

Does Forgiveness Require Reconciliation?

What is reconciliation?

Reconciliation is the restoration of a broken and estranged relationship. The focus of reconciliation is on rebuilding a workable, healthy relationship. Reconciliation is not always possible because true reconciliation requires healing, hard work on the part of both parties. It requires actions on the part of more than one person. Staying in a relationship with someone does not mean reconciliation has taken place.

What is required for true reconciliation?

For both parties:

- Forgiveness
- Change and restorative actions of both parties
- Willingness to work toward a healthy future
- Work toward regaining mutual trust

For the offending party

- A commitment to make the relationship a priority
- Consistent and ongoing change in behavior that honors the other person and the relationship
- Acceptance of responsibility of the offenses without excuse
- A focus on repentance, making amends, acts of repair and compensation demonstrating remorse and contrition. An apology alone is necessary but not sufficient.
- Internalizing deep contrition and true repentance which requires lasting positive change in behavior and attitude

What is the difference in forgiveness and reconciliation?

In true reconciliation, the relationship is restored. Trust, mutual love and respect are essential ingredients when rebuilding a functional relationship. Forgiveness is a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward someone who has harmed you, regardless of whether or not they deserve your forgiveness. Reconciliation requires forgiveness and lasting change of heart and behavior but forgiveness does not require reconciliation.

The Difference in Forgiveness and Reconciliation	
Forgiveness	Reconciliation
Does not always lead to reconciliation	Forgiveness must take place to reconcile
Requires only one person	Requires two or more people
Is granted to the other party without condition	Is earned, not granted
Does not require trusting the offender	Requires work toward restoring mutual trust
Does not require offender to take responsibility	Offender must take responsibility for actions
Occurs despite excuses or rationalization	No excuses or rationalization for offenses
Occurs without change or commitment to change on the part of offender	Offender commits to and actively changes offending behavior
Does not require that offender make amends or attempt to repair or compensate	Offender must make amends with acts of repair
Repentance and remorse are not prerequisites	True repentance and remorse is required

What initial steps do I take if I want to reconcile and restore the relationship?

- Ask God for direction and to help you find the words and actions that will begin the process of restoration.
- Address the hurts and wounds with the offender as soon as possible. Jesus encouraged reconciliation with a sense of urgency (Matthew 5:23-24).
- Talk to the offending person with a humble attitude and address the offense to see if he or she is willing to accept full responsibility. Appearing to be sorry must not become a substitute for sustained changes in attitude and behavior. Jesus said “You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act” (Matthew 7:16).
- Model firm, direct but appropriate boundaries and behavior when discussing the offense. Yelling, name calling or verbal assaults only escalate the situation (Ephesians 4:29,31).
- If you have forgiven the hurt, tell the offender that he or she is forgiven unconditionally. If not, address the reasons this has been elusive. Forgiveness is necessary for complete reconciliation.
- Take responsibility for any actions on your part that could have contributed to the problem. Relationships are rarely broken due solely to the actions of one person. Ask yourself if you were responsible for setting poor boundaries, being retaliatory, not communicating appropriately or for other actions that made the situation more difficult. Remember that everyone is responsible for his or her own behavior regardless of the actions of others. When we are hurting and wounded, especially if the offenses are relentless, it is difficult not to feel angry or defeated but it is important to take the high road.
- Tell the offender what you need for him or her to make amends. This is best done in person but can be addressed in a letter or email with discussion to follow. Be very specific about what must take place before you consider restoration of the relationship.

- If you or the offender are not willing to make necessary changes, consider relationship or family counseling.
- While working toward restoration of the relationship, avoid reconciling too early before enough time passes to determine if change is genuine, consistent and lasting.
- Maintaining appropriate boundaries is critical to relationship recovery. Change in your behavior toward significant others or family members who offend may not be well received. But continuing to allow oneself to be the target of inappropriate behavior sends the message that it is OK to offend, making forgiveness more difficult.
- Recognize that God is in control and will give you strength. (Romans 8:28)

When is work toward reconciliation not an option?

Reconciliation is not always appropriate when there is irreparable damage to the relationship or the offender is not willing to make the necessary steps for restoration. In such cases forgiveness does not require reconciliation. In the case of family and marital relationships, proximity does not equal reconciliation. Being in the same room or living in the same household does not mean reconciliation has taken place.

Reconciliation may not be an option if:

- The offender is not willing to take full responsibility for his or her actions without excuse or qualification.
- The offending party holds you responsible for his or her behavior or problems.
- The offender continues to be emotionally, physically, or sexually abusive and your safety and the safety of your family is at risk.
- The offender is not willing to be honest about past behavior or any other aspect of their interactions.
- In marital or dating relationships, your partner is unfaithful without renewed commitment to faithfulness.
- The offending party is involved in compulsive or addictive behavior such as alcoholism, sex addiction, gambling, drug abuse, etc. and refuses treatment. Such behavior typically does not change without treatment and typically has serious negative impact on relationships.
- You are doing all or most of the work to reconcile the relationship and the other party refuses to engage in the reconciliation process.
- The offender's behavior does not change or change is not maintained over time.
- Your personal and spiritual values and boundaries are violated or not supported by the other party.
- The offender is not willing to do what is necessary to make amends and/or restitution for his or her actions.

There may be situations where reconciliation is not possible due to unrepentant unfaithfulness and abuse or ongoing safety concerns. These can include:

- Unfaithfulness on the part of a partner
 - Emotional and/or physical affair
 - Sexting through phone, email, social media or other means
 - Porn involvement or addiction
 - Child sexual abuse
- Physical abuse, domestic violence
- Marital rape or an otherwise abusive sexual relationship
- Physical or emotional child abuse
- Chronic, toxic emotional abuse that seriously compromises one's emotional and spiritual health
 - Domination, manipulation and control
 - Verbal assaults
 - Threats of physical harm
 - Chronic humiliation
 - Withholding or limiting financial support

What about reconciliation in marital relationships?

Troubled marriages pose complex issues and decisions regarding reconciliation. God's perfect plan is for marriages to be a lifelong commitment (Mark 10:9; Ecclesiastes 4:12). Sometimes marriages fall short of his perfect plan and divorce is the outcome. Forgiveness of one's partner is required by God but does not always lead to reconciliation. Reconciliation may not be possible when one party is not willing to work on or remain in the marriage or because the offending behavior is so destructive.

The scriptures outline God's ideal and perfect plan for marital behavior:

- The marital coupleship should be the primary relationship in the family with healthy separation from parents and others (Genesis 2:23-24; Ephesians 5:31).
- Partners should treat one another with respect (1 Peter 3:7; Ephesians 5:21-24; 1 Timothy 5:1-2) and with kindness and forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32).
- True love comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5; 1 Peter 4:8).
- Marital faithfulness and sexual loyalty should be maintained. Your bodies are for each other and become one flesh in a sexual relationship (1 Corinthians 6:13-15; 18-20; Psalms 2:7; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4).
- Guard your heart because it determines the course of your life (Proverbs 4:23). Consider carefully your path because it will define you and your relationship. Mark out a straight path and don't get sidetracked by evil (Proverbs 4:25-27).

- Don't be dishonest or devious (Proverbs 4:23-26).
- Never associate with the wrong crowd, those engaging in poor conduct and those lacking Christian values (1 Corinthians 15: 33; Proverbs 13:20).
- Avoid being mismatched with unbelievers because there is no spiritual common ground (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

What if I'm faced with the possibility of divorce?

- Talk to God in prayer and ask others to pray for you. Pray for you and your spouse for changes of heart and movement toward reconciliation (Luke 6:28). Pray also for strength and guidance (Hebrews 4:6). Ask God to show you his will in your situation.
- Be honest about your motives. Make sure your desire is to do what pleases God and listen to his will. Be still enough to hear. Exodus 14:14 tells us, "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."
- Study God's word regarding marriage, divorce and God's grace and forgiveness.
 - You may find scripture based books on the subject helpful such as:
 - *Divorce and Remarriage* by Dr. Rubel Shelly
 - *Grace and Divorce* by Dr. Les Carter
- Determine if all avenues of recovery and reconciliation have been exhausted including martial counseling.
- Discuss your decision with a trusted Christian counselor or mentor.
- Remember that God will never leave your side no matter what your decision may be.
- Recognize that only you can make the final difficult decision with diligent study and prayer—it is between you and God, not family, friends or church members. Only you and God know the specific details of the martial situation in its entirety.

Thought Questions about Forgiveness and Reconciliation:

1. Have you experienced a relationship which was restored through reconciliation? Give details regarding the broken relationship.

2. What were the circumstances/factors that made reconciliation possible?

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3. Have you encountered a situation where reconciliation was not appropriate or possible? Why was restoration not possible?

4. What role did your faith in God play in a situation where reconciliation occurred and any situation where restoration was not possible?
