

LEARNING GOD'S WAY TO FORGIVE

It has been said:

"Forgiveness is the greatest indicator of one's character."

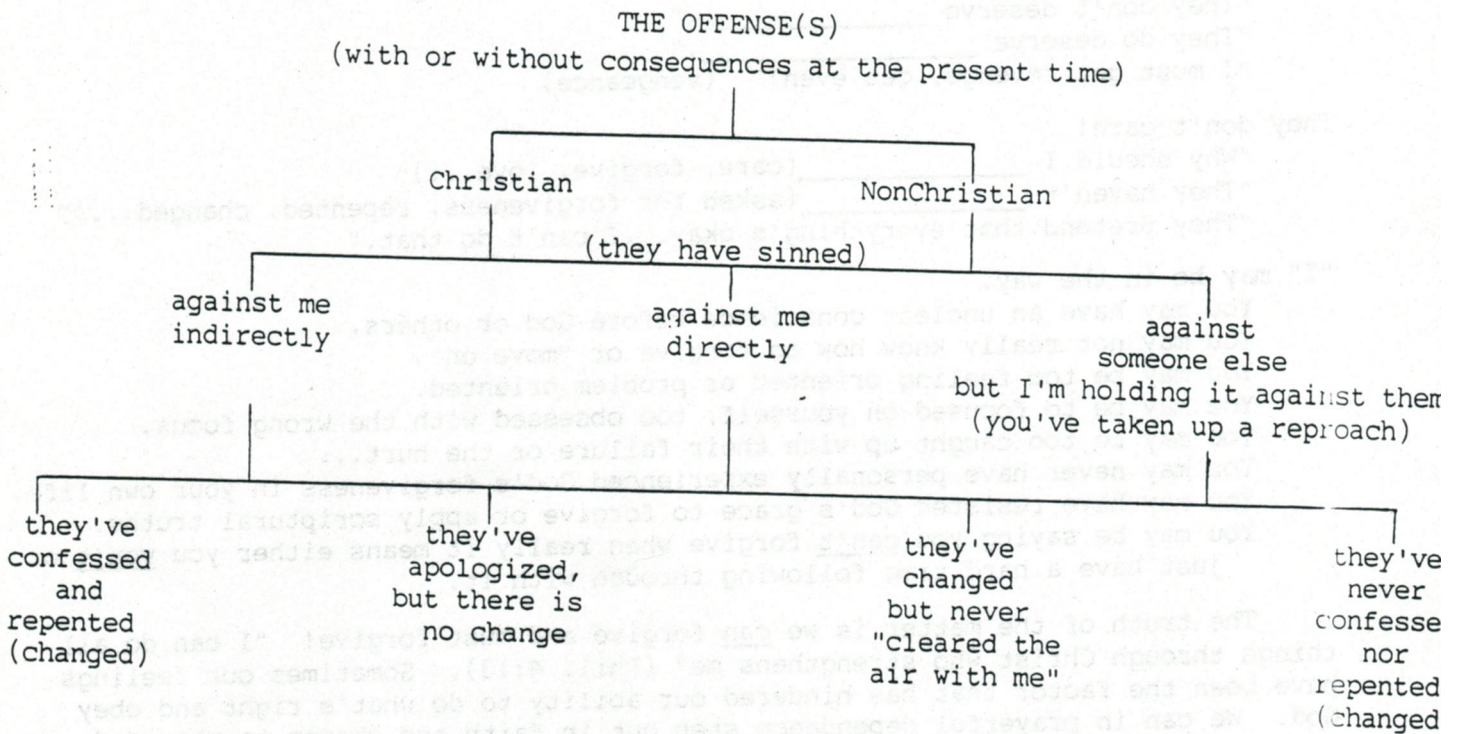
"To be forgiven and to forgive are man's greatest needs."

"Forgiveness is an indispensable ingredient to love, unity, commitment, and maturity."

It is also commonly said:

"What? Forgive them? Easy for you to say, but you haven't gone through what I have.." "My situation is different." "It's all their problem, they have to change. I can't do anything about it." "My forgiving them won't change anything."

Granted, every situation is a unique combination of personalities, influences, conflicts, circumstances, consequences, etc. It even becomes more complex due to the degree to which one is involved and experiencing these things. However, the following chart will help you to see the various possibilities from a Biblical stand point and enable you to clearly identify the situation that you are in presently.



As you can see, there is a multiplicity of possible combinations in which you may find yourself. The bottom line is, you feel hurt, you have been sinned against, it's hard to just "let go and move on. Well, whether you have been robbed or cheated in some way, misunderstood, falsely accused, treated unfairly, taken advantage of, hurt deeply, not taken seriously, ignored, rejected, mocked, persecuted, or abused (mentally, physically, verbally, emotionally or sexually) God wants you to FORGIVE THEM! (Mt. 18:21-35 Lk. 17:3-10) It's probably the last thing you feel like doing, but be humble and honest before God right now about it. We obey God's word based on our choice, not on how we feel. Tell God where you're at - where are you at according to the chart? What is the sin that's been committed against you? Tell God that inspite of your hurt, pain, feelings ... that you want to please Him and are willing to move in the righteous direction of obedience and blessing!

WHY IS IT HARD TO FORGIVE?

I believe, at times, we need insight into how life works and how we tend to operate as human beings - not to justify, rationalize, blameshift or excuse our responsibility, but to broaden the scope of our understanding. The more we come to grips with a problem, the more open we will be to God's truth filling us up with the Biblical solutions. For instance, it may help to think through the following reasons as to why it may be difficult to forgive. It's hard because:

They have caused so much HURT (to me and/or others).

"It's been hurt too deeply, it's too much for me to bear."

"I feel too _____ (rejected, betrayed, unloved ...)"

"I've been devastated, tramitized and I feel no love for them anymore."

"I can't forget what they've done, or let go that easily."

"They don't realize/understand what this has done."

"They've failed to come through for me in the way(s) that I've expected."

"My happiness, security, significance...was based on them and they've let me down."

They have to pay for what they've done!

"I resent _____ (them, what they did, the consequences they've caused...)"

"I'm too bitter; I hate them", "I don't want to forgive them."

"They don't deserve _____."

"They do deserve _____."

"I must get revenge, get even!" (vengeance)

They don't care!

"Why should I _____ (care, forgive, love...)"

"They haven't _____ (asked for forgiveness, repented, changed...)"

"They pretend that everything's okay...I can't do that."

"I" may be in the way.

You may have an unclear conscience before God or others.

You may not really know how to forgive or "move on".

You may be too feeling oriented or problem oriented.

You may be too focused on yourself, too obsessed with the wrong focus.

You may be too caught up with their failure or the hurt...

You may never have personally experienced God's forgiveness in your own life.

You may have resisted God's grace to forgive or apply scriptural truths.

You may be saying you can't forgive when really it means either you won't or just have a hard time following through with it.

The truth of the matter is we can forgive and must forgive! "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). Sometimes our feelings have been the factor that has hindered our ability to do what's right and obey God. We can in prayerful dependence step out in faith and choose to obey God whether we feel like it or not. We need to go against the feelings, the hurt, or whatever it is that is hindering us. We then need to trust God to pull us through, and the feelings will follow! No matter what the reason(s) may be as to why it's difficult for us to forgive, they all have a common denominator. It all boils down to the question of "What is my FOCUS?" Self - (our hurt, anger, bitterness, vengeance...) or Christ - (His character of love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, blessing...). The more I choose to focus on Christ and all that He is to me, the more I will be able to experience His character through me and live it out in reality!

If God tells me to do something, I can be sure that He has made available to me every resource (His promises, power (spirit) wisdom, grace, example, motivation, whatever) I need to follow through in obedience.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS?

"Forgive One Another Just As God In Christ Has Forgiven You"
(Ephesians 4:32)

If we are to forgive others, the way that we've been forgiven, then we must broaden the scope of our understanding, by building our thoughts around nothing less than a Biblical perspective of God's forgiveness of us.

1. In what terms do the following verses describe how God has forgiven us?

Isa. 43:25

Matt. 26:28

Jer. 31:34

Isa. 55:7

2 Chron. 30:18-20

Ps. 103:12

Isa. 1:18

"-Forgiveness is an act of setting someone free from a debt or obligation to you, that is a result of a wrong done against you. It involves three things: an injury (or offense); a debt, resulting from the injury; and a cancellation of the debt."

"-Forgiveness is an act of pardon - graciously freeing someone or releasing them from any further debt or obligation to me." "There is no condemnation to those in Christ" (Rom. 8:1)

"Forgiveness means I will clear the offenders record of all offenses - giving them a "clean slate". Our sin has been covered with the blood of Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:22).

It means: I will no longer hold anything against them in any way.

I will not bring it up to them again.

I will not bring it up to others.

I will not bring it up to myself.

Let me illustrate:

When the Moravian missionaries first went to the Eskimos, they could not find a word in their language for forgiveness, so they had to compound one. This turned out to be "Isumagijoujngnainermik". It was beautifully meaningful to them (at least because it meant "not-being-able-to-think-about-it-anymore").

It was told of a "harassed" man who entered into the office of a psychiatrist and said, "Doctor, I can't remember a thing from one minute to the next"

"Since when has this been going on?" asked the psychiatrist.

"Since when has what been going on?" replied the man!

If only we could forget that quickly! I Cor. 13:5 says, "Love does not keep a record of past wrongs". That means we get rid of the "gunny sack" we carry on our backs filled with past offenses, that we keep hurling out at people!

(If you need to build your perspective on love, I have a helpful study entitled "Discerning Genuine Love" that you could ask me for.)

2. What do the following verses reveal to be the basis of Biblical Forgiveness?

Ps. 86:5

Lk. 7:42

Col. 1:14

Heb. 9:22

Matt. 6:12-14

2 Cor. 5:17-19

To experience God's forgiveness personally you must realize that Jesus Christ has paid the debt (price) of our sin on the cross. There, He took the punishment that we deserve for offending a Holy God. Christ alone has met the demands of a righteous and just God and His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross has satisfied the judgment and wrath of God against sinners. You simply need to trust Jesus Christ, alone, to be your Savior and that what He did on the cross was for you! (Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 5:21; Jn. 5:24). (If you're struggling with your own personal guilt before God, see the study entitled "Biblical Confession and Repentance Brings God's Forgiveness").

3. How often are we to forgive?

Lk. 6:37

Lk. 17:3-4

Eph. 4:32

Mt. 18:21-22

How many times has God forgiven you?

The more I understand God's love and forgiveness, the more I will experience it personally. The more I experience it, the easier it will become for me to express it toward others.

Study these further examples of how forgiveness is illustrated in Scripture.

Jacob and Esau (Gen. 33:4-15)

Solomon (I Kings 1:53)

Joseph (Gen. 45:8-15)

Jesus (Lk. 23:34) (I Pet. 2:19-25)

Moses (Num. 12:1-13)

Stephen (Acts 7:60)

David (2 Sam. 19:18-23)

Paul (2 Tim. 4:16)

David (Ps. 32; 51)

Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11-32)

(note the unforgiving attitude of the older brother)

SO WHY MUST I FORGIVE?

1. It is commanded (Lk. 17:3-4; Eph. 4:32)
2. It follows the example of Christ (Lk. 23-32 and others)
3. Such should be the character of those who have been forgiven. (Eph. 4:32)
4. It frees my conscience from further sin, guilt, bitterness, hatred, grudges, vengeance ...

WHAT IF I DON'T FORGIVE?

1. You'd be disobedient to God and face consequences. God says, "You shall not avenge or bear a grudge against any people" (Lev. 19:18).
2. You'd never progress spiritually or get anywhere with God. (Matt. 5:23-24)
3. You forfeit your experience of God's forgiveness, joy, fellowship, restoration, grace...in your own life. Matt. 6:12,14-15
4. You're likely to be treated by others the same way in which you've treated them. Luke 6:37
5. You will experience the venom of bitterness and resentment by holding a grudge Heb. 12:15

God gives us GRACE to forgive, if we humble ourselves (Jn. 4:6-10). If we resist His help, wisdom, power...He sets Himself in opposition to us! Also, in the context of Heb. 12:15 - a root of bitterness will spring up and defile many! Prolonged anger and unresolved conflicts also gives Satan a hold on our lives (Eph. 4:29). That's why it says don't let a day go by without dealing with it.

Bitterness Has Consequences

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Emotionally | - internalized anger, exhaustion of energy, depression... |
| Mentally | - it binds the mind and takes pleasure from life (Prov. 15:17) |
| Physically | - deterioration of health; excessive hormonal increases affect blood thyroid; the whole central nervous system could break down creating chemical imbalances in the body. The breaking down of ones immune system makes one susceptible to many types of illness! |
| Socially | - you project bitterness at others, develop cynical, critical and negative attitudes toward life. People won't want to be around a person like that. |
| Spiritually | - I Jn. 4:20-21 Our love for God is on the line. |
| Future"lly" | - Deut. 5:9 - it eventually effects our children |

(These last two are not necessarily related to "bitterness" alone.)

Is it worth holding a grudge...at the expense of your own health, let alone the sacrificing of your fruitfulness and fulfillment in Christ?

The Principle of Forgiveness by Way of Parable
(Matthew 18:21-35)

1. Why did Jesus tell it?
2. How often are we to forgive?
3. How are grace and mercy evident?
4. How did each one respond throughout?
5. Why do you think each one in the story did what they did?
6. Doesn't verse 35 radically get you attention?
7. What have you learned, that you will apply? How does this parable reinforce Col. 3:13?

PRACTICAL STEPS IN FORGIVING OTHERS

Jesus said to "forgive from the heart" (Mt. 18:35) so that's where to start!

1. Evaluate where you are at in your own heart before God
 - a. Be honest with God about how you feel about the offense, the offender, the hurt, the present struggle...
 - b. Confess to God any possible sin of your own (bitterness, anger, grudge, revenge...) Prov. 28:13 I Jn. 1:7-10
 - c. Ask God for wisdom (Js. 1:5) in laying hold of the spiritual truths that you need to renew and transform your mind (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:23)
 - regarding your own forgiveness (how has God forgiven you?) Totally, because "Jesus paid it all."
 - regarding your focus (past, present, and future)
 - regarding your responsibility to forgive _____.
2. Choose to forgive whether you feel like it or not.
 - a. It is not "hypocrisy" to forgive if you don't feel like it. We are responsible to obey God's commands based on an act of our will, not our feelings!
 - b. When you start to step out in faith-obedience in doing what God says, it means
 - going against you feelings (if they're contradictory to God's word.)
 - decide to please God in the matter
 - forgive out of love for Christ
 - forgiveness doesn't start with feelings, it starts with your decision to do it
3. Forgive Them!
 - a. Release the person from the debt; let go of any further thoughts against them.
 - b. You may need to go to them personally. (If you do, work out the wording carefully and in a non-accusational/condemning way.) Make reconciliation restore fellowship, friendship with those who hurt us. Things may never be the same again, but "as much as lies within you, be at peace with others" (Rom. 12:18). If it is not possible to talk with that person by way of personal contact, phone or letter, then use a "substitute" (role play it to an empty chair). Many have released years of suffering by doing this.
 - c. Pray "Lord I forgive _____, in Jesus name, for _____. I am depending on your spirit, grace, love...to fill me and control my thoughts in this matter. Don't allow Satan to gain any ground through any "reminders". Help me to replace the "hurt" thoughts with your love..."
 - d. Make it a promise to the person, involving three things:
 - I won't raise these matters with you again.
 - I won't tell others about them.
 - I won't dwell on them in my own mind.Keeping this promise leads to "forgetting". (Jay Adams)

4. Respond Biblically by treating them the way Christ would. (Lk. 6:27-37)
 - a. Accept them. How has Christ accepted you? ("Just as I am") Rom. 5:7
 - b. Pray for them, ask God to bless them. Luke 6:28
 - c. Defuse any potential problems by "going the extra mile" Mt. 5:38-42
 - d. Show love to even your enemies! Mt. 5:43-47
 - e. Do good to them, give them a gift, help them... Luke 6:27
 - f. Overcome any potential build up of evil by doing good!
Rom. 12:17-21 (key passage!)
 - g. How would you want them to treat you? Put yourself in their shoes
Mt. 7:12

Take time to look up the above references and ask God's Spirit to help you to get a hold of these spiritual truths. The statement preceding each only scratches the surface of the context.

5. View the offender as a tool in the hands of God for your spiritual growth!
Luke 23:24 Acts 7:58-60
Realize that God is sovereign and has a purpose in everything Rom. 8:28-29
See the offense and offender as an instrument that God is using to produce Christ-like character in your life (Js. 1:2-5). He is at work in your life to use everything in a positive way to accomplish a greater picture, so cooperate with God by applying the scripture that you need to, to overcome evil victoriously. God is just and will render to every man according to his deeds (Rom. 2:6). Entrust the situation to Him who judges rightly (I Pet. 2:21-24). Thank God, not for what they did, but for what He will bring about as a result. (I Thes. 5:18). Read how Joseph was victorious (Gen. 45-50, especially Gen. 50:15-21) They may have meant it for evil, but God meant it for good!
6. Change your focus, turn the situation into spiritual maturity and victory. Take those hurtful memories or consequences and use it as a springboard for a positive life testimony. Remind yourself of what God has done and can do in spite of it all. Share the lessons God has taught you with others. Focus on God's promises, power, provision...(Phil. 4:8) worship and praise Him!
7. Transform your perspective.
Don't dwell on the negative - "change the tapes" in your mind - Start rehearsing the good.

Write these verses (and others in this study) on a 3 x 5 card and carry it with you to help focus your thoughts on God's truths!

I Pet. 1:21-24	Lk. 23:34
I Pet. 4:8	Prov. 10:12
I Cor. 13:5	Prov. 17:9
Matt. 5:7	Prov. 19:11
Lk. 6:27-37	Col. 3:12-17

REAL PEOPLE

Corrie TenBoom was sinned against greatly when placed into a concentration camp during the Nazi holocaust; you name it, she faced it. Yet she said "There is no pit so deep where God's love does not go deeper still". She got hold of God's truths which transformed her life and she was able to forgive those who hated and hurt her.

King Henry VI of England had it said of Him: "He never forgot anything but injuries." Of Cranmer it was said: "If you want to get a favor from him, do him a wrong." Emerson said of Lincoln: "His heart was as great as the world, but there was no room in it for the memory of a wrong." Spurgeon gives this advice: "Cultivate forbearance till your heart yields a fine crop of it. Pray for a short memory as to unkindness."

The little saying, "God has buried our sins in the deepest sea, let's not go fishing", also applies to what we should do with those offenses that we've chalked up in our own mind against others.

CONCLUSION

I must forgive others just as God has forgiven me. Since I am forgiven, I must be a forgiving person. Never forget the forgiveness which you have received from God. Forgiveness is "clearing the record", so each time you forgive an offense, it's not the seventh or fifth, etc; it's always the first! Even if it is all their fault and they won't change, that's all the more reason why you must forgive - your spiritual, mental and physical health are at stake if you don't respond Biblically! You are never exempt from doing what God says just because someone else has sinned! You don't base your forgiveness on feelings. It's a promise that you make as a act of your will to never bring the matter up again to them, others, or yourself. You're not demanding that they change - you're accepting them as they are and living Biblically toward them. (If they need help and restoration, then see other studies for guidelines.) Change your focus from "self-centered" thinking to "Christ-centered" thinking and "overcome evil by doing good".

How many times has God forgiven you?

