



Christians, Prisons, Restorative Justice and Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a word that is rightfully avoided in Restorative Justice because requiring forgiveness puts unacceptable pressure on the victim to forgive the offender. Also the concept of Restorative Justice, while it has roots in many faith and spiritual traditions, is non-sectarian. There is however, I believe a Christian understanding of forgiveness that violates neither of these basic principles.

Forgiveness is an important element in Christianity. As Christians, we believe that we are forgiven by the grace of God and are called upon to forgive each other.

Forgiveness between a person and God is a gift of unmerited Grace. There is nothing we can do to earn it. We can only accept it as a grace filled gift and live a life of gratitude for what we have received. Forgiveness between people is a more complicated matter. Traditionally for Christians forgiveness between people has required three things on the part of the person who has caused the harm: confession, contrition and compensation.

In prison, Restorative Justice programs can help a Christian fulfill these requirements helping prisoners understand the full consequences of their crimes. This is especially true of the contrition requirement. These programs can help a prisoner become aware of the wide ranging ripples of harm caused by their crime and all the contrition that is required to all the people that were harmed directly and indirectly by their crimes.

Fulfilling the requirements may or may not lead to forgiveness from the victim of the crime. That is, of course completely up to them. Completing the requirements may however enable the offender to forgive themselves and in the process repair some of the harm done by the crime.

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