get hurt again. But I chose to forgive him out of obedience. Now I ask you to heal my heart. I don’t want to hate him. I don’t want to be filled with anger and resentment. I don’t want his bad behavior to poison my life. I ask that you cleanse my heart of all those things so that I can be free . . . free to love you, and even free to love my dad.”

I was in phase two for *six years*. It was six years of praying daily, “God, heal my heart. Take away my anger and bitterness.” Slowly and mercifully, God drained and cleaned out my old bucket. Later in our journey together I will share how God ultimately replaced my anger and bitterness toward my father with compassion.

### *Phase 3—Reconciliation*

The final phase of forgiveness is when a relationship is healed and reconciled. But here is a hard truth—it is possible for God to bring us to a place of complete forgiveness without the relationship being fully healed. It may be that the family member who has hurt you never repents, never takes responsibility or changes his or her behavior. Reconciliation is not sweeping things under the rug and pretending they never happened. Reconciliation is not enabling or tolerating ongoing abuse. In the upcoming chapters, we will explore what true reconciliation looks like and how the Lord can accomplish it. Our responsibility before the Lord, and to our family, is to do everything in our power, as far as it depends on us, to forgive and to *seek*

reconciliation. In Romans 12:18 God says, “*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*” We can’t control the attitudes and actions of our family members. They may have no interest in forgiveness or reconciliation. But, as far as it depends on us, we can still seek healing.

### **How Many Times Do I Need to Forgive?**

When a family member does something that hurts our feelings a couple of times, it may not feel like a big deal to forgive them. But what if they do it ten times? Fifty times? Now it is a different story. You may remember that Jesus’ disciples asked Him about this. “*Then Peter came to him and asked, ‘Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?’ ‘No, not seven times,’ Jesus replied, ‘but seventy times seven!’*” (Matthew 18:21–22 NLT). Peter probably thought that forgiving his brother seven times for something was quite generous. Jesus blasted that out of the water when He called Peter to forgive seventy times seven. This, of course, was not meant to be a literal number. *Four hundred eighty-eight . . . four hundred eighty-nine . . . almost there!* It was a call to a lifetime and lifestyle of forgiveness.

I once heard a powerful seminar by Jerry Root, a professor at Wheaton College. He emphasized how the call to forgive is first and foremost a choice we make for our own freedom and wholeness. He shared this illustration: If you have rats in your house, you don’t get rid of them by eating a box of rat poison. That course of action won’t do anything to the rats and might just kill you. Holding on to bitterness and anger hurts us far more than the person with whom we are in conflict. Jerry asked, “How many times should we say no to eating rat poison?”<sup>3</sup> Every time. All the time. “Seventy times seven times.” Choosing forgiveness is choosing freedom.

## **Are You Ready to Take a Step?**

The first step toward freedom is making the choice to forgive. Flip back a few pages and reread the section called “Phase 1—Forgiveness with the will.” It may take about thirty minutes with the Lord for you to take this first step of obedience. However, for those of us who have experienced significant family trauma, it can take years before the Lord brings us to a place where we are ready or feel able to do this. If that is where you are right now, be honest with yourself and honest with God. But don’t stop reading. God loves you, and He will not abandon you. He will make the next step clear, then give you the strength to follow through. I believe the Lord led you to read this book because He wants to begin and accelerate healing in your life.

Perhaps you are ready to take this first action step of forgiveness. Find a quiet time to meet with God and boldly choose to obey His call to forgive. Write your list. Pray through it, then tear it up and throw it away. You have then taken a step on the path toward healing.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. When you were growing up, how did your family handle conflict and family problems?
2. Forgiveness is not easy. What might be holding you back from choosing to take the first step of forgiveness?
3. Which relationship in your family is the most challenging for you right now? Take time and pray specifically for God to bring healing and hope to that relationship.