

# **Forgiveness is one thing; Reconciliation is 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 so I try to do it. But each time I forgive him, he changes for a little while and then 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? People facing circumstances like this must learn to distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation. Forgiveness is always required by God. 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 others; instead, God expects forgiven people to forgive (See: Matthew 18:21-35). Yet forgiveness is 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 an offender.

An excellent example of this is found in the Old Testament character Joseph. After being betrayed and sold as a slave by his brothers, Joseph was separated from his father for many years. We can be certain that Joseph struggled in prayer over his hardships. “How could my brothers do such an evil thing against me?” “Why did God allow all of it to happen?” Joseph probably worked through several dark nights of the soul. But he arrived at the right conclusion.

Whenever faced with mistreatment, we also have options about how we respond to it. Our choices (bitterness or forgiveness) will then have generational affects! (See: Genesis 50:20). Since Joseph did not have access to his brothers, evidently he had forgiven them long before they confessed their wrongs. If he had not forgiven them, he would have allowed bitterness to destroy his effectiveness for God (Hebrews 12:15).

So Joseph forgave his brothers *in the context of his relationship with God* based on two things:

### **1) God's *authority* as the Judge: "God is judge, not me."**

Joseph's brothers were fearful that he would seek retaliation for the wrong they had done to him. But Joseph said to them: "Do not be afraid, am I in the place of God?" This truth is stated in Romans 12:19, "Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: It is mine to avenge; I will repay says the Lord." (See also: Genesis 45:1-7;50:15-20).

### **2) God's *control* of His life: "God is in control, not my offender."**

Joseph said to his brothers, "You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20). Here Joseph confessed that God (not his offenders) is the Lord of his circumstances. This truth is echoed in Romans 8:28, " And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose. " Joseph accepted the mystery of God's providence by faith. A third basis for forgiveness emphasized repeatedly in the New Testament is:

### **3) God's *forgiveness* of our sins: "God has forgiven me, I must forgive"**

"Forgive each other just as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). When offended, forgiveness means I surrender attitudes of revenge to God in recognition of his authority, providential purpose and forgiveness of my sins. But this can take place in the context of my relationship with God apart from my offender. Forgiveness can occur apart from the confession and repentance of the offender.

### **Reconciliation:**

Differing from forgiveness, reconciliation is a process that *is* conditioned on the attitude and actions of the offender. Its aim is restoration of a broken relationship—which is *often* a process. 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 freedom from a vindictive or vengeful response (see: Romans 12:17-21).

But such forgiveness does not always automatically grant the same level of relationship back—especially when trust has been deeply betrayed. 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 a great experience. Yet it is 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.

When someone has been *significantly* hurt, and feels hesitant about restoration with her offender, it is 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. However, when a person has consistently behaved in a harmful and irresponsible manner, he must accept the fact that reconciliation will be a slow and difficult process. Three main considerations affect the timing of the process of restoration:

1. The attitude of the offender
2. The depth of the betrayal or violation
3. The pattern of the offense (e.g. 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). A disingenuous and unrepentant offender will resent your desire to confirm the genuineness of his confession and repentance. He may 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).

You must be as certain as you can of your offender's repentance—especially in cases involving repeated offences. It is hard to genuinely restore a broken relationship when the offender is unclear about his confession and repentance. 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. Carefully consider the 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.

**For those who are hesitant to reconcile: Ten Guidelines to consider**

It is common for those who have been seriously hurt to feel hesitant about reconciling with their offenders. When your offender is genuinely repentant, however, it is important to open yourself to the possibility of restoration. Remember, 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 situation** -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, *The PeaceMaker*, 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).

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