

How to Forgive

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Forgiveness lies at the heart of Christianity. Its goal is restorative reconciliation. Broken relationships between us and our God and us and our neighbor can and must be repaired. As admirable as its goal is, forgiveness continues to be among our greatest challenges. The difficulty of forgiveness has caused us to adopt misguided forms of mercy.

1). Therapeutic forgiveness. We are told to internally forgive to release stress. This does have some value. Stress caused by anger, bitterness, and resentment can destroy us, personally. However, Biblical forgiveness demands we go further than forgiving for our own sake. Therapeutic forgiveness does nothing for the offender. It is solely focused on uplifting the victim.

2). Conditional forgiveness. This is a common approach to forgiveness. This is meritorious forgiveness. We will forgive if... The condition is often "if you change." We expect offenders to grovel and measure up to our standards. We are the judge. This form of forgiveness appeals to our ego. We use forgiveness as a weapon to leverage power. However, this is poisonous to the victims. It breeds self-righteousness and callousness. But, it is also crushing and oppressive to offenders. No matter how hard they try, they can never measure up to the victim's standard. Reconciliation is never realized.

3). Abusive forgiveness. The Bible teaches we are to forgive as often as necessary. But, what role does justice have in forgiveness and reconciliation? For example, a husband gets drunk after work. He comes home and beats his wife. When he sobers up the next morning, he is sorry. He apologizes. The wife forgives him and he goes off to work. After work, the process begins all over again.

This approach to forgiveness negates justice. It does not hold offenders accountable for their wrongdoing. There is no punishment for crime. This approach to forgiveness does not change the bad behavior of the offender. It is crushing and oppressive to the victim.

In summary, each of these paths to forgiveness is deeply flawed. They are corrosive and cruel. None accomplish restorative reconciliation. There must be a better way to forgive.

Internalization & Confrontation

There are two components of forgiveness that are often pitted against one another. However, both are necessary and have a role in forgiveness that leads to restorative reconciliation. There is an internal component and a confrontational component. Notice the following commands of Jesus corresponding to these two parts of forgiveness:

Internalization: Matt. 18:21-22: "Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Confrontation: Luke 17:3-4: “Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.”

These two components of forgiveness are often pitted against one another. For example, some will say, “I don’t have to forgive unless the offender comes to me first.” This conclusion comes from Jesus’ statement in Luke. Whereas someone else will forgive an offender based on Jesus’ statement in Matthew, but never confront him or her to seek restorative reconciliation. So, which approach is correct?

Forgiveness begins as an internal process. The victim internalizes the actions of the offender, but rather than give birth to animosity, the victim can see the greater good. They release feelings of hatred and resolve to show love to their victim. This is often a slow and agonizing process. However, the internal process of forgiveness leads the victim to confront his or her offender.

When a victim confronts an offender, Jesus instructed the disciples to rebuke. Offenders may or may not be aware of their actions. The victim is to express how the offender’s actions caused harm. The offense is made clear. But, the confrontation is not just about the rebuke. Our culture has become quite comfortable giving rebukes. Rebukes are often given in the spirit of vengeance. This is only evidence that the victim has not properly internalized forgiveness. The confrontation is about vengeance. Confrontation is about restorative reconciliation between the victim and offender.

Gospel Forgiveness

The Gospel is our model of forgiveness. The Gospel is about the self-giving love of God shown in the self-giving love of Jesus for a human family turned dead against Them. The Gospel is about the Cross. To put it more succinctly, the Gospel is about love. But, what does this mean, and how does it relate to forgiveness?

The process of internalization and confrontation are demonstrated in the Gospel. First, forgiveness was internalized by Jesus. His internalization began before He came to earth. His intense desire to restore and reconcile us to God was evidenced by Him leaving Heaven and coming to earth. Also, throughout His ministry, Jesus’ compassion and sincerity were displayed. His inner emotions were revealed by His teaching, miracles, and conversations.

Second, Jesus engaged(s) in a confrontation at His cross. Jesus confronted sin with a rebuke on many occasions. However, the cross was/is the most significant confrontation with our sins. The cross is a personal rebuke for our sins. The cross holds us accountable for our sins. However, Jesus’ cross is more than just a rebuke for our sins. The cross is the path to restorative reconciliation (Eph. 2:11-16).

The forgiveness for our sins extended by the Gospel is overwhelming. When the Gospel penetrates our hearts, souls, and minds, we begin to realize how abjectly undeserving we are of

God's forgiveness. But, that is the point. The Gospel lovingly draws us to restorative reconciliation but asks us to offer a similar experience to those who sin against us.

Conclusion

Paul wrote, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). The Gospel is the model of forgiveness that leads to restorative reconciliation. The Gospel reveals the deep, internal love God has for us as sinners and enemies. The Gospel is how God confronts us with our sins.

How we react to those who sin against us reveals what lies deep in our hearts. Rather than rashly confronting our offender with vengeful vindictiveness, internalize your victim's need for restorative reconciliation with you and God. Wrestle with this challenge. Then, confront them in the spirit of the cross of Jesus who died to forgive us.