

## What is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward someone who has harmed you, regardless of whether or not they deserve your forgiveness. The forgiveness process involves recognition of three components: the wrong or injury and identification of such, the debt owed to you by the offending party, and cancellation of the debt. The first two elements are usually easier to accomplish than the last. The debt owed you by the offending party includes restitution, an apology, remorse, a request for forgiveness, or change in behavior. By releasing the debt and refusing to put your life on hold until the offending party repents or does something to make it right, you are freed from being held hostage by that person and the resulting injury. Of course cancellation of the debt owed you is the most difficult part of the forgiveness process.

In its simplest terms, forgiveness is the act of giving up resentment, the need for retaliation toward an offending party and expectation that the offending party owes you anything.

### The Fallacies of Forgiveness

The concept of forgiveness has been long misused and misunderstood. One often hears the phrase “forgive and forget”. Yet in true forgiveness, remembering the offense is actually essential to long term forgiveness. How does one forgive something that is beyond recall? To forgive, one must lean into the reality of what has happened. The offense needs to be clearly understood and identified in order to know what is being forgiven.

Forgiveness does not mean that the wounding behavior is tolerated or we avoid holding the person who wronged us responsible. It does not mean that we must socialize with that person or continue the relationship. It does require that we are reconciled in the sense that there is enough resolution within our own hearts to move on. Only the party offended can do the forgiving. No one else can forgive in his or her behalf.

Forgiveness is a process, not typically a discrete event that occurs upon command or solely with the recognition that forgiving is necessary. One cannot forgive on command any more than one can fall in love because someone else demands it. It requires deep introspection and emotional work in order to come to terms with it. Without this process, forgiveness fades and resentment begins to bleed into our relationships and other aspects of our lives.

Seeking vengeance is a temptation when we are deeply hurt but retaliation always falls short of bringing necessary resolution and healing. Retaliation often escalates the behavior of the other party and reopens wounds. The satisfaction of “pay-back” is short-term and does nothing to assuage the feelings of anger and resentment that can turn into destructive bitterness. Those who focus on vengeance will never be able to move beyond it.

**Forgiveness is . . .**

- A complex, emotional, ongoing process.
- Knowing specifically what you are forgiving.
- Letting go of resentment and bitterness.
- Holding the offending party responsible for his or her actions.
- Moving ahead and letting go of the past.
- Getting your power back; not letting the offender control your emotions.
- A sincere, honest act.
- Surrendering your need to get even or retaliate.
- Gaining clarity about the feelings of anger and hurt and refusing to let turn into bitterness
- Not having to win.
- Cancellation of the debt the offending party owes you.

**Forgiveness is not . . .**

- Forgetting the offense.
- Absorbing your pain and releasing the offender from responsibility.
- Acknowledging that the offending party was right.
- Excusing or rationalizing the offending party's behavior
- Allowing the injuring behavior to continue.
- An obligation to reconcile or continue contact with the offending party.
- Treating or responding to the offending party in an inappropriate way.

**Forgiveness does not mean . . .**

- Allowing the offending party to continue to disrespect your needs and boundaries.
- Condoning or accepting inappropriate behavior.
- Acting as though nothing has happened.
- Trusting the offender without reservation.
- Shutting down legitimate feelings of anger, hurt or betrayal.
- Ignoring the impact of past offenses on current situations.
- That pain associated with the offense is erased.

**Feelings of pain associated with the offense:**

- Do not magically disappear with forgiveness.

- Must be acknowledged and addressed so healing and forgiveness can take place.
- Usually subside over time as the process of forgiveness becomes complete.
- May come and go during the forgiveness process.
- May include anger, a necessary part of forgiveness because it helps us detach and set better protective boundaries in the future.

### **Forgiveness is sometimes difficult because:**

- Our anger and hurt may be overwhelming and immobilizing.
- Not forgiving gives us the illusion of power and control when we hold the offending party's actions against him or her.
- Hanging on to the hurts and pain may become a defense that prevents us from dealing with the real issues; we may blame the offense for everything that has gone wrong.
- We wait for the offending party to change.
- Limiting contact with the offender may be difficult or impossible.
- The anger from the hurt makes it easy to consider retaliation or payback.
- Unresolved hurts and injuries from our past (childhood and other relationships) can become enmeshed in the current offenses.
- We may be trying to forgive the wrong offending party and have difficulty discriminating between a primary offender and a secondary offender. (More about this in the Primary and Secondary Offender handout.)
- We struggle to forgive ourselves for our role in the offense. This may include poor or unclear boundaries, anger that escalated the situation, not discriminating how previous issues in our past contributed to our response or not confronting the behavior before it become a major hurt or injury.

### **Why forgive?**

- Forgiveness helps us reclaim our personal power and terminates the control of the offending party.
- It helps us let go, move forward and focus on the future and not be stuck in the past.
- It helps you embrace the fact that you cannot control another person's choices and behavior.
- The forgiveness process helps us learn new ways of dealing with offenses and hurts.
- Inability to forgive can have an unhealthy impact on our bodies and mental health including increased anxiety, depression, impact on the immune system, etc.
- Forgiveness prevents bitterness from taking over our lives and impacting our relationships with others.

### **Why God tells us to forgive:**

- As God's ambassadors, we are to model God's love and forgiveness toward us (John 13:34-35).
- Because we have been forgiven by God (Ephesians 4:31-32; Romans 5:8; Romans 5:15).
- Anger and bitterness can control us and leave us vulnerable (Ephesians 4: 26-27; Psalm 37:8).
- To release us from destructive anger and bitterness (Ephesians 4:31-32).
- Failure to forgive can interfere with our relationship with God (Mark 11:25-26).
- We are to forgive anyone who offends because God forgives us. (Colossians 3:13).
- The way to conquer evil is by doing good and taking the high road (Romans 12:21).
- We are to forgive the offending party on an ongoing basis, understanding that forgiveness is a process (Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18:21-22).
- We can trust that God will bring the person to account if repentance is lacking (Hebrews 10:30-31).

### **Why does God ask us to forgive others before he forgives us?**

As Christ's ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), we are to model God's forgiveness by passing it on (Colossians 3:13; Matthew 18:21-22). Failing to forgive can color how we look at the world around us. It can blind us and interfere with our happiness. An unforgiving heart can keep us from accepting God's forgiveness (1 John 2:9-11). Instead of forgiveness earning our salvation, the act of forgiving others demonstrates our salvation. God requires us to forgive others because he knows how damaging chronic resentment can be. He knows it adversely affects our emotional and physical health and our potential for happiness.

Read the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:21-35. According to this story, there was a king who had a servant who owed him a large amount of money. Since the servant couldn't pay him, he ordered the man, his wife, children and all of his possessions to be sold to pay the debt. The servant fell on his knees and begged the king to have mercy. The king took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

After his release, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a small amount of money. He grabbed the servant and began to choke him, demanding that he pay the debt. The servant begged for mercy, but he refused. He had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

When the king was told about this, he called in the servant who owned him money. This servant was confronted by the king for failing to show mercy on his fellow servant as it had been shown to him. In anger, the king turned him over to the jailers until he could pay back all he owned.

Nothing men can do to us can compare with what we have done to God; man's sin brought about the death of His son. Yet God forgives us and asks us to pass this mercy on to others. God wants us to model forgiveness so others can grasp the concept of His grace and mercy.