

How to Ask for Forgiveness

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Refusing to forgive is like a terminal disease in one's soul. But, on the other hand, one who lavishly and biblically forgives finds healing, joy, and peace after even the most heinous of crimes. One may think saying: "I *can't* forgive him" or "I'd *never* forgive that guy" may give power but it actually serves to the contrary — it enslaves. In reality, unforgiveness is being enslaved to resentment, bitterness, and ungodliness. Thus, to refuse to forgive is, in a word, sinful.

A number of helpful elements can be incorporated in asking for forgiveness. For example, one could say something like: "I have sinned against you because I . . . Will you please forgive me?" Then pause and wait for them to respond.

Asking for forgiveness should include *three helpful parts*. Let me briefly speak to each in turn.

I. Acknowledge Your Sin.

To begin by affirming that you have sinned is a humble and necessary way of asking for forgiveness. Forgiveness is needed when a party has sinned. When sin happens, acknowledgement must follow. This is confession. This is agreeing that you have erred. To acknowledge your sin is to let the person who was offended know that you realize that you have sinned against them (and, ultimately, against God first). To say: "I apologize" does not have any scriptural warrant and is nowhere exemplified in the Bible. To apologize does not make amends to a sin that has been committed. One must acknowledge, affirm, confess, and bluntly state it outright to the offended party. This is where confession begins. This is where asking for forgiveness starts. One must say: "I have sinned."

Then, to specifically spell out how you sinned against the person is even better because it shows them that you know how you sinned against them. It does not allow for any pride. True acknowledgement of sin affirms *how* you have sinned — however grievous or despicable it may be. Thus, one could say: "I have sinned against you by slandering you to. . ." This kind of specific acknowledgement is demonstrated by the prodigal son when he says: "Father, I have sinned against heaven before you" (Luke 15:18).

II. Ask to be Forgiven.

After one has humbly affirmed the sin and acknowledged the sin to the person who was offended, the reconciliation must include the specific statement where the person who offended asks for forgiveness. This must be done. The transaction of forgiveness depends on this question. The person who committed the sin must ask the offended party the question: "*will you forgive me?*" To refrain from asking for forgiveness is to be steeped in pride. To not ask for forgiveness is to underestimate the sinfulness of the sin. When the offender has sinned against another person (or persons), he should humbly, bluntly, and explicitly say: "will you forgive me?"

III. Wait for a Response.

When the person has acknowledged his sin and asked to be forgiven, he must patiently wait for the offended party to respond with a verbal answer. If the person says: “yes” then the transaction has occurred and forgiveness has been granted and biblical restoration has taken place. If the person says “no” then the one who committed the offense should pray fervently and humbly for the offended one to realize the burden of unforgiveness.

Why should people go through this process? The very gospel of Jesus Christ is pictured beautifully or blurred terribly based upon how the transaction of forgiveness occurs.

Ephesians 4:29-30 29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. 30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

True believers have been sealed by the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation which guarantees their future inheritance (Eph 4:30). No unwholesome words should come out of the believer’s mouth. Rather, he should only speak words that are good for upbuilding and words that are timely (Eph 4:29). But when this does not happen, he must ask for forgiveness. If there is no asking for forgiveness, then the Holy Spirit is grieved (Eph 4:30). The Spirit is sorrowed when a believer whom He indwells will not humbly acknowledge his sin to another person.

Along the same lines, the person who was offended should be eager to forgive the penitent person who asks for forgiveness. Resentment should have no place in the life of the eternally forgiven saint.

Ephesians 4:31-32 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Paul brings the gospel to bear at this point. When sin has occurred and a breach in a relationship has happened, there should never be any allowance (at all!) of bitterness, wrath, anger, (loud) clamor or slander. A believer should continually strive to eradicate these sins from his life entirely. In putting aside those vices, the believer should be overly willing to show kindness to another person and tender-heartedness. The offended party should be willing to lavish forgiveness on the person who humbly comes and acknowledges his sin simply because he himself has been forgiven an infinite crime against the God of eternal holiness.

So when you have sinned against someone else, follow the pattern of asking God for forgiveness. You acknowledge to God that you have sinned by stating it outright and giving the offense. Then you ask for forgiveness, cleansing, and reconciliation. Then you find the comfort and promises of the Lord that abound in Scripture where he assures His dear children that he forgives them and washes their sins clean. Dear Christian, do this to others when you sin against them. No matter how petty, how small, how seemingly insignificant, or how big, how monumental, how life-changing, how heinous and hidden and hellish it may have been, acknowledge your sin by clearly stating you’ve sinned and spelling out your offense. Then ask for forgiveness and wait for the other party to respond. This is how to ask for forgiveness.