

Session 9: Forgiving from the Heart

A note to leaders: Forgiveness can be a massive issue for some people, and Jesus knows that. It is fine for people to really discuss this topic and what they understand about it, and what, frankly can seem too much for God to ask us to be able to do. As you lead this session, you don't need to have all the answers. Only God can bring people to a place of understanding and healing, so be open to the Holy Spirit's leading, and listen and pray. Luke 7:47 talks about the fact that those that have been forgiven little love little, and those that have been forgiven much love much. Professional Christian counsellors help people understand Jesus' forgiveness on the cross first. Once people recognise how much Jesus forgives them and takes away their pain by His death on the cross, they can understand better why they need to forgive others.

Matthew 18:34-35: The angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

Objective: To recognise what forgiveness is and what it is not, and to learn how to forgive from the heart.

Focus Truth: In order to experience our freedom in Christ, we need to relate to other people in the same way that God relates to us – on the basis of complete forgiveness and acceptance.

Review last session:

How did you get on learning the story of Jesus calming the storm? Who did you tell it to? What did they think? Is there anything of more significance to you than it has been before? If this story is true, how does it affect your ongoing relationship with Jesus?

New Material:

1. Read Matthew 18:34-35, the objective and focus truth together. What thoughts or feelings does this Bible passage bring up when you hear it?
2. As we read this story, consider the depths Jesus went to so we can have complete forgiveness in Him.

The parable of the Unforgiving Debtor

Based on NLT

Matthew 18:21-22

Then Peter came to *Jesus* and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!”

Matthew 18:23-27

“Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of *coins*. He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold; along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned, to pay the debt.

“But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

Matthew 18:28-30

“But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand *coins*. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. “His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

Matthew 18:31-35

“When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

“That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”

Now retell this story in your own words...*Use one of the ideas for ‘internalising the passage’*

Questions for Discussion: (Just ask the questions that didn't get covered when you 'retold' the story. Feel free to omit any questions that don't seem relevant to your situation or that feel redundant.)

1. *What did you like about this story?*
2. *What bothered you about this story?*
 - a. *Does forgiveness mean the hurt is forgotten or ignored?*
 - b. *Read Romans 12:19 – How can this help us to forgive when we've been desperately and deeply hurt?*
3. *What does this story show you about God?*
 - a. *Read Luke 7:47-48. Consider what Jesus went through on the cross – he was innocent, yet took all our wrong doings. He chose to forgive us. In light of that, how can the cross help us come closer to a place of us being able to forgive those who have hurt us? (and sometimes those hurts have been very, very big.)*
 - b. *Are any of our sins 'not as bad' as other peoples?*
 - c. *How does God want us to live?*
4. *What does this story show you about people?*
 - a. *If we don't forgive, who is mostly impacted by the lack of forgiveness, and why?*
 - b. *Optional: Ask two volunteers to stand back to back and tie them together. As one person walks around dragging the other with them, tell a story similar to this: "____ goes through life every day. She wakes up in the morning, but ____ is with her. She eats her breakfast, but ____ is with her. She does her weekly shop, and ____ is always with her. ____ is with her even when she sits down to rest in the afternoon. When she tries to sleep, ____ is there!"*
5. *How do the truths in this story apply to your life?*
 - a. *Read Luke 24:45-49. Examine your own life. Are you proclaiming this message in the way that you live? If not, what needs to change? Spend some time in pairs asking God to help you forgive others as he would want you to.*

Steps to Forgiveness

(based on The Freedom in Christ, Neil T Anderson & Steve Goss)

1. Ask the Lord to reveal to your mind the people you need to forgive

Make a list of everyone the Lord brings to your mind. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and write the names on a separate piece of paper. Even if you think there is no one, just ask God to bring up all the right names.

The two most overlooked are yourself and God.

Forgiving yourself

Only God can forgive your sins – but for many people, especially perfectionists, the hardest person for them to forgive is themselves, for letting themselves down. You are in effect accepting God's forgiveness and refusing to listen to the devil's accusations. Some people are really helped by being able to say, "I forgive myself for (list everything you hold against yourself), and I let myself off my own hook."

Forgiving God

Forgiving God is harder to understand because God has done nothing wrong. He has always acted in your best interests.

Because you have not understood God's larger plan, or because you have blamed God for something that other people or the devil have done, you may have felt that God has let you down.

Many people feel disappointed with God, even angry with Him, because He didn't answer their prayer; He didn't seem to be here for them. They cried out for help and nothing came. Usually they are embarrassed to admit it. But God knows anyway and He's big enough to handle it.

If you feel uncomfortable telling God that you forgive Him, say something like, "I release the expectations, thoughts and feelings I have against you."

2. Acknowledge the hurt and the hate

Jesus instructed us to forgive from the heart. That's much more than simply saying "I forgive" and pretending we've dealt with it. To forgive from the heart we need to face the hurt and the hate. People try to suppress their emotional pain, but it is trying to surface so that we can let it go.

3. Understand the significance of the cross

The cross is what make forgiveness legally and morally right.

Jesus has already taken upon Himself your sins and the sins of the person who has hurt you. He died 'once and for all' (Hebrews 10:10). When your heart says, "It isn't fair," remember that the justice is in the cross.

4. Decide to 'let it go'

You need to make a choice not to use the information you have against the other person in the future. That doesn't mean that you never testify in a court of law, rather that you don't do it in the bitterness of unforgiveness, but having first forgiven in your heart.

5. Decide to forgive

Forgiveness is a crisis of the will. If you wait until you feel like doing it, you probably never will.

You may feel you can't do it, but would God tell you to do something that you couldn't do? When he says that you can do all things in Christ, is that true or not? The reality is that you have a choice to make; are you going to remain in bitterness, hooked to the past, giving the enemy an entrance to your mind, or are you going to get rid of it once and for all?

You choose to forgive, and in making that choice you are agreeing to live with sin and its consequences. You are choosing to let God be the avenger and trust Him to bring justice in the end. You choose to take it to the cross and leave it there.

The gate of hell can't prevail against the kingdom of God. There is nobody out there keeping you from being the person that God created you to be. The only one that can do that is you. You need to forgive, be merciful and love as Christ has loved you. Let that person go; get on with your life; walk away free in Christ.

6. Take your list to God

To forgive from your heart, say: "Lord, I choose to forgive" And then specify what you are forgiving them for. Stay with the same person until you have told the Lord every pain and hurt that has surfaced and be as specific as you can. It's then helpful to take it a step further and say how it made you feel: "I choose to forgive For, which made me feel"

Tears will often come at this point, but this is not about trying to get someone to cry. It's making sure that forgiveness is as thorough as possible.

Pray for each person you need to forgive. If you find it helpful, you could use the following "Lord, I choose to forgive (name the person) for (what they did or failed to do), which made me feel (verbally tell the Lord every hurt and pain he brings to mind)".

Note what you told the Lord that you felt, and go back to the truths we've discussed before, and see that you aren't what you felt at the time. For example, if you see a pattern of feeling abandoned, stupid, dirty, then counter those feelings by renouncing the lies and holding firm to the truths. "I renounce the lie that I am stupid and I announce the truth that I have the mind of Christ – 2 Corinthians 2:16. I renounce the lie that I am abandoned. I announce the truth that God has promised never to leave me or forsake me – Hebrews 13:5" etc.

7. Destroy the list

You are now free from those people and the events of the past, so destroy the list.

8. Do not expect that your decision to forgive will result in major changes in others

Forgiving others is primarily about you and your relationship with God. Pray for those you have forgiven, that they may be blessed and that they too may find freedom of forgiveness (Matthew 5:44; 2 Corinthians 2:7)

9. Try to understand the people you have forgiven

You may find it helpful to understand some of what the other person was going through, but don't go so far as to rationalise away the sin – this isn't about saying "It didn't matter", because it did.

10. Expect positive results of forgiveness in you

Forgiveness is not about feeling good; it's about being free. However, good feelings will follow eventually. You will need to concentrate on the renewing of your mind, so your negative ways of thinking are replaced by the truth.

11. Thank God for the lessons you have learned and the maturity you have gained

You are now free to move on and continue to grow in Christ

12. Accept your part of the blame for the offences you suffered

Confess your part in any sin and know that you are forgiven. If you realise that someone has something against you, go to them and offer to be reconciled. Confess your own wrongdoing rather than bringing up what they did.

To Take Away

1. Take time to go through the 'steps to forgiveness' on your own, but also with a friend.
2. Spend time with God, asking the Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth and to show you any areas of your life where there is unforgiveness.
3. Read and mediate on the following verses: 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 and Ephesians 4:31-32.
4. Learn the story of the unforgiving debtor and practice it with at least one other person. Tell this story to yourself or read it every day and meditate on its truths. Consider if there are any ways you tend to think that are not in line with God's truth...Jesus overcame everything for you!