

Forgiveness is one thing ... **Reconciliation** another

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"He said I am sorry but this is at least the tenth time! I don't know what to do. I am told that it's my Christian duty to forgive and the Lord knows that I've tried. But each time I forgive him, he changes for a little while and returns to the same behavior. I have a gut feeling that I am handling things the wrong way. He never really changes and I just get angry. What should I do?"

Sound familiar? I encounter people all the time who are trying to forgive someone who has repeatedly hurt them. They know it's their Christian duty to be forgiving but they often feel they're either being deceived or taken advantage of. With these feelings, they also sense that they're enabling the selfish behavior of the very one they're trying to forgive.

Is there something wrong with this picture? Is this what forgiveness requires? Is it possible to forgive someone and to withhold reconciliation from him? We must learn the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is always required by God but it does not always lead to reconciliation.

Forgiveness

Jesus clearly warned that God will not forgive our sins if we do not forgive those who sin against us (see: Matthew 6:14-15; Mark 11:25). It's not that we earn God's forgiveness by forgiving; instead, God expects forgiven people to forgive (See: Matthew 18:21-35). Yet forgiveness is very different from reconciliation. It's possible to forgive someone without offering immediate reconciliation. It's possible for forgiveness to occur in the context of one's relationship with God apart from contact with her offender. But reconciliation is focused on restoring broken relationships. And where trust is deeply broken, restoration is a process—sometimes, a lengthy one.

Reconciliation

Differing from forgiveness, reconciliation is a process that is conditioned on the attitude and actions of the offender. While its aim is restoration of a broken relationship, those who commit significant and repeated offenses must be willing to recognize that reconciliation is a process. In many cases, even if the offender confessed his wrong to the one he hurt, and appealed for forgiveness, the offended person could justifiably say, "I forgive you, but it might take some time for me to regain trust and restore our relationship." The evidence of genuine forgiveness is personal freedom from a vindictive or vengeful response (see: Romans 12:17-21), but not always an automatic restoration of relationship.

When forgiveness has to do with minor offenses, restoration does not need to be drawn out. But when trust has been deeply betrayed, forgiveness does not necessarily grant the same level of relationship back. Even when God forgives our sins, He does not promise to remove all consequences created by our actions. Being forgiven, restored, and trusted again is an amazing experience. Yet it's important for those who hurt others to understand that their attitude and actions will affect the process of rebuilding trust. Words alone are not enough to restore trust.

When someone has been significantly hurt and feels hesitant about restoration with her offender, it's both right and wise to look for changes in the offender before allowing reconciliation to begin. This is especially true when the offense has been repeated. Reconciliation requires us to offer a repentant person an opportunity to demonstrate repentance and to regain trust (unless a clear issue of safety is involved).

When a person has repeatedly behaved in a sinfully harmful and irresponsible manner, he must accept the fact that reconciliation will be a slow and difficult process.

The timing of the process of reconciliation: three main considerations

1. The attitude of the offender
2. The depth of the betrayal
3. The pattern of the offense (often repeated offenses)

When an offended party works toward reconciliation, the first and most important step is the confirmation of genuine repentance on the part of the offender (Luke 17:3). An unrepentant offender will resent your desire to confirm the genuineness of his confession and repentance. He might resort

to lines of manipulation. "I guess you can't find it in yourself to be forgiving." "You just want to rub it in my face." "I guess I should expect that you want your revenge." "Some Christian you are, I thought Christians believed in love and compassion."

These lines reveal an unrepentant attitude. Don't be manipulated into avoiding the step of confirming the authenticity of your offender's confession and repentance. Carefully and prayerfully use the seven signs of true repentance listed below. It is advisable (in difficult cases) to seek the help of a wise counselor (only one who understands the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation). A counselor can help the injured person to establish boundaries and steps toward reconciliation that are restorative rather than retaliatory.

It is hard to genuinely restore a broken relationship when the offender is unclear about his confession and repentance. You must be as certain as you can of your offender's repentance—especially in cases involving repeated offenses. Even God will not grant forgiveness to one who is insincere about his confession and repentance. The person who is unwilling to forsake his sin will not find forgiveness with God (Proverbs 28:13).

Of course, only God can read hearts – we must evaluate actions. Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:16a). We must not allow superficial appearances of repentance to control our responses. Displays of tears or appearing to be sorry must not become substitutes for clear changes in attitude and behavior.

Seven signs of genuine repentance

The offender

1. Accepts full responsibility for his or her actions. (Instead of: "Since you think I've done something wrong..." or "If have done anything to offend you...").
2. Accepts accountability from others.
3. Does not continue in the hurtful behavior or anything associated with it.
4. Does not have a defensive attitude about his or her being in the wrong.
5. Does not have a light attitude toward his or her hurtful behavior.
6. Does not resent doubts about his or her sincerity- nor the need to demonstrate sincerity. (Especially in cases involving repeated offenses)
7. Makes restitution wherever necessary.

"If we can restore to full and intimate fellowship with ourselves a sinning and unrepentant brother, we reveal not the depth of our love, but its shallowness, for we are doing what is not for his highest good. Forgiveness which by-passes the need for repentance issues not from love but from sentimentality (John R. W. Stott, Confess Your Sins, p.35).

Ten Guidelines for those hesitant to reconcile

Those who have been seriously (and repeatedly) hurt rightfully feel hesitant about reconciling with their offenders. When your offender is genuinely repentant, however, it's important to be open to the possibility of restoration (unless there is a clear issue of safety involved). Jesus spoke about reconciliation with a sense of urgency (see Matthew 5:23-24). If you are hesitant to reconcile, work through the ten guidelines on the next pages.

1. **Be honest about your motives** - Make sure that your desire is to do what pleases God and not to get revenge. Settle the matter of forgiveness (as Joseph did) in the context of your relationship with God. Guidelines for reconciliation should not be retaliatory.
2. **Be humble in your attitude** - Do not let pride ruin everything. Renounce all vengeful attitudes toward your offender. We are not, for example, to demand that a person earn our forgiveness. The issue is not earning forgiveness, but working toward true reconciliation. This

demands humility. Those who focus on retaliation and revenge have allowed self-serving pride to control them.

3. **Be prayerful about the one who hurt you** - Jesus taught his disciples to pray for those who mistreat them (Luke 6:28). It is amazing how our attitude toward another person can change when we pray for him. Pray also for strength to follow through with reconciliation (see: Hebrews 4:16).
4. **Be willing to admit ways you might have contributed to the problem** – “Even if you did not start the dispute, your lack of understanding, careless words, impatience, or failure to respond in a loving manner may have aggravated the situation. When this happens, it is easy to behave as though the other person’s sins more than cancel yours, which leaves you with a self-righteous attitude that can retard forgiveness (i.e. relational forgiveness). The best way to overcome this tendency is to prayerfully examine your role in the conflict and then write down everything you have done or failed to do that may have been a factor.” (Ken Sande, p. 168). Such a step, however, is not suggested to promote the idea of equal blame for all situations. (See: Matthew 7:1-6) (Italicized words added).
5. **Be honest with the offender** - If you need time to absorb the reality of what was said or done, express this honestly to the one who hurt you. Yet we must not use time as a means of manipulation and punishment.
6. **Be objective about your hesitancy** – Perhaps you have good reasons for being hesitant to reconcile, but they must be objectively stated. Sometimes, for example, repeated confessions and offenses of the same nature make it understandably hard for trust to be rebuilt. This is an objective concern. Clearly define your reasons for doubting your offender’s sincerity.
7. **Be clear about the guidelines for restoration** - Establish clear guidelines for restoration. Requirements like restitution can be clearly understood. Others include financial accountability, holding down a job, and putting away substances.
8. **Be realistic about the process** - Change often requires time and hard work. Periodic failure by an offender does not always indicate an unrepentant heart. Behavior patterns often run in deep channels. They can place a powerful grip on a person’s life. A key indicator for change is the attitude of the offender. While you may proceed with some caution, be careful about demanding guarantees from a person who has truly expressed repentance. If the person stumbles, the process of loving confrontation, confession, and forgiveness may need to be repeated . Setbacks and disappointments are often part of the process of change. Don’t give up too easily on process of reconciliation. Keep the goal of a fully restored relationship open.
9. **Be mindful of God’s control** – “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). “We know that God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). “When you are having a hard time forgiving someone (i.e. being restored), take time to note how God may be using that offense for good. Is this an unusual opportunity to glorify God? How can you serve others and help them grow in their faith? What sins and weaknesses of yours are being exposed? What character qualities are you being challenged to exercise? When you perceive that the person who has wronged you is being used as an instrument in God’s hand to help you mature, serve others, and glorify him, it may be easier for you to move ahead with forgiveness (i.e. restoration)” (Ken Sande, p.165;cf. Hebrews 12:7;I Pet.2:23b; 4:19). (Italicized words added).
10. **Be alert to Satan’s schemes** - In Ephesians 4:27, the apostle warns about the possibility of giving Satan an opportunity in our lives. Significantly, this warning is given in the context of unchecked anger. A few verses later, the Apostle wrote, “ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 4:29-5:2). Meditate on these words and put them into practice! (See also: II Corinthians 2:14; Hebrews 12:15).