

Relationships that bring us the greatest joys can also be the source of our deepest hurts. So what can we do when someone hurts us, either with their words or actions (or possibly lack of action)? We can go to the One who made us. God cares deeply about us and our relationships with one another. He always wants what's best for us. That's why He gives us the gift of forgiveness. Consider what God tells us in the Bible about how to forgive...

How to Forgive: #1—Be Forgiveness

The hurt of the offended and the offender's hunger for forgiveness both point to the reality of our deepest needs in a broken world. Every person's deepest need is our need to be right with God. But each of us has turned away from God. That's why we need forgiveness through Jesus. Consider why God's forgiveness is the foundation for God's forgiveness through us:

God's Forgiveness Humbles Us. Jesus' parable of the forgiven servant who refused to grant forgiveness (Matthew 18:23-25) is a powerful reminder that we should not first think about forgiving others in light of the seriousness of their offense against us. Instead, we should first remember the far more serious nature of our own offenses against God, offenses that He graciously forgives because of Christ. Being hurt often tempts us to look down on the offender, rather than up to God in humility.

God's Forgiveness Empowers Us. At times, forgiving others can seem almost impossible. But God's forgiveness to us brings about an inner

change, so that we are now "a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come." (II Corinthians 5:17) Christ died "that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." (I Peter 2:24) Therefore, we have power to forgive from God's Spirit working through a new heart. Additionally, the comfort of having peace with God helps us to forgive in spite of the pain inflicted by others.

God's Forgiveness Guides Us. Not only does God's forgiveness in Jesus provide us with a right perspective on our own sins, but it also gives us an example to follow. The Bible reminds us we should be "forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32; cf. 5:1, 2) Though we might be tempted to forgive in a convenient, but shallow way, God reminds us we should give in the same manner we've been given: genuinely and generously.

How to Forgive: #2—Be Obedient

But if the gospel of God's grace to us prepares the soil of the heart, what does it look like to actually plant and water the seeds of forgiveness; of actually forgiving as we've been forgiven? Once again, God's word provides us with answers. Forgiveness is a command God wants us to obey. Like any command, it is not optional, and it is not to be obeyed only when I feel like it. But God gives us commands because he knows what is best for us. Consider what we learn about genuinely obeying God's call to forgive:

Cultivating a Forgiving Spirit. Before Ephesians 4:32 instructs us to forgive as God

forgave, it first calls us to be "tenderhearted". This is the same kind of heart Jesus prescribes in Mark 11:25: "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone..." In light of God's mercy to us, this should always be the first step when it comes to forgiving others. God wants me to see the neediness of my offender just as he graciously saw and responded to my neediness.

Communicate with the Offender. As your heart is being conformed to God's, your mouth should follow. Jesus couldn't be any clearer: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." (Matthew 18:15). While in some cases it is wise to "overlook an offense" (Proverbs 19:11), we shouldn't ever be afraid to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Hoping a person 'gets it' on their own or trying to simply 'get over it' ourselves will only make things worse.

Conferring Forgiveness. Always seeking a forgiving Spirit should lead us to seek the good of the one who sinned against us. This is one way we can be "imitators of God" (Ephesians 5:1). And this is why Jesus taught us, "if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." Even if that person wrongs you many times, but comes back "saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:3, 4) To grant forgiveness before a person repents can "short-circuit" the process God wants to do in them. But this principle should never be understood as an excuse to stay bitter. A forgiving heart is eager and praying for the person to return humbly, seeking our forgiveness

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How to Forgive: #3—Be Consistent

Our desire should always be to enjoy the fruits of forgiveness, that is, to enjoy our relationships without walls of hurt and bitterness blocking the way. But even after the words "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you" are uttered, there can be more work to do. The garden of forgiveness often needs to be tended. God's word does give us principles to consider in terms of moving forward in a way that is consistent with the forgiveness already described:

Forgiving and Forgetting. Even though God promised his people, "I will remember [your] sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34), forgiveness never literally means forgetting. God's forgiveness is not about wiping clean his divine 'database'. It's about Him thinking of us and acting toward us just as if he had. For us, some hurts will be forgotten with time. But the memory of some wrongs does linger, even after I've forgiven the one who wronged me. Feelings of resentment can resurface. That doesn't mean our forgiveness was not genuine. It simply means we have to go back to God in prayer, asking him to help us reclaim that tender heart, and to act in a manner consistent with the forgiveness we granted.

Forgiving and Repeating. While forgiveness does deal with a past or present injury, it does not guarantee protection against any future hurt, even from the very person we just forgave. In these cases, God knows we are tempted to harden our hearts toward such repeat offenders. The Apostle Peter asked Jesus about this very thing: "Lord how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven

times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21, 22) Jesus' point is the forgiveness we give should be just as generous as the forgiveness God gives us: without limit (consider the parable Christ goes on to tell in 18:23-35).

Forgiving and Reconciling. The Apostle Paul encouraged his readers, if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:18) While the restoration of a relationship is always preceded by forgiveness, forgiveness doesn't always lead to the restoration of a relationship. For example, while we are called to forgive without limits, that should not be interpreted as ambivalence toward patterns of abuse. In some cases the most "tenderhearted" thing we could do is step out of a relationship until the offender is willing to deal with such a pattern. To be clear, this is not a license to 'forgive' then forget a difficult relationship. That's not the kind of God-honoring, others-focused, long-suffering forgiveness the Bible prescribes. As hard (and sometimes scary) as it is, we should always strive for the same kind of restoration of relationship God's forgiveness makes possible between us and him.

Forgiveness is often not easy, and it is never not a process. But God wants us to be encouraged. When we cultivate this kind of forgiveness, not only is God glorified, not only are others encouraged, but we are blessed as well, both relationally and spiritually.

Ask him today to help you prepare the soil, to plant and water the seeds, and then to enjoy the fruits of true forgiveness.



Forgiveness
Reaping and Sowing the
Mercy of God