

Identifying My Personal Substitutes for Forgiveness

Practicing authentic forgiveness does not come naturally. However, practicing a substitute for forgiveness does. The most typical substitutes for forgiveness are briefly described below. You have done all of them at one time or another, but you specialize in just a few. They have become so natural to you that you are probably unaware that you are even doing them! They have become a part of your personality. After reviewing the descriptions of the substitutes, follow the directions for the worksheets. This exercise will help you to discover your primary personal substitute for practicing authentic forgiveness.

Sins travel in three directions—we sin against God, other people sin against us and we sin against other people. People use the following substitutes to cope with the pain and debilitating effects of sins.

Manage our emotions—When we are feeling an emotion we do not like to feel, we tend to block it out or replace it. We reject uncomfortable emotions and try to feel comfortable ones. This can be done through denial, a change in activity, or drugs.

Exercise self-control—When we think about doing something inappropriate, we tend to restrain ourselves so as to not act out what we are thinking or feeling. Self-control is a good thing, but it is not forgiveness.

Overlook sins—We are so used to seeing sin in everybody, we tend to overlook sins, especially those we would call “little sins.” Most sins just don’t catch our attention.

Misidentify sins—Culture, family and personal rebellion against God make it difficult for us to correctly identify sins. We can call something a sin when it is not. And we can believe something is not a sin when it is. God defines sin, not people.

Blame the wrong person for sins—We tend to blame our selves for other people’s sins and we tend to blame other people for our sins. We can even blame God for our sins!

Try to forget about sins—If something makes us uncomfortable, we tend to avoid it by not thinking about it. This can be done consciously and subconsciously (selective amnesia).

Minimize sins—We tend to compare one sin with other sins and “grade it on the curve.” Lesser sins are minimized when we start thinking “Well, it is not as bad as ...”

Excuse sins—We tend to find reasons why certain sins were unavoidable.

Justify sins— We tend to find reasons why certain sins were not only unavoidable, but appropriate and necessary!

Deny sins—We tend to deceive ourselves into believing that the sin did not happen, or at least was not a real sin.

Ignore sins—We tend to think that “time heals all wounds” and that if we just ignore the sin, it and its consequences will just go away.

Hide from sins—We tend to run away, physically or mentally, from sin, to escape having to face it head on. We can use all kinds of good and bad things to hide from sin, such as work, pleasure, drugs, alcohol, activity, inactivity, etc. to avoid dealing with it.

Tolerate sins—We tend to accept sins as normal and inescapable, so we tolerate most of them.

Punish someone for sins—We tend to try to punish the guilty person or someone else, even the victim of the sin.

Compensate for sins—We tend to “make up” for sins by doing good things. We also tend to modify our behavior in unhealthy ways to keep other people from sinning against us again.

“Let it go.”—We tend to try to “move on” and not let the sin affect us any more. Many psychological tools can be employed to do this. However, it is usually a combination of several of the other substitutes for authentic forgiveness.

We all have done all of these. They come very naturally to us. However, each person learns from childhood to specialize in just a few of them. Which ones do you specialize in?

There are three worksheets which follow, one for each path of sin. All sixteen substitutes for forgiveness are listed on each worksheet. Put a letter “A” next to the substitutes you do **most frequently**. Then look for the one you **least frequently** do and put the letter “C” by it. Put a letter “B” by the rest. Do not worry too much about the middle group. The goal here is to see what you do most frequently and what you do least frequently?

Then follow the directions on the remaining worksheet at the end of this exercise.

Knowing which substitutes you do automatically will help you to resist them and to replace them with authentic forgiveness. In addition to your own answers, you may want to ask someone who knows you very well (your spouse, your mom or dad, or a close friend) to fill out the first three worksheets. Their perspective may help you to see yourself more clearly.

Ask God to help you to identify your substitutes for forgiveness so that you can replace them with real forgiveness.

How do I *usually* deal with my own sins against God?

- ___ Manage my emotions—I try to force myself to feel something different than what I am feeling.
- ___ Exercise self-control—I discipline myself not to act out what I am thinking or feeling.
- ___ Overlook my sin—I don't let it catch my attention.
- ___ Misidentify my sin—I think something is not a sin when God says it is and/or think something is a sin when God says it is not.
- ___ Blame the wrong person for my sin—I blame someone else for my choices and actions.
- ___ Try to forget about my sin—I refuse to let my mind dwell on it.
- ___ Minimize my sin—comparing my sin to “worse” sins and thereby lessen my sense of need to deal with it. “It’s not as bad as ...”
- ___ Excuse my sin—“Everyone else does it!”
- ___ Justify my sin— I believe I had valid reasons for doing this.
- ___ Deny my sin—I do not believe I am guilty of the accusation. “I didn’t do it!”
- ___ Ignore my sin—I think that my sin and its consequences will go away with time if I just ignore it.
- ___ Hide from my sin—I run away, physically or mentally, from my sin, perhaps using work, pleasure, drugs, alcohol, activity, inactivity, etc. to avoid dealing with it.
- ___ Tolerate my sin—I accept it as normal and decide not to do anything about it.
- ___ Punish someone for my sin—I punish either myself, other people or God for my sin.
- ___ Compensate for my sin—I try hard to be better or pay for my sin.
- ___ “Let it go.”—I try to “move on” and not let my sin affect me any more.

How do I *usually* deal with the sins of others against me?

- ___ Manage my emotions—I try to force myself to feel something different than what I am feeling.
- ___ Exercise self-control—I discipline myself not to act out what I am thinking or feeling.
- ___ Overlook their sin—I don't let it catch my attention.
- ___ Misidentify their sin—I think something is not a sin when God says it is and/or think something is a sin when God says it is not.
- ___ Blame the wrong person for another person's sin—I blame myself or someone else for a particular person's choices and actions.
- ___ Try to forget about their sin—I refuse to let my mind dwell on it.
- ___ Minimize their sin—comparing their sin to “worse” sins and thereby lessen my sense of need to deal with it. “It's not as bad as ...”
- ___ Excuse their sin—“Everyone does it!”
- ___ Justify their sin— I believe they had valid reasons for doing what they did.
- ___ Deny their sin—I do not believe they are guilty of the accusation. “They didn't do it!”
- ___ Ignore their sin—I think that their sin and its consequences will go away with time if I just ignore it.
- ___ Hide from their sin—I run away, physically or mentally, from their sin, perhaps using work, pleasure, drugs, alcohol, activity, inactivity, etc. to avoid dealing with it.
- ___ Tolerate their sin—I accept it as normal and decide not to do anything about it.
- ___ Punish someone for their sin—I punish either the guilty person, myself, other people or God for someone's sin.
- ___ Compensate for their sin—I try hard to be better or to pay for their sin.
- ___ “Let it go.”—I try to “move on” and not let their sin affect me any more.

How do I *usually* deal with my sins against others?

- ___ Manage my emotions—I try to force myself to feel something different than what I am feeling.
- ___ Exercise self-control—I discipline myself not to act out what I am thinking or feeling.
- ___ Overlook my sin—I don't let it catch my attention.
- ___ Misidentify my sin—I think something is not a sin when God says it is and/or think something is a sin when God says it is not.
- ___ Blame the wrong person for my sin—I blame someone else for my choices and actions.
- ___ Try to forget about my sin—I refuse to let my mind dwell on it.
- ___ Minimize my sin—comparing my sin to “worse” sins and thereby lessen my sense of need to deal with it. “It’s not as bad as ...”
- ___ Excuse my sin—“Everyone else does it!”
- ___ Justify my sin— I believe I had valid reasons for doing this.
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- ___ Compensate for my sin—I try hard to be better or pay for my sin.
- ___ “Let it go.”—I try to “move on” and not let my sin affect me any more.

List the substitutes for forgiveness you use most frequently for each of the three paths of sin.

The main ways I cope with my sins against God.

The main ways I tend to cope with other people’s sins against me.

The main ways I tend to cope with my sins against other people.

Is there a pattern? _____

Why do you think you choose to deal with sin in this way?

A prayer to pray:

“Father, I acknowledge to you that I have developed a pattern of dealing with the sins in my life in ineffective and ungodly ways. I do not want to do so any longer. I want to deal with sin in the right way, the way you deal with it through Jesus Christ. Thank you for forgiving me. Please show me how to practice all three paths of forgiveness so You can heal me and set me free. Amen.”