

Resolving to Seek Christian Reconciliation

Just about the time I get accustomed to writing the correct year on my checks, a new calendar gets hung on the wall.

With the year entering its last moments, thoughts turn to self-evaluation. How am I doing? How can I do better? What must change in the coming year?

Pondering that in my own life, “pursuing reconciliation” comes to mind.

Here’s the dilemma: As Christians, we should be eager, even zealous, about seeking reconciliation when relationships become fractured. But as men and women who struggle against sin, we tend to seek reconciliation reluctantly.

There are a variety of reasons for our reluctance. Likely the biggest reason is *pride*. Seeking reconciliation is a major pride-breaker. It means confessing my sins to someone else – and thereby handing them ammunition for future disagreements. It means admitting that I’m something other than perfect, which is seldom enjoyable. And it means dropping whatever ammunition I have against them, thereby losing my “advantage” over them.

None of that is easy. It makes us reluctant to reconcile – slow to approach those who have offended us, or who seem to be offended by us.

Yet God won’t permit us to be satisfied with that.

Have I been offended? “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone” (Matt. 18:15). Our Lord offers no exemption for pride, no free-pass for major offenses, no allowance for delays. Just “If X, then do Y” – always. And delayed obedience is, in fact, disobedience.

What if I’ve offended another – perhaps unintentionally? “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24). We were created to worship God – but I must delay even this in the interest of being reconciled with my brother.

But he’s sinned against me *so often* – how could I *possibly* forgive *again*? “And if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” (Luke 17:4). Peter – perhaps pondering this precise statement – inquires: So is seven the limit? And Jesus says: “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22).

Seventy times seven. Lord, increase our faith!

Yet as difficult as pride makes it to forgive, *experience* should make it *easy*. How often have I prayed, “forgive me my debts, as I forgive my debtors”? How often have I asked: “O Lord, forgive me once more for the sins I’ve committed”? How *countless* the times I have turned to the Lord shame-faced, recognizing that I failed again in areas that I thought I had mastered!

Will I now begrudge my neighbor the grace of forgiving his *one* sin? Will I demand that he pay his tiny debt *immediately*, after the King has forgiven my debt of untold millions? Jesus warns: “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15).

This forgiveness stuff is no small matter.

But what is it, precisely, to forgive?

Start with what it’s not.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. We can’t forget at will. Trying to not remember the offense is like trying to not yawn while the folks on either side of you yawn and stretch: the harder you try not to, the more surely you fail.

Nor is forgiveness merely something you say. If I say, “I forgive you,” and then I go around telling everyone what you’ve done and how offensive it was – well, whatever I’ve committed, it wasn’t forgiveness.

True, Biblical forgiveness has three components – one internal, one external, and one a combination of the two.

The internal part involves our attitude toward the offender. I must refuse to hate the one who has offended me, choosing instead to express love toward him or her (Matt. 5:43-45). This is the love that covers over a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8). I must refuse to become bitter against my neighbor.

A second part to forgiveness involves a promise both internal and external. True forgiveness means forgiving in the way that we have been forgiven (Col. 3:13) – which is to say: self-sacrificially (Eph. 4:32); and without resentment or a keeping track of wrongs done to us (1 Cor. 13:5-7). Put in a different way, Christian forgiveness is a promise to never again raise the forgiven matter to the offender (manipulation), to others (gossip), or to ourselves (resentment).

And the third part to Christian forgiveness is external. Christ calls us not merely to forgive in our hearts, but to seek complete reconciliation that leads to rebuilding the damaged relationship. That’s why Jesus calls us to confront and (lovingly) rebuke the one who offended us (Luke 17:3). Unless he knows of his sin, he cannot

repent of it; and without repentance by the offender, there can be no true forgiveness before the Lord (Acts 2:38; 3:19).

Ultimately, our goal is to restore unity. Sin and offense create a rift between neighbors, and within the body of Christ. Christian forgiveness reunites what has been torn apart and rebuilds what has been torn down.

That's not easy. In fact, it's nothing short of resolving to treat one another in the way that God has treated us.

But that's precisely the sort of resolution that delights God, who calls us to imitate Him, as beloved children who "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:1-2).