

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership
Leader's Guide

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

LESSON 1: THE FOUNDATIONS OF FORGIVENESS

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Disciple Essentials module titled Forgiveness and Reconciliation. It can be difficult to accept God's forgiveness in our lives and extend forgiveness to others. Forgiving others goes against our natural inclination. But as we allow God to change our hearts and minds, we can experience reconciliation with God and with one another. This module explores the Biblical foundations of forgiveness, the process required for reconciliation, and how to promote living at peace with one another. It also examines forgiveness as it may be required between individuals or members of a community.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The intended audience for these lessons is Christians who are maturing in their faith and desiring to serve God. The lessons will be especially helpful to those who are pastors, church leaders, mentors or teachers, but also anyone wishing to grow in their relationship with God.

The Leader's Guide is intended to help you as a leader in your preparation. These lesson outlines may be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials found online at www.discipleshipessentials.org.

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FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

LESSON 1: THE FOUNDATIONS OF FORGIVENESS

PURPOSE

This lesson examines forgiveness as taught in the Bible. This includes God forgiving us, His command that we forgive one another, and the reasons why forgiveness is needed.

LEADER'S NOTE

When someone hurts us, forgiveness seems impossible. When the pain of an incident or a broken relationship just won't go away, it feels as though we are being hurt over and over again. And yet, Jesus taught so much about forgiveness! This lesson isn't easy, and you are instructing real people with real hurts in their past (and maybe present!). If your participants have been through difficult circumstances and have yet to truly forgive their enemies, leave time for them to process what they would need to do to truly forgive. If you have experienced an act of forgiveness in your own life, tell your participants about it. If there is an example you could bring to the class from their community or from local history, share the reality of forgiveness and reconciliation in a way that will be convicting and encouraging. Pray that your participants will experience God's help in learning to forgive!

INTRODUCTION

Select two or three of the following questions to ask the group.

- ❖ What does the word 'forgiveness' mean to you?
- ❖ Are there limitations to what you are willing to forgive? What could someone do to you that you would find impossible to forgive?
- ❖ How are forgiveness and reconciliation connected? Does the one always require the other?
- ❖ Has God forgiven all of your sins? How do you know you have been forgiven by God?
- ❖ Have you had to seek forgiveness from a friend or family member? What process did you go through, and what was the end result?



STUDY

Instruct the group on the following points.

TEACH:

- ❖ **What is Forgiveness?** The Bible can be summarized as the story of God's relationship with His creation. This relationship between us and God has been strained and broken by sin. Sins are intentional transgressions (doing wrong) against another, and against God. They are not simply mistakes or acts of ignorance; therefore, people are without excuse. This sin and broken relationship is the source of all evil in the world today, which God offers to restore by means of forgiveness. In order for us to extend forgiveness to others, we must understand what forgiveness is.
 - **Forgiveness means Release:** The simplest definition of forgiveness is to give up our right to hurt someone because they have hurt us. We release our claim on vengeance and do not hold the offence against them any longer. Even though there may be consequences to their sin, we release the offending party, freeing them from moral debt to us.
 - **Forgiveness begins Restoration:** When we have a good relationship with someone that is later broken by an offense, forgiveness is required in order to restore the relationship. It is repairing something broken to a state of renewal. It is welcoming someone back into friendship with us.
 - **Forgiveness is not the same as Reconciliation:** While you can choose to forgive someone who hasn't asked for it and who may not even be in your life any longer, reconciliation requires two people to mutually come together to fully repair a broken relationship. Forgiveness would be the first step in that direction.
 - **Forgiveness Requires a Change:** When we extend forgiveness to someone, it requires a change in our behaviour, not just the words, 'I forgive you'. Jesus taught us in [Luke 6:27-28](#) what is required of us. Jesus mentioned four things:
 - **Love:** This requires us to put someone else before ourselves through supportive actions. It isn't just a feeling in our heart, but a choice that affects our behaviour.
 - **Do Good:** This requires acts of kindness, service and mercy. It may be as simple as a smile or an offer to help in some way.
 - **Bless and Do Not Curse:** We must choose to say good about the offending party rather than bad things. We must not curse them, but speak about them with kindness. We must wish them well instead of hoping they would receive harm for their actions.
 - **Pray:** We must pray for God to forgive them and for the restoration of our relationship with them.

ASK:

Read [Matthew 5:38-48](#) out loud. Discuss the following questions with your participants:



What are some culturally acceptable ways that would harm those who harm us?

What change in behaviour was Jesus asking His disciples to make, especially as it relates to our enemies and those who hurt us?

Do our enemies require our forgiveness? If they are forgiven, are they still our enemies?

TASK:

Divide participants into groups of about four. Have each group look up one of the following sets of verses, and write down what God says about forgiveness. Have each group summarize what they learn.

SET 1	SET 2	SET 3
Ephesians 4:32 Mark 11:25 Matthew 18:21-22 Colossians 3:13	Psalms 103:2-4 Psalms 103:10-14 Ecclesiastes 7:20 Jeremiah 31:34	Proverbs 28:13 Ephesians 2:8 Luke 23:33-34 Romans 12:17

TEACH:

- ❖ **God's Forgiveness of Us:** God desires that His creation is restored to relationship with Him, and that the bond between Creator and creation that was broken by sin be restored. This comes through His forgiveness. When we understand the forgiveness God offers us, we are able to forgive others.
 - **God's forgiveness comes at great cost:** Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. During Old Testament history, forgiveness could only be achieved through specific burnt offerings. Then Jesus Christ came into the world to offer His life as a sacrifice for our sin. The cost of forgiveness was immense ([Hebrews 9:22-26](#)).
 - **God's forgiveness is something we all need:** Not one of us can claim to be without sin. Every person alive is in deep need of forgiveness, whether or not they are aware of it ([Romans 3:23](#)).
 - **God's forgiveness addresses our sin problem:** Regardless of what we think our greatest problem in life is, our sin problem is greater. It has broken our relationship with God and is destroying our relationship with others. Only God's forgiveness can fix our sin problem ([1 John 1:9](#)).
 - **God's forgiveness addresses our guilt problem:** When we are aware of our sin, we carry a weight of guilt that can stop us from productively and joyfully achieving our purposes. God's forgiveness brings peace, allowing us to live free of our guilt ([Romans 5:1](#)).
 - **God's forgiveness is not automatic:** Forgiveness is freely given at the moment of salvation, through confession and repentance. But for the Christian, fellowship with



God is hindered by sin, though our salvation is secure. Ongoing forgiveness and fellowship with God is dependent upon regularly confessing our sins (1 John 1:9).

- **God's forgiveness is eternal:** This forgiveness is not temporary, nor does it occur only once. It is as eternal as God Himself (John 5:24, Acts 2:38).
 - **God's forgiveness is for our past:** When we ask for forgiveness for past sins, God's forgiveness applies to all that we have done (Micah 7:19).
 - **God's forgiveness is for our present:** When we sin, we know we can ask God immediately for forgiveness because Jesus Christ has paid the penalty (1 John 2:1-2).
 - **God's forgiveness is for our future:** Even though we should avoid sin, we will find ourselves in need of God's grace and forgiveness in the future. We can be sure God's forgiveness will be there for us if we ask Him (Hebrews 7:25).
 - **God's forgiveness can be trusted:** We can trust God's forgiveness because we can trust His character. God is unchanging, so when He forgives us, our redemption is secure. It is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and nothing can undo it! (Hebrews 9:11-12).
- ❖ **Forgiving Others as We Have Been Forgiven:** God does not allow us to refuse forgiveness to other people. Our relationship with Him depends on His forgiveness, and because we have been forgiven a debt that we could never repay, we must be willing to forgive others when they sin against us. We are not permitted to withhold our forgiveness, regardless of the offence.
- **The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant:** Jesus taught us that we are like a servant who had an enormous debt forgiven, one he never could have repaid. However, a short time later the servant failed to extend forgiveness to a person who owed him. If we do not forgive the debts of others, we do not show love, mercy and gratitude (Matthew 18:21-35).
 - The Disciple Peter thought he understood Jesus' teaching on love and forgiveness. The tradition of Rabbis taught that one should forgive an offender three times. Peter, knowing this as well as Jesus' teaching on love and grace, thought that extending forgiveness to seven times was showing generosity. Jesus told him seventy-seven was more like it! He wanted him to know that forgiveness should not even be counted!
 - The servant in this story treats lightly the forgiveness he experienced. It did not make him humble nor grateful. In the same way, we must not take lightly the cost that Jesus paid for our sins to be forgiven.
 - Jesus adds that we must forgive our brother (anyone who sins against us) or we will not receive the forgiveness of God.
- ❖ **Why Forgiveness is Difficult:** Even though we know we must forgive others, it can be incredibly difficult and take time before we can do it. Some offences are very painful to recollect. We need to be aware of the barriers to forgiveness that could stand in our way. Here are some possible difficulties we may encounter.



- **Concern that the wrongdoer will escape the consequences of their actions, or will not be punished**
 - To forgive is not necessarily to free someone from the natural consequences of their actions, but it is to release them from your judgement and entrust them to God's. But God teaches us that it is not our place to carry out vengeance and retribution because we are all sinners. God is perfect, and we must let Him judge and deliver consequences and punishments as He so desires. We must trust that God is wise, just, and loving to deliver necessary punishments.
 - Romans 12:19, Hebrews 10:30, 1 Thessalonians 5:15
- **Concern that we will have to lie and pretend we weren't hurt deeply**
 - Seeking forgiveness and reconciliation is necessary because we were hurt, and/or a relationship was damaged. When we discuss how we have been hurt and the offender repents, we must offer forgiveness. Pretending we were not hurt or that there was no offence is not being truthful.
 - Luke 17:3-4
- **Concern that forgiving is giving permission to continue in sin**
 - When we release someone from their debt or let go of our right to retribution for what they have done, we must be careful not to dismiss the seriousness or the impact of sin. Forgiveness is not saying that what happened was acceptable; rather it is choosing to stop the cycle of anger it arouses in us. It takes courage and character to forgive, and rather than being permissive of evil, forgiveness stands for what is good. We must identify, confront and hold others accountable for sinful behaviour.
 - Matthew 18:15-17
- **Concern that forgiveness will allow us to be hurt again:**
 - Jesus taught that forgiveness is powerful. But it can be difficult to allow someone back into our life who once hurt us. It takes an act of grace to put ourselves in a position where we might be hurt again. If we forgive the offender but they remain unrepentant, we should pray for them and commit the situation to God. But when someone asks forgiveness of us, we must give it.
 - Matthew 5: 38-42

❖ **Why Do We Forgive?**

- **Because we have been forgiven by God for far greater offences:** God is infinitely good, and our sin is infinitely evil. No amount of good deeds can cancel out our rebellion against God. No sin committed against us is as great as that for which God has forgiven us. Therefore, we must forgive.



- **Because we desire to obey God, and God commands it:** Our desire should be to honour and obey God in all things – including forgiving others. It can seem difficult, but it is a necessary act of obedience on our part.
- **Because it releases us from feelings of victimization, resentment and anger:** God does not want us to be enslaved by our own emotions. When we let go of resentment, hate, and hostility, we are free to love and help others in their relationship with God. We can move on with our lives and live in freedom. Forgiveness restores broken relationships, and sets free those in emotional bondage.

DISCUSSION

- ❖ There are many issues which may make it difficult to forgive another person. What would you say to someone who asked you how to forgive
 - someone who has died?
 - someone who may hurt you again?
 - someone who has broken your trust?
 - someone who refuses to talk to you?
 - someone who is not sorry for what they have done?
- ❖ When we are offended or abused, our natural response is to protect ourselves. Sometimes we use the past sins of others as a weapon – bringing them up over and over in order to hurt, or try to shield ourselves from future harm by insulating ourselves from new relationships. Both of these responses can be harmful. Read Psalm 91 together. Compile a list of the dangers mentioned, and the ways God promises to be our protector.
- ❖ When we forgive someone for breaking our friendship through sin, what else is sometimes broken as well? Are these things always restored through forgiveness, or are additional steps sometimes necessary? Would these steps be impossible?
- ❖ Take a few moments right now to consider someone you need to forgive. What debt are you holding them to, and what would it take for you to release them from it?

PRAYER

Close the lesson in prayer. Pray that your participants would understand and accept God's forgiveness in their own lives, and be overwhelmed by it. Pray that this would cause them to look into their heart and see who it is they need to forgive. Pray that God would convict them, teach them, and free them to forgive others.