

Steps to Totally Forgiving Others

Since forgiveness is a choice, what is the next step? If we are persuaded that it is right and have decided to do it (and not look back), what next?

1. Make the deliberate and irrevocable choice not to tell anyone what they did.

You may need to do this for therapeutic reasons, but only to one person who in turn will never reveal your heart. Jesus also said that the one who is faithful in the least thing is faithful also in much, and this is the first thing. Do not mention it; refuse to tell anybody.

This isn't necessarily easy sometimes, but when our motive is to hurt another person by telling on them, there is sin on our part. So do not tell it at all or in part; keep it quiet.

2. Be pleasant to them should you be around them.

Do not say or do anything that would make them anxious. Put them at ease. This can be hard to do, certainly harder than the first step. It is we who are afraid when we can't forgive. When we pass our fear to them, it is utterly the opposite of what Jesus would do. He would say, "Fear not." Josif Tson says that there are 366 statements of "Do not fear" (or the equivalent) in the Bible—"One for every day of the year and one for leap year!" he says. God does not want us to fear; we must not do or say anything to cause others to fear. Be nice. Put them at ease. This is what Jesus did when He turned up after His resurrection to 10 disciples behind closed doors. (See John 20:19).

3. If conversation ensues, say that which would set them free from guilt.

Guilt is most painful, and we can easily punish people by

sending them on a “guilt trip.” Never do that. Remember that Jesus doesn’t want us to feel guilty. When we are going to be Jesus to another, then we will not want them to be angry with themselves.

This is a hard one. We get some satisfaction when we think they feel really, really bad. That defuses us and eases our anger somewhat. But if we want to be valiant and utterly magnanimous—thus showing true godliness—we will say whatever is the equivalent of Joseph’s words: “Do not be angry with yourselves” (Gen. 45:5). Joseph would not allow his brothers to feel guilty, and this is a choice we too must make. It’s hard, but it is what we would want if things were reversed and we needed forgiveness. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31).

4. Let them feel good about themselves.

Not only does this mean never reminding them of their wrong and your hurt, but it also means helping them through any guilt they may have. This can be done without any reference to what they did. If it is not in the open, as with Joseph’s situation, that is of course different; he let his brothers save face by showing God’s sovereign strategy in their sin. But in many cases you will not be able to talk about anything specifically. You can still let them save face, because you know that they know what they did.

You therefore must behave as though you don’t even think they did anything wrong! That is hard for all of us, but it must be done. Say whatever you can (as long as it is true) that will give that person a sense of dignity. That is the point of Galatians 6:1: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.” As long as there is a trace of self-righteousness and pointing the finger, your attempt at total forgiveness will backfire.

5. Protect them from their greatest fear.

If you are aware of some deep, dark secret and fear they have, they will probably know that you know. If they can tell by your graciousness that their secret will never be revealed—ever—to anyone, they will be relieved. You only tell them when you know they know what you know, and you are convinced this would make them feel better. If by reminding them it would obviously not make them feel better, don't even come close!

Remember that Joseph knew his brothers' greatest fear was that their father, Jacob, would learn the truth of their evil deed. Joseph never mentioned this directly but suggested they speak to Jacob in such a way that they wouldn't have to tell him after all. (See Genesis 45:9-13.) It must have given the brothers incalculable relief to know that they were not obliged to tell Jacob. But that is what total forgiveness is all about: setting people free.

6. Keep it up today, tomorrow, this year and next.

Total forgiveness is a lifelong commitment. Some days will be easier than others. There will come a time when you think you are completely over it and have won a total victory—only to find the very next day Satan reminds you of what they did and the utter injustice that they will be unpunished and never exposed. The temptation to bitterness will emerge. After all, we're not perfect! If we say we have no sin—that we are incapable of the same old bitterness—we are deceived (1 John 1:8).

This is exactly why I read Luke 6:37 every day: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." All commitments to forgive need renewal. In my case, daily. I am not telling you that this is what you must do, but be warned: the devil is cunning. He will come through the back door unexpectedly and try to upset you for forgiving. When you forgave your enemy, you then and there removed that open invitation to the devil to get inside. Satan's favorite

rationale is bitterness—he therefore will keep trying to get back into your thought life.

Whether it be Luke 6:37 or another way forward in your case—even if you aren't required to keep it up each day—I can tell you right now that it is only a matter of time before your commitment to forgive will need to be renewed.

7. Pray for them.

“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). When you do this from the heart—praying for them to be blessed and off the hook—you're there. It is not a perfunctory prayer, not a “We commit them to You” prayer, and certainly not an “Oh God, please deal with them” prayer. It is praying that God will forgive them—that is, overlook what they have done and bless and prosper them as though they'd never sinned at all.

But as John Calvin said, doing this is “exceedingly difficult.” As Chrysostom said, it is the very highest summit of self-control. “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city” (Prov. 16:32).

Praying for the one who has hurt you or let you down is the greatest challenge of all, for all three reasons:

1. You take a route utterly against the flesh.
2. Nobody will ever know you are doing it.
3. Your heart could break when God answers that prayer and truly blesses them as if they'd never sinned.

And yet Jesus's word to pray for such people is not a polite suggestion; it is a command—and one that may seem so outrageous that you want to dismiss it out of hand. Some see it as a lofty but unrealistic goal.

I remember a church leader turning to me to pray about his son-in-law who had been unfaithful to the leader's daughter.

He said to me that his own prayer was only this: that God would “deal” with this man. “This is where I have to come to,” he said to me, “that God will deal with him.”

I understood what he meant, and I felt for him. I find what people do to our own offspring the hardest things to forgive. I therefore understood what he was feeling. A few days later it was reported that this leader’s son-in-law had been in a serious accident. This same church leader was on the phone, glad that the accident had happened. Now in this particular case there was nothing sinister in this euphoria. He simply hoped that the accident would wake up his son-in-law to put his marriage back together. It was so understandable.

But this is not what Jesus means. He is commanding us to pray that our enemy will be blessed. If, however, you should pray that they will be cursed or punished instead of being blessed, just remember that is how your enemy possibly feels about you. After all, have you ever been someone’s enemy? Have you ever done something that brought a fellow Christian to tears and brokenness? If so, how would you like that person to pray for you? That God will deal with you? That God will cause you to have an accident? Yet how would it make you feel if they prayed that you would be blessed and let off the hook? That you would prosper as if you’d never sinned? Would you not like that? “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31).

Jesus wants a sincere prayer from us. It is like signing your name to a document, having it witnessed, and never looking back. You are not allowed to tell the world, “Guess what I did? I have actually prayed for my unfaithful spouse to be blessed.” No. It is quiet. Only the angels witness it, but it makes God very happy.

After all, every parent wants their children to get along with one another. No parent likes it when one child comes and squeals on the other and demands that they be punished. The

poor parent is put on the spot. What gladdens the heart of every parent is when there is love and forgiveness, and the parent is not put on the spot to have to take sides and punish anyone. That is what we do for God when we ask that He bless and not curse. He told us to pray for our enemies, "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteousness" (Matt. 5:45).