



Answers for a Changing Culture

05 How Do I Forgive the Unforgiveable?

*There is no offense too great for Christian forgiveness,
but biblical forgiveness is not the same thing as pretending nothing happened.*

EMBARK

Most of us know Christians are supposed to forgive... until we face something that feels unforgivable: abuse, betrayal, violence, adultery, abandonment, or other deep wrongs.

Then the questions come. Does forgiveness mean it didn't matter? Must I trust them again? What if they never apologize? What if it was criminal? What if I want to forgive but still feel angry or hurt?

Before asking, "How do I forgive the unforgivable?" we must ask, "What does the Bible actually mean by forgiveness, and what does God require of the deeply wronged?"

1. When you hear the word *forgiveness*, what do you assume it requires?
2. Which seems harder to you: forgiving someone who repents or knowing how to respond when someone refuses to repent?



EXAMINE

READ Matthew 18:21–35

3. What does Peter assume about how many times a person should be expected to forgive?
4. What is Jesus communicating by telling Peter to forgive "seventy times seven"?
5. How does the enormous debt forgiven by the king compare with the debt owed to the servant?
6. Does Jesus minimize what the second servant owed, or does He put it in perspective?
7. What makes the unforgiving servant's response so offensive?
8. What warning does Jesus give to someone whose settled posture is, "I will not forgive"?

READ Luke 17:3–4

9. What does Jesus tell us to do when another believer sins?
10. What comes before the command to forgive in this passage?
11. What happens when someone repeatedly sins but repeatedly repents?
12. Does unlimited forgiveness mean that sin should never be confronted?

READ Romans 12:17–21 and Luke 6:27–28

13. How should Christians respond to someone who has wronged them but has not repented?
14. What is the difference between seeking justice and seeking personal revenge?
15. What attitudes and actions are still required toward an enemy?
16. How does trusting God's justice help us surrender our desire for vengeance?

READ Ephesians 4:31–32 and Colossians 3:12–13

17. What attitudes must Christians put away?
18. What is the basis and model for Christian forgiveness?
19. Does forgiving others earn God's forgiveness, or does it demonstrate that we have received His grace?
20. Why should persistent, settled unwillingness to forgive cause someone who professes Christ to examine his or her heart?

EXPOSE

We can make bad decisions about forgiveness when we either minimize what forgiveness requires or make forgiveness require things Scripture does not require.

We confuse forgiveness with minimizing evil

Forgiveness does not mean saying, "It wasn't that bad," pretending nothing happened, or refusing to confront serious sin. Scripture can command us both to forgive and to rebuke. Calling evil what it really is does not make us unforgiving.

We confuse forgiveness with reconciliation and trust

Forgiveness, reconciliation, and trust are related, but they are not identical. Reconciliation involves both parties and ordinarily requires repentance. Trust may need to be rebuilt over time through demonstrated faithfulness. Forgiving someone does not automatically mean returning a relationship to exactly what it was before.

We confuse forgiveness with removing consequences

A forgiven criminal may still face prosecution. A forgiven thief may still owe restitution. A forgiven leader may still be disqualified from leadership. **Forgiveness relinquishes personal vengeance; it does not abolish justice or wisdom.**

We confuse forgiveness with a feeling

You may forgive and still hurt. You may forgive and still grieve. You may forgive and still remember. **"Forgive and forget" does not mean erasing the past; it means refusing to rehearse the wrong as fuel for bitterness or revenge.** Forgiveness is not measured by whether painful emotions immediately disappear.

We need to distinguish readiness to forgive from reconciliation

Scripture never permits bitterness, hatred, or revenge. Even when an offender refuses to repent, Christians should pray for them, desire their repentance, refuse retaliation, and remain ready to forgive.

When genuine repentance comes, we should forgive freely, extending the mercy we ourselves have received from Christ. The Christian is **never free to cherish bitterness, never free to pursue revenge, and never free to refuse forgiveness to someone who genuinely repents.**

ENGAGE

Step 1: Acknowledge the wrong honestly.

Am I minimizing what happened because I think admitting how serious it was would somehow make me unforgiving? Can I call the sin what God calls it without exaggerating or excusing it?

Step 2: Surrender personal vengeance.

Am I secretly hoping the person suffers simply because I want to see them hurt? Can I entrust judgment to God while still pursuing appropriate justice?

Step 3: Decide whether the offense should be overlooked or confronted.

Is this something love and wisdom allow me to overlook, or is it serious enough that confrontation, church involvement, protection of others, or civil authorities may be necessary?

Step 4: Pray for repentance rather than destruction.

Can I sincerely ask God to expose the offender's sin, bring genuine repentance, protect others, and transform this person by His grace?

Step 5: Be ready to forgive.

If this person genuinely repented, would I be willing to forgive and consider reconciliation, or have I already decided that no repentance could ever be enough?

Step 6: Rebuild wisely.

Am I confusing forgiveness with immediate trust? What boundaries, consequences, accountability, or time may still be necessary even after forgiveness is granted?

Step 7: Examine your own heart.

Am I struggling to forgive while seeking God's help to obey, or have I resolved in my heart, "I will never forgive"? Those are very different responses.

MEMORIZE

Ephesians 4:32, CSB "And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ."

Remember... *Forgiveness does not say that sin is small. It recognizes that the grace we have received in Christ is immeasurably greater. Christians may pursue justice without vengeance, establish boundaries without hatred, and acknowledge continuing pain without concluding that forgiveness has failed. Forgiveness does not earn salvation, but people who have truly received God's grace should increasingly become people who extend grace to others.*