

# Forgiveness: Some Common Myths

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Sometimes we just plain don't want to forgive someone. It could be because we find retaliation appealing. (Making someone suffer when they've treated us badly does bring a curious satisfaction.) Or perhaps we think that our unforgiving attitude will teach them a well-needed lesson – it's for their good (so we tell ourselves).

But often we don't want to forgive because what we've learned about forgiveness seems somehow off-base, like we're doing something we shouldn't be doing. And we may be entirely right.

## **Pseudo-Forgiveness**

Over the years, since we were little kids, we've learned a lot about pseudo-forgiveness – *Smile and tell them you're sorry!* – but you're not sorry at all. That can't be how God forgives, all mouth and no heart. If forgiveness means pretending to be nice or glossing over an act that ought to be addressed then forgiveness equals phoniness and that can't be what God means when He tells us to forgive. That's pretty obvious.

But other popular ideas about “forgiveness” sound true, more accurate, quite believable. They seem to make sense, yet we find them impossible to follow. How do you forget a cousin's cruel remark? How do you ignore the reality of a co-worker's arrogance? If that's what forgiveness requires then we're doomed to failure. We're also left feeling guilty, frustrated, and discouraged. But we condemn ourselves unnecessarily. These “failures” aren't failures to forgive; they're failures to follow misleading “forgiveness myths” that, in actuality, describe what forgiveness isn't. Let's look at a few of these myths.

## **Myth #1: Forgiveness Means Forgetting**

We've all heard “forgive and forget” – it's such a familiar phrase we never question its validity. Instead we blame ourselves for our inability to forget the wrong we've suffered. But what if forgiveness doesn't require forgetting? That would change a lot.

God remembers what we've done... and so do we. You may object and point out that God “remembers our sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12 and 9:28). But those verses refer to heaven, where there is no sin. On earth it's clear that God doesn't forget our sins. How else could He show us where we need to repent? Likewise, mercy on judgment day would be meaningless if there was no memory of our failures. God remembers; He just doesn't count our sins against us (2 Corinthians 5:10 and 5:19). If we're to imitate God, we need to do the same.

## **Myth #2: Forgiveness Means Ignoring Our Hurt**

No, not at all. Minimizing or burying our painful experiences doesn't lessen their impact on us – it just renders us unable to get beyond them. Forgiveness doesn't occur in the abstract. Forgiveness is a response to something that actually occurred. If we pretend something did not occur we aren't forgiving, we're avoiding reality (a practice that never has worked very well).

## **Myth #3: Forgiveness Means Ignoring Justice**

I occasionally have indulged in detailed fantasies about giving someone what they deserve. I'm actually quite good at it. You probably are too. And part of our desire for justice is legitimate. Sin is supposed to be punished rather than ignored. That part we have right. What we get wrong is thinking that *we* are the ones to carry out the penalty. We think vendettas are our personal responsibility; we assume that nothing will be set right unless we do it.

Forgiveness isn't ignoring justice; forgiveness turns justice over to the One who does it best. Vengeance belongs to God (Romans 12:19). We aren't to ignore justice, God doesn't. But we are to accept that justice was fulfilled when Jesus died. He died so we can have a living intimacy with God. That's the good news of the Gospel.

#### **Myth #4 Forgiveness Is Bilateral**

This myth assumes that forgiveness is a two-person event, something that stays incomplete until the other person understands how they've wronged us and repents of their deed. Nope.

Forgiveness is a change in our own hearts. It's unrelated to any change in the offending party. It's independent of whether they see or repent or confess, whether they acknowledge their wrong or have any regrets, whether they accept our offer of love or even care about it. It's a unilateral process.

Forgiveness sometimes follows the offender's repentance (Luke 17:3-4) and at other times precedes it (Luke 23:34a). Either way, it's a decision we alone make, independent of the other person's response. Forgiveness invites repentance; it doesn't guarantee it.

#### **Myth #5: Forgiveness Means Reconciliation**

Not necessarily. God offers forgiveness to everyone, but not everyone accepts and is reconciled to Him. Reconciliation, unlike forgiveness, *is* bilateral, because reconciliation is a joining of two formerly distant hearts. Forgiveness and reconciliation are two different things.

I'm not saying that we're never to associate with someone who is unaware of how badly they've treated us or worse, knows but doesn't care. But there's a certain emptiness to such associations and often considerable pain. Associating with an unrepentant person may at times be a foolish, unhelpful, unnecessarily dangerous choice. At other times associating with an unrepentant person may be precisely what God calls us to do. I've experienced both. Each decision needs to be made carefully and with godly counsel. What's important is that our hearts hunger to choose what will work for the offender's good.

#### **A Question to Ponder**

Which forgiveness myths have you heard (or believed)?

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Look for three more forgiveness myths in next week's post.

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