

## Freedom in Forgiveness

We don't need to tell you that being in a relationship guarantees hurt feelings and offenses. As the old saying goes, we hurt most the ones we love most. So learning to forgive is vital if we want a marriage that is strong and able to withstand the storms of life.

Let's take a moment and define forgiveness, so we're all on the same page before diving deeper into the concept. Forgiveness is not a feeling. It's an action you choose to do. It's giving up your right to resentment, retribution, and revenge. Forgiveness is refusing to revisit the offense in your mind and with your words or actions. Furthermore, forgiveness is unlimited and unconditional.

On the other hand, forgiveness does not mean you weren't hurt, but rather that you are choosing to move forward. It doesn't mean you forget what happened, but you don't hold it against the offender. Forgiveness is not excusing the behavior.

So, what, exactly, are we supposed to forgive? Everything! Forgiveness, at its root, is letting go of and disregarding the debt of sin. In essence, it's ripping up the bill. While it frees the forgiver from bitterness, it does not free the sinner from the consequences.

Your forgiveness of others correlates with God's forgiveness of you:

And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses (Mark 11:25-26).

Forgiveness is essential because our relationships – with God as well as with our spouse – cannot survive without it. Unforgiveness is a wall. Every time we refuse to forgive – even for the smallest of offenses – we add another brick to the wall. Eventually, it seems insurmountable.

Science has shown that our emotional and physical health depend on our ability to forgive. The bitterness that develops from unforgiveness can, if left unchecked, lead to depression, anxiety, heart problems, headaches, lowered self-esteem, high blood pressure, weight gain/loss, a weakened immune system, and a whole host of other physical problems. Letting go of resentment can free you from physical and emotional pain.

When we choose not to forgive, it can lead to bitterness, which can escalate to hostility, hatred, and eventually a hardened heart. A hardened heart full of bitterness cannot engage in a loving relationship with God, your spouse, or others – and eventually coats every part of your life.

## Forgiveness Is a Two-Way Street

While it seems like the burden for the actual work of forgiveness falls squarely on the shoulders of the offended, we cannot ignore that the offender also carries a responsibility to restore harmony in the marital relationship.

When you realize you have offended your spouse, you need to ask for their forgiveness. First, acknowledge the exact offense. To restore peace and intimacy in your marriage, you need to be specific. You need to understand and acknowledge that you did, indeed, hurt your spouse's feelings. Then humbly request their forgiveness.

If you are the spouse who is offended, graciously extend forgiveness to your spouse when it is requested. If you need time to process the hurt, it's OK to say, "Yes, I want to forgive you for XYZ, but I need to spend some time in prayer and the Word to process it." But don't wait for an apology before you forgive. You may be waiting a long time.

## How to Forgive

We are NOT meant to carry the heavy burdens of unforgiveness, bitterness, and revenge. The longer we try, the heavier they become. Jesus invites us to exchange those burdens for His:

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Here are some concrete steps you can take to practice the art of forgiving someone:

- **Feel to heal:** As contrary as it may seem, you have to feel to heal! Feelings that are swept under the rug do not heal. They multiply like dust bunnies underneath the bed. One of the best ways we can work through our feelings is to write them down, pray over them, and give them to God.
- **Journal it.** A word of caution is in order here: do not keep a journal in order to keep track of grievances. After all, love "*keeps no record of being wronged*" (1 Corinthians 13:5 NLT). The purpose of writing about your hurts is to process your feelings and then to release them into your Father's loving care.

You'll see that journaling about hurts will help you trace the redemption that is birthed through the process of forgiveness. After you've forgiven someone for a particular offense, either rip the paper to shreds or put it in your fire pit. Or, you can write "FORGIVEN" in bold letters across that particular page as a reminder to set aside the hurt when it comes to mind.

- **Go to God.** Set aside some time to get alone with God. Make a list of the offenses lurking in your heart – no matter how long ago they occurred – then out loud (and in writing if you choose) say, "Father, I choose to forgive (who) for (what) that happened on (when) at (where). Please help me to leave the offense here at the foot of the cross."
- **Say it out loud.** Words have power; use them for good. Psychologically speaking, hearing ourselves forgive someone aloud and release the desire

for revenge is much more powerful than just thinking about it. That's why we encourage you to practice forgiving audibly.

- **Ask for help.** If the wrongdoing is particularly grievous, or if you've been holding on to a list of wounded feelings for a long time, a Christian counselor can help you work through them to bring about restoration to your marriage.

### How Many Times?

We've all heard Jesus' reply to Peter's question of how many times we should forgive someone. Peter thought he was being generous by saying seven times because the acceptable number of times to forgive in that era was three. But Jesus blew even that generous amount out of the water, saying: "*I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven*" (Matthew 18:22).

Now, Jesus did not literally mean that we're supposed to keep tally marks and stop forgiving at offense number 491. No, He meant that we're supposed to forgive an *unlimited number of times*. True, we may have to forgive our husband for absent-mindedly leaving the cap off the toothpaste or for our wife's repeated reminders, but this is also referring to forgiving the same offense over and over again because our stubborn minds just won't give it up sometimes.

We see two different principles at work here. The first is to remember that we need to let go of things we focus too much on. Is that one dirty dish on the counter worth a major blowout? Is being interrupted while watching the big game worth a yelling match? The absent-minded professor will always be absent minded. One spouse will always want the towels folded a certain way. Let it go for the sake of peace and harmony in your home.

The second principle has to do with how *we choose* to dwell on a particular offense – especially if it is a big one and it keeps getting repeated. Think about the choices we can make in our minds.

- Are you showing compassion for the offender? There are so many possible reasons people act the way they do, and most often, what's needed is compassion instead of condemnation. We have a great opportunity to lead others to Christ by showing our love and understanding.
- Are you separating the sin from the sinner? This is an extremely difficult concept to understand, but it is invaluable in the forgiveness process. The sin is not to be excused; it is not to be dismissed as unimportant. But the sinner is to be shown love and compassion. You are forgiving a person not the offense.
- Have you decided to forgive and release the resentment? Don't let it become part of your identity. As Romans 12:2 says, "*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" You can overcome your hurts if you are actively studying and meditating on God's Word.

You may be saying to yourself, “But what about the constant nagging? Or the socks on the floor and the dishes on the counter every single day? Or what about the big issues like infidelity?”

In all of these cases, you need to first go to your Heavenly Father in prayer and seek His comfort, peace, and healing. Communication is a vital next step where you bring the offense into the light and define it so you can find reconciliation.

You will find freedom by just getting it out in the open. Let the weight of the forgiveness that God has already extended to you permeate deep into your soul. We need to request God’s forgiveness for our sins daily. Do we deserve it? Absolutely not! But God is compassionate and does not give us what we deserve. His mercies are new every morning.

The Lord’s Prayer is so familiar to most of us that we could recite it in our sleep – without actually thinking about the words. But notice the little phrases right in the middle: “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). The word “debt” here means what is owed or legally due. In this instance, it’s used as a metaphor for sin.

Likewise, we need to forgive our spouse whether we feel they deserve it or not. Even if our spouse refuses to acknowledge their part in the problem, we are still to forgive. We need to leave our spouse’s heart in the hands of God, who is just and merciful.

Ask the Lord to heal your own heart. When offenses come to mind again, remind yourself, that was then; this is now. We are not living in the past; we are living in the present headed toward a wonderful future.

Seek to heal the wounds in your marriage as soon as they occur. Don’t go to bed angry. You’ll only wake up angrier and start the day with a snarl instead of sunshine. Keep short accounts. “Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26-27). By stewing in our anger – whether it is justified or not – we are giving the devil a foothold in our marriage. Don’t let that happen.

### Aftermath of Forgiveness

Once you’ve decided to move toward forgiveness, then what do you do?

Don’t keep bringing it up again: “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32).

When we say we’ve forgiven our spouse but then give them the cold shoulder for the next few days, that’s not true forgiveness from the heart. It’s actually SIN on our part! Forgiveness is not earned, nor is it to be given in degrees.

True, we might need to process it again in our hearts, but we are not to keep bringing it up. No subtle digs. No snide comments. And definitely no silent treatment. Instead, when we feel the bitterness start rising in our hearts, we must take it to the Lord in prayer (just like the old hymn).

Remember that God is our judge. When we decide to condemn our spouse for being sloppy or lazy or nagging, we're taking God's place as the judge. We're essentially saying that we don't trust Him to do His job. The famous theologian Charles Spurgeon once said, "If we forgive in words only, but not from our hearts, we remain under the same condemnation." We need to forgive fully and completely and with God's agape love.

If you build an attitude of gratitude toward your mate, you will be surprised at how much less the smaller offenses irritate you. Daily think of things to praise your spouse for and tell them! Make it a habit to practice small acts of kindness and helpfulness. These habits will help to erase the bitterness from your heart and cultivate a heart of love toward your spouse.

Above all, learn to forgive even when it's the last thing on your mind. Enjoy God's peace. Enjoy His blessings. And never forget, great forgiveness leads to even greater love.