The Art of Forgiveness
Forgiving the unrepentant…? – Session 5

Five plausible reasons not to forgive people who do not say they are sorry:

1. If a person who wrongs us does not repent, he doesn’t deserve to be forgiven.
   Of course, he does not deserve to be forgiven. Nobody does. And all the tears in Neptune’s ocean do not earn him the right or make him deserving. Forgiving under any circumstance is only for people who don’t deserve it. Being sorry for the wrong we did does not earn us a right to be forgiven. How could it? There is no such thing as a right to be forgiven. Forgiving flows always and only from what theologians call grace – unearned, undeserved favor. Grace that is earned is not grace at all. In an odd way, if we deserved to be forgiven, we would not need to be.

2. Forgiving someone who does not repent is just too hard to do.
   If someone comes on his knees, eyes red from weeping, heart in hand, groaning to all that he is the lowest of louses, and running over with promises never to do it again, it is easier to forgive him than if he struts in like a peacock. Forgiving the hardheaded, dry-eyed unrepentant is hard in deed. And yet, when we realize that forgiving is the only remedy for the pain the offender left us with, the only way to heal the hurt he caused, we have an incentive to forgive no matter if his heart is hard as flint. In short, forgiving unrepentant people is a no-lose opportunity - difficult to do but with a harvest of healing.

3. To forgive an unrepentant person is not fair to ourselves.
   Yes, we must be fair to ourselves. But are we fair to ourselves when we prolong a bitterness that is shriveling our spirits? Are we fair to ourselves if we let our abuser or betrayer or deceiver decide for us when we may be healed of the pain he caused? I plead the victim’s right to heal herself, and if forgiving someone who never says he is sorry is the way to do it, she is unfair to herself if she declines.

4. To forgive an unrepentant person is dangerous; if he feels no sorrow for what he did, he is likely to do it again.
   The fear that forgiveness will encourage the culprit to repeat his wrong is rooted in a misunderstanding of forgiveness. Forgiving is not tolerance. Forgivers are not sentimental fools. Nor does forgiving a person mean that we invite him to get close enough to hurt us again. When we forgive someone who is not sorry for what he has done, we do not forget, and we do not intend to let it happen again.

5. The Bible says that we have to repent before we can get forgiven.
   The apostle Peter had just finished his keynote speech at the birth of the Christian church. People asked him: “What should we do?” And Peter told them: “Repent, and be baptized . . . so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:38 NRSV). It is clear that, when we are dealing with God, we have no right to expect forgiveness unless we ask for it in sorrow. But does this mean that we should not forgive anyone unless he is sorry for what he did?
I think not. Let me offer two reasons why I do not think the apostle was saying that we should forgive only after the person who hurts us repents for what he did.

1. We are dealing in this biblical passage with people who want to be forgiven. We are not dealing with people who need to do the forgiving. The question is whether anyone has a right to expect to be forgiven if he does not repent. The plain and simple answer is no: A person who wrongs God should not expect God to forgive her unless she is sorry for the wrong she did. So much for that.

2. When people want to be forgiven by God, they want to be reunited with him at the same time. But God wants reunion with integrity. And repentance is nothing but simple honesty about what we did to break our connection with God. This is why a person cannot expect to be forgiven by God unless he first repents.

The same goes for us mortals. Nobody can expect to be forgiven and reunited with the person he wounded unless he repents of what he did to hurt her in the first place. No one should ever presume on our forgiving and certainly not on our willingness to restore a relationship that he destroyed. But when we are the ones who have been hurt, we simply cannot afford to wait for the other person to come to his senses before we begin healing ourselves.

The person who hurt us should not be the person who decides whether or when we should recover from the pain he brought us.

Reflect and discuss.

Six good reasons for forgiving people who wounded us even though they do not seem to care—six reasons to forgive people who never say they are sorry:

1. Forgiving is something good we do for ourselves; we should not have to wait for permission from the person who did something bad to us.

2. When we forgive someone who does not say he’s sorry, we are not issuing him a welcome back to the relationship we had before; if he wants to come back he must come in sorrow.

3. To give forgiveness requires nothing but a desire to be free of our resentment. To receive forgiveness requires sorrow for what we did to give someone reason to be resentful.

4. We cannot expect to be forgiven without sorrow for the wrong we did. We should not demand sorrow for the wrong someone did to us.

5. Repentance does not earn the right to forgiveness; it only prepares us to receive the gift.

6. A wounded person should not put her future happiness in the hands of the person who made her miserable.

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