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Steps to Forgiveness

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Jesus' Teaching on Forgiveness

Matthew 6:12 -- Jesus gave His disciples an example of how to pray. Today we call that model "The Lord's Prayer." One of the requests in the prayer is, "Forgive us our debts, *as* we also have forgiven our debtors." The little word, "as" is a term of comparison. Jesus is saying that we should ask God to forgive us in the very same way that we forgive (or don't forgive!) others.

Matthew 6:14, 15– Immediately following "the Lord's Prayer" Jesus picked up on the forgiveness theme. He said, "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (see also Mark 11:24-26)

Matthew 18:34, 35 – One of Jesus' disciples, Peter, asked Him a question, "How often must I forgive? Seven times?" (Jews in that culture had been taught they should be willing to forgive someone up to three times daily ... so perhaps Peter was hoping to get a pat on the back from Jesus for his magnanimous offer to forgive seven times). In response Jesus told a story about a king who called in a servant who owed him (in today's currency) several million dollars and asked for payment. The servant begged for time and the king took pity on him and canceled the debt completely. Then that servant went out and found a colleague who owed him (in today's currency) just a few dollars. He grabbed him and began to choke him, demanding payment of the loan. That poor servant also begged for patience, but the first servant refused and had the man thrown into prison. News got back to the king and he called the "million dollar debtor" back in. In anger the king said, "After I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to, shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" Then the king turned him over to "tormentors"

until he would pay his debt in full. That ended the story and then Jesus turned back to Peter and said, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Jesus was saying here that if we do not forgive others we are going to be "delivered to the tormentors." This "torment" could take many forms... perhaps a guilty conscience, anger, resentment, bitterness, stress, fear, emotional and even physical illness. It can even open the door to demonic oppression.

Matthew 16:19 – Jesus told His disciple Peter that whatever he would bind on earth would be bound in heaven, but whatever he would loose (or free) on earth would be loosed in heaven. Then in John 20:23 Jesus addressed all His disciples and said, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." When we do not forgive we bind ourselves and others in sin. Unforgiveness always creates bondage. But when there is forgiveness there is freedom! When we forgive we are freed from the guilt and the "torments" we've had because of unforgiveness. And God is then free to work, not only in our own life, but also in the life of the person who hurt us!

Jesus couldn't have made it much clearer...

- When we pray we are to ask God to forgive us for our sins.
- The degree to which we receive God's forgiveness matches the degree to which we forgive others.
- When we ask God to forgive us, we shouldn't expect Him to do so, if we are unwilling to forgive those who have sinned against us.
- If we refuse to forgive others, we are disobedient and have thereby put a block in our relationship with God.

- If we refuse to forgive others, God allows “torment” of various kinds in our life.
- If we refuse to forgive others, we become “bound” to them and their offense. This is not a life of freedom.
- Considering that we all have sinned against the perfect King of the universe, yet in mercy He was willing to forgive us, shouldn’t we be willing to extend forgiveness to the people who have wronged us?

Practical steps to follow when someone has wronged you:

1 Confess Your Sin to God

Unforgiveness is sin against God. It is disobedience to His command to forgive others (Ephesians 4:32). When you have sinned, you need to ask Him to forgive you. And when you confess your sin of unforgiveness to God, do you know what He does?

I 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.

Proverbs 28:13 – He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

It couldn’t be said any simpler. If you confess your sins, the Lord will forgive you and cast your sins into the bottom of the sea and He will remember them no more!

Psalms 103:12 – As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Isaiah 43:25 – I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake and remembers your sins no more.

Isaiah 1:18 – Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

Micah 7:19 – You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

Perhaps sometimes you still doubt that you have really been forgiven. There is one more thing you need to do. You need to RECEIVE GOD’S FORGIVENESS, accepting it just as you would accept a gift someone gave to you. When you have been obedient and confessed your own sin, God WILL wipe your slate clean.

I John 3:21-23 – Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

2 Choose to Forgive

Forgiveness begins with the simple decision that, “I will obey Jesus’ teaching and forgive those who have hurt me.”

Ephesians 4:32 — Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Matthew 18:35—Forgiveness is to be “from your heart.” This means you are to forgive wholeheartedly, not holding back or keeping any resentment.

So what about feelings? When someone wrongs you, you don’t “feel” like forgiving them. How can you deal with such feelings?

Forgiveness doesn’t start with feelings, but with a decision. You don’t need to wait for the “right feeling” before making the choice to forgive. Instead, you can extend *instant* forgiveness! You can immediately choose to forgive from your heart. Verbalize the decision – say aloud, “In Jesus’ name I forgive _____ for _____.” When you make such a determined decision, you can trust God to begin to remove the tormenting feelings.

Be alert! When you think about the wrongs done to you (and the memories are bound to come back... sometimes very often) you may experience some of the same old resentful feelings. It is like playing a mental DVD on which you have recorded the painful memories. At an emotional level, you relive the event and the painful feelings resurface, even though the truth is that other person probably did nothing to re-offend you today. Since you already made the choice to forgive, you need to stand firm on that. When the memories return and the feelings of resentment come back, say to yourself, “I did forgive! I made that choice. I dealt with that! Now I am moving forward, not looking back!” Then choose to put your mind on something else... pray, quote a Scripture, sing a song, work on a hobby. As you do this consistently, you will discover that the painful memories begin to come less frequently and eventually instead of producing negative feelings, they will bring the happy thought, “Thank you Lord. That’s all over!” Over time the memories will even begin to blur and fade. This is the secret to healing of memories.

Forgiveness doesn’t start with feelings, but with a decision.

Be joyful! Thank God for loving you, for forgiving you, and for building His character into your life through this experience. Other emotions cannot stand up very long against a thankful heart and a joyful spirit! (I Thessalonians 5:15-18)

3 Ask for the Forgiveness of Those you Wronged

You are responsible to seek the forgiveness of anyone you have wronged, as well as anyone who may be holding resentment toward you for whatever reason.

Matthew 5:23-24 –Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Accept responsibility for any wrong you have done... even if you were only .01% at fault, and the other person is 99.99% wrong, God holds you responsible for your .01%.

Allow God to give you a whole new understanding and sensitivity toward that person

If you do not know what you did wrong, ask God to show you.

Ask forgiveness for the basic sin you committed. Do not go into graphic details that would do more harm than good.

If you do not have genuine remorse, prayerfully ask God to show you how you hurt that other person, and how they may have felt. Allow God to give you a whole new understanding and sensitivity toward that person.

It is good to look right at the person and say, "I was wrong when I _____. I am very sorry. Will you forgive me?" Wait for an answer. If they say, "Yes, I will forgive," this will bring release to them also. (But regardless of their answer, by confessing your sin and asking forgiveness you have been obedient. You can now leave them in God's loving hands.)

Make any restitution that is necessary. Ask God to give you His wisdom as to what restitution to make and how (see Ezekiel 33:15-16; Luke 19:1-10).

4 Ask God to Bless the Person Who Hurt You

Luke 6:27, 28 – Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

This might be difficult, but it is what Jesus taught and modeled Himself. Do you believe that God knows best what this individual needs? Then trust Him to know how best to bless that person.

5 Do Something Nice for the Person Who Hurt You

Luke 6:27 – Do good to those who hate you.

Romans 12:21 – Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This could be something simple like complimenting that person, baking cookies for her, fixing his car, or writing a note. Ask God and He will give you a creative idea that will be meaningful to that individual.

Caution: Forgiveness doesn't always mean that you should continue to have contact with the offending person. For example if someone molested your child, you should forgive but it would be unwise to continue spending time with him/her. However, you can always continue to pray for that person, asking God to work supernaturally in his/her life.

6 Accept the offending person just the way he is, even if you believe he is all wrong

This is not approving of what he is doing, or agreeing with his point of view... it is simply treating him with dignity, respect, love and kindness, anyway.

Romans 15:7 – Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

7 Look at that person through eyes of faith and believe God to change him/her.

Do not concentrate on areas of weakness, sin, or irritation. Rather, picture that person as God wants him to become. Believe that God will answer your prayers for that person. (I John 5:14,15)

Follow Abraham's example and by faith envision things that are not (yet!) as though they are (already!). (Romans 4:16-21)

Begin to think and speak positively about that person. Remember, love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (I Corinthians 13:7)

Don't wait any longer

Expect God to do a miracle – even greater than you can imagine! (Ephesians 3:20)

Here is a prayer that you can use to assist you in addressing this most important issue of forgiveness. It is best to pray aloud! (Romans 10:10) Of course this is simply a guideline, a help to get you started.

“Father in heaven, in Jesus’ name I ask You to forgive me for my sin of unforgiveness. I have held bitterness and resentment toward _____. I know this is wrong and terrible in Your sight and I truly repent for my sinful actions and attitudes. Show me if there is something I should do or say to make things right with another person. I am willing to do whatever You ask me to do!

Now I choose to forgive _____ for the wrongs he/she has done. I choose to forgive completely, without reservation, just as You have forgiven me. I don't want any

part of hatred or anger; I want only to extend Your love and forgiveness toward that person. I ask you to deliver me from the torment that has been part of my life since I began hanging onto bitterness and resentment.

O Lord, bless _____. You know what is best for that individual and I am asking You to work supernaturally in his life. In faith, I envision him as You desire him to be. Thank You Lord for doing above and beyond what I can even imagine possible. And if there is a kind word or action You want me to do for this person, please impress that on me now and I will do it!

Thank You, O Lord, that as I have forgiven those who have hurt me, You have forgiven me. Thank You for making me white as snow!”

And if memories return or old feelings resurface, I ask You to remind me quickly of the decision I made today. As of today, I have forgiven _____. His wrong toward me has been dealt with. It is behind me and I am moving forward, free from the past into a brand new future with You Lord! What an awesome God You are!

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