

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Forgiveness

As fellow missionaries, they were your closest friends. They had prayed with you for the last six months as you developed a plan to reach the people in your city. It was successful beyond your wildest dreams. But now they had a book coming out about your plan—claiming it as their own! Of course, you are glad for the success in reaching people, but how could they have done that? Can you ever forgive them? Even if you can forgive them, can you ever forget it, or can you ever really trust them again? Let us consider some of these questions.

How could they have done that?

Being hurt by someone you love is inevitable. Sometimes the people hurting you do it intentionally, planning it carefully and then carrying out their plot. Other times they do something without forethought. Most often they do not intend to hurt you and do not even know they have done so. The Old Testament clearly distinguishes between intentional and unintentional sins.

Having your brother or sister turn on you is as old as the human race itself, as found in the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. It occurred repeatedly in the book of Genesis, as shown in the life of Joseph and his brothers who first planned to kill him, but then decided just to sell him as a slave. How could they have done that?

Sometimes you are the one who is amazed at what you do. The first missionary, Paul, wrote about this in himself in Romans 7. He just did not understand why he did what he did. He did not do the things he wanted to do,

but he did the things he hated. Paul was saying, “How could I have done that?”

What if I can’t forgive?

When praying the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. Following that prayer in Matthew 6, Jesus said that if we forgive people who sin against us, he will forgive us. However, if we do not forgive others, he will not forgive us. He illustrated this in Matthew 18 with the parable of the unforgiving servant when Peter asked about how often to forgive. The one not forgiven was the one who did not forgive.

The goal is always forgiveness, but the time it takes to reach that goal may be very different for different offenses and for different people. You must be careful not to rush into a premature, shallow forgiveness, in which you say, “I forgive you,” but still really hold the offense against the other person. Generally the more serious the offense, the longer it takes to reach genuine forgiveness. If someone “borrows” an everyday dish without asking and breaks it, forgiveness may come quickly. If the dish was a treasured family heirloom, the forgiveness may take longer. If the offense is sexual abuse as a child or adolescent, the forgiveness may take years or decades. We must not rush into premature forgiveness.

People often cite Joseph’s clear forgiveness of his brothers in the last chapter of Genesis as an example of how we should forgive. Remember that it was more than 20 years after the offense when he first saw his brothers, and the first time he saw them (Genesis 42) he pretended to be a stranger and spoke harshly to them. By the time they came the second time, he was ready to begin to deal with forgiveness.

What if I can’t forget?

You will probably never actually forget. Forgiveness does not mean that you are no longer able to remember the incident. Some people say we should “forgive and forget.” Others quote Jeremiah 31:34 and Hebrews 10:17, pointing out that God forgives and forgets.

Of course, this does not mean that God literally cannot remember that the events ever happened. If that were the case, God would no longer be all knowing. He still knows that the sin occurred, but he no longer holds it against the person. He does not develop amnesia, but he will never bring that sin up again.

Of course, not having the memory constantly occurring as it once did may be a result of forgiveness, but it is not the means of forgiveness. Forgiveness literally means to “give up” or “give away.” The dictionary defines it as “to give up resentment against” someone. Forgiving someone frees you from being consumed with resentment about the offense, but it does not erase the memory. You may need that memory to avoid future abuses from an unrepentant person. God does not erase our memories, but he redeems them so that we can get on with our lives.

Joseph pointed out that his brothers had intended to harm him, but that God used it for good. He had not forgotten what happened 40 years earlier, but he no longer carried the resentment and wanted to punish them (Genesis 50).

What if I still don’t like them?

You may never really like people who have hurt you so deeply. Forgiveness and

reconciliation are two different things. Forgiveness means that you give up your resentment and your desire to punish the other person, not that you necessarily become best friends.

You may say, “Doesn’t God want us to love everyone?” Of course, he does. Such is commanded in “love one another as I have loved you.” But the kind of love that can be commanded is *agape* love. It is the kind of love in which you make a decision to be committed to the best interests of that person. It does not necessarily mean that you are good friends (*phileo*). Unfortunately, the English language does not have adequate words to express the meanings of these Greek words, so we use the word “love” for both.

God commands you to be committed to the best interests of all persons, not to be best friends with them all. After some time, you may grow to like the person and become good friends, but that will not always be the case. Notice that Joseph was kind to his brothers, reassured them, told them not to be afraid and said he would provide for them and their children. He did not say they were his best buddies, and he clearly favored Benjamin over the others, the ones who sold him into slavery.

Even though you may not be the best of friends with others who have hurt you, you can still work effectively with them. Being willing to forgive others benefits you as much as it does them. It frees you from carrying that resentment, freeing you to do God’s work.

What if they don’t ask for forgiveness?

This is a difficult situation. It is complicated to try to come to terms with

someone unwilling to accept responsibility for actions that have offended or hurt you. We are often tempted to become resentful.

Unfortunately, carrying around the resentment and bitterness is a heavy burden, and that burden is on you, not the one who offended.

You may be carrying such a load related to someone you will never see again; that person may even be dead. Being willing to forgive, being open to forgiving when they repent, or forgiving before God even if you cannot see the person lifts the load from you.

Thus, granting forgiveness, or turning the final judgment to God, is often more for your own sake than for those you forgive. Joseph granted forgiveness to his brothers even though they did not ask for it. The burden was taken from him, and he could get on with his life. If you continue to carry that load, many times you are granting the offender the power to continue to make you miserable and limit your effectiveness.

Why is it so hard to ask forgiveness?

The basic problem is usually pride. You have to admit that you have done something wrong, and that is very difficult to do. Many people find it much easier just to sweep the matter under the rug and say that the offense did not really matter that much, but it does. Until forgiveness is sought, something remains to hinder any relationship.

Since they move so often, some missionaries find it easy to just leave, thinking that the offense will be forgotten. However, that is not the case. The matter will still be there in the relationship whenever they meet again. Asking, giving, and receiving forgiveness are especially important parts of

saying good-bye when leaving the field to return home.

Why is it sometimes so hard to accept forgiveness?

This also often goes back to pride. We often feel like we must do something to earn forgiveness. Forgiving others is against our concept of justice in which people should suffer for the wrong they have done. Forgiving others does not come naturally to humans. However, God gives forgiveness to everyone who asks because Christ paid the debt through his suffering on the cross. The Bible clearly states that forgiveness is by grace, through faith, and even that is God's gift to us. Although we can repent and make restitution, we can never earn our forgiveness, only accept it.

In Genesis 50 Joseph's brothers had not really accepted his forgiveness 17 years after Joseph had granted it to them. They were still carrying feelings of guilt and fear for an offense that was forgiven. They asked for something (forgiveness) that had been granted nearly two decades before.

What if they won't forgive?

You may ask forgiveness, but the other party will not grant it. This is also a difficult situation. You must genuinely request forgiveness, make restitution as far possible, and continue to demonstrate acts consistent with repentance. If the other persons will still not grant forgiveness, you have done all you can. The burden is now on them. You may still feel some of that burden, but God does not hold you responsible.

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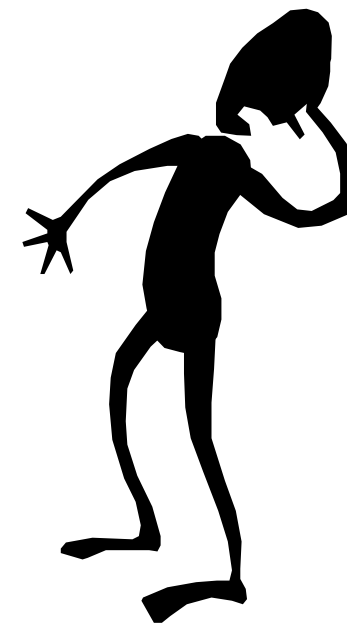
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