

THE PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS

Practical Steps to Forgive from the Heart

The following material has been adapted from Dr. Steve Seamands book entitled, *Wounds That Heal: Bringing Our Hurts to the Cross*.

Overview of the 7 Steps of Forgiveness

Preparation: Naming What Happened (Steps 1-3)

1. Face the Facts
2. Feel the Hurt
3. Confront the Hate

Decision: Choosing to Forgive (Steps 4-5)

4. Bear the Pain
5. Release the Person

Looking Ahead: Starting Over (Steps 6-7)

6. Take Responsibility for Yourself
7. Long for Reconciliation

Below you will find more detail on each step and guidance on how to work through them. The seven steps are especially helpful when addressing significant areas of unforgiveness. While the seven steps of forgiveness can be applied to any situation, they may not always be necessary for everyday offenses.

Simple Prayer of Forgiveness for Daily Use:

Jesus, _____ (name the person) said/did _____ to me.

Lord, this hurt me and made me feel _____.

But I choose to forgive them, in Jesus' name.

I release them to You and choose not to retaliate, in thought or in action.

Amen.

The hope is that this kind of prayer would become our natural reflex whenever something is said or done to us—whether big or small. As we practice forgiving others in our day-to-day lives, we grow in peace and deepen our awareness of Jesus' presence.

WORKING THROUGH THE 7 STEPS OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel and our discipleship to Jesus. The apostle Paul reminds us, "Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others." (Col.3:13). This is exactly how Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us." He goes on to clarify that we cannot receive forgiveness if we refuse to forgive others (Mt. 6:9-15). The assumption is clear: we will have to forgive others as we journey through life. This is the way of God's kingdom. It's not *if* but *when* others sin against us, we are called to forgive.

It's important to understand that forgiveness is a *practice*. It does not come naturally to us. We will have to work at developing the skill of forgiving others, so that it becomes a natural reflex: the goal being people and communities that embody forgiveness as a way of life.

The following steps is one way to practice the art of forgiveness:

Steps 1-3 help us *prepare* to forgive

Steps 4-5 help us *decide* whether or not to forgive

Steps 6-7 help us *look ahead* and long for reconciliation

Steps 1-3 help us prepare to forgive.

Step 1: Face the Facts

"Forgiveness begins when we are ruthlessly honest about what was done to us."¹

C.S. Lewis says, "There is no use in talking as if forgiveness were easy. It is one of the most horrible duties. ... We must look steadily at the sin, the sin that is being committed against us, and see it in all its dirt, meanness, and malice, and then let it go."²

Facing the facts means that we name the *specific ways* others have hurt us. This is important. Generalities won't do, because we cannot confess to God what we will not first admit to ourselves. If we are to be fully known and loved by God, then we need know ourselves and be able to name what's going on beneath the surface of our lives.

Jesus wants to address and heal our specific wounds. It's fair to say that many of us do not experience deeper healing because we come to Jesus with generic prayers.

¹ Dr. Steve Seamands. *Wounds That Heal*. Chapter 8

² C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. Chapter 7 - "Forgiveness"

Jesus is our friend. He wants to hear the specific ways we've been hurt, not simply for a cathartic experience, but because he wants to see us healed from the sin of others.

When we face the facts and name the narrative of our lives the work of forgiveness begins.

Step 2: Feeling the Hurt

"More than 'just the facts', we must connect with the feelings bound up with the facts."³

Henri Nouwen helps drive home the need to feel the hurt when he says, "The great challenge is *living* your wounds through instead of *thinking* them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than talk about them... In your head you can analyze them, find their causes and consequences, and coin words to speak and write about them. But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down into your heart."⁴

Many of us do not struggle naming the facts. We struggle processing our emotions. After all, who actually enjoys *feeling* our hurts? We have been raised up and trained to numb, suppress, and ignore our emotions. Many of us have been taught to "man up", or to "toughen up", or to "stop being so dramatic", or to "grin and bear it", or to "forgive and forget". The sentiment is clear: get over it and move on.

It's important for us to notice that Jesus not only addressed our emotions but was fully aware of His own emotions. He didn't suppress or ignore them. Whether it was addressing the reality that we will all experience worries, anxieties, fear, sadness, anger, etc. (i.e. Mt. 5:21-22; 6:25-34;10:3) in life or seeing him address Martha and her many worries (Lk. 10:41-42) or Jesus expressing himself acknowledging his sadness over Lazarus death or his turmoil in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was aware of his emotions.

If we are to walk authentically through forgiveness we cannot ignore our feelings. We need to, as Nouwen suggests, *live our wounds*, and let them go down into our hearts.

³ Dr. Steve Seamands. *Wounds That Heal. Chapter 8*

⁴ Henri Nouwen. *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit.* (1994)

Step 3: Confronting the Hate

“Forgiving involves letting go of hatred or resentment toward the persons who have wounded us.”⁵

Before we can release something, however, we must first acknowledge that it is truly there. This means honestly admitting that we resent—and at times may even hate—those who have hurt us. If we are willing to be fully truthful, we must also confront a harder reality: part of us prefers to hold on to our resentment and anger.

Resentment can give us a sense of control and a distorted feeling of justice. We tell ourselves, “*They deserve it.*” Yet the way of the kingdom does not permit us to cling to hatred or resentment toward others.

One of Jesus’ most radical teachings is his call to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). When we follow Jesus, he consistently addresses the anger in our hearts—the anger that, if left unchecked, so easily hardens into hatred of the other.

The sooner we confront our hatred, the better. Hatred opens the door to bitterness, and once bitterness takes root, it becomes far more difficult to uproot. Bitterness distorts our vision, blinding us to reality and eroding our capacity to love. For this reason, we must ruthlessly confront our anger and refuse to give it a foothold in our souls.

WORKING THROUGH STEPS 1-3

Reflection Questions

- What was said or done to you?
- What were you feeling when that happened to you?
- What has it cost you?
- Who else has been affected by it? What has that been like?

Follow Up Questions:

- Why? Chase the *why* with each question above to help gain great clarity.
- What is Jesus saying to you?
- Has this conflict brought up other circumstances or people in your life? If so, make note of this and circle back later.

⁵ Dr. Steve Seamands. *Wounds That Heal*. Chapter 8

How to Process the Question:

- **With Others.** Working through forgiveness is not something we do on our own. We believe deeper healing happens when we bring our reflections before Jesus and others, which is why we would recommend this process is done in an environment like *Band*. Some situations may require the assistance of a trained counselor. If this is the case, it is still important to have a few people besides a counselor help you process things.
- **Journal.** Throughout the entire process, it will be extremely helpful to write things down. Writing things down helps us process more deeply, but also helps us clarify our thoughts. This, in return, will help us process with others more deeply and with greater clarity. It will also help you track your progress so that you don't have to continually revisit the same thing over and over.
- **Prayer Walks.** Go on longer walks to process through the questions. Like journaling, prayer walking helps connect different parts of brain than simply sitting and thinking. For some people, walking helps them hear the Spirit more clearly. It can also help focus and limit our wandering minds. Other things, like driving, washing the dishes, etc., can also help us process better.

Simple Prayer:

Jesus, I want to work on forgiving _____ (name person).

Will you help me process what really happened to me?

Jesus, when _____ (name event) happened to me,

I felt _____ (name all emotions).

Jesus, I trust you and surrender to your forgiving love. Amen.

This is just an example. The point is to help us bring everything, in prayer, under the Lordship of Jesus, which should be done in the context of others. He alone can forgive, heal, and restore things.

Steps 4-5 bring us to a decision: to forgive or not.

Step 4: Bearing the Pain

“Though innocent, we choose to bear the pain of the injustice.”⁶

There is a God-given voice within us that cries out, *“This isn’t right. What they did is wrong. Someone ought to pay for this.”* This cry echoes the hope of Revelation 21—the promise that God will one day make all things new. Each of us carries this deep longing for the world to be set right, for injustice to be addressed and healed.

Yet when we are wounded, we often face a choice. Rather than demanding that those who hurt us pay for the injustice, we instead choose to pay ourselves.

As theologian H. R. MacIntosh wisely observes, *“In every great forgiveness there is enshrined a great agony.”*

To forgive—particularly as Jesus teaches in passages like Matthew 18—is to release someone from a real wrong. In forgiving others, we forfeit our perceived right to retaliate. On the one hand, forgiveness means saying, *“It stops with me.”* We choose to absorb the pain rather than return it through retaliation or vengeance.

On the other hand, this is not something we can carry on our own. We follow a wounded Savior who can bear what we cannot. And so, we bring the pain we have absorbed to Jesus and entrust it to him.

As James reminds us, *“Mercy triumphs over judgment”* (James 2:13). This does not mean minimizing the harm, rushing past it, or pretending it never happened. It means bearing it—and entrusting it to the One who will ultimately make all things right.

Step 5: Releasing the Person Who Hurt Us

“Forgiving means releasing our offenders and turning them over to God.”⁷

Forgiveness means releasing those who have wronged us and entrusting them to God. As Miroslav Volf writes, *“A genuine release of a genuine debt is at the heart of forgiveness.”* To forgive, then, is to release—or to choose not to retaliate for—a real wrong committed against us.

When we release someone from the debt they owe, we are essentially saying, *“I no longer need to be the judge.”* In doing so, we relinquish our desire for control and place both the person and the situation into God’s hands.

⁶ Dr. Steve Seamands. *Wounds That Heal*. Chapter 8.

⁷ Ibid.

In many ways, this is an act of faith. Once we release others, things are no longer in our control, and that loss of control can make forgiveness especially difficult. If we are honest, we often prefer to hold on to our hurts and pain. At times, our identity can even become entangled with our brokenness, making the act of laying it down feel frightening. Releasing others, then, is no small step.

This is also why we often need the support of our community. We need others to *encourage* us—quite literally, to put courage into us—so that we can take the difficult step of releasing those who have wounded us and entrusting them to God.

WORKING THROUGH STEPS 4-5

Reflection Questions

- Who are you releasing to Jesus?
- What specific things are you absorbing and releasing?
- What pain and hurt are you absorbing and releasing?

Simple Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I bring you all the pain and hurt that I've experienced because of _____ (name person).

I do not want to retaliate or seek vengeance or get even with them. Jesus, I choose to bear (or absorb) everything and draw a line under this.

Jesus, I release _____ (name person) from _____ (name everything you're releasing them from and choosing to bear).

I cannot carry this myself, so I ask that you lift it off of me and carry it in your broken body. Amen.

As you are praying (above), it can be helpful to open your hands as a way to engage your body in the act of prayer.

Imaginative Prayer. When praying to Jesus, with others present, it can be helpful to visualize yourself *giving something* to Jesus in your mind's eye. This may be a new practice to you, but Jesus can meet us in our imagination. When you're praying you could imagine yourself in a place that is safe, or peaceful, or important to you. Then picture holding something, like a box, or drawing, etc. This can represent everything you're handing over to Jesus. When you're finished praying, give Jesus whatever it is you're holding that represents all of the pain and hurt.

Steps 6-7 help us look ahead and start over

Step 6: Assuming Responsibility for Ourselves

“As long as we blame others, we don’t have to take responsibility for ourselves. They’re on the hook for our problems.”⁸

This is a crucial step. In an age shaped by victimization, many of us never pause to take responsibility for our own part in a ruptured relationship. If forgiveness calls us to release others, we may wonder: *Where does that leave us?* The answer is both uncomfortable and freeing—we are now responsible for ourselves.

Forgiving others dismantles the posture of victimhood. It takes the wind out of its sails. We cannot genuinely release someone, absorb the pain, and still cling to the identity of victim. This is precisely why forgiveness is so difficult—it requires us to lay down a story that, in subtle ways, can begin to define us.

When we remain in a posture of victimhood, we also lose the ability to receive forgiveness for our own participation in the brokenness of the relationship—whether through things we have said or done, or through what we have thought and harbored in our hearts. Jesus is clear: we cannot receive forgiveness while refusing to extend it to others. This is not a matter of earning God’s love, but of capacity. Forgiveness operates by a logic of overflow. When we refuse to forgive, we place a barrier between ourselves and the transforming love of God.

For this reason, taking responsibility for ourselves is essential. This means courageously confronting both the obvious and subtle ways we have partnered with sin—through our words, our actions, our judgments, and even the resentments we have quietly nurtured within. Only as we take responsibility can forgiveness fully do its healing work in us.

Step 7: Longing for Reconciliation

“Forgiveness ought to put within us a *longing* for reconciliation.”⁹

Robert Mulholland writes, “*Spiritual formation is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.*”¹⁰ For this reason, forgiveness is inseparably connected to reconciliation. While they are not the same, they belong together—they’re two sides of the same coin.

⁸ Dr. Steve Seamands. *Wounds That Heal*. Chapter 8

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Robert Mulholland. *Invitation to a Journey*. Page 16

It is often true that we feel little or no desire to be in relationship with someone who has caused us deep pain. Forgiveness does not begin with desire; it begins with obedience and trust. Yet as we patiently work through forgiveness—with God and within community—the Holy Spirit slowly reshapes our hearts. Over time, what begins as release can grow into a longing for restoration.

As we walk through the practices of forgiveness, the Spirit forms us to desire what Jesus desires. Hearts hardened by bitterness are softened into compassion. This transformation is not forced or rushed; it is the quiet, faithful work of the Spirit within us.

Scripture bears witness to this reconciling work:

For Christ himself has brought peace to us... In his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us... Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. – Ephesians 2:14-16

All of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him... He gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. – 2 Corinthians 5:18-19

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. – John 13:34-35

Jesus does not invite us to settle for less. He made peace by bearing the penalty we rightly deserved. And as his followers, we are called beyond mere tolerance—especially toward those who have wounded us—into the costly work of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

WORKING THROUGH STEPS 6-7

Reflection Questions

- What did you say or do?
- What emotions have you harbored in your heart?
- What have you come to believe about yourself, God, the world, others, and the church?
- How have you coped with it?
- What would it look like to pray for reconciliation?

Other things to consider:

- If you don't have a longing for reconciliation, ask the Spirit to give you a longing for it.
- What is getting in the way of having a desire to reconcile?

Simple Prayer:

Jesus, I confess that I have _____ (name everything you need to take responsibility for).

Lord, I am sorry and repent of my actions.

Those present should declare:

"In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven."

Amen.

PROCESS FOR HANDLING CONFLICT

Our primary focus has been learning how to practice forgiveness—always with the goal of reconciliation. But beneath all of this is a deeper desire: to become people and communities of forgiveness. We want forgiveness to be the natural reflex of every person at The Table and our various discipleship communities.

For that reason, we look to Matthew 18:15–20 as a simple and life-giving framework for handling conflict among us. One of the enemy's most common strategies is to convince us to stay silent—to keep hurts to ourselves until they harden into bitterness and resentment. When that happens, unforgiveness takes root, and over time the community begins to drift, or will inevitably fall apart.

Matthew 18 is a simple framework to help us be truth tellers, extend grace, and also protect the wider community. In fact, it's in this very context that Jesus promises, *"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."* (v20)

Our aim should be to address conflict early, before it grows into something bigger than it needs to be. With that in mind, we encourage using the following process to walk through conflict with love and grace:

Step 1: Go directly to the person

- If someone hurts you, however big or small, go to them as soon as possible in order to address the issue. It doesn't have to be a big ordeal! Simply share openly and honestly with them. The goal being to "win them over".
- If they listen and take responsibility, the relationship is restored and you can move on. It cannot be said enough, most major relational ruptures could have been resolved if we practiced going directly to the person who hurt us, right away.

Step 2: Bring a few others

- If the conversation goes nowhere, invite one or two trusted, non-bias, people to help you resolve the conflict. This can be helpful for a number of reasons:
 - It can bring greater clarity to the situation and help address potential misunderstandings. We all remember things differently!
 - It can create a safe environment for sharing and help others avoid taking personal shots or escalate things even more.
 - It can help us see our blind spots. Others can pick up on various patterns, tones, or dynamics in the relationship that we may not be able to see ourselves.

- It can help us move towards reconciliation. We can easily descend into accusatory talk, so it can be helpful to simply have somewhere else there to remind us of the goal.
- It can point us to Jesus! Jesus promised that he is with us, especially in the context of reconciliation. The number one strategy of the enemy is to rupture relationships. Therefore, others can help remind us Jesus is with us and that he will give us wisdom to resolve the conflict.

Step 3: Involve community leadership

- If there's still no movement towards reconciliation, it's important to go to church leadership to ask for help. If the conflict cannot be resolved with a few people, then it's possible unforgiveness will begin to spread throughout the community causing division, not unity. Again, church leaders goal should be to point those involved to Jesus and to reconciliation. But it's also important to go to leadership because:
 - It invites spiritual guidance from those overseeing the community. They can help listen, discern, and speak truth into the situation, and help everyone stay oriented towards Jesus.
 - It invites accountability. Unforgiveness is a sin that spreads like a virus. If people are unrepentant than it can infect the entire community. There are some situations in which pastoral leadership is needed to hold others to account.
 - It helps protect everyone involved because leaders goal is to be as fair as possible and they can help prevent the possible manipulation of others.
 - It helps discern next steps for reconciliation and involvement within the community. Leaders can help establish boundaries, and prayerfully discern how the Spirit is leading in the situation.
 - It is a godly principle for pastors (or shepherds) give oversight and care to the community. They are called to protect and watch over their flock.
 - In rare circumstances, community leadership may have to release unrepentant persons from the community. This decision is last case scenario and should be prayerfully discerned with The Table leadership.