

COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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What is keeping you from forgiving your spouse?

Are you having a tough time, at the moment, trying to forgive your spouse of some hurtful offense, or maybe a string of conflicts that have continued unresolved in your marriage? Forgiveness is one very important key to resolving these conflicts. But, do you know *why* we forgive and *how* to actually do it? If you will apply the principles you are about to learn, your relationship can be restored to experience the oneness and companionship you once knew. Let's begin by looking at why you must forgive.

Why should you forgive?

1. Because it is God's command. This is an essential place to begin in your thinking. Many couples think that somehow forgiveness is merely an option they have available to them; something they can take or leave. However, this is not the case. The Word of God declares that you *must* forgive any and all who offend you. This command would, of course, include your spouse. Jesus said, "... *if you have anything against anyone, forgive him...*" (Mark 11:25). Paul the Apostle also declared this imperative when he commanded the believers at Colosse to forgive. He encouraged them to bear with one another and forgive one another, "...*if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do*" (Col. 3:13 underline added). Therefore, it is clear that forgiveness is not an option, but a definite command and responsibility for every believer who has been offended. You must forgive, *even as Christ forgave you*. This is your calling

as a Christian.

Jesus said, "*If you love Me, keep My commandments*" (John 14:15). Ultimately, forgiveness is an expression of your love for the Lord; an act of obedience to God because you desire to please Him above all others, even yourself. Please Him now by obeying His command to forgive.



Reach out and seek reconciliation

2. Unless you forgive, you have no right to ask God to forgive you. In the Lord's prayer Jesus made it clear that you must forgive just as you expect God to forgive you. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "...*forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*" (Matt. 6:12). Jesus assumed that we would make the connection that if we were going to ask for His forgiveness we would naturally forgive others in the same manner. In fact, Jesus made it clear that "*if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses*" (Mark 11:26). You may think this is a harsh statement by Jesus, but it reveals just

how much importance He places on your obedience to forgive others.

Therefore, you have no right to ask for His forgiveness or to expect to be forgiven if you are refusing to forgive your spouse. You must see the very real consequences of your refusal to forgive and see also how God views these actions if you are ever to change.

3. Unless you forgive, you will be the real loser. What do you lose when you refuse to forgive? First, you lose the fellowship and closeness in your own relationship with the Lord. As we saw from the previous point, when you choose not to forgive, God refuses to forgive you. This creates an immediate distance between you and the Father due to your disobedience. Within a very short time you will begin to sense a dryness within your spirit. This is God's chastening hand seeking to bring you back to Himself. Unforgiveness simply robs you of the peace and joy God intends for your life. Many times the only person you are hurting by your unforgiveness is *yourself*. This is a simple equation: you can't be happy and be unforgiving at the same time. It doesn't work that way. Solomon noted this truth when he declared, "*The merciful man does good for his own soul, but he who is cruel troubles his own flesh*" (Prov. 11:17). Are you troubling your own flesh because you are refusing to forgive? If you want to be happy in your own life, you must be merciful and forgive your spouse just as you want to be forgiven.

Second, unforgiveness robs you of the oneness in your relationship with your spouse. You can't be in love and have the real intimacy you desire while at the same time holding resentment. The Apostle Peter revealed the means of how two people were to find the oneness needed for a real relationship. He said, "*be of one mind, having compassion one for another*" (1 Peter 3:8). If you refuse

She is your companion and your wife by covenant. Mal. 2:14

to show compassion and forgiveness toward one another, the oneness you long for will never be found.

How do you actually forgive one another?

1. Ask God to open your eyes to your own sin. This is a truth that I personally have found to help me forgive quickly. Many times the real problem with unforgiveness is that of *self-righteousness*. We think, “How could he or she have ever done this to me?” forgetting that we also have sinned against our spouse many times. We can’t see the plank in our own eye which definitely distorts the view of our husband’s or wife’s sin. Jesus said, “*First, remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye*” (Matt. 7:5).

Therefore, the quickest way to become a person who forgives easily is to ask God to reveal to you your own sin as well as His abundant forgiveness toward you. Once you have seen the plank in your own eye, your attitude toward your mate will change dramatically. This is how Jesus taught Peter to forgive seventy times seven. He told Peter a story of a man who was required by his lord to repay an impossible debt. He asked his lord if he would have patience so that he could repay everything. But his lord, instead, was moved with compassion and chose to release him by forgiving the entire debt. This servant who had been forgiven then went out and refused to forgive another man a very small debt. His lord returned and asked him, “*Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?*” (Matt. 18:33).

This is a good question to ask yourself. If you truly see how much God has forgiven you, should you not show the same compassion toward your spouse? Ask God to open your eyes to your own sin and the magnitude of His forgiveness in your own life. This will give you a more tender heart towards your mate. The Apostle Paul also associates tenderness of heart with the understanding that you also have been forgiven. He said, “*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ*

also forgave you” (Eph. 4:32 underline added). Tenderness in your heart will always come as you *consider* God’s forgiveness in your life. Stop right now and think about how much God has forgiven you. However, don’t let this be a one-time reflection, but make it the daily meditation of your heart.

With these practical guidelines, I am assuming that you have already received the forgiveness of Christ in your own life. If you have not yet received the forgiveness offered by Jesus, this is where you must begin. Without first receiving the Father’s forgiveness, you will have no access to God’s power to enable you to take the actions described here. God loves you and wants to help you reconcile your marriage, but you must first be reconciled to Him. Before you read any further, please consider your own need of God. Humble yourself before Him and ask Him to forgive your sins and take over your life. Scripture says, “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). The Apostle John said of Jesus, “*as many as receive Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, to those who believed in His name*” (John 1:12).

2. Ask God for a willing heart. Many times this is one of the simplest reasons why you refuse to forgive. It’s that you just don’t want to forgive; you would rather nurse the resentment and punish your spouse for his or her offense. This is especially true with long-term conflicts that surface over and over again. Your heart grows harder, and your willingness to forgive decreases with each occurrence.

Once you see your own sin, you now need to ask God for a willing heart to forgive. He will give it to you if you will just ask. Remember, “*...it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:13). It is God’s good pleasure that you forgive your spouse, so ask Him to begin His work to make you willing. Don’t wait any longer, it will never be any easier than it is right now.

3. Choose to obey His command. Now that you are tender-hearted and willing to forgive, it only remains that you make the *choice* to do it. Jesus commanded that every one of us must forgive “*from his*

heart” (Matt. 18:35). This is where the choice is made. Before you ever come to seek reconciliation with your mate, you must first deal with it at the heart level. Once you have chosen to forgive in your heart, then you are ready to talk about the offense with your husband or wife.

This choice within your heart does not depend upon whether you feel like forgiving your mate. In fact, your choice to forgive will probably be contrary to your feelings. Personally, I have never *felt* like forgiving anybody, but I do so because I know I am commanded to forgive. Knowing that forgiveness is God’s command encourages me to ask for the willingness, and enables me to make the choice to actually do it.

Tenderness in your heart will always come as you consider God’s forgiveness in your life.

Be sure of this one thing: if you are waiting for some overwhelming feeling of forgiveness before you actually make the choice to forgive, you will never do it. The feelings of forgiveness come *after* you have made the choice to forgive, not before. These feelings of love and forgiveness are the result of reconciling with your spouse. Think of the times you have reconciled with your mate in the past. After you forgave one another, didn’t the anger and resentment melt in your heart? The tears began to flow and the joy and love returned to your relationship. This was the result of taking the correct action before you felt like it. People struggle with this concept of action-before-feeling because our culture is so feeling-oriented. People today only want to do what feels good. However, Jesus taught that we should do just the opposite when it comes to forgiveness.

To prove this, you need to read the entire passage of Luke 17:1-10 in context. There, Jesus taught His disciples to forgive even if someone should sin against

them seven times in one day. The disciples, seeing great difficulty in forgiving this many times, asked the Lord to increase their faith. He told them that this wasn't necessary; all they needed was to use the faith they already possessed. Then Jesus told them a story to illustrate how they could exercise their mustard-seed faith and choose to forgive without the feelings. The story was of a servant who came home one day tired from plowing the fields and tending his master's sheep. This servant obviously didn't feel like serving anymore that day. But, the master requested his servant to go and prepare his dinner and serve him before sitting down himself. In the story Jesus declared that the servant did what his master wanted because he was commanded to do so. In other words, this servant took actions that were against his feelings simply because he was commanded to by his master. Jesus told His disciples, "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" (Luke 17:10).

The point of this story is that you have been commanded to forgive by your Master, and it's not an option to refuse this command. You must make the choice to forgive no matter how you feel simply because you know this pleases God. Once you have done what you have been commanded to do, then you can sit down and enjoy the feast of a heart satisfied that you have done what was your duty to do.

4. Determine to make a promise.

When God forgives, He makes a very important promise to you that you must also make when you forgive your spouse. God says, "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Heb. 8:12). The Greek word translated *remember* means to hold in a mental grasp, to recollect, or to dwell upon in order to use at a later time to punish. The Hebrew word for *remember* means to mention or recount again. The promise God makes here is very important. He is promising that when He forgives you, He will never recount or mention your sin to you ever again. He doesn't hold your sins in a mental grasp to use at a later time. It's not that He forgets your sin, He can't do that because He is omniscient and knows all

things. He simply chooses not to remember it against you or bring it up to you again in order to condemn or punish you. What a glorious promise! When God forgives, He promises never to throw your sin up in your face ever again.

When you forgive, you must have the same heart of forgiveness because Scripture commands you to forgive "just as God in Christ also forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). Here are three specific ways you should emulate God's promise to forgive: (1) When you forgive, you should see this as a promise to never condemn your spouse again with his or her past faults. To bring these issues up again would mean you have broken your promise to forgive. (2) When you forgive, you should see this as a promise not to recount or mention his or her failures to anyone else; this would constitute gossip. (3) When you forgive, you should see this as a promise not to ever recount or brood over these issues in your own mind. If you dwell on these offenses in your thought life, the anger and resentment will return. This is the practical meaning of the promise; not to mention these issues ever again to your spouse, to others, or to yourself. If you fail to do this, you are breaking your promise of forgiveness toward your mate. If you keep your promise in this manner, the past will truly be past, and your relationship will be able to grow, even blossom.

What should you do when you realize you have broken your promise to forgive? First, go back to God and ask His forgiveness. Then, choose again in your heart to forgive your spouse. Often, this choice must be made several times in a day, simply because you are battling your own will that wants to take revenge. If you continue to make the choice to forgive, while at the same time asking God for his power to work in you the total willingness to forgive, you will overcome the resentment. Just surrender your desire for revenge and ask for the love of God to fill your heart.

What forgiveness does not mean.

1. Forgiveness does not mean that reconciliation is automatic. Just because you forgive your spouse in your heart

does not mean that everything is reconciled between you. Choosing to forgive in your heart is only where the process begins. You now need to speak to your spouse and tell him or her that you are hurt and offended. Jesus said, "...if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone" (Matt. 18:15). Your mate may already know there is a breach between you, but if not, you need to verbalize it with the motivation of seeking reconciliation. Jesus also said in another place that once you have spoken to the person who has offended you, "...if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3).

This is a second aspect of forgiveness; the verbal granting of forgiveness to the offending party. This should only be given when your spouse acknowledges his or her fault and asks for your forgiveness. Then you can verbally declare to him or her, "I forgive you." You are only able to verbally grant this forgiveness because you have already forgiven in your heart.

Notice, the Scripture doesn't require someone to merely say, "I'm sorry." Being *sorry* is only half of the reconciliation process. A person can be sorry that the problem has occurred, but sorrow must be coupled with a request for forgiveness and repentance. When you ask for a person's forgiveness you are asking this individual to make a choice to obey God's command and to make the same promise to you as I described above. This is much more than a simple acknowledgment that you are sorry.

But, you ask, "What happens when your husband or wife refuses to acknowledge his or her fault?" Should you still verbally tell your mate that you forgive him or her? Absolutely not; simply because the offense is not reconciled. Even though you have forgiven from the heart, there cannot be complete reconciliation until your spouse acknowledges his or her fault. Save any verbal granting of forgiveness until this occurs. Let me give you an example of why this is the biblical response.

Consider for a moment the redemption of the world through the death of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was being put to death He prayed, "...Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). There upon the cross Jesus purchased the means of forgiveness

for the whole world. Through the shedding of His blood Christ “*obtained eternal redemption*” (Heb. 9:12). “*God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself*” (2 Cor. 5:19). But, does this mean that all men are actually forgiven and reconciled with God? Surely not. For complete reconciliation to occur between man and God, a person must acknowledge and repent of his sin and ask God’s forgiveness. Only then does God grant the forgiveness He has already determined in His heart. The same thing will be true in your marriage relationship. Forgiveness cannot be verbally granted until there is an honest acknowledgment of fault and a request for pardon.

2. Forgiveness is never deserved. No one deserves forgiveness. You didn’t deserve God’s forgiveness when He pardoned you, nor can you ever deserve it by any good work you do in the future. God completely canceled your debt simply because of His mercy, erasing it from your account forever.

Likewise, you must not wait until you believe that your spouse deserves your forgiveness before you grant it. He or she will never be perfect nor never fail in the future anymore than you will be flawless. Don’t set up a standard that he or she can never reach before you think complete forgiveness is deserved. You are required to “*be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful*” (Luke 6:36). You can never deserve mercy. It’s a gift given freely from the heart. Therefore, cultivate mercy and you will learn to fully and freely forgive.

3. Forgiveness does not mean you condone what your spouse has done.

Many think that when they repeatedly forgive an offense that they are communicating to their spouse that the transgressions are excusable or all right. Is this true? Of course not. If this were true, then, when God forgives you over and over again, it would mean that He also condones sin, and this is definitely not the case. When God forgives you repeatedly, He is communicating to you His love and commitment to show mercy. Yet, God also hates sin. It repulses and offends Him, but He still forgives it. This is why Jesus asked the woman taken in the act of adultery to “*go and sin no more*”(John 8:11). God expects a change of lifestyle when He forgives,

because this is what true repentance is all about. If He didn’t require a change of attitude and action from us, God would be condoning our sin.

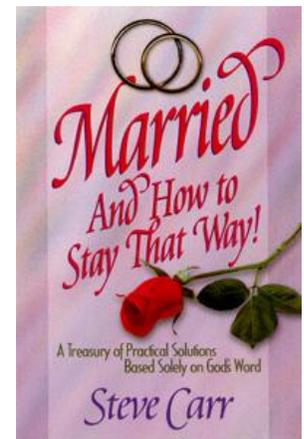
Therefore, in your marital conflicts if you hate what has occurred between you, forgive, and then require changes that will keep this problem from happening again. This is what Paul called the “*works befitting repentance*” (Acts 26:20). To see these changes will entail some serious conversations in which you should discuss practical solutions. You also may need to get some counseling from your pastor. There are solutions to every conflict that divides you and your spouse, if you are willing to search them out. Refusing to forgive and holding resentment in your heart is not part of any solution and will only create more problems. Forgiveness is the first step to seeing these changes become a reality. So, don’t miss the blessings God has in store for your marriage by being unforgiving. “*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy*” (Matt. 5:7).

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What is *Covenant Keepers*?

1. A ministry of Pastor Steve Carr of Calvary Chapel in Arroyo Grande, CA dedicated to strengthening marriages through the teaching of biblical principles alone.
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