

A NORMAL FAITH STUDY SERIES

LEARNING TO FORGIVE

Why It's Not As Easy As
You've Been Told.



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1. An Introduction

On May 14, 2000, Fox Television aired an episode of *The X-Files* entitled “Je Souhaite” (a French phrase meaning “I wish”). For those not familiar with *The X-Files*, it was a science-fiction series that followed the investigations of two FBI special agents into unexplained and sometimes paranormal cases the bureau classified as X-Files. In “Je Souhaite,” agents Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) investigate a strange occurrence in Creve Coeur, Missouri. It is there they discover a genie named Jenn (Paula Sorge).

Jenn grants Agent Mulder three wishes. Being a true idealist, for his first wish, Mulder declares: “I wish for peace on earth.” After Jenn confirms his wish has been granted, Agent Mulder proudly smiles with a sense of great accomplishment but soon senses that something is wrong. He goes to his apartment window, looks down at the street, and realizes it is deserted. Mulder runs outside and finds cars, buses, and stores abandoned with no one in sight. Concerned about his partner, he goes to FBI Headquarters only to find the building deserted with papers scattered on the floor and the office equipment and lights on, but no one in sight. The following interaction between Jenn and Agent Mulder is a true classic.

Agent Mulder: What the hell is this?

Jenn: It’s what you asked for: Peace on earth. (She takes a breath) Listen. (She turns her head and listens to the silence with a smile.)

Agent Mulder: (Angrily) You know damn well that’s not what I meant.

Jenn: You didn’t specify.

Agent Mulder: This has nothing to do with specificity. I mean, you don’t have to wipe out the entire population of the whole planet just to affect a little peace on earth and goodwill towards men.

Jenn: (Shaking her head) Hmmm. You didn’t say: Goodwill towards men.

Agent Mulder: (Rolls his eyes and shakes his head.)

Jenn: (In disbelief) So, you expect me to change the hearts of 6 billion people? No religion in history has ever been able to pull that off. Not Allah or Buddha or Christ, but you’d like me to do that in your name? So, what? So you can feel real good about yourself?

That was one literal genie – as I suspect genies would be. However, she did make an excellent point. If you are looking to find peace on earth, try not to bring anyone else on that quest. If there is more than one person in any given scenario, conflict is inevitable. It does not matter how well-intentioned they are; as long as people have differences in personalities, beliefs, or cultures, there will be conflicts.

Many years ago, one of my seminary professors recounted an event in the ministry of the late Christian apologist, Dr. Walter Martin. In one of his many debates in defense of the Christian Faith, his opponent challenged him with the proposition that God could not exist because there was too much evil in the world. Dr. Martin asked his challenger what he expected God to do about evil. He responded that if God was real, He should make all the evil in the world disappear. Dr. Martin paused for a moment, then said: “Thank you very much, sir. You and I just

disappeared.” Both the fictional genie Jenn and the real-life Dr. Walter Martin hit home on this point: people cause problems for one another.

2. The Motivation

My motivation for writing this resource came from two places. The first was my struggles with anger and resentment over the wrongs I believed were done to me by others. The most perplexing part was that these feelings centered on people who were no longer a part of my life. In a few cases, I had not seen or spoken to them in several years. However, any memories of them were accompanied by such stinging feelings of bitterness that it felt as if I had been hurt only moments ago. To solve this problem, I read several Christian books and numerous online articles on forgiveness. Although I cannot testify I read and studied every Christian perspective on the subject, what I did read lacked the weight of reality. By that, I mean too many writers approached forgiveness as a given – something that all Christians know how to do, but we were not doing it.

When it came to offering any usable and repeatable steps to experiencing forgiveness, many authors simply quoted Bible verses, along with the ubiquitous exhortation: “Just let it go!” Unfortunately, there seemed to be little appreciation for how deep our wounds can be when those we love or admire hurt us in unexpected and even malicious ways. How does a person just let that go? There was no shortage of cringe-inducing examples of the physiological dangers of harboring resentment. Still, Nike’s slogan of “just do it” could serve as a fitting summary for much of the advice on forgiving others.

After several months of trying to work through these struggles, I put what I learned into an outline and shared it with the Brotherhood Men’s Fellowship at Reedy Creek Baptist Church in Cary, North Carolina. Thankfully, this group created the ideal environment for discussing the topic of forgiveness. Their questions, feedback, and at times disagreements, were instrumental in helping me refine my thoughts and positions. What I could not have anticipated, however, was the willingness of these men to discuss their hurts and the encouragement it brought to my quest for healing. The realities they shared of being hurt by family, friends, and colleagues opened my eyes to the commonality of our pain, but even more so, our shared desire for healing. Unfortunately, just as I did, some of these brothers often found themselves not understanding why forgiveness was not more immediate and permanent in their lives. As one of them shared after recounting his struggles with the pain caused to him by another: “I’d like to think I forgave him, but every time I see him, that pain comes right back.” Helping others with what I had learned became my second place of motivation.

To those who will take the time to read this booklet, if you are truly looking for healing, you must be willing to open yourself to the most careful of self-examinations. The reality of hurt and resentment is never far from us. It is often just below the surface, waiting to rear its head when we least expect it. It takes courage to acknowledge the pain we have experienced at the hands of others and even greater courage to accept responsibility for the hurts we have caused. However, the acknowledgment and acceptance of both are necessary steps in learning how to forgive others.

3. An Oversimplification

Ephesians 4:31-32

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.

Forgiveness is a foundational virtue of the Christian Faith. The reason Jesus Christ came to earth was so that we could have forgiveness from our sins and the restoration of a personal relationship with God (Colossians 1:19-20). But, just as our sins disrupt our relationship with God, they also disrupt our relationships with one another. When we lie, cheat, steal, abuse, neglect, and otherwise hurt those in our lives because of our selfishness, we damage our relationships. And restoration, just as with God, comes through forgiveness.

With forgiveness playing such a vital role in our faith, one would think Christians to be the best practitioners of this virtue. But for many of us, forgiveness can be elusive. How many times have you found yourself reliving the pain caused to you by others after you said you had forgiven them? You may be able to go for months, even a year, without feeling any negative emotions. But then a smell, a conversation, or an image provokes a memory, and you are right back in pain again. What happened to our forgiveness? Was it even real? Do we need to keep forgiving until we no longer feel the hurt? Unfortunately, our only recourse in such situations is to isolate ourselves from those individuals to manage the pain. Then we end up feeling guilty for not living up to God's expectations of forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave us. Does any of this sound familiar?

Our problem lies in how we think about forgiveness. We believe it to be intuitive to the Christian experience, a spiritual byproduct of living by faith that can be implemented at will. We have this perception because of how we think about God's forgiveness, which we see as instantaneous and complete. So, if we are to forgive as God forgives, we should be able to do it in the same way. But that is an oversimplification of how the forgiveness of God works. In Ephesians 4:32, God forgives us because of Jesus Christ, but that in itself was a process. Jesus did not swing down from out of a cloud one day and go directly to the cross. God's plan for our forgiveness started as early as the book of Genesis (Genesis 3:15), continued with the giving of the Law in Exodus through Deuteronomy (Matthew 5:17; John 5:46-47), was confirmed by Jesus' birth and earthly ministry (Matthew 1:21; 2 Corinthians 5:21), and found its culmination in Jesus' death and resurrection (Galatians 4:3-5). God offers us His instantaneous and complete forgiveness now because He made provision for it over a period of time. It was based on a system of sacrifice and an understanding of God's requirements for a meaningful relationship with Him. God forgave us only because He made provision for that forgiveness through sacrifice.

If forgiveness were simply intuitive, God would have forgiven all of us without Jesus Christ. But that is not how forgiveness works. It is not based on sentiment; it is based on sacrifice. Forgiveness is only possible when someone is willing to pay for the offense that another has committed against them. Unfortunately, our failure to see forgiveness in this more practical sense has caused us to have misconceptions about how it is implemented in our lives.

4. Misconceptions

There are four misconceptions about forgiveness that cause us not to experience it in our lives as we should.

MISCONCEPTION #1. It is implemented through decision and declaration.

This misconception exists because we hold too simplistic a view of forgiveness. We believe we can forgive others by choosing to forgive them and then saying: “I forgive you.” For many of us, that has been our only model for exercising forgiveness. Ironically, experience has taught us time and time again that it does not work. How many times have we uttered the words “I forgive you” while our hearts remain consumed by anger and pain? Although forgiveness begins with an act of the will, it cannot be completed with a verbal statement.

MISCONCEPTION #2. It erases the offense and its effects.

This misconception gives us the regrettable notion of “forgive and forget.” We have all heard the saying that if you truly forgive someone, you will forget what they have done. We get to wipe the slate clean and move forward in our relationships as though nothing hurtful happened. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is impossible to forget those who have hurt us and what they did because all pains leave scars – physical or otherwise. We cannot erase what was done to us, nor should we attempt it. On the contrary, we must acknowledge and understand what others have done to us because it will aid our healing and our ability to forgive them.

Some use Bible verses that reference God’s willingness to remove our transgressions and forget our sins (Isaiah 43:25; Hebrews 8:12; 10:17) as proof that it is possible to forgive and forget. However, we must be careful how far we take these analogies. If it were possible for God to forget something mentally, it would mean God does not possess all knowledge. And if we can remember our sins, but God cannot, we would have more knowledge about ourselves than God. Therefore, the forgetfulness of God regarding our sins surely cannot mean a mental gap. Instead, it means that God does not use our sins as the basis upon which He relates to us (Psalm 103:10).

MISCONCEPTION #3. It vindicates the offender.

This misconception causes some people not to want to entertain the thought of forgiveness. They think it will let those who hurt them walk away while bearing no responsibility for their actions. However, dealing with the consequences of one’s sins is never overlooked in Scripture (Galatians 6:7-8). That happened to Adam and Eve when they were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Although they were sorry for their disobedience, and God did forgive them, they still had to leave Eden. Therefore, holding others accountable for their hurtful actions is necessary for their correction and our growth. It also helps us better understand what went wrong when relationships run into conflicts.

MISCONCEPTION #4. It guarantees reconciliation.

This misconception causes us to feel the most guilt when we cannot open ourselves to the same level of intimacy we previously had with the offender. It is at this point that we usually question if we did forgive them at all. This is especially true for Christians who often believe their faith calls them to take the higher road and be peacemakers who offer reconciliation. But here is something to bear in mind: Jesus calls us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). He never said that love stops

people from being our enemies, but we should love them even though they are. It is possible to have positive interactions with others even when there is no hope of reconciliation. We can forgive others and not have the relationships return to their previous levels of intimacy.

5. Definitions

Let us examine the definition of forgiveness. Knowing this will clarify how we understand it and build a framework to implement forgiveness in our lives. It may also help us to be more sympathetic and empathetic to those who struggle with the hurts we have caused them.

1. To Forgive – Merriam-Webster Dictionary

To give up resentment of or claim to requital for (compensation or retaliation) as forgiving an insult.

To grant relief from payment of as in forgive a debt.

These explanations see forgiveness as the cancellation of that which is owed when a specific act is committed. In the statements above, one is an insult, and the other is a financial loan. When we look at how the Bible uses the word forgive, it is not that far from our contemporary dictionary.

2. To Forgive – In the Old Testament

To pardon; to cover over; to take away.

3. To Forgive – In the New Testament

To release from bondage; to grant favor; to set free.

The common theme in all these definitions is that of something being owed and someone covering or canceling that debt. Forgiveness is in the cancellation of that which is owed. At this point, we often lose sight of the actual cost of forgiveness because the definition is so concise. To illustrate the implications of forgiveness, let's use the example of a financial loan. Suppose you lent a beloved family member ten thousand dollars, but on the day they were scheduled to repay you, they could not. After thinking about it and knowing how dear that individual was to you, you chose to cancel the repayment, forgiving the debt. However, your choice to forgive does not put ten thousand dollars back in your bank account. When you forgave that debt, you chose to take responsibility for the loss. To get that money back you would have to get another job or sell your assets. The loss is now your responsibility to make up because you chose to forgive that which was owed to you.

That is what God did when He forgave us in Jesus Christ. He did not wish forgiveness on us. Instead, He paid for our sins through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. God took responsibility for our sin debt and then paid for it with the blood of Christ. It was based on His love for us and His willingness to design and implement the means by which the debt would be paid. This is the ultimate pattern of forgiveness.

When we say we will forgive someone, we take on the responsibility of paying for the hurt someone else caused us. We acknowledge we are choosing to be responsible for our healing; we choose to pay for the debt another has incurred at our expense. And if you think that is a simple task, you

have never had to forgive anyone. This is not a sentiment, wish, or straightforward decision. Forgiveness is a process. It is the cancellation of that which is owed when an offense has been committed. It starts with the decision to forgive, but to have the debt canceled means putting the things in place that will cover all of what is owed.

6. The Implications

Our definition of forgiveness highlights that a debt is incurred when an offense is committed in any personal relationship. This happens in our relationship with God as our sins against His will create spiritual debts. Even though we owe them, God carries the liability because they were committed against Him. That is the same principle at work in our relationships with one another. When we act in negative ways and hurt one another, emotional and mental debts are created. Forgiveness of these debts is so vital that it is featured prominently in the Lord's Prayer:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Matthew 6:12

Even though others commit these acts, we carry the liability because they were done against us. In our case, the debts are the emotional and mental anguish we suffer. They are the hurt of broken trust, the disillusionment in the security of our relationships, and the loneliness, shame, self-doubt, and fear we feel when those we love, respect, and admire mistreat us.

It should be noted that not all debts are created equal. There are certain debts the offender can pay with no need for forgiveness. For example, imagine a friend promised to take you to purchase an item but forgot to do it. Understandably, you were upset because of the inconvenience. When your friend realized their mistake, they apologized and offered to treat you to lunch at your favorite restaurant. The offer seemed acceptable, and you agreed. What happened here was not forgiveness; it was restitution. Your friend took on the responsibility of paying for the inconvenience by apologizing and treating you to lunch, and you accepted it. Many offenses in our lives can fit that model, where a simple apology and a kind act can solve the conflict and restore harmony. However, forgiveness becomes necessary when there is nothing the offender can do to make restitution for the damage they have caused. There are no words they can say, no actions they can do, and no resources they can offer that will make up for what they have done.

Of course, the question may be asked: Why should the one who is hurt be responsible for offering forgiveness? After all, it was not their fault. They did not ask to be hurt. That may be true, but we must now ask: What is the alternative? If there is nothing the offender can do to make restitution, the debt will go unpaid, and the liability remains in their lives. If forgiveness is not given, it means they will spend the rest of their lives carrying that debt. We were not designed to carry such liabilities. If you believe you can, think about this reality: Even God had to make provision for the sin debts against Him.

When we choose to forgive, we are not letting the offender off the hook; we are doing it for our benefit. We are choosing to prioritize our healing. We are acknowledging there is a problem and that the one who hurt us is in no position to do anything about it. Some offenders are dead. Some are so selfish and narcissistic that they do not care how we feel. There are some offenders we may never see, but the debts they have incurred remain in our lives. Choosing forgiveness is a commitment we make to our spiritual, emotional, and mental well-being. We are not allowing

ourselves to become bogged down by those open wounds, but are prioritizing the freedom of healing that will enable us to fulfill God's destiny for our lives.

The longer we wait to address the pain others have caused us, the harder it becomes to implement forgiveness. Those who have been dealing with specific hurts for a long time think about them differently now than when they first happened. As we grow and mature, so do our thoughts and recollections about what happened to us. And the more our comprehension expands, so does our pain, anger, and resentment towards those who caused it. If we do not choose to forgive those who hurt us, our pain will continue to consume us until it ultimately defines us.

7. The Challenge

The idiom "time heals all wounds" suggests we can recover from all our hurts if given enough time, but this holds more poetic value than what is true. Time is neutral. It is merely the progression of our existence. The only value time has is what we ascribe to it. Therefore, time can work to our advantage or disadvantage depending on how we choose to use it. And when it comes to our hurts, time can be our greatest adversary. If we allow that pain to go unaddressed and untreated, it becomes harder for forgiveness to be implemented in our lives.

Ephesians 4:31 gives us several negative emotions forgiveness is supposed to counter: bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice. The visceral nature of these emotions does not occur instantaneously. Instead, each is a thoughtful but aggressive reaction to those who have hurt us. Such intensity can only exist when it is nurtured over time.

I can empathize with those who would rather avoid dealing with their pain. Sometimes addressing our hurts can be more painful than simply living with them. It is similar to getting a deep cut on your hand with a sharp object. At first, you do not want to touch your hand because it is so painful. You hold it away from you and try to position it so that you feel the least amount of pain. However, letting a deep wound go untreated can present more significant problems in the future. It can get infected, which could lead to worse, if not fatal, issues. And even if the cut does heal, the scar that forms is often bigger and more unattractive than the wound when it was fresh. It becomes a permanent, visible marker on your body to an awful moment in your life. However, if the wound was treated right after it happened, it would have increased the initial pain, but ultimately healing would have occurred much faster and be less conspicuous.

The wounds that happen to us on the inside are no different, and leaving them untreated leads to more significant problems in the future: bitterness, anger, brawling, etc. And the internal scars that form will often have greater ramifications than the original offense. Those scars are our interpretations of the memories of what happened to us. They are the emotional residue of the offense. Untreated wounds will always lead to scars that nurture growing negativity.

This all relates back to how we remember events in our lives. We do not reflect on our past as the people we were then, but as who we are now. This is why we can often see the humor in many past experiences that seemed quite serious at the time. Unfortunately, this does not always work to our benefit. Those who may have suffered traumatic experiences at the hands of others when they were very young will look back on those memories as the people they are today. They have grown stronger and gained more knowledge about themselves and their environment. As they

remember the hurtful things perpetrated against them, they do so with all the knowledge they have today. They can remember more details. They can better appreciate how devastating the long-term effects of those actions were or analyze the intentions of the perpetrators and form judgments based on their gained knowledge. If that pain was never treated, time gives them all the resources they need to hate those who hurt them. Tragically, some will turn on themselves. They see the successful men and women they are today and wonder why they did not stand up for themselves ten, twenty, even thirty years ago. These people may end up blaming themselves for being too weak and ultimately hold themselves responsible for what happened to them. If we want to avoid the trap of those negative emotions, we must choose to act quickly and decisively when others hurt us. Forgiveness is the only antidote to the poison of hate and resentment. It may be an intimidating prospect at first, but it is the first step in prioritizing our healing and embracing the freedom that comes with it.

8. The Solutions

We must now answer the most important question: How do we forgive? Remember, forgiveness is about taking on the responsibility for our healing; it is about making a sacrifice to cover the debts owed us by those who have hurt us. We must be active agents in this process. Here are seven steps that will help us.

1. Choose a trusted and wise companion for the journey. It should be cautioned that you cannot attempt this process on your own – no one can. The objectivity, accountability, and support required to truthfully acknowledge and adequately address what you are going through demands an outside perspective and committed encourager. King Solomon stated: “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out (Proverbs 20:5).” The degree to which our pain can affect us is profound. Too often we fail to realize what is going on in us until it comes out in a harsh word or hurtful action. These are the consequences of having a deep heart. Having someone with us who understands can help us put things into perspective and chart a course for our healing. That person could be a counselor, therapist, pastor, minister, family member, or close friend. Whatever their relationship with you, allow them access to the depth of your heart so they may draw out all you need to heal and thrive.

2. Acknowledge the debt. You must accept what happened to you. Unfortunately, this is often much harder than it sounds. We can go to great lengths to hide and even ignore the ways that others have hurt us. There are three reasons for this:

PRIDE – This stems from how we think about ourselves. When we get hurt, the blow to our ego can be hard to take. It can threaten our self-image, causing us to doubt ourselves, that we are not as strong or smart as we thought – and that blow to our self-confidence is not easily tolerated. Some would rather pretend it never happened to keep that image of themselves alive.

SHAME – This comes from how we think others think about us. In the communities where we live or the social circles we interact with, there may be stigmatized actions or behaviors. If what happened to us falls into either of those categories, we may feel pressured to conceal those painful parts of our lives to remain accepted.

FEAR – This has to do with the implications of acknowledging what happened to us. Some are afraid of what that will mean. Do I have to get others involved? Will I have to confront the offender? What will this mean for my family? Will this exposure even bring me the healing I need?

On their own, these three emotions are highly effective silencers. However, if you experience all of them, that is a trifecta for denial. The only way to get the healing you need is to acknowledge what happened to you. You can never move forward until you have a point from which to start. Acknowledgment is that point. And you must be able to say it for what it was; do not use vague terms or ambiguous references. Being able to expose the truth of what happened brings all of its darkness and horror to the light. It is only then that we can see it for what it is.

3. Understand why it hurt you. If you cannot define your pain, you will never understand it or know how to deal with it. This requires thinking purposefully about what happened to you. Going into the darkness is not a comforting thought, but that is where having a wise and mature companion walking this journey with you becomes essential. When you suffer hurt, you may feel shocked and overwhelmed. It becomes difficult to think clearly, so you start shutting down. But the truth is that you can think. It may take some effort to get through the clouds of your agitated emotions, but the sooner you can describe your feelings, the closer you get to understanding why you feel the way you do – and that is where healing begins. Once you know why the offense hurt you the way it did, you can identify and apply solutions to overcome it. That progression will diminish your confusion about the situation as the clarity you gain reveals the perspective necessary to live beyond your pain.

4. Realize you are more than your pain. When someone you trust betrays you, the hurt can feel unbearable. You may not see yourself apart from that pain. For me, my pain was in my divorce. It came to the point where I did not see myself as Terrence – just as someone who was divorced. God never intended our pain to define us. Refine, yes, but never define who we are. There is a powerful story in Acts 7:54-59 that recounts the execution of Stephen. As he was being judged for defending his faith in Jesus Christ, he sees a vision of God sitting on His throne and Jesus standing at His right hand. When Stephen sees this, he utters these astounding words as he is stoned: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Because he received that vision of God’s approval of his life, he held no anger or resentment toward his persecutors even while suffering such pain and injustice. When we can put our pain in the context of a grander purpose for our lives, it becomes a tool for our improvement, not a brush for our portrait. Our pain is a symptom – a warning that areas in our lives need to be strengthened. It is not all there is to us. We are complex and broken creatures, made in the image of God to fulfill His purposes. The glory we are allowed to bring to His Name through our obedience is a testament to the eternal worth our Heavenly Father places upon our lives. As horrible as the pains of betrayal may be, they will never be the end of us. God’s destiny for us will never allow it. When we can embrace this perspective, our pain will begin to subside. That happens, not because we are distracted by other things but because a God-oriented life nurtures healing. It helps us use what happened to us as opportunities for growth and maturity, and ultimately, forgiveness.

5. Learn about the character of the offender. This step is most relevant if the offender is still part of your life. If you forgive them, must things go back to the way they were before? The answer is no, they cannot. When someone hurts us, the relationship will never be the same

again. It will either be stronger, weaker, or dissolved. The fact that we have forgiven them does not make the reality of what they did disappear. As you move forward, you must be interrogative. What did this teach you about the character of the person who hurt you? Throughout this process, were they sympathetic, apologetic, or repentant? What attempts did they make to show they valued you and the relationship? The answers to these questions will tell you how you ought to interact with them in the future. Not every relationship is worth saving – not even for Christians. Jesus warns His disciples about dealing with those who are hypocritical in their criticisms: “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces (Matthew 7:6).” Discernment is essential in moving forward, as forgiveness is primarily for your well-being. It is not done to save others. Once you have recovered from the hurt, you must apply what you have learned to develop healthy relationships with those who respect you. There is nothing wrong with forgiving and moving away.

6. Remember your weaknesses. While forgiveness is about prioritizing healing, we must also allow for a balanced approach that does not neglect our own brokenness. Sometimes, it is difficult to let go of our anger because of what we think is our innocence when we are hurt by others. In situations where we have suffered because of the selfish actions of others, we cannot fathom that we could do the same thing to someone else. That attitude is steeped in self-righteousness and can cause us to stigmatize those who have hurt us. We think about them as possessing a measure of evil normal people like us do not have. As a result, they remain suspect in our lives. Unfortunately, that same attitude allows us to perpetually see ourselves as the victim of some unique evil. We feel justified in our anger and resentment since we believe no one has been hurt quite like us. That is unhealthy, for both them and us. We did not do what they did because we were not in their situation; we did not grow up as they did, with their personality and experiences. If we did, we may have done the same thing. But we are all still imperfect beings, capable of disrespectful and destructive behavior that can hurt others. When we struggle to forgive others, let us ask ourselves: If the situation had been reversed, how would I want the person I hurt to treat me? Pain in our relationships is a part of life common to everyone. What must differentiate us as Christians is how we choose to come out of it.

7. Engage in focused prayer and meditation. We will always need divine guidance and comfort to get through our pain in a healthy way. We must allow God to help us. Psalm 147:3 best sums this up: “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” To have such intimate and active interaction with God requires extended periods of confession and petition in prayer and meditation on the Scriptures. We speak to God, but submission to His will demands we hear back from Him. That is only possible when we are willing to silence all the external voices in our lives and listen for the voice of our Heavenly Father. We will know the truth, and the truth will set us free (John 8:32).

These seven steps to forgiveness represent a process where we are the active agents. They cannot be completed overnight, and none of them are optional. They require careful thought, deep self-examination, and a willingness to put in the work to attain our healing. But the result will be a debt-free life where we are no longer held captive to the pain others have caused us. That is what forgiveness is all about. As conflicts arise in our relationships and we consistently engage in this process, finding forgiveness becomes easier. These steps were not designed to give us temporary relief – they will change us. We become spiritually, emotionally, and mentally

healthier people. Every offense will find us starting from our last point of growth. Being stronger and wiser when we face new conflicts ensures that overcoming our pain becomes easier each time.

9. The Responsibility

Many Christians continue to see forgiveness benefitting those who do the hurting more than those who have been hurt. It is like a gift the injured present to their abusers – a testament to the validity of their Christian credentials. But an analysis of the definition of forgiveness shows the transaction is not that simple. Forgiveness is first for the benefit of those injured, and it requires a lot of work. Any discussions about the offender should remain in the context of what is healthy for those who have been hurt as they move forward. We must bear all those things in mind the next time we are in a position to forgive someone or require it from those we have hurt. Either way, forgiveness remains essential to our Christian Faith.

The conflicts in our relationships that bring pain will always be there. Situations may change, but people will always be people – imperfect and prone to mistakes. However, to live in isolation from them is no life at all. We need one another. If our relationships are going to fulfill us, we need to be the healthiest versions of ourselves – going into conflict and coming out of it. Forgiveness makes that possible. It will cost us, but the value gained in soul and spirit will inspire us to be the best of who we can be for Christ's sake. Do not be afraid of your past or your pain; neither has the power to control you. Instead, use them as resources to equip and empower you to move beyond your disappointments and frustrations in others. Make an effort to address that pain for your sake and benefit, and cancel the debts others have incurred at your expense. Engage in the process of forgiveness and embrace your freedom!

FORGIVENESS IS FOUNDATIONAL to the Christian Faith. The reason Jesus Christ came to earth was so that we could have forgiveness from our sins and the restoration of a personal relationship with God. But, just as our sins disrupt our relationship with God, they also disrupt our relationships with one another. When we lie, cheat, steal, abuse, neglect, and otherwise hurt those in our lives because of our selfishness, we damage our relationships. And restoration, just as with God, comes through forgiveness.

However, for many of us, forgiveness can be elusive. Our problem lies in how we think about forgiveness. We believe it to be intuitive to the Christian experience, a spiritual byproduct of living by faith that can be implemented at will. We have this perception because of how we think about God's forgiveness, which we see as instantaneous and complete. But that is an oversimplification of how the forgiveness of God works.

In **LEARNING TO FORGIVE**, Terrence E. C. Jones explains the true pattern of how God forgives and uses it as an example of how we should forgive others. Forgiveness is not a sentiment or wish – it is a process. It is only possible when someone is willing to pay for the offense that another has committed against them. Unfortunately, our failure to see forgiveness in this more practical sense has caused us to not experience in our lives as we should.

NORMALFAITH.ORG is dedicated to the belief that a vibrant Christian experience is not one that waits to present only the good in life. It is about embracing all that we are – our successes, our failures, and the journeys in between, all for God's glory. That is the normal life of faith we want to celebrate.

TERRENCE E. C. JONES was born on the Caribbean Island of Barbados. He completed his undergraduate studies in Religious Education at Bluewater Bible College in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. He completed graduate studies in Biblical Studies and Education Administration at Baptist Bible Seminary and Clarks Summit University in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. He served as Lead Pastor of Grace Baptist Church, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, and as director of Caribbean Baptist Partners, an organization dedicated to providing support services for churches in the Eastern Caribbean. He was Mission Liaison for the Puerto Rico/Virgin Islands Baptist Convention. He currently resides in Cary, North Carolina.



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