

RESOURCE:

HOW DO WE RECONCILE?

We can look at Matthew 5 and Matthew 18 as two different approaches—Matthew 5 is what you do when you believe you have (or may have) wronged someone else, while Matthew 18 is what you do when you believe someone has wronged you. But it is also possible to look at these passages as giving us two stages of the normal reconciliation process, because seldom does just one party bear all the blame for a tattered relationship.

Almost always, reconciliation is best done by *both* repenting *and* forgiving—by both admitting your own wrong and pointing out the wrong of the other. If we put these two approaches together, we can create a practical outline like the one that follows.

When You Have Sinned Against Another (Matthew 5)

- Begin by confessing anything you may have done wrong.
- Begin with yourself. Even if you believe that your own behavior is no more than 5 percent of the problem, start with your 5 percent! Look for what you have done wrong, and collect the criticism.
- Start by listing whatever you think you have done wrong and by asking the other person to add to the list (of what he or she thinks you have done wrong or contributed to the breakdown in the relationship).
 - Example: “I’m here because I don’t like what has happened to our relationship (or—if the term applies —“our friendship”). It appears to me that there is a problem between us; am I wrong?” Or “Here is what I believe I have contributed to the problem—where I’ve wronged you and contributed to the relationship problem. From your perspective, how else have I wronged you or contributed to the relationship problem?”
- If you are almost totally “in the dark” about what went wrong, you may have to simply offer to listen.
 - Example: “It appears to me that there is trouble between us and I have offended you. Am I right? Please tell me specific ways I have wronged you. I am really ready to listen. Honest.”
- Listen well to the criticism you’ve invited—what is clear and specific? Eventually (to do so too quickly may seem defensive), ask for as many specific examples as possible.
 - Example: If they say, “You are bullying,” you need to discover what actual words or actions or tones of voice strike the other person as “bullying.”
- Pray silently, asking God to give you wisdom and to sense his love for you. Assume that He is speaking to you through this whole thing (even through a flawed person) and is showing you ways you should be more careful or change.
- Beware of being defensive. Don’t explain yourself too quickly, even if you have a good answer or can show the person he or she was mistaken. Be sure that you don’t interrupt or keep the person from expressing frustration. Show sympathy even if you were misunderstood.

Adapted from Tim Keller’s *Forgive*

FORGIVE

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HOW DO WE RECONCILE? (CONTINUED)

- Always ask, “Is there anything else? I really want to know!” In stressful situations, it is easy for someone to hold back some of their complaints or concerns. Get them all out on the table or you will be doing this again!
- Make it safe to criticize you—support individual criticisms with, “That must have been hard; I see why you were concerned.” Look beneath the criticism for needs in the critic that may be there and with which you can be concerned.
- Respond to the criticism by repenting. Please, forgive me for _____. (This is your repentance, confession of sin.) Admit it without excuses and without blaming any other circumstances. Even if there are exaggerations, extract the real fault and confess it. Even if only 10 percent of the problem is you, admit it. Don’t just “apologize” but ask for forgiveness.
- Provide plans for changing your behavior. If you can think of something, say, “And here is what I am going to do to change so I will not do such a thing again in the future.” Ask him or her if there is anything you can do to restore trust. (If you really cannot see any validity in any of the criticism, ask if you can get back to the person later after checking with others about the criticism.)
- Avoid over-expressions of just “how terrible I feel over what I’ve done!” A confession like this can be a way to (a) relieve one of guilt feelings (the confession is a kind of atonement/punishment) or (b) get people to provide sympathy.
- On the other hand, avoid being deadpan, lighthearted, or even flip. These can be attempts to preserve pride, technically fulfill the requirement, or force the other person to let you off the hook without your showing any real contrition or emotional regret at all.
 - o Most of all, do not make a confession that is really an attack. “If I upset you, I am sorry” is in this category. It means, “If you were a normal person, you would not have been upset by what I did.” Do not repent to the person of something that you are not going to repent to God for nor take concrete steps to change.
 - » “Please, accept my explanation for _____.”
 - » “Here’s how I see it. Can you see that my motive or meaning was very different from what you inferred?”
 - » “Can you understand my point of view? Can you accept that I could have perceived this very differently and had the motives I am describing?”
 - » “Is there some way, since we see this issue so differently, that we can avoid hurting each other like this again?”

Real repentance has three aspects:

- confession to God
- confession to the person wronged
- the offering of a concrete plan for change that avoids the sin in the future (cf. Luke 3:7–14)

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HOW DO WE RECONCILE? (CONTINUED)

When Another Has Sinned Against You (Matthew 18):

(If necessary) address any ways that the other person has wronged you. If you have done all of the above, very often you will find that this approach elicits a confession from the other person without your having to ask for it or extract it! This is far and away the best way to get reconciliation!

- Be clear and specific. If the other person is not forthcoming, begin: "From my point of view, when you _____, it made me feel/impacted me by _____. I think it would be far better for all concerned if instead you did this: _____."
- Allow for explanation/clarity. "I am coming to ask you if my understanding is accurate or distorted. Correct me if I am wrong. Could you explain what happened?"
- If the other person offers an apology, grant forgiveness—but avoid using the term unless it is asked for! You can express a sentiment about letting go without using the phrase, "I forgive you"—that may sound humiliating. (Remember, God knows the state of forgiveness in your heart despite the words you use)
 - o Examples: "Well, I won't hold this against you" or "Let's put that in the past now" or "Think no more of it."
- Have a loving and humble tone. Tone of voice is extremely important. Overly controlled and forced "nice" and calm may sound patronizing and be as infuriating as fury.
- Don't resort to flattery and fawning syrupiness or fall into abusive or angry tones.
- Be aware of your body language and what it communicates to the other person.
- Attack the problem, not the person (e.g., not "You are so thoughtless" but "You have forgotten this after making repeated promises that you would not").
- Suggest substitutes and solutions for alternative courses of action or behavior. Make sure all criticism is specific and constructive.
 - o Never say, "Don't do this" without saying "Instead, do this."

In the heart of the discussion, you may discover some underlying goal or need that the other person is trying to meet that could be met in more constructive ways. Keep in mind differences in culture. Another culture may consider your approach incredibly disrespectful and demeaning when you think you are being respectful.