

FORGIVENESS

Ancient Practices Series

Created by Megan Koch

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DiscipleshipPath.com was created by pastors Phil Wiseman and Megan Koch at Table Church in Des Moines, IA. You can contact them directly at hello@tablechurchdsm.org.

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"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."—Lewis Smedes

Forgiveness isn't just about saying we're sorry and forgiving someone certainly doesn't mean what they did doesn't matter anymore. Forgiveness, at the heart, is about handing over a burden that's too heavy for us to bear. We can't hold it and live well, so we turn it over to Jesus instead. He can take it— he's *happy* to take it. Burdens are heavy for us because we weren't born to carry them. The good news is, Jesus *was* born to carry them. He's already paid for them, so we can hand them over.

Forgiveness reminds us that we're secure; God is in control. When we forgive, we choose to surrender our resentments. We give up anything we're holding against someone and invite God to handle it from here without our interference. Essentially, we surrender our right to judge, and stop trying to do God's job for him. That's when we get cut free, and that's how we can move forward and heal. Forgiveness is about living untangled and untethered.

It's important to remember that our freedom and healing are *never* dependent on what other people do or say. So, regardless of what the offending person does in *response* to our forgiveness, *we can be free*. In some cases, it might not even be best to tell a person we've forgiven them (in some situations, that could make things *worse*, not better). Or, perhaps that person is no longer living. That's OK, because again, forgiveness is ultimately about cutting free from burdens with God's help. He'll guide you to know how to restore broken relationships. Many times, that will mean coming together to resolve differences, but sometimes it will mean keeping a safe distance.

It's important to forgive "in every direction". There are some core ways we might be holding on to grudges and burdens and praying through each one is helpful. Untangling ourselves from unforgiveness can seem overwhelming or complicated, so these steps help us see things in a new light. Here are some ways to unpack a burden and work through forgiveness¹:

1. If God shows us something we've done wrong, we need to ask him for forgiveness for our own sin and seek forgiveness from anyone we've sinned against as God leads us.

¹ You can read an overview of the Six Steps of Forgiveness in Tim Howard and Brian S. Burke's book, *With Gentle Authority* (p. 145-163).

2. We need to forgive *ourselves*. Strangely, it can be “easier” to forgive others for what they've done, or to receive forgiveness from God for our own sin than it is to let *ourselves* off the hook. Have you ever done something you really, really regret? Forgive yourself for doing it. Let it go.

3. We need to forgive the things other people have done that have hurt us (whether it was intentional or not). Even if you're sure they never intended to hurt you, they hurt you nonetheless. It's a burden, so forgive it and let it go.

4. We need to forgive *God*. Yes, God. Most of us don't realize this is even possible, because God is perfect, and doesn't make mistakes or sin. But again, forgiveness isn't *only* about forgiving a way someone has sinned against us.

Forgiveness is necessary any time we're holding a grudge against someone else— and yes, we can hold a grudge against God. If we're mad that God allowed something happen, and hurt that he didn't intervene to stop it, we can surrender even that to him, and let him show us what we need to see so we can heal.

Finally, a note about confession. Have you ever confessed a recurring sin or an area of hurt to God again and again, but it just doesn't get resolved? That's probably because you're confessing privately, but there's so little risk in that, and very little accountability for real life. When we confess to God, but we're not being honest about our struggles with trusted people in our life, we're “confessing” but we're still letting shame win. We want the issue resolved, but we also want to *protect our image*. This is why we're encouraged to confess our sins to one another (James 5:16). Confession is appropriate any time we're burdened by something we need to get off our chest, and confessing to God in the presence of trusted brothers and sisters is a way we live well in this family. When you're trusted with someone *else's* confession, take that very seriously. Embrace that person and walk them through the steps of forgiveness they need to take to cut free. Active participation in reconciliation is a privilege and a joy for disciples, so steward that responsibility well.

Confession isn't about guilt; it's a gift. It's a gift to resist shame and lay your burdens out in the open. That's how we break free and heal. Pause now and ask God to bring one of your own burdens to the surface; a place where forgiveness needs to happen. Journal some notes and return to your next meeting ready for your discipler to walk you through the steps of forgiveness. Yes, you're going to practice confession together. We often run from our pain and unresolved issues, and that is understandable—but going there with Jesus changes everything. If God is bringing to mind an issue or wound that contains significant guilt, condemnation, or shame, know that he isn't showing you this to humiliate or expose you; *he's revealing a place he wants to set you free.*

THE PRACTICE:

First, journal some responses to the prompts below:

How has forgiveness been described to you in the past? How would you define it today?

It's important to remember that our freedom and healing are never dependent on what other people do or say. So, regardless of what the offending person does in response to our forgiveness, we can be free. Have you ever felt like you needed someone else to "get right" before you could move on?

Is there ever a time it's best to forgive someone without letting them know? Is there ever a time to resolve things "from a distance"? Think about relationships where the other person doesn't understand faith like you do. In some circumstances, could openly forgiving them alienate them, make them feel judged, or even push them further away from God? Also, consider relationships that are not safe in some way emotionally or physically.

God is perfect, but sometimes, we even need to forgive burdens we hold against him. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Now pause and ask God to bring an unresolved issue to the surface. Where is he inviting you to practice forgiveness today? Walk through the following steps to forgive "in every direction":

1. Forgiveness for our own sin and seeking forgiveness from anyone we've hurt as God leads. (This could mean committing to having a conversation with the individual(s) soon.)
2. Forgive yourself for anything you regret doing. Let yourself off the hook.
3. Forgive others for how they have hurt you, even if the offense was unintentional.
4. Forgive God. Let go of any resentments you've held against him. Consider what he wants you to see on the other side of it.
5. Finally, consider this experience. Was this practice of confession a gift? If so, how?