

The Superpower of Forgiveness

“If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14–15).

Life is unfair. Good guys don’t always win. Bad things happen to everyone, even “good” people. We don’t get what we deserve and others appear to get what they don’t deserve.

The result is that we are often hurt by others, and tend to develop an angry, distant, or hostile attitude toward them. When this happens, we struggle with what to do. Do we continue to build walls in every relationship? Do we force them to admit their wrong and demand their repayment?

God says that we should learn about forgiveness and Jesus made it a critical part of his teaching when he walked on the earth. He even linked our forgiveness, by God, to our willingness to forgive others.

For some of us, the word “forgiveness” doesn’t even exist in our vocabularies. Others may ask for it, but we don’t think we need to offer forgiveness. We may even think forgiveness is a sign of weakness or going easy on others.

That is why it is so important to understand what forgiveness is and what it is not. Only by understanding true forgiveness can we make it a choice and reap the benefits that Jesus wanted us to have in our relationships. Here’s a definition to get you started.

Forgiveness is releasing someone from an obligation to you and not demanding punishment for their actions. It is refusing to be their judge and jury.

Jesus had a lot to say about forgiveness. But he also lived it. He taught that forgiveness led to life and that harboring unforgiveness eventually would lead to death.

“Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37).

I am a proud person. I hate to admit when I’m wrong or even ask for forgiveness. I can think of a thousand reasons why the other person needs to do this—but not me. Instead, I find it easy to justify my lack of interest in forgiveness. I clearly see their offense and eagerly minimize what I did in the situation. I know that my motives were pure, but I question the motives of others. Sometimes I just sit there with the battle raging inside myself. I know I need to ask for forgiveness, but it takes everything I have to say the words, “I need to apologize. Will you forgive me?”

Did you notice all the “I” statements in this section? They indicate my selfishness is still at work!

Sin, at work in our lives, leads us to pride. Pride leads us to judge others and want to punish them. That’s a problem because the Bible says that only God and the ruling authorities (established by God) have the right to judge and punish others. When we choose to not forgive, we are ignoring our own sin and our dependence on God’s forgiveness. God’s forgiveness gives us eternal life, though we do not deserve it. Forgiving others is the only way to live in peace, without anger.

Let us look at unforgiveness and how it affects us in negative ways.

- It looks for the worst in others rather than seeing them as God does.
- It judges others for doing the same things we do.
- It inflates our pride and self-righteousness.
- It strongly affects our relationship with God.

- It makes us dwell on the past instead of the present.
- It links our happiness to someone else's actions.
- It gives others control over our attitudes and happiness.
- It rarely causes the other person to change or make things right.
- It looks for ways to get revenge or get even.
- It has no power over others to make them change; they may not know or care.
- It makes us the judge, jury, and executioner, when we are not qualified.
- It rejects Jesus's teaching and limits the power of grace to work in our lives.
- It requires a lot of emotional energy to maintain the attitude of unforgiveness.
- It requires that God not offer forgiveness to us.
- It limits God's desire to answer our prayers.
- It distracts us from other valuable and growing relationships.
- It restricts our spiritual growth, our relationships, our career, and our accomplishments.
- It creates a continual focus on the wrongs others have done to us.
- It testifies that God's ways and power are inadequate and ineffective.
- It disqualifies us for spiritual leadership.

Forgiveness is part of who God is. It should also be part of who we are. So how do you start?

Realize that forgiveness is a process. It is letting God get justice for us. It is recognizing we hurt others too and need forgiveness. It isn't instant. It takes time and commitment. When we are tempted to retreat to unforgiveness, we often have to forgive again.

Forgiveness is not forgetfulness. It does not trust someone who is untrustworthy.

Forgiveness does not always require meeting with the person you are forgiving. You can forgive them regardless of them knowing about it or getting their response. You can forgive someone who has died but offended you.

Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself. It sets you free to receive God's forgiveness and removes the focus from others.

Forgiveness is not saying they were right in doing what they did. It is not saying you should be their close friend again. It is not letting them take advantage of you. It is letting God do the work of judgment since He is all-knowing and all-powerful.

Forgiveness isn't conditional. We forgive because it leads to life, not because we want God to pour out His wrath on them. Forgiveness brings God back into the picture and puts Him on the throne. We are not sitting around like Jonah waiting for God to strike others down.

Forgiveness is not easy. It opposes our sin nature, which wants revenge, but it is a choice and decision of our will which we can begin.

Forgiveness is not being weak. Only the strong can forgive and trust God to settle the score. Revenge is easier than forgiveness.

Forgiveness is personal between you and that person. Forgiving someone does not mean that they are not subject to society's laws. Someone can commit a crime and we can forgive them. However, if the State prosecutes them for breaking the law, our forgiveness does not mean seeking to help them avoid the penalties. It does mean working to see them redeemed.

Forgiveness is recognizing that my sin is not less important than the sins of others. We easily dismiss the seriousness of our sin toward God while magnifying the sins of others. This is a defensive strategy we use to lie to ourselves and make us feel better. Our sin is disgusting to God—just like the person you struggle to forgive.

Forgiveness is divine (*sort of*). Biblical forgiveness is acting as God would act and shows you are a disciple of Jesus. It is a dramatic testimony to your changed life.

A Forgiveness Lifestyle

One of the most powerful ways to kick-start a life of forgiveness is to make a list of everyone you can think of whom you have been hurt by.

The coach who was too harsh. The teacher who was unfair. The person who cheated you. The friend who betrayed you. The person who crushed your dreams. The parent who mistreated you. The spouse who abandoned you. The person who lied about you.

Take a piece of paper or create a worksheet on your computer (see our website to download one).

1. Write down their names and the situation, then tell God how they hurt you and how it felt.
2. Write down exactly what you need to forgive them for. Be specific.
3. Now tell God specifically what you are choosing to forgive them for.
4. Tell God you are releasing them from any need to make amends or repay or repent.
5. Thank God for forgiving you of similar behavior.

6. Whenever you are tempted to “un-forgive them” or relapse into bitterness, go to Step 3.

7. Give God time to heal your heart.

8. Let God do the judgment work. Rejoice and relax in the freedom of knowing God will right every wrong.

9. Move on with your life and don't focus on past hurts.

10. Recognize that there are times when your forgiveness comes in stages. Work toward the day when you have forgiven them so completely that you pray for their blessing and their salvation from God.

11. Stay current on your forgiveness. Several times a year write out a list of new people you need to forgive. Start with Step 1 and clear your life of unforgiveness.

12. Recognize that forgiving someone doesn't mean they will change or that you can trust them again. You are forgiving them whether they change or not. Don't begin to put expectations on God or on that person that they must attain.