

"I'm Sorry, But..."

The Bible teaches us to forgive others: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13; Matthew 18:21-35). Indeed, one's forgiveness from the Father depends upon one's willingness to forgive (Matthew 6:14-15)! God does not dole out forgiveness gratuitously, he demands repentance (Acts 2:38)-a genuine change of heart revealing a crushed spirit: "This is the one I esteem," says the Lord, "he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2). Therefore, when we forgive others, there must be repentance (Luke 17:3).

Unlike God, humans have difficulty discerning true repentance. There are red flags which signal insincerity. Anger is a red flag sometimes reflected in a tone of voice or words of retaliation against accusers. All defenses are red flags. "Everybody does it." What if they do? Does that excuse everybody? And does everybody really do it? "It's not that big a deal." But isn't sin sin? "It may be immoral, but it's not technically illegal." So then maybe it was not so wrong after all; is that the point?

Genuine repentance flows naturally from a humble and contrite spirit; it does not repent only because it got caught or was pressured. It does not begrudgingly apologize while taking verbal swipes at accusers, regardless of their motives. It does not seek refuge in the sins of the masses, the relative gravity of the offense, or in the minutia of legalistic twaddle. Some 'apologies' die the death of a thousand qualifications. But we must remain cautious in judgment, maintain a forgiving spirit, receive the sinner on his or her word, and leave judgment to God.