

How to Forgive Someone

Matthew 6:9-15; 18:23-35; Mark 11:25; Luke 23:34a; Colossians 3:13

The Big Idea: Offering forgiveness can be as liberating as receiving it.

Learning Goal: Learners will practice the discipline of forgiveness, sensitive to the power of the spoken word and mindful of the forgiveness God graciously offers them. **Students note: you will need your Lutheran Handbook and a Bible ready!**

Opening: Begin by sharing a high and a low from the past week or the recent past. When each person has had a chance to listen and to share, open your session together by praying the following prayer together, out loud.

Opening Prayer

God of grace, thanks for forgiving us when we mess up. We know that we don't deserve to be forgiven—and we're grateful that you are always there to offer your assurance of mercy. Help us forgive the people in our lives who have caused us hurt, pain, and frustration. Give us courage to forgive these people, not only with our words, but with our hearts. Amen

Read: Read the following together, either silently or out loud and pay attention to the questions that the reading brings! If you are comfortable doing so, it is most appropriate to deal with your thoughts and questions on the spot.

Biblical

God asks us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Jesus makes this clear in parables (Matthew 18:23-34), in direct command (Mark 11:25), by his own example (Luke 23:34), and by embedding it in the prayer he teaches to his disciples (Matthew 6:12). In fact, Jesus speaks far more in the Gospels about our need to forgive one another than about our need to ask for forgiveness.

Different translations of the Lord's Prayer have related at least three different words for what it is we need to forgive: *debts*, *trespasses*, and *sins*. Of the three, *sins* is perhaps the most "loaded" word, one which many hesitate to use in reference to everyday offenses that we wittingly and unwittingly do to one another. *Trespasses* suggests the ways we "cross the line"—again, sometimes unwittingly—and thus need to reconcile with one another. But the most common metaphor in Jesus' parables is *debt*, indicating not just a spiritual or emotional matter to be worked out but actual material injustice. This is good news to all who feel that they have been wronged in such tangible ways that they cannot simply think their way into making it right. Jesus invites us to see our own forgiveness in such concrete terms. What might it mean to say to someone who has wronged us, "You really owe me nothing"?

Prayer is undoubtedly part of the process of forgiveness, as is saying the words aloud. But

forgiveness of debt indicates a concrete shift in the way people relate to one another. Matthew 18:15-20 tells the offended one to confront the sinner first alone, then with another, and then with the church. All too often readers have focused only on the last part of these instructions—"Let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector"—which sounds like Jesus giving permission to *not* forgive one who is unrepentant. First of all, we should take notice that this is the only place Jesus lets the potential "forgiver" off the hook. Second, it is unclear just how a "Gentile and a tax collector" is to be treated, given that Jesus often ministers with and to tax collectors in this Gospel (in fact, the Gospel is named for one who was a tax collector). Perhaps the instruction is to do what Jesus did with tax collectors: Eat with them.

Contemporary

Forgiveness in contemporary parlance has taken on two distortions. In one case, there is the dismissal of fault: "It's okay. It doesn't matter." Here no forgiveness is offered because we refuse to acknowledge that any harm has been done. Sometimes this is true. But when someone has been hurt, when boundaries have been crossed, or when debts are owed, it is essential that the truth be told. Forgiveness is not suppression of emotion or denial of reality. In the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, the process of "truth and reconciliation" relied on the importance of truth being spoken aloud. Words can have tremendous power to heal, even when there is no way to make full restitution for what has been lost.

The second distortion is the "nonapology"—"I'm sorry that you felt bad." In this case, the one doing the "confessing" has not acknowledged any ill intent, nor even really acknowledged harm done. While it may be possible to forgive someone who has so little recognition of his or her fault, true reconciliation is much easier when both parties can agree on what has actually happened.

Finally, the extreme subjectivity of our culture presents a challenge to the notion of forgiveness. Students may feel that in order to forgive they must have positive feelings toward the person. They may fear that lingering feelings of anger or hurt mean they haven't "succeeded" at forgiving. But forgiveness, like grace, is more a gift we receive than an effort we make. We pray, we talk, we tell the truth, we strive to live as if all debts have been canceled—because they have been.

Handbook Connection

Turn to "How to Forgive Someone" on pages 101-102 of *The Lutheran Handbook*. It is very important to begin all conversations about forgiveness by reminding others that God has forgiven us. Take a look at number 4 under "How to Forgive Someone." Emphasize the importance of saying, "I forgive you." Indicate that many people say things like, "It's no big deal," "That's alright," or "That's okay," instead of, "I forgive you." This isn't good because true forgiveness hasn't taken place—it's just a way of avoiding confrontation. Practice saying this important phrase to the people around you.

Finally, read number 5 and the subsequent paragraph aloud. Affirm the importance of involving God in the process of forgiveness. It's not easy to forgive others. God has a lot of practice in the business of forgiveness. God can help you forgive someone not only with words, but with your heart. Oftentimes, the more someone has hurt you, the more you'll find that prayer will help you forgive the offending person.

Bible Connection: Jesus, the Forgiver

- Begin by having learners turn to "How to Forgive Someone" on page 101 in *The Lutheran Handbook*. Ask someone to read number 2 and the subsequent paragraph aloud. As number 2 instructs, have learners turn to Matthew 6:9-15 in their Bibles. Indicate that these verses have become what today is considered the Lord's Prayer. Have everyone read these verses aloud. Ask students which verses deal with forgiveness. (*Verses 12, 14, 15.*) Why do you think Jesus felt forgiveness was so important? What about verses 14 and 15? Is it a little scary to think that if we don't forgive others, God won't forgive us? Is it possible for us to forgive others, not out of fear that God will hold a grudge, but because it's the right thing to do?
- Have learners turn in their Bibles to Luke 23:34. Select someone to read this verse aloud. Indicate that this is what Jesus said while being mocked on the cross. Jesus preached and taught about the importance of forgiveness. How powerful is it that Jesus, while dying in pain, was able to forgive others? Imagine if you were one of the people mocking Jesus. How would Jesus' words of forgiveness make you feel? How does this story give you strength to forgive the people who have wronged you?

More Bible Connections

Have learners turn in their Bibles to Colossians 3:13. Select someone to read the verse aloud. Encourage learners to underline or star this verse in their Bibles. Indicate that people endure complaints and gossip every day all over the world. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, urged forgiveness, not "payback," when someone was wronged. What is your natural tendency when you've been hurt—payback or forgiveness? What reaction do most of your friends have in similar situations?

Have students turn in their Bibles to Matthew 18:23-35. These verses are sometimes called the parable of the unforgiving servant. Select a few people to read several verses in a row. After the class has heard the parable, ask them what they think is the point of the story. If you had to think of the characters in this story resembling God, us, and others, who was the most like God? (*The king.*) Who was similar to us? (*The unforgiving servant.*) Who was similar to others? (*The fellow servant.*) Does it make sense that if God forgives us for the millions of sins we commit, we should forgive other people the handful of things they do wrong to us?

Have students turn in their Bibles to Mark 11:25 and read the verse aloud together. This verse talks about forgiving people in prayer. Encourage young people to involve God in the process of forgiveness. Ask God to help you forgive others. Start with prayers of forgiveness—then seek out the person and forgive him or her verbally.

Key Words

FORGIVE is to pardon or excuse someone for causing you pain. Forgiveness is one of the hardest, and most important, things we are called to do as Christians.

SINS are the things we do that separate us from God and often hurt other people; sin is a broken relationship.

DEBTS are something owed another person. Debts might be physical, emotional, or spiritual.

TRESPASSES are instances of crossing the line without permission. It could be metaphorical or literal crossing of the line—but when someone trespasses, it is unwelcome and unwarranted. *(Sins, debts, and trespasses are the three ideas paired with "forgiveness" in the Lord's Prayer.)*

Discussion Time

Use the following questions to kick off a conversation about the theme:

- Jesus spent a lot of time talking about forgiveness. He offered prayers about it, he told parables about it, and he even demonstrated it on the cross. Why do you think Jesus placed such high importance on forgiveness? What are the benefits of forgiving someone? *(Affirm all answers. Help the youth understand that Jesus talked about forgiving others as a response to the forgiveness that God has already shown us.)*
- In *The Lutheran Handbook* entry "How to Forgive Someone," the suggestion is made to seek out the person when you're going to forgive him or her. Do you think it's better to offer forgiveness face-to-face than over the phone or by e-mail? Why? Is it easier or harder for you to forgive someone when you have to look the person in the eyes? *(Affirm all answers. Encourage students to take the sometimes-difficult path of offering genuine forgiveness face-to-face.)*
- Forgiveness seems to be something that is very difficult for people. What do you think is so hard about offering forgiveness in general? What is at stake when you forgive someone? Is it easier to hold a grudge than offer forgiveness? *(Listen louder than you speak on this one!)*
- Is there currently a situation in your life where you need to forgive someone? How can this group help you follow through with this? What is keeping you from forgiving this person? *(Offer support, but don't force group members to share if they're not comfortable.)*