

Heartfelt Forgiveness

Why is forgiveness so important? Because it models the character of God. It has been said that we are never more like God than when we forgive others. Forgiving others is neither natural nor easy for us. Our natural tendency is toward revenge, spite or stewing in our anger. We easily plant roots of bitterness in our souls. How do we escape the clutches of this dark pool of resentment? This pamphlet is designed to help you do that through the all-sufficient grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will only briefly touch on a variety of topics so that we can cover a lot of issues.

1. Cherish the Forgiveness You Have in Jesus Christ - (Eph. 4:32; Lk. 7:47 (cf. Lk. 7:39); Col. 1:14; 3:13). The more you comprehend, and love and delight in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ towards you, the more likely you will be to forgive others quickly. Preach the gospel to yourself continually so that you don't drift far from its transforming truths and its grace (Col. 2:13-14; Rom. 5:10-11; 1 Thes. 1:10). Remember, you don't deserve *any* forgiveness for your own sins, but God in His great mercy *has* forgiven you and He *continues to* forgive you daily (Lk. 15:1-2, 25-29; 2 Cor. 2:7-8; Mt. 18:21-35). You must do the same towards others.

2. Forgiveness Means You Will Not Dwell and Meditate on the Offense or the Sin - This means that you will not dwell on the issue with the offender, with others, or in your own heart. You must seek to *glorify* Jesus Christ *even if* you have been wrongfully sinned against. Becoming embittered or carrying resentment *does not* glorify God. God is fully aware of this trial; therefore you must seek to be *trained* by it (Ps. 119:67 & 71; 1 Cor. 10:13; Jam. 1:2-4; Heb. 12:11) because God desires you to *learn* by it (Rom. 8:28-29). This means that every time you remember the offense, you must *continue* to forgive the person. You must not act like the "martyr" who seeks pity for bearing this offense.

3. Forgiveness is Not Optional - (Mk. 11:25; Mt. 6:9-15; Lk. 6:37; Col. 3:13; Mt. 18:21-35). God has given us the kind of heart that truly *can* forgive – No Christian should ever say, *I can't forgive him for what he did*. We need to repent when we say, *I don't want to forgive him for what he did*. Forgiveness is an act of obedience; a deliberate choice that we make. God would be a liar if He told us we *must* forgive yet we were not able to do so (2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:18).

4. There is Wisdom in "Overlooking" or "Passing Over" Some Offenses or Sins - (Prov. 12:16; 19:11; 1 Pet. 4:8). We don't need to confront every single sin or offense against us. There are times when silently bearing the offense is the best choice. We are "called" to suffer (Phil. 1:29; Eph. 5:25; Mt. 5:11-12; 1 Pet 2:19-23) and lay down our rights (Phil. 2:4-8; 1 Pet. 2:23; 3:9; Mt. 5:39). Allow the Lord to be your Defender rather than rushing to correct every wrong word said to you or about you (Rom. 12:19, 21; Ps. 27:1).

5. Forgiveness Does Not Mean We Just "Tolerate" Sin - It does not mean that you never confront sin in another person (Lev. 19:17-18). Forgiveness does not mean that you make it easy for someone to sin against you. You need to confront like in Mt. 18:15 & 1 Thes. 5:14, but be sure you follow the gentle compassion outlined in Gal. 6:1-2 and also examine your own heart first as in Mt. 7:1-5! We are not to ignore the sins of others or excuse them ("that's just the way he is"). Just be sure it is sin and not just a different preference from your own.

6. Don't Think You Can, "Forgive Whether You Feel Like it or Not" - This is like saying, "*tell your spouse you love him/her whether you do or not*." If you are "double-minded" like this, you are being dishonest & hypocritical and not walking in integrity (James 1:8; Ps. 119:113). What we "feel" or "desire" matters greatly to God – and to our own souls. You will not prosper or grow in sanctification if you practice hypocrisy. The aphorism is not true: *Time does not heal all wounds*. If we do not forgive, "time" causes wounds to fester and resentment to build. We are told to speak the truth in "love;" not to speak the truth in "anger" (Eph. 4:15). Outwardly "doing" & inwardly "desiring" should go together in our hearts (2 Cor. 8:10; 1 Jn. 3:18). A forgiving heart cannot be angry (Mt. 5:21-22) otherwise it cannot move towards reconciliation (Mt. 5:23-24). Forgiveness is tied to being "tenderhearted" or "compassionate" (Eph. 4:32). If your heart is not like this, you will not be able to forgive nor reconcile.

7. What if I Don't "Feel" Like Forgiving? - If you feel this way, you have a problem in your *own* heart. This does not minimize the other person's sin against you, but instead it highlights the conflict in your *own* heart.

Perhaps this is why God has allowed this trial to touch you in the first place – so that you can see your own struggles with anger, an entitlement mindset, a lack of patience, or your need for being more compassionate towards others. If you don't address this, your heart will eventually turn to resentment and bitterness – if it is not there already (Eph. 4:31-32; Col. 3:8-10; Heb. 12:14-15).

8. Important Diagnostic Question - Are you “angry” or “sad” when someone either offends you or sins against you? If you tend towards anger, you will not be able to forgive them (hard heart, resentment, bitterness) (Prov. 12:16; 14:10; 14:29-30; 15:18; 18:19; 29:11). If you tend towards sadness, then forgiveness is more likely (soft heart, heart of compassion, sorrow over the offense) (Mk. 10:21). Ask yourself if you weep over sins committed against you, or do you get enraged? Don't view sorrow & sadness as “weakness” and anger and rage as “strength” – this is a worldly view.

9. The Holy Spirit's Work on Your Soul is Crucial - There is an inner transformation that must take place in order for you to even desire to forgive. You cannot manufacture this desire on your own. We glorify God when we recognize that this is the Holy Spirit's domain (Gal. 5:16-17; 1 Cor. 2:10-13). In order to “feel” like forgiving, we need to be filled with affections & desires that will only come from Him (Rom. 8:5-6; Jn. 16:7-8). He is the One Who keeps us from clinging to offenses. He is the One Who moves in us to forgive rather than carry a grudge. Seek to have an “enlarged heart” (2 Cor. 6:11-13; Ps. 119:32; 1 Pet. 3:8) that loves deeply and tenderly.

10. Forgiveness is Not the Same as “Forgetting” - Though the Scriptures say that God “forgets” our sins (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 10:17), He obviously cannot cease to remember *anything* since He is omniscient (He knows all things). Instead what these verses mean is that God will no longer hold the past *against* us. He will not use it *against* us or continue to bring it up as a point of condemnation. God buries our sins and does not mark the grave (Rom. 8:1; Ps. 103:12; Isa. 38:17). Some sins committed against us will be remembered for a long time. This does not necessarily mean we have not forgiven others.

11. Don't Try to “Forgive Yourself” or “Forgive God” - The 1st is not possible (only God can forgive) & the 2nd is presumption (you are not God's judge). If you try to forgive yourself, your standards are not God's standards (1 Cor. 4:3-4; Ps. 51:4) and if you try to forgive God you are blaspheming (Mk. 2:7; Lk 5:7-8; Job 38-42; Rom. 9:20-23).

12. Be Sure to Distinguish Between “Judicial” Forgiveness and “Relational” Forgiveness - *Judicial* forgiveness is what God grants as the Judge (Mk. 2:7; Ps. 9:7-8). This is the forgiveness of sins that guarantees that we go to heaven through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Col. 1:14). It relates to God justifying us through the cross (Rom. 5:1). This forgiveness is complete and permanent and is never repeated. *Relational* forgiveness is related to our day-to-day relationship with God. It relates to how close our fellowship with God will be based on how we live our lives (1 Jn. 1:9; Lk. 18:9-14). The Judge not only proclaims our innocence, He also wants to have a relationship and friendship with us. When Scripture speaks of God not forgiving us (Mt. 6:14-15; Mk. 11:25; Mt. 7:2), it is relating this to His disciplining hand in our lives (Heb. 12:5-10; 4:16). If we are already Christians, we should seek *relational* forgiveness from God to keep our hearts and our relationship right before God. But our *judicial* forgiveness is already complete and does not need to be repeatedly sought. It is a one-time work (Heb. 9:26).

13. Remember that God Gives Grace to the Humble - Rather than being hyper-critical or defensive, we must forgive (Jam 4:6, 10; 1 Pet 5:5-6; Prov. 3:34). It takes great humility to forgive others. A proud person will be reluctant or slow to forgive. Notice in these passages that God is *opposed to* or *stands against* the proud; he is not just mildly concerned with them. Only the humble can truly “love their enemies” (Mt. 5:43-45; 1 Cor. 13:5; Rom. 12:20; 1 Pet. 2:23) by putting on kindness and graciousness (Col. 3:14; 1 Thes. 5:8). How can you truly love an enemy unless you first forgive him (Jam. 2:13 – you will only be merciful if you are forgiving)?

14. Don't Question the Repentance of Others, Forgive Them! - (2 Cor. 2:5-11). You are to forgive even those who demonstrate a false, or empty repentance (Lk. 17:1-10 (see verse 4)). Repentance is not a prerequisite to forgiveness (Jesus – Lk 23:34; Stephen - Acts 7:60). There is no evidence that the Roman soldiers or the Jewish leaders were repentant or even sorrowful for their actions.

15. You Must Forgive Those Who Never Apologize or Recognize Their Sin Against You - This will probably be much more common than those who will come and ask you to forgive them. Many will offend you, or sin against you and think little of it. You are still to forgive them from your heart (without verbalizing words to them) so that you do not develop a bitter and hardened heart (Mt. 18:35).

16. Make a Clear Distinction Between “Forgiveness” & “Reconciliation” - Forgiveness only requires a “one way” desire to not cling to anger. If the other person is still upset, or not willing to talk, you can (and must) still forgive. Reconciliation, on the other hand, requires a “two way” or mutual desire to restore the relationship. Both parties must desire it and agree to it. Forgiveness keeps our own hearts from bitterness; reconciliation restores our relationships. Forgiving someone does not *guarantee* reconciliation. Reconciliation is the step that *follows*. Sometimes reconciliation is not possible (Rom 12:18; Acts 15:39; 2 Tim. 1:15; 4:14-15). Forgiveness is *always* possible and is to be descriptive of the Lord’s Church and *every* marriage. We are to be a “forgiving community” (Mt 6:14-15; Eph 4:31-32; Col 3:13). Child molesters (pedophiles), and physically abusive husbands (or wives!), for example, *must* be forgiven, but reconciliation is typically unwise in these situations and can be potentially dangerous.

17. Some will Need to Repent of Being Hypersensitive - (Prov. 12:16; 14:17; 14:29; 15:18; 29:11, 22; Eccles 7:9). If others have to “walk on eggshells” around you, you probably struggle with longstanding resentment and bitterness. If this describes you, then you probably are slow to forgive others. Some people are offended far too easily and in a manner that is disproportionate to the offense against them (e.g. a husband forgets his wife’s birthday and she is cold toward him for 2 days). Remember also that hypersensitive or hyper-critical people are extraordinarily difficult to correct. They are also hard to live with since they are so critical and cynical.

18. Be Aware that the Devil Does Not Want you to Forgive (2 Cor. 2:10-11) - His goal is to destroy, to undermine, to prevent unity, to cause excessive sorrow (2 Cor. 2:7; 1 Pet. 5:8; Eph. 4:26-27; 2 Tim. 2:26; 1 John 3:8), or to trivialize forgiveness and make light of its necessity. He is a liar (Jn. 8:44), a deceiver (2 Cor. 11:3) and an accuser (Rev. 12:10) and your reluctance to forgive is due to you allowing him to win the battle in your soul (Eph. 6:12). He wants you to nurse your grudge, to cling to your resentment and justify your reluctance to let offenses go. Do not fear him, but do not underestimate him (Jude 9).

19. Some Potential Consequences to Not Forgiving Others

- Bitterness of soul (Heb. 12:15)
- Hindrances to prayer (Ps. 66:18)
- An inability to fully love God (1 Jn. 4:20)
- A “Stronghold” in the mind where the enemy keeps you in bondage to bitterness (2 Cor. 10:4-5)
- Brings Grief to God (Eph. 4:30) and to others (2 Cor. 2:7)
- God’s judgment is upon you (misery, unhappiness, depression, etc.) (Mt. 7:2; Mt. 18:33-35)
- God will not forgive you (Mt. 6:14-15)
- “Mental Illness” (Ps. 73:21-22; Dan 4)
- Physical Affliction and Sickness (Ps 32:3-5; Jn. 5:5-8 & 14)
- Failure to Model God’s forgiveness toward His people (Eph. 4:32)
- Prevents the Possibility of Reconciliation (Mt. 5:21-24)
- You play the part of a fool (Prov. 12:16; Eccles. 7:9) & others wonder why you are so moody

20. When You Forgive, You Obey the Gospel - You are called to follow Jesus Christ and to do so, you *must* practice forgiveness. Ask God to soften your heart so that you can *love* the person in spite of their sin or offense against you. Focus more on your own bitterness and resentment than on their sin against you. Pray through passages like Mt. 11:28-30 and 1 Peter 5:6-7 to help guide your thoughts in prayer. Your refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord (Jn. 14:23), not from whether or not they repent or are sorrowful for their sins. You are responsible to God for *your* reaction to their sin. You are not responsible for *their* harshness towards you. Trust that God is working through this difficult trial for the softening and change of your own heart. Wait on Him to satisfy the longings in your heart and the pains of your sorrows. God is faithful (1 Cor. 10:13).