**How to Deal with Bitterness and Resentment**

Forgiveness is hard, but it sets us free.

Anne Peterson



Jenny was 92 years old when she died. For the 50 years I knew Jenny, she told the story over and over of a time her sister would not give her the dollar she needed for a pair of shoes. Her details made it seem like the offense had happened just days ago. She'd retold the story so many times she had memorized every tidbit. One message came through loud and clear. She would never forgive her sister for withholding that dollar from her. Like a magnet, this story pulled her back into all her hurt and injustice.

Bitterness starts out small. An offense burrows its way into our hearts. We replay it in our minds, creating deep ruts that will be hard to build back up. We retell our hurts to any available listener, including each sordid detail. We enlist support, pushing us further into our resentment. We hear the offending person's name and cringe.

Struggling with bitterness? [Download this 6-session Bible study](https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/a/are-you-stuck-in-sin.html?tCode=DF989A5467&dCode=3BEE571E4F) to help give you perspective and tools to break free from sin.

We decipher the offense as intentional and our offender as full of spite. We look for other reasons, both real or imagined, to dislike our villain. With each new piece of information, we form another layer of bitterness.

We fool ourselves into thinking no one will know, but anger and resentment have a way of seeping into everything. Resentment is like a beach ball we try to submerge in the water. No matter how valiant our efforts, it pops up with all its vitality, splashing everyone around.

Romans 12:18 says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." So how can we do that? How can we prevent bitterness from moving into our hearts? How can we deal with our feelings instead of letting them grow into bitterness?

**Know that God requires forgiveness.**  
God knew it would not always be possible to live at peace with some people. That's why Romans 12:18 says, "If it is possible …" But God does require that we forgive others ([Ephesians 4:32](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A32)).

This is where the rubber meets the road. Our lack of forgiveness is why we choose to hold onto bitterness, letting it ripen into full grown resentment. While it looks like we are unable to forgive, sometimes we need to face that we are unwilling.

In the parable of the man who was forgiven a great debt ([Matthew 18:24-35](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+18%3A24-18%3A35)), we see the forgiven man immediately demands payment from someone who owes him a fraction of what he himself owed. Though he was shown mercy and grace, he was unwilling to extend it even in a small way.

**Understand that we are to forgive because we are forgiven.**  
You can discern a person is trapped when their first response is, "You don't understand what they did to me."

We may not understand, but Jesus Christ does. He lived a perfect life, but was beaten, mocked, spit on, and hung on a wooden cross to die a cruel death. Yet, John 3:16 says that he loved the world enough to go through this. Sometimes we mistakenly think he died only for us, but when he died, he died for the world—including whoever offended you. We are told to forgive others just as Christ forgave us. Do they deserve it? No. Do we deserve it? Again, no. But still, he hung on that cursed tree because of his love for each of us.

When we have an unforgiving spirit, our eyes are not on him; they are fixed on ourselves. Once when I'd been hurt, I told God, "Someone should pay for this." And in his kind, loving, tender way he said to me, "I paid."

**Pray for those you can't forgive.**  
God already knows what's going on inside of you. He knows your thoughts and he knows how the other person hurt you. He was there.

We don't have the capability in ourselves to forgive others. But God can empower us to forgive those who have hurt us ([Philippians 4:13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+4%3A13)).

With a blank piece of paper before you, ask God to bring to mind anyone you need to forgive. If he gives you a name or two or ten, start praying for those on your list. Pray every day until you feel God melt that resentment you've been holding onto.

I have found it is impossible to be unforgiving toward those I am praying for. It's not easy to start praying for them; it's one of the hardest things I've done. But when I make that person an object of prayer, I open the door of my heart a little wider so that God can come in and breathe on my hardened heart, melting the icy resentment that is there.

Anne Peterson is a poet, speaker, and author of over 42 studies at ChristianBibleStudies.com. You can learn more about her at [www.annepeterson.com](http://annepeterson.com/).

Copyright © 2011 by Christianity Today/ChristianBibleStudies.com. Click [here](http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/help/permissions-privacy/reprint-information.html) for reprint information.