



The Courage to Forgive

Families of faith find courage to forgive through prayer, humility, apology, and a larger view of their relationships.

By Savannah Lowe, Loren Marks, David Dollahite, Betsy Hughes Barrow

AMERICAN FAMILIES OF FAITH

September 2, 2026

In the 2015 movie “Cinderella,” Ella’s mother tells her to “have courage and be kind.” Ella, later known as Cinderella, endures cruelty yet responds with kindness and forgiveness, inviting us to reflect on our own capacity to find the courage to forgive. Her struggle to forgive her stepmother and stepsisters might be more dramatic than most family [conflicts](#), but it still speaks to even the most ordinary family relationships.

Adapting the counsel in “Cinderella,” we focus on a related invitation that helps families thrive: “have courage and forgive.” In religious families, forgiveness is both a demand and a blessing. Drawing on interviews with members of about 200 families from diverse

racial and religious backgrounds, we uncover why forgiveness remains central to reconciliation and relational healing, despite how challenging it can be.

The findings come from a [study](#) of relational reconciliation in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families in the *American Families of Faith* project. We consider both why families choose to reconcile and the processes through which they do so.

Why Families Reconciled

Participants described three key reasons for reconciliation: (1) their religious beliefs, (2) their ability to see a “bigger picture,” and (3) their own experiences of God’s love and forgiveness.

Religious Beliefs

Many participants said their faith created an expectation that they would forgive and reconcile, shaping their responses to conflicts. Briana, an African-American Christian wife, reflected on how scripture motivated her during disagreements with her husband:

Scripture tells us, you may get angry, but sin not. Because we are different, we’re not going to always agree, but being in the church, that’s a benefit for us. We’re able to hear something in Bible study or Sunday service God is always going to bring a word back to our memory that makes us realize and ask Him for forgiveness. Then we come back and ask each other for forgiveness.

Cynthia, a teenage daughter of Latino and Caucasian Latter-day Saint parents, shared:

Through the hard times ... we’re all kind of going our separate ways, but then I know that each of us think about [our] religion and we’re all like, ‘Yeah, we’re supposed to make up—that’s what we’re supposed to do.’ That’s what we do, and we feel better about it.

Seeing the Bigger Picture

Participants frequently described how their faith helped them see beyond immediate conflicts to a “bigger picture” or a “long-term perspective.” Saul, a Caucasian Jewish

husband, highlighted how religious observances like Yom Kippur encouraged him and his wife to reflect on their relationship:

Both of us always have something [in our Yom Kippur goals] about being a better spouse—stop yelling at each other or whatever we do. There is some sense that a religious observance helps us to keep our focus on the big picture and reminds us of things we want to change. If we didn't do that ritual, I don't think we would have the opportunity to say, 'These are things I want to do better.'

An adolescent daughter named Alecia, a Caucasian member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, explained her perspective:

If we fight here, it's like we fight and get over it in like an hour. Most people in our family don't stay mad at each other for weeks and weeks. Knowing that our scriptures say we are going to be together forever ... that we are bound forever, that we have that bond, fighting here seems trivial when you think about it.

God's Love and Forgiveness

Participants also described experiencing God's forgiveness as another powerful reason to reconcile within their families. Many said that recognizing God's grace in their lives inspired them to extend forgiveness to others. Chen, an Asian-American Christian husband, reflected: "I am a forgiven sinner by God—and if God can forgive me, I can forgive her."

Similarly, Shawn, a Black Baptist husband, connected God's forgiveness with his approach to marital conflict:

We intend that God ... be the center of our marriage, so that our commitment to each other is an outgrowth of our commitment to Him. Also, in the practicalities of living together, needing to exercise forgiveness and grace toward each other, because we receive grace and forgiveness from God—we can extend that to each other.

Having discussed three reasons *why* families forgave, we now turn to four processes that reflect *how* they forgave.

How Families Reconciled

Reconciliation involved four interconnected processes: spiritual, personal, relational, and practical. These processes often overlapped, reflecting a dynamic approach to resolving conflicts.

Spiritual Processes

Prayer emerged as a foundational spiritual practice that guided families toward reconciliation. Participants often turned to prayer to seek clarity and guidance and to regain calm. Angela, an Italian-American Catholic wife, described resolving conflicts with her husband as follows:

In times when we have conflict about anything ... we both are always open to either one of us saying, 'Let's just pray about this.' ... That ability to come together in prayer and ask for each other's forgiveness or God's forgiveness and discernment and direction is something that, again, I don't know how people can get through without having that.

Prayer also helped individuals acknowledge their own mistakes. Yul, an Asian-American Christian husband, said, "Prayer is very helpful. When we have conflicts and arguments, prayer can calm us down God leads us through prayer to recognize our sin and to improve our marriage."

Personal Processes

Participants described self-examination and admitting mistakes as additional personal steps toward reconciliation. These actions often required [humility](#) and introspection. Bekah, a Caucasian Jewish wife, emphasized the importance of personal responsibility:

I think one of the strong points of Judaism is the sense of personal responsibility and certainly in any conflict we've had, it's been really important

to own up to whatever part we have in the conflict. And that's something that comes straight from Judaism.

Apologizing was another key practice. Brent, a Caucasian Jehovah's Witness husband, described how saying "I'm sorry" often helped resolve conflict in his marriage:

I'll have regrets afterward and say, 'Why am I making such a big deal of such a little thing?' And she's having the same feelings of regret. And then we're like, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' And then it's over.

Relational Processes

Participants frequently described forgiving and being forgiven as relational acts that fostered understanding and acceptance. A Caucasian Latter-Day Saint husband named Stewart shared:

I think one of the basic teachings of the Savior is forgiveness. So ... if you want to be forgiven, the Bible teaches that you need to forgive other people. And obviously, we're imperfect and we want to be forgiven, so I think both of us bring that idea or that principle into our marriage relationship. We see that we have to be willing to forgive the other person. I think that influences our ability to ... forgive a little bit sooner than we normally would have, because we know and we believe that forgiving is a good thing.

Parents also modeled forgiveness for their children. Shawn, a Black Baptist father, said:

Our kids ... see Emily and I not always get it right and we have to hash things out, but then extend forgiveness to each other. I've had to ask my kids for forgiveness. So I hope they see that we're real people, we haven't got it all together, but we can accept and love each other because we extend forgiveness of God and the grace of God to each other. And we each know that we need it desperately.

Practical Processes

Families often took practical steps to repair relationships and prevent conflicts from escalating. These steps included communicating thoughtfully, using strategies to de-escalate conflict, and making amends. Aashif, an Arab-American Muslim husband, described how he and his wife approached disagreements:

At the beginning of our marriage, we had so much more conflict. The religion part is that we say, "It is okay, let's stop here and discuss it later. Let's go to pray or leave things for later." We control ourselves by the faith ... so we do not exaggerate the problem and make it like a snowball and make it bigger and bigger and reach the point of disagreement that makes us two parts. We definitely say, "We need to stop, we need to think about it." We have this limit that we do not cross.

For others, practical action meant repairing ruptures quickly. Jeffrey, a Caucasian Christian husband, explained:

While I am quick to explode, I'm also quick to try and heal that explosion. ... I think that a lot of that has been key in our relationship because a lot of times things boil over. Being quick to try and come back and fix the rift is important.

Together, these overlapping processes illustrate the dynamic and multifaceted nature of reconciliation in families. Each step, whether spiritual or practical, contributes to repairing and strengthening relationships.

Our adaptation of the counsel in "Cinderella" to "have courage and forgive" echoes the experiences described by participants in the *American Families of Faith* project. Motivated by faith, a focus on the bigger picture, and the experience of divine grace, these families seek to make forgiveness a core part of their family dynamics. Through prayer, personal accountability, relational repair, and practical action, participants described forgiveness as fostering healing and deeper connections. Just as Cinderella chose kindness over resentment, these families show that the courage to forgive ultimately strengthens relationships and brings peace.

About the authors



Savannah Lowe

Savannah Lowe is a student in the BYU School of Family Life.



Loren Marks

Loren D. Marks, Ph.D. is professor of Family Life at BYU, co-director of the American Families of Faith project, and co-author of *Psychology of Religion and Families*. He is a Fellow at the Wheatley Institute.



David Dollahite

David C. Dollahite, Ph.D., is professor of Family Life at BYU, co-director of the [American Families of Faith](#) project, and co-author of [Strengths in Diverse Families of Faith](#).

Betsy Hughes Barrow

Betsy Hughes Barrow, M. S., MFT, is a PhD Student in Marriage & Family Therapy at Brigham Young University.