

What We Talk About When We Talk About Forgiveness

What's one of the most common reasons we give for not forgiving others?

If you're like many people, you might have answered that our forgiveness implies approval or tolerance of the behavior.

We read about it, talk about it and teach it. Yet for most of us, forgiving others is one of the most difficult things we can do.

A recent conversation with a friend reminded me that one reason we may find it difficult to forgive is because we misunderstand what it is we're forgiving.

What if I told you we are *not* forgiving the sin?

Remember what David wrote in the Psalms? "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak, and You are blameless when You judge" (Ps. 51:4).

Even the Pharisees of Jesus' day understood that God alone can forgive sin. That's why they pitched a fit when Jesus proclaimed the forgiveness of sins. In Luke 5:18-25 (ESV), we read:

Now some men brought in a bed a man who was paralyzed. They searched for ways to bring him in and lay him before Him. When they could not find a way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his bed into their midst before Jesus.

When He saw their faith, He said to him, "Man, your sins are forgiven you."

The scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is He who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

When Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered them, "Why question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," He said to the paralyzed man, "I say to you, rise, take up your bed, and go to your house." Immediately he rose before them, and took up that on which he lay, and departed to his own house, glorifying God.

Yes, only God can forgive the actual sin. And since Jesus is God, He demonstrated that He also has the authority to forgive sin.

Perhaps that's one reason we struggle with forgiveness. We're trying—and failing—to forgive something that we don't have the right to forgive. We justify our failure to forgive by saying we don't want to communicate a tolerance for the sin. Or that it's not right for the other person to "get away with" what they've done.

So where does that leave you and me? If we're not forgiving the sin, then what are we forgiving?

Consider that we are forgiving the *offense*. The offense against our rights. Against our values. Or our family. Against whatever it is that we hold dear.

Matthew 6:14-15 tells us, "For if you forgive men for their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men for their sins, neither will your Father forgive your sins."

By forgiving the offender, I'm saying my rights are less important than freedom from bitterness and resentment. I'm saying my job is not to forgive actual sin, but the offense

against me. The offense that has trespassed *my* rights.

Could it be that the act of forgiveness is the ultimate act of admitting that I am not God? That in giving up my right to be angry and resentful, I am submitting to the authority God has to forgive sins?

Could it be that when we forgive others, we're admitting an awareness that we are desperately in need of the same forgiveness? Because, let's face it, it's just about impossible to go through life without giving offense, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Sooner or later, we will need others to forgive our offenses against them.

Even so, forgiveness is not something we can even begin to do in our own strength. We need the prompting of the Holy Spirit to motivate us to surrender our rights (Gal. 2:20). And we need the power of the Holy Spirit to humble ourselves to actually forgive (John 14:15-17). Finally, we need the Holy Spirit's comfort to know that God is a just judge (Gen. 18:25) and we can trust that He will make all things right in the end.

There's a freedom in forgiving others. Freedom in knowing God is God and we are not. Most of all, freedom in offering what we, ourselves, need.

What are your thoughts? {eo}

Ava Pennington is a writer, speaker and Bible teacher. She writes for nationally circulated magazines and is published in 32 anthologies, including 25 *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. She also authored *Daily Reflections on the Names of God: A Devotional*, endorsed by Kay Arthur. Learn more at .

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