

Forgive One Another

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:32

Our forgiveness or lack of forgiveness towards others has a deep impact in three areas:

- The Scripture above points out (as well as other Scriptures that we will read in this study) that forgiving others is best understood when we remember how much God has forgiven us. As hard as it is to remember when we are hurt and angered by the thoughtlessness and cruelty of others' sins, we all have to admit that God has also forgiven us for a lot of thoughtless and cruel acts. We definitely need to focus, first and foremost, on how it must hurt God when forgiven sinners like ourselves refuse to forgive others. Our forgiveness or lack of forgiveness is impacted by and impacts our relationship with God.
- We also realize what a hard blow we are dealing to the people in our relationships when we will not forgive them. They can still be forgiven by God, and that is what should comfort them the most. But it deeply impacts them and leaves them with an empty feeling when we won't forgive them.
- In addition to how our forgiveness or lack of forgiveness affects God and others, many people have also found that forgiving someone else is one of the greatest gifts we can give ourselves. It frees us from the prisons of bitterness and resentment that hold us captive for years if we do not repent. Forgiving others has a deep impact on your own life.

With all of that importance, it is no surprise, then, that forgiveness is such a difficult topic to understand. Even with the best of intentions, we may not know for sure whether we have forgiven. So, pray for God's wisdom as you begin this study.¹

NOTE: Throughout this study, you will be encouraged to read the Scriptures and reflect on what they are saying to you. I (J.S.) will give some of my reflections, but the key and lasting results will come from the convictions that God gives you as you read, meditate, and pray for the heart to put it all into practice.

Our Need to Forgive As God Forgave Us

Begin with a prayer to ask God to help you understand, believe, remember, and put into practice what you will read.

1. Read **Matthew 18:21 – 35**. This parable about forgiveness was given right after Jesus' teaching about what to do when someone sins against you and the very practical steps of reconciliation (18:15 – 17). What stands out to you from this *Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*?

2. Read also **Matthew 6:14 – 15**.

The conclusions from reading these two passages from Jesus may not be easy to practice, but they couldn't be any easier to understand.

- Based on these two readings, what does Jesus want us to understand about the need to forgive others?
- When we have a particularly painful experience of someone sinning against us, it can be very hard. In order to forgive, we may need a lot of help, first of all and foremost from God, and then a lot of prayers and encouragement from our brothers and sisters. We have more to study about the practicals of this subject, but start with a conviction about what Jesus wants us to do. If we are

convinced of that and of the fact that he will never ask us to do something that he will not empower us to do, then we know that it can be done. How do you feel about that?

3. Read the following passages in their contexts and summarize what they say about the necessity of forgiving others.
 - **Mark 11:25**
 - **Ephesians 4:32 – 5:2**
 - **Colossians 3:13**
4. What are your thoughts about the following:
 - When someone deeply hurts us, it is, to say the least, hard to forgive. When that happens, why is it important that you personally believe that it is Jesus himself who wants you to forgive, rather than just thinking that other people are trying to convince you to forgive?
 - Once again these Scriptures point out the principle of treating others the way Jesus treats us. We are to forgive others as Jesus has forgiven us. And how has he forgiven us?
5. If you are not currently in a situation where you need to forgive someone who has deeply hurt you, now is a good time to write down your convictions about what Jesus wants you to do. When it does happen, and your emotions want to take control, you can look back at your statement of conviction and let it rule instead of your emotions.

Forgiving Others Frees You From Bitterness

Begin with a prayer to ask God to help you understand, believe, remember, and put into practice what you will read.

1. Read the following passages in their contexts and summarize what they say about **bitterness**.
 - **Hebrews 12:14 – 15**
 - **James 3:14**
2. Look at what happens when someone sins against another person:
 - If the one who committed the sin does not confess it and repent, that person's soul is in danger.
 - If the offended person doesn't forgive, there is the possibility of carrying bitterness, hatred, and resentment for a long time.If both of these happen, Satan wins on all levels.
3. But God has another plan.
 - What is his plan for the sinner who repents?
 - What is his plan for the offended person who forgives?

When both of these happen, Satan loses on all counts, and everyone involved grows from the experience. But also note that if only one of these two things happens, that person also gains from doing it. In other words, if the offender repents but the offended person doesn't forgive, the offender still gets forgiveness from

God. And, more to the point of this study about us forgiving, if you forgive the other person and they don't repent, you still get the blessing of being freed from bitterness.

Do you want to let Satan win by keeping you in the prison of bitterness, hatred, and resentment or do you want to be freed from that by forgiving?

Concerns About Forgiveness

Now we want to notice some things about what forgiveness is **not**.

1. Forgiveness is **not** condoning the sin. Read **Luke 17:3 – 6**.

- Sometimes the concern is raised that forgiving others, especially if they haven't repented, is saying that what they did is OK. Notice that Jesus says to rebuke the sin and that the sinner has an obvious need to repent. What they did is definitely not OK.
- On the other hand, you can forgive others, even if they don't repent. Your forgiveness releases you from bitterness, hatred, and resentment. It does not release them from the need to repent and be forgiven by God. You don't even have the power to do that.

2. Forgiveness is **not** saying that the sin didn't hurt you deeply or that you will recover from that hurt quickly. Read **2 Corinthians 7:8 – 10**.

- "I'm not over that hurt yet," someone who has been sinned against may say, "so I'm not ready to forgive."
- One thing that needs to be understood is the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Are we hurt because of the pain that the sin caused God, or because of the pain that it caused us? Both, right? But Godly sorrow brings more godly results. Also, we need to remember that forgiveness is obeying Christ, and healing always comes to us when we obey Christ, even though it may take time.

3. Forgiveness does **not** mean that you allow the one who sinned to keep hurting you. Read **I Timothy 1:18 – 20**.

- Another concern that we may have is that forgiving a hurtful person means that we give that person the opportunity to keep hurting us.
- In many cases, the relationship will continue and will continue on a much higher level (like in a reconciled marriage, for instance.) But in other cases, the person who sinned does not need to be given the opportunity to keep on sinning and doing hurtful things. (For instance, we can forgive someone who stole, but we might not put them again in a situation that will tempt them to do so again and again.)

Forgiveness and the "One Another" Way or How Do I Know if I've Forgiven Someone?

Forgiveness can be such a difficult concept to understand. We may often wonder: "How can I know if I've forgiven someone?"² Let's approach that question by looking again at three of the "One Another" passages that were listed earlier in this study. Forgiveness is definitely highlighted in those passages, but don't overlook the other powerful principles found there. It may be that these relationship standards can give you a hint at what it looks like in a practical way to actually forgive someone.

1. Read (again) the verse listed at the top of this study: *Ephesians 4:32*.

What are the first two principles listed in that verse? _____

The goal is not to just forgive others, which can be a little bit vague to us. The goal is also to be kind and compassionate towards one another, which is probably a little easier to understand. Not necessarily easier to do, but easier to understand.

Have you forgiven the person? Not sure.

Are you able to be genuinely (not fake) kind to them? You can probably answer that.

Are you able to be truly (again not fake) compassionate towards them? Do you really want God to bless them with his grace, forgiveness, and compassion? You can also probably answer that.



Jonah: A Case Study

After God chased him down, Jonah repented enough to go and preach to Ninevah. But when they repented, he was angry with God for forgiving them. He said that he knew that God was compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love, and he was upset that God would apply those things to the Ninevites (*Jonah 4:2*). He preached forgiveness but had no compassion or kindness towards them.

Have you forgiven? = Can you be kind and compassionate towards them?

2. Also, read (again) *Colossians 3:13*.

What is the first principle listed in that verse? _____

Again, the goal is not to just forgive others, which can be a little bit vague to us. The goal is also to "bear" with one another, which may be a little easier to understand. (See also *Ephesians 4:2*.) Granted, this is not the highest level of achievement in our relationships, but it is a practical and needed training. Not everything that irritates us is worth getting upset about. God knew that we would need this instruction!

Have you forgiven the person? Not sure.

Are you able to bear them? You can probably answer that.

Do they make you sick to see them, hear them, or have anything to do with them? Then you don't yet have the relationship with them that God wants you to have.

Have you forgiven? = Can you bear with them?

3. Also, read (again) *Matthew 18:32 – 33*.

The master's question for the unmerciful servant was "Shouldn't you have had _____ on your fellow servant?"

As stated in the two points above, forgiving others can be a little bit vague to us, but "having mercy" on the other person may be a little easier to understand. (Again, not necessarily easier to do, but easier to understand.)

Have you forgiven the person? Not sure.

Are you able to have mercy on them? You can probably answer that.

Similar to the first point above, do you really want God to have mercy on them and do you want to be merciful towards them?

Have you forgiven? = Can you be merciful to them?

As you possibly can see, we could continue with many more of the "One Another" principles. Can you encourage the person or people you are trying to forgive, serve them, pray for their well being, accept them, confess your sin to them, worship with them, and love them the way Christ loves you? ³

There is no way that any of us should say that these things are even close to being easy. If it was easy, everyone would be doing it. But we can see that this is the kind of relationship that God wants us to have with others. Of course, if they do not also repent and strive to have a godly relationship with you, then some of these "One Another" principles will be impossible on a practical level. (See *Romans 12:18* for a helpful reminder of that.) But the point is that you are willing to say "yes" to all of the questions in the previous paragraph.

One more observation about this point: if your answer is "no" to the string of questions asked above, don't let that discourage you. Forgiveness is probably one of those principles that takes time, and it definitely takes prayer. You know for sure that you can't do it without God's power, but you also know that he is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (*Ephesians 3:20*). And that includes giving you the almost unimaginable strength to forgive.

So, instead of asking God to help you "forgive" the person, which may be a little vague, you might want to try to ask him to help you to have these "One Another" attitudes towards the person.

Conclusion: As stated in the beginning of this study, forgiveness can be a difficult subject. And as stated in the last point of this study, it can also seem a little vague to us. Hopefully, these Scriptures give you some hope and some practical instruction to help you in your journey.

John Sullivan
October 2025

Footnotes

- ¹ Some of the material in this study is taken from my 13-week Bible study journal *Relationships in the Family of God* first published in 2013. Chapters 11 and 12 of that journal deal with reconciliation and forgiveness.
- ² A Google search of the question "How do I know if I've forgiven someone?" will produce some helpful results. See, for instance, *5 Tests to Determine if You've Forgiven Someone* by Ron Edmondson.
- ³ My favorite book on the one another principles is *One Another* by Thomas Jones and Steve Brown, published in 2008 by DPI books. See also my summary of the one another passages below.

"One Another" Passages

Here is one list of some "one another" passages. Wording is based on the New International Version. As you study this topic, you may find other categories and Scriptures to add to this list.

Love one another	John 13:34 – 35 Rom. 12:10 Rom. 13:8 1 Thess. 3:12 1 Thess. 4:9 1 Pet. 1:22 1 Pet. 4:8 1 John 3:11 1 John 3:23 1 John 4:7-12 2 John 1:5
Encourage, teach, and admonish one another	Rom. 15:14 Eph. 5:19 Col. 3:16 1 Thess. 4:18 1 Thess. 5:11 Heb. 3:13 Heb. 10:24 – 25
Humility, unity, acceptance, and submission to one another	Rom. 12:16 Rom. 14:13 Rom. 15:7 1 Cor. 1:10 Eph. 5:21 James 4:11 1 Pet. 3:8 1 Pet. 5:5
Confess to, show mercy to, and forgive one another	Zech. 7:9 Eph. 4:2 Eph. 4:32 Col. 3:13 James 5:16 1 John 1:7
Serve and care for one another	1 Cor. 12:25 Gal. 5:13 Gal. 6:2 1 Thess. 5:25 1 Pet. 4:9
Greet one another with a holy kiss	Rom. 16:16 1 Cor. 16:20 2 Cor. 13:12 1 Pet. 5:14