

WHY ME? HELP AND HOPE FOR THE HURTING

Appendix E – When Forgiveness Is Rejected

This section is devoted to the thorny issue of following up on failed attempts at confrontive forgiveness. The failure indicates that there has been no repentance on the part of the individual who has sinned and is in need of being forgiven. Yet repentance is the key to any horizontal resolution of conflict between two people. When the guilty party repents and the victimized party forgives, true reconciliation can take place. Jesus states the process by means of a simple formula recorded in Luke 17:3-4 –

“Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

In an ideal world, this methodology would be consistently employed, with conflict resolution always being achieved. Of course, in an ideal world, there would be no sin and no need of forgiveness. There would be no strife, eliminating the necessity for making peace. However, this world is anything but ideal. As a result, the above formula is not only necessary but vulnerable to breakdown at several points. For example, we may fail to rebuke the guilty individual, who if rebuked, may refuse to repent, or who if repentant, may not be forgiven. In each case, the process unravels and falls short of the desired goal: reconciliation. However, for our purposes, the assumption is that the hurt individual who needs to forgive is ready to do so. At the same time, the guilty party who needs to repent refuses to do so. At that point, is it possible for the one who is hurt to process their anger and be healed of their hurt by means of the God-given resource known as forgiveness? The answer is yes. This is how.

First, the hurting individual cannot overlook the lack of repentance, and forgive anyway, in order to achieve a pseudo-reconciliation. Such a desperate attempt at restoring a relationship makes a mockery of the Biblical concept of forgiveness. If God does not forgive unrepentant sinners, but remains in a state of alienation toward them – even though He has made forgiveness available to all through Christ – then we should follow His example, rather than pursuing a path of peace at any price. This is why churches are instructed in Matthew 18:17 and 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15, to maintain a posture of alienation toward the guilty and unrepentant believer.

In the case of two individuals, the process is the same, with the key point of comparison found in what Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3:15 – “Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” What a strange balance to maintain: alienation without animosity. How? By reverting back to the covering forgiveness spoken of by Christ in Mark 11:25-26. After attempts at confronting forgiveness have failed, through no fault of our own, due to a lack of repentance on the part of the one guilty of inflicting the hurt, we have no other choice than to process our anger vertically with God, as described in Mark 11. Why? So that our relationship with God is not hindered by an unforgiving spirit, because of any unresolved anger in us (Matthew 6:14-15). In following the precept of Mark 11:25-26, we can maintain a positive relationship with God, even though there continues to be a lack of reconciliation with the one who hurt us. We are then free to move on with our life for Christ, even though our sincere attempts at reconciliation have failed. In such an instance, the priority must be maintaining a successful/obedient walk with the Lord.