

Forgiveness may not mean what you think it does



What does it really mean to forgive someone? This is one of the most frequent questions my wife and I get on our call-in radio program.

We all know that Jesus wants us to forgive “seventy-seven times” (Mt 18:22), but we tend to be a little fuzzy on what forgiveness does and doesn’t actually require. We often feel that if we still feel hurt or upset about an offense that perhaps we haven’t forgiven the offender. Or, that it is somehow unforgiving to hold the offender responsible for healing the wound they caused or fixing the damage they have done. All of these mistaken beliefs actually make forgiveness feel like a bigger burden than it’s meant to be.

St. Augustine taught that forgiveness simply involved the willingness to surrender one’s natural right to revenge. That is to say, when you stop wanting to hurt someone for having hurt you, or don’t want bad things to happen to them because they hurt you, you have forgiven them. Period. That’s really all forgiveness requires.

Granted, sometimes, that’s hard enough. But it’s still a lot easier than pretending an offense hasn’t occurred or forbidding ourselves from feeling hurt when someone does a hurtful thing. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “It is not in our power to not feel or to forget an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming hurt into intercession” (No. 2843).

It is possible to forgive someone – that is, to refuse to wish or inflict pain or insult on them for having hurt you – and

still feel pain or anger, or a host of other feelings. It is likewise possible to forgive the offender but still need them to make things right in some way. Forgiveness is a function of love. To love someone is to work for their good. Letting people do bad things without requiring them to learn from their mistakes and heal the damage they have done is not working for their good. It is not love. It is aiding and abetting.

Seen through this lens, it becomes clear that we can even forgive someone but not be reconciled to them. Again, according to Augustine, reconciliation is the “tranquility that comes from right order.” In other words, reconciliation can only happen when there is mutual commitment on the parts of both the injured party and the offender to make things right again. Forgiveness allows the offended person to extend the invitation to reconciliation, but it is up to the offender whether they are willing to accept that invitation or not. The offended person is not obliged to make the relationship “right” all by themselves by pretending things are fine even when they are clearly not. Forgiveness is ultimately a gift we give ourselves. Reconciliation is a gift two people give to each other by committing to the process of healing the damage that was done.

For reconciliation to occur, the offender needs to be able to do three things: feel it, own it, fix it. First, they need to be able to show that they feel the depth of pain they have caused. They can't just say the “magic words” – for example, “sorry” – and make it go away. They have an obligation to empathize with you and show they understand the pain their actions caused.

Second, they need to own it. They offer a half-hearted, “I'm sorry, but ...” or, “If you didn't have such a thin skin, or such high standards, or if you knew how to take a joke.” They need to be able to look you in the eye and say, “You had a RIGHT to expect more from me.”

Finally, they need to demonstrate their willingness to fix the damage they have caused and explore ways to avoid causing similar damage in the future. Ideally, they will propose some of their own ideas for how they will make things right and avoid giving similar offense in the future, but either way, they also have an obligation to be willing to do whatever reasonable things you might ask of them to heal the damage and prove their remorse. The offended party can't hold the injury over the offender's head, or perpetually move the goalposts, but they can insist that whatever needs to be done to repair the damage actually gets done.

The unwillingness of the offender to do any or all of these things does not require the offended person to try to make things right on their own. It only means that, in such a case, forgiveness may be extended even if reconciliation can't happen.

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