

Matthew 18:21-35



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



Focus Image



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Extreme Mercy

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

This session picks up the theme of reconciliation begun in Session 1, but now emphasizing what is "loosed" (Matthew 18:18), that is, forgiven. Last week learners saw that persistent, chronic wrongdoing, with no intention or desire to reconcile, may be grounds for cutting off fellowship (18:17), but what about the ordinary irritations of daily life? Peter asks a sensible question: What are the limits of forgiveness? Jesus answers Peter with a strong, even humorous reminder of what God has done.

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, such as drawing paper and supplies.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.

Session Overview

Whether received and given—or not—forgiveness figures in every life. The point of Jesus' parable is so massive and obvious, says Tom Wright, that the conclusion is unavoidable: "Every time you accuse someone else, you accuse yourself. Every time you forgive someone else, though, you pass on a drop of water from the bucketful God has already given you" (*Matthew for Everyone: Part Two, Chapters 16-28* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004], p. 39).

Literary Context

Peter, Jesus' disciple, suggests seven times as an ample exercise of forgiveness. The number seven, in the symbolism of ancient literature, signified completeness. As the sum of three and four, the numbers of heaven and earth, seven covered everything. Jesus' response (sometimes translated "seventy-seven" and sometimes "seventy-times-seven") really means, "Just do it!" If we keep track of how many times we have forgiven, we haven't really forgiven, we've just extended credit on a debt.

Sometimes a story has more power to produce change than a mountain of factual data. Jesus' response to Peter's question continues with a particular kind of teaching story called a **parable**. The word *parable* comes from a Greek word that means comparison, illustration, or analogy. A parable is a short, fictional story used to address universal spiritual or moral issues. The parable sketches a setting, describes an action, and shows the results. Many parables, including this one, involve a character who makes a questionable decision and suffers the consequences.

Consider asking learners what role each character plays in the story. Who is looking out for whom? What in this story is outrageous, humorous, or sobering? Make sure your group wrestles with the closing verse (18:35) in which Jesus solemnly declares that forgiving others "from your heart" is a condition for receiving forgiveness.

Historical Context

Slaves were part of life in the Roman Empire. Prisoners of war, sailors captured and sold by pirates, and even children sold by their destitute families were forced into slavery. Freedom was possible for slaves whose masters freed them outright or allowed them to buy their freedom with assistance from family and friends.

Jesus' description of the slave with the large debt would have made his listeners laugh. Kings did not enter into business deals with slaves; that would have been absurd. Still more absurd was the amount at stake: 10,000 talents of gold. A single talent was worth more than 15 years of a laborer's wages, so the slave owed more than a free man could earn in 150,000 years! The debt of the second slave, 100 denarii, amounted to only 100 days' wages. The sheer hypocrisy of the forgiven slave was unbearable to both his fellow slaves and to the king, and his debt was reinstated.

To the first slave, the debt owed him was more significant than his own huge debt. This seems absurd to us as we hear the story, and yet the story reveals something about us: we sometimes see the sins of others as far worse than our own. The story also reveals something about God. God's forgiveness is generous and merciful, and is meant to overflow into our relationships with others.

Lutheran Context

In Martin Luther's time, many of his contemporaries believed that some sins were worse than others, with greater penalties



Parable:

A succinct story and type of analogy that conveys an important and often complex insight. While fables feature animals, plants, forces of nature, and objects, parables generally focus on human characters. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, parables are central to Jesus' teaching method.

SESSION TWO

attached. Luther's understanding of sin, however, was similar to the understanding presented in the session Scripture text, namely that sin is sin, and all of it is bad for our neighbors and deadly to our relationship with God. Sins may vary in their outwardly observable impact, but all sin spoils God's gift of life and joy and makes sinners unfit for life with God.

Luther emphasized that the extravagant forgiveness of God, like that shown by the king in Jesus' parable, happens not because of anything we do, but because of what God does for us in Jesus Christ. Through God's merciful and generous forgiveness we are not only set free from our sins, we are set free to love and serve our neighbors.

Devotional Context

Forgiveness as a way of life challenges even spiritually mature Christians. Rather than swallowing all resentment or trying to forgive and forget as though nothing happened, the life of forgiveness means allowing the forgiveness we receive from God to stream through us into the lives of others. Jesus makes it clear that this is among the most basic faith practices. If we do not allow forgiveness to flow to others, we soon lose the capacity to receive and respond to God's forgiveness ourselves.

What is it that gets in the way of saying a simple "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you"? Is it a misplaced sense of self-importance, one that leads us to fear a loss of face by apologizing? What do we fear in forgiving? Are we afraid we might lose something that we could hold over another as leverage? Whatever the problem, the New Testament speaks with one voice on this: being forgiven and being forgiving come as a package. We are desperate sinners in need of God's forgiveness. At the same time, we are beloved children of God, sharing God's forgiveness with others.

Facilitator's Prayer

Merciful God, to spend this session talking about forgiveness means I have to come clean with you now. You know who and what I am. You know how I struggle to be the person you want me to be. If I have wounded anyone, help me apologize. If anyone has wounded me, help me forgive with a glad and generous heart, as you have forgiven me. By your grace let me be willing to be seen for what I am, a forgiven sinner, a child of your own redeeming. Amen.



Gather (10–15 minutes)**Check-in**

Welcome and introduce any newcomers. Invite learners to share completed homework or any new thoughts or insights about the last session. Be ready to give a brief recap of that session if necessary.

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 (10–15 minutes)

Use a broad, shallow bowl filled with sand as a centering place. Have votive candles on hand, one for each participant. Before reading the session Scripture text, light a candle and place it in the center of the bowl of sand. Invite participants to light candles from this center candle and place them in the sand as a sign of their longing, kindled by the Spirit, to receive the light of God in the Word. When each has placed a candle, read the text slowly, so that each word may be savored.

OR

Have one person read the text slowly, stopping briefly after each verse to allow listeners to reflect and jot down questions or images.

Read Matthew 18:21–35.

- When you heard Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question, what went through your mind?

**Tip:**

If in the last session group members committed to praying for a relationship in which they are experiencing tension, be sure to ask how that is going. Even if there hasn’t been reconciliation at this point, participants may have experienced a kind of healing of their own hearts.

**Tip:**

Prepare participants for entering into a time of prayer. Invite them to sit comfortably, relax, and become mindful that they are in God’s presence.

**Tip:**

Invite participants to hold their hands open and raise their arms up toward their heads. Then ask them to lower their arms, extending their open hands in front of them. Finally, have them extend their open hands downward, toward their knees. Whether giving or receiving, the open hands gesture generally looks the same. The movement of forgiveness from God, through believers, to others is a continuous flow.

**Tip:**

Be aware of local fire regulations, and do not leave burning candles unattended. As an alternative, battery-operated candles may be used.



Tip:

Occasionally learners will struggle to understand why Jesus would tell a story that didn't really happen. Jesus uses parables as illustrations or analogies meant to tell an eternal truth about God rather than factual details about one moment in time.



Bonus Activity:

Commission participants to create and present their own parable to express something about God's forgiveness. If there are more than six participants, form two or more parable-making groups. Allow 5-8 minutes for participants to prepare their presentation, and provide a box of props (hats, scarves, miscellaneous objects) if possible.



Bonus Activity:

Ask participants to compare last week's text, Matthew 18:15-20, with 18:21-35. In Matthew 18:17 Jesus allows for the breaking off of a relationship with one who will not repent and be reconciled; in today's text Jesus teaches limitless forgiveness. Use the discussion to point out that forgiveness is an individual action, while conflict resolution is about the community. Even if a relationship is broken beyond repair, forgiveness can still happen, and indeed must, if the injured party is to find peace.



Tip:

Members of your group will not have met many kings or slaves. Help them identify people with similar roles or levels of power in society today. Perhaps a king compares to a CEO? Ask the group who they consider the truly powerless in our own society.

- 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 (25-55 minutes)

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.

- 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 (see *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

+ Bonus Activity:

Show one or two video news clips or newspaper clippings of individuals, firms, or nations demanding what they are owed. Ask the group to compare and contrast those typical approaches with the conduct of the king in the parable.

+ Bonus Activity:

The only "payback" God wants is that we pass along the sacred grace and generosity we have received. Have the group generate a list of concrete ways a person could realistically "share the grace" in everyday life. Remind participants that forgiveness is never a substitute for accountability, but it is the way to move forward after someone has done wrong.

Tip:

Have available copies of Luther's Small Catechism or ELW.

+ Bonus Activity:

In Luther's Small Catechism, read the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer and its explanation (ELW, p. 1164). Ask the group to identify at least two points of similarity with Matthew 18:23-35.

+ Bonus Activity:

Think of the children and youth in your congregation. What would your group tell them, if it could, about forgiving and being forgiven? Consider distributing note cards and inviting participants to write words of encouragement to young people in your congregation's Sunday school or youth group.

Tip:

Learners may hear Jesus' challenge to forgive in different ways because we hear it differently at different points in our faith journeys. Although participants cannot solve problems for one another, they can listen with care and sensitivity. If someone needs more support than the group can provide, however, speak with that person privately after the session. You might suggest that he or she talk with the pastor as well.

SESSION TWO



Bonus Activity:

Explore the way that South Africa learned to move past the violence and hatred of the apartheid years by showing this ten-minute video of Archbishop Desmond Tutu discussing the South African Truth and Reconciliation project: <http://www.linktv.org/video/2808>.



Tip:

If your group is open with one another, consider inviting the group to pray aloud for one another's specific needs, particularly those related to forgiveness.

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

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on chart paper or a whiteboard. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.
2. Have the group respond to these questions: What have you learned about forgiveness today? How do you plan to carry it into daily life with you?

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 (5 minutes)

Homework

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

Available from augsburgfortress.org/store:

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

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Matthew 20:1-16.
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities.

**Tip:**

Call attention to the Enrichment activities, each of which takes up the transforming power of forgiveness in real-world conditions.

SESSION TWO

4. Pray for members of your group during the week.
5. Be alert for news stories, videos, or anecdotes from your daily life that have to do with fairness, the topic for the next session.