

HOW TO FORGIVE

LEARNING THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE OF
RELEASE



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Introduction:

Over the years, monkeys in India have grown to love candy, and this sweet addiction has come back to bite them. The locals have found out that monkeys are so addicted to sweets that they will sacrifice their freedom for a taste. Here is how they do it: they simply take a hollowed out gourd, make a small hole in it and fill it with candy. Then, they secure the gourd to a tree. The hole in the gourd is just big enough for a monkey to get its hand in, but once it grabs the sweets, it can't get its hand out. As a person approaches to throw a net over the monkey, it will not let go of the candy inside the gourd to run away. The monkey simply can't let go and, therefore, is enslaved for the rest of his life.

When a person gets trapped in unforgiveness, it is just like the monkey and the gourd. All it takes is to let it go and you are free. However, if it is so simple, then why is forgiving so hard to do? Why doesn't everybody do it all the time?

The reason is our sense of justice intersects with our offense. In other words, it seems unjust to let someone go when they have done something to us we believe to be unjust. Therefore, unforgiveness looks somewhat right and, like the monkey trap, it seems sweet. In the end, my hope is that you see this trap for what it is - a prison that ends up destroying your freedom. Unforgiveness is a trap that will destroy your spiritual life, your relationships, and eventually, your faith.

This booklet was written so that you may know the truth of what God is telling you in the Bible and how you can learn to let go and find freedom in your life.

Begin a New Journey

My challenge for you sounds simple, but it takes guts. Let go of the candy in the gourd - unforgiveness - and grab onto a new gift, the one that comes from God. When you grab onto this gift, it sets you free, unleashes the grace of God into your heart, and allows God to be the One who will set things right in the universe. You will discover that learning to forgive is actually learning the heart of God. This is not a gift you unwrap and set on a table to admire, this gift is an invitation to live out the ultimate adventure in life: know God, know His heart and know why you are here.

Here is what I mean: learning how to forgive is actually learning the very heart of God. You come to understand God more deeply and how He relates to you. Can there be no greater adventure than learning the heart of God? Could there be any higher goal for your life than to understand God's purpose for you? When you open this gift from God, you are entering into a lifetime of adventure, exploration and discovery.

Now, you may be thinking that sounds good, but so what? I want you to understand there is a huge downside to ignoring this aspect of your spiritual life. Let's go back to the monkey trap. Satan uses unforgiveness to trap you and destroy your heart. Hebrews 12:15 says, *"See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."*

What happens if you decide not to walk in forgiveness? Satan has you trapped, and bitter roots easily grow into massive trees. Therefore, if you want to grow deeply in your faith, it is critical for you to grasp the importance of forgiveness in the words of Jesus when He said, *"14For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."* Matthew 6:14-15 (NIV)

Forgiveness is such a critical principle for spiritual growth that some Christian teachers conclude that until a person learns to live and practice forgiveness, they will be unable to grow to a mature faith in Jesus Christ.

The Essence of Forgiveness

In reality, forgiveness is a simple spiritual principle. It means to give up any desire for revenge or getting even, as well as releasing any resentment, anger or bitterness towards a person or situation. Even though the principle seems simple, on a spiritual journey it is often the basic principles that appear to be the most difficult to live and practice.

Practicing forgiveness is difficult due to a basic human trait. Jack Hayford, in his book, ***The Key to Everything***, says this, *"Our fears have taught us that to give anything is to be left with less."*

If we believe we are left with less when we forgive, our sense of fairness flashes across our radar screen and says, *"Wait a second! They did the wrong, why should I have less!"* In order to live the principle of forgiveness, you have to resist this temptation and state the truth: *God promises that I will be free if I forgive.* The real truth in God's promise is that people who forgive experience the greatest spiritual freedom this side of heaven.

In order to learn how to live free and practice the following steps, you must stay focused on what God does, not on what you think you will lose.

Face Unforgiveness Head-On

The first step in practicing a lifestyle of forgiveness is to face the underlying beliefs that cause you to hold on to unforgiveness. Below are some of the basic concepts we believe that cause us to hold onto things when we should let go:

- *"He doesn't deserve it."*
- *"I will never let them off the hook for what they did."*
- *"One day, I will see them get their just desserts."*
- *"Some things should never be forgotten."*

When we believe these thoughts and then hold onto them, unforgiveness takes root in our hearts. Forgiveness becomes a nice platitude, with no real power or truth. We put on a nice Christian face - playing nice - but in reality, our heart is holding on. BAM! The trap is set. Happy on the outside, bitter on the inside.

In reality, bitterness, resentment and bearing a grudge only kills you in the end. Someone once said, *"Bitterness is like drinking rat poison, expecting it to kill the other person."* Bitterness warps your relationships, destroys your health, and distances you so far from God that you no longer hear His voice.

I would like for you to consider a simple question: What if forgiveness - the learning of how to release anger, bitterness or a grudge - was the key principle in your life that would set you free from the attitude that destroys your faith? What if forgiveness could give you the power to live in the attitude of faith that builds and strengthens your life? What if learning to give - that is, **forgive** - was the key to the life you were looking for?

Let me help you think through the issues that often keep us from wanting to forgive, and then show you practical steps on how to forgive.

Specific Guidelines to Know:

1). Understand the True Nature of Biblical Forgiveness

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells the parable of the "Unforgiving Servant". The parable tells of a servant who had a great debt cancelled by his king. He immediately turned around and demanded payment of a small debt from an old friend. When the king heard of this, he threw him in prison because of his wickedness.

True forgiveness is about canceling a debt, giving pardon to someone, and choosing not to seek revenge. It is an intentional, willful choice to give up resentment and letting go of the "offense". The purpose of authentic, Biblical forgiveness is to release you from unhealthy spiritual attitudes. True Biblical forgiveness does not seek to produce an unhealthy spiritual bondage in a person. Therefore, clear thinking is important concerning forgiveness.

► **When you choose to forgive, you are not excusing or condoning the wrong committed.**

When you forgive, it does not mean you will necessarily be reconciled with the offender. Though reconciliation requires authentic forgiveness, forgiveness should not be equated with reconciliation. Relationships are built on trust, and a person can forgive and move forward and still need for the trust in the relationship to be rebuilt before reconciliation takes place.

► You may not be able to completely forget the wrong. There is debate among theologians about whether or not forgiveness is real unless someone can forget, since God forgets when He forgives. However, since we are not God, we may never be able to completely forget the offense. However, we can forget the resentment, the anger, the betrayal that we felt in response to the offense. One thing you CAN do: stop talking to other people about it.

2). Authentic Forgiveness Sets You Free

When a person does not walk the journey of forgiveness, they fall into the trap of bitterness. The real power of bitterness is its deceptive nature. The person who is bitter often believes their bitterness does not affect other areas of their lives. However, the Bible teaches something different:

► **Unforgiveness destroys relationships.** Proverbs 17:9 says, *"He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends."*

Bitterness can easily impact other relationships.

► **It becomes a prison.** Proverbs 14:10 says, *"Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy."*

A bitter heart is alone.

► **You become captive to sin.** Acts 8:23 quotes Peter telling a person who had wrong motives concerning faith, *"For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."*

► **It allows others power over you.** Educator Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), an emancipated slave who started out living in abject poverty, struggled his whole life. Facing obstacle after obstacle, he never became bitter or resentful. He eventually became a professor at the Hampton Institute, one of the first black colleges in America, and then founded the prestigious Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. His lifelong motto was, *"I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him."*

The personal toll of bitterness and resentment is extremely heavy. When the human spirit does not forgive, it falls into a trap. As Booker T. says, your soul is "belittled". A small soul - belittled soul - cannot experience the forgiveness of God. It is not even capable of forgiving itself. The Bible accurately shows a person how bitterness and resentment ultimately kills the spirit of a person.

3). **Authentic Forgiveness Will Grow You**

When you begin the journey to develop the attitude of forgiveness in your life, you will see yourself begin to grow first. First, authentic forgiveness will cause you to challenge your "should" statements. "Should" statements are often where our offense originates.

- ▶ *"I should not be treated that way."*
- ▶ *"He should never have spoken to me in that manner."*
- ▶ *"She should not treat me this way."*
- ▶ *"My child should never disrespect me in that manner."*
- ▶ *"Spouses who love each other should never do that."*
- ▶ *"My boss should be more attentive to me."*

One of the first steps in maturity is to remind yourself that it is unreasonable to expect people to treat you with honor, respect and sensitivity at all times. More often than not, the baggage that everyone else is carrying will cause them to treat you poorly. Everyone out there is flawed, so be careful of the expectations of how you should be treated.

The best **defense** against people treating you poorly is a solid attitudinal **offense**. *How do you do this?* Believe what the Bible teaches. Everyone out there is flawed, and therefore will do things that offend and hurt you.

Make a decision to forgive offenses before they occur. By developing this attitude, you will constantly be on the offense. Strong, healthy attitudes will happen in our lives when we believe what the Bible says and then choose to live as Jesus would have us live.

Secondly, walking the journey of forgiveness grows you by stretching your faith. Here is how "stretching" works. If you are saying to yourself, "God, I believe You are in control.

I know that You will resolve every injustice. I trust You to work this out for me." Then you will live each day trusting God to take care of the situation or circumstance. Your issue is now God's issue. It takes a lot of faith to let it go and expect God to do something about it.

You really grow when you begin to realize that just because you don't see something happening on the outside, God is doing something on the inside. Remember, God works in mysterious ways!

4). Authentic Forgiveness Releases the Power of God in Your Life

Developing the attitude of forgiveness in your life is the key to unlocking the power of God inside of you.

Luke 6:37-38 says, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven. 38Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

God wants to fill us to overflowing with His power. The attitude of forgiveness is the process of shaking and pressing down your measure. Do you want a greater measure from God? Then use a bigger measure!

See what Paul says in his letter to the church in Ephesus:

"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." Ephesians 4:17-19

Unforgiveness, resentment, bitterness and bearing a grudge are attitudes that act as blockers to the fullness of Christ dwelling within us. When we learn to forgive, we release the power of God to work through us freely.

Specific Steps to Forgiveness:

Step #1: Acknowledge the Hurt

Admitting there is an issue to resolve is the first step. Strangely enough, this is the most difficult step to take. Admitting that there is an issue which only forgiveness can resolve requires a person to look beyond their own pride. The easiest manner in which the evil one short-circuits our ability to forgive is by appealing early on to our sense of personal strength.

- *"I'm not mad, there's nothing to forgive."*
- *"I'm not offended; it's no big deal."*
- *"You can't hurt me. I'm tough as nails."*

Regardless of the phrases we employ, if we are repeating them over and over again in our minds, it should tell us that we might have something to deal with in the area of forgiveness.

Now the reasons we tell ourselves these things vary. It might be that we don't want to look petty, like *"Why would such a small thing hurt me?"* - or self-centered, or possibly weak - *"Not much gets to me, I'm pretty tough."* However, the tactic of denying an offense is an attempt at relying on our own ability to deal with the offense. This is called *self-righteousness*.

Step 2: Make a Willful Choice

When you read the scriptures, you get the impression that Jesus thinks it is possible to simply choose to forgive. Psychologists now find Jesus to be correct.

Lewis Smedes, a professor of ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and author of ***Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve***, tells of his rage towards a police officer who brutalized his young son, John. The officer was a large 250-pound lawman who assaulted his 140-pound son and then charged him with resisting an officer. Although the charge was quickly dismissed, Smedes' rage and hostility were not so quickly appeased. Realizing that his intense feelings toward the police officer were creating a personal emotional crisis, Smedes knew he had to find a way of forgiving.

"I tried a technique that everything in my temperament resisted," he writes.

I thought about how a priest gives instant absolution to a penitent, right off the bat, in the confessional booth. And I decided to give this cop absolution. 'In the name of God, I hereby forgive you - go in peace,' I said out loud, at least six times. It worked enough to get me going. I felt myself pried a couple of inches off my hate. And I was on my way."

Step 3: Pray an Authentic Prayer

The purpose of prayer is not to request that God afflict your antagonist with open boils. The true power of prayer is found in the word of Paul to the church in Philippi:

6 "Do not be anxious over things (situations), but in everything through prayer and petition, let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:6-7

The purpose of prayer is to request God to live out forgiveness through you. When you request power to live according to God's plan, He willingly supplies you with all you need. Request that God would empower your decision to forgive. Ask Him to let you experience the release of forgiveness.

Step 4: Learning Release

In the parable of the unrighteous servant, Jesus showed how the servant was wicked because he quickly forgot the immense debt for which he was forgiven. When the bitterness seeks to return, or the negative thoughts of that situation begin to take over, remember the immense debt God forgave you. Seek to walk in the warmth of your own salvation, not in the cold reminder of the wrong done to you.

Remind yourself of the truth of your choice. *"I let that go; it has no power over me any longer."*

Conclusion:

Ultimately, forgiveness is a gift that you give to yourself. There is an old story about a former inmate from a Nazi concentration camp who was visiting a fellow survivor long after the war.

“Have you forgiven the Nazis yet?” his friend asked him.

“Yes, I have,” he replied.

“Well, I haven’t!” his friend stated strongly. “I am consumed with hatred for them and what they did.”

“In that case,” he replied gently, “They still have you in prison.”