

How Do You Define Forgiveness in the Absence of Repentance?

by Diane Stelling

Some words in the English language are very straightforward in their meaning and easy for us to understand. Other words have many nuances and connotations associated with them that cause people to interpret these words in a myriad of different ways. Forgiveness is one such word, a word that has much “baggage” associated with it. If I were to ask ten people what forgiveness means, I would not be surprised if I received ten different answers.

I have come to believe that there is a disconnect between what people attribute to the act of forgiving and what the actual definition of the word really is. “Forgive” is used many times throughout the New Testament in many significant passages, from the Lord’s Prayer to the words spoken by Jesus on the cross. The Greek word used in these passages for “forgive” is “aphiemi” and the literal translation is “to let go.” It is an act of taking something away from, not of giving something to someone, and therein, I believe, lies the confusion.

I am not a theologian, nor do I pretend to be a Biblical scholar, but I do know what I hear over and over again about forgiveness when I present workshops and seminars regarding the spiritual concerns of abuse victims. Therefore, I present this information more as a reporter relaying how the information by theologians and pastors is being interpreted by the average lay person. If it is not correct, then we need to examine how we can better explain this concept so that we are all on the same page, since this is a deep theological issue that affects everyone on a daily basis, regardless of their educational level or Biblical knowledge.

In many Christian denominations, when people attend church they confess their sins, either individually or corporately. They are told to leave their sins and burdens at the foot of the cross, to transfer those burdens to Jesus, who has already borne the weight of our sins. This being accomplished, the pastor announces absolution, or forgiveness, in the name of the triune God.

But this act has certain other connotations for the lay person. It is an indication that God is extending undeserved grace and mercy, in a sense bestowing the gift of forgiveness upon the repentant sinner. Even further, the act of absolution causes the parishioner to believe they have been restored completely in their relationship with God, that they have been fully pardoned of their sins before God and that the sins will no longer be remembered by God. The interpretation is that these are things God is “giving” to the sinner by the act of forgiving.

The natural extension of this logic, then, is that when we forgive another individual, we need to fulfill all of the above-mentioned criteria that we perceive God has demonstrated to us through forgiveness. The former scenario is also one in which the sinner confesses his sins, but what

happens when the sinner is unrepentant? What happens with forgiveness then? The actions required to forgive as God forgives us seem insurmountable and unattainable for many victims, producing stress, guilt, and a sense of failure.

In many abuse situations, victims never receive acknowledgment or an apology from their abuser. How can victims move on and not let the vicious acts perpetrated against them and the person who did them control and hinder their ability to live and enjoy their lives to the fullest? I have heard repeatedly contradictory phrases such as “you must forgive and forget” and “you shouldn’t forgive unless the person apologizes first,” which cause tremendous amounts of confusion, frustration and guilt for abuse victims. There are no simple answers, but some clarity can be achieved about the act of forgiving in the absence of repentance by examining forgiveness from the perspective of its definition, “letting go.”

“Letting go” implies that you are going to disregard what was done, to let it alone, to take the debt for that particular sin away from the person who wronged you. It does not imply the act of “giving” or bestowing anything to the person who sinned against you. Using the example of a simple monetary debt that someone owes you, it is the equivalent of erasing that debt from your ledger so that the person no longer owes you money. It implies that you are taking the burden of the debt away from the person. It does not mean that you are excusing the act that was done, just that you will overlook it, not speak of it anymore or dwell upon it. Notice that “letting go” is something that the victim can do, independent of whether or not the perpetrator apologizes.

This does not necessarily mean that when you “let go” you restore a person completely in relationship with you, nor should you necessarily trust that person until and unless they demonstrate repentance. Restoration and reconciliation are processes separate from forgiveness. If someone owed you money and you “let go” of the debt, but they never apologized or made any attempt at restitution, then it would be unwise to completely forget what was done or to trust that person again until they demonstrated true contrition and repentance.

In the case of abuse, I do not think it is possible for victims to forget the atrocious acts done to them, but by “letting go” they can hopefully put the memories in perspective, allowing them to fade over time, so that they no longer hurt or significantly impair a victim’s quality of life. By keeping hurtful memories in the forefront, victims allow those memories and the perpetrator to continually control their emotions and be a negative filter for their outlook on life and people. How a victim proceeds to “let go” is a long and individual process.

Forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation are each processes. Victims are responsible for their journey towards forgiveness, perpetrators are responsible for their journey towards repentance, and both parties are responsible for their journey towards reconciliation if and when forgiveness and repentance are achieved.

Victims should not feel pressured into reconciliation with an abuser they have forgiven. Abuse is a cycle that continues because of the ability of a victim to infinitely forgive and reconcile with an abuser without any attempt on the part of the abuser to repent. If a victim reaches the point of being able to forgive an abuser, that helps the victim move forward and it also signals the abuser that the door is open for restoration of the relationship once repentance occurs by the abuser. The victim should not trust the abuser until and unless repentance occurs, and forgiveness itself does not automatically imply reconciliation.

It is my experience that forgiveness is a “loaded” word that has many meanings and criteria associated with it. I believe that the issue is extremely complex partly because we have assigned many more implied actions to forgiveness than are actually required to achieve it. Like many complex concepts, however, there is a simple kernel of truth at the heart of the issue. “Letting go” is never easy for traumatic hurts. My faith helps me with this when I realize that the ultimate judge is God. I needn’t worry about unrepentant abusers because the Lord will mete out eternal justice and mercy to them. I now understand and appreciate more fully the phrase “let go and let God.”