

Pk's Perspectives... Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Reconciliation and forgiveness are closely related, but separate issues. Reconciliation can never be realized without authentic forgiveness being offered and received; forgiving someone, however, is only the first of many steps in the initiation of reconciliation.

Lewis Smedes writes in his book Forgive and Forget: "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you." Holding unforgiveness, holding a grudge imprisons you. Forgiveness sets you free. Forgiveness is an internal, spiritual process where you work through the hurt in your prayer closet, gain an understanding of what happened, rebuild a sense of safety, and let go of the offense. The offending party is not necessarily a part of this process.

On the other hand, reconciliation is an interpersonal process where you dialogue with the offender about what happened, exchange stories, express the hurt, listen for the remorse, and begin to reestablish trust. It's a much more complicated, involved process that includes, but moves beyond forgiveness. Forgiveness is solo, reconciliation is a joint venture. Said Smedes: "It takes one person to forgive, it takes two people to be reconciled."

As followers of Christ, our model for forgiveness and reconciliation is God's demonstration of love through Christ's incredible sacrifice, and the necessity of our honest response (confession/repentance) to God's invitation to be reconciled. Christ's atoning death purchased the forgiveness of God for all of sinful humanity and offers a path leading to reconciliation; all who reject Christ also reject any hope of reconciliation with God. It is the convicting work of the Gospel that brings us to the moment of honestly crying out to God, "I'm a sinner, I've offended You, I'm sorry, and I desperately desire the forgiveness You offer through Jesus." This model would be nigh to impossible for us to emulate if not for the Holy Spirit!!

As followers of Christ we follow this same pattern of forgiveness/reconciliation in our wounded human relationships. First, we choose to forgive just as God chose to forgive us in Christ; we settle the issue of forgiveness in our hearts and minds. Remember - the one who chooses to forgive always assumes the loss. A common question at this point is, "Does forgiveness mean I expunge the infraction from my memory? Is that even possible?" Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember; we change the memory of our past into a hope for our future. Frederic Luskin says, "It's actually remembering differently. While lack of forgiveness is remembering something with an edge or a grudge or a sense of injustice, forgiveness means remembering it more benignly, with compassion. It involves some purpose of moving ahead, rather than just being stuck in the past."

Second, we gently express to the offender - by phone, letter, conversation - our forgiveness, our love, and our desire for open and honest conversation leading to reconciliation. This is all you can do...it is now at the point where you have to trust and expectantly wait on the Holy Spirit to accomplish the heart work of bringing the offender to the place of honest apology and acceptance of your offer of reconciliation. Waiting for a genuine response of repentance is HARD! While waiting, you drench them with love but from a distance - through prayers, notes of encouragement, gentle reminders that forgiveness has been settled, and reiterating the invitation to reconcile. Always remember: reconciliation is not going back to the way things used to be...that would be called capitulating; reconciliation is moving forward, redefining the relationship, and building hedges of protection against a return invasion of the hurtful behavior patterns.

Authentic forgiveness is unconnected to the offender's willingness to apologize and/or pursue reconciliation. Forgiving someone does not mean you must once again expose yourself to their toxic behavior; forgiving someone does not indicate that you now accept or condone their toxic behavior. Forgiving someone brings healing in your life, and can open the door to reconciliation when/if the offender genuinely repents. Yep - relationships can be messy but don't give up! Reconciled relationships are a beautiful thing to experience. Cya in Sunday School (9:15) & combined Worship (10:30), PK.