

Empowered to Forgive

Your pocket guide to Freedom.

By Shakeisha Johnson

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Message from the Author

Learning to extend grace instead of judgement has shaped me into a version of myself I had always hoped existed and have now begun to witness.

All in all, God is good and I am grateful.

Since publishing my first book, I have married the love of my life and given birth to two amazing little girls who have expanded my capacity for love and patience in ways that I am eternally grateful for. The one thing I have learned from all of the experiences I've had, is that growth is a journey that never ends. Our evolution is not a destination, it is a lifelong commitment to the purpose of God acted out by our fierce obedience to His divine will. A part of that evolution has been learning to extend mercy to myself and others along the way.

I discovered that love and marriage are beautiful, but they do not complete me. I am and have always been complete in Jesus. Whatever stage of life you find yourself in—there is

purpose in it. I pray that as you read this book you will evolve into the truth of who God created you to become and that you will stand in that truth, unwavering in the confident hope of His love all of your days. May you know now and always that just as God has forgiven you for all things, you are empowered to forgive in every circumstance.

Love & light,

Shakeisha C. Johnson

The X Factor

I want to start this journey with you by bringing you in on a little secret—it doesn't matter at all why a person left, cheated, ghosted you or wasn't interested. It makes no difference why it didn't work and you DO NOT need closure. What we are really looking for when we seek closure is an opening; a way to undo the sting of what has happened by trying to paint it in a different light. It's natural. It's normal. I get it. With that being said, do not let a desire for closure stop you from closing the book on a painful chapter. Your story goes on. There is so much beauty to be witnessed if you allow your story to unfold the way God intended; unencumbered by the rhetoric of a love gone stale.

Many times, I coach women and they ask the question many of us have at some point “Why wasn't I enough?” The real reason many of us find it so difficult to move on from toxic relationships is that they support our internal narrative, that we are not good enough. We attract relationships at the level of our self-esteem and once they have done exactly what we subconsciously expect; we spiral into depression, self-doubt and fear of inadequacy. Those things were always there, they have just been magnified by relational issues we face. One of the biggest truths I had to face was that deep down, I didn't believe anyone would ever fully love me for who I am. For years I lived in pretense, even in my walk with God because I felt like His love was conditional. I would hide from Him every single time I felt like I was failing and come back

only when I felt like I was getting it right. Oh, how I missed out on precious moments with the Father with that mindset.

Luckily for us all, God in His infinite wisdom makes allowances for our erroneous belief systems and ensures that we are acquainted with the truth of His nature and love. For me, that process began with a prophetic word that didn't sound anything like the person I'd known myself to be and a series of encounters with the God of heaven's armies.

I never would have shifted the type of relationships I encountered in my romantic life and friendships had I not reconciled with the truth of God's love and began living in His truth about me. I was the common denominator in all my failed relationships and by taking responsibility for the role I played in them, I took my power back. Jesus empowered me to do all things through HIM. That includes forgiving those who brought me harm, forgiving myself and making choices in alignment with my divine destiny and not my sketchy past.

Today, I want you to recognize that you are empowered by The Lord to live well, to choose wisely and to love beyond limits. In my life, I had to accept that some questions will remain unanswered, but that I can trust God's plan for my life regardless. So can you.

Face the Facts:

- Your identity is the foundation that your relationships are built on.
- As you evolve and grow, so will your capacity for healthy and mutually beneficial relationships.

- It is nobody else's responsibility to make you love yourself, self-esteem cannot be outsourced.
- You CAN improve your self esteem, you don't have to remain this way.

There are a few things that can eat away at our self esteem over time, things like trauma, rejection and abandonment can cause us to create narratives to help us cope with aspects of our reality that we can't fully process. Healing happens incrementally and it's absolutely okay if it takes a while. Let's start by looking at some inner narratives that may be shaping your reality; then we will reframe them.

In order to do this, we will take the facts, reframe it with truth then make a personal declaration based on the truth we uncovered. I'll give you an example then I want you to try a few for yourself.

Facts	Truth
Everyone always leaves me.	It hurts when relationships change, but I can learn to adapt.
I hate the way I look, I'll never be as attractive as other people.	God was intentional about every detail about me and I can learn to love my appearance.
You can't trust anyone, people will always hurt you.	I have been hurt in the past but I can choose differently moving forward; in the event I am hurt - God can heal my heart.
If people really knew me, nobody would love me.	I am worth loving and as I learn to accept myself, others will be ready to do the same.

I want you to put this into practice with the specific thoughts you have about yourself and your relationships. It's okay to acknowledge the facts of what happened to you but the truth will

always triumph. The facts of what you have experienced have to bow to the truth of who God is and who He created you to be, every single time.

How Do I Forgive?

I want you to rest assured that you are not wrong for feeling that you don't want to or know how to forgive, but I also want to share why you ought to let it go. Imagine for a moment that someone hands you 25lb dumbbells and leaves the room. After a while, you're probably going to put it down even if they never come back and tell you to because it's simply too heavy. That weight they walked away and left you with is *unforgiveness*. When we hold onto the pain of the past so tightly that we become burdened by the weight, we are the only ones suffering.

Forgiveness allows you to release the weight of resentment so that you can walk into the future unencumbered by the burden. Forgiveness isn't something you have to do, it's something you get to do. You have the power to extend grace. You have the power to change your heart, your mind, and your soul by deciding to forgive as often as it takes for you to be free.

Don't be held hostage waiting for an apology. You don't need anyone's permission to forgive and you certainly don't need their remorse.

I know this is easier said than done but I want to share some practical tips on how to forgive no matter how great the offense. These are the exact steps I have used to forgive friends who've betrayed my trust, exes that cheated, men who have sexually assaulted me and parents who let me down in one way or another. In every circumstance, these have worked for me and brought me to a place of vulnerability and truth that allowed me to heal in an authentic way

without forfeiting the lessons and wisdom I received from those instances. It was dirty, shameful and a lot of times I wanted to opt out; but I am grateful for Holy Spirit who is a guide in all things because through His guidance I was able to survive and reshape the narrative surrounding even my most painful memories. Before I get carried away, let me just give you the steps.

Forgiveness action steps:

- **Intercession.** You cannot hate who you pray for. Intercession for those who've hurt you safeguards your heart against bitterness and allows you to see things and people from the perspective of heaven rather than pain.
- **Distance.** I know we all want to seem mature and to pretend things don't bother us; but, the worst thing you can do is deprive yourself of the space you need to truly heal and process what transpired.
- **Accountability.** Cautiously share what happened with an objective party you trust, do not gossip or demonize your offender—simply share without looking for a cosign.
- **Boundaries.** Once you become clear on what happened, get clear on what boundaries were violated and how you can be more intentional about enforcing them in the future. Protect yourself.
- **Love.** We are instructed to love all men, what they do to us does not exempt us from this mandate. Intercession will make this easier for sure!

Along with implementing these strategies; I want you to take into account the fact that your path to forgiveness will not be linear. There will be twists and turns along the way as you unpack, not only the events that happened but their effect on your mental health, the traumatic blows to your self esteem and the parts of you that were modified to accommodate the changes

those events caused. When we are in the process of forgiving, it can feel daunting to peel back the layers. It is perfectly normal to go back and forth on whether or not the entire process is worth it at all. As a reminder, it is. Not because anyone 'deserves' forgiveness but because we all need it at some point. Giving yourself the freedom to forgive, opens you up to new levels of growth and empathy that you will never experience when you choose to remain bothered and bitter.

Grace for Me

Sometimes we are the person it's hardest to forgive because we are so painfully aware of our shortcomings and flaws.

For instance, I found myself married and forgotten. Not by my husband or the friends I'd outgrown, but by me. I stopped considering myself, stopped showing myself kindness and it showed. One of the hardest things for us to do, is to extend the level of grace to ourselves that we extend to others. This journey is one I have been more intentional about recently and I want to share it with you. Yes you!

I want to encourage you to be kind to yourself. I know that past failures and the things you don't do well are pierced into your mind but dare to love yourself beyond it. Show the same level of reckless abandon loving yourself as you did when you were loving "them." One of the areas where I struggled giving myself grace was in the area of family, I bound myself to unrealistic expectations of being every woman, every day. I would feel broken when I didn't complete my to-do list and my inner conversations were unkind, judgemental and painful. I allowed myself to believe the lie that imperfection made me ineligible for grace.

The truth is, if we were perfect, grace wouldn't be necessary. I had to learn how to be honest with myself without being mean to myself. Before you try to be a superwoman and save the world, practice on yourself. The more grace and mercy you allow in your own space, the greater the reservoir you have to extend to those around you.

Grace is not:

- Agreement with unhealthy behavior
- Exemption from repercussions
- A license to be reckless

Grace is:

- Allowance for mistakes, without denying the truth
- The divine ability to forgive through the empowerment of Holy Spirit
- The capacity to love well even when someone doesn't do well

God gave us grace for a reason, He knew we would not be perfect. Why are your standards higher than His? Strive to be your absolute best but be kind when that doesn't look the way you want it to. Making mistakes can pack an extreme blow to our self esteem when not framed correctly. We can incorrectly attribute a mistake with an inherent lack of value in ourselves when we are not secure in our identity.

Here are some ways you can reframe your declarations in the moments you need grace:

Instead of "I keep failing at this" try "This hasn't worked out well so far, but I can get better at this"

Instead of "I never do anything right" try "I am proud of myself for taking on new challenges"

Overall don't say things to yourself that you wouldn't say to a loved one whose feelings you were trying to protect. Consider yourself valuable and worth the effort of kindness and patience,

God does. The bible declares in Romans 8 that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus and that we are free when we walk according to Spirit. If we invite this heavenly perspective to challenge our learned understanding of our value, we would move from condemnation to grace. Accepting the love of God, in my opinion, is an essential component in loving and accepting oneself.

There are many relationship books, podcasts and other media that will tell you all about how to prepare yourself for marriage and relationships. You have been bombarded with how to get and keep a man, how to be a Proverbs 31 woman and how to ensure that you are your absolute best for the man you will marry. My question is, why are we not often willing to make those changes and become the woman we were meant to be for ourselves? Why do we need the motivation of connecting our lives to another person before we see it as valuable? Why don't we love ourselves enough to show up powerfully and authentically?

The truth is, many of us were never informed of our intrinsic value. We often learned to love ourselves based on what we do well, or by the aspects of our personalities and giftings that were most often celebrated by others. This is absolutely fine, but it cannot be all our love of self is based on.

Power of Patience

Patience is defined as the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, problems, or suffering without becoming annoyed or anxious. Very often when we struggle with patience, it's a matter of misplaced trust. As a believer in Christ, when I place my trust in Him, I am able to weather the unpredictable storms of life because I trust Him. When that trust waivers or I am silly enough to think I somehow can do a better job at managing my life—that's when anxiety sets in.

Patience empowers you to remain diligent despite distractions and setbacks.

As a mother, patience is a necessary tool. If I spend my days being annoyed at what goes wrong, I will miss out on the bountiful joy of those I love most. Don't let a lack of patience rob you by pushing you into grumbling rather than gratitude.

Action Steps:

- When you find yourself becoming impatient, list 3–5 things you are thankful for in the situation. It will shift your perspective.
- Consider other people's issues and not just your own inconvenience, life happens and we are all doing our best to manage it well.

If this is a struggle for you, ask yourself:

1. Where can I exercise more patience?
2. Who is often the victim of my impatience?
3. What boundaries are being violated? How can I better articulate and enforce them to minimize inconveniences and irritation in the future?

4. When this moment passes, will I be proud of my response?

To summarize: Be kind to you, be kind to them.

Drawing the Line

We have talked all about forgiveness and while I am a huge fan, I believe that wisdom dictates that we also consider healthy boundaries as well. Personal boundaries are limits we set on how we allow others to treat us and the level of access WE ALLOW them to have in our lives. Yes, you get to choose who is in your space, who gets your time and how you allocate your resources. Oftentimes as a single woman, people will assume that you are always available because you don't have a significant other and it's so inconsiderate. Your time is just as important now as it will be when you marry the love of your life. Learning to set and discern healthy boundaries while you are single will be a great asset to help you when you begin dating seriously. Additionally, learning how to speak up when something makes you uncomfortable is an important part of building healthy relationships. However, the process begins way before that.

Healthy boundaries are born from a distinct realization that we are inherently valuable and should be treated as such by ourselves and our community. It begins by understanding who you are and how the Lord created you to function. You don't need a full life blueprint to do this, just an idea of what God is saying to you about your current season. Begin by prioritizing the things He says are most important and setting limits in place to protect those priorities. After all, boundaries are about protection and not elitism. Learning to honor the boundaries that help you to be fully who God has called you to be will also make you more open to accepting and honoring the boundaries set by others who are doing the same.

Many times, however, we are offended by the boundaries of others because we don't have any.

Why Do I Need Boundaries?

Healthy boundaries are reinforcements that guard your life's purpose. You may have noticed my repeated use of the word "healthy" when referring to boundaries and it's a very intentional distinction. Unhealthy boundaries are like impenetrable walls that are born from trauma with the intention to keep hurt out. Boundaries created from trauma do more harm than good, you not only keep hurt out, you also keep out the love and acceptance your heart truly desires and create a vicious cycle that will eventually open you up to the very same thing you were trying to avoid. Pain.

I cannot speak for you, but the lack of boundaries in my own life was because I felt the need to earn the love of others by what I did for them. I was afraid that saying no would make people leave, so I said yes to things I didn't want to be a part of and was extremely reckless with my heart and with my life. I wanted to be wanted. This showed up most consistently in my dating life but it was present in every relationship I had. My lack of boundaries made me a questionable friend and almost caused me to lose one of my best friends in the world forever.

A few years ago, I went home to Freeport to visit my family and decided to spend some time with an old friend who I hadn't spoken to in a while. I was in a vulnerable place and shared sensitive information about my best friend with someone I assumed was a safe place, since we had mutual friendships. I did not honor my best friend's boundaries with this person, and it cost

me dearly. For a long time, she did not speak to me; understandably, she was hurt and felt like I couldn't be trusted. Unbeknown to me, my conversation with this old friend was recorded and used to belittle and demean me as well as my best friend. I messed up big time!

After a while, we began to repair our relationship but had I set better boundaries then, I could have saved my friend the pain of betrayal she felt. I lost out on the level of intimacy and trust it took us years to build and I am telling you this because I want you to learn to honor the boundaries of others as well as your own. Your relationships will require you to know when to shut up.

What are Boundaries?

Personal boundaries are guidelines, rules or limits that a person creates to identify reasonable, safe and permissible ways for other people to behave towards them and how they will respond when someone passes those limits.

Wikipedia.com

Why do I need Boundaries?

Without healthy boundaries, you will not be able to effectively communicate when you have reached your limit or to accept that others have without taking their boundaries personally.

People who have trouble setting boundaries, saying no and setting limits will very often feel cheated when others aren't equally as willing to breach their own boundaries.

They allow you to be good stewards of your time, energy and resources by streamlining and focusing your energy. Boundaries ensure that you have what's required to do what's purposeful, by setting limits on how much you take on because you view it as helpful.

What happens without boundaries?

Lack of self control

Lack of relational intelligence or empathy

You feel cheated in relationships because you're constantly saying yes to things you'd rather not do.

You put an unfair expectation on others based on your own inability to say no.

You can become resentful and angry at others for breaching personal boundaries you refuse to enforce.

You forfeit the life you want, for the life that makes others comfortable.

Why is it hard for me to say no?

You feel you'll be rejected if you do.

You have a low opinion of yourself

You only feel valuable when serving others.

You believe that setting boundaries make you a bad person.

You are overly responsible.

You believe that things won't get done unless you do them.

Things that influence boundaries:

Culture

Trauma

Self esteem/worth

These issues will need to be discussed in depth with a coach or therapist to fully understand your unique journey to freedom.

Deeper Reasons:

Low self esteem/Self Worth - You based your self worth on the value you bring to others and are of the impression that your goodness is inherently tied to your usefulness. This is flawed, mainly because your value of your self keyword SELF esteem should never be based on the opinions of another human being.

3 questions to ask yourself when you find it hard to say no:

1. What am I afraid will happen if I say no?
2. Is going along with this what's requested, enforcing or diminishing my sense of self worth?
3. Does this request go against my core values?

Sometimes what is requested of us may not be bad, but it takes us away from what we have already established as pertinent. IN instances where you have to choose between someone's

request that directly goes against your pre-established priorities or preferences; weigh the pros and cons. You may not need to say no each time, you may simply need to assess what you CAN do if there's a viable alternative and offer that. If that offer is not accepted, you can move on knowing that you offered only what you were comfortable with and feel proud of yourself for enforcing your healthy boundaries.

When boundaries are breached:

- Be honest with yourself about whether or not you emphatically stated them.
- Acknowledge how it makes you feel, own it and understand why you feel the way you do
- Create boundaries that protect you from further harm
- Be clear with the offender about the specific terms of the boundary that was breached if the opportunity arises.
- Accept that you're not responsible for their response or feelings about your boundaries.
- Remember that setting boundaries is essential to maintaining healthy relationships.

Drawing the line with those we love can be difficult; especially when they have become accustomed to us responding to them in a particular manner. Be patient with all parties involved and accept that you may have to have the conversation a few times before a mutual understanding is established. In the event that your boundaries are intentionally or continually breached; you should then reevaluate the relationship and make changes as led by Holy Spirit.

Character > Connection

The mistake I made in the past was basing my trust on connection instead of character. It is okay to love people regardless of their character but being realistic about how much you can trust them is important. As much as you may love your mom, if you know she has loose lips, you may not want to share sensitive information with her until you're okay with other people knowing. Similarly, when we are choosing romantic partners and friends, we should apply the same principle. There are many people you may find attractive, witty and enjoyable. They may be amazing people overall, but if there are character traits that do not align with your core values, it is your responsibility to set parameters in place to guard your heart.

Connection is absolutely important; I want you to find the people that set your soul on fire and make you feel safe and loved. I want you to find friends who you can trust with your complete self. I just don't want you to choose a person whose character will leave your heart in ruins. Before you commit yourself based on connection; whether in friendship or romance—allow yourself the time to observe their character first.

Things to consider:

How do they treat people who have nothing to offer them?

How do they respond to pressure/disappointment?

Do they operate in integrity?

Are they generally reliable?

The Closure Clause

Imagine for a moment, signing a contract that gives someone the right to do as they wish to you. They can physically harm you, emotionally abuse you, manipulate and mistreat you but you are not able to move on without their permission. Sounds ludicrous right? That is exactly what we do when we use our need for closure as a crutch. Requiring closure keeps us crippled by the fear of making a decision. You don't need anyone's permission to make decisions about how you will spend your time, money or energy. Sometimes we get so lost in looking for answers because the truth is—we just aren't ready to leave. I get it. But, don't kid yourself by asking for closure, because nine times out of ten you are really just asking for an excuse not to make the decision your soul already knows it needs to.

Relational Agreement

Whenever we meet someone new, whether friend or potential spouse; we ought to engage them from a place of intention. We should be clear on what our needs are, what we realistically have to offer relationally and our motives for wanting to establish a relationship with this person. We will call this the *relational agreement*. Without this agreement, our relationships will likely be based on emotional deficits and unspoken expectations that will lead to disappointment. I'll give you an example:

When I got married, I automatically assumed that those I had established friendships with would automatically adjust to my new lifestyle. I didn't take into consideration that the dynamics

of our relationship would change, simply because I changed. Getting married, focusing on establishing my family and working diligently to follow The Lord meant that I wasn't as available for outings. I didn't notice at first when the invitations stopped coming; but when I came up for air, I was breathing alone. I wasn't abandoned. I broke the agreement. The friendships I had at the time, were not meant to do what I expected. I didn't adequately voice my expectations nor did I prepare myself for the adjustments that may have been required to maintain those relationships. I had to release them. I simply could not relate to them the way I did before and that was totally okay.

By acknowledging my lack of agreement within these friendships, I was able to take responsibility for how they transitioned without feeling bitter or rejected (after a while). It hurt. I questioned if I could have done things differently to keep them close, I wondered if I could have changed the outcome. However, no matter what I did—they had every right to distance themselves if their needs in our friendship were not being met. Additionally, I had every right to prioritize my family and I have no regrets at all. I was able to readjust my expectations in those friendships and appreciate them for what they are without feeling cheated by what I thought they should have been. Nobody owes me their friendship, and I would never want anyone to feel pressured into giving me more than they desire to.

You DO NOT NEED permission to move on. You do not need permission to change what takes priority in your life; but in an instance where you have a *relational agreement*, be sure to communicate that shift and give the other party the opportunity to decide if they want to continue journeying with you.

Points to ponder:

- You are responsible for the outcome of your life, allow the Holy Spirit to guide you.
- Do not wait for toxic relationships to end by default, make the decision!
- You don't need permission from the perpetrator to be free from the prison of their abuse.
Be free.
- Break the closure clause by taking responsibility for the life you desire and only accepting God's best.

Submit your life to The Lord and trust that His plans for you are good.

You are worth the effort it takes to grow into who you were born to be by peeling back the layers of dysfunction, insecurity, fear and trauma. Underneath it all is God's best for you, you have the rest of your life to evolve into her. The relationships you build moving forward, need to be with people who create a safe environment for your evolution.

Make good choices.