

# What Is Forgiveness?

THE BIBLE'S ANSWER:

Forgiveness is the act of pardoning an offender. In the Bible, the Greek word translated “forgiveness” literally means “to let go,” as when a person does not demand payment for a debt. Jesus used this comparison when he taught his followers to pray: *“Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is in debt to us.”* (Luke 11:4) Likewise, in his parable of the unmerciful slave, Jesus equated forgiveness with canceling a debt. [Matthew 18:23-35](#)

We forgive others when we let go of resentment and give up any claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered. The Bible teaches that unselfish love is the basis for true forgiveness, since love “does not keep account of the injury.” [1 Corinthians 13: 4, 5](#)

What forgiveness does not mean:

- 1. Condoning the offense.** The Bible actually condemns those who claim that bad actions are harmless or acceptable. [Isaiah 5:20](#)
- 2. Pretending that the offense never happened.** God forgave King David of serious sins, but he did not shield David from the consequences of his actions. God even had David’s sins recorded so that they are remembered today. [2 Samuel 12:9-13](#)
- 3. Allowing others to take advantage of you.** Suppose, for example, that you loan money to someone, but he wastes it and then cannot repay you as he had promised. He is very sorry and apologizes to you. You could choose to forgive him by not harboring resentment, not rehashing the matter with him continually, and perhaps even canceling the debt altogether. However, you might also choose not to loan him any more money. [Psalm 37:21](#); [Proverbs 14:15](#); [22:3](#); [Galatians 6:7](#)
- 4. Pardoning with no valid basis.** God does not forgive people who are guilty of willful, malicious sin and who refuse to acknowledge their mistakes, change their ways, and apologize to those whom they have hurt. ([Proverbs 28:13](#); [Acts 26:20](#); [Hebrews 10:26](#)) Such unrepentant ones become God’s enemies, and he does not require us to forgive those whom he has not forgiven. [Psalm 139:21, 22](#)

## What Is Forgiveness? (Continued)

What if you are the victim of cruel mistreatment by someone who refuses to apologize or even admit to what he has done? The Bible advises: *“Let go of anger and abandon rage.”* (Psalm 37:8) While not excusing the error, you can refuse to be **consumed with anger**. Trust that God will bring the person to account. (Hebrews 10:30, 31) You can also take comfort in knowing that God will bring a time when we will no longer feel the deep pain or hurt that may burden us now. [Isaiah 65:17](#); [Revelation 21:4](#)

- **“Forgiving” every perceived slight.** Sometimes, rather than pardoning a so-called offender, we may need to admit that we had no valid cause for being offended in the first place. The Bible says: *“Do not be quick to take offense, for the taking of offense is the mark of a fool.”* [Ecclesiastes 7:9](#)

How to forgive someone:

1. **Remember what forgiveness involves.** You are not condoning the wrong or acting as if it never happened – you are simply letting it go.
2. **Recognize the benefits of forgiving.** Letting go of anger and resentment can help you to keep calm, improve your health, and increase your happiness. ([Proverbs 14:30](#); [Matthew 5:9](#)) Even more important, forgiving others is a key to receiving God’s forgiveness for your own sins. [Matthew 6:14, 15](#)
3. **Be empathetic.** All of us are imperfect. ([James 3:2](#)) Just as we appreciate being forgiven, we should likewise forgive the mistakes of others. [Matthew 7:12](#)
4. **Be reasonable.** When we have a minor cause for complaint, we can apply the Bible’s counsel: *“Continue putting up with one another.”* [Colossians 3:13](#)
5. **Act quickly.** Work to forgive as soon as you can rather than letting your anger fester. [Ephesians 4:26, 27](#)