

# Forgiving Others

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## Forgiveness is . . .

- Letting go of resentment
- Moving ahead and letting go of the past
- Getting your power back; not letting the offender control your emotions
- A sincere, honest act
- Surrendering your need to get even
- Gaining clarity about the feelings of anger and hurt
- A complex, ongoing process

## Forgiveness is not . . .

- Forgetting the offense
- Acknowledging the offender was right
- Allowing the offending behavior to continue
- An obligation to reconcile

## Feelings of pain associated with the offense:

- Do not magically disappear with forgiveness
- Must be acknowledged and addressed so healing and forgiveness can take place
- Usually subsides over time
- May come and go during the forgiveness process

## Reasons forgiveness is sometimes difficult:

- Our anger and hurt may be overwhelming.
- It gives us the illusion of power and control because we can hold offender's actions against him or her.
- It may become a defense that prevents us from dealing with the real issues; we may blame the offense for everything that has gone wrong.

## Aren't we supposed to "forgive and forget"?

Forgiving others does not require forgetting what happened. Amnesia is not a realistic requirement. Remembering is important so we can grow from our experience and avoid similar situations in the future. Forgiveness is a complex, ongoing process that requires grieving the situation and feeling the pain in order to move past it. Forgiveness is not a one time event where the pain vanishes forever.

God shows us how forgiveness works. He remembers our misdeeds but does not hold them against us if we ask for forgiveness.

God remembers. . . .

*But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. (Matthew 12:36)*

But he forgives and does not count our offenses against us.

*Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him. (Romans 4:7-8)*

*In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. (Ephesians 1:7-8)*

God's forgiveness is still freely given even though he remembers what we have done.

### **What Does the Bible Say About Forgiveness?**

- Pass it on. Model God's forgiveness by forgiving others.

*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)*

*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. (Luke 17:3)*

- Failing to forgive can color how we look at the world around us. It can interfere with our relationships and our happiness. It can impact our physical health, especially our cardiovascular and immune systems. An unforgiving heart can blind us, preventing us from understanding and accepting God's forgiveness.

*Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him (I John 2:9-11)*

- God requires us to forgive others because he knows how damaging chronic resentment can be. He knows it adversely affects our emotional and physical health and our potential for happiness.

### **How Can I Forgive Others?**

A forgiving person avoids obsessing about the wrongs of others. The definition of forgiveness is "to give up resentment of". Appropriate and healthy anger can be used to distance from the event and move on; ongoing bitterness and resentment can be toxic and emotionally paralyzing. True forgiveness requires honesty, accountability, and persistence. It means letting go in order to gain control of your life. Forgiveness is a multi-step process that takes time and work but brings healing.

**Step 1:** Honestly examine the circumstances. Consider these questions when someone wrongs you:

1. Was the offender's behavior a response based on personal issues, a reaction to you or a combination of both? Don't take responsibility for the behavior and the issues of the other party.
2. Was your reaction to the offender's behavior based on your own issues, the offender's actions alone or a combination of both?

3. Did the situation trip some “hot buttons” from your past experience with family or other relationships?
4. Can you understand the other person’s viewpoint even though you don’t agree with his or her behavior?
5. Can you agree to disagree or do you feel compelled to make the offender see your side even after repeated discussion?

**Step 2:** Courageously give yourself a long look. Did you contribute to the situation in any way? If so, you can still hold the offender accountable for his or her behavior while taking responsibility for yours. However, being wronged is no justification for acting inappropriately yourself.

**Step 3:** Confront the person who wronged you. People who have difficulty forgiving and giving up resentment still view themselves as powerless. One way to lay a foundation for forgiveness is to hold the offending party accountable for his or her behavior.

The offender can be confronted in person, in a letter, or by phone. The important thing is to let him or her know you have been hurt. Confront with the expectation that the offender may not own the behavior or make changes. The primary purpose of the confrontation is to help you let go. If the person you need to confront is too threatening or unsafe to address personally, write a letter and read it aloud as though that person were present. If the offender has died, write a letter and read it at the gravesite. You can also read the letter while visualizing him or her in the room.

Basic rules of confrontation include:

- Keep your power by staying appropriate and calm even if the offender becomes upset.
- Stay on the subject at hand without sidetracking. If necessary, use the broken record technique; regardless of what the offender says, stay focused and keep repeating what you need to say.
- Redirect the offender if he or she changes the subject or attacks you in an effort to divert the focus away from him or herself.
- Avoid the use of sarcasm, verbal attacks or emotional outbursts.
- Keep your voice appropriate without yelling or screaming.
- Write out a script in advance so you can organize your thoughts; if necessary, read the script during the confrontation
- Role play the confrontation with someone you trust, coaching him or her to play the role as the offender.
- Don’t be defensive. This will only pull the focus away from the offender’s behavior.
- If the offender becomes verbally abusive and retaliatory, quickly say what you need to say (if it is safe) and exit.
- Confront the offender in neutral territory if possible (not in either home); use a public place such as a restaurant if appropriate.
- Take someone with you for support and to witness if necessary.
- Avoid confronting the offender in front of your children or others not directly involved in the situation.
- Document the confrontation in writing; include the time, date and content.
- Never confront an offender that might be dangerous to himself or others; if the situation becomes volatile during a confrontation, exit immediately and call 911.

**Step 4:** Set clear boundaries. Forgiving someone does not mean you continue to allow yourself to be abused or mistreated. God wants you to protect yourself from abuse. He understands its devastating emotional and physical toll. When we set limits and boundaries with those who are inappropriate, it can

empower us. If you have difficulty setting and maintaining healthy boundaries, read *Boundaries* by Henry Townsend.

**Step 5:** Deal with the anger and grief associated with the situation. Take care of any unresolved feelings that stand in the way of your recovery. Emotional baggage can negatively impact your health and emotional well-being. Process feelings of anger and hurt with a trusted friend or counselor so that you can let them go. Healthy ways of dealing with feelings include:

- Set aside some time when you can be alone to grieve or anger
- Keep a journal of your feelings and what precipitates them. Date each entry and write every day if possible.
- Make a collage of pictures depicting the offending situation and the resulting feelings. Cut pictures from magazines or newspapers and arrange them on tagboard or cardboard. Show the collage to a trusted friend or counselor and discuss it with him or her.
- Write a letter to the offender expressing your feelings. You may or may not choose to mail it. If you don't mail it, read it out loud as though the offender is in the room.
- Role play with a trusted friend who is willing to play the part of the offender. Express your anger and hurt as emphatically as your need to so you can let the feelings go.
- Establish a ritual that will help you let go of the past and move on. Some examples of healing rituals include: inflating helium balloons, writing on them feelings you want to surrender and releasing the balloons into the air; writing a letter to the offender, putting it in an envelope and shredding it; drawing or painting the offense to be forgiven and burning it.

**Step 6:** Humanize the offender without excusing the behavior. Try to understand why the offender wronged you and what he or she was thinking. Examine the offender's history including major life crises, family history and feelings. Make a list of the factors you believe contributed to his or her behavior. Look for reasons, not excuses. Regardless of the contributing factors, the offender is responsible for his or her actions.

**Step 7:** Turn it over to God. Ask God to change the offender's heart and heal his hurts. Pray for Him to grant you a forgiving heart and the wisdom and strength to let go. Turn your anger and pain over to Him on a daily basis.

*Pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5:44)*

*For we now him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." (Hebrews 10: 30-31)*

*God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and gie relief to you who are troubled. (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7)*

**Step 8:** Fake it until you make it. Act in a forgiving manner even if your journey of forgiveness is not complete. Sometimes behavior change precedes a change of heart. If you practice having a forgiving heart while working the rest of the plan, the feelings will follow.

#### **If the offender continues to offend, what do I do?**

Continue to maintain boundaries and confront inappropriate behavior. Forgive as often as God forgives you--over and over again.

*If your brother sins, rebuke, and if he repents forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says 'I repent,' forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4)*

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18: 21-22)*

**Why does God ask us to forgive others?**

Read the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35.

There was a king who had a servant who owed him a large amount of money. Since the servant couldn't pay him, he ordered the man, his wife, children and all of his possessions to be sold to pay the debt. The servant fell on his knees and begged the king to have mercy. The king took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

After his release, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a small amount of money. He grabbed the servant and began to choke him, demanding that he pay the debt. The servant begged for mercy, but he refused. He had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

When the king was told about this, he called in the servant who owned him money. This servant was confronted by the king for failing to show mercy on his fellow servant as it had been shown to him. In anger, the king turned him over to the jailers until he could pay back all he owned.

God forgives us even for our most inappropriate, unseemly behavior. In return, he asks us to pass this mercy on to others. God wants us to model forgiveness so others can understand the concept of his grace and mercy. Those who have never experienced true forgiveness typically struggle to embrace God's forgiving nature.

**I'm having trouble forgiving someone and I'm afraid God won't forgive me.**

Forgiveness is a complex process that takes time. God knows your heart and resolve to forgive. He knows how tough it is for us to forgive, especially when we are deliberately wronged. God offers grace and understanding when you earnestly want to forgive someone but are overcome by anger and hurt.

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

**My Forgiveness Plan:**

1. Who do I need to forgive?

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2. What are the feelings I am experiencing about the offender and his or her behavior?

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3. What do I need to do to resolve these feelings and keep them from interfering with my ability to forgive?

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4. After examining the circumstances surrounding the offense, what was my contribution if any to the situation and what was the contribution of the offender?

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5. What are some reasons the offender wronged me?

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6. What "hot buttons" did the offender trip from my past experience with family and relationships?

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7. What boundaries will I establish with the offender in the future?

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8. How will I hold the offender responsible for his or her actions?

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9. Do I need to confront the offender face to face? If so, how will I do it and what will I say?

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10. What do I need to ask of God to help me forgive the offender? Write out a prayer, remembering Mark 11:24.

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**Reading Suggestions:**

*The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* by Lewis Smedes