

Forgiveness

As Jesus hung on the cross, His eyes focused on all those whose past and present sin separated them from God. In one mighty act of kindness, the sin of mankind was taken away. As He uttered His last breath, He said, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Thus, the love of God was poured out on creation. The strength of God’s love for us was shown in His forgiveness. We also show the strength of our love, not only for others, but for God as well in the way we choose to forgive those who have wronged us. The only way God could open the opportunity for restored relationship with us was to forgive. Our relationships with each other look incredibly similar. If we have been separated from one another because of sinfulness, the only way to be restored is to either forgive or be forgiven. Jesus provided Himself as the example, and we are to follow in His steps.

In this lesson, we will look at why forgiveness is so important, and how we can specifically apply it to our own wounds and scars. Forgiving someone is a process; it’s a choice we make daily or each time we see the offender. In this lesson we will see that choosing to forgive carries a high price, but it is one worth paying.

Why Must We Forgive?

The main reason we should forgive is because Jesus mandates it.

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Matthew 6:14-15

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:23-24

When an offense stands between us and someone else, we are held captive to the offender, we are chained to the memory and pain of the offense, and we also place ourselves at the mercy of the offender. When we refuse to take control of the hurt we have sustained and claim responsibility for our mandate to forgive, we allow the offender to have the power. He not only has power over himself, but also over part of us. If he offends us again, the wound only grows deeper, along with the bitterness. We are less likely to reconcile with the offender or move forward in relationship.

You can walk in the authority you have in your relationships. You have the ability to choose whether the pain speaks for you or whether you will exercise true Christian character.

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Hebrews 12:15

The Face of Forgiveness

Forgiveness will look as different in each situation as the offense. There are different kinds of forgiveness, as evidenced by the examples below.

- Your female boss comes down on you in front of others. You feel ashamed and abused, whether her comments were truthful or not. She is not a believer, and she doesn't subject herself to the same code of conduct as you do. After discussing the mishap with her, you see she does not believe that what she did was "wrong."
- You got into an argument with one of your close friends. You each said some things that were less than accurate, because you were angry. This person is an integral part of your circle of fellowship, because he or she provides accountability, but also intimacy, with an understanding of your struggle. You know you need to reconcile.
- Your father hurt you terribly growing up, and once you left the house and carved out a life, things only seemed to get worse. Now you're in mid-life, and you feel you have no relationship with him. He suddenly falls ill, and shortly after, dies. You are left with all of the same feelings of abandonment and neglect, but now you have no chance of resolving them. You always prayed for an opportunity, and trusted that one would come while he was still alive. You know you need to forgive him, but how do you do that when he's no longer around?

God calls us to obey Him and His Word.
Obedience is an act of faith,
believing that God is the rewarder
of those who diligently seek Him.
Although we may not always understand "why,"
we trust that He has our best interests at heart.

The above three scenarios call for different applications of forgiveness. Sometimes our offender is not someone we see daily or perhaps will ever see again. It's not always appropriate to have face-to-face confrontation or reconciliation. Sometimes it's simply

not possible. The kind and depth of forgiveness will look different depending on the situation.

Who Must We Forgive?

The first thing we need to identify when forgiveness is required, is what needs forgiving? Maybe the better question would be, is there anything that does not need forgiving? The truth is, anything that has hurt you and held you back from continuing on in relationship, needs to be forgiven.

Some of the common wounds that need forgiving are (This list is not comprehensive):

- Abandonment: there can be a sense of loss with the same-sex parent, which causes us to feel abandoned.
- Rejection: anyone who has hurt us has probably caused us to feel rejected.

- Abuse: any emotional, verbal, physical or sexual abuse.
- Enmeshments: any manipulation another has used to control our lives with emotion.

No matter what the offense, if it causes us to feel pain, it needs to be recognized, grieved, and then forgiven and released.

When Must We Forgive?

Forgiveness is something we should exercise as soon as we are able. Why prolong the pain? But sometimes, when we have been hurt deeply, distance from the one who has wounded us is necessary. Some of the typical questions surrounding this idea are:

- How long do I stay distanced?
- What does distance look like?
- What will reconciliation look like?

We are called to die to our fleshly nature. In order to know newness of life, we must intentionally put to death our sinful natures. God calls us to not just manage our problems, but to surrender them to Him.

The answers vary with the circumstances of each specific situation. The time you spend away from the offender will depend on the depth of the wound. We need appropriate grieving time, and time for processing in order to arrive at the next step.

Distancing yourself from someone who has hurt you can be a matter of days or months. If it's someone close geographically, you may need to discontinue activities you both participate in together. If it's someone living out of the area, you may need to plan a special trip in order to work through the issues and come to an agreement. It all depends on the situation and what kind of restoration you desire.

As the Holy Spirit leads you to maturity, you will discover that you cannot grow if you hold onto unforgiveness. The point to all of this is that when the grieving is done and you are prepared to move forward, forgiveness is extended, and relationship is restored, if possible.

... If your brother sins, rebuke him, 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

The Process of Forgiveness

There are steps we must take in order to be able to extend true and full forgiveness. These steps are outlined below:

- Identify the offense: What wounded you that needs to be forgiven? Be specific.
- Owning the feelings: However this offense makes you feel, whether you think the feelings are valid or if people tell you they are invalid, own them. The way you feel is the way you feel. You can't move out of anger and hurt unless you acknowledge that you are angry and hurt for a reason.
- Releasing the offender from judgment: What they did may have been incredibly wrong and hurtful, but they need to be released from your judgment, and you need to release them or you will be chained to your "right" to judge.
- Releasing the offender from your expectations: You may want them to change, and you may be able to see the steps they could take toward change if they really wanted to, but you need to lay down those expectations and realize that they have no place in forgiveness. The offender won't be able to live up to your expectations anyway – it will only drive you to be more disappointed and angry with them.
- Giving up your ability to avenge: You have the ability to take vengeance on someone who has wronged you, but your vengeance will not solve anything. It will only make matters worse. God will be your defender, and He will settle scores if there are any left to be settled after taking into account how you treat others.
- Forgiving as an act of your will: You must purpose to forgive. It is a tangible choice you make regularly in how you treat your offender and how you choose to think of him or her.
- Releasing the offense to God: You have a choice – to either hang on to the memory of how you were wronged or relinquish it. God can do a whole lot more with it than you can. Bear in mind that true forgiveness cannot happen if you are hanging onto the past.
- Not expecting change from the offender in order to forgive: Your forgiveness cannot be conditional. The offender must make the choice to change. Forgiveness is something you choose for yourself – since it's your choice, it doesn't depend on anyone but you.
- Seeking reconciliation: Once you have chosen to forgive someone, the next step is to reconcile with him or her, so you can be restored to relationship if possible. If the offender is not willing to reconcile or they are unsafe, you must accept that. There are still other things you can do.
- Loving and praying for the offender: Regardless of his or her response, you can love them from a distance (in your heart) and you

can pray for them. It will affect your heart toward them if you commit to praying for them.

- Ask forgiveness for your response to the offender: Undoubtedly you made some wrong moves along the way, and one of those moves could have been your attitude toward the offender, which affected your responses. Instead of responding in love, you may have responded out of anger and bitterness. Asking for forgiveness for your part will show the offender you are serious about reconciling, and it will help you to own a piece of it.

Forgiveness requires a lot of the forgiver. Consider these steps as you seek to reconcile with those who have hurt you. What you are willing to put into the process may just foreshadow what you get out of it.

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

I Peter 4:8

God empowers us through His indwelling Spirit
to live a victorious life.
In our own strength, we are unable to fulfill God's desires.
He has given us the Holy Spirit to lead, guide and comfort us.

Reflection & Journaling

Day 1 – Why Must We Forgive?

In order for us to be healed of the pain that the sin of others brings into our lives, we need to forgive. When we sow unforgiveness, we reap bitterness. Not only is this pattern very destructive in our own lives, but it continues to affect those who follow us in the next generation. (Hebrews 12:15) The greatest need of a victim is not to get justice, but to forgive. The benefit to the victim is wholeness – spiritually, mentally, psychologically, and emotionally. Of course, our desire for justice is good. God is just and desires justice as well. Often, when we pursue justice our motive is impure. We want to ensure that the offender will suffer as we have and be made to pay. Unlike us, God’s motives are pure. We can count on Him to see that our offender is disciplined in a way that will best bring him or her to repentance. God’s “vengeance” is surgical, redemptive, and has the goal of healing.

Are you willing to entrust your offenses to God who judges rightly? Do you really believe He can be counted on to administer justice?

Day 2 – What is Forgiveness?

As you proceed through the rest of this lesson, it is important that you only deal with the issues of forgiveness the Holy Spirit impresses on you right now. Do not revisit injuries you have already dealt with, or “forgive again” those whom you have already chosen to forgive in the past. Instead, focus on what and whom the Holy Spirit shows you is current in your life today.

To forgive someone does not mean that you forget the evil they have done. Jesus isn’t saying, “Just forget it.” His desire is that we invite Him into that pain. If you were abandoned, then let Him be there for you. If you were rejected, then let Him accept you. Jesus wants to bear the pain of our wounds and to be our Protector. Our ways of protecting and defending ourselves usually entail building emotional walls that “keep others out.” Unfortunately, those walls end up keeping us in as well and, consequently, keep us from experiencing healthy, loving relationships.

What burden do you need to let Jesus bear?

Forgiveness does not mean that we tolerate sin. In fact, to tolerate sin in others violates the law of love (doing what is best for another). True, people will always sin against you. That is part of living in a fallen world. But, we do not continue to allow someone to hurt us or mistreat us if it is within our power to confront or avoid his or her behavior. In love (for ourselves as well as others) we need to set healthy boundaries.

Do you know of anyone right now that continues to harm you with his or her sin? If yes, who?

Ask the Lord to show you what boundary He wants you to set in order to keep this person from continuing to sin against you.

The word “forgiveness” means to give away. It is our choice to forgive. We are not doing it because we owe someone forgiveness or because we are forced to forgive. One aspect of this is the realization that we have to live with the consequences of another’s sin. The struggles you face with homosexuality are tied in some way or another to someone’s sin against you. Even though you may have suffered tremendous evil at the hands of others, your choice to take responsibility to heal involves choosing to forgive. It is an act of your will, not a result of your emotions.

Day 5 – The Eternal Benefits of Forgiveness

Jesus knows what it feels like to suffer unjustly. In fact, Scripture says that we are called to suffer unjustly as well, to “follow in his steps.” – I Peter 2:20-21. In I Peter 2:23 we read, “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” This passage goes on to tell us that Jesus continued to love those who wounded Him in order to give the offenders an opportunity to be healed through the cross.

Another benefit to entrusting ourselves to the “Overseer of your souls” and refusing to give in to the temptation “repay evil with evil, or insult with insult,” is that when we instead bless others, we will “inherit a blessing.”

We are given an assurance from God concerning His dealing with those who do evil.

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

I Peter 3:12

Today, take some time to read what God says about our suffering as Christians. The world, the enemy, and our flesh would tell us we must get even. Our western culture is rampant with the idea that someone should pay whenever there is an injustice. But as believers, it is imperative we hear from God on the subject and renew our minds according to the Truth. The book of I Peter speaks about the sufferings that come to Christians as they live faithfully in a fallen and hostile society.