

OVERCOMING GUILT AND SHAME

book forty-five in the series:

THE OWNER'S MANUAL TO THE NEW YOU

DOUG BRITTON, MFT

Five-day Bible study for individuals, small groups, and churches

Day One: Accept God's Forgiveness

Day Two: Don't Think You are a Uniquely Bad Person

Day Three: Reject Inappropriate Guilt

Day Four: Ask Others to Forgive You

Day Five: Review and Test

Overcoming Guilt and Shame: Book forty-five in “The Owner’s Manual to the New You”

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The Owner's Manual to the New You

Forty-eight short books

(Each book includes a five-day Bible study and homework)

By Doug Britton, MFT

Twelve books on "Knowing God"

Twelve books on "Developing a Godly Character"

Twelve books on "Enjoying Healthy Relationships"

Twelve books on "Overcoming Personal Problems"

For

Individuals

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The Owner's Manual to the New You

"The Owner's Manual to the New You," published by LifeTree Books, is a series of forty-eight cross-cultural discipleship books by Bible-based Marriage and Family Therapist Doug Britton. LifeTree Books is making these books available free of charge for individual use.

Each book is ideal for a five-day study by small groups, classes, or individuals. Although this is a forty-eight-book series, each book can be studied as a complete book by itself.

Knowing God

- Book 1: Who is God?
- Book 2: Becoming a Believer
- Book 3: Your Identity in Christ
- Book 4: Quick Overview of the Bible
- Book 5: How to Study the Bible
- Book 6: How to Pray
- Book 7: Key Christian Practices
- Book 8: Successful Christian Living
- Book 9: Living a Joyful Life
- Book 10: Knowing God's Will
- Book 11: Obeying God
- Book 12: Living in God's Power

Developing a Godly Character

- Book 13: Growing in Christ
- Book 14: Changing Your Self-Image
- Book 15: Changing Your Attitudes
- Book 16: Living with Humility
- Book 17: Living with Purpose
- Book 18: Living with Self-Control
- Book 19: Living with Integrity
- Book 20: Growing through Problems
- Book 21: Trusting God
- Book 22: Breaking Free from Our Culture
- Book 23: Handling Money Responsibly
- Book 24: Staying Faithful to God

Enjoying Healthy Relationships

- Book 25: Keys to Healthy Relationships
- Book 26: Making Friends
- Book 27: Showing Grace to Others
- Book 28: Forgiving Others
- Book 29: Serving Others
- Book 30: Resolving Conflicts
- Book 31: Overcoming Peer Pressure
- Book 32: Helping Others with Wisdom
- Book 33: Dating, Marriage, and Sex
- Book 34: Embracing the Body of Christ
- Book 35: Respecting Authority
- Book 36: Sharing Your Faith

Overcoming Personal Problems

- Book 37: Overcoming Your Anger (Part 1)
- Book 38: Overcoming Your Anger (Part 2)
- Book 39: Overcoming Rejection
- Book 40: Overcoming Temptation (Part 1)
- Book 41: Overcoming Temptation (Part 2)
- Book 42: Overcoming Anxiety and Fear
- Book 43: Overcoming Jealousy and Insecurity
- Book 44: Overcoming Self-Sufficiency
- Book 45: Overcoming Guilt and Shame
- Book 46: Overcoming Discouragement
- Book 47: Overcoming Failure
- Book 48: Overcoming the Fear of Death

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Foreword

When I was first asked to write a series of downloadable books for intensive discipleship training, I was excited. Jesus has revolutionized my life, and I am glad to share his truths with you.

The pages you are about to study come straight from God's word. They contain truth that puts our feet on the path to the fullest life possible—truth that sets us free.

As Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32).

May God speak to your heart as you read, and may he bring his truth alive in your life.

Your brother in Christ,

Doug Britton

P.S. LifeTree Books is offering this downloadable book and all the other books in “The Owner's Manual to the New You” series free of charge. If you find these books helpful, please feel free to spread the news to churches, ministries, and individuals who might benefit from them.

Small Group Leader's Guidelines

Introduction. These studies are for new believers as well as mature Christians. They are for small groups, discipleship classes, mentors, and individuals. They are ideal for studies lasting from sixty to ninety minutes.

Choose the key points, verses, and discussion questions you will talk about. Don't think you need to cover every verse and question. With new believers, go over the main points, key verses, and selected questions. Go into more depth with mature Christians.

Begin and end each study with prayer. Start by asking God to help each person grow from the study. At the end, ask everyone to pray for help to put God's truth into practice.

Review homework. Before starting the current lesson, ask group members to discuss their answers to some of the previous day's homework questions.

Personalize the lesson. Although it's okay to read each lesson word-for-word, the material will "come alive" if you discuss some of the key points in your own words. Share your own experiences and struggles, and how God has helped you.

As you read, identify important points and key parts of verses. Ask group members to circle them, and then explain why you want to emphasize these points.

Get everyone involved. The more people are actively involved, the more they are impacted by what you are studying. Don't ask questions that can be answered by "yes" or "no." For example, don't ask, "Do you have any thoughts about this?" Instead, ask, "How does this insight speak to you?"

Consider breaking up into smaller groups to discuss the questions if you are leading a large group or class.

Use day five for a review and test. Use the questions in day five as a review and/or test. Remove these pages if you do not want group members to see the questions ahead of time.

Want to Learn More?

Free online resources: For more suggestions for small group leaders as well as many online Bible studies on Christianity and daily living (anger, marriage, self-image, finances, and more), visit www.dougbrittonbooks.com/resources/small-groups

Small group leader's book: For detailed information on how to lead small groups and overcome typical problems, visit www.dougbrittonbooks.com/bookstore/small-groups.

Day One: Accept God's Forgiveness

Do you struggle with guilt over things you have said or done? Do you live with shame and think you must be a bad (or evil) person?

If you feel guilt or shame, you aren't alone. Most people experience these crippling emotions at different times throughout their life. Some people never escape these feelings.

David, a man who wrote much of the Bible, knew the impact of guilt first-hand. Some time after he committed adultery and arranged to have the woman's husband killed, he faced the awful truth of what he had done.

In this short verse, you can see how his sin impacted him.

My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear. (Psalm 38:4)

The good news is that David eventually repented of his actions and found relief (and joy) in God's forgiveness. In today's lesson, you will discover how you too can break free from guilt and shame.

But before you read the rest of this lesson, I'd like to ask you an important question:

Do you know Jesus?

Have you entered into a relationship with Jesus? I ask because it is through belief in him that we can begin to find freedom from guilt and shame. Let me invite you to accept him as your Savior and Lord. Make this your personal prayer:

Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God, and I need your help. I confess I have sinned and failed you in many ways. I invite you to be my Savior and Lord, and I ask you to help me follow you the rest of my life. Thank you for loving me, forgiving me, and accepting me as your child.

If you prayed this prayer, you have been "born again" (John 3:3). Welcome to the family of God. God has plans for you—to transform your life. You have an exciting time ahead of you!

God forgives sins you committed before you were born again

God forgave all your sins when you became a believer. The slate was wiped clean. Don't waste time being overwhelmed with regrets over your past life. Deal with the consequences of your past sins, yet remember that God has forgiven you.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. (Ephesians 1:7)

I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. (Isaiah 43:25)



As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12)

Discussion question

1. What do you think Psalm 103:12 means?

God forgives sins you committed after you were born again

When you were “born again” (became a believer), you became a spiritual baby (John 3:3) and began a growth process. As Paul wrote, we “are being transformed into his likeness” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Our “new self ... is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:10).

As you grow in the Lord, it is inevitable you will stumble. Even the most sincere Christians sin from time to time. As James wrote, “We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2). If we claim to be without sin, “we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Because he was human, Jesus understands what it’s like to be human. He sympathizes with our weaknesses.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16)

When we are born again, we are very imperfect. If God were to show us everything wrong with us right away, it would overwhelm us. As we grow, he periodically helps us become aware of new things to work on. To use a word Christians sometimes use, God “convicts” us of sin.

When God shows us our imperfections, he’s not trying to beat us down. Instead, he is showing us attitudes or actions that need changing so we can grow in love and maturity. When this happens, don’t beat yourself up for being imperfect. Instead, ask for and accept his forgiveness, then focus on growing closer to him.

When you sin for whatever reason, God’s forgiveness is available. Seek to walk in holiness, but don’t give up if you sin.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Discussion questions

2. What does it mean to be forgiven?
3. Can you count on God to forgive you when you confess your sins? Why or why not?
4. What does “purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9) mean?

Three steps to God’s forgiveness

Finding God’s forgiveness isn’t a complex process. Read the following three steps with an open heart. God wants you to escape guilt and enjoy his forgiveness.

1. Confess your sin to the Lord.

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:5)

2. Ask for God's forgiveness.

Don't give up because of repeated sins. If you keep committing the same sins, you may feel like a hypocrite and think God won't forgive you. But look at what Jesus told his disciples:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22)

Jesus wants us to overcome our sins and not take advantage of his grace. However, since he asked his followers to forgive continuously, we know that it is in his character to forgive, and we are encouraged to come to him even when we sin repeatedly.

Discussion questions

5. If you don't feel forgiven, does that mean God hasn't forgiven you? Why or why not?
6. If you don't feel forgiven, what should you do?

3. Thank God for his forgiveness.

Some people think you need to "forgive yourself," but that misses the point of God's forgiveness. When God forgives us, we are forgiven. We can walk in peace and joy because he has forgiven us.

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:18-19)

Discussion question

7. After God forgives you, do you need to "forgive yourself"? Explain your answer.

Deal with the consequences of your sins

Although God forgives you, there may be consequences for your actions. They may be "natural consequences" (such as contracting a sexually transmitted disease). Or they may be other people's reactions (such as friends who don't trust you because you lied). Or there may be legal consequences.

In addition, God sometimes disciplines us, just as parents sometimes discipline their children for disobedience. When God chastises us, he is helping us learn from our sins. He does this with love.

And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." (Hebrews 12:5-6)

Discussion question

8. After God forgives you, do you still need to deal with the consequences of sin? Why or why not?

Digging deeper

Read and discuss 1 Kings 8:33-34; Psalms 38:4, 65:3, 85:2-3, 103:11-13, and 130:4; Isaiah 1:17-20 and 55:6-7; Ezekiel 33:14-16; James 5:15-16 and 1 John 2:1-2.

Memory verse

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Want to learn more?

Free online Bible study

God's Love for Me

www.dougbrittonbooks.com/resources/gods-love

Day Two: Don't Think You are a Uniquely Bad Person

Many people think something is severely wrong with them—something that makes them different from other people. They are sure they are bad people, or that they are messed up in ways other people are not.

They often say things such as, “I know God forgives sin, but what I did was really bad.” As a result, many feel hopeless in their Christian walk, or they go through life feeling like failures or second-class Christians.

There are countless reasons you may think something is uniquely bad or wrong with you. Here are some common reasons. Check each one that describes you:

- You have ugly thoughts or temptations.
- You sinned after accepting Christ.
- You think you blasphemed the Holy Spirit.
- You have battled a sin for years without success.
- You had an abortion, or you encouraged someone to have an abortion.
- You don't feel like reading the Bible or praying.
- You have been divorced.
- You committed murder, sexually abused someone, or committed another crime.



Discussion questions

1. Do you think something is wrong with you, something that makes you different from other people? If so, what is it?
2. Do you often think God is angry with you? If so, why do you think he's mad at you?
3. Have you felt condemned or hopeless because of any of these reasons? Explain your answer.
4. Do you often feel like a hypocrite? If so, how does this affect you?

Realize that early Christians also were imperfect

We sometimes think the early Christians were perfect, and that we cannot hope to come up to their standards. Yet when we read the Bible, we see that they sinned in many of the same ways that we do.

Sometimes they were hypocrites.

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. (Galatians 2:11-12)

Sometimes they gave in to peer pressure.

The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. (Galatians 2:13)

Sometimes they argued.

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. (Philippians 4:2)

Sometimes they were selfish.

I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 2:20-21)

Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only. (Philippians 4:15)

Sometimes they were disbelieving.

But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. (Luke 24:11)

When Rhoda, a servant girl, said Peter was at the door, many people said, "You're out of your mind." (Acts 12:15)

Sometimes they were afraid.

When he [Saul] came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. (Acts 9:26)

Sometimes they disobeyed God.

Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." (Acts 10:14)

Discussion questions

5. What lessons can we learn from these verses?
6. Which of these verses give you hope? Why?
7. Do these examples give us an excuse to choose to sin? Why or why not?

Accept that everyone sins, including you

Acknowledge that everyone, including you, is messed up to some degree, and that everyone has something in his or her past or present that could torment him or her. As James wrote, "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2).

When God forgives you, you are forgiven.

"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." (Isaiah 1:18)

Remember that growth is a process

When you became a Christian, you did not automatically become perfect. I'm sure you are aware of that. But after days or weeks or years of being a Christian, you might begin to feel guilty, thinking you should have become perfect by now. That would be a shame, for God does not expect you to be perfect in everything you do. You are in a growth process, one that will continue as long as you live.

We start as babies in Christ.

Jesus said that when we are reconciled with God, we are "born again." Spiritually, we become like a newborn baby. We have a lot to learn!

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." (John 3:3)

We grow in maturity.

Just as a baby grows into maturity, you and I grow in the Lord.

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

The new self ... is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Colossians 3:10)

Discussion questions

8. Does God expect a new baby to be able to walk? Explain your answer.
9. How can knowing you are in a growth process encourage you?

Memory verse

We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. (James 3:2)

Digging deeper

Read and discuss 1 Timothy 1:12-17.

Want to learn more?

Free online Bible study

Several Bible studies on your self-image
www.dougbrittonbooks.com/resources/self-image

Book by Doug Britton

Who Do You Think You Are?
www.dougbrittonbooks.com/bookstore/who-are-you

Notes

Homework – Day Two

1. Have you thought you are a uniquely bad person, that something is wrong with you that isn't wrong with other people?
 - a. If your answer is "yes," why have you thought this?

 - b. In view of today's lesson, how do you look at yourself now?

2. List three examples of early Christians who sinned that describe something you have done (being a hypocrite, giving in to peer pressure, etc.). Beside each answer, briefly explain your answer.
 - a. First example:

 - b. Second example:

 - c. Third example:

3. Looking at these three examples, did God give up on the people who sinned? Choose one example and write how God used that person:

4. Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17.
 - a. How serious did Paul say his sin was?

 - b. Do your sins make you a worse sinner than Paul? Why or why not?

 - c. Given your answer, are you a uniquely bad person? Why or why not?

 - d. Given your answer, will God forgive your sins? Why or why not?

 - e. Did God still use Paul in spite of what he wrote about his sinfulness? Explain your answer:

 - f. Given your answer, does God want to use you? Why or why not?

5. How can knowing you are in a growth process encourage you?

Day Three: Reject Inappropriate Guilt

It's good to feel guilty when we do something wrong. Guilt can drive us to ask for forgiveness from God and from people we have wronged. It can also motivate us to change our behavior.

There's another type of guilt that is not healthy. Some people feel guilty when they have done nothing wrong. They may constantly question their motives. Or they may be hypersensitive, often sure they said something they shouldn't have said or certain they disappointed their friends or God when they didn't. They often apologize for nonexistent offenses. This type of guilt could be called "inappropriate guilt" since there's nothing to feel guilty about.

Some reasons people feel inappropriate guilt are:

- They think they are bad people.
- They don't understand that everyone has sinned.
- They don't understand God's love.
- They don't understand God's grace.
- They don't understand God's forgiveness.



Discussion questions

1. What does it mean to feel "inappropriate guilt"?
2. Have you ever felt inappropriate guilt? If so, when did you experience it?
3. Is inappropriate guilt a problem in your life now? If so, what do you feel guilty about?
4. Looking at the typical reasons people feel inappropriate guilt, what is one insight that can help you?

Inappropriate guilt can rob you of peace and joy

People who live tormented by inappropriate guilt go through life feeling condemned and miss out on the peace and joy Jesus offers us.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27)

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

Discussion question

5. How can inappropriate guilt rob you of the peace and joy Jesus offers?

Don't feel guilty if you were raped or abused

An extreme and deeply tragic instance of inappropriate guilt is when someone feels responsible, ashamed, or ruined if he or she was raped or sexually abused.

If this describes you, let me encourage you to never accept sexual abuse or rape as your fault. If you think you used poor judgment and could have avoided being raped, learn whatever lessons (if any) are necessary for the future, yet do not blame yourself for what was done to you. Remember that no one has the right to rape or molest someone else, regardless of the circumstances.

If you were sexually abused as a child, you may ask yourself, "Why was I abused? Why not someone else? Was it something about me?" There are many possible answers to these questions. For example, you might have been more available at the time, you may have had a gentle personality, or you may have reminded your abuser of someone else.

Regardless of the answer, do not fall into the trap of thinking there is something bad about you, or that you deserved to be abused. You were a victim.

Along the same lines, don't blame yourself if you didn't resist. That does not mean you deserved to be raped or abused.

Discussion question

6. What would you say to someone who blames himself or herself for being raped or molested?

Don't give in to "superstitious thinking"

Some people experience an extreme type of inappropriate guilt that I'll call "superstitious thinking." These are people who feel guilty because they think they caused bad things to happen, things that in fact had nothing to do with them.

For example, if you have a negative thought about someone else, and the next day the other person has a car accident, you might feel guilty, sure that your bad thoughts caused the accident.

Another type of superstitious thinking takes place when people hear a sermon, read the Bible, or hear about a problem on a TV talk show, and think any negative comments are directed at them personally.

Don't feel guilty if you have ugly thoughts

Sometimes people feel guilty for having ugly thoughts. For example, if an inappropriate sexual thought comes to your mind, you may become consumed by guilt because you think Christians aren't supposed to have ugly thoughts.

Having ugly thoughts does not mean you are a bad person or that you are not a Christian. It means you are human being. What's important is that you resist the thoughts, not entertain them. Pray for freedom from the thoughts, but don't give in to guilt for having them in the first place. (Of course, if the thoughts come from watching pornography or something else you have done, be sure to deal with that sin.)

Discussion question

7. Do you think anyone goes through life without sometimes having wrong thoughts?

Ask for help

It can be hard to identify whether or not you have given in to inappropriate guilt or whether you really have done something wrong. One of the best things you can do is to ask a mature Christian for his or her opinion.

Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel. (Proverbs 27:9)

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17)

Pray about your inappropriate guilt, not imaginary problems

Don't ask God to forgive you for a non-existent offense. Instead, ask him to help you escape inappropriate guilt.

Discussion questions

8. If you are feeling inappropriate guilt, what should you do?
9. If you are feeling inappropriate guilt, what shouldn't you do?

Memory verse

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

Want to learn more?

Free online Bible study

Guard Your Thought Life

www.dougbrittonbooks.com/resources/guard-your-thoughts

Notes

Homework – Day Three

1. Read Psalm 62:1-2; John 10:10, 14:27, and 15:11; Colossians 3:15. Briefly describe how well your experience of life matches up to the peace and joy described in these verses:
2. Do you think you sometimes suffer from inappropriate guilt? If so, when does this seem to happen?
3. If you feel guilty about something, who could you ask to help you decide whether or not it is inappropriate guilt?
4. How can being consumed by guilt over bad thoughts make it difficult to resist the thoughts?

Day Four: Ask Others to Forgive You

If we hurt someone, verbally or physically, God expects us to do the best we can to bring healing to the situation. When we haven't done that, we often live with a lingering sense of guilt or condemnation. Today's lesson covers three important steps to take if we have sinned: apologize, deal with the consequences, and press on.



Apologize to people you hurt

Most of us are amateurs at apologizing to others and asking for forgiveness for our sins, whether for speaking in anger, breaking a promise, gambling away the rent money, or anything else.

Why is this so hard? The most common reason is pride. Another is the fear that if you apologize, you open yourself up to verbal attacks. Plus, you may feel like you are weak if you apologize. God looks at it differently. He sees you as humble and strong in his Spirit.

*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.
(Luke 14:11)*

When you apologize, follow a two-step process:

Step one: Confess.

Say, "I'm sorry" for what you did. Be specific. Do not merely say "I'm sorry for the problem" or "I'm sorry you are unhappy." Say exactly what you did wrong. For example, "I'm sorry I spoke rudely." Here are some more guidelines:

- Approach others before they complain.
- Pray for a humble attitude. Don't make excuses.
- Apologize even if the other person is angry.
- Apologize even if the other person was also at fault. Do not turn an apology into an accusation.

*If you ... remember that your brother has something against you ... go and be reconciled.
(Matthew 5:23-24)*

Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5)

Discussion questions

1. Do you need to apologize more often? Explain your answer.
2. Which of the previous points will help you apologize in a way that pleases God?

So far you have been reading about steps to take when you sin against someone as you go through life. But what if you have a backlog of offenses for which you have never apologized? Now is a good time to wipe the slate clean. Ask God to show you any past wrongs you committed against people—and whether or not you should apologize for them.

In general, we should confess to people we have wounded, but there are times when it would be unwise or harmful to do so. For example, confessing to the spouse or partner of everyone you have had sex with probably would not be loving or wise. Likewise, although there could be rare exceptions, if you raped someone who has started a new life, any efforts to bring healing would probably reopen old wounds and cause harm.

There are no absolute rules about whom you need to apologize to. However, these general guidelines can help:

- Ask God to give you a willing heart to apologize.
- Ask God for wisdom about whom you should apologize to.
- Ask God for wisdom in the words you say.
- If your apology might hurt or injure the person you originally wounded, in most cases do not contact that person. If you think you should, (1) first ask a pastor or mature Christian friend for advice and (2) wait and pray before doing anything.

If you are married, it's usually best to be completely open and honest about what you have done.

Discussion questions

3. Are you willing to apologize for past sins? Why or why not?
4. Are there people you should apologize to? If so, who are they?
5. Are there people it would harm if you apologized? If so, how can you pray for them?

Step two: Ask for forgiveness.

Follow up your apology by asking, "Will you forgive me?" There is real power in these four words. Asking for forgiveness brings peace. It makes it easier for others to forgive you and sets the stage for rebuilding trust.

Discussion questions

6. Why is it a good idea to ask for forgiveness?
7. Do you usually ask for forgiveness after you apologize? Explain your answer?

Rebuild trust with others.

If you have wounded people, don't expect them to forgive you immediately. Be ready to earn their trust back.

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. (Luke 3:8)

Answer unforgiveness with love.

If someone does not respond to your "will you forgive me?" with, "Yes, I forgive you," you have a chance to show how sorry you really are. If you respond, "In that case, I'm not sorry," you prove your apology was insincere. Instead, say something such as, "I understand, and I hope you can forgive me in the future."

Discussion questions

8. Read Hebrews 12:5-6. Why does it say not to “lose heart” when God rebukes you?
9. How will you respond if someone reacts poorly when you apologize?

Make restitution if needed.

If you sinned against others, take care of any moral or legal consequences. If you lied, tell the truth. If you stole money, do everything you can to pay it back.

Let God know you are willing to do whatever it takes to try to make things right. Be like Zacchaeus. When he invited Jesus to his home, he felt awful about his sins and said:

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” (Luke 19:8)

Ask God to help you learn from the situation

Turn the unpleasant, difficult consequences of sin into powerful teaching tools for your life. Learn from what happened. Analyze why you sinned.

- What were your excuses? Were you giving in to peer pressure? Were you feeling sorry for yourself? Were you looking for comfort?
- What were the first steps you took on the path to sin?
- What were decision points as you walked down that path?
- What preventive actions will you take to avoid committing that sin in the future?
- What will you do if you are tempted again?

Realize that God can bring good out of your sin.

God can bring good out of your failures. As you just read, we can learn from our mistakes and grow closer to him. (Many people learn more from their failures than from their successes.)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Do not give up because you sinned

As you read in Day 1, when you asked God to forgive you, he forgave you. Accept his forgiveness and press on. Walk in humility of spirit, but with your head held high, because the king of kings has forgiven you.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

Discussion question

10. How can you “hold your head high” and have “humility of spirit” when you have done something wrong?

Memory verse

Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (1 Peter 5:5)

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Homework – Day Four

1. What are some guidelines to giving a good apology?
2. Is it important to ask for forgiveness after apologizing? Why or why not?
3. How should you respond if someone doesn't forgive you? If it's a Christian, should you give a lecture about how he or she is supposed to forgive you? Why or why not?
4. Read Romans 8:28. How can good come out of your sin?

Day Five: Answer Key to Test (may be removed by leader)

Note to teachers and small group leaders

Remove this page if you do not want group members to see these answers ahead of time.

True or false

- F 1. If you sin, it proves you are not really a Christian.
- T 2. We can count on God's forgiveness when we confess our sins.
- T 3. God doesn't want anyone to think he or she is a uniquely bad person.
- F 4. As read in the Bible, early Christians did not sin or make major mistakes.
- T 5. Growth as a Christian is a process. We don't immediately become perfect.
- F 6. Inappropriate guilt means feeling guilty when you act inappropriately.
- T 7. Inappropriate guilt can rob you of peace and joy.
- F 8. If you apologize to God for hurting someone, there's no need to apologize to the person.
- F 9. If we ask someone to forgive us, we should tell them the Bible says they must forgive us.
- T 10. God can help us learn from our mistakes and sins.

Memory verses

- 1. 1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

- 2. John 10:10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.



About the Author

Doug Britton, Bible-based Marriage and Family Therapist, has helped hundreds of thousands of people as a therapist, clinical director of a treatment center, seminar speaker, radio co-host, and author of over twenty books that show people how to apply God's truths in their daily lives.

He has also trained pastors, counselors, mentors, and lay leaders in biblical counseling, mentoring, and small group leadership.

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Books

Doug has written Bible-based books on many daily-living topics. Visit www.dougbrittonbooks.com/bookstore.

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Seminars and retreats

Doug is the founder and president of LifeTree Institute and LifeTree Books. If you would like him or another member of the LifeTree team to speak in your church on any of the above topics, please visit www.dougbrittonbooks.com and click on the "Seminars" link.

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