

# Forgiveness



Gus Moretta: <https://unsplash.com/photos/BCyfpZE3aVE>

Forgiveness has always been difficult. Our sinful nature prefers clinging to the Old Testament/Jewish principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. From childhood on we have been conditioned to take revenge. When somebody kicks us, we have to kick back even harder. If parents do not teach their children about forgiveness, they respond with unbridled fury to any small wrong done to them. Retaliation is deeply embedded in our nature. While forgiveness is an important principle in the kingdom of God, reprisal is part of the kingdom of the self. As with all sin, this is about a battle between our will and God's will. We need to acknowledge that our unwillingness to forgive is sin.

## ***What is forgiveness?***

Much of our inherent reluctance to forgive lies in the fact that we do not really understand what forgiveness is and what it is all about. The following statements should describe it more clearly:

- Forgiveness is not in the first instance about the other person, but about my personal relationship with God.
- Forgiveness is a clear, emphatic command from God to his children.

- Forgiveness is not something that can be done as a once-off act, like in a ritual; it is a process that one has to work through. It is part of a way of life.

## **What does the Bible teach us about forgiveness?**

In the conversation between Peter and Jesus in Matthew 18:21–35 we learn a lot about forgiveness: Peter asks Jesus how many times he has to forgive when someone sins against him. The question can be seen from two angles:

- If someone sins against me, how many times do I have to forgive him/her for what he/she has done? Seven times? What happens after the seventh time? Jesus however answers: seventy times seven! The answer does not lie in the final count of 490, but in the symbolic value of the numbers that indicate totality or completion. In other words: forgive until you have forgiven completely.
- Some interpreters also emphasise the question: how many times may somebody sin before I stop forgiving? The answer remains the same: never stop forgiving. Jesus' answer remains the same, regardless from which angle you look at the question.

In the same Scripture Jesus substantiates his answer by telling another parable. A man owed the king more money than he would ever be able to pay back during his lifetime. When the king demanded his money and the servant begged for the chance to pay him back, the king realised that the debt was too much and he wrote it all off. The man whose debt had just been cancelled then met a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money. This man also begged for time to pay back his debt, but the man who had been pardoned by the king responded with violence. His fellow servant begged for more time and an instalment agreement, but the one who was forgiven by the king wanted his money back immediately. When he could not get his money back, he had his fellow servant thrown in jail until he could pay the debt. The king heard about this, called for him and said, "I have cancelled all your debts when you begged me to, but you couldn't show mercy to your fellow servant for owing you some small amount of money." So, the king turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay back all he owed.

And then the key, verse 35: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." Clearly stated: if you cannot forgive each other from your heart, do not be surprised when you suffer, even physically.

Why so hard? Why is God so serious about this matter? The answer lies in the gospel's message of mercy and forgiveness. If we had to stand before God on our own feet and with our best deeds, we would still stand there soiled and punishable by death. But in his great mercy God gives his Son as the Sacrifice redeeming us from sin. His blood cleanses us. God forgives without any conditions, without demanding any refunds (restoration), revenge or any further punishment. He forgives unconditionally, completely – we only have to accept this give in faith. Because Jesus has paid the price for our sake, we become co-heirs of the Kingdom of God. Instead of eternal hell, we receive eternal life, without deserving it. It comes free of charge, because the price that God paid is enough: for He made the ultimate sacrifice!

## ***What do I do when someone has done me a great injustice?***

No matter what has been done to you, how big the wrong you have suffered, the truth is: Jesus has already paid for it by his death on the cross. In 1 John 2:2 we read, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” What we have done, what we are doing right now and what we will do in the future, has already been forgiven. So, also those that sinned against us.

What happens when we do not forgive? By not forgiving we put up a barricade between ourselves and God. This upsets our relationship with God. And it also strains the relationships with other. But our refusal to forgive also brings pain, bitterness and bondage in ourselves. It is like a stone that lies in our hearts, growing heavier all the time. It pulls our whole life down; it drives peace and joy from our hearts. Only forgiveness will free us from all this.

How then do we free ourselves from this bondage and pain? Real forgiveness requires that it comes from our hearts, not only from our minds or our lips. To simply forgive everybody there and then will not really help. Not if it doesn't come from our hearts. And this forgiveness requires a process, it means that we have to forgive more than once, continually, even for the same single transgression.

### ***The process to forgive wholeheartedly!***

- At first when we forgive it is mostly for a deed done against us, that is only the start of the process.
- Now the damage to our hearts must still be healed. We can only forgive wholeheartedly if we know what happened in our hearts as a result of the wrong done to us. That deed and the pain have to be confessed openly at the Cross of Jesus. We have to tell Jesus honestly what happened and how we feel about it.
- We have to try and put it into words, in the presence of others that we trust.
- Of course, it is not easy to talk openly about pain in our hearts. When we reveal the depth of the pain and experience the depth of the hurt once more, we will also have to be honest about our willingness to forgive all of it.
- We must admit and confess our inability or unwillingness to forgive. Then we must choose to forgive in obedience and ask the Lord to help us. The moment we leave everything in the hands of Jesus, we will really be able to grieve over the loss or pain and receive profound healing. We must give the Holy Spirit time to work in our hearts. Confess all sinful reactions like gossiping, bitterness, feeling injured, etc.
- It also means that we eventually have to learn to forgive ourselves ... because Jesus also forgave us! We must accept the Lord's forgiveness. This might be the hardest part of the process of forgiveness –forgiving ourselves.

- Two things have happened now: In the first instance we have been freed from the pain that the wrong has brought. This does not mean that God won't perhaps reveal an even deeper hurt at a later stage, should there still be a deeper wound. But then we follow the same process, till we have forgiven with all our heart. In the second instance we have paved the way for God to work in the heart of our transgressor – and maybe even restore the relationship between us.

### ***But what about justice?***

Does forgiveness mean that no justice is required? Can there be any forgiveness without justice? Should justice be a precondition before we forgive? Of course not! The Lord forgives us unconditionally for our sins. We do not deserve to be forgiven. But being forgiven, the Lord also expects us to seek righteousness, to do what is just, to rectify what is wrong, to sin no more. Out of gratitude we must mend our sinful ways, try to restore the injustices we committed. To live righteous lives is also as important as being forgiven; the one cannot without the other.

But what about those whom we're supposed to forgive? Those who wronged us? What if they do not feel remorse or make amends? Can we still forgive them? This is also a very difficult part of forgiveness, to really leave it in God's hands. It is God who will judge, who will punish: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord. On the contrary: 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head'" (Romans 12:19-20). Trust God in this.

***It is only sincere, heartfelt forgiveness that can set us free***

