

Forgiveness and Boundaries

Guarding Your Heart While Walking in Love

Introduction

One of the most challenging tensions in Christian living occurs when we encounter people who consistently provoke us to respond in ungodly ways. Perhaps it's a family member whose criticism triggers defensiveness, a colleague whose manipulation tempts us toward resentment, or a friend whose toxicity erodes our peace. We know we are called to forgive—and we do forgive—yet we find ourselves afraid to be around these individuals. Not because we harbor bitterness, but because we fear our own potential response.

Consider Sarah's dilemma: She has fully forgiven her mother and brother for their patterns of verbal cruelty and control issues. She holds no grudge. Yet when family gatherings approach, she feels genuine fear—mostly of herself. She knows from experience that their unkind words often provoke her to respond with sharp retorts or cold withdrawal. Then comes the guilt and the need to apologize for her own sin. Sarah wonders: Is it un-scriptural to avoid people I've forgiven? Does setting boundaries mean I haven't truly released them?

This study addresses the biblical balance between unconditional forgiveness and wise self-protection. Scripture affirms that we can forgive completely while simultaneously exercising discernment and even boundaries about relationships that threaten our spiritual health.

For Bible teaching of what forgiveness is and what two types are, I have these studies:

- <https://sidnash.org/docs/Forgiveness.html>
 - <https://sidnash.org/docs/ForgivenessAspects.html>
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I. The Biblical Mandate to Guard Your Heart

A. Protection as a Command, Not a Suggestion

[Proverbs 4:23](#) – "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

- The Hebrew word for "guard" is *shamar* (Strong's #8104): "to keep, watch, preserve, protect." This is the same word used for soldiers guarding a city or priests protecting holy things. Guarding your heart is not optional—it is placed "above all else" in priority. The heart, in Hebrew thought, encompasses mind, will, emotions, and moral character. Everything you say and do flows from this center. When we fail to protect our hearts, we compromise our witness, our relationships, and our walk with God.
- The fear Sarah experiences may actually be the God's protective alarm system, warning her that a particular environment threatens her spiritual equilibrium.

B. Recognizing Danger Is Wisdom, Not Fear

[Proverbs 22:3](#) – "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty."

[Proverbs 27:12](#) – "The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty."

- The repetition of this proverb in Scripture emphasizes its importance. The "prudent" person (Hebrew arum, Strong's #6175: "shrewd, sensible, crafty in a good sense") recognizes patterns and adjusts behavior accordingly. The simple person ignores repeated evidence and suffers consequences.
 - If Sarah knows from repeated experience that certain interactions lead her to stumble, recognizing that pattern and taking protective action is biblical wisdom, not spiritual weakness.
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II. Forgiveness Does Not Require Foolishness

A. Shrewd Innocence

[Matthew 10:16](#) – "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."

- Jesus sent His disciples into hostile environments with a dual mandate: maintain moral purity while exercising sharp discernment. The Greek word for "shrewd" is phronimos (Strong's #5429): "prudent, sensible, practically wise." This is not worldly cunning but spiritual wisdom—the ability to recognize danger and navigate accordingly.
- Sarah can be "innocent as a dove" in her motives (free from malice, harboring no grudge) while being "shrewd as a serpent" in her choices (limiting contact, choosing neutral settings, bringing others along for accountability).

B. Learning from Patterns

[Proverbs 26:11](#) – "As a dog returns to its vomit, so fools repeat their folly."

- While this proverb addresses those who return to sin, the principle could apply to any repeated behavior that produces harm. Repeatedly placing yourself in situations where you reliably stumble is folly, not faithfulness. If every Sabbath dinner ends with harsh words and apologies, wisdom suggests restructuring the pattern—perhaps shorter visits, phone calls instead, or meeting in public places.

C. The Limits of Personal Responsibility

[Romans 12:18](#) – "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

- This verse contains two critical qualifiers: "if it is possible" and "as far as it depends on you." Paul acknowledges that peace is not always possible and that we cannot control another person's choices. We are responsible for our own attitudes and actions, but we are not responsible for maintaining relationships at any cost to our spiritual health.
 - Sarah can pursue peace without bearing full responsibility for a relationship that the other party consistently sabotages or that consistently leads her into sin.
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III. The Corrupting Influence of Toxic Company

A. Bad Company Corrupts Character

[1 Corinthians 15:33](#) – "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'"

- Paul wrote this in the context of false teaching, but the principle could extend to any relationship that degrades godliness. The Greek word for "corrupts" is *phtheiro* (Strong's #5351): "to destroy, corrupt, spoil, deprave." Prolonged exposure to criticism, manipulation, or other negative behaviors can slowly erode even a mature believer's peace, confidence, and Christ-likeness.
- This does not mean we immediately sever all difficult relationships, but it does mean we acknowledge the reality of spiritual contamination and take protective measures.

B. Pearls Before Swine

[Matthew 7:6](#) – "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces."

- This is one of the most challenging sayings of Jesus. In context, He is teaching about discernment in relationships. There are times when offering your heart, your vulnerability, or your presence to someone who will exploit or abuse it is unwise. The Greek word for "trample" is *katapateo* (Strong's #2662): "to tread down, trample underfoot, treat with contempt."
- Jesus himself modeled boundaries. He withdrew from hostile crowds ([Luke 4:30](#)), limited what He shared with certain audiences ([Matthew 13:10-13](#)), and warned His disciples to shake the dust off their feet when people rejected them ([Matthew 10:14](#)).
- Sarah is not withholding love by protecting herself; she is stewarding her emotional and spiritual health so that she has something to offer others.

IV. Distinguishing Burdens from Loads

[Galatians 6:2, 5](#) – "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ... for each one should carry their own load."

- These verses appear contradictory until we understand the Greek distinction. "Burdens" (*baros*, Strong's #922) refers to overwhelming, crushing weights—crises, tragedies, situations beyond a person's capacity. We are called to help with these.
- "Load" (*phortion*, Strong's #5413) refers to each person's daily responsibilities—the pack a soldier carries, the work assigned to an individual. We are not called to carry what others should carry themselves.
- When Sarah's mother chooses to speak unkindly, that is her mother's load (her own sin and responsibility). Sarah can offer support during genuine crises, but she is not required to continually subject herself to behavior her mother could choose to change.

V. Seeking Divine Strength and Wisdom

A. Strength for Unavoidable Encounters

[Philippians 4:13](#) – "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

- There will be times when contact is unavoidable—a funeral, a wedding, a family emergency, etc... In these moments, Sarah can ask for Godly self-control and grace. The "all this" Paul refers to in context is contentment in all circumstances. God provides strength for what He calls us to endure, but that does not mean He calls us to endure everything always.

B. Wisdom for Boundaries

[James 1:5](#) – "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

- Sarah needs specific, situational wisdom: How much contact? In what settings? With what boundaries? God promises to provide this without condemnation. She can pray specifically:
 1. "Should I attend this event?"
 2. "Should I bring someone with me for accountability?"
 3. "Should I put a time limit on the visit?"
 4. "Should I communicate primarily by text or email where I have time to respond thoughtfully?"

C. Freedom from Unnecessary Temptation

[Matthew 6:13](#) – "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

- Jesus taught us to pray for protection from temptation. If Sarah knows that extended time with certain people reliably tempts her to respond in ungodly ways, avoiding that temptation when possible is cooperating with God. We are not required to place ourselves in the path of spiritual danger.

VI. Practical Summary

Forgiveness and boundaries are not opposites; they are companions. You can release someone fully from the debt they owe you while simultaneously limiting your exposure to ongoing harm.

Key principles:

1. Guarding your heart is a biblical command, not evidence of unforgiveness.
2. Recognizing patterns of relational harm and adjusting accordingly is wisdom, not fear-based living.
3. You are responsible for your own choices, not for controlling another's behavior or maintaining peace at any cost.
4. Prolonged exposure to toxic behavior can erode spiritual health, even when you have forgiven that person.
5. Jesus himself modeled boundaries—withdrawing from hostile people, limiting what He shared, and teaching His disciples to do likewise.
6. Pray for specific wisdom about how much contact, in what settings, and with what protections honor both love and self-care.
7. Forgive completely, love genuinely, and set boundaries wisely. These are not contradictory but complementary aspects of mature Christian living.

If you find yourself afraid to be around someone you have forgiven—not because of bitterness but because you fear your own response—that may be the Holy Spirit prompting you toward greater wisdom. Listen to that prompting. Set boundaries that protect your heart. And trust that God honors both your forgiveness and your discernment.

Desiring to live by every word that comes from the mouth of Jehovah ([Deut8:3: Matt4:4](#))

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