



The Freedom of Forgiveness

**Learning how to surrender your
burdens, thoughts, and feelings to God**

You can use this Bible Study on your own or as part of a group. Go to <http://todayschristianwomanstore.com/biblestudies.html> to download **free** resources on how to lead a life-changing Bible study and tips for getting the most out of participating in small group experience.

Scripture Focus: Matthew 6:12–15; 18:21–35; Romans 3:23–26; 12:17–21; Isaiah 43:25

Article: “Keys to Forgiving” by Lewis B. Smedes, CHRISTIANITY TODAY

Everyone needs to learn how to forgive. We often try to forgive, yet we still feel tormented by hurt and anger. As this study shows, forgiveness is usually a process. We have to continually surrender our acts of anger, bitterness, and resentment and trust that God will help deliver us from the bondage of unforgiveness. Through his help, we can be victorious in discovering the freedom of full forgiveness.

This Today's Christian Woman Bible Study will help you deepen your faith as you dig into Scripture, reflect on the truth of God's Word, and take action steps to live out your faith as you embrace forgiveness. You can use this Today's Christian Woman Bible Study on your own as part of your personal spiritual growth, or you can use it in a group setting as you discuss God's Word with a community of friends and grow in faith together.

Connect

Option: If you'd like, begin your study with this interactive experience.

Divide the group into smaller groups of three or four. Give each group large sheets of paper or poster board, markers, old magazines to cut up for pictures, scissors, and tape. Every group should create a magazine ad. Assign half of the groups to develop an ad promoting forgiveness, while assigning the other half to develop an ad promoting unforgiveness. For example, a group's ad might say, "Forgiveness: Don't Leave Home Without It," or "Unforgiveness: The Natural Feeling." Then have groups present their ads, explaining why they chose the picture and slogan they did.

Get Ready

Before the study, read the article "Keys to Forgiving" (included at the end of this study). Or, if you'd prefer, begin your meeting by reading the article aloud as a group.



Open Up

No one enjoys the confrontation that has to take place in order to offer forgiveness and reconciliation. It can be awkward and is always painful, reminding us that when we enter into a friendship, we automatically open ourselves up for hurt and misunderstandings. But from the beginning of the book of Genesis, we understand that God has created us to be in relationships with each other—to love and encourage each other in our walk with the Lord. We need to acknowledge that from time to time we are hurt by our friends. When those times arise, we need to know how to forgive.

- >> What stands out most to you from the article "Keys to Forgiveness"? Why?
- >> In his book *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes describes the way we sometimes feel: "I'll never understand why you did that. There is no understanding it. You didn't have to do what you did. . . . You did it of your own free will, and I hate you for it—at least I hate that part of you; and I blame you for it. I can't get over it or excuse it or understand it." Imagine you're having coffee with a friend who just admitted to having these feelings toward someone. What would you think is at the root of her feelings? What advice would you offer?

>> What do you think is the hardest aspect of forgiving someone? What makes that so difficult?

Seek

Before launching into your time of Scripture exploration, pause as a group to pray. Express your desire to seek out God's truth in his Word and to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit during your discussion.

Discover

If we refuse to forgive, we have no claim on God's forgiveness.

Read **Matthew 18:21–35**.

Not only does this passage bring up the issue of God's relentless forgiveness, but it also informs Peter how often Jesus expects him to forgive others: seventy times seven! And this truth still applies to us today. Jesus shared with Peter the parable of the unforgiving debtor who had his debt forgiven by the king, yet the man failed to show that same mercy and forgiveness to his own servant who asked for mercy shortly after. Jesus finished the parable claiming that God would punish anyone who, like the unforgiving debtor, would refuse to forgive her brothers or sisters.

This raises the question of how God treats people who do not forgive. Some scholars read Jesus' words literally, meaning that by not forgiving, you actually block the forgiveness God wants to give you. Others say that God's forgiveness is established by Christ's death and cannot be hindered. Jesus is using hyperbole to communicate that if you don't forgive, God will chastise you.

Either way, the irreducible meaning of Jesus' words about forgiveness is simple and shocking: If we don't forgive, something goes terribly wrong in our relationship with God.

>> What is your initial reaction to what Jesus says in Matthew 18:35, "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse

Optional Activity

Break up into pairs. Bring in a tray of different bitter foods (radish, unsweetened chocolate, tonic water, and so on). Let each person choose which food she would like to taste. Brainstorm with your partner different ways that unforgiveness can bring bitterness into our hearts. Be prepared to share your discoveries with the larger group.

to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart”? Why do you think you reacted that way?

- >> Read **Matthew 6:12-15**. What does this passage add to your understanding of the teaching in Matthew 18? What is the implication of God not forgiving your sins if you don't forgive other people's sins?

Forgiveness requires that we surrender the right to get even.

Read **Romans 12:17-21**.

Paul talked about how we, as Christians, are to interact with those who have wronged or hurt us. We are to live at peace with others and wish them well—to the point of meeting the needs of our enemies! His instruction is so counter-cultural that it would seem foolish to non-Christians. Yet God has called his followers to love, and he has claimed revenge as his own.

Read **Romans 3:23-26**.

We often think that the one who wrongs us deserves to suffer as much as we did from her actions, but this is not how God sees our sins. As Christians, Christ's sacrifice on the cross paid the debt we owed to God because of our sins. Although there are often earthly consequences for our sins, God offers us the free gift of forgiveness made possible through Jesus' death and resurrection. When we choose to forgive, we surrender our right to get even and place the outcome of the matter in God's hands, whatever that may be.

- >> Smedes writes in *Forgive and Forget* that “forgiveness is a miracle. It breaks through the normal calculus of morality that calls for evenhandedness and balance. Forgiving is always a decision to put up with an uneven score.” Think back on a time when you had to forgive someone. In what ways do you see your forgiveness as a miracle?
- >> What happens to a person who refuses to forgive? What affect does that decision have on her life?
- >> Smedes writes that forgiveness requires three basic actions: (1) We surrender our right to get even, (2) We rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer, and (3) We wish our wrongdoer well. Which of those steps have you found the most difficult, and why?

Forgiving does not require forgetting.

People often say, “But how can I forget what that person did? I can’t get those words and pictures out of my mind because they are now a part of my past.” While this might be true, we are asking the wrong question.

Instead we should be asking how God “forgets” every time we sin against him. As Smedes points out, God said in Isaiah 43:25, “I—yes, I alone—will blot out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again.” How does God do it? We know that God has perfect knowledge and, therefore, a flawless memory. As a result, the only way God cannot remember your sins is by him choosing not to remember. As humans, we don’t have that same divine capability. But while we most likely will never fully forget that painful memory, we are still called to forgive and not hold it against the person.

- >> When we take time to remember and reflect on certain painful memories, sometimes we can learn from our experiences—what we should do differently next time or what to avoid. Brainstorm other different benefits you might receive from remembering and reflecting on certain situations that were difficult.
- >> In what ways can we “dethrone” and “detoxify” a painful memory?
- >> What is the difference between seeing a person as an enemy and seeing that person as someone who did an evil act? Have you personally had to make that shift? Share the steps that you had to take in order to make that change.

Change

Forgiveness is not easy. It takes continual surrender on our end to give up our right to feel angry, bitter, or resentful. But sometimes in the midst of going through the process of forgiveness, we recognize that we are also complex, weak, confused, and fragile people. We are called to forgive even when we feel like we can’t—because not only is it important that we love others as God has called us to, but it is also important that we are set free from the bondage of unforgiveness. Remember, God is the one who equips us with the ability to forgive and frees us. He is our Redeemer.

- >> Think about a time when you had to forgive. How did forgiving the one who wronged you free you? How did becoming free affect the way you interacted with that person?

- >> We are commanded to forgive for our own good, but it is often so difficult to do. Brainstorm specific ways to encourage each other when you go through times that require forgiveness.
- >> In light of all you've read and discussed, what's one attitude, action, or pattern in your life that you sense God is leading you to change?

Take Action

Choose one of the following steps you'll do after the study to apply God's Word to your life.

- ▶ Select one of the passages you read during this study and commit it to memory. Make a daily habit of meditating on that passage from Scripture, inviting God to impress his truth upon your heart.
- ▶ On a piece of paper, write the name of someone you are struggling to forgive. Then describe what that person did and how it makes you feel. Fold the paper up and hold it in your hands as you offer the situation to God in prayer. Ask God to help you forgive as he forgives: utterly and completely. Then tear up the paper or burn it to represent your commitment to grow in forgiveness.
- ▶ Confess your unforgiveness to a close Christian friend who can hold you accountable in your effort to forgive. If you are dealing with a more serious matter like abuse or addiction, consider seeing a Christian counselor to work through these issues and move toward forgiveness.

Commit

Form pairs in your group; as partners, pray for each other's relationships. Ask God to give the strength and humility to forgive. Pray that your love will overflow more and more as you continue to grow in your faith and to glorify God in your life.



Explore More

Want to dig deeper into this topic? Check out these articles and online resources.

- >> **An Ugly Falling Out** from TodaysChristianWoman.com
- >> **No Ordinary Forgiveness** from TodaysChristianWoman.com
- >> **The Power of Forgiveness in Marriage** from TodaysChristianWoman.com
- >> **Learning to Forgive** from TodaysChristianWoman.com
- >> **Forgiveness** from TodaysChristianWoman.com

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Keys to Forgiving

By Lewis B. Smedes



Jesus was unequivocal on this point: As his followers, we are required to forgive those who sin against us (**Matthew 6:15**). But what if we don't feel like we have forgiven them? How do we know if we have truly forgiven? Forgiveness is a divine characteristic, and only God is able to equip us with the strength to forgive. But forgiving, and knowing that we've truly forgiven, comes easier when we understand six realities of forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness is a redemptive response to having been wronged and wounded. This is simple but important. Only those who have wronged and wounded us are candidates for forgiveness. If they injure us accidentally, we excuse them. We tend to only lack the willingness to forgive the ones who intentionality hurt us.

2. Forgiveness requires three basic actions. First, we surrender our right to get even. Every victim is sure that the victimizer deserves to suffer at least as much as he made the victim suffer. But that is not necessarily so. "The wages of sin (wronging God) is death" (Romans 6:23), but the payment was made through the death of God's own son Jesus. The blood of Jesus Christ covers all of our sins, but each of us must do personal business with God in order to experience his forgiveness. When we forgive, we place the outcome of the matter in God's hands and often choose to live with the scales unbalanced.

Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer. When we have been badly injured and clearly wronged, we make an instant caricature of the person who did it to us. We define her totally by the wrong she did. If she betrayed us, her total being is reduced to her betrayal. When we forgive, we rediscover that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person—not all that different from us.

And third, we wish our wrongdoer well. We not only surrender our right to revenge against him; we desire good things to happen to him. We bless him. This is unnatural and seems almost too much to ask, yet this is how God forgives us; he not only surrenders his right to see us punished, but he graces us with whatever blessing is right for us.

3. Forgiving takes time. God can forgive in a single breath, but we need time. Just before he died, C.S. Lewis wrote: “I think I have at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it.” Maybe, had he lived longer, he would have had to do it again.

4. Forgiving does not require forgetting. In the natural course of things we are stuck with our past and its effects on us. We may learn from our history, but we cannot escape it. We may forget our history, but we cannot undo it. We may be doomed to repeat our history, but we cannot change it. Our history is an inevitable component of our being. We can dethrone our past, and we can refuse to let it control our lives. We can detoxify the past, and we can purge its poison from our souls. But only one thing can release us from the grip of our past. That one thing is forgiveness.

5. Ideally, forgiving leads to reconciliation. But we often have to put up with less than the ideal. Sometimes the forgiven person will not want to be reunited with us. Perhaps he won't even want anything to do with us! Though he is forgiven, he may not be changed. If he is reunited with us, he may hurt us again, but it is a risk we are called to take.

6. Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven. Nothing enables us to forgive like knowing in our hearts that we have been forgiven. This is probably why Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us” (Matthew 6:12). Jesus implies that it is unthinkable for a forgiven person to refuse to forgive. If we do refuse, he says later, we have no claim on God's forgiveness. But remember, he does not expect perfect forgiving; he is the only expert at it.

By God's grace we participate in his power to change the past and control the future. We, too, can forgive, and must forgive. Indeed, by forgiving we become most powerfully human and most wonderfully free.

When you forgive someone, you slice away the wrong from the person who did it. You disengage that person from her hurtful act. You recreate her. At one moment you identify her as the person who wronged you—the one you can't seem to forget or forgive. The next moment you change that identity. She is remade in your memory.

Forgiveness has taken place when you feel a burden lifted and start to see the person you forgave differently—you will feel the power to wish them well. You will think of him now not as the person who hurt you, but as a person who needs you. You feel him now not as the person who alienated you, but as the person who belongs to you. Once you branded him as a person powerful in evil, but now you see him as a person

weak in his needs. You recreated your past by recreating the person whose wrong made your past painful.

You do not change who she is. What she did sticks to who she is. Her wrong is glued to her. But when you recreate her in your own memory, there, within you, she has been altered by spiritual surgery. When you pull off forgiveness, you do the one thing—the only thing—that can remedy the inevitability of painful history. The grace to do it is from God. The decision to do it is our own.

—The late Lewis B. Smedes was professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* (Ballantine). This article was adapted from “Keys to Forgiveness” and “The Power to Change the Past,” from CHRISTIANITY TODAY in December 2001 and December 2002.

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