

What Forgiveness is NOT

By Stephen Arterburn

Forgiveness is not:

It is not condoning the behavior. Once we understand that the act of forgiving does not compromise our moral standard by condoning the offense, we are in a position to forgive even the worst of sins. To forgive is not saying "What you did is OK." It is saying, "The consequences of your behavior belong to God, not to me." When we forgive, we transfer the person from our own system of justice to God's. To forgive is to recognize that the wrong done against us is a debt of sin, and all sin is against God. Therefore, in forgiving, we transfer the debt from our ledger of accounts to God's, leaving all recompense in His hands.

It is not forgetting what happened. It would be foolish to erase from mind some of the wrongs done to us. If we were to do so, we would never learn from our experiences and would walk right back into the same or similar situation, only to face the same disappointments. What *can* eventually be forgotten are the raw emotions associated with the event. When we forgive, the terrible memories and feelings gradually diminish.

It is not restoring trust in the person. Trust is earned. It is something we give to those who deserve it. To blindly trust someone who has hurt us is naïve and irresponsible. If a person is a thief, it is foolish to give her a key to your house. If he is a pedophile, you would be derelict to hire him as a baby-sitter. We can forgive people for the wrong they've done without extending to them an open invitation to do it again. It is foolish to trust an untrustworthy person.

It is not agreeing to reconcile. Forgiveness is a necessary step toward reconciliation, but reconciliation is not necessarily the goal of forgiveness. In fact, there are some situations when reconciliation is *not* a good idea. Reconciliation requires forgiveness, but forgiveness can be done without reconciling. If the other person is unwilling to reconcile due to bitterness or denial, we can still forgive. It is silly, if not dangerous, to press for reconciliation when the other person is unrepentant, unchanging or unwilling.

It is not doing the person a favor. In Judaism, forgiveness is not required unless repentance is demonstrated and pardon is sought. But Jesus raised the standard of forgiveness to a higher level. According to him, we are to forgive even those who remain unrepentant. Forgiveness benefits the giver at least as much as it does the receiver, so we extend it whether or not the person asks for it.

It is not easy. Forgiving is difficult enough when it involves a onetime transgression. It verges on the impossible when the offense is ongoing. Such circumstances require an *attitude* of forgiveness, not simply an *act* of forgiveness.