



Forgiveness: The Possible Impossibility

There are few aspects of life more misunderstood or neglected than forgiveness. By God's grace, this study will give biblical insight into the following aspects of forgiveness:

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS
THE BASIC DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS
THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT OF FORGIVENESS—SACRIFICIAL LOVE
THE EXAMPLE AND STANDARD OF FORGIVENESS
CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS
TRAITS OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS
PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS
MEMORIES, REMINDERS, IMAGINATION AND BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS
PROOFS OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS
HOW TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS
THE BASIC REASON THAT BELIEVERS WILL NOT FORGIVE
FORGIVENESS LINKED TO THANKFULNESS
CONSEQUENCES OF FAILING TO FORGIVE BIBLICALLY
BENEFITS OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

The following suggestions are provided to maximize your use of this study:

- ☞ Set aside some time to study this relatively brief but comprehensive presentation of biblical forgiveness.
- ☞ If you have limited time, scroll to any of the sub-headings in the following study and review its contents.
- ☞ If you recognize specific aspects of biblical forgiveness that need to be applied in your life, copy that portion and print it for on-going review.
- ☞ If you notice some aspects of biblical forgiveness that would help other friends or family members, refer them to this particular study or "cut and paste" sections of the study to send to them.

May God be glorified as His children forgive others in loving response to their own forgiveness provided through Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION—FORGIVENESS: THE POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITY

One of the pillars supporting beneficial relationships is forgiveness. Paradoxically, there are few aspects of life more misunderstood or neglected. The definition and practice of forgiveness typically varies from person to person which leads to unrealistic expectations and, often, disheartening results.

There is no confusion, however, about forgiveness being at the heart of Christianity. From a biblical perspective, no activity of Christian life is more closely aligned to the love of God and the willing sacrifice of Christ than forgiving others.

If forgiveness is to be incorporated into everyday life, its definition must be rooted in unalterable truth and its practice clearly described by a trustworthy source. The Bible is the only written source that authoritatively proclaims its truthfulness in all aspects of life and relationships. (*For further study on this topic, see [Truth](#)*) Since forgiveness is basic to understanding God's recorded plan for all of life, every person should, at a minimum, know what the Bible says about forgiveness. In a greater dimension, believers in Christ can learn and practice biblical forgiveness and, in the process, mature in Christ and bring glory to the Lord.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

The lack of authentic forgiveness can sometimes be traced to insufficient knowledge on the subject. Many erroneous viewpoints contribute to a misunderstanding of forgiveness, such as:

- Personal feelings determine whether one should grant or receive forgiveness.
- Some mistakes/sins can be forgiven but other shortcomings are beyond forgiveness.
- Forgiveness removes the consequences that result from sinful behavior.
- An unwillingness to forgive has no bearing on one's spiritual development.
- Broken relationships are completely restored by the statement, "I forgive you."
- Granting or receiving forgiveness requires one to forget associated past sins.
For further study on this topic, see [Forgetting Your Sins ... What Does the Bible Say](#)
- Forgiveness requires that no aspect of forgiven sin can ever be discussed again.
- Forgiveness only deals with "big" mistakes and is not necessary for "minor, everyday" wrongdoings.
- One's willingness to forgive others must be precipitated by their confession/repentance.
- The person granting forgiveness determines if another is worthy of being forgiven.
- A person receiving forgiveness will no longer have to deal with guilt.
For further study on this topic, see [Responding to Guilt ... and Changing Accordingly](#)
- The phrase, "I'm sorry" has the same meaning as "Please forgive me."
- There is no perfect example of forgiveness to follow.
- Those who grant forgiveness as well as those who receive forgiveness will no longer have troublesome memories associated with forgiven sin(s).
- It is possible to "forgive yourself."
For further study on this topic, see [The Futility of Forgiving Yourself](#)

The above viewpoints are not descriptive of biblical forgiveness, an action that is integral to Christ-like love. Many of these erroneous assumptions result from a faulty understanding or denial of true love as described in the Bible.

For further study on this topic, see [True Love is Not Based on Feelings](#) and [Are You a Loving Person?](#)

THE BASIC DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS

An unbiblical understanding of forgiveness can also result from an unknown or ignored definition of forgiveness. Dictionaries describe forgiveness primarily from a judicial (legal, accounting) perspective, such as:

- Pardon, absolve, or acquit another of an offense
- Cancel a debt

The Bible defines forgiveness in a similar manner:

- Remit or cancel a debt, to send away
- Let alone, leave, set aside

The above definitions eliminate many misconceptions of forgiveness that are linked to emotions. Feelings can be stirred substantially in situations pertaining to forgiveness, but forgiveness, at its core, involves a choice. Such a choice is a matter of the will. Thus, biblical forgiveness rests on the power of a purposeful decision as opposed to the intensity of strong emotions.

THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT OF FORGIVENESS—SACRIFICIAL LOVE

The Bible goes much further than defining forgiveness simply as a choice. God's Word presents forgiveness in the context of sacrifice, a perspective that greatly impacts the decision to forgive.

Since biblical forgiveness has a spiritual basis, only certain people can faithfully forgive as the Bible teaches. These persons must first respond to God's love that is preeminently displayed by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:6-10).

Romans 5:6-10, For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but *God shows his love for us in that*

while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. *[Emphasis added]*

Those who accept the love of God that is described in the above passage will believe in Christ, realizing that Jesus gave His life to provide forgiveness for their sins.

Ephesians 1:7, In Him (Jesus) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

John 3:16, For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Ephesians 2:4, But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved

THE EXAMPLE AND STANDARD OF FORGIVENESS

The awesome demonstration of God’s love—the sacrifice of Jesus—is the perfect example of forgiveness that sets the standard by which God’s children are to forgive others.

Ephesians 4:32, Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ forgave you. [Emphasis added]*

The previous verse indicates that a person must receive God’s forgiveness in order to know how to forgive others biblically. In the framework of sacrificial love, biblical forgiveness becomes the “possible impossibility” for believers in Christ who trust God to help them forgive others.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOD’S FORGIVENESS

Since forgiveness begins with God, believers in Christ should review the characteristics of divine forgiveness in order to understand and practice forgiveness of others.

Bible verses referenced earlier reveal aspects of divine forgiveness and, simultaneously, unmask misconceptions of forgiveness. For example:

- God’s forgiveness is freely offered but its cost is beyond our full comprehension.
For further study on this topic, see [The Cost of Forgiveness—We Can Only Imagine](#)
- No one is worthy to receive God’s forgiveness since potential recipients are weak, sinning, unworthy enemies who should receive God’s wrath. God willingly offers forgiveness to those who are truly unworthy to receive it.
- God demonstrated His willingness to forgive due to His love, mercy, and grace. His willingness to forgive is part of His nature and is not conditioned by someone’s confession or deeds of repentance.
- God grants forgiveness initially to those who believe in Christ. As a result, these believers are given eternal life, and a new relationship begins between them and their Heavenly Father.
- God is able and is ready to forgive every type and any amount of sin except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.
Matthew 12:31, “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.”

Other verses illuminate more characteristics of God’s forgiveness. For example:

- When God forgives a person, He no longer relates to that person on the basis of past sinfulness.
Psalms 103:10 & 12, He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities ... as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
In the above capacity, God is the righteous judge who has removed His eternal judgment of wrath that is due our sin.
- God always forgives when personal sins are truthfully confessed. The relationship between God and a believer in Christ can be vibrant as a believer responds in everyday life to God’s readiness to forgive.
1 John 1:9, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Our Heavenly Father grants “parental” forgiveness in response to His children’s confession of sins. This action demonstrates the eternal family relationship God the Father has with His children, all of whom are not immune to sinning in thoughts, words, and actions.

- God removes all guilt (judicial, not emotional) when He forgives.

Romans 8:1, There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

TRAITS OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

Those who are maturing in Christ realize that biblical forgiveness is patterned after God’s example and should be integral to their lives. After recognizing the characteristics of God’s forgiveness, however, believers may conclude, “Who can come close to forgiving like that?” If this is your reaction, good! You are growing in your understanding of forgiveness from God’s perspective and are closer to practicing biblical forgiveness than you think.

When biblical forgiveness is recognized to be impossible from a human perspective, then believers realize the necessity of relying on God to help them forgive others. Biblical forgiveness may seem impossible, but with God, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26, Jeremiah 32:17).

Matthew 19:26, But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Jeremiah 32:17, Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.

When believers depend on God’s unlimited power and His Word, they will truly forgive instead of trusting in their own natural wisdom, limited strength, and unpredictable emotions that prohibit biblical forgiveness. Biblical forgiveness is not “lip service” but is “from the heart” (Matthew 18:35, a verse printed later in this study). Believers who forgive from the heart will demonstrate forgiveness in the following manner:

- Forgiveness is offered because it is needed, not because it is deserved.
- Forgiveness is a purposeful choice that overshadows emotional responses that are often wrongfully used to legitimize the withholding of forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is offered because God’s grace, mercy, and love are active in the lives of those offering forgiveness instead of forgiveness being conditioned on the supposed “worth” of the person(s) receiving forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is granted for any type of sin, from simple mistakes to the worst sins imaginable.
- Forgiveness is often offered at great cost to the person granting forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is *ready* to be offered before wrongdoers realize their need for forgiveness.
- Forgiveness will always be granted to those who confess personal wrongdoing.
- Forgiveness covers sin in such a manner that past sin is not brought up again in an accusing or manipulative manner. *Any discussion of past failures is to focus on a more comprehensive restoration to the Lord and others and not simply be a recitation of past misdeeds.*
- Forgiveness provides the possibility for renewed relationships, including those that are considered beyond repair or completely “dead.”

PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

There are practical aspects of biblical forgiveness that should not be overlooked. For example:

- Unbelievers are unable to fully understand or practice biblical forgiveness.
1 Corinthians 2:14, The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.
- The definition and expression of biblical forgiveness should be explained to everyone who is involved or impacted by its application. This explanation should be presented to believers and unbelievers, even though incomplete understanding is to be expected. When biblical forgiveness is explained to unbelievers, their response will typically focus on its impossibility. Believers who do not know or practice biblical forgiveness will also see its natural impossibility. As believers mature in Christ, however, they will respond by graciously forgiving others as God has forgiven them.
- Often, those in sinful relationships or those who hide long-standing personal sins are encouraged by well-meaning friends to immediately “ask for forgiveness” from others who are impacted by these sins. However,

“quick forgiveness” is not the issue. Instead, the focus of forgiveness should be its reality, and that takes time and effort by all those involved in order for biblical forgiveness to be understood, asked for, and then implemented.

- The phrase “I’m sorry” can obviously describe how one feels but does not specifically indicate that a person is asking for forgiveness.
- Biblical forgiveness does not remove all consequences that can result from sinful behavior. For example, a robbery victim might forgive a repentant thief who committed the crime, but law enforcement will still arrest the thief and the judicial system will sentence the thief accordingly.
- Biblical forgiveness can be offered wholeheartedly, but potential recipients can reject this loving offer in word or deed. This rejection might be evident right away or sometime in the future.
- Those who ask, “Will you forgive me?” for specific sin(s) will demonstrate their sincerity and repentance in the days, weeks and, yes, months and years that follow. Immediately departing from specific sin(s) is encouraging and necessary, but “ceasing from known sin” does not guarantee wholehearted repentance. Authentic repentance will result in Christ-like maturity across every dimension of life and relationships.

For further study, see [Responding to Guilt ... and Changing Accordingly](#)

- The question “Will you forgive me?” and the response of “I forgive you” do not guarantee any beneficial results simply because these words are uttered. Biblical forgiveness is the “start” of the journey to improve or restore a relationship, but it is only the beginning ... not the finish line.
- Those in a sinful relationship may ask, “Will you forgive me?” and hear the reply, “I forgive you,” but those words do not provide approval for them to have further interaction or fellowship. Other scriptural directives must be examined and followed before a relationship can be continued in any dimension after sinful behavior has been admitted and forgiven. For example:

1 Thessalonians 5:22, Abstain from every form of evil.

Philippians 2:3-4, Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15, For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

Romans 14:19, So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Galatians 5:13, For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

“M.R.I.” TESTS CAN UNDERMINE BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

The challenge to maintain biblical forgiveness will be waged in the minds of those who grant forgiveness. The three major tests in this regard are **Memory**, **Reminder**, and **Imagination (M.R.I.)**

Memories related to forgiven sins can resurface and can be significant hindrances for believers to maintain biblical forgiveness. These memories often focus on painful situations that were accompanied by overwhelming emotions.

Reminders of past sins can be triggered by situations in everyday life, and their appearances often are unexpected.

To minimize unexpected reminders of past sins, a believer can eliminate some of them in advance. For example, any reminders of past sin(s) such as clothing, memorabilia, pictures, letters, or gifts should be discarded. Any locations, events, stories, or songs that are associated with past sinfulness should be avoided. Some reminders of past sins, however, are out of a believer’s control and can surface without notice.

Imagination often deals with *unknown* or *imagined* possible sin(s) that are mentally linked to *known* forgiven sins.

Imagination of this type can create disturbing emotions.

A believer should immediately respond to any **M.R.I.** test by:

- praying for all persons, including one’s self, who are impacted by known forgiven sin(s)
- giving thanks for personal salvation and for the Lord’s continuing help to grow in Christ
- rejoicing that every test/temptation is common and can be overcome by relying on the Lord and His Word
- trusting in the Lord instead of yielding to anxiety and worry

- redirecting thoughts from anxiety to matters that bring honor to the Lord
- moving one's attention away from sinful situations and back to on-going growth in Christ

The above responses are indicated in the following verses:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Philippians 1:6, And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:13, No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Philippians 4:6-8, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

2 Corinthians 10:4-5, For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

Romans 12:2, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Philippians 3:12-14, Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

PROOFS OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

Anyone, believers and unbelievers alike, can say, "Will you forgive me?" or "I forgive you." As stated previously, biblical forgiveness is impossible for unbelievers to understand fully or to practice. On the other hand, believers in Christ are divinely empowered to grant biblical forgiveness that is validated by measurable proofs. Believers may sometimes fail to demonstrate these proofs initially; but, eventually, believers who are growing in Christ-likeness will faithfully exhibit the following proofs of biblical forgiveness:

- Biblical love will be given to those who are offered forgiveness.

1 Peter 4:8, Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

For further study on this topic, see [Are You a Loving Person?](#)

- Any communication of others' sins will conform to scriptural guidelines instead of following emotional impulses.

Ephesians 4:29, Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Proverbs 17:9, Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

Matthew 18:15-17, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

For further study on this topic, see [Communicating the Sins of Others](#)

- On-going prayer and help (blessings) are given on behalf of those who need forgiveness.

Luke 6:27-28, "But I say to you who hear, 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.'"

1 Peter 3:9, Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

- Personal growth in Christ is the goal of daily life instead of focusing on the past sins of others.

Philippians 3:12-14, Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:8, Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

- Concentrated efforts will be made to remain at peace with the person(s) offered forgiveness, even though on-going fellowship may not be possible.

Romans 12:18, If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Hebrews 12:14, Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

- A readiness to help restore others who need forgiveness is ever present.

Galatians 6:1, Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

Romans 15:1-2, We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

1 Thessalonians 5:14, And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

HOW TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS

One of the most overlooked aspects of forgiveness is how to ask for it. Asking for forgiveness should not be done according to human wisdom nor simply generated by emotional intensity. Asking for forgiveness should, instead, be based on biblical truth, especially with regard to personal responsibility and esteeming others as more important than one's self. Any important endeavor of life requires planning, and forgiveness is certainly one of those undertakings.

If you are a believer in Christ and ask another person to forgive you, be sure to speak the truth about your sin(s). Truth means "bringing everything to light." In the Bible, this is described as being verifiable, indisputable, without pretence or deception, devoid of any hint of falsehood, unconcealed, and complete with all the facts.

For further study on this topic, see [Truth is Personal, Not Merely a Concept](#)

Ephesians 4:25, Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

The following examples demonstrate how scriptural guidelines can help one realize God's purposes through biblical forgiveness. The examples demonstrate that there is more to biblical forgiveness than the question, "Will you forgive me?"

- Since asking for forgiveness involves your mention of personal wrongdoings, do not judge or bring up another person's failures in your confession. For example, you could say, "Please forgive me for slamming the door in your face." Do not say, "Please forgive me for slamming the door in your face when you called me stupid." Since there is no valid excuse for sinning, do not give excuses for failing to be Christ-like. For example, you could say "Please forgive me for using unwholesome words." Don't say, "Please forgive me for using unwholesome words, but I was having a bad day." *

1 Corinthians 10:13, No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

- A presentation that includes the Lord, personal responsibility, specific sins(s), repentance, Christ-honoring intentions for the future, and asking for forgiveness might be stated:
"I recognize that I have sinned against the Lord and you by (*name the specific sins*). It is my intention never again to repeat this offense against you or anyone else. I repent and will change by doing the following. (*Explain*

your specific plan for change). I have asked the Lord to forgive me, and I want you to know that I desire your forgiveness as well. Will you please forgive me?” *

1 John 1:7-8, But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Matthew 7:12, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

James 5:16, Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

- It is often helpful to practice asking for forgiveness by first writing it and, then, saying it out loud. In addition to practicing what you will say, prepare for various responses from the other person by writing and rehearsing what you would do and say if the other person replies with statements such as “Oh, that’s all right” (minimizing sin) or “Don’t worry about it” (avoiding a commitment to forgive) or “People do that all the time” (making excuses for sinful behavior) or “I will not forgive you” (refusing to reconcile) or “I’ll forgive you, but I won’t forget it” (harboring a grudge).*
- When believers ask for forgiveness, they should remember to stay focused on Christ (Hebrews 12:1-2) and be ready to explain the difference Jesus has made in their lives (1 Peter 3:13-17).

Hebrews 12:1-2, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

1 Peter 3:13-17, Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect*, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil. [*Emphasis added*]

In response to “Oh, that’s all right” or “Don’t worry about it” or “People do that all the time,” you might say, “Even though my actions may not have bothered or offended you, I recognize that my actions toward you were unloving, contrary to what the Bible teaches, and not pleasing to God. Since my desire is to be more Christ-like and to love you God’s way, would you please forgive me?” *

If the offended person says, “I won’t forgive you,” you might respond with, “I am deeply sorry that I have so offended you. I regret that I was unloving to you and not acting as the Bible teaches me to do. I have made a commitment to live in a more Christ-like manner in our relationship and will be praying that our future interaction will demonstrate that commitment.”*

If you ask for forgiveness and hear a response similar to, “I will forgive you but I won’t forget it,” you might say, “I regret being part of such a painful memory in your life. My behavior was certainly unloving. I commit to act and speak in such a way that our future relationship will, hopefully, be surrounded by much better remembrances.”*

The above examples of “how to respond” are based on numerous verses in God’s Word, some of which are listed below:

Matthew 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”

Matthew 5:16, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Matthew 5:23-24, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Romans 12:17-18, Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Ephesians 4:29, Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the

occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

James 3:17-18, But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

After developing and reviewing your plan to ask for forgiveness, consider the best time to approach the person whom you have wronged. When the person is not busy, ask if you can discuss your failure. If that time is not appropriate for the other person, ask if there is another time in which a conversation may take place. When the meeting takes place, the objective is to confess your sin(s) and ask for forgiveness.*

Proverbs 25:11, A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

Proverbs 15:23, To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!

Philippians 2:4, Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Romans 14:19, So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Since some sins impact many people, you can meet separately with each person or, if appropriate, with everyone as a group.

THE BASIC REASON THAT BELIEVERS WILL NOT FORGIVE

Unbelievers legitimize their refusal to forgive others for self-oriented reasons. Believers in Christ can also fail to forgive because of self-interest. Believers, however, primarily refuse to forgive biblically because they do not realize the magnitude of their forgiveness from the Lord. As a result, they do not fully appreciate God's work on their behalf. Jesus addressed this issue in Matthew 18:21-35 in response to a question from Peter.

Matthew 18:21-35, Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.²³ Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

In this parable, Jesus reminds us that each person's debt of sin is beyond one's own ability to redeem. To demonstrate this truth, Jesus said the "impossible debt" was ten thousand talents, an amount estimated to be as high as \$70 million USD. God, the king in the parable, mercifully released the debtor from this overwhelming debt of sin. Yet, when this forgiven debtor had opportunity to forgive another person of a much smaller debt of 100 denarii (estimated to be about \$70 USD), his lack of awareness and thankfulness for his own debt-free status was profound! Forgiven of \$70 million yet unwilling to forgive \$70? That is hard to believe, isn't it? Yet, believers in Christ who refuse to forgive others are similar to the unthankful debtor in the parable.

Believers who will not forgive display staggering ingratitude for God's forgiveness of their overwhelming debt of sin pardoned through the sacrifice of Jesus (Romans 5:7-10).

Romans 5:7-10, For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

FORGIVENESS LINKED TO THANKFULNESS

The most profitable step believers can take when faced with the supposed "impossibility" of forgiving others is to review their own salvation. As believers grow in their understanding of God's forgiveness and acceptance of them, their thankfulness will increase for the price Christ paid for their redemption. Thankfulness for Christ's sacrifice will

overshadow any personal cost believers may incur in forgiving others.

CONSEQUENCES OF FAILING TO FORGIVE BIBLICALLY

As Ephesians 4:32 states, believers are to forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven them. Since forgiveness is not a suggestion but is a beneficial divine command, believers sin by failing to obey the Lord (James 4:17).

James 4:17, So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

- When believers disobey God's Word, they can expect the corrective discipline of the Lord. This discipline is designed to help believers mature to greater Christ-likeness (Hebrews 12:6-11).

Hebrews 12:6-11, For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later *it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.* [Emphasis added]

- One of the ways that the Lord disciplines unforgiving believers is to limit their prayer effectiveness. Unforgiving believers are typically unaware that their prayers are hindered dramatically when they will not forgive others (Psalm 66:18, Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 11:25-26).

Psalm 66:18, If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Mark 11:25-26, "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

- When a believer chooses to sin for a period of time (which includes a refusal to forgive), spiritual discernment will diminish (Hebrews 5:11-14, James 1:22-25).

Hebrews 5:11-14, About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, *for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.* [Emphasis added]

James 1:22-25, But *be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.* For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. [Emphasis added]

- The Lord also disciplines unforgiving believers by withholding forgiveness of their everyday shortcomings (Matthew 6:14-15; Mark 11:25-26). This withholding of forgiveness does not negate the eternal family relationship between God and His children but vibrant, on-going communion between the Father and His children is hindered.

Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Mark 11:25-26, "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

BENEFITS OF BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS

As was stated at the beginning of this article, forgiveness is at the heart of Christianity. There is no activity of Christian life that is more closely aligned to the love of God and the willing sacrifice of Christ than forgiving others. Believers who truly desire to grow in Christ will be characterized by this loving practice.

Typically, believers learn to forgive faithfully by going through situations in which they struggle to forgive others, even to the point of choosing not to forgive for a period of time. God uses these particular trials to develop the practice of forgiveness in the life of a believer and, as a result, to grow in Christ. All of life's difficulties allow a believer to die to self in order to learn more of Christ and to experience God's mercy, grace, and love.

For further study on this topic, see [God's Purposes in His Children's Trials](#)

Relying on the Lord, faithful followers of Christ will graciously grant forgiveness to those who have sinned against them. In the process, these believers will mature in Christ.

- When believers forgive others in a biblical manner, they demonstrate their love for the Lord by being obedient to His Word (1 John 5:3). When believers forgive, their love for the Lord is evidenced and their love for others is demonstrated (1 John 4:20-21).

1 John 5:3, For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

1 John 4:20-21, If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

In practicing forgiveness, believers fulfill the two great commandments Christ emphasized in Matthew 22:37-39, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

- Believers who obey God’s Word by forgiving others also have the potential for a vibrant and productive prayer life (1 John 3:22).

1 John 3:22, and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

- Believers display the difference Jesus has made in their lives when they forgive biblically. This purposeful action provides opportunity to turn others’ attention to the Lord (Matthew 5:13-16).

Matthew 5:13-16, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, *let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*” [Emphasis added]

CONCLUSION

The words announcing biblical forgiveness are simple: “Will you forgive me?” and “I forgive you.” Hopefully, this study has illustrated the spiritual depth and richness of biblical forgiveness that is to be reflected in the use of these words.

* All footnotes refer to material from *Self-Confrontation, A Manual for In-Depth Biblical Discipleship*, 19th printing, pages 451-452, under Guidelines: Victory Over Failures Worksheet. We greatly appreciate the Biblical Counseling Foundation’s permission to include this material.

Recommended for further study:

[Misunderstandings About Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Articles 1-4](#) (free PDF downloads), on the Biblical Counseling Foundation website.