

What Forgiveness in Your Marriage Means—And What It Doesn't

Your spouse has hurt you. Guaranteed. If you haven't been hurt by your spouse, you either got married five minutes ago (and you're not reading this!) or you're lying. There is absolutely no way you can connect your life that closely with another human being and not get hurt. The question now is, how can you forgive your spouse when they have hurt you?

When you hear the word “forgiveness” in the context of marriage, you likely have one of two reactions.

You cannot imagine forgiving your spouse for what they've done. You respond to your spouse with the kind of treatment you believe their shortcomings deserve. You internally keep score and feel justified in your less-than-loving behavior because of what your spouse has done to you. You may manipulate and control, using your spouse's weakness as a weapon to “keep them in line.”

Or you are resigned to suffering as you “forgive.” You feel somehow entitled to your misery because of how your spouse has treated you. You're determined to follow Jesus' command to forgive, and that means you've chosen to “take it.” Whether the offense is small or large, current or long past, you see your wounds as yours to bear. You think you are loving your spouse when you put up with their bad behavior.

Neither of those choices is forgiveness. You know deciding to wound your spouse in return for their wrongdoing is not forgiveness. But neither is the second choice—becoming resigned to suffering. Neither option gives any hope for restoration of your relationship.

Forgiveness Is This, Not That

Forgiveness is not an easy thing to learn, but once you do, it opens the door to amazing freedom, connection and love. I had to learn about forgiveness—as I believe everyone does—the hard way. Thankfully I had learned enough about forgiveness before I got married to make our marriage happy, but that doesn't mean it was easy. I believe you can learn how to forgive now—even if you're in the middle of a miserable marriage.

Forgiveness is not a feeling, nor is it pretending everything is OK. God doesn't pretend everything's OK when He forgives us—far from it! Our sin cost the life of His Son Jesus! God's forgiveness takes into account the seriousness of our wrongdoing.

But God's forgiveness didn't stop there. God's love found a way to restore relationship with us in spite of our wrongdoing. That restoration of relationship depends on our choice, but God did—and does—all in His power to make that happen.

Likewise in a marriage, forgiving your spouse is not pretending that everything is OK. It takes into account the seriousness of the wrong, and then through love it finds a way to let that wrong go and makes it possible for the relationship to be restored.

Just like with God's forgiveness of us, you forgive first, regardless of how the other person responds. But whether or not your relationship is restored then depends on your spouse's response.

How do you do that? Here are some suggestions.

Steps to Forgiveness

Forgiveness in marriage is not easy. In learning to forgive, here are some things that will help.

1. Look at yourself first. You have hurt your spouse too! You get no points for hurting them less than they hurt you; the point is that you have also done wrong. Then look at your wounds as well. If you refuse to acknowledge how you have been hurt you will end up in bitterness and resentment, not forgiveness. Own your own stuff—your weaknesses, how you have hurt your spouse, how your wounds have affected you, the ways in which you have responded to those wounds. Honesty can be painful, but it's absolutely necessary.

2. Look at your spouse next. They may have caused you pain unknowingly or by mistake; look at their heart, their intention. They may have hurt you because they were themselves hurt in some way; hurting people hurt people. Or they may have deliberately hurt you out of spite, fear, greed, lust or other evil. You probably won't understand your spouse perfectly, but looking at them in this way may allow you to see them with compassion.

3. Look longest at God. Spend plenty of time in God's presence, letting His forgiveness wash over you. Look at how Jesus forgave—freely, but then allowing the other person the choice about whether the relationship would continue. Allow God's grace, mercy, wisdom and courage to change your own heart and soul. Learn how God's forgiveness does not equal weakness. Learn what it means to trust God with the outcome when you forgive, and what it looks like to give the other person the respect of choosing what happens next.

Taking these steps does not guarantee your relationship will be restored. If your spouse is acting out with infidelity, addiction or violence, they will have to make a choice. Here is my discussion of the two questions to ask to know whether or not your marriage is salvageable.

Regardless of the magnitude of the wrong, I can promise that if you do *not* learn to forgive, you will never have a happy successful marriage—or life. You can choose misery, or you can

choose to do the hard work of learning to forgive the healthy way.

That's what healthy forgiveness in marriage is all about.

In what ways have you had to forgive your spouse? How well do you think you've done in that arena? Please leave your comments below. {eo}

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