

Prayer Ministry

Small Group Study Guide

Lesson 5. Forgiving Others

Strive for peace with everyone. Be merciful, even as your Heavenly Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. The person that is able to forgive others will find increased health and blessing.

Instruction

Jesus was very clear in His teaching that we should be quick to forgive all that have sinned against us. He modelled this while dying on the cross when He said: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We act as judge against a person whenever we hold a sin against them.

A "root of bitterness" will spring up and cause trouble when we do not forgive. There is an emotional cost for being a debt collector, and sin is a debt that the person cannot repay. As long as they owe it to us we will try to collect on it, either actively or passively. Hebrews 12:15 warns that "many become defiled" by a root of bitterness.

There are normal emotional responses to unforgiveness, such as anger, bitterness, condemnation, disappointment, and holding a grudge. These emotions act as a poison to the person carrying them. These feelings flood the emotional realm, not leaving room for healthy emotions such as joy, peace, confidence, and harmony. They trigger fight or flight responses in the physical realm that set the body in a defensive mode, and usurp energy that would otherwise be used for physical repair and maintenance. They also disrupt relationships in the spiritual realm.

The first step for forgiving others is to take account of what is owed to you and who is responsible. The purpose of this step is not to find someone to blame, but to clearly identify who you will forgive. Some debts are quickly obvious because of the pain it has caused you, or the loss you have incurred because of the action or inaction of another person. Other sins are only apparent when you begin to understand truth and realize what you have missed before renewing your mind.

You can forgive a person for the offense they committed against you, for the debt they owe you, but not for an event. The event is part of history and cannot be forgotten or reconciled, but you can choose to release the person from their offense. The event is the circumstance in which the offense occurred.

For example, adultery is the event or circumstance in which infidelity occurs, but the offense of the infidelity is determined by the spouse. He or she may define the debt as betrayal, rejection, disloyalty, dishonesty, and the like. These offenses are what can be forgiven, though the history cannot be rewritten.

The way you discover all the offenses held against a person is to consider what their sin has cost you. Like a bookkeeper, you want to take an accurate and complete accounting of the debt. Suppressing, ignoring, or minimizing offenses does not resolve them nor free you from the burden of debt collector.

While you are taking an account you may feel anger rising up inside. It is appropriate to have an emotional response to the sin when you realize what it has cost. Be angry, but in

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your anger do not sin. It is wrong for you to harbor anger or hold a grudge. That is a sin that grows into a root of bitterness. It is not wrong to experience anger and allow it to motivate you toward resolving the pain.

The second step is to acknowledge the debt. You cannot release an offense that you are unwilling to acknowledge and accept. Do not attempt to excuse or justify the sin or the sinner. It would not be a debt needing forgiveness if it could be justified.

Accept that the sinner does not have the means to resolve the debt. They would not need forgiveness if they were able to repay. Before you can forgive you must realize that the person has not been able to repay, cannot now repay, and will not be able to pay in the future. They do not have the wherewithal to make good on what they owe you and never will.

The one that caused you this pain has no role to play in this act of forgiveness. They do not have to accept the blame, ask for forgiveness, or even be willing to receive it. Forgiving others is a one-way street. It is something you grant without coercion or return benefit.

The third step is to find compassion in your heart for the person. Compassion does not justify or excuse the offense but recognizes that the person is in hopeless bondage because of the debt. You may be familiar with the statement: "hurt people hurt people." This is a reminder that everyone has a story. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and if you knew the whole story behind the person's fall it would melt your heart.

Forgiving is an act of mercy, and you are to be merciful just as your Heavenly Father is merciful, as it says in Luke 6:36. Even a trace of mercy, no more than a mustard seed, is enough to start with.

The fourth step is to release the offender from this debt. This is a choice made of your own free will. You choose to release all of your rights, past, present and future, to collect on the debt. It is as if you hold an IOU or demand note in your hand with that person's name and signature. That paper gives you the right to engage in all legal efforts to collect the debt. But you choose to tear up that IOU and give up all rights to it.

Forgiving another person is a spiritual transaction. The one who forgives is now free to receive payment from God, and He is a much better credit risk! The one who is released no longer owes the debt, and experiences freedom in the spiritual realm because of it. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them (John 20:23). You are able to act in the role of priest for the person in your debt because when you grant them forgiveness God does too.

Reconciliation is possible after forgiveness. The forgiver is free to establish a redeemed relationship with the person that has been forgiven. A forgiven person cannot be reconciled to sin nor to the sin nature of another person. However, when that sin has been forgiven the forgiver can be reconciled to the perfect nature of God as it is reflected in the other person.

Finally, when you forgive another it is good to ask the Holy Spirit if there are any appropriate actions for you to take. There are situations in which forgiveness is necessary in the spiritual realm but does not need to be shared with the other person. For instance, they may have passed away or otherwise not available, or they may not have the spiritual maturity to accept your forgiveness. However, the Spirit may invite you to share the good news so the forgiven person can enjoy their new freedom. Listen and obey.

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Exercise: Forgiving Others

Ask the Holy Spirit to identify one offense that He wants you to forgive. Use the simple table below to help guide you through the process. You may find it easier to begin with the name of the person, or the event or circumstance in which the offense occurred. Use the right hand column to record any course of action God as asked you to take in response to forgiving this offense, if any.

Person	Evidence	Offense	Action

Steps for forgiving others:

- Take account of the offenses
- Acknowledge the debt
- Find compassion for the debtor
- Release the person
- Reconciliation becomes possible

Sample prayer for releasing a debtor:

Lord, I confess to you that (person) owes a debt to me because of (offenses). I have taken an account of these debts and choose, of my own free will, to release (person) from this debt. As far as I am concerned, (person) owes me nothing in this matter any longer. This is true past, present and future. Since I have forgiven (person), I ask that You forgive also. Now, Lord, I wait for any instruction you have for me in this matter. Amen.

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Sharing: Forgiving Others

Answer these discussion questions in your small group:

- What did it feel like to forgive an offense?
- How does releasing a debt change you?
- Choose an event or circumstance and then brainstorm likely offenses.
- How does forgiving the offense answer the problem of dealing with repeat offenders?
- What offense have you found to be the hardest to forgive?
- What would have to change in your mindset to allow forgiveness to flow more readily?
- How has your ability to forgive been affected by your willingness to be forgiven?
- How might God repay for losses you incurred?

Write a script that you could use to let someone know that you have forgiven them, following the pattern used in the exercise above.

Caring: Forgiving Others

Spend some time in prayer with each other, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal an offense or offender you should forgive. Listen for His direction on how to release the offense.