

FORGIVENESS A STUDY IN RELEASING

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Matthew 18:21-35

STUDY THEME

As Christians, we forgive as the Father forgave us; that is, thoroughly, and quickly — requiring and expecting nothing in return. We desire and purposefully pursue resolving in our hearts hurts, wounds, or offenses. We understand that our forgiveness does not promise reconciliation. However, our forgiveness does hope for reconciliation.

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SERIES PREFACE

You know those negative attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, or habits that are seemingly impossible to overcome? Or, how about those relationships and circumstances where you feel completely trapped, powerless, or out-of-control?

For me, this was a deep-rooted bitterness toward my dad, an inability to share my feelings, and a 20-year addiction to pornography. My wife, Lacey, struggled with fear that fed an explosive anger producing a need to control people and circumstances.

If our heart and mind are poisoned with feelings of being unloved or unsafe, we hurt.

We are all created in the image of God. This identity is intrinsic. However, our perception of this identity can be distorted and devalued. When we feel loved and safe in our relationships, our heart and mind feel at peace. If our heart and mind are poisoned with feelings of being unloved or unsafe, we hurt. This pain affects how we see ourselves and others. As a result, we hurt others while continuing to hurt ourselves. This devalued and distorted perception of our identity is what led Lacey and I into our negative attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and habits. It wasn't until we were set free from our perceived identities that we were able to truly live a joy-filled life.

We are all created in the image of God. This identity is intrinsic.

We truly believe that every person has the potential to live a life of freedom and overflowing joy like Jesus. That is why our vision is to see Christians live free, joy-filled lives. The power of one person's story of freedom and victory is life-changing. It is the best evangelistic tool a Christian has. Our mission is to encourage and equip Christians to live free of those negative attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and habits and empower them to live joy-filled in every relationship and circumstance. Our hope is that Christians — through their story of Jesus' redemption in their lives — would be the best testimony the world has of God's transforming love, grace, mercy, and truth. This is the prayer behind the *Christian Living Study Series*.

On behalf of my wife, Lacey, and me, it is an honor to be able to share these studies with you. They are the result of our combined heartache, healing, education, and transformation. To get the most out of this series, we recommend that you participate in each study in the following two ways:

First, choose a partner. Due to the nature of the questions, we recommend, if married, your partner be your spouse. If you're not married, choose a partner of the same gender. You and your partner will independently begin each study with prayer. Then, work through the study — reading the main Scriptures (*indicated by* \clubsuit) and text. Finally, together prayerfully discuss the Response Questions (*indicated by* \clubsuit) and implement the Next Steps.

Second, journal. Personal journaling through the lessons will help solidify what the Holy Spirit is doing in your heart and mind. Write out a summary of your answers and discussions to the *Response Questions*; your experience with the *Next Steps*; and your own thoughts, objections, and struggles with the studies. This journal will be a record of God's grace and transformation in your life, mind, and heart.

While each study booklet may stand-alone, the *Christian Living Study Series* is a process — a linear progression of theology and application. With this in mind, we recommend going through the booklets in order. A full list of studies is available in the back of each booklet.

Our prayer is that you would be vulnerable — challenging yourself to openly discuss and answer the questions with your partner. Also, that you would allow the Holy Spirit to convict, comfort, and encourage you — empowering you to accomplish Jesus' mission for God's glory, other's good, and for your joy.



NATHANAEL P. STEEL

Study One



God demonstrates His love toward us by extending the opportunity for reconciliation; He forgave us quickly and thoroughly of our unrighteousness and self-righteousness through Jesus' death on the cross. This forgiveness is extended to us regardless of whether or not we repent. It is a forgiveness extended without expectation. In receiving His forgiveness, we choose to forgive others. The most difficult test of our love being filled with God — is our ability to forgive our enemies.



What is your greatest apprehension in loving people like Jesus — without expectation? Why?

WHO WE LOVE



Luke 6:27-35

Jesus explicitly tells us that it is meaningless to love people who love us back. Rather, He exhorts us to love those we consider our enemies — people we believe to be unlovable and unworthy of our love. In this context, our **enemy** is anyone who may have emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually, sexually, or psychologically hurt, judged, manipulated, offended, or coerced us. Essentially, it is anyone who has knowingly or unknowingly distorted or devalued our perception of our identity. This includes parts of ourselves that we hate, view as unlovable, or unworthy of love. The ultimate test of our love comes in our ability to forgive those we hate and believe to be unlovable. We cannot judge the success of our love on how we perceive other's love — judging people's "loving" actions as either good or bad.¹

¹ Matthew 7:1-5

Control Con

~C.S. Lewis

We cannot judge other's words and actions as loving or unloving because we cannot see the intentions or motivations of their heart. Therefore, the measure we use to judge the success of our love must be Jesus. We are able to do this because we know His actions and words along with His motivation is for God's glory and our good.³ The following contrasts unforgiveness with forgiveness and examines the heart behind each.

UNFORGIVENESS

Unforgiveness trusts our perspective and judgment of people's words, actions, and intentions above the Holy Spirit. It inaccurately assesses - through diminishing or exaggerating — the negative affects of other people's words and actions on our heart and mind. This leads to a belief that forgiveness is either unnecessary or impossible. It rejects the Father's love and grace through our unwillingness to acknowledge and trust Him above our experience and perspective. Furthermore, our unforgiveness rejects the Father's forgiveness⁴ — we cannot extend to others what we reject ourselves. Unforgiveness reveals the belief that we are a better, more qualified judge of a person's words, actions, and motives than Jesus.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness, on the other hand, acknowledges and trusts the Holy Spirit above our perspective and judgment of people's words, actions, and motivations. It accurately acknowledges the affects of other people's words and actions on our heart and mind. In light of what Jesus has done for us, it recognizes forgiveness through Jesus as both necessary and achievable if we desire to be free from the offense and its effects. It receives the Father's love and grace to release the negative effects and offender to Him. Furthermore, it allows Him to work our experience out for

² C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity. (Macmillan, 1960), pg.104

³ John 3:16; Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

⁴ Matthew 6:14-15

His glory and our good.⁵ Our finite mind should not seek to define what good might look like for us. Rather, God's definition of good is that we reflect — regardless of our circumstances — Jesus. Forgiveness is the supreme test of love because it is the most selfless act we can show others — freely releasing them from a debt we believe they owe us. Our Heavenly Father loves us with an immeasurable, unconditional, never stopping, never giving-up, always, and forever love that He revealed through Jesus.⁶ Forgiveness reveals our ability to truly understand and receive this love, and extend that same love toward others. Forgiveness reveals the belief that Jesus is a better, more qualified judge of a person's actions, words, and motives than ourselves.



Based upon the previous definition of "enemy", can you list out specific people (including yourself) who may be your enemy? What specifically have they said or done to make them your enemy? What negative or hurtful intentions do you believe they had toward you?

WHY WE LOVE



2 Corinthians 5:16-21

We love and forgive unconditionally because we desire others to experience the same love we've experienced from the Father. Our motivation to love others is two-fold.

1. THEY MAY EXPERIENCE JESUS

Recognizing and receiving the perfect love of the Father will compel us to share that same love with others. Jesus freed us from eternal death and empowered us to live free, joyfilled lives. If we lack freedom and joy in our own lives, it is because we've rejected His forgiveness and grace. Without first experiencing Jesus, we will lack the motivation and desire to love those we believe to be undeserving and are incapable of sharing that experience with them.⁷

⁵ Romans 8:26-30; Ezra 8:22; Ecclesiastes 8:12; John 10:10

⁶ Ephesians 3:14-19; 4:25-5:2; Matthew 18:21-25; Romans 8:31-39; Revelation 5:1-14; See also Sally Lloyd-Jones, and Jago, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name.* (ZonderKidz, 2007)

⁷ Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 7:36-50; Ephesians 3:14-19

2. THEY MAY BE SET FREE

Jesus desires to see people live free, joy-filled lives. To this end, He empowers us with the Holy Spirit to extend that joy and freedom to others. God fills us with His Spirit to encourage us, equip us, and empower us to minister to the needs of others. In allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us, we partner with God in His mission to free people from destructive attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and habits. God's desire is to set people free. He fills us and makes His home in us through the Holy Spirit. For Him to be comfortable and love through us, we must give Him access to every part of our heart, mind, and life.⁸

Q

For whom is it difficult for you to desire freedom? Who, in your experience, does not deserve to experience the Father's love? Who, in your experience, appears to be disinterested in the Father's love? In what relationship or circumstance in your life do you not acknowledge or invite the Holy Spirit to access?

HOW WE LOVE



The Father loves Jesus. Jesus loves us. If we receive Jesus' love for us then the Father will put that same love in us toward others. Our understanding of how much we've been forgiven will directly affect how we forgive others and receive forgiveness. If we believe we must earn or deserve our forgiveness then we are incapable of extending true forgiveness toward others. Jesus is the reason, example, and motivation for our love because He reconciles us, redeems us, and empowers us. There are two factors to consider when loving others:

1. LOVING PEOPLE IS A CHOICE¹⁰

Love is not an emotion or feeling. It is a willful response in spite of other's actions — whether or not they reciprocate.

⁸ John 10:10; 15:1-17; 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21; Ephesians 3:14-19; 4:11-16; Isaiah 61:1-4; Romans 8:9-11; James 4:5-10

⁹ John 17:20-26; Romans 5:5; Matthew 18:21-35

¹⁰ Mark 8:34-38; Luke 6:32-36; 1 John 2:1-11; 3:11-24; 4:7-21; 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Obligated or conditional love is a false love. This false love reveals that we do not fully understand or fully trust the Father's love for us. God loves us because He is love. If we put limitations or expectations on our love then it is no longer God loving through us. Therefore, we deny others the ability to experience the Father's love. To love others as God loves we must be willing for Him to love through us. This selfless unconditional love is a denial of ourselves (our rights, beliefs, and expectations) for the benefit of others. Like Jesus, it prefers others without condition, coercion, expectation, requirement, compulsion, or manipulation. We love because Jesus loved us.

C But forgiveness is not an emotion — I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.¹¹ JJ

Corrie Ten Boom

2. LOVING PEOPLE IS THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT¹²

The Father desires to use us to reveal His love for people. We partner with Him by choosing to allow the Holy Spirit to love others through us. As finite beings, we are incapable of showing the infinite love that God is, possesses, and desires to express. This principle is especially applied to those who have affected us negatively through hurts, wounds, and offenses. Loving people on God's terms rather than ours means that we submit to the Father, agree with Jesus, and trust the Holy Spirit. We submit to the Father by putting His desire for other's freedom above our desire for revenge or passivity. We agree with Jesus by extending forgiveness as He extended forgiveness toward us — without expectations or requirements. We demonstrate our trust in the Holy Spirit by our willingness to pursue relationship with those who we consider our "enemies".



Who recently has it been difficult for you to love? Specifically, what steps might you take for that person to feel loved by you?

¹¹ Corrie ten Boom, Guideposts Magazine: "I'm Still Learning to Forgive".

⁽Guideposts Association, Inc., 1972)

^{12 1} John 4:7-21; Romans 12:14-21

CONCLUSION

Our definition of being worthy of love is based upon acceptable cultural and traditional behaviors with which we grew up. Therefore, one's perceived lovability, worth, and acceptance then becomes the means by which we receive and extend love, worth, and acceptance. We live in unforgiveness when we make one's actions and conduct the prerequisite of our love. Unconditional standards of love therefore must come from a God who is outside of every tradition and culture. The Gospel is the good news that God unconditionally loves and has extended unconditional forgiveness toward everyone. God gave everything for us because He loves us and believes we are worthy of His sacrifice. This sacrificial love is what He desires to demonstrate to others through us. God has always extended this love toward us. However, we may not have been able to recognize and receive this love because of our own selfrighteousness and unrighteousness. We cannot love like Jesus until we recognize and receive His love. If we have not experienced the Heavenly Father's unconditional love, we will be incapable of extending unconditional love to others.

STUDY RESPONSE

DISCUSSION

Pray through and discuss the above \mathbf{Q} questions with your partner. Journal your response and answers to this study. Include any questions or differing opinions and thoughts that were shared in your discussions.

NEXT STEP

Who do you need to purposefully love this week? Specifically how will you purposefully love them?

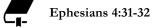
RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

The Four Loves *C.S. Lewis* Mariner Books, ©1971

Keep Your Love On

Danny Silk Loving On Purpose, ©2015

Study Two RESOLUTION



Forgiveness is a lifestyle of choosing to acknowledge and release (entrust) intentional and unintentional negative words and actions (or inactions) of others along with their negative outcomes with the offender to Jesus. This trust empowers us to have true love and compassion for the people who have hurt, wounded, or offended us. While forgiveness may be extended, reconciliation of the relationship is not possible if forgiveness is not truly received by the offender. Reconciliation happens when both forgiveness and repentance is extended and received. Both individuals sacrificially loving and preferring each other is the key to reconciliation. While a relationship may be reconciled, full restoration of access (or proximity) and trust may not always be possible. Healthy boundaries and caution for a season (or the unforeseeable future) may be required for safety and security. Restoration goes beyond reconciliation in that it extends full access and trust to the offending person. This restoration of access and trust within the relationship can only happen once a season of testing has been established. To proceed in restoring a relationship should be at the advice of people you trust and have both your maturity and good in mind.¹ While reconciliation and restoration may not always be possible (as it requires both individuals to fully participate), resolution and freedom of an offense in our heart, mind, and life is always possible through true forgiveness.



What relationships may be impossible to reconcile (or restore) because of the other persons' response? What relationship has been impossible to reconcile (or restore) because of your unforgiveness or unrepentance?

¹ Henry Cloud & John Townsend, *Safe People: How to Find Relationships That are Good for You and Avoid Those That Aren't.* (Zondervan, 1996)



Mark 11:15

In our pursuit to move forward with our redeemed heart, we must be willing to revisit and resolve past offenses.² Forgiving these offenses will empower us to live free of our distorted or devalued perception of our identity. Living a free, joy-filled life through forgiveness means that we are willing to:

1. FORGIVE ANYTHING AND ANYONE

Living out forgiveness as a lifestyle means that we are willing to acknowledge others' negative words and actions negatively affect us - especially in our developmental and growing up years. Offenses are attitudes, thoughts, words, or actions that cause emotional or physical pain or has caused negative emotional, physical, circumstantial, or relational affects. While it may be more difficult to forgive deep, traumatic, and painful offenses, doing so will provide great freedom in our future. This does not mean that only big traumatic offenses negatively affect us. While these offenses can be daunting or overwhelming to face, often the subtle, seemingly innocuous offenses do the most damage. These "insignificant" offenses if left unresolved over time will negatively affect our current and future relationships. Resolving these small offenses through forgiveness will equip and empower us to live free, whole lives.³ Regardless of how traumatic or insignificant an offense may be, fully resolving it means we forgive the offender. This means that we acknowledge the offense (and offender), admit their negative emotional or circumstantial impact, and release their current and future affects to God. As soon as we recognize unforgiveness or negative affects in our heart we must forgive quickly and thoroughly. Otherwise, the affects of these unresolved offenses accumulate over time.

2. FORGIVE FORMATIVE OFFENSES

Formative offenses are offenses that happen to us during our developmental and growing up years. This especially includes uncontrollable influences. Our emotional, mental, and physical reactions to current negative circumstances and people are the byproduct of unrelated uncontrollable

² Peter Scazzero, Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to be Spiritually

Mature, While Remaining Emotionally Immature. (Zondervan, 2014), DVD

³ Colossians 3:12-13; Ephesians 4:31-32; Matthew 18:1-35

negative influences from our developmental and growing up years. Current relationships and social issues are amplified by these unresolved formative offenses. Formative offenses lay the foundation for how we mature, develop, and learn. If left unresolved, they form the lenses through which we view relationships and circumstances. These formative offenses also affect our view of God and how we approach our relationship with Him.⁴ In these passages, Jesus addresses the affect of offense (sins) on young children. His anger is directed toward those who cause, through offense, a child's pursuit of relationship with God to be hindered. Jesus understands the negative spiritual, physical, and emotional impact that formative offenses have. There are three primary formative groups:

Parents // These are the most influential people in our developmental years. Whether we grew up with our biological parents or not, our parental figures shape our lives. Our biological parents give us our genetics and leave an indelible mark on who we are — how we process information and to a certain degree how we think, behave, and act. Because God, our infinite Heavenly Father, has chosen to share the title of "father" with our finite earthly father, — our biological father in particular and other father figures in general — their words and actions represent God. Our primary perspective of God is developed through these words and actions.

Mentors // This group includes but is not limited to teachers, coaches, leaders, older siblings, grandparents, etc. It is any older individual who has the ability to influence us, either through their position or our permission.

Peers // The last group includes our friends, classmates, close siblings, or other individuals who are close to us either by their age or common life experience.

Forgiving formative offenses often minimizes, or in some cases, eliminates current offenses altogether. It also, to an extent, guards against similar future offenses. In removing these formative "lenses", we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to see current relationships and circumstances through the Gospel-lenses of love and hope. Additionally, it provides clarity into God's character, allowing us to experience a broader spectrum of His attributes.

⁴ Luke 17:1-4; Mark 10:13-16



Who, from the three primary formative groups, has offended you? How did they offend you? How might these formative offenses have negatively affected your current perspective on relationships and circumstances?

DEFINING FORGIVENESS



Forgiveness is cancelling any past or current desired words or actions (responses, expectations, or requirements) of the offending person. It also releases and entrusts any negative consequences we may experience from the offense to God. These consequences may include negative physical, emotional, or relational affects. Forgiveness also acknowledges that future consequences of these offenses may present themselves. In light of this, we are choosing to cancel any future desired outcomes and release any future negative consequences to God.

JESUS' EXAMPLE OF FORGIVENESS

In looking at how Jesus forgave, we discover several characteristics in which we can use to define what Christfocused forgiveness looks like.

Jesus forgave before we repented. Jesus, as He was dying on the cross, desired forgiveness toward those who were killing Him. Christ-focused forgiveness does not require the offender to own or admit to any of the offense. Forgiveness is extended regardless of any admission of wrong-doing or repentance.

Jesus forgave knowing we would probably continue to sin. Jesus taught us to forgive regardless of how many times we are sinned against. Christ-focused forgiveness is not dependant upon whether or not the offender ever changes.⁶ Forgiveness is demonstrated no matter how many times we are sinned against in the same way.

⁵ Matthew 18:21-22; Luke 23:34; 2 Corinthians 5:21

⁶ Boundaries may need to be established and full restoration of the relationship may not be possible. For more on this, see the *Confrontation* booklet.

Jesus, in forgiving, paid a debt He did not owe. When Jesus died on the cross, He suffered the consequences of our sin. Christ-focused forgiveness is not fair in that it pays the price for a sin we did not commit. Forgiveness is willing to suffer or endure the consequences for a wrong we did not commit.

THE CHOICE TO FORGIVE7

When we choose Christ-focused forgiveness, there are several key attitudes and mindsets that we are choosing:

We are choosing to love the person in-spite of their sin. This is a self-sacrificing decision that requires nothing from the offender. This Christ-focused love is given without expectation or condition. Forgiveness resolves and settles an offense at the extreme conclusion — it trusts that Jesus is enough whether or not change happens in the consequences or in the offending person.

We are choosing not to personally punish (seek revenge or hold a grudge) the person for their sin. Christ-focused forgiveness means that we do not personally seek retribution or "fairness" in a situation. This is the definition of mercy; that is, to not give what is deserved. This does not mean that authorities are never brought into a circumstance or that there are not negative consequences for the person. This is a personal choice to release the person and their sin to God and allow Him to act rather than ourselves.

We are choosing not to keep a record of their sin. This is different that forgetting — deeply hurtful or life-changing offenses can rarely be forgotten. Rather, it is a choice to keep short accounts (not living in unforgiveness) with people and not bring up past forgiven failures.

We are choosing to believe the best about the person. This is a hope-filled, Christ-focused response. It believes that change is impossible. It trusts the Holy Spirit to move and work in the life of the offender. It rejects using "always" and "never" statements.

⁷ Luke 17:3-4; 11:4; Colossians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 2:6-8

Q

What characteristics of Jesus' forgiveness do you struggle with the most? Why? What forgiveness choice is the most difficult for you? Why? With whom or in what circumstance is it most difficult for you to choose to fully forgive?

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness is neither a feeling nor a response. It is an active choice to release an offender of any expectation and to entrust them and the offense to God. While full reconciliation or restoration may not be possible, real freedom and resolution of the offense in our hearts and minds is possible through Christfocused forgiveness. It is through forgiving past offenses that we can truly live in Jesus' freedom for our future.

STUDY RESPONSE

DISCUSSION

Pray through and discuss the above \P questions with your partner. Journal your response and answers to this study. Include any questions or differing opinions and thoughts that were shared in your discussions.

NEXT STEP

Who, in recent times, do you need to forgive? Who, from your growing up years, do you need to forgive?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life

Henry Cloud & John Townsend Zondervan, ©1992

The Bait of Satan: Living Free from the Deadly Trap of Offense

John Bevere Charisma House, ©2014

Study Three



We face numerous obstacles when we're presented with opportunities to forgive. These obstacles include false definitions of forgiveness and excuses as to why we believe we do not need to forgive. There are several consequences if we do not overcome these obstacles. There are several negative outcomes when we choose not to acknowledge the effects of others' words and actions on us and not forgiving those people for these negative words and actions.



What have been your limits to forgiving someone? What has been the outcome of this decision to limit your forgiveness?

FALSE DEFINITIONS OF FORGIVENESS



When faced with the negative effects of others' sin on us, we either choose to negate the need for forgiveness or wrongly define what forgiveness means. The following are ways we invalidate or incorrectly apply forgiveness:

Approving: *"It's okay."*¹ This is one way we diminish or deny the hurtful words and actions of others. This affirming reply comes from our desire to protect ourselves from the pain of an offense. This may also be an attempt to not offend the person who hurt us.

¹ Proverbs 24:23-25

Excusing: "They had to." "They did the best they could." "They didn't know any better."² The ability to understand the offender's words and actions (and even agree with them) does not diminish their negative effects on our heart and mind. While this is a gracious response, it is not forgiveness.

Denying: "They didn't offend (sin) against me." "It didn't affect me."³ We are often blind to the effects of other's words and actions on our heart and mind because of our desire to protect or fight against these hurtful words and actions. Therefore, we need to surround ourselves with people who love us and can speak truth to us.

Diminishing: "It's not a big deal." "It didn't affect me that much."⁴ While this technically acknowledges that an offense occurred, it minimizes the offense or it's effects. It is impossible to fully forgive if we do not affirm the weight and effects of an offense. We will continue to live under these negative effects as long as we continue to belittle them.

Forgetting: "We have to forgive and forget." "Tesus wouldn't want me to think about it anymore."5 Deep, lifechanging offenses are often impossible to forget. In fact. "forgetting" an offense and continuing to be in relationship (close proximity) with someone who continues to offend us may lead to further pain. "Forgetting" may also take the form of not wanting to talk about the sin because "as a Christian I'm not suppose to think about it". While we shouldn't dwell on other's sin, the pain and ongoing negative effects of that sin influence our heart and mind. These negative effects are what we must acknowledge and forgive. Once we acknowledge and forgive an offense, we can begin the process of freedom from the negative attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, or habits created by the offense. Our desire to forget past hurts is a signal of incomplete forgiveness.

Reconciling: "I can't/won't reconcile with them." Forgiveness is often wrongly used as a synonym for reconciliation. As we saw in the last study, reconciliation is two people choosing to trust Jesus by forgiving and repenting. It is only when one person repents AND the other person forgives that reconciliation can happen.

² Proverbs 18:21

³ Proverbs 18:1; 26:24-26

⁴ Proverbs 18:5

⁵ Proverbs 26:11; 22:24

Restoration: "I can't/won't let that person back into my life." Forgiveness has also been wrongly identified as restoration — extending full access and trust to the offending person. As we've previously seen, restoration can only happen after a relationship is fully reconciled. Trust, the catalyst of restoration, is gained slowly over time through seasons of testing. Scripture is clear that we are never trust humans. Rather, God is the only one we are fully commanded to trust.⁶



How have you falsely defined forgiveness? Because of this false definition, with who have you neglected to forgive?

CONSEQUENCES OF UNRESOLVED OFFENSES



Matthew 6:14-157

Refusing, negating, or wrongly defining forgiveness produces negative effects. This is additional suffering to what we may already be going through because of the person's sin. The following are what we choose when we do not forgive:

Bitterness (internal) or Anger (external) is two reactions to negative emotions (offenses). While the emotions that trigger anger and bitterness may differ, the result is the same. They both cause the numbness or death of emotions and relationships. We compound our suffering when we react with bitterness or anger.

Heaviness is the unseen spiritual weight of an unresolved issue. This weight is often a result of real guilt that is felt when the Holy Spirit convicts us of unresolved offenses (unforgiveness). This heaviness may come from our unwillingness to release the negative consequences of other's sin to Jesus. This leads to us denying the Holy Spirit access to our heart and rejecting His grace amidst the offense.

Torment is a self-inflicted and demonic result of unresolved offenses. These are often lies we believe about God, other people, and ourselves. They may also be "voices" we hear in our

⁶ Jeremiah 17:5-8; 2 Chronicles 32:8; Psalm 118:8-9; 146:3; Romans 1:24-25

⁷ Isaiah 57:20-21; 59:1-2; Psalm 32:1-4; Proverbs 28:13-14; Luke 6:36-45; 2 Corinthians 2:6-11

mind (or sometimes out loud) that reinforce the lies we already believe about our identity. Torment is ultimately the result of us separating ourselves from God through our willful choice to not resolve offenses. Our prayers are hindered as long as we live in this willful state of sin (unforgiveness). We will lack peace when we reject God's conviction of unresolved offenses. His kindness will always reveal areas of our heart that are not free.

Edginess, frustration, and irritation are symbols that something is not right in our heart and mind. When directed toward Jesus, they can be very beneficial in identifying unresolved offenses. If left unchecked, they can develop into habits of anger or bitterness.

It's hard to treat anybody right when our heart isn't right. Even people you want to love may be suffering from your bitterness, resentment, and unforgiveness. JJ 8

~Joyce Meyer

Negative reactions are our habitual or "natural" unhealthy responses that emanate out of unresolved offenses. This is especially true of wounds we received in our developmental and early growing up years. We will react out of our own pain. As a result, we will hurt others while continuing to hurt ourselves.



What consequences of unforgiveness have you been living with?

REASONS FOR WHY WE DON'T FORGIVE



Whenever freedom is possible, the enemy will always lie to us, giving us excuses to justify why we do not have to or need to forgive. While this list is not meant to be exhaustive, these are the most common excuses given when faced with the opportunity to forgive:

⁸ Joyce Meyer, *The Poison of Unforgineness*. (http://www.joycemeyer.org/articles/ ea.aspx?article=the_poison_of_unforgiveness)

⁹ John 10:10; Matthew 7:12

"They won't admit they're wrong." The issue is not their unwillingness to repent. The issue is our unwillingness to be free. If we do not forgive, we will continue to live out of the unresolved offense that is in our heart. Agreement of a sin should never be the goal simply because two people rarely agree on what is considered offensive — especially if they are on opposite sides. Obedience, trust, and submission to the Father is the ultimate goal of forgiveness. This leads to freedom.¹⁰

"They'll just keep doing it." There will always be people who hurt us — and often in the same way. These are repeat offenders. However, to stay free, we need to forgive regardless of how often we are wounded. This is not a sadistic command for us to stay in unhealthy or dangerous relationships. It is a command from our Creator who designed us to live free of offense. We are also instructed to set up boundaries, with wisdom, guarding our heart from unproductive offenses.¹¹

"They will get away with it." / "They need to suffer the same pain." While others may sin against us, unforgiveness is a sinful response that only perpetuates the pain of their sin. This is an attitude of fairness and revenge. Revenge never brings life. Forgiveness, rather, is choosing to trust God's righteousness and His ability to deal righteously with unrepentant sinners. Our freedom is dependant upon the extent to which we trust God and allow Him to be judge.¹²

"I don't want them in my life." Forgiveness does not equal friendship, reconciliation, or restoration. God does not desire us to remain in harmful relationships. However, it does require that we entrust that relationship to God, allowing that relationship to be on God's terms rather than our own.

"Forgiving means I don't care about those who got hurt." This is a great lie from the enemy. Forgiveness is the truest test of love. Through our forgiveness, we can demonstrate to those we love how to live in greater freedom and fulfillment. However, we cannot choose to forgive on someone else's behalf. They must choose forgiveness and freedom for themselves.

"If I forgive then that means I have to forget." This selfish, fear-based reaction entraps us in the belief that we must protect ourselves. It is void of trusting God and rejects His grace.

¹⁰ Colossians 3:13

¹¹ Matthew 18:21-22; Proverbs 26:11; 24:1-2; 4:14; Psalm 1:1-2

¹² Romans 12:14-21; Hebrews 10:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9

"But they're dead." / "I can't contact them." Forgiveness is not reconciliation. For us to live free in our redeemed heart, we must be willing to forgive past offenses regardless of whether or not we will see or speak to the offender again. Forgiveness is a choice not dependant upon anyone else's participation.



What reasons have you given to justify living with unresolved offenses? How might this be affecting your current relationships?

CONCLUSION

The enemy will always present us with reasons why we shouldn't forgive past offenses. Some of these reasons may even be logical, convenient, and justifiable. In addition, our own false or misguided definitions of forgiveness may be preventing us from experiencing full freedom and peace. God's desire is for our freedom. If there is even a hint of doubt, justification, or aversion to an offense or a person, then we should revisit forgiveness. Even if we feel as though we've already forgiven them, we should be willing to make it a non-issue.

STUDY RESPONSE

DISCUSSION

Pray through and discuss the above \P questions with your partner. Journal your response and answers to this study. Include any questions or differing opinions and thoughts that were shared in your discussions.

NEXT STEP

What offenses from your growing up years have you not truly forgiven? What negative consequences from that offense have you not entrusted to God? What will you choose to do in light of your responses to the last two questions?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Redemption: Freed by Jesus from the Idols We Worship and the Wounds We Carry Mike Wilkerson Crossway, ©2011

Study Four PROCESS



Forgiveness is a process of the heart and a decision of the mind. This study outlines the steps of forgiveness as found in *The Process Booklet*. *The Process Booklet* is a simple tool that helps explain the process of forgiveness — providing easy steps to follow along the way. This study will explain each step found in *The Process Booklet*.



What were you taught about forgiveness in your growing up years? In the home you grew up in, how was forgiveness demonstrated?

THE PROCESS

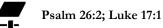


Matthew 18:1-6

Forgiveness is a two-part activity — it is an act of the will and a process of the heart. Forgiveness is a choice not a feeling. It will always require us to sacrifice something. Simply "burying" or "getting over" offenses will not resolve them. Neither will offenses resolve themselves over time. We will have to purposefully make an effort to resolve offenses. While forgiveness may be simple, it is not always easy. The following steps are to be used as a guideline toward resolving past offenses. Two issues that need to be addressed when dealing with forgiveness are forgiving ourselves and forgiving God. If we've repented of our sin, then we can be confident that we are forgiven through Jesus death on the cross. We simply receive and live confidently out of that forgiveness. If we continue to believe that to be free we need to forgive ourselves, we are putting our judgment and actions above Jesus'. Releasing our sin to Him and receiving His forgiveness will enable us to live free of shame, guilt, and condemnation.

Finally, if we feel a perceived debt against God and feel as though He "owes" us something we can still benefit from this booklet. God's desire is to work all things out for good if we trust Him. Because of our limited perspective, we do not get to define what that good may mean. We must entrust ourselves and our circumstances to His perfect love, grace, mercy, and goodness. The extent of our freedom and peace is directly related to the extent to which we trust God.

STEP ONE: OFFENSES



It's impossible that we will never be offended. This step simply acknowledges all the offenses, wounds, or losses that we've experienced. While we may not be able to remember everything, it is beneficial to begin writing down all that we can remember — especially in our developmental and early growing up years. We should write everything and everyone down that comes to our minds. This includes any losses we may we've experienced. This first step is an open slate to write down everything we have negatively experienced. Some things will be easy to remember while others will be more difficult. The more we become familiar with this process, the less intimidating this step will become. Finally, write down a specific person and offense to begin "process".

The Prayer: Each step should begin with prayer. Our prayer for step one is to ask God to give us three specific people He would like us to forgive. Don't ignore or belittle who comes to mind. He is faithful and knows our hearts more intimately than we do. Trust Him. Then ask Him who you should start with.

STEP TWO: AFFECTS

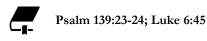


Wounds, hurts, and losses affect us emotionally, physically, and mentally. These foundational emotions become the theme of our lives whenever we are in conflict with others or our circumstances. It should be noted here that both bitterness (internal) and anger (external) are willful reactions to a specific offense, hurt, or loss. While we may genuinely "feel" bitter or angry, we respond with anger or bitterness because something or someone triggered a negative emotion in us. We need to ask the Lord to reveal the underlying emotion that led to our bitter or anger. The list of emotions in this step is for our clarity and benefit — we shouldn't select all of them.

It is through these negative events in our life that we begin to believe lies about ourselves, our circumstances, others, and God.

The Prayer: We should begin by asking God what our emotions were that we felt during this event. He may want to bring us back to the moment of pain to help reveal our thoughts and emotions. While this step is one of the most vulnerable, it is also one of the most foundational in the process of forgiveness.

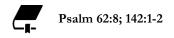
STEP THREE: REACTIONS



It is through these negative events in our life (especially in our developmental and early growing up years) that we begin to believe lies about ourselves, our circumstances, others, and God. These harmful beliefs and attitudes are what lead us to lifestyles of sin and addiction to negative emotions. Through these negative events, we develop lenses (i.e., world-views, perspectives) through which we view and judge all relationships and circumstances. This is also where we decide to believe a distorted or devalued perspective of our identity. If we can identify these early decisions, God will be able to root them out of our heart and provide truth to replace the lie.

The Prayer: While we may not always remember our reactions and early decisions, God is faithful. We should pray that He would reveal the lie that was planted through this specific offense and our responses to these offenses.

STEP FOUR: DESIRES



We all have those moments that we would like changed. This step provides us the freedom to express our desires to God. This is not a moment of doubt or rejecting God's plan, it's simply acknowledging and sharing our heart's desire before our good and loving Heavenly Father. This is a moment where we can express our version of what wish could have happened (or not happened). It's our time to tell God, perhaps for the first time, what our thoughts and desires are.

The Prayer: While this step is a prayer in itself, we should begin by acknowledging to the Father that we have a limited perspective and that we trust He is good. Once we start with a perspective outside of ourselves, we are free to then move on to our own desires.

STEP FIVE: THANKSGIVING



1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Hebrews 13:15

Giving thanks to God realigns our perspective with His. While we may not be feeling thankful (especially in light of an offense), this is Scripture refers to giving thanks as a sacrifice. In addition, it acknowledges God's ability to turn what may have been meant for our pain into something good and beneficial for us.

The Prayer: We should ask God to help us find specific things to be thankful for, with the person or within the situation itself.

STEP SIX: REPENTANCE



2 Corinthians 7:10-11; 1 John 1:9

God brings clarity into offenses. Part of this clarity is the revelation of our own choices has contributed to our pain. Even though our reactions (see Step Three: Reactions) may have been "natural" or learned, they still reveal a lack of faith in God. In addition to our reactions, it is also our wrong, hurtful, or negative thoughts and attitudes that we've believed (assumed) that we need to repent of. It is in light of these self-reliant reactions and assumptions that we need to repent. Godly sorrow - genuine Christ-focused grieving over sin - leads to a changed lifestyle (repentance). This lifestyle renews our mind and produces hope, peace, and joy. Worldly sorrow - false or self-focused grieving over sin - leads to a stagnate lifestyle. This lifestyle entraps our mind, producing regret, discontentment, and shame.

The Prayer: Asking God to reveal to us how we have contributed to our pain will bring a greater measure of freedom — if we are willing to own our choices and repent of them.

STEP SEVEN: FORGIVENESS

Matthew 6:14-15; Ephesians 4:32

We can't stop here. We've acknowledged the offense, the offender, the affects, and our reactions. This step is where it all comes together. Our Heavenly Father loves us with an immeasurable, unconditional, never stopping, never giving-up, always, and forever love that He revealed through Jesus. Forgiveness reveals our ability to truly understand and receive this love, and extend that same love toward others.

The Prayer: God is full of hope and peace. For this step, we should ask Him to fill our hearts and minds with hope and peace. Asking Him to take away any fear or anxiety that we may have will help us approach this step with confidence.

STEP EIGHT: RELEASE



Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:16-21

God desires us to live free. This includes freedom from thoughts of revenge or unfairness. For us to do this, we need to purposefully release the person to God — including and consequences or punishment. Additionally, it means that we pray specific blessings for the person and their life. A blessing is believing and praying good for the offender. The closer the blessing is to the offense the more real this prayer becomes. God desires that none would be separated from Him but that all are in a growing relationship with Him. This includes His grace and blessing upon their lives. Therefore, this should be our desire as well. God's desire is to set people free. He fills us and makes His home in us through the Holy Spirit. For Him to be comfortable and love through us, we must be willing to allow Him to extend blessing and compassion through us.

The Prayer: Asking God to give us His heart and compassion for the person will help us fulfill this step.

CONCLUSION

As Spirit-filled Christians who are pursuing relationship with the Father, forgiveness is not an option; it is a command from Jesus. *The Process Book* is simply a tool to help us accomplish this command. We must keep in mind, this command is not given to us for us to suffer through. It is given by God knowing that it is the most life-giving way to live. Forgiveness is not a chore we get through, it is a lifestyle we live on a daily basis. Finally, we must remember that God does not leave us alone to accomplish this task. He empowers us with the Holy Spirit to forgive, bless, and have compassion for those who have offended us. All we have to do is let Him work through us.

STUDY RESPONSE

DISCUSSION

Pray with your partner regarding this study. Begin The Process Booklet. Once you've completed the booklet, go through it with your partner. Share with them what you wrote down in response to the questions asked.

NEXT STEP Fill out *The Process Booklet*.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

A full list of recommended resources dealing with offenses and forgiveness can be found in the back of *The Process Booklet*.

FINAL JOURNAL THOUGHTS

- 1. In **Forgiveness** (*Love, Resolution, Opposition, Process*), what passage of Scripture has been the most convicting or challenging for you? Explain. What passage of Scripture has been the most encouraging or empowering for you? Explain.
- 2. What content or discussions regarding Forgiveness (Love, Resolution, Opposition, Process) have you disagreed with? Or, have difficulty accepting or understanding? Or, find most difficult to apply? Explain.
- 3. What content or discussions regarding **Forgiveness** (*Love*, *Resolution*, *Opposition*, *Process*) have you agreed with? Or, find easy to accept and understand? Or, find easy to apply? Explain.
- 4. From study two, Resolution, what choice of forgiveness do you find the most difficult to choose? Explain. From study three, Opposition, what false definition of forgiveness have you embraced? Explain. What reasons have you given for not forgiving? Explain.
- 5. Since beginning the study on **Forgiveness**, what area in your <u>life</u> (actions & words), <u>mind</u> (thoughts & beliefs), and <u>heart</u> (motivations & passions) have you noticed the most significant change positive or negative? Explain. Or, in light of this study, what do you desire to change? Explain.
- 6. What was your favorite discussion with your partner? Why? What was your least favorite or most difficult discussion with your partner? Why? Who could you encourage with what you've learned from this unit? How will you do this?

CHRISTIAN LIVING STUDY SERIES

The power of one person's story of freedom and victory is lifechanging. It is the best evangelistic tool a Christian has. Our mission is to encourage and equip Christians to live free of those negative attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, and habits and empower them to live joy-filled in every relationship and circumstance. Our hope is that Christians — through their life and story would be the best testimony the world has of God's transforming love, grace, mercy, and truth. This is the goal behind the *Christian Living Study Series*.

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- 6. CONFLICT // A Study in Resolution
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- 10. PRAYER // A Study in Divine Relationship
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INFORMATION

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Contributions The *Christian Living Study Series* are provided free of charge. If you would like to contribute to the development and distribution of them or to NLS Ministries in general, please visit their website at www.NathanLaceySteel.com.

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NATHAN & LACEY STEEL were married in 2004. They met at Alaska Bible Institute. located in Homer, Alaska. Nathan graduated from ABI's Biblical Study Program in 2004 and Christian Ministry Program in 2006. Nathan was born with a genetic disease called Cystic Fibrosis. This disease led the Steels to adopting their

two girls, Lydia and Arianna. Through God's grace and provision, the Steels have shared Jesus' love, grace, mercy, and truth all over the world. Nathan and Lacey's vision is to See Christians Live Free, Joy-Filled Lives. They designed the Christian Living Study Series as a catalyst for one-on-one discipleship, a curriculum for church small groups, and a course for discipleship schools. They developed and teach the Christian Living Course at Alaska Bible Institute (ABI). ABI exists to Train and Equip Christians for Life & Ministry. You can find out more at www.AlaskaBible.org. For more information about the Steels, visit their website at www.NathanLaceySteel.com. They currently reside with their two girls in Homer, Alaska.





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