



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 4

| Scripture: Luke 23:32–43

Goal for the Session

The goals of this session are to identify at least one thing for which we need forgiveness and to seek both God's forgiveness and that of any person(s) affected by our offense.

Preparing for the Session

- Pray for each person in the group, including yourself, to be wide open to the gift of God's forgiveness and for the spirit of grace to seek it.
- Be prepared to e-mail or distribute copies of the Participant Handout for the next session. Plan to bring a few extra copies for those who forget to bring theirs.
- Read the Participant Handout for session 4.
- Review this Leader's Guide, including the "Teaching Alternatives," and determine the approach you will take to best meet the needs of your group.
- Set up the room in advance, preferably with chairs in a three-quarters circle and your chair at one end where you can easily reach newsprint or other materials.
- Try to find a reproduction of the crucified Christ large enough for the whole group to see as a visual aid for the first step of prayer in "Seeking God's Forgiveness." Place the picture upright on a small table in the open part of the three-quarter circle of chairs so all can easily see it.
- Write on separate pieces of newsprint in advance the three prayer steps under "Seeking God's For-

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Transitioning to the topic

EXPLORING

- Seeking god's forgiveness
- Discussing apologies
- Writing a letter of apology

RESPONDING

- Journaling

CLOSING

- Singing a hymn as prayer
- Preparing for the next session

giveness," the three Journaling foci, and the journaling questions for the week under "Preparing for the Next Session."

Materials Needed

- Nametags
- Easel, newsprint, and markers
- A chime or bell
- Extra blank paper for those who may forget their journals

- A few Bibles for those who forget to bring theirs, especially if you plan to use some of the teaching alternatives
- Hymnals for the Closing

Teaching Tips

- If you are not comfortable leading the group in song, perhaps a musical member of the group would be willing to do so. If the room in which you meet has a piano, check at the start to see if you have a volunteer to accompany the hymn singing.
- If questions are raised about why one would write a letter of apology to a person who has died, here are two responses: (1) Sometimes this exercise helps free us from the burden of guilt we have been carrying, perhaps for years, in relation to someone who has died and to whom we cannot speak directly. (2) If we believe that, in the mystery of God's grace, we are spiritually linked to the whole communion of saints, or that souls have an existence in God beyond this life, any sincere act of apology or forgiveness can surely be used by God to good purpose.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Welcome

Welcome participants as they arrive. Make sure name tags are available for all.

2. Prayer

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

O God, your love truly will not let us go. Help us to seek, and receive with gratitude, your costly forgiveness in Christ. Then, humbled and strengthened by your love, help us to seek forgiveness from those whom we have wounded or offended, knowing that our sins against one another are first of all sins against you, the author and giver and lover of life. We pray in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, whose suffering love redeems and transforms us. **Amen.**

3. Transitioning to the Topic

Briefly recap one of the early points in this week's Participant Handout, with words like these: God's solution to the problem of human sin is *costly love*. This is not a cheap and easy love, given "automatically," but

love that expresses God's total self-giving to us and demands in response a total self-offering—not as duty but as love freely returned. The handout says that faced with human transgression, "God's justice and love are fused into a single response and a singular invitation."

Instruct participants to turn to another group member and put into their own words how they understand the fusing of God's love and justice in Christ. How does Jesus embody the paradox of divine judgment and divine grace?

Exploring (25 minutes)

4. Seeking God's Forgiveness

Lift up the truth that our ability to forgive others depends on our first receiving the gift of God's costly forgiveness. Indicate that we will spend a little time now prayerfully seeking that grace. Ask them to recall their response to the journaling question at the end of session 2: What do I need to be forgiven for? If they have already dealt with that issue sufficiently, invite them to identify something else for which they need forgiveness (we all have many such needs!). Perhaps it is an inner attitude requiring forgiveness from God alone. Or it may be something needing forgiveness from God *and* another person. Allow a minute for everyone to identify the issue.

Suggest the following three steps on newsprint for the group to prayerfully follow. Allow about three minutes.

1. Imagine (or observe) Jesus on the cross, arms outstretched in costly love. (If a picture is available, adapt your instruction accordingly.)
2. Seek *metanoia*, being "clothed in [our] right mind" (Mark 5:15). Ask the Spirit to show you what a new mind-set would look like in this situation.
3. Thank God for your desire to be changed and for the Spirit's loving power to transform you. Receive deeply God's forgiveness and grace to strengthen you for a new life.

To gather people from their prayer time, sing the first verse of "Amazing Grace."

5. Discussing Apologies

Turn to how we seek forgiveness from others, beginning with the matter of apology. Ask the group to talk a

few minutes about anything that struck them in reading about apology in this week's handout. What did they learn, question, or feel confirmed in?

Read the following examples of apologies. After each one, invite the group to discuss if it is a good apology; why is it a good apology, or why not a good apology?

1. "Honey, I'm really sorry that I exploded at you last night about not helping with dinner clean-up and getting the trash out. I know you were exhausted after the crazy week you've had at work, and you deserved some down time. I guess I was pretty tired myself from the baby being sick and all, and then my friend Jodi being so rotten to me on the phone about what I said to her kid. I'd had a really hard day, too."
2. "I want to say to you that I am deeply ashamed by what I have done in breaking our marriage vow. I am sorrier than I can say for the hurt I have caused you by my infidelity. I've been really foolish and selfish. I wish I could go back and erase what I did. All I can say is that I will try to make it up to you in any way I can, in any way you will let me. I'm prepared to go to counseling and do it seriously. I want to make a new start, if you are willing. Please forgive me; with all my heart I ask you, please, give me a second chance with you."
3. "Hey look, I'm sorry if what I said hurt your feelings. I didn't mean to, you know. I'm not really prejudiced about your ethnic background; I'm just a pretty rough and tumble kind of guy. And you're sort of a sensitive kind of gal."

6. Writing a Letter of Apology

Let participants know that they now have an opportunity to write a letter of apology to someone, living or dead, from whom they feel the need of forgiveness. Instruct them that they have about eight minutes to write an apology in their journals, using the three guidelines from the Participant Handout. Note that while shame or regret will not be "visible" in a letter, it can be readily apparent through written expression.

After about eight minutes, ring the chime gently and say that if they are not quite finished, they can complete their letters in the journaling time. Then invite participants to speak briefly about their experiences of the process by asking a few questions:

- Was writing a letter of apology difficult? What made it so?
- What feelings surfaced in you as you wrote? Was it painful, liberating, both?

Let group members know it is entirely their choice as to whether or not they send these letters. If the intended recipient is not alive, then the act of writing itself is sufficient and may lead to further prayer.

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Journaling

Invite participants to give attention to one or more of these areas:

- Finish your letter, if not completed.
- Journal on insights about yourself in relation to apology.
- Express your intentions about seeking forgiveness from others.

After ten minutes, gently ring the chime or bell.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Singing a Hymn as Prayer

Invite the group to sing several verses of "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," a hymn that can be found in most traditional hymnals. Ask participants to pay attention to the words of this familiar hymn, hearing its meanings and singing it as the prayer that it is.

9. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the next session's Participant Handout or indicate when you will send it via e-mail. Agree to read it before the next session and remind everyone to bring journals and Bibles to each session.

Invite participants to journal this week around these questions: Who else do I need to seek forgiveness from, and for what? Is there any *pattern* in what I need forgiveness for, revealing something I need to see about myself?

Teaching Alternatives

- Open up a discussion of how we understand God's love in relation to God's judgment or justice. Start by inviting comments and questions on the opening

segment of the Participant Handout, “The Way of Love.” Then move from a general and abstract discussion to the realm of personal life. What, for example, might our own family life or parenting experience tell us about the relationship between love and justice? What are some of the more constructive expressions of judgment, and which are more destructive ones? What stories can we tell about judgment that is loving or love that is just?

- Further explore repentance as *metanoia*—getting beyond our conventional ways of thinking, perceiving, and responding. Look together at Luke’s version of the Beatitudes in 6:20–26. Draw a vertical line down the middle of two newsprint pages. Write the essence of the “blessings” in the left column of the first page. Ask, What *metanoia* is required of us by each blessing? Write group responses in the right column. Then write the essence of the “woes” in the left column of the second page and ask what *metanoia* is required by each woe? Write responses on the right side. Invite the group to look these over and ponder which change in mind-set is most challenging to them personally.

If you wish to spend more time here, read on through verse 36. Again, ask what personal *metanoia* is called for if you would take these teachings seriously. What mind-set would you need to let go of? What values would you need to embrace fully? What aspects of these teachings most challenge you? Then invite three volunteers to read aloud the last three paragraphs of “The Spirit of Repentance” in the week’s handout. Let this lead to a time of prayer, seeking God’s forgiveness and grace to live by the Kingdom values expressed in the Beatitudes.

The “Journaling” segment should subsequently focus on insight, challenge, and learning from this process.

- Instruct participants to reread the first paragraph of “Seeking Forgiveness from Others.” Let it prompt them to begin recalling the names and noticing in memory the faces of those they have misjudged or mistreated over time. Ask them to make a list of names and faces they recall and to note beside each what they need to ask this person forgiveness for. Invite participants to take their list into prayer.
- An alternate Closing reading is Mark 14:17–30. Point out that Jesus knows full well his disciples are about to betray, deny, and desert him; yet he stays at table fellowship with them, offering the bread and cup to all.

Invite everyone to take a few moments to imagine what words of blessing Jesus wants to say to *all* of his disciples through all time, in the face of all the ways we disappoint, betray, and wound him. After a minute of quiet, invite participants to share the words of blessing they hear within themselves. Add a brief prayer of thanks for the grace and love Christ offers us.

Key Scriptures

Psalm 51

Matthew 25:31–46

Mark 14:17–30

Luke 6:20–36

Luke 19:1–9 (Zacchaeus exemplifies *metanoia*)

Luke 23:32–43

1 Corinthians 13, especially verses 4–7

For More Information

Carl. D. Schneider, “What It Means to Be Sorry: The Power of Apology in Mediation,” *Mediation Quarterly*, 17, no. 3 (Spring 2000).