



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 5

| Scripture reading: Matthew 18:23–35

Goal for the Session

The goals of this session are to identify at least one person we need to forgive and move toward readiness to forgive through story and imagination.

Preparing for the Session

- Pray for each person in the group, including yourself, to be open to the Holy Spirit as you move toward a true spirit of forgiving others.
- Be prepared to e-mail or distribute copies of the Participant Handout for the final session. Plan to bring a few extra copies for those who forget to bring theirs.
- Read the Participant Handout for session 5.
- Review this Leader's Guide, including the "Teaching Alternatives," to determine the approach you will take to best meet the needs of your group.
- For the Closing ritual you will need to secure a large bowl (preferably of pottery or glass, not plastic or stainless steel); enough smooth "river stones" so each participant can take three or four (you can obtain these in mesh bags at places like Pier I Imports); a basket to hold the rocks; a small table to set the bowl and basket of rocks on; and a cloth to cover the table. This arrangement can be set up in advance, placed either in the open section of the three-quarters circle of chairs or at the center of the group where you will place it for the Closing. Fill the bowl about half full of water. If you opt for the alternate Closing ritual, you will need a collection of old buttons along with the stones and two baskets.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Transitioning to the topic

EXPLORING

- Naming reasons to forgive
- Engaging stories of forgiveness
- Imagining the act of forgiving

RESPONDING

- Journaling

CLOSING

- Symbolizing forgiveness
- Preparing for the next session

- Write in advance on separate newsprint sheets the possible areas of attention for "Journaling" and the journaling questions under "Preparing for the Next Session."

Materials Needed

- Nametags, if still needed
- 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

Teaching Tip

Remember that no one can be forced to forgive, since such “forgiveness” would not be authentic. It is a gift that can only be offered freely from the heart. You want to encourage participants to come to the point where forgiving another person seems not only the right thing to do but also expresses what they feel ready to do. Even though Scripture treats forgiveness as necessary for Christians, avoid using any language with the group that conveys a sense of pressure or coercion. Forgiving may be a spiritual necessity, but it is one we each must come to in our own way and time.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Welcome

Welcome participants as they arrive and provide nametags if needed.

2. Prayer

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

Holy God, your willing grace astonishes us when we consider what we, as human beings, have done to each other, to your creatures, and to this beautiful earth. Each of us has the seeds of destructiveness within us, yet we struggle with hard feelings when it comes our turn to forgive others. Soften the soil of our hearts with the spring rain of your grace; prepare us to be merciful as you are merciful. For we ask it in the name of Christ, your Mercy poured out upon us. **Amen.**

3. Transitioning to the Topic

Read the following quote from the last paragraph of the “Call to Forgive” in this week’s handout: “Normal human feelings can easily block our acting on the knowledge that forgiveness is imperative for Christ-followers.” Point out that sometimes our emotional resistance to forgiving others comes from simple misunderstandings of what forgiveness is. For example, we can confuse forgiveness with *denying* our hurt or with *excusing* a harmful behavior or with *forgetting* the wound (write these three italicized words on newsprint as you talk). Invite participants to think about their own

understanding of what forgiveness is and to come up with a one-sentence definition. Just what are we doing when we forgive another person?

Allow a few minutes for your group to write their definitions. Then ask them to share their definitions in pairs.

Exploring (25 minutes)

4. Naming Reasons to Forgive

Introduce a brainstorming session: Ask, what are the best reasons you can think of to forgive others? List responses on newsprint as participants speak.

Here are some responses you might anticipate or could suggest if they do not surface:¹

- God forgives us/ Jesus’ example
- Seeing my own weaknesses or “shadow side” in the enemy
- Discovering the humanity of the offender
- Holding onto a grudge/wanting revenge is ruining my life.
- I don’t want to be the kind of person who can’t forgive.
- Life is too short for hanging on to resentment.
- I want the pain passed on from earlier generations to stop with mine.
- The peace I want in this world begins with me.

5. Engaging Stories of Forgiveness

Instruct the group to turn to the section of the handout titled “Stories of Forgiveness.” Ask them to share which story especially drew them in or made them wonder what more was involved. Ask them to reflect on how they think they would have reacted if they had been Kelly, Chris, or Ron in these situations. What thoughts or emotions would they find it most difficult to get past? What do they think made it possible for these people to forgive?

If participants have a story to tell, allow for one or two, time permitting. The point of this discussion is to bring to the surface the kinds of feelings that block us from a forgiving heart and enables us to move beyond these feelings.

6. Imagining the Act of Forgiving

Ask participants to recall or locate their answer to the weekly journaling question at the end of session 2, “Can I identify . . . one person I need to forgive?” If they have already forgiven that person, invite them to identify another, living or dead. Sometimes the person we most need to forgive is beyond the reach of this world but not beyond the reach of the Spirit. Allow a few moments for participants to identify someone. Tell everyone they now have an opportunity to work on offering forgiveness rather than receiving it.

Instruct participants to spend five minutes imagining how they might forgive the person they have identified. Ask questions like these to stimulate their imagination:

- How would you like to approach or encounter this person?
- What basic ideas or feelings would you want to express in conveying your forgiveness?
- What might it feel like, after?

Tell them to walk through the act of forgiving, allowing their imagination free play.

After about five minutes, gently ring the chime. Then invite participants to speak briefly about how they experienced the imagining process, using questions such as:

- Was it hard or easy to imagine forgiving?
- Do you feel motivated or reluctant to follow through with your imagined act?
- What is the gift of imagination here? What is its limitation?

After a few minutes of sharing, encourage group members to allow their imagined acts of generosity to take shape in the real world, as they are ready. Remind them to ask God for help with feelings they may be stuck in. For those who focused on someone who is dead, suggest that imagining forgiveness may be the best way to offer it spiritually.

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Journaling

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

- Write about the way you imagined offering forgiveness.
- Journal about the feelings you may still be struggling with.
- Express your intentions about forgiving.
- Notice what you are learning about yourself.

After ten minutes, gently ring the chime or bell.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Symbolizing Forgiveness

Set the small table you have arranged for this purpose at the center of the group. Explain the process briefly as follows: As a group we are going to engage in a simple ritual expressing where we are in the process of forgiving. The bowl of water represents forgiveness and new life, like the waters of our baptism. The stones in the basket represent people we have identified since session 2 as those we need to forgive. Together we will sit prayerfully and begin to hum “Amazing Grace.” As you are ready, go to the table and select a few stones. More than one may come forward at the same time. For each person we have forgiven over these past several weeks, slip a stone into the water as a sign of letting go of the weight of resentment or bitterness. For each person we are not yet ready to forgive, simply place a stone on the table near the bowl. If you wish, you may name the stones in a whisper, but there is no need to say anything. Then you return to your seat. While seated, we remain in prayerful gratitude for what we have been able to let go of and prayerful intercession for what remains to be forgiven.

Afterward, assure the group that there is no shame in not yet being ready to forgive. The stones around the bowl remind us all that we are still “works in progress” by God’s grace. Indicate that the bowl will be in the room next week also, in case any are ready to let go of another stone.

9. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the final 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 the last session.

Suggest the following questions for journaling this week: What is the chief block to my readiness to forgive?

Is there a pattern in my resistance? What spiritual practice do I most need in order to embrace forgiveness fully, from my heart?

Teaching Alternatives

- Make use of the story of Abba Anthony from the desert wisdom tradition (in the middle of “The Call to Forgive” segment of the week’s handout) to explore how we commonly react to being hurt or offended by someone. Take each counsel of Abba Anthony in turn, but start with the last one, which is the least demanding. The third counsel is Anthony’s version of Jesus’ teaching in Luke 6:31 (the Golden Rule). Talk about why we have trouble abiding even by this basic principle of life together. It is the first rule we teach kindergartners, yet we see it contradicted on every playground and on the stage of world events. What fuels our felt need to “strike back”?

The second counsel of Abba Anthony is to receive abuse or offense with patience. He may have had in mind Paul’s words to the Romans: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” (Rom. 12:12). This virtue involves a willingness to bear suffering, as Jesus in his passion bore insults, mocking, scourging, and the sheer physical agony of the cross. Yet far less dreadful sufferings are hard for us to bear patiently without loud complaints or lashing out in anger. Discuss what makes patience in the face of adversity or offense difficult for us and what our natural inclinations are.

The very first but most difficult counsel of Abba Anthony is taken directly from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel (5:39) and Luke’s equivalent (6:29). It is essentially to “overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21), probably the hardest spiritual teaching we could ever embrace. Talk about what makes this response so challenging to us and how countercultural these words still are to us today. Allow it to lead into the “Journaling” time for self-examination and insight.

- Work with the two types of emotional obstacles to forgiveness identified in the handout: “When I Don’t Want to Forgive” and “When I Can’t Yet Forgive.” Instruct participants to put these headings at the top of two facing pages in their journal and to make a list of situations and persons under each category. Have them review the first paragraph under each heading in the handout to help them identify where

to place their entries. Then invite them to work on the “don’t want to” side, honestly assessing the ego needs behind resistance to forgiving: what is satisfying about resentment, what makes for a good victim story, the desire for sympathy, and so forth. After a period of individual work, invite them into triads to share what they have learned about the power of the needs of the ego in relation to forgiveness.

The “Journaling” segment could allow further opportunity to focus on insights and learning from this work.

- An alternate Closing, if you choose to work with “I don’t want to” and “I can’t,” would shift the symbolism in the ritual. Instead of a bowl of water, place two baskets on the table at the center, one with small stones and the other with various old buttons. The stones represent the “don’t want to” hardness in our hearts, while the buttons represent the mending and healing still needed when “I can’t yet” (buttons help pull sides of clothing together, symbolizing the healing of relationships). Participants would select stones for the situations or persons they don’t want to forgive, and place them in a pocket or purse to remind them of the weight of carrying their resentment. They would also pick up buttons for the situations or persons they can’t yet forgive and place them in a different pocket or part of a purse to remind them of what needs further mending in their lives.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 5:38–48

Luke 6:27–42

Luke 11:1–4

Luke 18:23–35

Romans 12:9–21

Colossians 3:12–15

For More Information

Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

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

Endnote

1. Several of these are drawn from Kathleen Fischer, *Forgiving Your Family: A Journey to Healing* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2005).