Eight Steps To Forgiveness

Have you ever been hurt by someone you love? Have you been mistreated by someone you trusted? Has your heart been broken by betrayal? Have you ever experienced church hurt cause by other church members? Do you find yourself in a position where now you must forgive the person(s) who offended you? Finally, “Are you struggling with knowing how to forgive?” If you have answered yes to any of these question, this lesson is for you. In this lesson, with God’s help, I hope to help you discover what true forgive means and how to achieve it.

What is forgiveness?



“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”

Forgiveness is one of the most freeing yet challenging principles in the Bible. If you’ve ever struggled to forgive someone or even yourself, you’re not alone.

The definition of forgiveness is essentially the act of pardoning an offender. My definition of forgiveness is the wiping out of an offense from useful memory; which can be effected by the one offended. Once eradicated, the offense no longer conditions the relationship between the offender and the one offended, and harmony is restored between the two. .

Forgiveness isn’t pretending nothing happened. It’s not forgetting or excusing the pain. Biblically, forgiveness means releasing the offense and giving up the right to revenge.

The Greek word aphesis (forgiveness) means “to let go,” or “to release.” It’s a canceling of the debt someone owes you, not because they earned it, but because God forgave you first. Jesus used this comparison in his parable of the unmerciful slave (Matthew 18:23-35) as well as when he taught his followers to pray, “forgive us our sins (debts), for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is in debt to us.” (Luke 11:4).

The Bible teaches that unselfish love is the basis for true forgiveness, since “it keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Forgiving others means letting go of resentment and giving up any claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered.

Why do we need to forgive?

Forgiveness is at the very heart of the gospel. Colossians 3:13 states, “Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” We were born sinners against God, but He loved us enough to send Christ, His Son to die for us. God actions validate that forgiveness is an action of the will when one choses to forgive regardless of the actions or response of the one being forgiven.

In the same way, we are commanded to forgive those who do wrong to us, not just those who are asking for forgiveness, or those who are first-time offenders or whose wrongs seem forgivable. Jesus famously told Peter in Matthew 18 (vs. 21-35) to forgive someone “seventy times seven” times and he makes the sobering statement in Matthew 6:15, “But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” This statement alone makes forgiveness an absolute necessity; unless you just want go hell.

Luke 13:37 says, “forgive, and ye shall be forgiven…” Forgiving others is required to be in obedience go God.

We also need to forgive others so that we don’t grow bitter. Resentment is a very unhealthy emotion; it hurts us far more than those who have offended us.

The Bible states in Hebrews 12:15, “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it, many become defiled.” Tony Evans explained this verse like this. “When you’re experiencing troublesome circumstances, you’re in danger of resenting what God is doing in your life. But resentment will only serve to compound the problems.” Plain and simple, we hold on the pain, hurt, anger, and bitter caused by the offense, it will fester to the point of hatred, vengeance and strife. By releasing unforgiveness and all the bitterness and anger that comes with it, we are freed to live and serve with real peace and joy; and to grow in spiritual maturity. A persons ability to forgive is evidence of spiritual maturity.

What Forgiveness Is Not

In Rick Warren’s well-known book, The Purpose Driven Life, he explains that many people are reluctant to show mercy because they don’t understand the difference between trust and forgiveness. Forgiving others must be immediate, whether or not a person asks for it. Again, reflect back to what the Bible says. “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) God did not hesitate in His forgiveness of those who had offended Him. Therefore we should respond in like manner and quickly forgive others.

Trust, on the other hand, has to do with future behavior and it will likely take time to build or rebuild. Warren explains, “If someone hurts you repeatedly, you are commanded by God to forgive them instantly, but you are not expected to trust them immediately, and you are not expected to continue allowing them to hurt you.”

* How many times will you allow a person to slap you before you decide that’s enough?
* How many times will you allow your spouse to be unfaithful before you decide that’s enough?
* How many time will you allow your spouse to abuse you physically or mentally before you decide that’s enough?
* How many times will you allow a person to make trouble for you continuously before you decide that’s enough?

Every person has a breaking point. Sooner or later you will come to the point when you are no longer willing to tolerate affliction, bad behavior or abuse. Psalm 56 teaches that God is on the side of the abused and oppressed. We are not required to accept bad treatment. (Note: No when to leave. David fled from King Saul; the angel of the Lord instructed Joseph to flee to Egypt with Jesus to escape the evil King Herod. If you are in an abusive situation, you should seek safety and seek help.)

Forgiveness IS NOT sweeping things under the rug and saying what the other person did or said was okay. Forgiveness is also not necessarily forgetting what happened. You can remember and forgive because forgiveness again is an action of the will. However, depending on the situation, forgiveness may require a time of healing. I can personally testify that I have forgive offenses against me while still hurting from the offense.

Notice the scar on this mans face. The wound has healed, but the scare reminds him of pain. Forgiveness is an immediate action but healing takes time and sometimes it leaves a scare.

In the picture below, the scar over the eye has fade away over a period of time. That’s what the healing process is like. It time healing will allow the scar of the offense to fade away and you will no longer look back and see what caused you pain.

News Flash! If you hold on to the transgression like a trump card and play it every chance you get, you can be sure that you HAVE NOT forgive the person. This goes against Jesus’ command to forgive “seventy times seven” times in one day.  After all, remember that God has forgiven you more times than you will ever have the opportunity to forgive someone else.

Think about one thing that you need forgiveness for right now. Is that one thing you are thinking about a sin? Most likely are you wouldn’t need forgiveness. You do know it only takes one unforgiven sin to take you to hell for eternity. What if God decided not to forgive you of that one sin! Exactly! You’re going to hell because of one sin. Now imagine if that one unforgiven sin was the result of you not forgiving someone. You could have gone to heaven if you would have forgave them.

How to forgive

How then do we achieve forgiveness, this “letting go,” which can feel like an impossible task? Sometimes our emotions have a great impact on our ability to let go. Pain and anger stir our emotions and make it hard to forgive.

In our own strength, forgiving others in the way we have received God’s forgiveness is impossible, but with God, nothing is impossible, and with His Spirit inside us we can go through a process that leads to true forgiveness.

In my experience with forgiveness, I made up in my mind (will) that I was going to forgive while battling with my emotions. My emotional response was fueled by common practices of society. Societies response to my pain was it’s okay to be mad, hurt, vengeful, and unforgiving. How do I fix my mind to over-ride my emotions supported by worldly influences? “…be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (Romans 12:2). To allow my emotions to follow the social norms of the world would mean that I am conforming. To transform my mind to be within the perfect will of God, would mean that I would have to transform my thoughts according to the Word of God. I begin to search the scripture and discover eight steps that help me to forgive that I would like to share with you.

I believe these eight steps will help you to truly forgive and have freedom in your life. If you have been significantly hurt by someone’s actions or words, working through these stages can be immensely helpful.

There is a benefit in having a Christian Counselor. A person who is knowledgeable of the Word of God, not bias, easily influence and who will be honest with you. If you have someone that you trust completely, it’s often helpful to have someone to whom you can reveal your internal feelings and who will gently nudge you towards God’s word. They can also guard you against stagnation, and those bitter roots which Hebrews 12 warns about.

8 Steps To Forgiveness

1. Acknowledge the pain.

Working through pain can only happen once you admit you’ve been hurt. However, acknowledging this can intensify the feelings. Tears, feelings of resentment and deep thoughts are a good indicator that something’s wrong. Becoming numb, suppressing, stiffing or bottling up feelings only cuts off and delays the process of forgiving others before it’s even begun. Admit it and deal with it!

1. Think It Through

Try writing down what happened in a journal or share it with the person you chose to serve as your Christian Counselor. (Again, the Christian Counselor must be committed to God’s truth and not to saying what you want to hear, but what you need to hear.) Thinking it through means admitting how what happened made you feel. If it made you sad, angry, disrespected, unappreciated, betrayed, violated, etc., admit it. Be honest about what emotions are rising up in you at that moment even if it seems to justify un-forgiveness.

1. Flip The Script

Think about a time when you have had to ask for forgiveness; especially when guilt had set in. Guilt brings home a real need for forgiveness. When you felt guilty, how did it make you feel? When you were guilty of offending or going wronged to another person, did that person extend forgiveness to you or did they withhold it? When you ask someone to forgive you and they are unwilling to do so, it makes you feel some kind of way. What more can I do to show the person I am truly remorseful? How can I get them to accept my apology? How will this affect our relationship in the future? If they would forgive you, none of these question would be on the table.

The Bible directs us to do to others what we would have them do to us (Matthew 7:12). Thinking about our own sins and how we would desire forgiveness can be helpful to put ourselves in their shoes for a moment.

Note: Disregard “Step 3” if you’re perfect.

1. Remember God’s Forgiveness

Every person who has experienced the ‘grace of God,” understands the meaning of forgiveness. In order for God to save our soul, He had to forgive our sins. When someone does something against us, we must remind ourselves of the debt that God forgave us through Jesus Christ when we certainly didn’t deserve it. Remembering God’s forgiveness can help us to forgive others. Think about it, if we have been forgiven so much, how then can we hold onto offenses committed against us? This is a step in the process that doesn’t necessarily mean that you are ready at this point to voice your forgiveness to your offender. Remember you can forgive someone without that forgiveness being accepted by the other person.

1. Listen To God

By now, I’m sure you have spent some time praying about the situation. Hopefully you are now ready to listen. You’re not ready to listen when you do all the talking. (*When the incident is fresh, we tend to do more talking than listening because we re in the complaint stage and not the counseling stage.*) If you listen to God, you will hear Jesus stress the importance of forgiving others on many occasions and even included it in the Lord’s prayer. He said specifically “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” At this point, you should be getting your emotions under control and your intellect should be in the drivers seat. The Word of God has a way of helping us to regain control and focus on the next step. It’s time to move forward.

1. Let Go Of The Hurt

Letting the hurt go is not easy to do because by now Satan has found his footing. He has done the work to convince you that your feelings are justifiable and the hurt is real. Real hurt deserves justice and letting it go without justice is inconceivable. Don’t allow devil to replay the offense over and over in your mind. You have already thought it through and flipped the script. Now it’s time to let go of the pain and make the decision to move forward by chose. You will never move forward until you make a conscious decision to press forward. Philippians 3:13-14 says, “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended (I’m not there yet): but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind (everything that hinders you from moving forward), and reaching forth unto those things which are before (peace), I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (living out God’s truth).”

This is the stage when you will find yourself praying the most. Why? Because that old messenger from Satan will become a thorn in your flesh and keep replaying the past in your mind. You will need to pray for strength to walk by faith, to embrace God’s word and pray most all pray for the person who offended you to be forgiven and live out God’s truth in their life. Luke 6:28 says, “Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.” It’s impossible to ask Go to bless someone who mistreated you and remain bitter towards them.

1. Live For The Future And Live Free

It is impossible to change the past, but we have the power to change what we do next. Is it possible to live like it never happened? God does it for us daily according to Isaiah 43:25. When God forgives us, He “will not remember thy sins.” He cast our sins in the sea forgetfulness according to Micha 7:19. God forgives our sins and doesn’t hold them against us any longer. He treats us as if they never happened. That’s the freedom of true forgiveness. Don’t allow what happened to control your thoughts, actions, attitude or emotions. We are no longer slaves to sin or Satan. We have the freedom to live godly and practice the principles of God’s word. Forgiveness is one of the most power actions in scripture. When you can forgive and live as if it never happened, that’s living free and future is eternal.

1. Show Love And Pray

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus commands us “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” How would you feel knowing that you mistreated someone and they show no ill feelings towards you, but rather show you nothing but love? When we love those who mistreated us, they get to experience the love of God flow through us. 1 Peter 4:9 says, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” The word cover means to cause a multitude of sins to be overlooked and not punished. By showing love it proves that you not looking serve up an “eye for an eye.”

Matthew also said pray for them. The word pray (proseúchomai) in Mt. 5:44 means to pray exhaustively; include all components of prayer. More interesting than the meaning of the word pray is its syntax. Present Tense, Imperative Mood, Active Voice. The syntax of the word commands us to continuously pray for the person who offended you. I discovered this. The more I pray for my offender, the more it changes my opinion of my offender and I see my own need to be forgiven. It has become my prayer that God will forgive me as I forgive others. This the place where God desires for me to be. I wonder, did God allow those things to happen to me, just to get me to this place?

SUMMARY

With promises found in Scriptures like Philippians 4:13 (“I can do all this through Him who gives me strength”) and Romans 12:21 (“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”), we know that we can depend on God to give us grace to live out forgiveness daily. I encourage you to make the right choice and start your journey of forgiveness today. I’m praying for the Lord to equip you for this difficult but rewarding task that will free you from the burden un-forgiveness and all her offspring.

Dr. P. Randolph Hamilton Sr., Pastor-Teacher