

How do you know when an abusive person is adequately repentant, and therefore, capable of providing a safe environment for others to live in? The answer, of course, is found in the **fruit** they produce.

PHILIP G. MONROE

**A**s a psychologist and seminary professor, I frequently entertain questions about the timeline for forgiveness and reconciliation in situations of domestic or familial sexual abuse. Most frequently, church leaders want to know when it is appropriate to encourage a victim of abuse to allow an offender back into the home or life.

These questions sometimes originate for quite different reasons. Some ask due to fear that once abuser and victim are separated, reconciliation is made much more unlikely. Others ask because it

seems that the abuser is not being forgiven in a timely manner. Still others want to know how to discern whether the abusive person is genuinely repentant. It is this last question that I think merits the most attention. How do you know when an abusive person is adequately repentant, and therefore, capable of providing a safe environment for others to live in? The answer, of course, is found in the fruit they produce.

**Honest admission.** When God's people encounter his holiness, they often fall on their faces and admit the state of their soul (e.g., Moses, Isaiah, Paul). They make no pretense of being clean and they do not look to excuse their behavior or blame others ("I might be 60% responsible, but she's responsible too."). They do not attempt to manage their image as Saul did when confronted by Samuel (1 Samuel 15:14f). In appropriate settings they willingly reveal secret sins that had not been known. This honesty should be permanent rather than temporary. If another should bring up their sins decades later, they should be capable of admitting what is true without defensiveness or undue shame.

Does the abuser:

- *openly acknowledge abusive behavior and its impact on the victim?*
- *accept full responsibility for actions without excuse?*
- *accept the consequences of the abuse without demand for trust or forgiveness?*

**Sacrificial efforts to repair.** The story of Zacchaeus provides a wonderful illustration of the fruit of repentance in the life of a man who profited by abusing others with his power. He does not shy away from the sniggering comments of others, but publicly promises to pay back all he has cheated plus four times more (probably twice as much as the Law required!). Not only that, but he willingly gives half of his wealth to feed the poor.

Jesus describes the kingdom of God as having so much worth that a true

disciple joyfully gives all to acquire it (Matthew 13:44-46). The repentant abuser sees the value of restoration and joyfully gives all to obtain it. He no longer sees his rights as something to hold on to, but immediately thinks of how he can sacrificially put the interests of others before his own. Further, he does not demand acknowledgement of this sacrificial effort to undue the wrong done. Sadly, the opposite fruit seems more prevalent. The abuser strives to protect personal interests (e.g., an unwillingness to pay for counseling costs of the victim), attempts to compromise (I'll pay for counseling if you won't report the abuse to the authorities), or uses children to gain leverage (the children will be hurt if I am out of the home)

Does the abuser:

- *spontaneously seek to make restitution (not penance!) or to offer economic support without demand for things in return?*
- *give physical and emotional space for the victim to receive help from others?*

#### **Accepts and flourishes under discipline.**

When caught in abusive or addictive behavior, individuals commonly make immediate changes in their behavior. They stop certain problematic behaviors and start healthier ones (e.g., returns to church, reads the Bible, goes to counseling). We commend these behaviors. However, Jesus warns the disciples (Matthew 12-13: the story of the house swept clean and the parable of the soils) about the problem of reading initial reactions to the Gospel. Time and cultivation are required. The repentant abuser willingly submits to the loving discipline of the Church. When adequate ministry to him is not available, he pursues it until he finds it. He does not demand time limits or the entitlement to be forgiven. He accepts the intrusion of accountability partners and sees their work not as police work, but as discipleship.

Does the abuser:


- *accept the ministry of discipline,*

*accountability, counseling, etc. with joy?*

- *acknowledge that the fruit of change takes time to develop and so sees discipleship as a lifetime project?*
- *show evidence of a growing life of prayer, reading of the Word and increasing measure of the fruits of the Spirit?*

**Be careful.** A word of caution to those whose job it is to assess the level of change in an abuser. There are two errors we must avoid. It is easy to classify abusers as subhuman and unable to ever change. If we fall into this error, we may be tempted to prejudge their ability to change, thereby encouraging greater defensiveness on their part. The power of the cross changes the worst of sinners (including ourselves). These men and women deserve God's grace as much as any. The second error is that of being thrown off by external issues that may not have

much to do with repentance. Those who are charming and well-spoken (especially those who use spiritual language) may tempt you to ignore fruit that is inconsistent with repentance. Also, when victims are less likeable due to their own interpersonal demeanor, it is tempting to excuse abusive behavior.

It is wise to seek supervision during this process and to remember that you participate in the Lord's work and that He will accomplish refinement in his children, including you! 



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