



## **Biblical Forgiveness, Amends and Reconciliation**

We were created for relationships with God and with others. Yet, sin breaks fellowship with God and with others. Sin creates debt in our relationships. The Bible says, “... the wages of sin is death” (Romans 3:23). When someone hurts us, we feel “owed” an apology. We try to “pay back” those who harm us. When we sin against others, we may feel the need to “make up” for damage we have caused.

It is critical to know God’s peace process—forgiveness, amends and reconciliation—if we are to experience God’s peace. Each part of this process is distinct and necessary for living in God’s will. Christians are called to be peacemakers like Christ (Hebrews 12:14-15). Peacemakers will be blessed (Matthew 5:9).

### **Understand Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is God’s command. Christ taught us to ask the Father to forgive us as we have forgiven others (Matthew 6:12). Paul wrote that we are to forgive others as Christ forgave us (Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:8-14). Christ’s forgiveness of sin was radical; He asked the Father to forgive the people crucifying him (Luke 23:33-24)! If God’s forgiveness of our sins is how we should forgive others, we must accurately understand biblical forgiveness. To better understand forgiveness, it is often helpful to examine some misunderstandings:

- **Forgiveness is not excusing sin.** There is no excuse for sin. God hates sin (Hebrews 1:9) and demands death as justice for all sin (Romans 6:23). Christ died for sin (Hebrews 9:22–28). Sin is never okay.
- **Forgiveness is not freeing the guilty of a demand for justice.** All sin must be paid for. Forgiveness transfers your demands for justice to God for him to execute in His time (Hebrews 10:29–31).
- **Forgiveness is not denying your hurt or ignoring your anger.** Forgiveness frees you to work through pain honestly. You should be hurt and angered by sin—God is. God’s wrath was poured out on Christ and it will be poured out again on those who reject Christ (John 3:35–36; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–9).
- **Forgiveness is not a feeling and is not conditional.** It is a decision between you and God without conditions.
- **Forgiveness is not forgetting.** To forgive, you must remember—remember the offense, Christ’s suffering for sin, God’s forgiveness you, God’s coming judgment, and your decision to transfer justice to God.
- **Forgiveness is not trust.** Forgiving the past does not mean someone is trustworthy for the future. Forgiveness is a gift but trust is earned (or rebuilt) by consistent trustworthy behavior.
- **Forgiveness is not reconciliation.** You can forgive someone who is unwilling or unable to reconcile. Forgiveness is a transaction between you and God alone.

Christ paid the debt of sin with God—your debt, but also the world’s debt (1 John 2:2, Colossians 2:13-14). The Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice as payment for sin for all who receive it as their own (Hebrews 7:27). God transferred His demand for justice from us to Jesus (John 1:29). Sin was not excused; Christ paid sins’ debt in full.

**To forgive as you have been forgiven is not giving up your demand for justice; it is transferring your claim for justice to God**—trusting that Christ’s blood was enough payment for your sins and for the sins against you. When you forgive others, releasing your claims for justice to God, others’ no longer owe you, but rather, they owe God. If they reject Christ, God’s vengeance for sin awaits them (Romans 12:19-21). If they receive Christ, God’s wrath for sin poured out on Christ is adequate payment for all of their sin—even for their sin against you.

The decision to forgive is between you and God alone. Christ already suffered for sin. You can forgive the one who hurt you before they make amends with you, or even if they never make amends. You can forgive even if you are not reconciled with that person. You can even forgive someone already dead.

**Forgiveness prayer:** “Dear God, I am facing the truth of how I have been hurt by [list the offense]. I know you are aware of my suffering and care about my pain. Please heal me; I am releasing my wounds to you. I know that your judgments are perfect. You want all to repent of sin and receive forgiveness through Christ, just as I received your gift of forgiveness. So, I choose to forgive [name]. I give my claims for justice to you. I surrender my rights for apologies, revenge, bitterness or using this sin to my advantage. These debts are now yours. I accept your justice for sin as my own. Jesus, thank you for paying my debts and becoming a peace offering to the world—even to those who have hurt me! Help me love [name] by the power of the Holy Spirit in me.”

### **Understand Making Amends**

Making amends, like forgiveness, is a one-way transaction. It is the second step of the peacemaking process. It is a personal effort to pursue peace with another by taking responsibility for your sin, attempting to repair sin’s damage to open a door of reconciliation. A biblical amends makes no excuses for sin and carries no expectations from others—even if your offense is a very small part of a conflict with someone.

The Bible commands us to strive for peace with everyone (Hebrews 12:14, Romans 12:17-18), to owe nothing to others except love (Romans 13:8). We are to handle conflict by dealing with our part of the conflict first. When we honestly address our sin without excuse, then we will see clearly to address another’s sin (Matthew 7:2-5). Making amends is not taking all responsibility for a conflict or excusing someone else’s sin. It is taking responsibility for all of your sin in the conflict without excusing anyone’s sin.

Characteristics of a biblical amends include a humble attitude, an honest and specific confession of your sin, an apology, a request for forgiveness, willingness to make reasonable restitution for the damage of your sin, readiness to share Christ and personal steps to change your own sin pattern. Poor reasons for making amends include a desire to draw out a confession of sin from another person, to restore your image, to make someone like you, to be heard or to further wound someone.

Here is an example of making amends between a wife and her husband: “Jack, I must ask your forgiveness. I have been harming our marriage. I have realized that when I disagree with you, I often try to control you. I keep my distance emotionally and physically rather than try to understand and partner with you. That is why I turned you down for sex the other night and have not been kind this week. My actions are sinful. I am sorry for my selfishness. I am sorry that I let fears affect our relationship. Will you forgive me? From now on, I will try to talk with you when I disagree. I want to honor you and Christ and move forward with you.”

## Understand Reconciliation

Reconciliation is the final stage of peacemaking. Reconciliation is agreement between people that debts are settled. Nothing more is owed for past sin, and past sin does not prevent a healthy relationship in the future. Forgiveness and amends are one-way transactions; but reconciliation requires that both persons agree about their wrongs and both take the necessary steps to repair sins' damage. Full reconciliation will not occur until both agree about the nature of sin and what it will take to settle it. You can forgive someone, make amends for your sin, yet remain unreconciled because the other person is not willing or able to deal with sin biblically.

Love puts God's interest and the long-term best interest of others first. It is God's desire for people to reconcile with him. It is more important for someone to reconcile with God than with you. However, it is also God's desire for our relationships to become what he intended for us. When we are personally reconciled to God and reconciled to one another according to God standards, then we will experience godly fellowship together.

God wants to use those who have experienced reconciliation with Him as his ambassador so that others can be reconciled with him too (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). Sometimes God's greatest ambassadors of reconciliation are those who have been most injured by sin. Victims of sin, who can lovingly confront others' sin against them, yet offer the same mercy, grace and reconciliation with God that they have received through Christ to those who have caused harm, will be blessed as "sons [or daughters] of God" (Matthew 5:9).

When attempting to reconcile, deal with your side of the relationship first—examine your motives, forgive the sin against you and make amends for your sin (1 Timothy 1:5, Ephesians 4:32, Matthew 7:2-5). Next, consider whether the offense can be overlooked (Proverbs 19:11). If the offense is seriously dishonoring to God, seriously damaging to a relationship, continuing to hurt people or the offender himself, the offense can't be overlooked.

When confronting sin, follow Matthew 18:15-17. First go privately to that person to tell him his sin. If he listens, you have won your brother; help him walk through recovery from sin. If he does not listen, widen the circle; bring one or two trusted friends when you come back to him. If he still does not listen, then involve the church (Christians who are part of the solution: close community, ministry leaders, clergy). If he does not listen to the church, treat him as someone who is not following the faith. Jesus told us to love and pray for those who sin against us or who do not follow our faith (Matthew 5:44–45). Our message is the same to Christians in rebellion as it is to non-Christians: reconcile with God; it is possible through Christ.

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