

The Confusing Thing About Forgiveness

By Dale Simpson, Ph.D.

Extending forgiveness when wrongs are suffered in relationships is one of the highest of Christian virtues. We are first called to forgive because we as Christians are forgiven for so much. We are also challenged in the Lord's prayer to think of the process as reciprocal, meaning we are to think of our forgiveness being as deep or as limited as the forgiveness we extend to others. So why is forgiveness such a hard thing for some people to accomplish and feel?

There is frequent confusion in our Christian circles that I think creates unnecessary guilt and feelings of defeat. This confusion also puts people at unnecessary risks. The confusion I am speaking about is the mistake of equating forgiveness with trust. The confusion goes like this: someone wrongs another person and we ask them to forgive them. Then we often expect emotional or even physical vulnerability from the wrong party to the offender. We expect them to be warm and close and trusting again because they have forgiven the offender. For instance when one child mistreats another child, we ask them to forgive the other child. Do we expect the victim to trust the offending party just because they have forgiven them?

For example, if a child hits another child and we have them go through the forgiveness process, the offended child should not be expected to embrace and trust the other child immediately.

If we ask a child to forgive us for our temper, does that necessarily make them trust us? Of course the answer is no because God never commands us to trust any human being as far as I can tell. Trust would be rebuilt if we repent and show that we are more self-controlled when upset. He does tell us to trust Him but trust is something earned as well as given in interpersonal relationships. So when you think about forgiveness and trust, think of them as two different things.

Forgiveness may actually be the easier of the two because it requires only one person whereas trust requires a change on the other person's part and a commitment to more godly behavior. There is an interesting Scripture where Jesus says, "If your brother repents, forgive him". I believe without repentance, which is a true turning away from the misbehavior; trust in that area should not be given. It would make no sense to trust a physical bully who said I'm sorry but had no sincerity or follow-up behavior to change his ways. If he went through the motions and made no change, I would encourage my child to forgive him but to be careful not to make one's self so vulnerable to that child.

Adults complain that their spouse won't "let go" of an issue. Sometimes, this is the problem of a resentful spouse. Other times, it is the spouse expressing mistrust and wanting the offended spouse to take more responsibility for their sin than they have to that point. "I said I'm sorry; isn't that enough?" comes the reply "No, that is not enough for what you did. A change in your behavior would show that you take it seriously."

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