

How to Forgive Someone

Matthew 6:9-15; 18:23-35; Mark 11:25; Luke 23:34a; Colossians 3:13

The Big Idea: Offering forgiveness can be as liberating as receiving it.

Learning Goal: Learners will practice the discipline of forgiveness, sensitive to the power of the spoken word and mindful of the forgiveness God graciously offers them.

Opening: Begin by sharing a high and low from this past week. When each person has had a chance to listen and share, open your session together by praying the following prayer together, out loud.

Opening Prayer

God of grace, thanks for forgiving us when we mess up. We know that we don't deserve to be forgiven - and we're grateful that you are always there to offer your assurance of mercy. Help us forgive the people in our lives who have caused us hurt, pain, and frustration. Give us courage to forgive these people, not only with our words, but with our hearts. Amen

Read: God asks us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Jesus makes this clear in parables (Matthew 18:23-34), in direct command (Mark 11:25), by his own example (Luke 23:34), and by embedding it in the prayer he teaches to his disciples (Matthew 6:12). In fact, Jesus speaks far more in the Gospels about our need to forgive one another than about our need to ask for forgiveness.

Different translations of the Lord's Prayer have related at least three different words for what it is we need to forgive: *debts*, *trespasses*, and *sins*. Of the three, *sins* is perhaps the most "loaded" word, one which many hesitate to use in reference to everyday offenses that we wittingly and unwittingly do to one another. *Trespasses* suggests the ways we "cross the line"—again, sometimes unwittingly—and thus need to reconcile with one another. But the most common metaphor in Jesus' parables is *debt*, indicating not just a spiritual or emotional matter to be worked out but actual material injustice. This is good news to all who feel that they have been wronged in such tangible ways that they cannot simply think their way into making it right. Jesus invites us to see our own forgiveness in such concrete terms. What might it mean to say to someone who has wronged us, "You really owe me nothing"?

Prayer is undoubtedly part of the process of forgiveness, as is saying the words aloud. But forgiveness of debt indicates a concrete shift in the way people relate to one another. Matthew 18:15-20 tells the offended one to confront the sinner first alone, then with another, and then with the church. All too often readers have focused only on the last part of these instructions—"Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector"—which sounds like Jesus giving permission to *not* forgive one who is unrepentant. First of all, we should take notice that this is the only place Jesus lets the potential "forgiver" off the hook. Second, it is unclear just how a "Gentile and a tax collector" is to be treated, given that Jesus often ministers with and to tax collectors in this Gospel (in fact, the Gospel is named for one who was a tax collector). Perhaps the instruction is to do what Jesus did with tax collectors: Eat with them.

Contemporary

Forgiveness in contemporary phrasing has become distorted in two ways.

In one case, there is the dismissal of fault: "It's okay. It doesn't matter." No forgiveness is offered here because we refuse to acknowledge that any harm has been done. Sometimes this is true. But when someone has been hurt, when boundaries have been crossed, or when debts are owed, it is essential that the truth be told. Forgiveness is not suppression of emotion or denial of reality. In the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, the process of "truth and reconciliation" relied on the importance of truth being spoken aloud. Words can have tremendous power to heal, even when there is no way to make full restitution for what has been lost.

The second distortion is the "nonapology" - "I'm sorry that you felt bad." In this case, the one doing the "confessing" has not acknowledged any ill intent, or even acknowledging any harm done. While it may be possible to forgive someone who has so little recognition of his or her fault, true reconciliation is much easier when both parties can agree on what actually happened.

Finally, the extreme bias of our culture presents a challenge to the notion of forgiveness. Students may feel that in order to forgive they must have positive feelings toward the person. They may fear that lingering feelings of anger or hurt mean they haven't "succeeded" at forgiving. But forgiveness, like grace, is more a gift we receive than an effort we make. We pray, we talk, we tell the truth, we strive to live as if all debts have been canceled - because they have been.

My Faith Story

Tell a story of a time in your life when you forgave someone, even though it was difficult. Perhaps it was a situation from your childhood or a relationship with a friend, parent, or coworker. It might be difficult to open yourself up in this way, but showing vulnerability might help others to realize the power of forgiveness.

How to Forgive Someone...Tips

Forgiving someone is one of the most difficult disciplines of faith, since it seems to cost you something additional when you've already been wronged. Swallowing your pride and seeking a greater good, however, can yield great healing and growth.

- 1) Acknowledge that God forgives you – When you realize that God has already shown forgiveness, and continues to forgive sinners like you, it's easier to forgive someone else.
- 2) Consult Scripture – Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer to his disciples, who were hungry to become like he was. Forgiveness was a big part of this. Read Matthew 6:9-15
- 3) Seek the person out whenever possible – Consciously decide to deliver your forgiveness in person. In cases where this is geographically impossible, find an appropriate alternative means, such as a telephone.

Note: This may not be wise in all cases, given the timing of the situation or the level of hurt. Certain problems can be made worse by an unwelcome declaration of forgiveness.

- 4) Say, "I forgive you" out loud – A verbal declaration of forgiveness is ideal. Speaking the words enacts a physical chain reaction that can create healing for

Points to Ponder

- Turn to Matthew 6:9-15 in their Bibles. These verses have become what today is considered the Lord's Prayer. Read these verses aloud. Which verses deal with forgiveness? (*Verses 12, 14, 15.*) Why do you think Jesus felt forgiveness was so important? What about verses 14 and 15? Is it a little scary to think that if we don't forgive others, God won't forgive us? Is it possible for us to forgive others, not out of fear that God will hold a grudge, but because it's the right thing to do?
- Turn to Luke 23:34. Read this verse aloud. This is what Jesus said while being mocked on the cross. Jesus preached and taught about the importance of forgiveness. How powerful is it that Jesus, while dying in pain, was able to forgive others? Imagine if you were one of the people mocking Jesus. How would Jesus' words of forgiveness make you feel? How does this story give you strength to forgive the people who have wronged you?
- What are ways that God has forgiven you?
- Who is in need of your forgiveness?
- How can you offer them your forgiveness?

Closing Ritual

Loving God, thank you for giving us Jesus to teach us how to forgive others. Help us follow his example of forgiveness with the people we encounter after we leave this place. Give us the courage to swallow our pride and seek a greater good in all of our relationships. Amen