

# Total Forgiveness, Part 1

## Sources

Much of the material in this study comes from a great book by R. T. Kendall titled *Total Forgiveness*. I thought I understood the subject fairly well—until I read this book. Not only was it edifying, but with that came the understanding that most of us probably carry around some “unforgiveness baggage” that we need to get rid of.

## Introduction

A Facebook friend and distant relative, Joelle Casteix, posted a question regarding forgiveness. She is a victim of abuse and a nationally known and respected author on the subject who advocates for abuse victims. Her post:

*So tell me: What are your thoughts about forgiveness? (Not "how to", but forgiveness as an issue and tool for healing - or a tool of manipulation and control)*

She got quite a few replies, and most seemed to be from victims. In reading the replies, it was sad to see, but understandable, the deep pain and anger felt by these victims. Many had not been able to find any peace after their abuse. Some comments:

*“Here is his name, phone & address, forgive him yourself if that will make you feel better” So far no one called my brother and forgiven him for raping his sister.*

*It’s harder to forgive my mom for not believing me and handing me back to my perp time after time for at least a year than it is to forgive the sicko predatory “priest”.*

*Some say it’s not good to hold on to this and to ‘forgive and forget’. Sorry, but I use that as my fuel to keep persevering. I have places to go, people to love, and bastards to outlive. I can’t forgive because that means, to me at least, that your behavior/action against me is (finally) condoned.*

*Releasing myself from the grip of hatred and malice toward those who shattered me, soul murdered me. I stood alone at the very early age of 7! It has hindered every aspect of my relational capabilities, emotional intelligence, trust, etc.*

*I believe it is a manipulative lie that victims are obligated to forgive. Americans seem to think that we have to make peace with everything. The trick is to make peace with the fact that we might not always have peace.*

You can't help but feel the pain these men and women suffered at the hands of their abusers. Some have found ways to forgive or at least find peace within themselves and move on. Many have not.

What I found interesting is very few of the commenters spoke from a Biblical viewpoint. If they had a religious background, it was not apparent. What was clear was that most of these victims were not prepared by their church to deal with this problem and/or were too angry to try. And perhaps, if I were the victim of such abuse, I might also find the bitterness so overpowering that forgiveness would be elusive. But that would be allowing the abuser to live in your head rent-free and, in effect, continue the abuse.

## **What I Replied**

Here is my reply, which I will expand on in this study.

*If you are a Christian, then you are called to forgive, but that does not necessarily mean the offender is absolved of any consequences relating to the offense. The offender should be held accountable and reap what he has sown.*

*Also, forgiveness is not the same as trust. Trust, for the offender, must be earned, but forgiveness is grace and is unearned and undeserved. Maybe with time and experience trust can be recovered—and maybe not. But forgiveness is finding peace within oneself concerning the offense, and that is a gift from God best seen in the Fruit of the Spirit which “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” (Gal 5:22-23). Apart from that, finding the ability to forgive may be elusive.*

That reply was given back in 2020, and while it does a halfway decent job of capturing the essence of forgiveness, it lacks any real understanding of how or why one forgives. That will be dealt with in much more detail in this study.

## **What This Study Is About**

While forgiveness for sexual abuse was the main topic that began this study, the subject of forgiveness has a much broader application. Many have suffered some form of “being wronged,” be it sexual abuse, physical abuse, verbal abuse, or being “used,” including “teasing,” which many of us have been the recipients of and often also the ones dispensing it. Whatever the reason for being hurt by someone else, either physically or mentally, the subject of forgiveness must be dealt with.

As I stated in my reply to Joelle’s question, Christians are commanded to forgive, and here are two verses stating that:

**Ephesians 4:31** Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

**Colossians 3:13** ... bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

If the Bible demands it, then God must have a reason why and a way to forgive. God never requires something of His children that is impossible to achieve.

## **What does it mean to forgive in the Bible?**

Two Greek words are used in the New Testament for forgiveness. One is *aphiemi*, the more common of the two, and means basically “to let go, to send away.” The other Greek word is *charizomai*, which means to do something pleasant or agreeable (to one), to do a favor to, to grant

forgiveness, to pardon. But let's first look at *aphiemi* as used for forgiveness.

Consider the mechanics of forgiveness. While the focus of forgiving is outward toward the one being forgiven (the abuser/offender), the act of forgiving is itself purely inward. The recipient of the forgiveness need never know they have been forgiven, and often they don't even think they have done anything to be forgiven for. The transaction of forgiving is entirely one-sided. The offense suffered by the victim is his to own and his to give up, thus the definition "to let go" makes the most sense.

### **Let go of what?**

Not only are there different kinds of offenses, from physical to emotional as well as combined, but there are different levels of abuse or offense from mild to mortal. Furthermore, we don't all experience an offense the same way. The offense is very personal, and the person's response is deeply personal. Regardless, it is the victim who always carries *all* the physical and/or emotional pain.

That emotional pain is usually directed toward the offender, but it can also be directed inward to the victim themselves because they, in some way, "allowed" the offense to take place. Thus, the transaction is entirely inward, and the emotional pain eventually becomes entirely self-inflicted. Meanwhile, the offender goes on their "merry way," rarely feeling any emotional pain.

While many will identify anger as the main component of the emotional stress of the victim, I submit the main element is the loss of any sense of peace, which is manifested as anger toward the offender or self. This loss of peace brings on mental turmoil that can be experienced as flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety (especially when around the offender or similar situations where the offense took place), depression, alcohol/drug abuse, thoughts of revenge, including murder, and even thoughts of self-harm or suicide. These are all symptoms of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

There may be a loss of the sense of any joy in life. While there may be moments of superficial happiness associated with life's pleasures, always in the background is this nagging feeling of damage to the victim's self-esteem. The victim may find it hard to feel genuine love toward another, and with that comes a sense of cynicism, mistrust, and withdrawal from associations with others. Forgiveness is not even a consideration. Anger and retaliation replace any thoughts of forgiveness. This pain is all inwardly focused to be experienced by the victim, while the offender walks away undamaged by the transaction. It is the victim who suffered the abuse/offense. It is the victim who carries the guilt of the offense. It is the victim who carries all the anger for the offense. It is the victim who suffers the loss of peace. The victim, and only the victim, feels *all* the emotional pain, and he/she alone must make the decision on how to deal with it. It is the victim who carries all the emotional baggage. Someone once said, "When you don't forgive someone, it is like drinking poison and waiting for them to die from it."

Since the emotional pain is all internal for the victim, forgiveness must be entirely an act of the victim, and while the offender may apologize or even perform some act(s) of contrition, forgiveness remains exclusively within the purview of the victim.

Forgiveness means letting go of the "demon" that has control of you. You can choose to let that demon go or keep him and all the pain associated with him. The **ONLY** solution for recovery is to "let go." The consequence of not "letting go" means *you* get to be miserable. The reason to forgive has nothing really to do with the abuser but has everything to do with the one abused. It is the victim who is suffering. It is no surprise that the Biblical purpose for forgiveness is for the victim to unburden himself of that pain.

**The person who gains the most from forgiveness  
is the person who does the forgiving.**

**"Father, forgive them ..."**

As Jesus hung there on the Cross suffering unimaginable pain after the abuse of unfair trials, then a lashing followed by carrying that heavy cross

to Golgotha, He asked for their forgiveness then said, "... For they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). That should be our response as well.

This is the ultimate forgiveness—to ask God to forgive those who have hurt you. Jesus was not saying that *He forgave them* but was calling for their sins not to be counted against those abusing Him. He was asking for the Father to set them free as if they had done nothing.

**Ephesians 4:32** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

**Colossians 3:13** Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

How has the Lord forgiven me and you? Unequivocally and unconditionally! Our sins are never held against us. They were judged at the Cross, and someone else, Jesus Christ, took them upon Himself, and He was judged for them. By our faith in what Jesus did on the Cross, we will *never* be judged for our sins.

**Ephesians 2:8** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

You cannot earn God's forgiveness. It is a gift of God given to those who believe (faith) in what Jesus did on the Cross for us. Unequivocally and unconditionally! *That* is Total Forgiveness. *That* is how we are to forgive.

## **What Total Forgiveness is not.**

### **It is not the approval of what they did.**

God never approves of sin; He hates it. Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden because of sin, but God graciously made garments of skins for them, demonstrating His forgiveness. Jesus forgave the woman found in adultery but did not approve of her sin. He told her to "Leave your life of

sin.” (John 8:11). Forgiving people does not imply endorsement of their evil deeds.

### **It is not excusing what they did.**

We do not point to circumstances and explain away the offender’s behavior. We do not cover for them! In the Exodus, Moses complained bitterly to God about the Israelites’ failings and continual aggravating complaining. God agreed and offered a simple solution.

**Numbers 14:12** I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

Moses rejected that offer and appealed to God’s mercy. But he did not excuse their behavior.

**Numbers 14:19** Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.”

### **It does not justify what they did.**

To *justify* means to make right or just. God will never call evil just or right. And He will not require us to do so either. In Moses’ prayer for the Israelites, he did not offer even a hint of justification for their behavior. Instead, he pointed out to God how the Egyptians would view His act of destroying the nation He had brought out of slavery in Egypt. Though we are required to forgive, we are not required to declare the wrong as right.

### **It does not pardon what they did.**

A pardon is a legal transaction that releases an offender from the consequences of their actions. Forgiveness by the victim is not a pardon. The offender should still face the consequences which may include fines, prison, or even the death sentence.

### **It does not bring reconciliation.**

Reconciliation requires the participation of both parties in the offense. The bitterness of the wrong may be gone, but any desire to restore the

relationship may not be there. The injured person may forgive without reconciliation.

### **It does not deny what they did.**

Denying that the offense took place is almost always unconscious. Some live in denial and refuse to come to terms with the reality of a bad situation. It may be difficult to face the facts, and denial seems an easy way to deal with that. Repression almost always has negative psychological consequences. We do it because the truth is just too difficult to face. Many child abuse and rape victims repress the memory of their experiences. But this does not heal the wound. It remains and festers.

### **It is not blindness to what happened.**

Some argue that to forgive is to be willfully blind to the sin that was committed, and forgiveness is turning a blind eye to what happened, ignoring the offense. They believe this is effectively excusing the offense. Blindness is different from repression. Blindness is willful and a conscious choice to pretend the offense did not take place. Repression is usually unconscious and involuntary. Both are wrong and can be psychologically damaging. In either case, we are refusing to come to terms with our own responsibility to forgive. True forgiveness does not pretend the wrong didn't happen.

### **It is not forgetting.**

You have heard the statement, "We must forgive and forget." What they are saying is we should wipe the memory of what our abuser did—as if that were even possible in many cases. Deep trauma may cause amnesia of the event, but that is not a healthy form of forgetfulness. Often, recovery from this form of amnesia is to try to remember every detail of the trauma. Love doesn't erase our memories. It is a demonstration of greater grace when we are fully aware of what happened and yet still choose to forgive. God doesn't "forget" our sins; He chooses to not recall them knowing full well what we did that offended his righteousness.

**Hebrews 8:12** For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."

We may not forget, but we can choose not to remember. Deep hurts may never be eradicated, but we must not dwell on them.

### **It is not choosing to take wrongs seriously.**

We cannot truly forgive until we can clearly see the offense we are forgiving and understand its seriousness. Dismissing the wrong as inconsequential or insignificant is not a solution. It is only avoiding the problem or trying to make forgiveness easier. For the one forgiving, the greater victory is facing the seriousness of the offense and still forgiving the offender.

God does not look at our sins and blow off the “little ones” as no big deal. There is no such thing as “venial” and “mortal” sins as taught by some; all sins are an offense to God and all are “mortal” in the sense that they damage our personal relationship with Him. Sin breaks fellowship with God until we confess them.

**1 John 1:9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Christ’s sacrificial death proves just how serious God considers sin—all sin. Adam and Eve got kicked out of the Garden for simple disobedience. God does not pass off our sins as inconsequential, yet He forgives. Totally!

### **It is not pretending we are not hurt.**

It is ridiculous to think we should keep a “stiff upper lip” when we have been injured by another. God did not pretend He was not hurt by David’s sins of adultery and murder. He was deeply hurt. Jesus was hurt when he was struck in the face by a high priest’s official. He even asked the man, “Why did you strike me?” (John 18:23) He then endured the Cross and all the shame, and yet He was able to say, “Father, forgive them because they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

### **What Total Forgiveness Is.**

**It is being aware of what someone has done and *still* forgiving them.**

Total Forgiveness is not covering up, excusing, or refusing to acknowledge what happened. That would be living in denial. Some choose to live there as a way of dealing with the pain, but sooner or later, you must come to

terms with the problem. Repression is not a solution and will only prolong the pain.

Total forgiveness is achieved only when we acknowledge what was done without any denial or covering up—and yet still refuse to make the offender pay for the crime. Initially, it hurts to know the offender is getting away with the offense, and no one will know what they did. But—when we know fully what they did and accept in our hearts that they will be blessed without any consequence for their wrong, we cross over into the supernatural realm of Christ-likeness, because that is what Jesus would do and did do.

### **It is keeping no record of the wrong.**

Why do we keep remembering the times we are offended? To use them. To prove what happened. To wave them before someone who doubts what actually happened.

**Isaiah 58:9** Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,

When wronged and exclaiming something like, “I will remember this!” you will, and all the pain of the wrong will come back to haunt you. If you choose to forget and “take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,” the Lord will hear your plea for help, and you will be blessed. The word “yoke” in Hebrew is *mowtah*, and figuratively, it refers to oppression. Remembering the wrong is taking that oppressive yoke back upon yourself. Who hurts? Not your offender, but you do.

Total forgiveness is an act of the will. We clearly see and acknowledge the evil that was done to us, but we erase it—destroy the record—before it becomes lodged in our hearts. Resentment then does not have a chance to grow and become a yoke around our own necks.

### **It refuses to punish.**

Giving up the desire to see our offender “get what is coming to them” is the essence of total forgiveness. We want them to get their just punishment; in

other words, we want vengeance! It is human nature to want someone who hurt us to experience some form of punishment for the wrong they did.

**1 John 4:18** There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

“Fear?” We fear the offender will never get their just punishment for the wrong. The words “fear has to do with punishment” are literally, “fear has punishment.” Fear carries with it a kind of torment that is its own punishment. But there is no fear in love.

**John 15:12** “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

We are called to love one another. In that love, since it is divine love, part of the Fruit of the Spirit, imparted to the believer by the indwelling Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), there is no fear. But if we harbor feelings of hate and revenge to see our enemies punished, we will lose the anointing of the Spirit. Total forgiveness is refusing to punish, refusing to fear that the offending party won’t get “what is coming to them”—the punishment or rebuke they deserve.

Giving into this fear that God will not handle the problem is trespassing on His territory. Vindication is God’s prerogative and His alone.

**Romans 12:19** Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

**Hebrews 10:30** For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.”

God doesn’t need our help. When we refuse to be instruments of punishment, it sets God free to determine what should be done and do it. But if we get in the way, He will likely let us do what we will, and neither divine vengeance nor true justice will be executed—only the fulfillment of

our personal grudge, and we will not likely find it satisfying either. If we punish the offender, we grieve the Holy Spirit, and that love we experienced is lost and replaced by our sin of hate.

### **It is not telling what they did.**

To truly forgive means you do not gossip about the offense or the offender. But we often want to talk to someone about how we have been hurt, and this can be therapeutic. But I caution you, this is dangerous territory and *must* be done with the correct heart attitude. We often do this to keep the enemy from being admired. We damage their reputation. Talking about how they hurt you is nothing more than a form of punishing them. If talking to someone about the hurt is necessary, you must choose the person you tell very carefully, making sure that person is trustworthy and will never repeat your situation to those it does not concern. This can be therapeutic but is rarely a good idea. If you feel you must share your pain and offenses with someone else, first examine your motives and be sure you are not doing it to punish anyone by making them look bad.

To gossip about the wrong done to you is to forget that God will never expose the wrongs you have done that He has forgiven you for, thus showing contempt for your own forgiveness.

### **It is being merciful.**

Two words best describe God: merciful and just. Because He is merciful, he does not want to punish us, and because He is just, He must punish us when we have sinned against Him. How can He do this simultaneously? The answer is found at the Cross. He sent His Son to die on the Cross for us, to take our place and be judged for our sins in our stead.

**Isaiah 53:6** All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Because Christ died for our sins, God can be true to Himself and yet still be merciful to us. When it comes to being merciful, this is our Lord's command to us.

**Luke 6:36** Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

In the Greek language, mercy is kindness or goodwill towards the miserable and the afflicted, joined with a desire to help them. When we show mercy, we are withholding justice from those who have injured us, and that is one aspect of Godliness. There is a fringe benefit for those of us who show mercy.

**Matthew 5:7** “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”

Total forgiveness is not devoid of self-interest.

**Proverbs 11:17** A man who is kind (merciful) benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself.

### **It is being gracious.**

True forgiveness shows grace and mercy at the same time. Graciousness is withholding certain facts you know to be true to leave your enemy’s reputation unscathed. Graciousness is shown by what you *don’t* say, even if what you could say would be true. Self-righteous people find it almost impossible to be gracious.

When a group of self-righteous religious leaders led a woman to Jesus who was found in the act of adultery, there was no question that a sin had taken place. But the Lord said, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” (John 8:7) And her accusers melted away. Jesus asked the woman, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (John 8:10) She replied, “No one, Lord.” (John 8:11) And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” (John 8:11)

The Lord’s attitude was to be gracious. Total forgiveness sometimes means overlooking what you perceive to be true that could be damaging to another person.

### **It is an inner condition.**

Total forgiveness must take place in the heart, or it is worthless. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). Bitterness in your heart will sooner or later be revealed in your speech.

This is why reconciliation is not essential for total forgiveness because forgiveness is an inward act of the heart of the one wronged. Even if you forgive someone in your heart of hearts, but they still do not want to speak to you, you can still have the inner victory. It may be easier to forgive when we know the one who wronged us is sorry for what they did. But if you must have this apology before you can forgive, you may never know victory over your bitterness.

**Luke 23:34** And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

If Jesus had waited until His enemies had felt shame or guilt for their actions, He might never have forgiven them.

Most people we must forgive do not even believe they have done anything wrong, or if they do know they did wrong, they believe the act was justified. Furthermore, they would probably be indignant that you had even thought they had done something wrong.

Total forgiveness must take place in the heart of the one wronged. If the one who hurt you doesn't want to continue a relationship with you, it is not your problem if you have forgiven them. In the end, the One we want to please is our Lord. He cares and knows if we have truly forgiven.

### **It is the absence of bitterness.**

Bitterness is an inward condition, an excessive desire for vengeance that comes from deep resentment.

**Ephesians 4:30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Bitterness is one of the most prevalent causes for God's children to miss out on the grace of God.

**Hebrews 12:15** See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.

When the Spirit is grieved, our fellowship with God is damaged, and we are on our own in Satan’s world. But if we confess our sins and rid ourselves of bitterness, the Spirit can once again work in our hearts and fill us with the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and make us more Christ-like.

Must you forgive? Absolutely, but that does not mean you will be close friends with the one who wronged you. You can forgive and yet see it as totally reasonable not to invite them to lunch every Sunday. The essential fact is that there is no trace of bitterness remaining. You will know if that bitterness is gone when there is no desire to get even or to punish the offender, you do nothing to damage their reputation, and you truly wish them well.

### **It is forgiving God.**

While it may not be obvious at first, our bitterness is ultimately traceable to a resentment of God. That you might feel that way is probably horrifying to most Christians. Why would you feel that way? You are harboring bitterness toward God because deep in our hearts, we believe that He is the one who allowed bad things to happen in our lives. He has allowed us to suffer when we did nothing wrong, or so it seems to a bitter heart.

Why does God allow evil in this world? This is a subject for a deeper study we will get into later, but the short answer is He does this in order that we may believe. It makes faith possible. Thus, it is related to our God-given free will.

**Romans 8:28** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

God can and does turn evil into blessing. We may not see that happening at the time, but often, when we look back on the event, it becomes obvious that, in the midst of the pain and suffering, God was working it out for our good, and we are made stronger for it.

## **It is forgiving ourselves.**

Many have said, "I know God forgives me, but I just can't forgive myself." Maybe you have even said this? There is no lasting joy in forgiveness if it does not include forgiving yourself. But what have you done that requires self-forgiveness? Did you, by deed or act, place yourself in a position to be hurt? That is accepting the blame for another's wrong. Or have you ever done something so utterly stupid that you hurt another or even caused hurt to yourself? Nobody ever beat themselves *up* to a better place. Self-forgiveness is essential to moving forward. We will discuss this subject in more detail later in this series.

## **Conclusion**

Total forgiveness is multifaceted. And each facet must be addressed in order to totally forgive. It may seem impossible, but we will see that it is not.