

What Must I Do To Be Forgiving?

Ben Giselbach
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You know this feeling. Someone has wronged you (either recently or in the past) and the hurt festers within you until it dominates your thoughts throughout the day. If the hurt is allowed to go unchecked, the growing bitterness will prevent you from pursuing reconciliation and destroy your heart in the process. The only cure—or preventative measure if this hasn't yet happened to you—is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is hard. The young apostle Peter, wrestling with how difficult it can be to forgive those who sin against him, asked, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matt. 18:21). Peter felt he was stretching his generosity to the breaking point with this suggestion. By this time in the early first century, the Jewish teachers had done some impressive gymnastics with a verse in the first chapter of Amos (“For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,” v. 3) and taught that one only had to forgive someone three times. Perhaps Peter thought he was being extreme by doubling that number and adding another to it. Yet Peter’s words only betrayed the fact that he didn’t understand the teaching of Jesus at all.

Jesus wanted Peter to know that there was nothing mathematical to forgiveness at all. His answer to Peter’s question removes all doubt for how often we must forgive. “Seventy times seven,” He said, or as many times as needed. **Mercy is an attitude, not a formula.**

What is the alternative to forgiveness? *Unforgiveness*, which does more damage to you than it does to anyone else. An unforgiving heart—a vindictive in spirit—a desire to “get even”—is too heavy to carry around. Yet unlike literal weights that make us stronger through exercise, unforgiveness always makes us weaker. It absorbs our energy, sucking our strength like a black hole. **We do ourselves more damage than we do to others when we refuse to forgive.**

There is a story of a man who was carrying a bundle of dynamite underneath his jacket, taped to his chest. When asked why, he explained that he was tired of a certain man at work pushing him in the chest all the time and said, “The next time he does it, he’ll get his foolish hand blown off!” This is a perfect picture of ourselves when we maintain an unforgiving spirit—carrying a bundle of death taped to our heart, unknowingly hurting ourselves more than the person with whom we are angry.

Many have the attitude, “If you’ll act right, and pay the right price, I’ll consider forgiving you.” However, we forget the fact that, as Guy N. Woods says, “we must forgive the penitent brother, not in order for him to be saved, but in order for us to be saved—not in order for him to go to heaven, but in order for us to go to heaven!”¹ God only forgives us when we are willing to forgive others (Matt. 6:12, 14-15).

Thus we understand the worst thing about unforgiveness is not the psychological harm it brings, but the spiritual damnation we are sentencing ourselves. **No matter how difficult forgiveness is, we can’t afford *not* to be forgiving.** In fact, if we understood how much of a debt we owe God, we would begin to realize how petty even the worst debts we are owed truly are (Matt. 18:23-35). God’s forgiveness is so much greater and more precious than whatever forgiveness we are tempted to withhold from those who have wronged us.

It is common for well-meaning people to say, “Just forgive automatically, regardless of whether the person in the wrong is penitent.” In other words, just pretend like everything is fine and forget about it. But that’s not forgiveness—that’s just an excuse. It has always been easier to excuse sin in a therapeutic way, pretending it did not happen. **But true, biblical forgiveness is modeled after God’s forgiveness. We must care about the soul of the offender to the degree that we want God to forgive them too, even if we have to confront him/her and step outside of our comfort zone to bring that about. That’s what God did; He pursued us.** We can excuse others for what they have done wrong, but that is not enough. If we have the true spirit of forgiveness, we must recognize that the person is culpable for their sins and we must be willing to sacrifice our pride in order to confront them. Jesus taught, “**If** your brother sins, rebuke him, and **if** he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). **Sin must be *confronted* if we truly love our brother, and forgiveness must be *accepted* before it can be true forgiveness.** Forgiveness requires

a willing receiver, not only a benevolent giver.

God has confronted us in our sins with an offer of forgiveness, yet forgiveness is only actualized when we respond with a penitent spirit. **And just as God forgives those who repent, He expects us to forgive those who likewise repent before us** (Luke 17:4). **How many times? An unlimited number of times.** True forgiveness hasn't occurred unless one first acknowledges his or her wrong, repents, and accepts your pardon. Unless a rebellious brother or sister desires a relationship of peace with you, you cannot force one.

Sometimes the person who has wronged us refuses to admit guilt. In which case, are we to walk around with a chip on our shoulder, harboring our bitterness and anger against him or her? No way! We perpetually desire reconciliation, hoping and praying that the offender will repent. We also acknowledge that vengeance was never ours to execute; vengeance belongs to God (Rom. 12:19-21). **Cast your hurt feelings and bitterness on the Lord** (Psa. 55:22; 1 Pet. 5:7). Let Him do what is best, because He will.

Search your heart today. Is their vindictiveness toward someone who has wronged you? Then remember the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:23-35 who accepted his master's forgiveness of his unpayable debt like an ungrateful pig, and in turn refused to forgive his peer a small debt. The unmerciful servant found his own attitude of unforgiveness returned to him. Don't be that guy—quick to condemn, unwilling to forgive, unable to show compassion. **Instead, be like Christ—who overlooks our unintended weaknesses, begs us to repent of our known sins, and eagerly forgives us when we confess our wrongdoing** (even while knowing we'll regrettably sin again, then ask for forgiveness again; cf. 1 John 1:8).

Despite the fact that the wrong done to you was unfair and the offender deserves to be punished, **do not let your heart rot with unforgiveness**, which in turn only severs you from God's forgiveness. Mimic God's forgiving spirit: Offer forgiveness to everyone. Desire everyone's repentance. In so doing, you will heal your own heart and reconcile with your penitent brother.

Footnotes

1. Guy N. Woods, *Questions & Answers*, 2:24.