

Semicontinuous
Exod. 14:19–31
Ps. 114

Complementary
Exod. 15:1b–11, 20–21
Gen. 50:15–21
Ps. 103:(1–7), 8–13

Rom. 14:1–12

Matt. 18:21–35

Is Forgiveness an Option?

Goal for the Session *In the light of God’s forgiveness, adults will gain a deeper understanding of the need to forgive and to be forgiven.*

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Matthew 18:21–35

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Lewis R. Donelson

Peter’s suggestion that he must forgive up to seven times is not an attempt to place a limit on forgiveness. In fact, since seven is a holy number, Peter is probably asking something like, “Must I practice perfect forgiveness?” To which Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (v. 22). While the exact number is not clear in the Greek, the point of the number is. Your forgiveness must be beyond perfect; it must be beyond counting. The parable places human forgiveness in the context of divine forgiveness and divine punishment.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Kathryn D. Blanchard

This parable is a reminder of the high value Matthew’s Jesus places on forgiveness, particularly among his followers. The church is meant to be a uniquely forgiving people, a people of humility and repentance. Hearers of this parable must not place themselves in the judgment seat of the king who forgives, but rather in the hot seat of the unworthy servant who is forgiven. In any reading of this text, the theological tenet that God’s “default” stance toward the penitent is one of mercy must lead to the conviction that God’s people are those who likewise practice mercy—willingly, concretely, and as a communal way of life.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn

Although Peter’s question is directed toward others within the church, those with whom there is a bond through the Spirit of God, the area of forgiveness is one that weighs heavily upon people of faith in all areas of their lives as they seek to live in a way that is faithful to Jesus’ life and teaching. Jesus speaks to the necessity of forgiveness because he knows the effects unforgiveness has on individuals and communities. There are so many situations within our society that, when not dealt with, can sow the seeds of bitterness and fester into deep, painful wounds.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Charles L. Campbell

The forgiveness spoken of by Jesus in this passage is set within the communal process outlined in Matthew 18:15–20—a process that includes naming the sin, the repentance of the sinner, and where necessary, the communal support of the victim. It is a challenging process that does not minimize the sin and that provides resources to support and empower the one who has been sinned against. Only within this process does Jesus call us to forgive other church members countless times. The forgiveness Jesus calls for is inseparable from truth telling and accountability within the church.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Matthew 18:21–35

Focus on Your Teaching

Today's lesson considers the way God's forgiveness works. All adults have experienced this tragedy in some way and have grieved. Forgiving those responsible might be the hardest case study we could possibly explore. Yet today's Scripture teaches a difficult lesson: that because we have been forgiven, granting forgiveness is no option for the Christian. As you lead this lesson, consider the grief your participants are living now and how this lesson may challenge or help them.

God of grace, open my heart to accept your forgiveness. Soften my heart to forgive others. Help me and other learners better practice your way of forgiveness. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles (at least one study Bible)
- pens
- paper
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 24, 2017

For Responding:

- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 2

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Greet the participants as they arrive. Introduce anyone who is new to one or two other persons.

When it is time to begin, invite group members to recall a tragedy that affected their families, community, or region. As time allows, ask volunteers to tell briefly about these tragedies. Suggest that they sit in silence for a moment to pray for those who have suffered or perished in these tragedies and their families. Then pray aloud the following prayer or one of your own:

Loving God, may all those affected by tragedy feel your warm tears of compassion and grief. Forgiving God, open our hearts and minds to the power of your immeasurable grace, extended even to those who do us wrong. Guide us as we study your ways of forgiveness so that our lives may be a light to others. Amen.

Recall with the group that we are using a study program that uses the Scriptures for Sunday that we hear in worship each week. The program focuses on one text from the lectionary and excerpts from the commentary series *Feasting on the Word*.

Remind the participants that last week the discussion was about forgiveness, based on Matthew 18:15–20. Jesus taught a process to follow when someone sins against us. Ask: What happens if all the steps are followed and that person still refuses to listen? Can we ever totally exclude someone even if they are a “Gentile or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17)? Then invite questions or comments that came to participants during the past week.

A talent weighs about 75.5 pounds and is worth 6,000 denarii. Just one denarius is a laborer's daily wage. Jesus is talking about 10,000 talents, which was more than all of Galilee would have paid in tribute to Rome over a fifteen-year period.

EXPLORING

Tell the group that today they will be studying a parable of Jesus that continues the theme of forgiveness. Invite participants to silently read today's passage, Matthew 18:21–35, and write down the characters in the story. When they finish reading, ask them to call out the characters and list them on the board

Acknowledge that there are two related parts to the passage. The first is Jesus' reply to Peter, who asks Jesus how often he should forgive the same person. Ask: What do we learn from Jesus' response to Peter?

Next, draw the participants' attention to the ten thousand talents. Encourage them to use notes in their Bibles to figure out how much money this is. The information in the sidebar is taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, Fourth Edition.

Remark that Jesus was obviously exaggerating figures to make a point. Encourage a conversation based on the following questions:

- ✪ Would it be possible for a slave to ever pay this amount back?
- ✪ Do you think a slave could even amass such a large debt?
- ✪ What other details in the story sound farfetched?

Work in pairs to review Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Matthew 18:21–35) and answer this question: What is the message of this parable?

Reconvene the group and invite the pairs to answer the question. After all have reported, ask: Why do you think Jesus used this tall-tale parable for this purpose?

Slowly read aloud the focus scripture Matthew 18:21–35, and then after a short pause, read the "Now What?" section of Resource Sheet 1. Discuss:

- ✪ According to this parable, is forgiveness an option for Christians?

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. My Experience with Forgiveness** This activity allows participants a chance to ponder their own experiences with forgiving or being forgiven. Either print the following instructions on the board or write them on slips of paper that you distribute to the participants. Allow some time for silent reflection and writing before returning as a large group for discussion.
 - ✪ Write about a time when you were wronged by someone and forgave him or her.
 - ✪ Write about a time when you were the offender and the forgiveness you asked for was granted.
 - ✪ Write about a time when you were unable or found it difficult to forgive.

Even the thought of attempting to forgive a perpetrator of a horrible wrong can seem impossible to the victim. Be cautious about coming across as judgmental toward those who may not be able to forgive.

Either in pairs or as a large group, exchange the responses given by participants. Then lead a large-group discussion on these questions:

- ✧ What makes forgiveness easy at times and difficult at other times?
- ✧ How has the parable in today's Scripture passage affected how you understand forgiveness?

2. Connection with Contemporary Tragedy As a group, recall the tragedies named in Gathering or recall some recent global terror incident. Form pairs or groups of three to discuss the following questions:

- ✧ What are the reasons you find it difficult to forgive those responsible for causing a tragedy?
- ✧ Do Christians have any option other than to forgive those who cause or perpetrate a tragedy on others? If so, what option does the Christian have?

If there is strong disagreement between participants, encourage tolerance of opinion.

3. A Guided Meditation on Forgiveness A guided meditation gives individuals time to reflect. The leader of the meditation should be intentional about using a soothing voice, allowing time for reflection, and using gentle pacing. Read each question on Resource Sheet 2 (A Guided Meditation on Forgiveness), leaving sufficient silence before moving to the next question. This will give participants the space they need to gain insight about the power of forgiveness in their lives. Before beginning, give yourself a moment to relax. Consider playing soft music in the background during the meditation if it is not distracting to your group.

CLOSING

Ask a volunteer to read aloud the "So What?" excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Invite them to think about how forgiveness of this kind might be part of their lives in the coming days.

Pray the following prayer or one of your choosing:

Forgiving God, your mercy is indeed as wide as the sea and as limitless as the universe. We give you thanks that you readily grant us forgiveness of our sins. We pray that you would also grant us the courage and compassion to forgive those that sin against us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 24, 2017, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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A Guided Meditation on Forgiveness



If you are able to, dim the lights. Ask the group to sit comfortably and close their eyes. Instruct them to pay attention to their breath. Breathing in . . . and out. In . . . and out. Repeat this a few times. Lead the group in the meditation:

Think of a time when you were shown gracious forgiveness by another individual or by a group in such a way that your relationship with those involved was restored.

What happened to cause the need for forgiveness? Who were the people involved? What was the harm done? What did you feel? Did you confess or was your sin discovered? Were you immediately repentant or did you need time to realize your need for forgiveness?

When you asked for forgiveness was it immediately granted? How did you know when the forgiveness was complete? What were you feeling? How did the forgiveness affect your relationship with the offended person or persons?

Now consider a time when you were wronged. What happened? Who were the people involved? How did you find out about the transgression? Was there a confrontation? What were you feeling?

Did you grant forgiveness easily or did it take some time? Why did you forgive? What made it worth it for you? Was the damaged relationship fully restored?

We all sin. We sin against others, creation, and God by the wrongs we commit and not doing the things we should have done. The good news is God loves us. God wants to be in relationship with us. God wants to be a part of our lives. Whatever our past sins, God forgives us and shows us that love through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God in Jesus Christ does not abandon us. God in Jesus Christ shows us infinite mercy and grace. By that we are transformed to be loving and forgiving.

What is today's parable calling you to do? Knowing that God forgives you and calls you to forgive others, where might you show that forgiveness?

Breathe in God's forgiveness . . . breathe out forgiveness toward others. (Repeat a few times.) End with a moment of silence and invite the participants to open their eyes.