



# Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

## SESSION 1

| Scripture reading: Luke 15:11–32

### Goal for the Session

The goal of this session is to welcome participants and encourage them to begin reflecting on forgiveness in relation to human community.

### Preparing for the Session

- As you begin your preparations, take time to pray for each participant and for yourself as leader. Pray that the handout reading and group meeting time will be guided by the Spirit, leading each person to a deeper understanding of, and greater desire for, the gift of forgiveness in their lives.
- Decide how to distribute the Participant Handouts for the six sessions. You may print them out, copy a sufficient number for your group, and distribute them ahead of time; or e-mail them as attachments to participants a week in advance if you have all needed e-mail addresses. If you send all six at once, ask everyone to read only the first handout prior to your first session. It may be better to distribute the following session's handout at the end of each session to ensure that participants don't misplace their materials or spend time looking ahead. Plan to bring a few extra copies for those who might forget to bring theirs.
- You will need to make small notebooks for journaling available to participants in this first session, since journaling will be the primary practice in the Responding segment of each session. Your church may be able to supply these or reimburse your purchase, or you may ask participants to cover the cost.

### Session at a Glance

#### OPENING

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Introducing ground rules for sharing

#### EXPLORING

- Reading the prodigal son story
- Triad sharing
- Plenary discussion

#### RESPONDING

- Journaling

#### CLOSING

- Prayer
- Preparing for the next session

Thin spiral bound notebooks (not smaller than 5 x 7 inches) should be inexpensive.

- Write on newsprint the journaling questions from "Preparing for the Next Session" (exercise 9 below).
- Read the Participant Handout for session 1 so you are familiar with the content participants will have read.
- Review this Leader's Guide, including the "Teaching Alternatives," and determine the approach you will take to best meet the needs of your group.

- Provide nametags if your participants do not know one another or if you do not know them by name.
- Try to secure a room large enough to accommodate triads without crowding them. Set up the room in advance. Chairs arranged in a three-quarter circle, whether single or double rows, will help encourage eye contact and dialogue within the group. Set your own chair at one end of the chair arrangement where you can easily rise to reach newsprint or materials. Your role is that of a facilitator, not a teacher.
- Have an easel, newsprint, and markers available to record ideas and resources.
- Bring a Bible; it will be needed in this session and useful in all sessions.
- You may choose to print and copy the Closing prayer for all participants or to write the prayer on newsprint before the session.

## Teaching Tips

- If your group is newly formed, or you have new members joining this study, take time to welcome them and help them connect with each other. As leader, aim to be calm and put participants at ease.
- The topic of forgiveness may provoke anxiety or uncertainty, because it can be a painful and tender issue. Some will come with personal reasons for choosing this study, while for others the topic may be of more general interest. It will be important to emphasize the group ground rules during the Opening, especially the invitational nature of all sharing and the covenant of confidentiality.

## Opening (10 minutes)

### 1. Welcome

Welcome participants by name as they arrive and pass out nametags (or name tents if you are sitting at a table). Introduce yourself and express welcome to the whole group, along with your sense of anticipation about the time you will spend together in this study through Lent. Say a few words about Lent as the six-week period of preparing ourselves spiritually for the great celebration of Easter. It has traditionally been a penitential season of reflection, prayer, and self-giving, so the theme of forgiveness fits well with the purpose of Lent.

## 2. Prayer

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

Great God, you are rich in mercy beyond our knowing. We thank you for the gift of your forgiveness of our sin, made known to us in Jesus. Help us to open our minds and hearts to your Holy Spirit in the days ahead as we travel together through this Lenten season. Show us what we need to understand, and help us learn how to practice forgiveness in all our relationships, so we might experience the renewal of common life you desire and offer to us in Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

## 3. Introducing Ground Rules for Sharing

Explain that because the topic of forgiveness can raise hard questions and sometimes painful memories, it will be important to agree to a few basic ground rules that help make times of sharing safe for everyone. Here are four:

- Speak only for yourself, using “I” language when speaking about your own experiences and beliefs.
- Listen to and respect one another’s ideas and feelings.
- Everyone is free to share only what and when they are ready to share.
- Maintain confidentiality; nothing of a personal nature shared by anyone will go outside the group, even to spouses or close friends.

Ask the group to agree on these ground rules. Tell them it is OK to gently remind each other of them if it seems necessary. As leader, you should also be prepared to intervene with reminders if it seems called for and no one else is doing so.

## Exploring (30 minutes)

### 4. Reading the Prodigal Son Story

Invite a volunteer to read aloud the parable in Luke 15:11–32. Then give the group three to four minutes to read or review the section of the Participant Handout titled “Who Needs Forgiveness?”

### 5. Triad Sharing

Form the group into triads (allow them to form these as they choose, or count off by threes for a more ran-

dom mixing). Invite the triads to find a space slightly apart from each other in the room so they can hear each other speak.

Ask each person in the triad to assume the role of one of the three characters in the parable. Give them a few moments to sort out which one will choose each character. Then ask them to imagine how, as that character, they would respond to the following questions:

1. How do you see the other two persons in your family?
2. What do you really want to say to each one?

Instruct the triads to allow a few minutes of quiet for each person to reflect on these questions and perhaps jot down notes on how they imagine their characters might respond. As any are ready, sharing may begin with each participant having about three minutes to share.

## 6. Plenary Discussion

Guide a time of shared reflection and discussion. Ask some of the following questions: What insights arose from your triad sharing? Did you gain new perspective on any of the characters in this story? What about fresh insight into your own character? What kind of healing does each brother need? Do you think the father needs to be forgiven? Why, or why not? How are the various needs for forgiveness in this story connected?

Point out that when we use our imagination to enter the mind of biblical figures, we learn more about ourselves than about the character portrayed, whether historical or fictional. This can be a powerful way for the Holy Spirit to help us connect our own experience and life story with the great Story of salvation.

## Responding (10 minutes)

### 7. Journaling

Lent is a season for spiritual practice. One of the most helpful practices for contemporary Christians is that of journaling, so the response in each session will be a brief time for journaling.

Distribute small notebooks to participants for this purpose. Explain that journal keeping has been used for centuries as a way to record insights, questions, prayers, feelings, and inner dialogues on matters of faith. It is

a way of “meditating on paper” and capturing movements in our relationship with God. Give participants permission to journal in whatever way is most comfortable. Complete sentences and grammar are less important than free and authentic self-expression.

Invite the group to journal on their insights and ongoing questions from this session. Suggest that they specifically ponder how issues of forgiveness in our own lives are connected in webs of relationship.

Invite them to continue journaling on their own as further insights or questions arise.

## Closing (5 minutes)

### 8. Prayer

Print the following prayer on newsprint or copy it to distribute to participants so it can be prayed in unison:

God of Grace, thank you for the wonderful gift of human relationships. We acknowledge that often we take our deepest relationships for granted and find ourselves at odds with each other by putting our own interests first. Help us to see the larger picture of our hurts and hopes. By your generous mercy, give us humility and courage both to receive and offer forgiveness, so that our life together may be restored in the unity of love. We pray in Jesus’ name and spirit. **Amen.**

### 9. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the next session’s Participant Handout or indicate that you will send it via e-mail by end of day. Confirm your agreement to read it before the next session.

Remind everyone to bring their journals and Bibles to each session.

Invite participants to continue journaling this week, and encourage them to reflect on the following questions printed on newsprint. Where have I witnessed or participated in a meaningful experience of forgiveness? What has it taught me, and how has it challenged me?

## Teaching Alternatives

- A second story is told in the Participant’s Handout, about the Sioux Indian tribe’s response to a man who murdered one of their own. Ask the group to read or review the section titled “A Deeper Kinship Story,” marking the portions that especially strike them.

Then invite participants to read aloud one paragraph or portion of their choice and to comment on what they learn, question, or feel challenged by in it. Allow for responses from the group.

If not raised in the discussion, ask the group if they think this kind of response is possible within our culture, and why they think so or not. Explore the kinds of attitudes and practices that might enable us to take offenders to heart, or other ways of healing breaches of love and respect in our communities today. Question how we understand the role of larger communities in matters of forgiveness and reconciliation.

- If you prefer, or if your group has a strong negative response to journaling, allow for a time of meditation and prayer in the Response period. Invite everyone to reflect on what they have received from God during this session, how their spirit has been touched,

and how they feel called to respond in prayer and action.

## Key Scriptures

Genesis, chapters 1–2

Matthew 25:31–46

Luke 15:11–32

Luke 18:10–14

Colossians 1:15–20

## For More Information

Ella Cara Deloria, *Waterlily* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

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

# Bibliography on Forgiveness

Johann Christoph Arnold, *Why Forgive* (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2000).

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

Kathleen Fischer, *Forgiving Your Family: A Journey to Healing* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2005).

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, 1996).

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