

Step 3: Bitterness vs. Forgiveness

It has been said that holding grudges and harboring resentment is like swallowing poison and hoping the person who hurt you dies. When you fail to forgive those who hurt you, you become a wide-open target for Satan. God commands us to forgive others as we have been forgiven (Eph. 4:32). You need to obey this command so that Satan can't take advantage of you (2 Cor. 2:10-11). Christians are to forgive others and show them mercy because our heavenly Father has shown mercy to us (Lk. 6:36).

This step is typically very challenging for most people. If you have a heightened sense of nervousness, don't worry, God is with you. Remember freedom comes when we rightfully surrender to God and recognize Jesus Christ as our Lord. Sometimes it helps to understand the moral reason "why?" behind God's commands. In Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus tells the story of a servant who had been forgiven much by a great king. This servant then immediately turned around and refused to forgive a fellow servant of a much lesser debt. This behavior made the king extremely angry and he rightfully punishes the unforgiving servant until he learned his lesson. The lesson this king desires to teach is grace. You see, the way of Jesus is all about undeserved favor, or grace. It is only through Jesus' shed blood that we are able to be forgiven and cleansed. When we begin to recognize the amount of grace God has bestowed on us through Jesus' death and resurrection, you will develop a sense of gratitude that will enable you to show grace (undeserved favor) to others as well.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of confusion and incorrect teaching about biblical forgiveness. The following will help you to understand God's definition of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. People who want to be able to forget all their pain before they get around to forgiving someone usually find they cannot. God commands us to forgive now. Confusion sometimes arises because Scripture says that God "will remember our sins no more" (Heb. 10:17). But God knows everything and can't "forget" as if He had no memory of our sin. His promise is that He will never use our past against us (Ps. 103:10). The key issue is this: We may not be able to forget our past, but we can be free from it by forgiving others. When we bring up the past and use it against others, we are showing that we have not yet forgiven them (Mk. 11:25).

Forgiveness is a choice, a decision of the will. Since God requires us to forgive, it is something we can do. Forgiveness seems hard because it pulls against our sense of what is right and fair. We naturally want revenge for the things we have suffered. But we are told by God never to take our own revenge (Rom. 12:19).

You might be thinking, "Why should I let them off the hook?" And that is exactly the problem! As long as you do not forgive, you are still hooked to those who hurt you! You are still chained to your past. **By forgiving, you let them off your hook, but they are not off God's hook.** We must trust Him to deal with the other person justly, fairly and mercifully, something we cannot do.

You might say, "But you don't know how much this person hurt me." But until you let go of your hate and anger, they will continue to be able to hurt you. You finally stop the pain by forgiving them. **You forgive for your sake, so that you can be free. Forgiveness is mainly an issue of obedience between you and God. God wants you to be free; this is the only way.**

Forgiveness is agreeing to live with the consequences of another person's sin. Forgiveness costs you something. You choose to pay the price for the evil you forgive. **But you will live with the consequences whether you want to or not. Your only choice is whether you will do so in the bondage of bitterness or in the freedom of forgiveness.** Of course, Jesus took the eternal consequences of all sin upon Himself. God "made Him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). We need, however, to accept the temporary consequences of what was done to us. But no one truly forgives without suffering the pain of another's sin. That can seem unfair and we wonder where the justice is? It is found at the cross which makes forgiveness legally and morally right. As those who crucified Him mocked and jeered, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34).

How do you forgive from your heart? You allow God to bring to the surface the mental agony, emotional pain and feelings of hurt towards those who hurt you. If your forgiveness does not reach down to the emotional core of your life, it will be incomplete. Too often we try to bury the pain inside us, making it hard to get in touch with how we really feel. Though we may not know how to or even want to bring our feelings to the surface, God does. Let God bring the pain to the surface so that He can deal with it. This is where God's gentle healing process begins.

Forgiveness is the decision not to use their offense against them. It is not unusual for us to remember a past, hurtful event and find the anger and hate we felt returning. It is tempting to bring up the issue with the one who hurt us in order to make them feel bad. But we must choose to take that thought of revenge captive to the obedience of Christ, and choose to maintain forgiveness.

This doesn't mean that you must continue to put up with the future sins of others. God does not tolerate sin and neither should you. Nor should you put yourself in the position of being continually abused and hurt by the sins of others. You need to take a stand against sin while continuing to forgive those who hurt you. If you are trapped in an abusive situation, get help from an adult you know and trust (e.g. at church) or if you are in danger or being harmed physically or sexually, contact the police.

Don't wait to forgive until you feel like forgiving. You will never get there. Your emotions will begin to heal once you have obeyed God's command to forgive. Satan will have lost his power over you in that area and God's healing touch will take over. **For now, it is freedom that will be gained, not necessarily a feeling.**

You can do this! Victory from your bondage and healing from pain are yours today in Christ if you will by faith obey God's command. So why wait? Begin this step by working through the following exercise:

Ask God to bring to your mind the names of those people you need to forgive by praying the following prayer out loud. (Remember to let this prayer come from your heart as well as your mouth!)

Heavenly Father,

Thanks for the kindness and patience you have with me. When I realize how good You are it makes me want to be more like You and turn from my sins (Romans 2:4). I know I have not always been completely kind, patient and loving toward those who have hurt me. I have had bad thoughts and feelings toward these people. Today, I want to change that. I am asking You to bring to my mind all the people I need to forgive (Matthew 18:35). I ask You to bring to mind any painful memories associated with these people so I can choose to forgive from my heart. I pray this in the precious name of Jesus who has forgiven me and who will heal me from my hurts. Amen.

Now, without stopping, go to the next page and list the names down the left side column that are coming to mind right now.

**Name of the person
who hurt you.**

**What the person did to you
and how it affected your life.**

**How it made or makes you
feel.**

After you've written all the names down that come to mind, return to the top and fill in the middle and right-hand columns with information regarding each person you need to forgive, including how their offense made you feel.

Remember to add your own name to the list if you have committed sins, hurt other people or even made mistakes that have caused you or others pain. There is nothing noble or spiritual about wallowing in a pit of regret and self pity. That is what Satan, the accuser of the brethren, wants you to do. God wants you to forgive yourself. To forgive yourself means to accept God's complete forgiveness of you in Christ. Though your sins were as scarlet, in Christ they are white as snow (Isaiah 1:18).

You may also need to let go of angry thoughts against God. We do not need to "forgive" God because He is incapable of doing wrong. But sometimes we hold things against Him because He did not act in the way or in the time frame we expected Him to act. Letting go of those angry thoughts and trusting that His ways are much higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8,9) may be a very important element to your freedom.

Now you are ready to biblically forgive and to be set free from bitterness. This might be one of the toughest things that God has ever asked you to do, but forgiving is the only way to be set free from the pain of the past. Remember God has given us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). In Christ you have the authority and power to do this very important step. You can choose to forgive and finally be set free! Now is your time, don't let it pass you by. We have provided some model prayers printed below in bold font.

As you pray, God may bring to mind painful memories that you had totally forgotten. Let Him do this, even if it hurts. God wants you to be free; forgiving these people is the only way. Don't try to excuse the person's behavior, even if it is someone close to you.

Remember, forgiveness is facing your own pain and leaving the other person for God to deal with. Good feelings will follow in time. Freeing yourself from the past is the critical issue right now.

Don't say, "*Lord, please help me to forgive*". He is already helping you and will be with you all the way through the process. Don't say, "*Lord, I want to forgive*" because that bypasses the hard choice we have to make. Say, "**Lord, I choose to forgive**". As you move down your list, focus on each individual until you are sure you have dealt with all the remembered pain, everything the person did that hurt you, and how it made you feel: rejected, unloved, unworthy, dirty, etc.

O.K., it's time to begin. Start with the first person on your list and stay with that person until you cannot think of any more painful memories associated with them. Then move to the next person and so on down your list until you are done. Don't rush through this; take as much time as you need. The Lord is with you to strengthen you. The following prayer will provide some help in how to pray through your painful memories thoroughly.

Dear Heavenly Father,
I choose to forgive (name the person) for (say what they did to hurt you; be specific), even though it made me feel (share the painful memories or feelings).

Once you have dealt with every offense that has come to your mind and you have honestly expressed how that person hurt you, wrap up by praying the following for each individual on your list:

Lord,
I choose not to hold any of these things against (name) any longer. I thank You for setting me free from the bondage of my bitterness toward him/her. I choose now to ask You to bless (name). In Jesus' name, Amen.