

TWO RESPONSES TO SIN

Virgil Warren, PhD

Sin involves two issues that correspond to the two sides of a sin situation. There is the doing of a moral wrong and the reacting to a moral wrong. Because sin takes place between people, there is the person who does evil and the one who suffers evil. In resolving that circumstance, repentance happens on one side and forgiveness happens on the other.

What happens, though, when there is no repentance? The basic principle seems to be that *“where there is no repentance there is no forgiveness.”* What people have done in the past they would do again unless they have changed, or “repented.” Without a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of resolve to behave differently, they are the same as they were when they sinned. Since “sin separates,” the separation continues because nothing has changed.

Under the lofty expectations of Christian living, people can feel bad for not forgiving people even though the people have not changed. Forgiving them would seem to condone their behavior; yet it feels wrong somehow to be “unforgiving.” In response to that dilemma, we observe that the Greek word for “forgive” (ἀφίημι) has a word picture that includes two ideas rather than just the one we call “forgiveness.” In addition, there is *“letting go of something”* instead of forgiving someone. The word picture in ἀφίημι is “to throw something away.” In that light, we offer these comments about appropriate responses to sin.

Scripture distinguishes between kinds of sin and whether past sin continues to be “reckoned.” There is not only the sin; there is the reckoning of it as well. There are (a) sins of ignorance, which we do not hold against people—at least as long as they are ignorant (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60; 14:16; 17:30; cp. Romans 2:12-13; 3:25). When they become aware, they become responsible; they become responsible for separating themselves from it by repenting of it. Ignorance situations include “secret faults” (Psalm 19:12), faults the doers are not aware of.

“Sins of ignorance” implies a difference in the moral quality of an act. It is people’s hearts that determines whether other people view their acts as sin and continue to “hold it against them.”

There are (b) sins done under the pressure of the moment’s temptation. Doers may repudiate them later when the pressure is off and they “come to their senses.” John’s “sin not unto death” (1 John 5:16-17) appears to be a case in point.

There are (c) sins that people later repent of, in which case—for relationship purposes—it is as if they had not done them. The past cannot be changed, but its impact on the present can be removed, and life together can continue as before.

There are (d) sins with a high hand (Number 15:30; cp. Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26). They are deliberate; the people know what they are doing. If all manner of sin except “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” is forgivable (Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10), then presumably deliberate sin is forgivable too on the condition of repentance later. Under this last category belongs characteristic sin, or sin unto death, for which people do not pray for other people’s forgiveness (1 John 5:16). If doers depart from such

a pattern, then the nature of it changes to (c), sins later repented of. Evidently this category may include “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” as well. “*Repenting of it in the next world/age*” is not effective unto divine pardon because the period of condition has run out.

On the other side of the interpersonal relationship, the meanings of *aphiēmi* apply. The other person—or an “on-looker/bystander against whom the same behavior could be addressed”—has two options. Forgiveness is the most ideal because it leads to a resolution and implies a change of heart and resolve on the sinner’s part. Sin separates; repentance reconciles.

The other reaction is “letting go of it,” not reckoning it against a person in the first place or overlooking it. This applies notably to sins of ignorance, but it applies as well to all categories of sin, regardless of degree or kind, motive or consequence. “Letting go of it” is involved in every case where someone is wronged.

The purpose of forgiveness is to restore social relations; the purpose of “*letting go of it*” is to preserve the emotional well-being of the one wronged. Forgiveness benefits the sinner and the self; “letting go of it” benefits the self. Forgiveness responds to the other person; “letting go of it” responds to the other person’s act. “*Letting go of it*” contrasts with forgiveness because it is not aimed at restoring relationship. “Letting go of it” provides an alternative to allowing sin to “eat on us,” “get us down,” “turn us sour.” Psychologically it puts the person above the circumstance—like going two miles when compelled to go one. It subjectively gets rid of the act so it cannot continue to do us harm, but it does not get rid of the broken relationship caused by the sin.

“*Letting go of something*” is a lesser response than forgiving, but it is indeed something significant. “*Letting go of it*” is not the same thing as “letting it go” in the sense of letting it pass as if it does not matter. It is not appropriate to treat unrepentant people as if they did not do anything wrong. Such a reaction would only embolden them to keep it up. Letting it go does not call them to responsibility; it does not maintain the standards of rectitude and the conditions of personal relationship; it can even endanger the other person’s well-being, character, and reputation. The more extreme the sin the more serious these results may be.

“*Letting go of it*” can in fact lead to forgiveness since it creates a void of relationship the other person may come to see as a meaningful loss. Letting go of it can have the value intended in church discipline and disfellowshipping. Letting go of it can lead to (repentance and) forgiveness also because sinners do not get a sense of gaining the upper hand; they can see that they are the loser by having lost the positive things that were there previously. “Letting go of it” does not condone the doer’s act, but it does not forgive it either.

As a postscript, there are practical considerations in any real sin circumstance. (a) Sometimes we cannot be sure what the motive behind the act was. The person sinned against is not always privy to whether it happened out of ignorance or under temptation’s duress. Under such conditions people can let it go without breaching their responsibility to the standards of rectitude and at the same time not communicate to sinners that they can continue doing as they please without it making any difference.

Another practical consideration, especially in light of the previous one, is how to proceed in rebuilding the relationship. It makes sense to renew it the same way it was established. First, people that are wronged can venture a certain degree of trust; and when that proves positive, they can increase the trust as the other persons proves trustworthy.

Such a pattern provides a degree of self-protection against wolves in sheep's clothing, as Jesus' saying goes. It contrasts with acting as if nothing had happened and avoids the risk of being misused again. A forgiving person's good will can be taken advantage of. The sinner can "*pull the wool over other people's eyes.*" By "letting it go," people are using good sense and better judgment not to open themselves up to misuse and abuse again. They are being "*wise as serpents and harmless as doves*"; "*they are not casting their pearls before swine.*"

christir.org