

Forgiveness

What is forgiveness?

A definition of forgiveness from the Oxford English Dictionary:

To stop feeling angry or resentful towards (someone) for an offence or mistake.

To excuse (an offence, flaw, or mistake).

The bible says,

He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1¹⁴

Redemption is the buying back and restoration of something to where it rightfully belongs. If we were to take something to a pawnbroker, we can buy it back later on. It is the same idea. There are two Greek words used for forgiveness in the New Testament:

Aphiemi meaning to send away, to remit or release

Charizomai meaning to bestow a favour unconditionally (where the word "charity" comes from.)

There are two sides to forgiveness, giving and receiving. Forgiveness is the only thing that we ask for in the Lord's Prayer that has a condition attached to it (**Matthew 6¹²**).

- Giving forgiveness.

Choosing to release the offender, letting go of my grudges and bitterness, the desire for revenge. It does not settle all of the questions about blame, injustice and fairness but it does allow me to move on and to begin to repair relationships. My choice is not based upon my feelings but on choice because I have been forgiven much by the Father. He will supply all of the grace I need to be able to do this.

- Receiving forgiveness.

I need to receive forgiveness myself, even if I am the offended one. My reactions may need to be repented of. If I am unwilling to acknowledge any part I have in the dispute, I cannot move on. I need to receive forgiveness for myself and to dump the load that I have allowed myself to become burdened with.

Why should we forgive?

- It is what God wants us to do.

He forgave us, so we are under an obligation to forgive others. We have to return to the cross and see what Jesus has done for us, what his death and resurrection redeemed for us.

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. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused.

Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." **Matthew 18**²¹⁻³⁵

1. It is for our good and the good of others. It preserves unity.

Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. The reason I wrote to you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven - if there was anything to forgive - I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. **2Corinthians 2**⁷⁻¹¹

2. It releases God's grace and power into the world and extends his kingdom.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. **2Corinthians 5**¹⁴⁻¹⁹

Misconceptions about forgiveness

1. If I forgive, I must forget.

Forgiving and forgetting are not the same thing. It is true that forgiveness releases the forgiver and so the hurt is no longer recycling through their mind, so that it is not so prominent and, in time, it may be forgotten from our everyday consciousness. It is also true that grace will be present to reconcile two people or groups that have forgiven one another.

However, what about the unrepentant or the weak amongst us. Even if we could forget the things that have happened to us, it might be a foolish thing to do. It could do more harm than good trying to forget and perhaps to put temptation back in front of an offender, which is not the wisest or most loving thing to do. Nor is just trying to forget enough. We need to go through the process of forgiveness. Nelson Mandela, who knew a thing or two about forgiveness, said, "True reconciliation does not consist in merely forgetting the past."

2. Forgiveness is impossible

Not according to the bible. We might feel that way because of our weakness or the enormity of the offence against us. There is nothing that is unforgivable.¹

¹ In Matthew 12²²⁻³² Jesus states that speaking against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Seen in its context, he is referring to those who persist in attributing his work to Satan. By definition, those who do this, have no means to salvation because Jesus was clear that he was the only way to the Father. It follows that once they stopped their erroneous belief that the way of forgiveness became open to them.

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." (**Mark 10** ²⁷)

Jesus said that we were to forgive our brothers seventy times seven times (**Matthew 18**²¹). The sense of what Jesus is conveying here is that forgiveness is without limit.

3. I do not feel like forgiving

C S Lewis wrote, "Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea, until you have something to forgive." Feelings do not come into it. It is a decision, which is not optional. It is a command from the Lord.

4. I should not grant forgiveness unless the other is willing to respond

Forgiveness works two ways. It is for us and it is for the offender but if the one who makes the first move is rejected by the other party, it is still valid for the one who wants to forgive and be forgiven even if the other does not.

It is up to us to make the first move (**Matthew 4** ²³⁻²⁴). The theologian and philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, said that "The only true forgiveness is that which is offered and extended even before the offender has apologised and sought it."

5. I should act as if nothing has happened

That would not be the truth. Acknowledgement of what has happened is a key to real forgiveness. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said,

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. **John 8** ³¹⁻³²

6. I have to forgive immediately.

Some hurts may take longer to overcome and to come to terms with. We do not have to forgive straight away, but we do have to forgive sooner or later, otherwise we will be stuck where we are, unable to move on.

God meets us where we are. The father came running to meet the prodigal son when he was a long way off (**Luke 15**²⁰). We may have fallen because of our sin or the sin of others, but there is grace to enable us to take the steps to forgiveness and to get rid of the bitterness that has grown up in our hearts. We do not have to start from the beginning again. We move on from where we left off.

Steps to forgiveness

1. Acknowledgement of what the offence is.

We have to acknowledge the offence against us in order to be able to forgive at the level of the harm that was done to us. It is also helpful in the healing process if those responsible for the offence acknowledge what they have done and preferably ask for forgiveness themselves. If one of the responsible parties are unwilling or unable to do this (for instance they may be dead.), it makes no difference to the process for the other party or parties involved. However, it can help if another trusted person, outside the original offence acknowledges that it actually occurred and the damage that it caused.

2. Confession and ownership

Even though we may be the offended party, it would be rare if we had not reacted, at least in part, in some way that is unrighteous. We need to own any contribution we have made to the issue. This may be difficult if we feel that by admitting our part it will diminish or even cancel out the offence by the other party. God knows and, even if others fail to understand, he is able to look on the heart and judge between men (**1Samuel 16**⁷).

3. Recognition that there is something to be dealt with and be real with one another in the sight of God. Sweeping issues under the carpet is not acceptable. Ignoring an issue will only institutionalise it and it becomes the accepted norm around which we have to manoeuvre. We need to deal with issues of forgiveness as soon as we can to avoid their becoming stumbling blocks in our walk with God and our witness to the rest of the world.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin". Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. **Ephesians 4²⁵⁻²⁷**

4. Repentance, turning away from the offence and the bitterness. God is able to forgive, much more quickly than we can accept it.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **1John 1⁹**

5. An agreement with ourselves that this is not what God wants and an attitude of mind that things need to change, even if we feel that we do not have the strength to follow through. He will provide all we need to do this.

He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. **2Corinthians 12⁹⁻¹⁰**

6. Recognising and embracing the hurt and consequences, grieving the loss, releasing the anger and pain of injustice.