

FORGIVENESS

What is forgiveness?

Question: "What is forgiveness?"

Answer: Forgiveness in the Bible is a “release” or a “dismissal” of something. The forgiveness we have in Christ involves the release of sinners from God’s just penalty and the complete dismissal of all charges against us (see [Romans 8:1](#)). [Colossians 1:14](#) says that in God’s beloved Son “we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” The Amplified Bible translates the last phrase like this: “the forgiveness of our sins [and the cancellation of sins’ penalty].” God’s gracious forgiveness of our sin is to be the measure of our gracious forgiveness of others ([Ephesians 4:32](#)).

To some people, forgiveness may seem like weakness or letting an undeserving person win, but it has no connection to weakness or even to emotions. Instead, forgiveness is an act of the will. Forgiveness is not granted because a person deserves to be forgiven. No one deserves to be forgiven. Forgiveness is a deliberate act of love, mercy, and [grace](#). Forgiveness is a decision to not hold something against another person, despite what he or she has done to you.

What is forgiveness in relation to salvation?

Forgiveness is an integral part of salvation. When Jesus forgives us, our sins, trespasses, iniquities, and transgressions are erased, wiped off the record. Forgiveness of sin is comparable to financial debt being erased. When Jesus said, [“It is finished,”](#) from the cross ([John 19:30](#)), He was literally saying, “It is paid in full” (*tetelestai* in Greek). Jesus took the punishment we deserved, so, when God forgives us of our sins, we are free; we no longer live under that debt. Our sins are wiped out. God will never hold that sin against us ([Psalm 103:12](#)).

It is impossible to have salvation without forgiveness. Salvation is God’s

deliverance from the consequences of sin. God's salvation in Christ is the ultimate example of forgiveness. Have you accepted [forgiveness from God](#)?

What is forgiveness of others?

Forgiveness is also an essential part of the life of believers. [Ephesians 4:32](#) commands, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Similarly, [Colossians 3:13](#) says, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." The key in both passages is that we are to forgive others as God has forgiven us. Why do we forgive? Because we have been forgiven!

The Bible tells us that we are to forgive those who sin against us. We keep no record of wrongs ([1 Corinthians 13:5](#)) but forgive as many times as necessary ([Matthew 18:21–22](#)). Refusing to forgive a person demonstrates resentment, bitterness, and anger, none of which are the traits of a growing Christian.

God promises that, when we come to Him confessing our sin and asking for forgiveness, He freely grants it for the sake of Christ ([1 John 1:9](#)). Likewise, the forgiveness we extend to others should know no limits ([Luke 17:3–4](#)).

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In regards to forgiveness, is there a difference between willful sin and ignorant sin?

Question: "In regards to forgiveness, is there a difference between willful sin and ignorant sin?"

Answer: Though God makes a distinction between those who sin in ignorance and those who sin willfully ([Numbers 15:27-31](#)), repentance is always necessary to receive forgiveness ([Mark 1:15](#); [Acts 2:38](#); [Acts 26:18](#)). Repentance is literally a change in one's attitude about God and accompanies saving faith in Christ ([Acts 3:19](#); [20:21](#); [26:20](#)). Without it there can be no forgiveness. Jesus said, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" ([Luke 13:3](#); cf. [17:3-4](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#)).

To sin willfully is to be proud and presumptuous in one's defiance of God ([Psalm 19:13](#); [Hebrews 10:26](#)). Willful sins bring God's judgment, sooner or later, but sins of ignorance are not excusable, either: "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed" ([Ephesians 4:17-19](#); see also [Acts 3:17-19](#); [Acts 17:30-31](#)). Forgiveness is available to all, but we leave it to God's sovereign grace to cause the transgressor to truly repent in order to be pardoned ([Ephesians 2:4](#)).

Those who reject Jesus and His gospel in ignorance must accept Him in repentance in order to receive forgiveness of their sins. Jesus made this abundantly clear: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" ([John 14:6](#)). It doesn't matter whether someone

misses the way because of ignorance or because of willful rebellion—he has still missed the way.

People are not as ignorant as they may claim, however. No one can be utterly ignorant of God, and no one has an excuse to live in disobedience. The apostle Paul said, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” ([Romans 1:18-20](#)).

Though we may at times sin in ignorance, we can always be assured of God’s forgiveness. The apostle Paul is a classic example of this truth: “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief” ([1 Timothy 1:13](#)). Yet for those who willfully and habitually sin, Peter makes it clear that “if they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them” ([2 Peter 2:20-21](#)).

John gives us clarity on the matter of forgiveness: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” ([1 John 1:8-9](#)).

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How can I forgive those who sin against me?

Question: "How can I forgive those who sin against me?"

Answer: Everyone has been wronged, offended, and sinned against at some point. How are Christians to respond when such offenses occur against them? According to the Bible, we are to forgive others. [Ephesians 4:32](#) declares, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Similarly, [Colossians 3:13](#) proclaims, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." The key in both Scriptures is that we are to forgive fellow believers as God has forgiven us. Why do we forgive? Because we have been forgiven! Our forgiveness of others should reflect God's forgiveness of us.

In order to forgive those who sin against us, we must first of all understand God's forgiveness. God does not just forgive everyone automatically with no preconditions—if He did, there would be no [lake of fire](#) in [Revelation 20:14–15](#). Forgiveness, properly understood, involves [repentance](#) on the sinner's part and love and grace on God's part. The love and grace are there, but the repentance is often lacking. So, the Bible's command for us to forgive one another does not mean we ignore sin. It means we gladly, gracefully, lovingly extend forgiveness to those who repent. We are always willing to forgive when given the opportunity. Not just seven times, but "seventy times seven" times ([Matthew 18:22, KJV](#)). Refusing to forgive a person who requests it demonstrates resentment, bitterness, and anger, none of which are the traits of a true Christian.

To forgive those who sin against us requires patience and forbearance. The church has the command to "be patient with everyone" ([1 Thessalonians 5:14](#)). We should be able to overlook personal slights and minor offenses. Jesus said, "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, [turn to them the other cheek also](#)"

([Matthew 5:39](#)). Not every “slap in the face” needs a response.

To forgive those who sin against us requires the transformational power of God in our lives. There is something deep within fallen human nature that thirsts for revenge and urges retaliation in kind. We naturally want to inflict the same type of injury on the one who injured us—an eye for an eye seems only fair. In Christ, however, we have been given the power to love our enemies, do good to the haters, bless the cursers, and pray for the abusers (see [Luke 6:27–28](#)). Jesus gives us a heart that is willing to forgive and will work to that end.

Forgiving those who sin against us is made easier when we consider the extent to which God forgives our transgressions. We who have been lavished with grace have no right to withhold grace from others. We have sinned against God infinitely more than any person can sin against us. Jesus’ [parable](#) in [Matthew 18:23–35](#) is a powerful illustration of this truth.

God promises that, when we come to Him asking for forgiveness, He freely grants it ([1 John 1:9](#)). The grace we extend to those who seek our forgiveness should be just as readily available ([Luke 17:3–4](#)).

