

forgiveness

Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.

Matthew 5:44

God didn't give this command to be a control freak or a dictator—it's for our own good.

Forgiveness frees us from many levels of bondage that God encourages us to walk away from. When we forgive, we are freed from things like bitterness, fear, resentment, anger, sadness, isolation and pain. God wants us to be free of these things because they can harm us. Not only can these feelings stunt our spiritual growth, but medical experts also have found that they can have serious implications on our health. So, wherever you are on the spiritual spectrum, consider the possibility that forgiveness may actually be in your favor.

If your natural response to forgiveness is “but...” that's understandable. By nature, the subject can bring with it an overflow of emotions. But God isn't asking you to set your emotions aside. He created them and cares about them. It is because He cares that he asks us to embrace something different: freedom, love and forgiveness. For the next six weeks, consider the possibility that forgiveness is for you, and God has blessings waiting for you on the other side.

week one

What does forgiveness look like?

Forgiveness includes, but is not limited to, eliminating resentment, indignation and anger, choosing not to require punishment and deliberately letting something go—even to the most undeserving offender.

But most importantly, forgiveness is a matter of the heart. A heart that's fully yielded to God and seeking to conform to his desires first—more than holding on to anger or desiring restitution, regardless of the act in question.

Even with great desire to forgive, it's often incredibly difficult to get rid of resentment or anger, and even harder to want to release the offender from "punishment." Forgiveness is a process than can happen in different layers.

Many aspects of forgiveness are found in the Bible. Read each of the following passages, and record what you find:

Luke 23:34 _____

Matthew 18:21–22 _____

1 Corinthians 13:4–5 _____

Learning to love in the midst of forgiveness makes the impossible seem possible. God commands us to love our enemies, and yet, he does not expect us not to hurt. When someone offends you, it's natural to feel a need to keep score or discuss it with others. Talking through hurts can often be therapeutic, but it's best to discuss them with someone you trust and who is holding you accountable to forgive. The safest person to process emotions with is God. He's always safe to talk to, and he longs for intimacy with us. Scripture has plenty of examples of this: see King David—the man after God's own heart.

Psalm 17:8–15, Psalm 35:19–38 _____

Luke 6:35–38 _____

1 John 2:9–11 _____

Hebrews 12:14–15 _____

Forgiveness is an inner condition that requires God's transformation in our lives. The struggle to forgive often lies in deep-rooted pain. It sometimes feels safer to hold onto it, as though we need to protect ourselves with a wall of bitterness. Yet when you choose not to forgive, you open the door to anger and false righteousness, inviting Satan to wreak havoc in your life.

The choice to forgive often has to be made over and over, sometimes daily, until it becomes easier. The more you choose to actively pursue forgiveness, the easier it becomes, and your words and actions begin to show it. God's provision for you is forgiveness. Learning the skill of forgiveness is essential to an abundant, joyful, intimate life. And you have plenty of opportunities to practice it: forgiving others, yourself and even God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Forgiveness can feel multi-dimensional. Talk to the group about your definition of forgiveness based on what has struck you most. (Hint: the piece that is striking you most may be an area God wants to grow you or free you.)
2. Discuss the verse from this week that is the easiest for you to relate to. Which is the hardest?
3. Explain any hesitation to forgive that you might be feeling now or that you have struggled with in the past. How will (or did) you overcome them?
4. **Challenge:** Think of (at least) one situation where you are having a hard time forgiving someone. This week, invite God into that situation. Go through the offense, every little bit of it, telling God every detail of the hurt. Concentrate on how you felt, how you still feel, and allow yourself to grieve. Acknowledge the losses that you experienced, and ask Him to heal those broken areas and help you trust him to take care of it. Pray or journal about the situation every day.

Levels of Forgiveness

Sometimes the enemy keeps us in bondage to unforgiveness by convincing us we've already forgiven. But there are levels of forgiveness, not all of which bring real freedom.

1. Cheap Forgiveness:

Premature, quick.

Does not come to terms with the injury.

Reduction of negative feelings;
no reconciliation.

One-sided, compulsive.

Fearful of the risk, of the relationship being hurt.

Cannot forgive the person, only the specific hurt.

2. Acceptance and forgiveness:

Offender does not participate in the process.

Transformation of self.

3. Complete Forgiveness:

Hurt party comes to terms, offender participates and acts to repair...in deeper and deeper levels over time.

The pain is gone from the memory.

Reconciliation.

Transformation of relationship.

Forgiveness is:

very hard work

a choice

a command

a commitment

a process

a lifestyle

received and given

evidence of God's glory

God's greatest gift

Forgiveness is not:

cheap

a feeling

excusing

pretending you're not hurt

stuffing feelings and ignoring them

relieving responsibility

forgetting

trusting again

reconciling

dependent upon the offender

week two

You are forgiven.

*Dear (your name here),
I forgive you.
More love than you can imagine,
God*

Give that a minute to sink in.

Yes, the God of the universe, who knows every action you've committed and every thought that goes through your head, forgives you joyfully and without hesitation.

Read Luke 15:11–32.

Jesus often used parables (stories that made his messages relevant and easy to understand) like this one to give us insights into God. The message in this story is that, whether there is a huge sin in your life or you're being buried under the pressure of hundreds of little signs of not measuring up, God is waiting at the door ready to run to you with open arms—full of forgiveness—eager to celebrate your return.

Read Luke 7:36–47.

Then read John 8:1–11.

God's heart is always for the repentant sinner. Admitting our imperfections and receiving His grace is the first step toward cultivating a heart that forgives others. In fact, your ability to forgive can be significantly paralyzed when you don't understand the degree to which you have been forgiven—that God loves you no matter what and simply wants a relationship with you. For a moment, forget everyone you need to forgive, and just receive God's forgiveness for you. (If the offenses against you are consuming your thoughts, take a minute to list them. Then, set the paper aside for just a moment to move on.)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider a time that you were wronged. What was your reaction?
2. Have you ever received the type of loving response that the son receives from the father in the first parable? If not, describe a time when you wished you would have.
3. What hesitations do you feel to receiving God's love and forgiveness? Talk with the group about any barriers that come to mind that keep you from embracing the idea that God is passionately pursuing a relationship with you regardless of past mistakes.
4. Imagine how different life would be to feel completely free of shame. (Shame is never from God. The Holy Spirit convicts us, but conviction spurs us towards freedom and reconciliation.) What do you need to do to feel that type of freedom?
5. **Challenge:** Identify at least one area (or as many as come to mind) of your life that you still feel shame about. If you've already received forgiveness and put an area to rest—we're not talking about those—don't bring them back up. Consider an area that still burdens you. Grab a piece of paper, and write "God forgives me for..." Keep the list in a safe place—somewhere you're confident no one will find it. We'll be examining it again in a few weeks.

week three

Forgiving Others

Once we've spent time processing our emotions and feelings—as hard as that process may be—there eventually comes a time when we have to make a choice: to forgive or not. One of the greatest lies we tend to believe is that the world revolves around us. Few people would claim believing that, but at the root of many of our sins is that belief. Part of being a Christ-follower means dying to self—choosing to believe that God is in control, it's his role to judge, and our role to love. (See Romans 12:17–21. We are not designed to bear the weight of judging. It only leads to bondage.)

Not only does unforgiveness breed feelings within us that are unhealthy, but ultimately the feelings are us-centered, and separate us from the only one who can heal those wounds in the first place. Forgiveness allows us to choose not to focus on the hurt any longer, and gives freedom from the experience. However, forgiveness does NOT mean we are:

- Approving of the wrongdoing,
- Excusing the act as though it was OK,
- Denying the hurt that it caused,
- Justifying others' actions,
- Or pardoning what the other person did.

Instead, we are acknowledging what happened and releasing it to God. (Release means to grieve the act, ask God to take it from you, and trust he will take care of you.) He doesn't always ask us to reconcile, sometimes it's not even possible. The other person may not be willing or may not even be alive to do so. Forgiveness is for us and our relationship with God, so regardless of the other person's choices or situation, we are responsible for choosing to forgive or not forgive.

When we choose not to forgive, we are not hurting the other person, we are hurting ourselves. Unforgiveness can allow bitterness to grow in our hearts. It can put us in bondage to reliving painful memories in our minds instead of embracing freedom from past pain. Most of all, it separates us from God.

As we wrestle with forgiving, the essential question becomes: what is bigger in my life? The offense or God? Choosing to forgive requires believing that God is bigger and more powerful than the act and can be trusted with it.

You may never feel totally ready to forgive, but sometimes obedience comes before understanding. Our actions can guide our heart. Consider the process of forgiveness below:

1. Admit we need forgiveness and spend time receiving it from God.
2. Know that we can't do this on our own—and we aren't expected to.
3. Choose to forgive, letting God work on our behalf.
4. Begin forgiving the other person, painful event by painful event. Often blanket forgiveness doesn't work. Sometimes it takes a slower process of forgiving each offense to really let go.

Read Matthew 7:1–2.

Ultimately, when forgiving just feels too hard, we can rest in the knowledge that God fights our battles and it's his role alone to judge others. He is the only one who knows their heart, what happened in their life and their mind.

Read Matthew 5:11–12 and 43–44.

R.T. Kendall, former pastor of Westminster Chapel in London and author of "Total Forgiveness," encourages us that, "the greater the hurt, the greater the blessing that comes with forgiveness." We can't control others, but we can make choices to walk towards freedom and trust in God regardless of the actions of others. We can have faith that God has our best in mind and is worthy of our trust.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

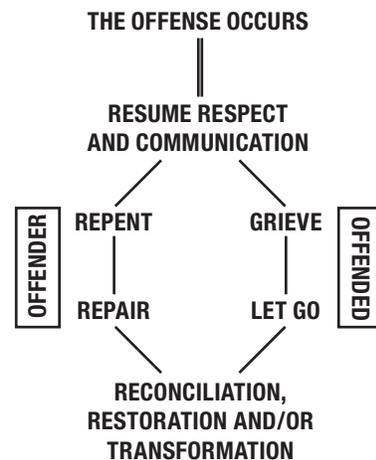
1. It's natural to have barriers to forgiveness. Which ones are you struggling with? What feels hard to let go of?
2. Have you ever reached one of the five stages of praying for your enemies (see right)? How did it feel? (Remember, it's not necessary to bring up the situation and all its gory details.)
3. The people we forgive aren't always enemies. Often we have to forgive family members, spouses and close friends. What changes do you find that makes in your ability to forgive?
4. Explain one practical thing you can do this week to eliminate a barrier to forgive.

5 STAGES OF PRAYING FOR OUR ENEMIES

1. **Duty:** Praying strictly out of obedience because we feel we have to.
2. **Debt:** Realizing what God has forgiven us of, we cannot help but pray for our enemies.
3. **Desire:** Praying for our enemy because it is what we really want.
4. **Delight:** Truly loving praying for the person who has hurt us and wanting them to be blessed.
5. **Durability:** Our committing to praying for enemies as part of our lifestyle. It has become a habit to pray for our enemies and no longer feels like something excruciating and exceptional.

The Ideal Forgiveness Process

This is the ideal process that includes BOTH parties effectively forgiving. How-ever, we can only do our own part out of obedience to God.



week four

Forgiving Ourselves

We often talk about forgiving others. If you've spent much time in the Bible or churches, you've likely heard it's wrong to withhold forgiveness. Have you ever considered that it's also wrong not to forgive yourself?

God has given us a gift in Jesus: forgiveness. Refusing to forgive ourselves or rejecting God's forgiveness is rejecting Jesus' sacrifice itself. Our inability to forgive others can also stem from our inability to forgive ourselves. Maybe you "knew better," or maybe you can't bear the shame of admitting the sin long enough to forgive yourself. Whatever it is, God knows. He knows you're not perfect, and he's waiting for you to receive the forgiveness he's already given.

Read 1 John 1:5–9.

God does not want us to live in shame and guilt any more than he wants us to live in the false reality that we can achieve perfection. If we're unable to see ourselves clearly, good and bad, we will not be able to openly and effectively deal with the offenses of others. God needs us to know that we are not without sin.

Read Romans 7:18–20.

Even Paul, a great missionary and apostle of Jesus who authored most of the New Testament, struggled with sin he could not overcome. God has abundant grace for everyone willing to confess and receive from him. Don't let pride stand in the way. Confess your sins and receive the freedom God has waiting for you.

Read Romans 8:15–17.

As a child of God, he wants you to receive your full identity in him. Just as a parent does not abandon their child for stumbling, God does not abandon you. He runs to you—just like the parable of the lost son. Let him pick you up, and leave the past behind.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which verse that you read this week stands out the most? Explain why.
2. Consider one thing for which you have struggled to forgive yourself. How does it make you feel? What do you think others would say about it? What would God have to say about it?
3. What consequences have you experienced from not forgiving yourself?
4. Describe what it means to be a child of God. How does that change your view of yourself and your mistakes?
5. **Challenge:** Get out the list you made Week One. God wants that list gone. Out of your house, out of your mind. It's standing in the way of receiving Him and living in relationship as his sons and daughters. Find a safe place to burn it, and as it disappears, ask God to help you remove the pain from your heart and mind for good. Breaking free from the past can be difficult, so spend some time each day this week asking God to give you the strength to not look back. Ask him to show you how to embrace his view of you—not a view that is based on your past.

week five

Forgiving God

We may not want to admit it, but some of us get angry at God for the pain in our lives. He could have stopped it. He permitted it to happen. He allowed us to get hurt.

To some, that feels like a horrible thing to admit. We're supposed to be building relationship with God, submitting to him, trusting him. So, when those feelings and thoughts enter our mind, some feel pressured to suppress them. By pretending we're not angry with God, we don't have to deal with the intense emotions surrounding our perceived betrayal.

But it's OK to be angry with God. Go ahead, he can take it.

Read Genesis 3:1–24

Thousands of years ago, God decided to create a man and a woman. He gave that man and woman the opportunity to make choices, a gift he had not given any of his other creations. Being God, he knew that they might choose to do the wrong thing, and alas they did.

When God created the world we live in, he did not intend for the pain and suffering that is undoubtedly a part of the world today. He did not want anyone to go hungry, suffer from disease or to commit such evil crimes as rape or murder. God's wish for us has always been to have an intimate bond with him in a pure and peaceful environment. However, due to the influence of the devil, Adam and Eve committed the first sin and were forced to leave the Garden of Eden. Pain and suffering were introduced into our lives. We now know the difference between good vs. evil and right vs. wrong.

Fast forward to the year 2010. Every day, we make choices. Some of them are good, some not. But one thing God has shown us in the narratives told throughout the Bible is that he will forgive us. And

he wants us to offer this same forgiveness to those people in our lives that need to be forgiven.

There is a terrible lie out in the world—and even in some churches: Everything happens for a reason. Well, the Bible doesn't exactly say that...

Read Romans 8:28.

When God is in control, everything, good or bad, works together for a purpose. Nothing that happens in our lives is wasted. Although no one claims to pinpoint exact reasons for each suffering, we can acknowledge it often leads to a depth of faith unable to attain otherwise. It's easy to believe in something when everything is going your way and you are constantly being blessed, but when you are hurt and suffer through some hardship and come out on the other side with your faith intact, you can be even more confident that your commitment to God will survive anything.

"We will not encounter Christ as our best friend, as the source of all true goodness, as the one who provides the sweetest pleasure to our souls, until we abandon ourselves to him. And full abandonment, real trust, rarely happens until we meet God in the midst of shattered dreams, until in our brokenness we see in him the only overflowing sufficient answer to our soul's deepest cry."

-Larry Crabb, Shattered Dreams

Read John 19:1–4, 16–24, and 28–37.

Even Jesus, the only one to live without sin, suffered. But one thing that was present and clear within Jesus' spirit during suffering was trust in God.

Read Proverbs 3:5–8.

Pain is real. The world is full of suffering. God doesn't promise us a life without it. He does promise to be with us, and he does promise to win in the end. Resentment and anger towards Him often grows from a lack of trust in him. He doesn't ask us to hide it, but he asks us to release it.

God says to us: Seek me. Trust me. Let me restore. Be angry, reluctant, real. I receive your fear and pain. Then release it all to me. Grab a hold of me. Let me rescue you. Forgive me so that I can heal you.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what areas of your life have you been angry with God? In what ways do you struggle to forgive God?
2. Can you think back to any times in your life you felt lost and alone—that now in hindsight you see God was working? Share that experience.
3. What seems to be easiest for you—forgiving others, yourself or God? Which is the hardest?
4. What can your group members pray for you this week to help you gain more freedom? Everyone answer.
5. **Challenge:** Pray daily for the requests listed in your group tonight, and pray for an increase of trust in God for yourself. Ask God for healing from areas you feel trust has been broken, and allow him space to heal those places.

week six

Living in forgiveness.

Read Matthew 18:21–35.

Sorry to be Debbie Downer, but forgiveness is not a one-time activity. In order to maintain freedom, forgiveness must become a lifestyle. Living in forgiveness means small, quick acts of forgiveness and even forgiving the same person again and again.

Read Ephesians 5:1–2.

Walk in love. Be imitators of God. By accepting forgiveness and offering it to others, we are doing just that. We are opening our hearts to peace, happiness, freedom and the generosity we need to walk in love. Jesus came to earth to give up his life for this very purpose—to give us what we needed: freedom from our past hurts, a close relationship with him and the example of a life that glorifies God and sets the soul free.

Read Ephesians 4:25–32.

We are reminded here that God is not against anger. It's an emotion, and that emotion is reflected in us because we are made in his image. God wants us to embrace emotions, as long as they don't control us. He also wants us to use our words and actions to build up others, displaying compassion and love instead of malice and unforgiveness. An ongoing, growing relationship with God can help make this happen.

Read Philippians 3:12–14.

Examples of living in forgiveness:

- Experiencing freedom from grudges and bitterness
- Forgiving the same person again and again
- Remembering without pain or anger or over-reacting
- Loving freely
- Inner peace

Living like Christ is no easy task. That's why we have to change our task-oriented mindset. When we try to maintain the words of Scripture as rules to be kept, it's exhausting, debilitating and ultimately impossible. It's only when we let ourselves be renewed from the inside out, by relying on God to work through us to complete what we cannot manage on our own, that we are free to experience life and love the way he hopes. It takes determination, focus and continuous submission to the Holy Spirit transforming us from the inside out. Working through deep, emotional hurt takes energy, discipline and trust in God. By wrestling through the pain, God is building into us, strengthening us and preparing us for a more intimate relationship with him. A life where we can love others freely and fiercely—caring for and forgiving them the way Christ cares for and forgives us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has this study brought any change in your life?
2. In what area of forgiveness (or situation in your life) are you still working to experience forgiveness fully?
3. Share the verse that has most spoken to you, and ask the group to hold you accountable for memorizing it for future strength.

4. Challenge: Living a life of forgiveness is not something we can often do alone. Commit to asking someone in your small group (or another trusted friend or advisor) to be a point of accountability, strength and encouragement in your life. Letting them in this way gives them permission to speak truth into your life, both to challenge you and strengthen you. This is a safe person to talk to about your hurt, but only if they will push you towards forgiveness and a Christ-like attitude. Consider who that person may be and commit to asking them this week.