

Forgiveness made easier

We tend to have trouble forgiving for many reasons. Some of these reasons are obvious, but others are more subtle, and because of this they are more difficult to overcome. Here is a brief list:

- 1. We sometimes have trouble forgiving because we confuse forgiveness with exoneration.** Offering forgiveness is not the same as handing out a pardon and ignoring the need for correction. Jesus demonstrated on Calvary God's love by dying on a Cross for the sins of not some, but all, while we were still sinners. He didn't wait for us to repent and change our ways. First God forgives us by not holding our sins against us and freely offers us a loving relationship with Himself. But that is only half of the salvation process. The other half has to do with the reformation of our character and shaping us into the likeness of Christ. In order for this to happen, we must be held accountable for sinful attitudes and behaviors that we do not fully repent of. If a murderer does not repent of his sin, then he must be isolated from the rest of society until such time as he no longer poses a threat. The earthly justice system ideally has as its goal protection of society and the rehabilitation of the offender. The goal is not retribution. The same is true of life in Heaven. None of us arrives in Heaven after death with fully reformed characters. Additional growth and learning are still needed, and for some the experience of God's judgments after death will involve isolation from the higher realms and consignment for a period of time to the lower realms where many lessons must be learned the hard way. In the end, by the conclusion of the ages, all will be fully redeemed in every sense of the word.
- 2. We sometimes have trouble forgiving because we do not fully understand the reasons why people fall into sin and offend us.** Most of us have heard the saying, "*but for the Grace of God go I.*" I was privileged to grow up in a Christian home by a loving Christian family in the greatest nation on earth. Is it any wonder that I am a Christian today with reasonably high moral and ethical values. Each of us is unique, and our decisions in life are shaped to a large extent by our genetics and our life experiences. According to the Apostle, Paul, all of us are basically good in our spirit, or innermost mind or being, but have been corrupted by the influences of our fleshly bodies and the outward circumstances of our lives. He points this out in Romans 7:22-24, "*So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?*" According to the Scriptures, we are all sinners and literally cannot help ourselves. We need to be rescued from this condition and reconciled to God. As Christians we are to be God's agents of reconciliation. We need to mirror in our lives the love of God which is freely offered to all regardless of their sinful condition. When we harbor in our hearts hatred and animosity towards sinners who do us harm, then we do not fully understand and empathize with their sinful condition and their need for redemption.

3. **We sometimes have trouble forgiving because we believe we have been victimized, rather than blessed, by the offense.** According to Romans 8:28, *“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”* In the short term, we sometimes experience pain and suffering at the hands of someone whom we may or may not be ready to forgive. After the passage of time, however, we can often look back on those experiences and view them as *“blessings in disguise.”* In the words of James, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”* When we view ourselves as victims and refuse to forgive those who have harmed us, we fail to recognize and take full advantage of the blessings of God which come mostly through negative experiences. We have been deliberately placed by God into a flawed and sinful environment so that we may be challenged and grow by it. What better way to grow into the likeness of Christ than to share in His sufferings and triumph over them, and offer forgiveness to those who sin against us. Another way of looking at this is to ask yourself, “How soon do you want to be blessed by the negative experiences of your life? Do you want to be blessed now, in anticipation of good things to come? Or do you want to be blessed only in the future when looking backwards?”