

## Lesson 17

### Forgiveness

**Principle 6:** Evaluate all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for harm I've done to others, except when to do so would harm them or others.

“Happy are the merciful.” (Matthew 5:6) “Happy are the peacemakers.” (Matthew 5:9)

**Step 8:** We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:31)

**Step 9:** We made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:23–24)

### Introduction

Tonight we are going to continue to work on evaluating all of our relationships. We will offer forgiveness to those who have hurt us and, when possible, make amends for the harm we've done to others, without expecting anything in return.

We have discussed how to make your amends, but tonight I would like to talk about something that can block, stall, or even destroy your recovery: the inability to accept and offer *forgiveness*.

I think we all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.

A guy once told me, “John, you won't catch me getting ulcers. I just take things as they come. I don't ever hold a grudge, not even against people who have done things to me that I'll never forgive.” Right!

I saw this sign on a company bulletin board: “To err is human; to forgive is not company policy.”

There are a lot of jokes about forgiveness, but forgiveness is not something that those of us in recovery can take lightly, because forgiveness is clearly God’s prescription for the broken. No matter how great the offense or abuses, along the path to healing lies forgiveness.

We all know that one of the roots of compulsive behavior is pain—buried pain.

In Principle 1 we learned that pretending the hurt isn’t there or that it doesn’t bother you anymore won’t solve your problems. Jeremiah 6:14 (TLB) reminds us that “You can’t heal a wound by saying it’s not there!”

Facing your past and forgiving yourself and those who have hurt you, and making amends for the pain that you have caused others is the only lasting solution. Forgiveness breaks the cycle! It doesn’t settle all the questions of blame, justice, or fairness, but it does allow relationships to heal and possibly start over.

So tonight let’s talk about the three kinds of forgiveness.

## **Forgiveness**

In order to be completely free from your resentments, anger, fears, shame, and guilt, you need to give and accept *forgiveness* in all areas of your lives. If you do not, your recovery will be stalled and thus incomplete.

The first and most important forgiveness is extended from God to us. Have you accepted God’s forgiveness? Have you accepted Jesus’ work on the cross? By his death on the cross, all our sins were canceled, paid in full; a free gift for those who believe in Him as the true and only Higher Power, Savior, and Lord.

Jesus exclaimed from the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). No matter how grievously we may have injured others or ourselves, the grace of God is always sufficient! His forgiveness is always complete!

Romans 3:22–25 (GNB) says, “God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ. God does this to all who believe in Christ, because there is no difference at all: everyone has sinned and is far away from God’s saving presence. But by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with him through Jesus Christ, who sets them free. God offered him so that by his sacrificial death he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him.”

Remember, if God wasn’t willing to forgive sin, heaven would be empty.

The second kind of forgiveness is extended from us to others. Have you forgiven others who have hurt you? This type of forgiveness is a process. You need to be willing to be willing, but to be truly free, you must let go of the pain of the past harm and abuse caused by others.

Forgiveness is all about letting go. Remember playing tug-of-war as a kid? As long as the people on each end of the rope are tugging, you have a war. You “let go of your end of the rope” when you forgive others. No matter how hard they may tug on their end, if you have released your end, the war is over. It is finished! But until you release it, you are a prisoner of war!

Think about who your anger is hurting most. I’ll give you a hint. It’s you! Forgiveness enables you to become fully freed from your anger and allows you to move forward positively in those relationships.

The Bible has a lot to say about forgiveness. Romans 12:17–18 says, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

Causing an injury puts you *below* your enemy. Revenging an injury makes you *even* with him. Forgiving him sets you one *above* him. But more importantly, it sets you free!

By the way, on your list of “others to forgive,” you might have forgotten about someone you may need to forgive: God. Yes, you heard me right. God.

God cannot and does not sin. His very nature is marked by perfect holiness in every attribute and action. God is perfect in love, mercy, and grace. But remember that He loved us so much that He gave us a free will. He didn't want us to be His puppets. He wanted us to love Him as our choice. You need to understand and believe that the harm others did to you was from their free will. It was their choice, not God's. It was *not* God's will. Once you understand “free will” you will understand that your anger toward God has been misplaced.

His promise is found in 1 Peter 5:10 (PH): “After you have borne these sufferings a very little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to share in his eternal splendor through Christ, will himself make you whole and secure and strong.”

If you have been the victim of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or childhood emotional abuse or neglect, I am truly sorry for the pain you have suffered. I hurt with you. But you will not find the peace and freedom from your perpetrators until you are able to forgive them. Remember, forgiving them in no way excuses them for the harm they caused you, but it will release you from the power they have had over you. I have rewritten Steps 8 and 9 of the 12 Steps for you.

Step 8. Make a list of all persons who have harmed us and become willing to seek God's help in forgiving our perpetrators, as well as forgiving ourselves. Realize we've also harmed others and become willing to make amends to them.

Step 9. Extend forgiveness to ourselves and to others who have perpetrated against us, realizing this is an attitude of the heart, not always confrontation. Make direct amends, asking forgiveness from those people we have harmed, except when to do so would injure them or others.

To recap, we need to accept God's forgiveness by accepting what Jesus did for us on the cross, and we need to forgive and ask forgiveness of others. The last kind of forgiveness is perhaps the most difficult for us to extend.

We need to forgive ourselves. Have you forgiven yourself? You can forgive others, you can accept God's forgiveness, but you may feel the guilt and shame of your past is just too much to forgive.

This is what God wants to do with the darkness of your past: "Come, let's talk this over! says the Lord; no matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you white as wool! If you will only let me help you" (Isaiah 1:18-19, TLB).

No matter how unloved or worthless you may feel, God loves you! Your feelings about yourself do not change His love for you one bit.

Let me ask you a question: If God Himself can forgive you, how can you withhold forgiveness from yourself? In fact, I believe that we must forgive ourselves before we can honestly forgive others. The first name on your amends list needs to be God, the second needs to be yours. Why?

The answer is found in Matthew 22:36-40, where Jesus was asked,

"Which is the most important command?" Jesus replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. The second most important is similar: 'Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.'"

Now how can you love or forgive your neighbor, if you can't love or forgive yourself? If you have not forgiven yourself, your forgiveness to others may be superficial, incomplete, and done for the wrong motives.

Self-forgiveness is not a matter of assigning the blame to someone else and letting yourself off the hook. It's not a license for irresponsibility. It is simply an acknowledgment that you are human like everybody else and that you've reached the stage in your recovery where you are able to give yourself greater respect.

### **Wrap-up**

As you take the necessary steps of forgiveness, you will discover that you are letting go of the guilt and shame. You'll be able to say, "I'm not perfect, but God and I are working on me. I still fall down, but with my Savior's help, I can get up, brush myself off, and try again.

We can say, "I forgive myself because God has already forgiven me, and with His help, I can forgive others."

When you forgive yourself, you don't change the past, but you sure do change the future!