

Peacemaking for Families

Forgiveness & Reconciliation

by Steve Cornell

He said I am sorry, but it's 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 I've tried. But each time I forgive him, he changes for a little while and then returns to the same behavior. I have a gut feeling I am handling things the wrong way. He never really changes, and I just get angrier. 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 forgive, but they often feel they're either being deceived or taken advantage of. They also have a disturbing sense that they're enabling the selfish behavior of the very one they're trying to forgive. Is this what forgiveness requires?

Is it possible to forgive someone and to withhold reconciliation? We must learn the differences between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is always required by God, but it does not always lead to reconciliation.

Jesus clearly warned that God will not forgive our sins if we do not forgive those who sin against us (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 (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.

It is difficult to genuinely restore a broken relationship when the offender is unclear about his confession and repentance. We should strive to be as certain as we can of our 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. As 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

1. Accepts full responsibility for his or her actions. (Instead of: "Since you think I've done something wrong . . ." or "If I have done anything to offend you . . .")
2. Welcomes accountability from others.
3. Does not continue in the hurtful behavior or anything associated with it.
4. Does not have a defensive attitude about being in the wrong.
5. Does not dismiss or downplay the hurtful behavior.
6. Does not resent doubts about their sincerity or the need to demonstrate sincerity – especially in cases involving repeated offenses.
7. Makes restitution where 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 ~

TABLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why are most people hesitant or unwilling to forgive someone who has wronged them and is seemingly unrepentant?
2. In your personal experience, which of the seven signs of true repentance do offenders neglect most? Why do you think that is the case?