



# The Freedom of Forgiveness

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## Forgiveness is more important now, than ever before!

For some, living in close quarters during the COVID pandemic has bonded you together as a family. For others, it has brought tensions to the surface, causing conflicts and arguments.

Even for those who live alone, seclusion may have given you more time to ruminate on negative emotions and resentment towards others. In any case, the pandemic has been a time when unforgiveness has often bubbled to the surface.

Because of the stresses and struggles of our time, learning to forgive is more critical than ever. As we learn to walk in the reality of God's forgiveness, seek forgiveness from others, and extend forgiveness to those who have hurt us, we will experience joy and freedom.

On the surface, the steps to the freedom of forgiveness seem pretty basic. God forgave us, we are supposed to seek forgiveness from others, and we must forgive others. In reality, this seemingly simple process can actually be quite complicated at times!

To practically live in the freedom of forgiveness, we first must understand the forgiveness that God freely offers us. **The Holy Spirit enables us to forgive because we are FULLY FORGIVEN by Jesus.** Jesus forgave the sins of the whole world at the cross. God is in the reconciliation business, and he wants a restored relationship with all of us through Jesus Christ. Though some have not accepted His forgiveness, it is offered to everyone. (1 John 2:2) In the same way, he wants us to have good relationships with others.

If you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior, you that you are forgiven from every sin, once and for all. We have been declared not guilty by God through Jesus Christ. Praise God we will not receive the punishment which sin deserves. At the same time, we still live in a

fallen world. Each of us still wrestles with sin, making us feel guilty, unforgiven, or even unworthy of God's Grace.

Thankfully, God offers us the daily solution--confession. Jesus made it possible for you to go directly to Him in prayer and confess wrong thoughts, actions, and attitudes. The Bible says in 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

This is a very confusing concept to understand at times. How can we be forgiven from all our sins--past, present, and future, and yet continue to sin? To understand this seeming irony, let's look at what Jesus said in John 13 at the Last Supper Passover Meal:

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John 13:1-11

*He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"*

*Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."*

*"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."*

*Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."*

*"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"*

*Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean."*

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In ancient days, it was a custom to wash one's feet when coming inside and preparing for a meal. A guest would bathe at home before coming to a special event, but by the time they had walked across town on the dusty, muddy streets, their feet and ankles would be coated with dust. They would need to wash their feet before they relaxed together around the table.

In the same way, when we trust Christ as Savior, we are covered and forgiven--totally. We are bathed from our sin, and cleansed from all unrighteousness, but we still sin daily as we pick up the dirt of the world: sin, attitudes, language, and actions that come from the world. We still need the daily cleansing of Christ, which is illustrated by the washing of feet.

Jesus taught us that while we need his daily forgiveness, we must extend the same forgiveness to others around us.

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*John 13:12-17*

*When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.*

*“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”*

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Jesus urges us to wash others' feet, just like he washed his disciples' feet. We must freely offer forgiveness to others, even if they refuse it or never ask us to forgive them.

Peter initially refused to have Jesus wash his feet. He didn't think Jesus should stoop so low to act like a common servant. Perhaps he disagreed that he needed to have his feet washed. Like Peter, others may not want to admit they need to be forgiven. It takes the humility and love of the Holy Spirit to forgive others, and it also takes humility to receive forgiveness from others.

**The second step to living in the freedom of forgiveness is learning to seek others' forgiveness.**

Seeking forgiveness is often just as hard as forgiving someone else, and just as necessary for maintaining good relationships.

The Program of Alcoholics Anonymous really helps people to live out the concept of seeking forgiveness from others. My husband is in the program, and I attended it with him for a year when we were first married.

In the 12-Step program, we learned two important steps. During Step 8, we “made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.” In Step 9, we “made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.”

Seeking forgiveness requires the humility of acknowledging you are wrong and have harmed another person. The best course of action in seeking forgiveness is go to a person with an open heart, ready to listen to the ways you may have hurt him or her. Recognize that it may take time for someone to feel ready to forgive you.

The third step to living in the freedom of forgiveness is learning to forgive others.

Why is it hard to forgive others? In his book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Miraslav Volf has this to say:

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*Offenders don't just stand with empty hands, waiting to receive. The empty hands of offenders have inflicted pain and are sometimes stained with blood. Injuries to forgivers' bodies and souls stand in the way of forgiving. So do smugness and enmity of the wrongdoers. The offenses and the offensiveness of wrongdoers collude with the self-love of the wronged to make it difficult to forgive, very difficult.*

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In other words, the wrongdoer feels guilt and shame over the harm they have caused. Their feeling of shame often collides with the victim's shame and pain over the damage received. The shame of both people rises like a wall that makes it seem impossible to seek reconciliation. The first step to forgiveness for both parties is to let go of shame.

The book, *As We Forgive*, outlines the process of forgiveness and reconciliation that Rwandan genocide victims and perpetrators followed when seeking reconciliation for the most heinous, unbelievable acts of violence. Both the perpetrator and the victim had to muster up the willingness to face the truth, open old wounds, and heal years of bitterness, pain and shame.

Shame is a prison that keeps us from having good relationships with ourselves, God and others. In his book, *Soul of Shame*, Curt Thompson shares that “When we experience shame, we tend to turn



away from others.” The more ashamed we feel, the more we turn inward, like the “tightening of a noose.” Forgiveness helps break the power of shame. As we freely turn towards others with forgiveness and hope, we receive restoration and power like never before.

As we conquer shame, Jesus encourages us to forgive others as he has forgiven us.

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*Colossians 3:13*

*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (NIV)*

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Further, we must forgive people freely and without holding back. In Matthew 18, Peter asked Jesus how often he had to forgive his offenders. Jesus had a surprising answer.

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*Matthew 18:21-35*

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”*

*Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”<sup>NIV</sup>*

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Sometimes, we forgive a wrongdoer even when they continue with the offensive behavior. Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates his love for us that while we were yet (still) sinners, Christ died for us.”

You may have heard that unforgiveness is like a poison that you drink. Rather than hurting your offender, it hurts you instead. Many times, when you hold a grudge, the other person is not even aware of your buried or even obvious resentment towards them. It does not even affect them, but it hurts you--it makes you an angry, unloving, bitter person who has built up new walls in relationships with others.

You see, unforgiveness is also like an open wound. If left untreated, it will fester or get infected. If our unforgiveness becomes infected with bitterness, it will be harder to get rid of.

The only way to truly forgive someone else is with the help of Jesus and His Holy Spirit. He forgave the sins whole world: the worst, most disgusting, evil sins deserving eternal punishment. Because he did, he has the power to help us forgive.

Christ's love living in you and changing you makes the difference. When Jesus saw someone else's sin, he was often more grieved over how it hurt them than how it affected Him. He was filled with so much love for the other person.

- If you need to forgive someone, pray for the willingness and for the help of the Holy Spirit as you start the journey of forgiveness. If you think you've forgiven them, but anger and resentment keep popping up, pray for God's help to more completely forgive the other person.
- Pray for the person you need to forgive. We are supposed to pray for our enemies, and this certainly includes those who have sinned against us.
- Try to allow Jesus to show you how to see that person differently. Ask him to help you see their brokenness, their shortcomings, their selfishness and how it is keeping them from being who God really made them to be.
- You may be surprised at the compassion that wells up for this person. Maybe the hurt you experienced will not fully go away, but let God comfort you every time it wells up and continue to pray about this and the other person daily.



- Consider your own part in the conflict. Think on what you have done to others out of your own brokenness/selfishness and remember that God forgives you.

As you understand the lavish forgiveness that God has extended toward you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, you will be equipped and motivated to extend the same forgiveness toward others, humbly asking for forgiveness, and compassionately forgiving those who have hurt you. As you do, you will experience amazing freedom! Without the heavy burden of resentment, you will be free to live the abundant, grace-filled life that God has called you to live. Hallelujah! Now, whom has the Lord put on your heart to forgive as you are reading this? Go ahead and take the first step today!