



# Forgiving When It's Not Easy

**The Bible tells us to forgive unconditionally, but it doesn't say we are to forget immediately. Sometimes it takes time to rebuild the trust that's been lost.**

*by Matthew J. White*

One Bible story that stuck with me ever since I was a kid is the story about Peter asking Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who has sinned against him. Jesus first replies with what would seem to be an absurd number of times – "seventy times seven" – and then He follows with a parable about forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35).

Hearing this story as a child, I thought, "Man, 490 times? That's a lot of forgiving!" But, that's the point, isn't it? We are to never stop forgiving. And Jesus makes the point very clear that unless we forgive others, our Father in heaven will not forgive us. (Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 11:25)

## Forgiving the Unforgiveable

But, you may be thinking, "What if my spouse does something *unforgiveable*?" Jesus never said forgiving would be easy. But, He did say that we need to forgive, over and over again. There was no caveat that said to forgive only when the other person deserves it or to forgive if they ask for forgiveness. Matthew 6:15 says, "If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." This is serious business.

Unfortunately, I can speak from experience in this area. I was on the receiving end of forgiveness. For many years, I struggled with pornography. This was something that began as a teenager and had progressed into a full-fledged addiction that was present even before Anne and I were married. Yet, it was something I kept hidden from my wife and everyone else. It wasn't until just a few years ago that I shared my sin and addiction with Anne, after much personal pain and confession to God. It also meant I needed to come to terms with some issues of my past.

But, as that heavy weight was lifted off my shoulders, it became a tremendous burden for Anne. For so long, I had lied to her. I had hidden something from her. I had pretended to be something I wasn't. I was hypocritical. With every right, Anne felt betrayed. How could she trust me? How sad did this make her feel? She was disappointed. She was angry. She was hurt.

At this point, Anne could have chosen to walk out on me, and with every right, I think. I certainly didn't "deserve" to be forgiven. But, neither do any of us deserve God's forgiveness. He doesn't forgive us because we deserve it. He forgives us because He loves us; and that's exactly why Anne was able to forgive me.

## Forgiveness vs. Forget-ness

Now, that doesn't mean she just swept it under the rug and said, "Thanks for letting me know. Just don't let it happen again." Forgiveness does not mean "forget-ness." Being forgiven does not mean that your spouse will just forget about whatever it was that required the act of forgiving. Depending on the situation, it may require a time of healing, a time of rebuilding that trust you once had.

In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren says:

*Many people are reluctant to show mercy because they don't understand the difference between trust and forgiveness. Forgiveness is letting go of the past. Trust has to do with future behavior.*

*Forgiveness must be immediate, whether or not a person asks for it. Trust must be rebuilt over time. Trust requires a track record. If someone hurts you repeatedly, you are commanded by God to forgive them instantly, but you are not expected to trust them immediately, and you are not expected to continue allowing them to hurt you.<sup>1</sup>*

This doesn't mean that you can hold on to this like a trump card and play it every chance you get. "Remember that time when ... ?" That goes totally against Jesus' point of "seventy times seven." Just remember, God has forgiven you more times than you will ever have the opportunity to forgive someone else.

In my case, I understand that even today I am still rebuilding the trust that was lost due to my lack of honesty. But, I also know that Anne has truly forgiven me. It wasn't easy for her, but I am thankful that she has taken God's Word to heart by forgiving me in this ... and all the other stupid things I do every day that require forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup>Warren, Rick. The Purpose Driven Life. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002

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