



Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

SESSION 3

| Scripture reading: Matthew 5:43–48 and 7:1–6

Goal for the Session

The goals of this session are to identify some of our external and internal enemies, learn from them, and begin to move toward loving them.

Preparing for the Session

- Pray for participants and for yourself as leader, that all parts of this Lenten journey together will be guided by the Spirit.
- 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 3.
- 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. The recommended arrangement is chairs in a three-quarters circle, with your own chair at one end where you can easily reach newsprint or other materials.
- Write simplified instructions for the personal reflection time under "Learning from Our Enemies" on newsprint before the session begins. The underlined sections offer guidance, but you may vary as you see fit.
- You might also wish to write the journaling questions for the upcoming week on newsprint (see "Preparing for the Next Session").

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Welcome
- Prayer
- Transitioning to the topic

EXPLORING

- Discovering the sins we don't see
- Learning from our enemies
- Brief plenary sharing

RESPONDING

- Journaling

CLOSING

- Prayer
- Preparing for the next session

Materials Needed

- Nametags for all participants
- Easel, newsprint, and markers
- A chime or bell to signal the end of personal reflection time
- Extra blank paper for those who might forget their journals
- A few Bibles for those who forget to bring theirs, especially if you opt for the teaching alternative that involves the writing of imprecatory psalms

Teaching Tips

- The subject of this study invites participants to move into deep waters fairly quickly. Self-examination, judging, or forgiving can move us into uncomfortable territory, and some will be more at ease speaking of personal experiences than others. It helps to expand the topic to less personal spheres like community, nation, or world, but it is important to explore these dynamics at the personal level. As leader, you can model this shift by periodically sharing a personal illustration from your own life. This does not necessarily mean divulging intimate matters, but rather some personal experience you have had with self-examination, judgment, or forgiveness that could extend to or evoke more universal human experiences. Think judiciously about what you might be comfortable sharing.
- If you choose to guide the imaging intercession for the closing prayer, practice your timing in advance. Pay attention to how long you feel each pause should be to allow participants' imaginations to engage the picture; you may feel some participants need more time than others, especially visualizing God's healing love and its effects.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Welcome

Welcome participants as they arrive, drawing in newcomers and distributing nametags.

2. Prayer

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

God of light, you shine in every part of creation and into every dark corner of our lives. Shed your light and grace today on our experience of enmity with others and enmity within our own divided selves. Help us to discover the motives behind our judgments and to begin seeing more clearly what it means to love our enemies. We pray in the name of him who loved us fiercely and tenderly while we were still *your* enemies. **Amen.**

3. Transitioning to the Topic

At the end of the Participant Handout this week, a distinction is drawn between two basic uses of the word

“judgment,” one with positive and one with negative connotations. Point the group to this section of the handout (“Condemnation or Discernment?”), and give them a minute to refresh their memories on the distinction.

Instruct them to pair with someone they don't know too well in the group. Ask them to discuss their understanding of this distinction and to come up with a few examples of each kind of judgment in their own experience. You could offer a sample statement or two to stimulate their thinking: “My mother always said her father was an excellent judge of character.” Or, “I remember my tenth-grade English teacher as a very fair judge of student work.” These express positive traits of wise, discerning judgment. On the other side, statements like “She judges by appearances” or “He is judgmental of people who don't think like him,” illustrate the negative traits of dismissive, condemning judgment.

Exploring (30 minutes)

4. Discovering the Sins We Don't See

Have a volunteer read Matthew 7:3–5 and another read the story of Abba Moses from the Participant Handout. Ask, what connection do you see between these readings? How would you identify the common motif? Then invite them to consider how we discover the sins we are blind to, either because we cannot or will not see them. Give the group a minute to reflect and note ideas before seeking responses. Possible responses include self-examination; other forms of listening prayer such as *lectio divina* (a way of listening for the personal message of Scripture); discernment practices; listening to what others sometimes tell us about ourselves; directly asking those who know us best to help us see our weaknesses; and maturing through experience and being honest in self-reflection. Receive responses with affirmation, allowing participants to respond to each other.

5. Learning from Our Enemies

If someone has mentioned the idea of learning from our enemies, affirm it again. If not, indicate that one of the best ways to discover aspects of ourselves we are blind to is to look closely at our enemies. Take a few minutes to convey how our enemies teach us about the dark corners of our hearts. It is often said that the things we can't stand in others reveal sides of ourselves we

can't bear. What we dislike and reject most in ourselves we project onto those in whom we see those traits most clearly. That way they become bearers of our hidden faults and we don't have to take responsibility for them. This dynamic is forceful both individually and corporately—between ethnic groups, religious groups, and nations. Walter Wink states this spiritual truth concisely:

My enemy is my mirror. I tend to project onto my enemy everything in myself that I cannot stand, tolerate, acknowledge, or accept. My enemy returns the compliment. . . . We are locked into a very tight embrace, my enemy and I.¹

Ask the group how they respond to this idea and whether they have some experience with this connection between self and enemy. Have they seen this dynamic on the world stage, in someone close to them, or known it in themselves? Allow a few stories or testimonies to surface. If you can think of a historic example or your own nearer experience that you would be willing to share, be ready to do so.

Invite the group to a time of personal reflection with these instructions (point to the simplified version you have created on newsprint as guided by the underlines):

1. Take a few minutes to identify several external "enemies" in your life: people in your family, church, work setting, or the government, whom you deeply dislike, criticize, judge, despise, feel angry with, or wish did not exist. Name them, and list as specifically as you can which of their traits make you feel so critical.
2. Then take another few minutes to identify several internal "enemies" in your life: attitudes, behaviors, reactions, feelings, perceived weaknesses or limitations that you deeply dislike, criticize, judge, despise, feel angry about, or wish did not exist. List the things about these parts of yourself you find so difficult to accept or acknowledge.
3. Take a final few minutes to look at your two lists together. What do you notice? Are there any surprises or fresh connections for you? What do you learn from your external and internal enemies?

6. Brief Plenary Sharing

Invite participants to share whatever they choose about insights they may have gained from this exercise. Ask,

what have you learned by giving closer attention to your enemies? What have you noticed about the source of your judgments? What was it like to reflect on your life in this way? Gather several responses. Thank people for their honest reflections, and encourage them to remain alert to learning from inner and outer enemies as their lives unfold.

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Journaling

Invite participants to journal about insights, learning, or questions arising from this exploration of inner and outer enmity. Suggest that this time might allow some to continue with questions from the Exploring period; or provide a chance to reflect on what others in the group shared during the brief plenary; or allow for written prayer in response to insights and challenges. After ten minutes, gently ring the chime or bell.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Prayer

Call the group to a time of intercessory prayer for an enemy. Explain that you will guide them in a form of prayer called "imaging intercession," which engages our visual imagination. Tell them it's OK if some can't visualize easily; some people use an "intellectual imagination" to get a sense of the person they are praying for. Invite them to relax, take several deep breaths, and close their eyes. Guide the following prayer speaking at a relaxed pace, allowing ten to twenty seconds of silence where you see ellipses (. . .):

Come into God's presence, visualizing it as light, feeling it as love. . . . Remember when we are in the divine presence we are never alone, but there together with all God's beloved children. Choose one of those children now, one you have real difficulty loving, who feels like an enemy. Allow yourself to see this person held in God's light and love, alongside yourself. . . . Now imagine the things you find most difficult about this person as dark places, or hard shapes, or cold or hot spots in the mind, heart, or body. . . . And imagine how God's love affects these places inside the person, visualize warmth and light surrounding, penetrating, and healing what needs to be healed. . . . And imagine the same light of God's love embracing and irradiating the dark or hard or cold or hot places in your own

mind and heart. . . . Allow yourself to absorb this healing grace as fully as you can. . . . And, finally, look at both you and the other person again, side by side, and see if the picture looks or feels different. . . . Give thanks for whatever you have experienced in this time of prayer, and ask that the healing of wounds and changing of perspectives may continue. . . . **Amen.**

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: Where do I find myself engaging in discerning judgment and where in condemning? What is the source or motive of my judgments of others?

Teaching Alternatives

- Here is a variation on the Exploring process, following Walter Wink's quote in "Learning from Our Enemies." Talk a little about the ways our enemies "mirror" aspects of ourselves back to us: one is that they mirror back to us the very same traits we find distressing in ourselves, as discussed. Another is that they mirror something opposed to our own traits, in a way that reveals our "shadow" side. Share the following quote from author Kathleen Fischer, writing about family members who anger or hurt her as sources of the grace of self-knowledge:

"Does a niece or nephew seem to live too wild a lifestyle? Maybe it is also true that I have pretty rigid rules. Is a sibling shirking family responsibilities? What about my tendency to take over and tell others what to do? Is an in-law too demanding? Perhaps I don't know how to say no."²

Invite participants to consider some of the ways family members or coworkers who feel like enemies help to shed light on sides of ourselves we may not readily see. Ask, what do we learn about ourselves from our reactions to them? What part of us feels most irritated or threatened by their attitudes or behaviors? Point out that the answers may help us see our own shadows emerging from the dark.

Have participants try this exercise: Identify an "enemy" among your relatives, acquaintances, or coworkers. Draw two ovals side by side, like two mirrors. In one, write the traits or behaviors you find distressing, irritating, or intolerable in the other person. In the other, write what expression of these traits/behaviors you find echoes of in yourself; OR, what opposite but perhaps equally negative traits/behaviors you find in yourself. An example of the first might be "outright lies" in my enemy's mirror, and "subtle deceits" and "exaggeration" in my mirror. An example of the second might be "overbearing" and "controlling" in my enemy's mirror, and "over-accommodating" and "capitulating" in mine. Repeat this process for several "enemies" in your life.

Invite a brief time of sharing insights and questions from this exercise. For example, ask people to notice whether they found more "similar echoes" or "opposite shadows" in their mirrors. Keep the focus on how they experienced the process, but accept the sharing of content if participants choose to offer it. Let the "Journaling" segment focus on insight, challenge, and learning from this process.

- For another alternative in the Exploring segment, focus on love of enemies. First, discuss whether we do or do not have trouble acknowledging that we have enemies. Ask who "counts" as enemies in our lives (perhaps anyone with whom we feel enmity at a given time). Then have participants honestly express their feelings toward such enemies by writing their own psalms of imprecation (point to the examples of Ps. 69 and Ps. 94 in the Participant Handout, adding Ps. 109). If any wish to share from their imprecatory psalms, allow time for this.

Engage in a group discussion about what it means to love our enemies and how we can do so. Perhaps the best way to defeat enemies is to make them your friends. You could point out that the Sioux story in the first session was a beautiful example of that wisdom. List on newsprint all the ways the group can think of to express love for enemies: praying for them, refraining from judgment, forgiving them, acts of kindness or inclusion, and so forth. Invite

the group to share examples of each, if they have such stories.

Suggest that the “Journaling” time focus on how they might choose to express love for the enemies in their lives, and what next steps they can take in this direction.

- If you are not comfortable leading the guided prayer in the Closing, write a prayer of your own that incorporates the theme of praying for our enemies and learning from them. Or invite a period of spontaneous prayer, asking participants to offer one-sentence prayers arising from their reflections and learning in this session.

Key Scriptures

Psalm 69

Psalm 94

Psalm 109

Matthew 5:21–24

Matthew 5:43–48

Matthew 7:1–6

Matthew 10:11–16

For More Information

Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1993), esp. chap. 5, “Vengeance: Human and Divine.”

The Desert Christian: Sayings of the Desert Fathers, Translated and with a Foreword by Benedicta Ward (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1975).

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

Walter Wink, “My Enemy, My Destiny: The Transforming Power of Nonviolence,” *Weavings*, 21, no. 2 (March/April 2006). For a substantial treatment of enemies, violence, and patterns of domination, see Wink’s renowned trilogy on the Powers: *Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers*, and *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

Endnotes

1. Walter Wink, “My Enemy, My Destiny: The Transforming Power of Nonviolence,” *Weavings*, 21, no. 2 (March/April 2006), 11.
2. Kathleen Fischer, *Forgiving Your Family: A Journey to Healing* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2005), 27.