

Discussion Starter #1: Why do you think the Bible places such a strong emphasis on forgiving others who have sinned against us?

Key Passage: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

The Bible has much to say about forgiving others. Here are biblical answers to some common questions people ask about forgiving others.

Why should we forgive others?

1. We should forgive others because God has forgiven us.

We who have been forgiven by God are transformed into forgiving people. We forgive others because it is in our new nature to forgive (1 John 3:9). As Ephesians 4:32 (above) says, we forgive others as – or because – God in Christ forgave us. Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12), reminding us that God holds us accountable for paying forward what He has done for us. Refusing to forgive those who wrong us is an insult to the Lord who has forgiven us much more. We forgive as an act of gratitude for all we have been forgiven.

Discuss: Read Jesus’ parable in Matthew 18:21-35 about why we should forgive. What is your reaction to the strong words Jesus ended the parable with in v.35?

2. Forgiving others makes us God-focused, but unforgiveness makes us self-focused and steals our love, peace, and joy.

Nazi concentration camp survivor Corrie ten Boom said this about forgiveness: “To forgive is to set a prisoner free; and to discover the prisoner was you.” When we forgive, we free ourselves from the bondage someone’s wrong has created for us. We cannot live in complete obedience to God when someone else controls our emotions. We are to be controlled by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

Discuss: In what ways does your forgiving someone actually set you free?

3. Forgiveness is a window through which the world sees the grace of God.

You may be the only Bible some people ever read. When you forgive, you model God’s teachings on grace, mercy, kindness, love, and humility. People cannot see Jesus in us when we are walking in bitterness and anger. When all we can talk about is how we were wronged, how someone betrayed us, or the wounds we are carrying, we lose sight of our primary mission, which is to make disciples (Matthew 28:19).

Discuss: How can your forgiving an offender be a witness of your faith in Christ?

Does the Bible say I am supposed to forgive and forget?

The phrase “forgive and forget” is not in the Bible. It is impossible to truly forget – to erase from our memory – sins that have been committed against us. We cannot simply “delete” events from our memory. The Bible says God does not “remember” our sins (Hebrews 8:12), but this phrase means that God does not hold our sins against us.

However, if by “forgive and forget” one means that they choose to forgive the offender for the sake of Christ and move on with their life, then this is a wise and godly course of action. Paul instructs us to forget what is behind as much as possible and strive toward what is ahead (Philippians 3:13). Regarding forgiveness, we must not let a root of bitterness to spring up in our hearts (Hebrews 12:15).

Also, keep in mind that while forgiveness involves making the conscious decision not to hold a sin against a person any longer, forgiveness is different from trust. It is wise to take precautions, and sometimes a relationship will have to change. “*The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty*” (Proverbs 22:3). The ideal, of course, is for the offender to truly repent of the sin and for the offended to forgive and forget. The Bible tells us that love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5) and covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). However, changing hearts is God’s business, and, until an offender has a true, supernatural heart change, it may be wise to limit the level of trust one places in that person. Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. We can forgive from the heart while keeping betrayers at a distance. Forgiveness does not allow unrepentant abusers back into our lives, but it does allow the peace of God back into our lives. Being cautious doesn’t mean we haven’t forgiven. It simply means we are not God and we cannot see that person’s heart.

Discuss: Why does bitterness so easily spring up in a heart that refuses to forgive?

Discuss: Why is bitterness so damaging to our lives?

What steps can I take to express genuine forgiveness?

1. Remember that you have been totally forgiven by God. The gift of forgiveness that God gave you equips you to give the same gift to someone who has offended you.
2. Release the offender from the debt they owe you and let God deal with the offender (Romans 12:19). Mentally bundle your hostile feelings and surrender them to Christ. You may need to do this more than once as the memory of the offense comes to mind.
3. Reconcile, if possible. Do your part to restore fellowship with the offender.
4. Recognize that God uses people to help us grow spiritually. Just as Joseph in the Old Testament recognized that the evil his brothers intended against Him was ultimately used by God for good (Genesis 50:20), God can redeem your hurt.

Discuss: Which of the four steps to expressing forgiveness is hardest for you? Why?