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## Forgiveness: What It Is, What It Isn't, & How To Do It



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# Forgiveness: What It Is, What It Isn't, & How To Do It

Some have said that the most important phrases spoken in life are: "I love you;" "I'm sorry;" and "I forgive you." While forgiveness is a central concept in Christianity, many people find it to be a confusing process that does not always come easily.

## I. SCRIPTURAL DIRECTION & BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

### A. Forgiveness is a releasing of a debt.

God, through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, offers forgiveness to all believers. Because He has forgiven us, we are called upon to extend forgiveness to others.

*2 Corinthians 5:18-21, "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."*

*Luke 17:3-4, "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him."*

*Romans 5:6-8, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

### B. Forgiveness, as Christ-modeled it, is truly a high mark that is only possible by God's grace.

*Luke 23:34, "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."*

*Colossians 3:12-13, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."*

*1 John 4:11-12, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us."*

### C. Forgiveness keeps bitterness from developing and causing more damage to a relationship and each person involved.

*Hebrews 12:14-15, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled."*

*Colossians 3:19, "Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them."*

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## D. Being forgiving is part of God's character and nature.

While God does not overlook sin, He is patient, gracious, merciful, and willing to forgive.

*Daniel 9:9, "To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him."*

*Nehemiah 9:17b, "...but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not."*

*Exodus 34:5-8, "And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped."*

*Ephesians 2:4-5, "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)."*

## E. God desires that we forgive one another, keeping in mind that we have been forgiven by Christ.

*Colossians 3:12-15, "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful."*

*Matthew 5:43-48, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."*

*Mark 11:25-26, "And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses."*

*Luke 6:37, "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven:"*

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## F. Withholding forgiveness, bearing grudges, harboring bitterness, and allowing hatred can all lead to serious consequences.

*1 John 3:15-16, "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."*

*Matthew 18:21-31, "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done."*

## II. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

### A. Differentiating types of forgiveness from reconciliation.

1. **Vertical Forgiveness:** God extending forgiveness to human beings because of Christ.

*Colossians 1:12-14, "Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:"*

*1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

2. **Horizontal Forgiveness:** What one human being extends to another human being. This is also called interpersonal forgiveness. God takes this type of forgiveness very seriously.

*Matthew 6:14-15, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

*1 John 4:20, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"*

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3. **Reconciliation:** The process whereby two people take steps to rebuild a relationship that has been hurt.

a. The purpose of reconciliation is restoration and reconnection.

*Matthew 5:23-24, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."*

b. Forgiveness (what one person extends to another) together with reconciliation (two people working together to rebuild a relationship) is a high calling and worthy goal. However, in some circumstances reconciliation is not always possible. In these cases, we must recognize that forgiveness can occur without reconciliation. God asks us to be responsible for our part and to not be a hindrance to the healing process.

*Romans 12:18, "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."*

c. Confusing or merging forgiveness and reconciliation can hinder the whole healing process.

## B. Differentiating between "errors" and "offenses."

Below are several categories of issues that can cause tension and hurt in relationships. This list isn't meant to be exhaustive; it is simply meant to help identify some differences between types of hurts in relationships.

1. The range of errors and offenses

### Errors

- Mistakes- We all make mistakes. We forget things, break things, spill things, and so on. You need to be prepared for mistakes in yourself and in others; they are unavoidable in life.
- Irritants- We all have them. Habits, quirks, personality traits, and idiosyncrasies that one person does (usually unconsciously) that irritates another. From making sounds while chewing to snoring, irritants can lead to anger, harsh words, and arguments.
- Poor Choices- From occasionally not getting home on time to making a purchase that ended up costing you more than you bargained for, we all make poor choices sometimes. However, if poor choices are a repeated pattern and are severe enough, they may actually become offenses (see below).

### Offenses

- Hurtful Omissions- While we all forget things sometimes (mistakes), forgetting an anniversary or not following through on things you agreed to be responsible for can lead to significant hurts in your relationships.
- Hurtful Words and Actions- Yelling, harsh criticism, put-downs, and so on can lead to periods of feeling disconnected with others. If this becomes a pattern, you may need help in learning how to deal with it.
- Major Sin/Major Harm- Major offenses include adultery, addiction, abandonment, abuse (sexual, physical, emotional), etc. These offenses strike at the very core of relationships violating trust, boundaries, emotional closeness, and spiritual connection.

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2. While the differences between types of errors and offenses can certainly be cloudy, the main difference is that errors call for *forbearance* while offenses are dealt with through *forgiveness*.

*Colossians 3:13, "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."*

*Ephesians 4:1-3, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*

3. When offenses in your relationships aren't dealt with appropriately, minor matters (a. b. & c above) can become triggers for larger arguments.

## C. Common misperceptions about forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>

1. Some people may believe forgiveness must be requested before it can be granted. In actuality, forgiveness can be given to someone who is no longer living, to someone who doesn't acknowledge any harm was done, to someone who is not repentant, to someone who only acknowledges a portion of the severity of the transgression, etc. Remember that forgiveness only requires one person while reconciliation requires two cooperating parties.
2. By forgiving someone, you are not simply "getting over it." Some of the transgressions you may have experienced are very serious and cannot be simply overlooked. God does not excuse sin or deny its severity; neither should we. Remember that, "God's mercy cannot override His holiness. Offenses demand payment."<sup>2</sup> The solution that God offers for all sins for all time is Jesus, the perfect son of God, who died to pay the penalty for sin.
3. Misperceptions and Truths about forgiveness.

Some people incorrectly believe that forgiveness:

- a. Denies the seriousness of sin.
- b. Lets people "off the hook" too easily.
- c. Places too much responsibility on the victim.
- d. Is unjust.

On the contrary, true forgiveness<sup>3</sup>

- a. Acknowledges a wrong has occurred.
- b. Recognizes that the wrong has created an obligation for repayment from the offender.
- c. Recognizes of that often the offender cannot provide adequate compensation for the hurt.
- d. Realizes that revenge, although a natural desire, isn't a Godly or healthy solution.
- e. Releases the debt over the offender.

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We can acknowledge that there are times when the offender does provide some payment for their wrong. For example, a drunk driver who drives head-on into a car, killing the other driver and passengers, may be convicted by the law and go to jail. However, that payment does not begin to cover the losses experienced by the family members and friends of those who died. Those losses are greater than that which the transgressor could ever provide compensation. Those are the losses that are acknowledged during the forgiveness process.

## D. What forgiveness IS NOT.

1. Forgetting: One does not completely forget an offense when forgiving. The often cited phrase, “Forgive and Forget” sometimes leads people to believe that forgiveness means that one will truly forget the memory. Many people believe the phrase “forgive and forget” comes from the Bible, but it does not! In fact, trying to deny that some act of mistreatment or betrayal hurt you can actually intensify the memory of what you are trying to forget. Christ-like forgiveness for human beings means that we will not hold anger, bitterness, or hostility “over the person’s head.” Therefore, instead of trying to literally forget a memory, the goal is to be released from the unhealthy emotional tie it has to you.
2. Pardoning: Pardoning is a legal term that means to release from punishment, or to not punish, for some crime or offense. Even when someone is forgiven, they may receive consequences for their actions.
3. Apologizing: Apologizing is an acknowledgement and expression of regret for a fault, injury, or insult. Flippant or insincere apologies can do more harm than good. A sincere apology means that the offender is (1) acknowledging the wrong they have done, (2) accepting responsibility for it, (3) acknowledging the hurt caused, and (4) is willing to accept the consequences.<sup>+</sup>
4. Reconciling: Reconciling is the process whereby two people take steps to rebuild a relationship that has been hurt. Though forgiveness may lead to making a relationship right, it does not in and of itself bring about reconciliation. Reconciliation is actually the work that both people, the offender and the offended, do together to restore a broken relationship.
5. Avoidance or denial: Sometimes people are so hurt by something that they quickly say, “I’ve already forgiven it.” in order to try to avoid having to feel the pain of the injury. Forgiveness is not simply a way of avoiding dealing with someone or something to get around pain or conflict. It is also not the same as denying we were truly hurt by someone’s words or actions.
6. Excusing the offense: Forgiveness does not give the offender the right to offend again. Healthy boundaries are important so that we do not simply allow another person’s hurtful or sinful actions to continue.
7. Easy or cheap: True forgiveness is not simply a few pleasant sounding words. It is hard work that involves a true and lasting change of behavior.

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8. Trusting: Trust in relationships is built and maintained over time. Depending upon the seriousness of an offense, trust may be slightly diminished or even destroyed. Forgiveness may lead to the process of trust being restored as part of reconciliation, but trust isn't a prerequisite for forgiveness. Remember that forgiveness is what one person extends to another. Trust is earned over time, and the person who committed the offense must accept that regaining trust will occur as a process over time.
9. A feeling: We can't wait to forgive until we feel like forgiving someone or are no longer feeling the effects of the offense. Rather, forgiveness is an act of obedience through which God can guide us.
10. Dependent on time: A phrase that is sometimes quoted about relationship hurts is, "time heals all wounds." Unfortunately it isn't true! While the passage of time can sometime help us get perspective on a hurt, time itself doesn't heal anything! We could more accurately say, "Time plus forgiveness leads to the healing of wounds."

## E. What forgiveness IS.

1. Extended with grace: God demonstrated the ultimate grace-giving act when he initiated the forgiveness and reconciliation process with us (*Romans 5:6; Ephesians 2:4-5*).<sup>5</sup> Forgiveness is what one person gives to another. Those that need to be forgiven don't necessarily "deserve" forgiveness. We certainly didn't "deserve" forgiveness from God. We extend grace to others because we receive grace from the Lord. We have something in common with the person who wronged us. The same fallen nature that led to the offense is the same fallen nature we deal with in our heart.

Even if the one who caused the offense does not initiate reconciliation or admit to an error or offense, the one who has been offended must still grant forgiveness and extend it with grace. Granting forgiveness may *feel* unfair; however, grace allows us to grant it to even the ones who don't seem like they deserve it. The one who offended may not have the repentance and remorse necessary to receive the forgiveness, but that fact does not preclude the *granting* of forgiveness. God offers forgiveness to everyone because of Christ's death on the cross. Repentance is necessary in order to *receive* this forgiveness.

Grace does not deny the seriousness of the offense either. Forgiveness extended with grace both acknowledges the seriousness of the wrongdoing and releases our perceived "right" for vengeance or holding it against someone.

2. An intentional decision and a process: Forgiveness doesn't happen by accident. Rather, you must make a choice to commit to the process. This process is empowered by the Holy Spirit and takes time to work through. Both parts, making a choice to forgive and committing to the forgiveness process over time, are necessary.

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3. Hard work and multifaceted: Forgiveness takes courage and is personally demanding. Forgiveness has emotional, relational, spiritual and physiological components. It involves changing our attitudes, behaviors, feelings, and beliefs. We also need to learn how to calm ourselves down instead of getting 'worked-up' and reactive when we are reminded of the hurts. Working through forgiveness alters the emotions tied to the transgression that occurred. Instead of feeling anger, bitterness, or other feelings of unforgiveness, forgiveness allows us to experience the 'forgiveness emotion' of release when we think of the transgression.
4. A releasing of a debt: Often, when you have been wronged or offended, you have suffered some sort of loss. Whether it is as serious as losing a child to a drunk driver or a more minor slight that occurred in a relationship, hurts give us the feelings that something has been lost or taken from us. A debt has resulted. People often find it difficult to forgive because they want the offender to repay the debt. In other words, they want vengeance. Often, we want the offender to feel how bad we hurt. Sometimes we want the offender to hurt to a greater magnitude than could be repaid by the offender. Forgiveness is often the only way to settle a debt. We choose to release the debtor from his or her debt. This choice also releases us from holding on to something that could hinder our walk with the Lord (*Hebrews 12:1-2*). Forgiveness does not change the nature of the transgression from wrong to right; nor does it presume the transgression never occurred. Rather, instead of allowing the anger and hurt of the offense to bond us to the offender, forgiveness allows us to release and to detach from the wrong that occurred.

## F. Some steps toward forgiveness using the acronym R.E.A.C.H.<sup>6</sup>

1. Recall the hurt: The first step involves acknowledging that hurt occurred. The goal of this step is to accept that you have been wronged and to focus on moving forward. The extremes of either denial of the pain or of obsessively replaying the event over and over in your head are not helpful.
2. Empathize: In this step towards forgiveness, feelings such as anger or cold, detached feelings are replaced with empathy. For example, try to see the scenario from the other person's perspective. In this step you want to try to understand what the other person may have been thinking, feeling and so on. Note that the more horrific the act of transgression was, the more difficult it is to show empathy. When empathy is too difficult, first try sympathy. For example, you can think, "How horrible it must be to have a conscience so seared that he could have done ..."<sup>7</sup> Another way to work through the empathy step is to remember that forgiveness is extended with grace and that we didn't deserve forgiveness from God.
3. Altruistic gift of forgiveness: Humility and gratitude are required in this step as we realize that we need and have received forgiveness. Consider how you felt when you needed forgiveness. How did you feel after you had done something wrong and were forgiven by God and by others? Because we have received the gift of forgiveness from both God and other people, we offer forgiveness to others.

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4. Commit to forgive: Make a firm commitment to forgive and set an Ebenezer to remember it by. An Ebenezer is a marker or memorial (described in *1 Samuel 7:12*) that reminds us that God has helped us to get to this point. This is most effective if you tell someone else (e.g., the person who wronged you, your spouse, a friend, a minister, etc.) about your commitment to forgive so that you can come back to this when painful memories from the past come up again.
5. Holding onto forgiveness: If you occasionally remember things from the past incidents that you have worked at forgiving, don't get discouraged. Recommit to forgive, commit the event and the person to God, and go on. Having a memory of a hurtful event that sometimes comes up does not mean that you haven't forgiven.

## G. Forgiveness, vengeance, justice, and consequences.<sup>8</sup>

The previous sections have laid out what forgiveness is and is not. So how does forgiveness relate to justice? Some people may conclude that forgiveness is unjust or may believe that getting vengeance is simply just and right. Our *desire for vengeance* should not be confused with a *desire for justice*. Consider these verses that address the topics of forgiveness, vengeance, justice, and consequences.

*1 Thessalonians 5:15*, "See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men."

*Romans 12:19-21*, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

*Micah 6:8*, "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

*Proverbs 24:17*, "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth."

*2 Samuel 1:11-12* (In spite of Saul's offenses against David, David did not seek vengeance or even rejoice when Saul died.)

We are instructed by God's Word to not be vengeful. That is, we are not to hold a desire in our hearts to see another person suffer. At the same time, forgiveness does not necessarily remove the consequences of the offense and it does not automatically free the offender from any obligations for his actions. Consider the following descriptions of the difference between vengeance and justice.

- "Vengeance is my desire to see another person suffer for the pain he has caused me."<sup>9</sup>
- "Unlike vengeance, justice is the payment God or others might demand from someone because of a wrong they have committed against us, against another person or group of people, or against society as a whole. While we are to avoid vengeance, we are to seek justice for those who have been wronged."<sup>10</sup>

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- “Vengeance is our desire for retribution against our offender; justice is the repayment another person demands from our offender. Vengeance is striving to settle the debt ourselves; justice is allowing someone else to settle the score.”<sup>11</sup>
- “Vengeance leads to bitterness; justice leads to healing.”<sup>12</sup>

Even though we may be forgiven by God, we will still face consequences when we sin and we are still accountable to others for our behavior. As one writer noted, “When God forgives us, He removes the eternal consequences of our sin—eternal damnation—but not necessarily the temporal consequences of our actions.”<sup>13</sup> The fact that we are covered with Christ’s robe of righteousness (*Isaiah 61:10*) does not preclude the fact that we may have to pay a fine if we get a ticket if we are speeding. Likewise, when others wrong us, they may still have to pay the consequences of their sin. However, our responsibility is to forgive and to seek God’s guidance as we balance justice and mercy.

## H. The high cost of unforgiveness and bitterness.

The benefits of forgiveness are clear: it is following God’s example and command and provides hope and healing. Conversely, unforgiveness has many detrimental effects. Bitterness is a common result of a refusal to forgive. People often are hesitant to forgive because they think it will somehow better the individual who wronged them. Rather, holding on to the hurts from the past and refusing to forgive causes damage to oneself. In addition, bitterness can damage the people closest to us whom we hold most dear.

1. Spiritual consequences of not forgiving: The Bible provides clear warnings against bitterness, and spiritual damage results when we allow bitterness into our lives. Unforgiveness interferes with our sanctification process. We are falling prey to self-centered reasoning when we nurse a hurt and allow bitterness to develop.

*Hebrews 12:15, “Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.”*

*Ephesians 4:31, “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.”*

*Matthew 6:14-15, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”*

*Colossians 3:19, “Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them.”*

*James 3:14-15, “But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.”*

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2. Emotional and relational consequences of not forgiving: Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and then waiting for the other person to die. In actuality, bitterness eats away like a cancer in the person who holds it. Unforgiveness can lead to anxiety or even spiritual depression. When we refuse to forgive even though we know we have been forgiven, we hinder our relationship with God, which can lead to many forms of emotional and relational consequences.

The longer we hold onto our grievances against others, the more difficult it may be to eventually forgive. The longer the period of unforgiveness and allowing the memories of the hurt to grow deeper roots, the more our actions, thoughts, and emotions become aligned with bitterness. If you are dealing with bitterness, pray and ask God for help and take action today to begin the healing process. Don't hesitate to talk with a mentor, minister, or Christian counselor in order to get help to work through these issues!

## I. Steps to reconciliation.<sup>14</sup>

As stated above, forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Reconciliation testifies of God's power and of the power of unity in the Body of Christ. It strengthens the individuals involved to resist the attacks of the enemy. And while reconciliation is preferable, it is not always possible.

Restoring a relationship after an offense has occurred takes two cooperating parties. It can only occur to the extent that the two parties agree on each of the steps towards reconciliation. Remember, it may take time to rebuild the trust and reunite the offended with the offender. Also, the type of relationship you have with the person may change from what it was before the offense occurred. Reconciliation does not automatically mean you must become best friends with the one who offended you. Rather, it is restoring a relationship to the degree that it can be. Below are some of the ingredients necessary for rebuilding trust that allows reconciliation to occur.

1. Repentance: The first step towards reconciliation is repentance. The offender must be willing to confess the transgression and acknowledge the pain it caused the offended. In addition, he or she must have a sincere desire to turn from the circumstances that led to the offense. A person interested in reconciliation exhibits the attributes of humility, honesty, and accountability. Note that forgiveness (what one person does for another) can be accomplished even if the offender doesn't repent. However, full reconciliation is greatly hindered, and is sometimes impossible, if the offender doesn't acknowledge the hurt that he caused.
2. Restitution: In certain cases, the offender needs to provide restitution for what he has done wrong. This process validates the sincerity of repentance. Participating in the restitution process is not for vengeance, but for justice. Vengeance demands payment while justice provides due compensation in accordance with what is deemed right and fair.
3. Rehabilitation: Rehabilitation may be necessary in order for the individual to return to a better way of life. This is especially true if he or she has fallen into a pattern of unhealthy and ungodly living. This step helps provide us with assurance that the offender has truly changed. Genuine repentance is evidenced by a change in behavior.

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## J. Self-forgiveness.

At times, individuals struggle most with forgiving themselves even after they have repented, asked for forgiveness from God, and made appropriate confession. Even though they may know (in their heads) that God has forgiven them, they may still feel unforgiven and condemned (in their hearts). Sometimes people condemn themselves because of the shame they feel or because they think they have committed a sin that God would not be willing to forgive.

Remember that Satan is the accuser of the brethren (*Revelation 12:10*). He may attempt to accuse and condemn you even after you have received forgiveness for sin. Satan's attempts at accusation should not be mistaken for the Holy Spirit's conviction (i.e., true guilt). Self punishment and trying to continually "pay" for or "offer sacrifices" for what occurred doesn't bring forgiveness. As it says in *Hebrews 10:10-12*:

*"By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God;"*

Don't underestimate the extent of God's forgiveness. Note that, "Although God hates sin, He loves to forgive sin, a truth that flows from His abundant grace, loving-kindness, and compassion."<sup>15</sup> Walking through steps below may help you receive self-forgiveness.

1. Trust the Word more than your emotions: Read through Scriptures related to God's forgiveness and believe they are true even when your feelings don't confirm it. For example, *1 John 1:9* says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Choose to believe it is true, even if it doesn't feel like it is. God is able and faithful in forgiving us when we come to Him.
2. Don't fight alone. Talk to a family member, friend, or mentor who understands forgiveness and who can help support and pray for you as you work through this.
3. Accept that you are imperfect and that you will make mistakes during your life on earth.<sup>16</sup> While each of us desires to live a life that is free from errors and offenses, we just can't. Thankfully, we can remember that God understands. The words of *Psalms 103:13-14* can bring us comfort:

*"Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust."*

4. Seek help sooner rather than later. At times, clinical depression, perfectionism, or other emotional issues lead to issues with self-condemnation and an inability to move on. Seeking advice from a minister or Christian counselor may help you discover barriers to self-forgiveness and tools to overcome them.

# Forgiveness: What It Is, What It Isn't, & How To Do It

## K. Conclusion.

Don't stay stuck with the pain, anger, and hurt of unforgiveness. Seek God's help through the Word and prayer; and don't hesitate to seek counsel from a friend, mentor, minister, or Christian counselor if you need help working through forgiveness. Working through these issues will lead to healing and will provide you with an opportunity to learn more about Christ-like love and how it is lived out on a day-to-day basis.

*Ephesians 4:32 "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."*

## III. ADDITIONAL HELPS

Below are some additional resources that can help you understand and work through forgiveness. They are available by contacting ACCFS by phone 877-370-9988 or by downloading or ordering them online at [www.accounseling.org](http://www.accounseling.org).

Carter, Les and Minirth, Frank. (1997). *The Choosing to Forgive Workbook*. Thomas Nelson.

*Forgiving as Christ Forgave* by Elder Dan Kilgus.

Jeffress, Robert. (2000). *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press.

Woerner, Ralph. (2005). *Overcoming Hurt*. Promise Network.

*True Guilt-False Guilt* by ACCFS Staff.

# Forgiveness: What It Is, What It Isn't, & How To Do It

## References:

Referencing of these materials is not meant to imply an endorsement by the Apostolic Christian Church of America of the author, publisher, or organization that created the materials.

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1. Robert Jeffress, *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2000), Chapter 3.
  2. Ibid., 42.
  3. Ibid., 41-46.
  4. Ibid., 162.
  5. Ibid., Chapter 2.
  6. Everett Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
  7. Ibid., 102.
  8. Jeffress, *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense*, Ch. 5.
  9. Ibid., 90.
  10. Ibid., 93.
  11. Ibid., 93.
  12. Ibid., 94.
  13. Ibid., 95.
  14. Ibid., Ch. 6.
  15. Ibid., 53-155.
  16. Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling*, 224-226.

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