

Summary of How To Forgive

This is an excerpt from *Let Go and Be Free*, which is a revised and combined edition of *Anger: Yours, Mine and What to Do About It* (1981) and *Forgive and Be Free* (1983) by Rich Walters, both of which enjoyed considerable success and usefulness in their original form. This brief section summarizes practices derived from biblical principles of forgiving.

First of all, remember there is no one way in which forgiving takes place. This summary presents pieces of the process in the order in which they *often* occur, but this should *not*, by any means, be interpreted as a rigid formula.

God must participate in the forgiving process, and he will always do it in the pattern that is best for the individuals involved. The purpose of this summary is to facilitate thoughtful and prayerful exploration of various areas of life.

Prayer is an essential part of the forgiving process. A prayer of commitment indicating our desire to learn the forgiving process and the forgiver's lifestyle is a good place to begin. Here is such a prayer:

Heavenly Father, forgiveness is something you have freely given me. I don't understand forgiveness or why you have forgiven me, but I thank you for it. You want me to forgive others, but it is very hard because it seems unfair that I must forgive when I have been mistreated. Yet I will, with your help. Teach me how. Give me the courage to do what you show me I should do, and the ability to proceed with your wisdom and love flowing through me. Amen

Now, we shall consider the steps in the process.

0. The low point is zero. Here we are in the pit of resentment, controlled by how we feel about the offense and by what we do in response to it.

1. Receive God's forgiveness. Change begins with a proper relationship with God, and that begins when we confess and repent of our sins. Receiving forgiveness and forgiving others go hand in hand. This is shown in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:12; Luke 11:4) and in Christ's words, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt. 6:14-15).

This does not mean that our salvation is contingent on our having forgiven all who have hurt us. We cannot forgive until we have God living within us and until we have his participation in the forgiving process. But these verses definitely mean that if we neglect to forgive others, we are separated from full fellowship with God.

For some persons, like Anna, receiving God's forgiveness is difficult. Writing a prayer of thankfulness that celebrates God's forgiveness often makes it easier to receive that forgiveness. Here is a composite prayer written by two friends who have received, with thankfulness, God's forgiveness:

Dear Father, Almighty God, thank you! You have forgiven my sins! For nearly a year my life has been chaos and confusion. You had not forsaken me, but I had separated myself from you. In your Word you say that if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just to cleanse us. I have claimed this verse, have asked for your forgiveness in Jesus' name, and with my heart and mind opened up to receive what you have promised, I have been forgiven!

Thank you for this forgiveness, so free for all of us. Thank you for the assurance that my sins are forgiven and that you have removed them from me as far as the east is from the west.

You have given me joy overflowing and a heart filled with gratitude. Help me to grow, to mature in my devotion to you, to serve others. In Christ's name I rejoice in new life and pray this with the assurance of your love. Amen

Those who have written similar prayers have found, with few exceptions, that the experience is very valuable to them, often in unexpected ways.

2. Quit hurting the other person. Forgiving is the opposite of vengeance; we cannot have both. If we have chosen to forgive, we must quit doing things that are contrary to forgiving.

3. Decide we are willing to want to apologize and to forgive. When forgiving seems impossible, we should remember that God will help us and that he is satisfied when we start wherever we are.

We may begin at the point where we don't even want to forgive, but in obedience to God's commands, we are willing to want to apologize and forgive. Although this is a small step, it is probably the most difficult one to make. It is an essential step because it is a deliberate act of the will to be obedient to God's commands.

Prayer at this point emphasizes our willingness to learn and to allow our attitudes to be shaped by the Holy Spirit. Here is a prayer asking for that:

Heavenly Father, you ask me to forgive others. It seems so hard, and I've tried so often and failed. When I consider your forgiveness to me, whatever forgiving I might be able to do seems so paltry and incomplete. I can't do it on my own. Help me let go of the resentments and jealousies that seem so important to me. Teach me to allow the love you have for me to flow through me to others so that relationships are restored and your will is done. Amen

4. Begin to want to apologize and forgive. Moving to this point is partly the result of our willful obedience and partly God's response to that obedience. God gives us an infusion of his love that begins to change our attitude.

5. Make amends for sins against the other person. This means apologizing and making restitution, to the extent possible, for what we have done.

6. Determine if talking to the other person about the forgiving is necessary.

7. Forgive. During this process there is a point at which, through an act of the will, we let go of the claims against the other person. We may be aware of it when we do this, but the awareness is not necessary. The act of the will to release the claim is necessary.

Included in this, I believe, is a covenant before God to serve that other person in whatever way is appropriate. This service may not involve us directly with that person—we may never speak to them or do anything directly with them—but we would be willing to do so. Our attitudes and behavior change from seeking justice to being willing to serve the person who hurt us.

8. Claim forgiveness and forgiving. Close the incident. A prayer of thanksgiving for this occasion is appropriate. Here is a prayer of celebration:

Lord, miracles are happening! You have forgiven me, and you are teaching me to forgive others.

Hallelujah! I praise you for your power!

You sought out the desolate, burned-out shell in which I huddled, nursing my grudges. You entered willingly, offering to replace the acrid stench of my resentment with life; you brought freshness, sweetness, growth.

Hallelujah! I thank you for your love!

You alone, Lord, bring life and hope! You alone set my heart free through the miracle of forgiveness—both to me and through me.

It works! Whoopee!

You alone produce wholeness and meaning, which are available to me, to all of us, through the sacrifice of Jesus, in whose name I pray. Amen.

9. Pray for healing. There are two kinds of emotional healing for which we can pray. We may pray that the memories of the incident will no longer be painful. Or we may pray that God will fill the emptiness caused by the absence of closeness in a relationship, such as a child growing up without any emotional closeness to a parent.

10. Keep the issue closed. Refuse to think about it any more. The discipline of praying in thanksgiving can be helpful here. And serving others is a very positive and valuable way to release our minds from thoughts of past or present difficulties.

Some people have thought about an old hurt so much that it is necessary for them to use a systematic method to retrain their thought patterns. Here is a method that is useful in such situations. When the

unwanted thought intrudes, say the word "Stop!" We may say it either out loud or to ourselves, but we must say it with authority and then turn our thinking to something else—even something meaningless like counting or reciting the alphabet. Or make an exercise more challenging by counting backward from 387 by 7's or by reciting the alphabet backward. Better yet, recite a Scripture verse, pray with thanksgiving, or count your blessings. Any of these activities will displace the unwanted thought with something neutral or positive.

This method is most useful in situations when the unwanted thought has been a frequent intruder over several months or more. It encourages us to take individual responsibility for our mental acts and can be a wholesome way of participating in the process of renewing our minds (Rom. 12:2).

11. Use assertive behavior to minimize future hurt. We are to exercise stewardship over our emotional lives as well as over our physical selves and other resources. It is wrong for us to go looking for trouble or to make it easy for others to abuse us because this reduces our capacity to praise and serve God and makes us a party to the other person's wrong behavior.

The action plan below is designed to help us identify those we need to forgive. Make as many copies of it as you need so you will have one for each person you need to forgive. Remember once again that this is not a rigid process and that I am not suggesting a legalistic formula, but rather, a way of systematically opening ourselves to God's direction on these matters and prompting ourselves to resolve them. Pray before working on these.

We must commit ourselves to knowing God's truth and using that truth, no matter how painful it might be. Following God's truth leads to action, and action leads to resolution (not always reconciliation). It produces a sense of peace within one's own heart knowing that the right thing has been done, and a sense of security and "rightness" in relationship with God. That is a good even when reconciliation has been denied.

ACTION PLAN TO FORGIVE _____(initials) Date_____

In the space below, list the injustices for which you need to forgive this person. In the "Present Status" column, use the code numbers from the list that follows. Then list the ways you have responded to this person in the past, using an asterisk to indicate those responses for which you need to apologize; what you should do next; and the date by which you will do it.

Injustices I need to forgive: Present Status

0. I still have resentment and a desire to retaliate.
1. I am out of fellowship with God because I have not forgiven.
2. I have quit hurting the other person.
3. I am willing to want to apologize and forgive.
4. I want to apologize and forgive.
5. I am trying to determine if I should talk with the person.
6. I have apologized and am making restitution.
7. I have forgiven the person.
8. I am claiming the forgiving and the forgiveness.
9. I am praying that my memories will be healed.
10. I am working on keeping the issue closed.
11. I am learning assertive behavior to minimize future hurt.

P: Add a "P" in front of the number if you are praying about the situation the number represents.

T: Add a "T" in front of the number if you are talking with a reliable friend about it.

Ways I have responded in the past and those responses for which I need to apologize:

Target: What I should do next Date I will do it _____`

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