

WEEK SEVEN

FORGIVENESS

“He is so rich in kindness and grace that He purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.”

EPHESIANS 1:7

Because we live in a fallen world, we face the realities of hurt and offense. The words and deeds of others can wound us to the core in indescribable ways. Things like neglect, abuse, violence, betrayal, and cruel remarks can cause bitterness and resentment to infiltrate our hearts, and we, perhaps even unintentionally, begin to harbor unforgiveness. An unforgiven offense is like an arrow dipped in poison. The offense slashes through our defenses and hurts us in the moment, but the aftermath of unforgiveness is like a poison that remains long after the event takes place. It seeps into our lives, tainting our thoughts and clouding our vision. If left unchecked, it will eventually penetrate our hearts and paralyze our ability to live, to love, and to be loved. Harboring unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting another person to die; it does much greater harm to us than the person we refuse to forgive.

Write Proverbs 18:19

Offense is the bait that the enemy uses to lure us into bondage. When we become offended, we become unyielding. Think about a city surrounded by walls. The walls' purpose is to protect the city. We use this same thinking to protect ourselves, placing walls around our hearts. People may have hurt us once, but we will not allow them to do it again. But what works for a city of stone does not necessarily work in the same way for a heart of flesh and blood. Walls may keep out the bad stuff, but they also keep out the good. With walls around our hearts, we not only protect ourselves from pain and rejection but from experiencing love and life-giving relationships. We think it is up to us to protect our hearts, but the truth is, God never meant for this to be our responsibility; it is His.

Ask Yourself: Am I harboring unforgiveness?

Unforgiveness holds us in bondage and keeps us from living in the Tree of Life. So why is it so hard to forgive others? Here are a few possible explanations.

REASONS WE MAY STRUGGLE TO FORGIVE

1. We have a wrong idea of forgiveness.

The first reason we don't offer forgiveness easily to others is that we have an incorrect definition of forgiveness. To truly understand what it means to forgive someone, we need to start by learning what forgiveness is not.



Forgiveness is not minimizing the offense.

Offering forgiveness to someone who has wronged you is not saying, "It's not a big deal," or, "It didn't really hurt." What was done or said was not right, and harm never reflects the Father's heart for you; God's perfect will is to protect you and nurture you. When you choose to forgive, you choose not to

- hang on to the offense because it robs you of freedom.

Forgiveness is not forgetting what happened.

Sometimes we think in order to forgive someone, we must forget what has happened. "Forgive and forget" is a cliché that holds no truth. The reality is we may never forget what has happened to us. But, God wants to do something extraordinary in our lives. He wants to bring healing to our hearts so that we can remember these past experiences without reliving the pain associated with them. God wants to show you how he can make all things new.

- Forgiveness is not reconciliation.

We often make reconciliation a caveat for our forgiveness, saying, “When they apologize, I will forgive them.” In doing so, we actually become a hostage to the very one who has wronged us because it leaves our freedom up to another person. Letting go of offense does not mean that you must reconcile with the person. Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” God understands that there are times when reconciliation may not be the best choice. If the offender is not ready to reconcile, it will only cause further pain and disappointment when you are exposed to the same circumstances. In such situations, rely on the Holy Spirit to lead you. Begin by allowing the miracle of forgiveness to happen in you.

Reconciliation is a two-way street. If you’ve forgiven someone and desire to restore the relationship, use wisdom throughout the process. The door to reconciliation may be open if you see the following in the other person:

- *Repentance: Turning away from wrong actions and going in the opposite direction*
- *Restitution: Making things right if possible*
- *Rebuilding Trust: Proving themselves consistent in words and actions*

2. We don't think it's fair.

The second reason we don't offer forgiveness to those who have hurt us is that it does not seem fair to let them off the hook. We reason in our minds that they don't deserve forgiveness. But God doesn't use "fairness" logic (or doesn't hand out forgiveness based on merit)—and thank goodness, because none of us deserve forgiveness!

Read Matthew 18:21–35. Through this parable, Jesus explains the profound and undeserved forgiveness we receive as believers. What instruction does Jesus give us regarding forgiveness?

Jesus told Peter that he needed to forgive 490 times a day. That's once every three minutes! Considering how fast our minds often race, that number doesn't seem too farfetched, does it? In the Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor, the first man owed the king millions of dollars, but when he begged for mercy, the king canceled his debt. As sinners, we too owed a great debt that we could not pay. But God showed us great mercy and, by the blood of Jesus, paid our debt in full. We have been forgiven much.

The second man owed the first man a debt of a few thousand dollars. While this is not an insignificant amount of money, the first man was forgiven a much greater debt.

In light of the incredible mercy he was shown by the king, he should have readily shown mercy to the second man as well. Since we have been forgiven so very much, we should extend what we have received to others. The forgiven must forgive!

Ask Yourself: In light of all the sin for which I have been forgiven, can I release those who have wronged me? Would I trade my forgiveness from God for the right to hold someone accountable for their offense toward me?

3. We don't think we can do it.

The third reason we don't forgive is that we don't think we have the power and strength to do so. This is the voice of the enemy. We must recognize and silence the voice of our adversary. In our own human power, we may not be strong enough to forgive the great wrongs done against us, but we don't have to walk through this Christian life in our own strength. We are empowered by the supernatural strength of God.

In this passage, Paul is saying something incredible happens in the midst of his struggles—the power of Christ is at work! Forgiveness does not turn us into doormats. On the contrary, forgiveness makes us victorious.

Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling, and it is a choice we have to make daily. We prefer to wait until we feel like forgiving, but if our lives are dictated by our feelings, we will always live according to the reality of this world. God is inviting you into a new reality.

If we dare to believe God, and choose first to forgive, our feelings will follow our decision. Then, instead of merely “reacting” to what happens to us, we can choose to live in the Tree of Life. Remember: Choices lead, feelings follow.

THE FORGIVEN FORGIVE

We forgive others in response to the great forgiveness we've been shown by Jesus. Read Isaiah 1:18–19. This passage says that our sins were scarlet, and Jesus made them white as snow; they were crimson, and He made them as wool. Note that the end of the Scripture says “if you obey me.” Forgiveness is not a suggestion, but a requirement from our loving Father for our benefit. The forgiven forgive.

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.”

EPHESIANS 4:31–32

Romans 5:6 says that while we were still sinners, God sent Jesus to die for us. When it comes to understanding forgiveness, this is critical: It is impossible to forgive others of their offenses until we receive forgiveness for ourselves. If we struggle with forgiveness, chances are we have not fully grasped what God has done for us. We have been given total forgiveness for past, present and future sin. It is not that God forgets our sins, but, rather, He chooses to remember our sin no more. He chooses to never mention our sin again—ever. Why does He do this? Because God desperately wants to be in relationship with us.

The Unforgiveness Trap

An offense is something we consider to be a violation of what we think is right and fair. We need to understand that the enemy uses offense to hold us captive and keep us from moving forward in the freedom that God has for us. The word offense comes from the Greek word “scandalon,” which means “the bait.” In Old Testament times, when someone wanted to trap an animal, they would cover a pit with branches and place a piece of flesh (scandalon) on top of the branches to lure the animal into the trap.

Satan uses offense as bait to lure us into a trap of unforgiveness and bondage. By holding on to offense, we think we are trapping the person who hurt us, but in reality, we are the ones who are ensnared.

Below is a list of five common snares that the enemy uses to lure us into unforgiveness. Notice that Jesus Himself also suffered these offenses. Jesus was fully God and fully man. He allowed Himself to be tempted in every way that we are today because He wanted us to know that no matter what we face, He has been there—and He has overcome.

When we are...

Betrayed – by a best friend who lied, a spouse who didn't stay forever, a confidant who broke our trust

Falsely Accused – misunderstood, the subject of gossip and slander

Rejected – by a spouse, friend, trusted authority, or even a church

Abused – emotionally, physically, verbally, or sexually

Humiliated – haunted by an embarrassing moment, ashamed, disgraced

Remember Jesus was...

Betrayed – by Judas, a trusted friend and one of His disciples

Falsely Accused – wrongly indicted in several courts

Rejected – by Peter, one of His disciples and closest companions

Abused – beaten, tortured, cursed, and crucified on a cross

Humiliated – crucified and disgraced in a public setting

To get a better understanding of why Jesus had to suffer in the way He did, read Hebrews 2:17–18 in The Message translation:

“That’s why He had to enter into every detail of human life. Then, when He came before God as high priest to get rid of the people’s sins, He would have already experienced it all Himself—all the pain, all the testing—and would be able to help where help was needed.”

It was important for Jesus to experience all of these offenses in a human body so that He could understand every struggle we would encounter. Now, when we come to Him with our hurts, He can honestly reply, “I understand. I went through that, too.” Not only is Jesus now able to empathize with our pain, but because He went through these trials, He was able to set an example for how we should respond when we suffer at the hands of others.

At His death, Jesus asked the Father to forgive the very ones who cursed Him, who nailed His hands and feet to the cross, saying, “They don’t know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34) In reality, they knew exactly what they were doing: killing a man they hated and making sure He felt every ounce of their malice. Jesus knew his oppressors were blinded by hate, but He chose to view their actions with a heavenly perspective. Offenses will undoubtedly come, so we must arm ourselves with the same thinking of Jesus.

Our primary prayer in relationships should be that the Lord would allow us to see the other person through the eyes of Jesus. If we begin to see others as God sees them, we will find ourselves loving people the way Jesus did, regardless of what they do or don’t do to us.

Living an Unoffended Life

How do we keep our hearts pure and unoffended?
Consider these three simple statements:

1. Recognize our own imperfection.

We will never have to forgive others for more than God has forgiven us.

Write Romans 3:23

Write Matthew 10:8

2. Focus on the real enemy.

People are not our enemy—the devil is. Jesus made a choice to see the people with the hammer and nails as unknowing participants in satan’s agenda of darkness. If it is true that hurting people hurt people, then the guilty have their own story as well. Our approach should be to love people and hate the devil.

Write 1 Peter 5:8

3. Receive the love of God.

This will give us the capacity to love people. If we continually struggle to love people, it may be because we have not fully received the love of God.

Write 1 John 4:10

FORGIVENESS IN ACTION

The Bible's steps for walking out forgiveness are countercultural (the opposite of mainstream society) and counterintuitive (different than what would be expected). But if you follow them, they will change your life. Our way of thinking and God's way of thinking are not the same. Read 1 Corinthians 1:25–28 (NIV) to gain the proper perspective on submitting to God's way of doing things:

“For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are.”

Daily Steps for Walking Out Forgiveness

1. Pray for people who have offended you.

Society tells us to return evil for evil or, at the very least, isolate the people who hurt us so they cannot do so again. But Jesus said in order to have different results, we have to respond differently.

2. Bless people who have offended you.

For some of us, it is all we can do not to talk negatively about the people who have wronged us. But Jesus asks us to go a step further; He asks us to bless them. The word bless means to “speak well of.” Again, this is not something that is demonstrated in today’s culture. Listen to what the Bible says:

“But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you.”

LUKE 6:27–28

3. Do good to people who have offended you.

This requires a change in our way of thinking. It is not that we are repaying good for evil; it is that we have made the decision to do only good to others. So whether someone is serving or attacking us, our response should be to treat them well, as the Word says to do.

Ask yourself: Are there people in my life who I have not released to the Lord? Am I trying to get revenge for their offense?

LET FREEDOM RING

Below is a declaration based on Romans 12:17–21. Read it out loud.

I do not repay evil for evil. I am careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on me, I will live at peace with everyone. I will not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath, because God has promised He will handle it. On the contrary: If my enemy is hungry, I will feed him; if he is thirsty, I will give him something to drink. I will not be overcome by evil, but I will overcome evil with good.

A PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS

This is a simple prayer of forgiveness you can use to release anyone who has offended you. Insert the name or names of those you feel you need to forgive, and say the words out loud.

“Lord, instead of loving, I have resented certain people, and I have unforgiveness in my heart. Forgive me for my sin of holding on to offense. I ask you, Lord, to give me the power to forgive those who have hurt me. I release them to you now. Give me the strength to pray for them, bless them, and want the best for them. Thank you for breaking these chains off of my life. In the name of Jesus I pray, Amen.”

FORGIVING OURSELVES

Getting past your past may be the biggest obstacle you face. Every time you seem to be making progress, that old movie reel of the sinful things you have done begins to play in your mind. Peace and freedom slip away as your past rises up to remind you of your failure. You think forgiveness is for other people but not for you because you have done too many horrible things and it's just too late.

You may be surprised to know that these feelings are actually common for many believers. The enemy loves to remind us of the mistakes we made in the past because guilt keeps us stuck, unable to move forward into the future that God has planned for us. We feel we must repent for our past over and over again as we are continually bombarded by painful memories that we are powerless to change. These thoughts come solely from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Ask Yourself: Am I constantly reminding myself of past failures?

Does the sin of my past continue to bother me even though I have asked God to forgive me?

Confronting The Past

When our past rears its ugly head, there are three ways we usually respond:

1. We try to bury it.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “You’ve got to bury the past”? Well, the fact is, you can’t. It will find its way to the surface at some point. We hear that time heals all wounds, but that is also untrue. Only the Holy Spirit can heal. Concealing the past never works. Proverbs 28:13 (NIV) says, “Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” The Bible also says that confessing our sins and praying for one another actually helps us find healing and wholeness. (James 5)

2. We beat ourselves up.

Some of us live in the land of regret. We dwell on the “if only” scenarios from our past. But “if only” is a trap. We cannot change the past and the enemy uses the notion to torment us. King David knew this type of grief. He committed adultery with his own soldier’s wife and then had the soldier killed when she became pregnant with his child. When the prophet Nathan confronted David, he repented and cried out to God. In Psalm 38:4–8, David says, “My guilt overwhelms me—it is a burden too heavy to bear. My wounds fester and stink because of my foolish sins. I am bent over and racked with pain. All day long I walk around filled with grief. A raging fever burns within me, and my health is broken. I am exhausted and completely crushed. My groans come from an anguished heart.” David shows us that unwillingness to forgive ourselves can even cause physical pain in addition to emotional pain.

3. We blame others.

This tactic has been used since the days of Adam and Eve. When God asked Adam why he disobeyed, Adam blamed Eve. Eve's response was to blame the serpent. (Genesis 3:12–13) We must take responsibility for our actions, then repent and move forward.

Since these are unhealthy ways to deal with our past, what is the best way to face it? We need to look to the Word and agree with God's perspective on our past. God says when we ask Jesus into our hearts, our old life vanishes and we become a new person. You may know this in your head, but is it your reality?

"Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

The Apostle Paul had a terrible past of persecuting and killing Christians, but he understood this truth, and it allowed him to accept the grace of God and move forward in freedom.

"Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."

1 TIMOTHY 1:13–15 NIV

Getting Past the Past

To let our past die, we must change our way of thinking. The old way of thinking doesn't line up with God's Word, so it doesn't produce life. We must accept what the Bible says and renew our minds with the truth so that we, like Paul, can walk in freedom. In order to walk in freedom from our past, we need to do the following:

1. Stop trying to earn forgiveness.

Most people don't understand the gospel. They think that if they work hard to be good more days than they are bad, they get to go to heaven. That's not true. The price has been paid. Forgiveness is received, not earned. If we think we have to earn forgiveness from God, we will make others earn forgiveness from us.

Here is the gospel:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

EPHESIANS 2:8–9 NIV

2. Receive God's forgiveness by faith.

It will free our hearts and allow us to forgive others.

3. Defeat every lie with the truth.

It would be great if once we had received forgiveness, we never thought about our past again. The truth is, the enemy will continue to bring up our past every day. He will wait for weak moments in our lives and whisper our failures to us. We have to resist him every day. Remember, he is the accuser of Christians and the “Father of Lies.” (Revelation 12:10) We defeat him by knowing and speaking the truth.

Write 1 Corinthians 1:30

Write Romans 8:28

God never said that forgiveness would be easy. In fact, following the instructions in His Word takes courage and strength. But His instructions work. They will lead us into pathways of righteousness where we can live again, free from the ghosts of our past. No more guilt, no more hiding, no more shame. Free.

It takes faith to believe that these words are true, but if you do, they will change your life. Trust that God's Word is true. Believe that you have been made new and clean and that He can and will make you whole again. Life as you know it will never be the same. As you begin to see yourself the way God sees you, you will begin to see others differently. You'll find yourself with open hands, releasing offenses, and receiving abundant life. You will be living in the Tree of Life.

Journal: *Below is a space for you to write what you're learning, thoughts on this week's topic, or what you feel God is leading you to do.*