



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 6

| Scripture reading: Luke 7:36–47

Goals for the Session

The goals of this session are to explore the relationship between forgiveness, repentance, and justice; to claim a personal faith stance on these issues; and to share the central gifts and challenges of this study.

Preparing for the Session

- Pray for each person in the group, including yourself, to be guided by the Holy Spirit as you conclude this study and seek to put into practice a renewed life as forgiven and forgiving believers.
- Read the Participant Handout for session 6.
- Review this Leader's Guide, carefully considering the "Teaching Alternatives," to choose the approach you believe will best meet the needs of your group (see the "Teaching Tip" below).
- For the Closing you will need a small to medium size standing cross and a pillar candle (preferably white or purple) to symbolize the presence of Christ. You will want at least a small plate beneath the candle, and if the room you meet in is carpeted you may need a flat base or tray for both the cross and candle.
- Set up the room in advance, with chairs in the three-quarters circle arrangement. Set the small table you used for last week's Closing activity near the door. It should remain as undisturbed as possible, with the water bowl, basket of river stones, and stones left around the bowl. If the room is used for other purposes between your sessions, place a note on it to not disturb.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Transitioning to the topic

EXPLORING

- Weighing the order of repentance and forgiveness
- Studying Jesus' example
- Revisiting our ideas of justice

RESPONDING

- Journaling

CLOSING

- Worship sharing
- Singing and signs of peace

- Create a handout with the "Journaling" questions under Responding and make copies so participant's can take the questions home for further journaling.

Materials Needed

- Nametags, if still needed
- Easel, newsprint, markers, and masking tape
- A chime or bell
- Extra copies of the Participant Handout for those who forget to bring theirs

- Extra blank paper for those who may forget their journals
- A few extra Bibles

Teaching Tip

As the final session of this Lenten study, it will be important to bring some sense of closure to your six weeks together. For this reason, the journaling time has been reduced to five minutes and the Closing time expanded to ten minutes. There are several important themes in the final handout and not enough time to engage with them all if you are to leave time for the kinds of questions and sharing that will help bring closure to the group. Consider more carefully than usual the “Teaching Alternatives” and what you believe will be most helpful to your group at this stage.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Welcome

Welcome participants as they arrive and make name-tags available if needed.

2. Prayer

Lead the group in the following prayer or one of your own:

Great God, your ways are truly not our ways, and your thoughts are infinitely higher than our thoughts. Help us to grasp the nature of your justice within the wider realm of your mercy, just as your ocean of love washes over the ocean of our sin. Reveal to us what we need to see within our own minds and hearts and lead us in your ways of life-renewing truth and peace. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

3. Transitioning to the Topic

Direct participant’s attention to how the handout for this final session begins with a section on the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation. It suggests that reconciliation can occur without direct forgiveness, but that a certain interior release of the past must be in place for reconciliation to be authentic. The handout speaks of “implied forgiveness” and offers a few stories to illustrate. Ask the group if they can think of a story from their own experience with family, friends, or colleagues that illustrates reconciliation without direct forgiveness. Invite the brief sharing of a story. Ask the storyteller if she or he thinks the situation involved a

truly forgiving heart or just “sweeping things under the rug,” and how we might know the difference.

Exploring (25 minutes)

4. Weighing the Order of Repentance and Forgiveness

Introduce a quick brainstorming session around the question of whether or not repentance must come before forgiveness. Start by asking the group to name some reasons for why repentance and apology *should* precede forgiveness, since many hold this as an axiom, which is supported by certain biblical passages. Capture each argument in brief on newsprint. After a few minutes of collecting reasons, ask the group to shift gears and give reasons for why repentance and apology *don’t need* to precede forgiveness, since many also hold this position and Scripture supports it. Capture each response in brief on a second sheet of newsprint. Tape these sheets up in the room for viewing.

Ask the group to consider which of the reasons carry more weight and to note their responses inwardly. Then ask them to simply notice where they are standing on this question. There is no sharing at this point.

5. Studying Jesus’ Example

Point the group to this statement in the handout: “The only problem with our conventional ideas about justice is the larger witness of Jesus’ life and death.” Remind them that the next several paragraphs point to stories in the Gospels that seem to argue that for God repentance is *not* a prerequisite to forgiveness.

Indicate that another beloved Gospel story, not addressed in the handout, may also be read in this light. Invite the group to turn to John 8:1–11, the woman caught in adultery. Ask for a volunteer to read it through and for participants pay attention to where they see repentance and forgiveness in this story. Ask, what is Jesus’ expression of forgiveness here? Where is the element of repentance? Let members respond to you and each other.

In this discussion you are aiming to bring out (1) the idea that Jesus’ refusal to condemn this woman is an implicit expression of forgiveness; (2) that his exhortation to her, “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” is an implicit expectation of her subsequent repentance.

If time allows, ask the group to imagine what the woman is likely to proceed with her life after this momentous event, and why. Then invite them to consider any connection they see between the woman caught in adultery and the murderer of the Dakota Sioux man from the story recounted in session 1. What “justice” does each sinner face? How is release from the death sentence likely to affect them?

6. Revisiting Our Ideas of Justice

Turn now to the issue of how this reversed perspective on forgiveness and repentance affects our assumptions about justice. First, invite participants to respond very quickly, without thinking, to the question, how have you generally understood justice? You might follow up with these questions: What is the purpose of justice? What are some of the chief characteristics and expressions of justice? You don’t need to write down responses; just encourage basic notions about justice to “pop up” all over the room. Generally, this process should elicit some fairly conventional ideas that tend to emphasize punishment and compensation.

After a few minutes, move on to ask, what is your understanding of the distinction between “retributive justice” and “restorative justice” in the handout? Point them to the two paragraphs describing each approach (second and third paragraphs under “Rethinking the Nature of Justice”). Invite general comments and reaction. Then ask them to articulate what is most convincing or promising about the idea of restorative justice and what anxieties they might have about its limitations.

Responding (5 minutes)

7. Journaling

Pass around a handout of the questions below or write them on newsprint. Invite participants to make journal notes on just *one* question and to take the rest home for continued journaling beyond this study.

- What relationship do I see between the emotions I most struggle with around forgiveness and my ideas of what serves justice?
- How do I respond inwardly to retributive justice? To restorative justice? Where do I stand on the relative value of each, and how would I justify my stance biblically and theologically?

- How does restorative justice connect with the idea that forgiveness involves us in larger issues of human community (from Session 1)?

After five minutes, gently ring the chime or bell.

Closing (10 minutes)

8. Worship Sharing

Move the chairs to form a complete circle (you may need a double circle if you have a larger group). Place the cross and candle on the floor at the center of the circle and light the candle. Explain that we will bring closure to this study by sharing with each other in a worshipful way a little of what we have gained in these six weeks, what challenges remain, and what practices we hope to continue. Instruct the group to “share to the center,” focusing their gaze on the cross and candle as symbols of Christ’s presence among us rather than directing responses to you as leader. Indicate that we will enter a prayerful silence together; then you will ask a few questions, allowing responses to emerge from the quiet as individuals are ready. Encourage participants to respond briefly, perhaps in a single word, phrase, or sentence.

Invite the group into silence again (about 15 seconds). Ask the following questions, allowing a few minutes for responses to each (not all may have time to respond):

- What is the most important learning, conviction, or gift you take from this study?
- What remains the greatest ongoing challenge for you in relation to forgiveness?
- What spiritual practice do you most want to deepen and nurture a forgiving heart?

Thank the group for what they have shared and thank God for the gifts of insight and fresh conviction given in these weeks together (not as a formal prayer but as a statement).

9. Singing and Signs of Peace

Sing the first verse of “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” as an expression of gratitude and praise for God’s great mercy and grace. If your hymnal includes the verse “Thou are giving and forgiving . . .,” sing this as well.

Remind the group that the water bowl signifying God’s grace and the stones symbolizing persons yet unforgiven in our lives is near the door. If any are ready to

slip another stone into the water, they are free to express their act of forgiveness before leaving today. End the class by sharing signs of Christ's peace with each other.

Teaching Alternatives

- Try a “quickie debate” format for the theme of revisiting our notions of justice. Ask for several volunteers to form two panels (two to four persons each), one panel to argue for the importance of retributive justice and the other to argue for the virtues of restorative justice. Recognize that these are not likely to be finely tuned arguments, since the group probably has few experts and only a little information. There should be a certain lightness of spirit in this but also a good faith effort to represent two pictures of justice.

Have each panel pull their chairs together opposite the other panel with four to six feet between. Serve as moderator with your chair between the panels at one end. Ask two or three questions such as, what is the primary purpose of justice? What are the most effective means of justice? How does your faith support your position? Starting with the retribution panel, give each side one minute to respond to your question; allow another half minute for responses to the other side. Then go on to the next question. You can only cover a few questions in the time given.

After about eight minutes of panel debate, ask the group of nonpanelists to say what was most convincing about various perspectives and arguments shared by the panelists.

- Another alternative to “Revisiting Our Ideas of Justice” is to show an audiovisual clip from a film version of *Les Misérables*, showing the scene between Jean Valjean and the bishop involving the bishop's stolen silver. You will need to set the context for those who have never seen the show or read the book, telling a bit about Valjean's desperate theft of bread to feed his family, his long imprisonment, how this punishment turned him into a hardened man, and how the bishop, out of kindness, took him in when he was finally released. After showing the clip, ponder how the bishop's response to Valjean's theft, in the police captain's presence, transforms Valjean. Discuss connections with the themes of retributive and restorative justice. This will take longer than ten minutes, so plan what to cut from the lesson.

- Substitute “Weighing the Order of Repentance and Forgiveness” for the current material under “Transitioning to the Topic,” freeing up additional time for Journaling or the Closing. This would be the first place to consider a cut from the lesson plan if you opt for a clip of *Les Misérables*.

- *Options for the Second Part of the Closing.* If your hymnal does not contain the verse of “Joyful, Joyful” with the forgiveness motif, try to locate (or recall) it and write the verse on newsprint. The traditional version of this verse does not contain inclusive language, although the original intent was inclusive. If you believe your group would find this problematic, then ignore this option.

If your group doesn't like to sing, offer a prayer of thanksgiving to gather up the gifts of this study instead. Do allow for a time of sharing the peace of Christ to close your time, because this helps to confirm the bonds of community you have formed during these weeks together.

Key Scriptures

Leviticus 6:1–7

Numbers 5:5–7

Mark 2:1–12

Mark 2:14 (Luke 5:27–28)

Luke 7:36–47

Luke 17:3–4

John 8:1–11

Romans 2:4 and 5:7–8

For More Information

L. William Countryman, *Forgiven and Forgiving* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998).

L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995).

Rupert Ross, *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (Toronto, Penguin Books Canada, 1996).

Marjorie J. Thompson, *Companions in Christ: The Way of Forgiveness* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002).