

Forgiving Step by Step

We all long for deep and loving relationships, but unfortunately all of us have experienced hurt and even abuse by others. It is painful and we suffer from it. Just as physical wounds can be infected and fester, wounds in our heart can grow into bitterness if we don't act. Time alone won't heal! In response we often withdraw ourselves and build up walls as protection. As a result we don't allow anyone to get close to us and become isolated. Alternatively, we react with anger, hold the mistakes against the other person and seek revenge. This response leaves our thoughts to be consumed with the hurt another person caused us.

By using these strategies, we try to protect ourselves from further misuse, but in the end we hurt ourselves even more. Furthermore, if we're hurt we won't treat others with love – *Hurt people hurt people*.

The only escape from this vicious cycle is *forgiveness*, which can be very hard if we have experienced significant pain. However, as long as we don't forgive we stay bound to the person who hurt us and to the past. This is because we can't just forget painful experiences and can only try to repress the memories. Instead God wants us to be *free* – free from pain, free from bitterness, free from the desire for revenge and free from the past.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiving is choosing to let go of all reproaches and accusations against the other person. I hand him/her into God's hands. Rather than passing judgment myself, I trust God, who is the just judge, and let Him decide what will happen with the other person. It also means that I no longer count the other person's sins against him or hold them over him. In other words, as I'm already living with the consequences of his sins and can't change the past, I now make peace with this and release the other person from all his debts against me.

This is my decision alone. It is completely independent from the other person, whether he/she says sorry or not or whether he/she is present or not. We're not dependent on the person who hurt us. Though forgiving is good for the other person, first and foremost I do it for my own good. When we forgive we become free from negative feelings like fear, anger or bitterness and can become healed and whole again.

Steps of forgiving

How can we fully forgive others? The following steps help us by leading us through the process of forgiving. (Beware of the danger of "shortcuts" where we hastily speak out forgiveness but later realize that there are still remnants of the pain in our hearts.)

The first three steps we go through carefully, preferably together with a helper.

1. What happened?

- Describe specifically what happened
- *Common mistake:* We stay general and vague.

2. What hurt me? How did I feel?

- Feelings are important! It's not only about the facts, it's about me as a whole person. God created feelings as a vital part of who we are.
- *Common mistake:* We skip this step and just stick to the facts.

3. Name the sin

- Don't soften wrongs and don't justify. Identify how the other person sinned against me through the things he did or did not do.
- *Common mistake:* We justify the other person (but if we don't call it sin there can't be forgiveness)

Now we go into prayer and bring everything to God.

4. Bring charges of injustice to God

- We go to God the judge and bring charges against the person who hurt us. We speak out all main points from the first three steps.
- *Common mistake:* We skip this step, or we stay “politically correct” here.

5. Speak out forgiveness

- We now speak out forgiveness (“I forgive ... for ...”) and decide to hand the whole case over into God's hands.
- *Common mistake:* We pray, “Lord, please help me to forgive.” We can start like this, but if we end here, we have not yet forgiven!

Bringing charges of injustice to God

God is the judge and we can bring every injustice to Him. We can be certain he will bring justice and will judge everyone – that's not our job. We have no right to pay back others or to take revenge on them.

In the same way as we bring charges to a judge in this world, we can bring charges to God. In His presence we can be totally honest and show all our feelings. After we're finished, we let go of the accusations including their influences on our lives and put everything into God's hands. We don't continue to judge the other person ourselves, but we leave the judgment to God alone.

More hints

Forgiving myself: Sometimes we're angry at ourselves or blame ourselves for something. If that's the case, write your own name on the list in the following exercise. Forgiving myself means accepting God's forgiveness and cleansing through Jesus Christ.

Forgiving God: Sometimes we have negative thoughts about God or are even mad at Him. In this case, write down God in the list of the following exercise. God doesn't make mistakes, so in that sense we can't forgive Him. But it is important that we let go of our frustrations and negative feelings towards Him.

Using the support of a helper: It is hard to go through this whole process of forgiveness alone without overlooking some aspects. Look for someone who can go through these steps together with you and pray with you!

Our own sin: When we are hurt, we often unintentionally treat others badly and sin against them. It's important not to ignore these things but to repent and ask forgiveness. Clarify anything that comes to your mind here as soon as possible!

Sticking to forgiveness: In case the old feelings come up again, remind yourself that you have already chosen to forgive and those feelings will pass. However, it is possible that there might be other aspects or deeper layers of hurt that you did not address the first time. We can then go through the process of forgiving once again so that these areas get healed as well.

Searching myself

Take 5 minutes to ask God the following question and make notes:

God, whom do I need to forgive?

Listen to God and go through your relationships (parents, family, relatives, colleagues, classmates, friends, ...)

How was I hurt and by whom?

Hints for finding out whether the relationship with a certain person is healthy or still broken in some way:

- Think about the person: Can you wish him/her all the best with all your heart?
- Imagine you meet the person on the street: How would you feel? Are you still bearing a grudge?

Practice

Which hurts do I want to address first?

Who should support me in this? Clarify specifically how you will continue!