

SESSION TWO

Matthew 18:21-35

Learner Session Guide



Focus Statement

We are called to forgive others as God has forgiven us.



Key Verse

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” [Matthew 18:21](#)

Extreme Mercy

 Focus Image



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Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group. Be ready to share new thoughts or insights about your last session.

Pray

*O Lord Jesus, because, being full of foolishness, we often sin and have to ask pardon, help us to forgive as we would be forgiven, neither mentioning old offenses against us, nor dwelling upon them in thought, nor being influenced by them in heart; but loving each other freely, as you freely love us; for your name's sake. Amen. (Christina Rosetti, in *Communion of Saints*, ed. Horton Davies [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990])*

Focus Activity

Study the Focus Image. Hold your own hands in the same position. Are these hands giving or receiving? American educator and civil

rights leader Mary McLeod Bethune once said, “As I give, I get.” How might the same thing be true about forgiveness?

Open Scripture

Read Matthew 18:21-35.

- When you heard Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question, what went through your mind?
- What caught your attention as you heard the parable in Matthew 18:23-35?
- What questions do you have about this text?

Join the Conversation

Literary Context

1. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter wants to know what is expected of him when it comes to forgiveness. When he proposes “seven times,” he may think he is being generous. Jesus, however, ups the ante significantly with his reply.
 - How would you assess the quality of a relationship in which each offense and each act of forgiveness is somehow recorded?
 - Reread Matthew 18:21-22. Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question is sometimes translated as “seventy-seven” and sometimes as “seventy-times-seven.” In ancient times the number seven signified completeness. What might this mean for how often Jesus calls us to forgive?
2. Jesus continues his answer to Peter’s question in a teaching story called a parable. Parables themselves are not intended to be historically factual, but Jesus told them as a way to convey vital truths. Look at the overall action, rather than minute details, to grasp what a parable is saying.



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- Reread Matthew 18:23-35. What exactly was it about the slave's behavior that outraged the king?
- Notice the reactions of the other servants. What can you surmise about their relationship with the forgiven servant and with the king?

Historical Context

1. In the Roman Empire, prisoners of war, sailors captured and sold by pirates, and even children sold by their destitute families were made slaves. They lived under extremely harsh conditions and received no wages. Slaves and their family members could be bought or sold on a whim, and little was done to regulate their masters' care. Masters could, however, free their slaves or allow them to purchase their freedom with help from family and friends.

- Jesus' hearers would have been acquainted with the practice of slavery. What in this parable would have surprised these hearers or sounded absurd to them?

2. One talent of gold equaled more than 15 years of wages for an average laborer, and the slave's debt was 10,000 talents! In comparison, a denarius equaled about one day's wages, and his fellow slave's debt was 100 denarii.

- How does the huge difference between these two debts affect your understanding of the parable?
- Talk about what a heavy debt load, financial or spiritual, can do to a person's outlook on life. What happens to a person's outlook when he or she gets out of debt?

Lutheran Context

1. Many of Martin Luther's contemporaries believed that some sins were worse than others and deserved greater penalties. Luther, however, believed that sin is sin. We may observe differences in the impact of various sins, but all sin is bad for us and our neighbors and deadly to our relationship with God. It spoils God's gifts of life and joy. We are set free from sin only by the extravagant forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ. This also sets us free to love and serve our neighbors.

- Review the parable in Matthew 18:23-35. How does Luther's understanding of sin compare to this? What impact does sin have on the relationships described in the parable?

2. The Lutheran tradition emphasizes the sheer generosity and love demonstrated in what Jesus has done for all people. Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed is an example of this.

- Read the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed and the explanation from Luther's Small Catechism (*Luther's Small Catechism with Evangelical Lutheran Worship Texts* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008], pp. 14–15; or ELW, p. 1162).
- In your own words, what has Jesus done? What motivated him to do this?

Devotional Context

1. New Testament scholar Tom Wright says that forgiveness is like the air in your lungs—there's only room for you to inhale the next lungful after you've exhaled the previous one (*Matthew for Everyone: Part Two, Chapters 16-28* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004], p. 40). If we refuse to breathe forgiveness on others, we will not do well ourselves. Jesus teases Peter a bit with “seventy times seven.” It's as if to say, “Sure, but who's counting?” If we spend our lives tallying all the slights, real or imagined, with which others wound us, we have not yet learned forgiveness.

- How does it feel to be forgiven by God or another person? How does it feel when you refuse to forgive someone?
- Why is it important to take forgiveness in and breathe it out?
- Make a list of ways you can respond to the gift of God's forgiveness.

2. Read or sing “There's a Wideness in God's Mercy” (ELW 587/588). As you savor the beautiful words, look for expressions of the same extravagant love described by Jesus in Matthew 18:23–35.

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

O most amazing God, you have poured out your love for us with an extravagance we cannot understand, and poured your grace into our open hands like rain. Guard our hearts from acting as though your generous love is ours to hoard. Inspire us instead to let it pour through us to all those whom you love. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Matthew 20:1–16.



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2. Make a list of all the ways in which you have experienced forgiveness in the past year, and name the persons through whom it has come to you. Pray through this list with gratitude.

3. No one can pay back God's generosity or even the kindness of our fellow human beings. You can, however, find a way to pay it forward. Plan something generous and gracious you can do for one or more persons in the week ahead. Then just do it.

Enrichment

1. Discover Mary McLeod Bethune. Born in 1875, this daughter of former slaves became a notable educator, author, and African American civil rights leader. She endured and forgave ignorance and racial hatred, pressing on to become the founder of a university and an advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt. This online article will get you started: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_McLeod_Bethune.

2. Forgiveness not only honors God, it's good for one's health. The benefits include lower blood pressure; fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, and chronic pain; as well as lower risk of substance abuse. Find out more at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131>.

3. Watch the film *Changing Lanes* (Paramount Pictures, 2002), which speaks to the capacity for evil, as well as the need for forgiveness, inside each of us. Two ordinary men (a Wall Street lawyer played by Ben Affleck and a recovering alcoholic played by Samuel L. Jackson) enter a vortex of retaliation because of a car accident.

For Further Reading

Matthew for Everyone: Part Two, Chapters 16-28 by Tom Wright (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

No Future Without Forgiveness by Desmond Tutu (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1999).

Fire of Grace: The Healing Power of Forgiveness by Richard W. Rouse (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2005).