



FORGIVENESS: WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT ISN'T, & HOW TO DO IT

While forgiveness is a central concept in Christianity, many people find it to be a confusing process that does not always come easily. The emotional impact that comes with dealing with being transgressed against is one factor that contributes to the difficulty of forgiveness. In addition, misunderstandings about forgiveness can make it harder than it needs to be.

Defining forgiveness as it is described in Scripture is a good first step towards understanding this concept. God, through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, offers forgiveness to all who come to Him by faith. Because He has forgiven us, we are called upon to extend forgiveness to others even when we do not desire to do so.

Ephesians 4:32 "And be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

Withholding forgiveness, bearing grudges, harboring bitterness, and allowing hatred can all lead to serious consequences. Forgiveness keeps these negativities from developing and from causing more damage to a relationship and to each person involved.

Hebrews 12:14-15, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled."

Being forgiving is part of God's character and nature. While God does not overlook sin, He is patient, gracious, merciful, and willing to forgive.

Ephesians 2:4-5, "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)."

What forgiveness IS NOT.

1. **Forgetting:** The often cited phrase "Forgive and Forget" sometimes leads people to believe that forgiveness means that one will truly forget the memory. In fact, trying to deny that some act of mistreatment or betrayal may have hurt you can actually intensify the memory of what you are trying to forget. Instead of trying to literally forget a memory, the goal is to be released from the unhealthy emotional tie it has to you.
2. **Pardoning:** Pardoning is a legal term that means to release from punishment, or to not punish, for some crime or offense. When someone is forgiven, they are not necessarily pardoned. The pardoning does not relieve the consequences for their actions.
3. **Reconciling:** A distinct difference exists between forgiveness and reconciliation although many people see them as the same thing. Forgiveness is what one person extends to another. Reconciliation is the process whereby two people take steps to rebuild a relationship that has been hurt. The purpose of reconciliation is *restoration* and *reconnection*. Forgiveness together with reconciliation is a high calling and worthy goal.

However, we cannot control and are not responsible for the reaction of the other party in our attempts at forgiveness and reconciliation. Rather, we are responsible for our own efforts and willingness to lovingly engage in this process. In some circumstances reconciliation is not always possible and, in these cases, forgiveness can still occur without reconciliation.

4. Avoidance or denial: Sometimes people are so hurt by something that they quickly say, "I've already forgiven it," in order to try to avoid having to feel the pain of the injury. Forgiveness is not simply a way of avoiding dealing with someone to get around pain or conflict. It is also not the same as denying we were truly hurt by someone's words or actions.
5. Excusing the offense: Forgiveness does not give the offender the right to offend again. Healthy boundaries are important so that we do not simply allow another person's hurtful or sinful actions to continue.
6. Easy or cheap: True forgiveness is not simply a few pleasant sounding words. It is hard work that involves a true and lasting change of behavior.
7. Trusting: Trust in relationships is built and maintained over time. The person who committed the offense must accept the fact that regaining trust will occur as a process over time.
8. A feeling: We can't wait to forgive until we feel like forgiving someone or are no longer feeling the effects of the offense. Rather, forgiveness is an act of obedience through which God can guide us.

What forgiveness IS.

1. Extended with grace: Those that need to be forgiven don't necessarily "deserve" or acknowledge the need for forgiveness. We certainly didn't "deserve" forgiveness from God. We extend grace to others because we receive grace from the Lord. The fallen nature that led to the offense against us is the same fallen nature we deal with in our hearts. Forgiveness extended with grace both acknowledges the seriousness of the wrongdoing and releases our perceived "right" for vengeance or holding it against someone.
2. An intentional decision and a process: Forgiveness doesn't happen by accident. Rather, you must make a choice to commit to the process that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and takes time.
3. A releasing of a debt: People often find it difficult to forgive because they want some type of vengeance or want the offender to feel how badly they hurt. In forgiving, we choose to release the debtor from his debt. This choice also releases us from holding onto something that could hinder our walk with the Lord (*Hebrews 12:1-2*).

Some steps toward forgiveness using the acronym R.E.A.C.H. (from *Forgiving and Reconciling* by Everett Worthington)

1. **Recall the hurt:** Acknowledge that hurt occurred.
2. **Empathize:** Try to understand what the other person may have been thinking, feeling and so on. Also, remember that forgiveness is extended with grace, and that we didn't deserve forgiveness from God.

3. **Altruistic gift of forgiveness:** Because we have received the gift of forgiveness from both God and other people, we humbly offer forgiveness to others.
4. **Commit to forgive:** Make a firm commitment to forgive and consider sharing your decision with another person so that they can hold you accountable for keeping that commitment.
5. **Holding onto forgiveness:** If you occasionally remember things from the past incidents that you have worked at forgiving, don't get discouraged. Recommit to forgive, commit the event and the person to God, and go on.

Don't stay stuck with the pain, anger, and hurt of unforgiveness. Seek God's help through the Word and prayer, and don't hesitate to seek counsel from a friend, mentor, minister, or Christian counselor if you need help working through forgiveness. Working through these issues will lead to healing and provide you with an opportunity to learn more about Christ-like love and how it is lived out on a day-to-day basis.



APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN

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ACCFS is thankful to announce the addition of a new staff member, Bro. Roger Gasser.

Roger Gasser recently joined ACCFS as a staff counselor. Roger's clinical specialties are in the area of addictions, working with both those struggling with addictions themselves and also family members, churches, and other support people. His addition is a blessing to this area of our ministry as we strive to help individuals experience the joy of living an overcoming life.

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