

Forgiveness Refocused

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We are all too familiar with Jesus' command of forgiveness. This is arguably one of the most difficult commands of Jesus to obey. When Jesus taught the apostles to forgive as often as is required, they responded, "Lord, increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5). As challenging as this act may be, we are expected to develop forgiving spirits.

The apostle Paul often wrote of forgiveness in the context of love. He told the Ephesians, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). Forgiveness is the expression of kindness. Forgiveness is the result of a heart softened by an awareness of God's forgiveness.

Forgiveness is sometimes misrepresented. Some view forgiveness as the acceptance or toleration of sin. Whenever considering a divine attribute that is intended to be cultivated in us, we must bring God's word into focus. Consider forgiveness refocused.

Forgiveness is Not...

Regardless of the intention, when we mishandle concepts, we will create problems in our relationships. With this in mind, notice what forgiveness is not.

1. Reconciliation. Some think when they extend forgiveness to someone, their relationship is to be instantly restored. Reconciliation is the process by which trust is rebuilt resulting in a favorable relationship. Trust is built by behavior that is proven consistently responsible over time. We may forgive someone, but be unable to trust them. Forgiveness is not synonymous with reconciliation. Forgiveness is a step in the process of reconciliation.

2. Forgetting the past. Some think when they receive forgiveness, the one whom they have hurt must forget the past. Some offenders expect to be treated as if nothing happened in the past. This is an unreasonable view of forgiveness. For example, a fornicating husband can be forgiven by his wife. However, his wife does not have to stay married to her husband (Matt. 19:9). As far as Jesus was concerned, fornication committed by a spouse was betrayal of the highest order. He recognized that trust may not be able to be rebuilt in a marriage where fornication has occurred. Therefore, Jesus permitted divorce for the cause of fornication.

3. Foregoing consequences. Some think when they are forgiven that they should not have to endure the consequences of their sins. Or, some think forgiveness precludes punishment. Neither of these views is accurate.

God is willing to forgive us; however, He does not remove the consequences of our sinful actions. Likewise, when we sin against each other, we will have to live with the consequences of our actions. Additionally, punishment may be part of the consequences of our sin.

For example, if someone steals, he can be forgiven for stealing. However, the thief will have to answer for his crimes. This may involve restitution and or imprisonment. Also, as is the case with most sins, trust will be lost. The Bible teaches that we reap what we sow (Gal. 6:7-8).

Forgiveness Is...

1. Acknowledging sin. To be forgiven, we must first acknowledge our sin. We are to have a forgiving heart; however, until an offender seeks forgiveness he or she cannot be forgiven. For example, John wrote, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Jesus makes cleansing for our unrighteousness possible. However, we will remain defiled unless and until we confess our sin. Confessing our sin produces accountability and shame. This reinforces our need to repent: turn away from a specific sin. Acknowledging sin is the beginning of our reconciliation with God and man.

2. Releasing an offense. In Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, He emphasized the need to release an offender from their sin. This was the primary point of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:21-35). If someone seeks our forgiveness, we must not hold the offense to their account. Extending forgiveness means we must be willing to participate in the process of reconciliation.

For example, consider the saint at Corinth who was living in sin. He was rebuked for his sin in Paul's first letter (1 Cor. 5). Thankfully, he repented and sought the forgiveness of God and the church. In Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, he wrote, "For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him" (2 Cor. 2:6-8).

When an offender seeks our forgiveness, we must respond with comfort and love. If we ostracize the offender, we create a vulnerability within him or her. Our mistreatment could become the cause of the offender being overwhelmed by sorrow. In a weakened condition, the one seeking forgiveness needs to be strengthened.

3. Expression of faith. When Jesus taught the apostles to forgive, they responded by asking, "Lord, increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5). Forgiveness is not a natural response. We often want offenders to suffer for what they have done. Rather than demand justice, we often want vengeance. We may think this is the only way an offender will "learn their lesson."

Being willing to release an offense and share in the process of reconciliation requires great faith. Forgiveness that leads to reconciliation is how God seeks to keep harmony in His family. Unity within God's family is how He maintains His guiding light in the world (John 17:20-25). Do we trust in God's wisdom for keeping peace in His family?

Conclusion

Maintaining loving relationships may be the most difficult task we face in life. Husbands and wives; parents and children; siblings; the local church. Whatever the relationship, keeping it intact and growing is hard. In every relationship, there will be differences of opinion and, yes, even sin. Therefore, in every relationship, forgiveness is key.

Learning to forgive and having faith to share in the painstaking work of reconciliation is how we grow. This is how we become more like the One who died to forgive our sins.