STUDY GUIDE

Forgiveness in the Gospels: a four-session small-group study

For: small groups, classes and families (about 45 minutes per session)

Read each passage aloud, then discuss. There are no wrong answers; the goal is to listen to the text and to one another. Forgiving someone does not mean excusing harm or returning to an unsafe situation.

1. Peter's question

MATTHEW 18:21–35

21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I
forgive him? Until seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I don't tell you until seven times, but,
until seventy times seven. 23 Therefore the Kingdom of Heaven is like a certain king who
wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he had begun to settle, one was brought to
him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 But because he couldn't pay, his lord commanded
him to be sold, with his wife, his children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 The
servant therefore fell down and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I
will repay you all!' 27 The lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him and
forgave him the debt. 28 "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who
owed him one hundred denarii, and he grabbed him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay
me what you owe!' 29 "So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have
patience with me, and I will repay you!' 30 He would not, but went and cast him into prison
until he should pay back that which was due. 31 So when his fellow servants saw what was
done, they were exceedingly sorry, and came and told their lord all that was done. 32 Then his
lord called him in and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you
begged me. 33 Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, even as I had mercy
on you?' 34 His lord was angry, and delivered him to the tormentors until he should pay all that
was due to him. 35 So My heavenly Father will also do to you, if you don't each forgive your
brother from your hearts for his misdeeds."

Peter proposes a generous limit. Jesus answers with a story about a debt no one could repay.

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- What does Peter assume forgiveness is?

- Why does the first servant refuse to forgive?

- What does the parable suggest about where forgiveness comes from?

2. The father who runs

LUKE 15:11–24

11 He said, “A certain man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give
me my share of your property.’ So he divided his livelihood between them. 13 Not many days
after, the younger son gathered all of this together and traveled into a far country. There he
wasted his property with riotous living. 14 When he had spent all of it, there arose a severe
famine in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 He went and joined himself to one of the
citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 He wanted to fill his
belly with the pods that the pigs ate, but no one gave him any. 17 But when he came to himself,
he said, ‘How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough to spare, and I’m dying
with hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and will tell him, “Father, I have sinned
against heaven and in your sight. 19 I am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me as
one of your hired servants.”’ 20 “He arose and came to his father. But while he was still far off,
his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and ran, fell on his neck, and kissed him.
21 The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer
worthy to be called your son.’ 22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe
and put it on him. Put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf, kill
it, and let’s eat and celebrate; 24 for this, my son, was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is
found.’ Then they began to celebrate.

The younger son rehearses an apology; the father interrupts it.

- What is surprising about the father’s response?

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- How does the son's prepared speech compare with what actually happens?

- Where do you see yourself in the story?

3. Forgiveness from the cross

LUKE 23:33–34

33 When they came to the place that is called "The Skull", they crucified Him there with the
criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for
they don't know what they are doing." Dividing His garments among them, they cast lots.

Luke alone records this prayer.

- Whom is Jesus praying for, and what does He say about them?

- What makes this example hard to follow — and why is it offered?

4. Forgiven, and forgiving

MATTHEW 6:9–15

9 Pray like this: "'Our Father in heaven, may Your name be kept holy. 10 Let Your Kingdom
come. Let Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread.
12 Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. 13 Bring us not into temptation, but
deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever.
Amen.' 14 "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
15 But if you don't forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

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MARK 11:25

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father, who is in heaven, may also forgive you your transgressions.

The Lord's Prayer joins the two directions of forgiveness.

- Why do you think Jesus links being forgiven with forgiving?

- What is the difference between forgiving and reconciling?

- Is there a next step you could take this week?

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