

Forgiveness Small Group Preparation:: Week Nine

Remember

- It is about you experiencing the gospel first. So take time to walk through this stuff ahead of time, spending time thinking through it, answering the questions for your life, being gut level honest.
- After that, pray for the group members that you and they will be transformed by the gospel.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you through the material and listen as you go.
- It is not about getting through the material or about having the right answers. Groups work best when you facilitate discussion and people feel free to participate and learn from each other. Think through questions that will facilitate discussion.
- As we are experiencing more and more of the transforming power of the gospel, our hearts will want to share it. Being on mission will be a natural overflow of the work of the gospel.

Read through and complete all of the small group material and activities before the group meets.

Thrive Small Groups:: Week Nine

Connect

1. Take time to relationally connect with and engage your group members.
2. General questions to spur on discussion:
 - What opportunities did you have to **live** the gospel with or **give** the gospel to someone this week? How were you hindered by not believing the gospel or helped by believing the gospel?
 - How did you **experience** the gospel this week? How are you seeing God transform your life?
 - Make sure you as a leader also share.
 - ***Note:** Some may choose to share the ways they have been minimizing sin. Some may choose how they are living as orphans. Some may share ways they are seeing supernatural victories in their lives. Some may share about ways they are being able to share this with others.*

Pray

Take a moment and have the group pray (if they feel comfortable) and run to God and expose the idols they have been trusting in. Then take time to thank God for the gospel, for His righteousness, for the many things they have received as a result of Christ's death and resurrection (thanksgiving is a sign of faith). Then honestly bring to God the specific ways they need the gospel right now and ask the Holy Spirit to speak through His Word and this study to make the gospel real in everyone's hearts.

Transition

As we live in light of the gospel, we will not only have a renewed desire to share this message of reconciliation with others, we will be compelled to live out reconciliation ourselves one with another.

Scripture

Read **Matthew 18:21-35** together out loud and answer these questions:

- What does the passage say?
- What is the point of this passage? What does it mean?
- How does this story relate to us and the gospel?

Read **Luke 23:32-34** and some of the surrounding verses and answer these questions:

- How were people sinning against Jesus?
- What was his response?
- How have you recently sinned against Jesus?
- Have you received his forgiveness? Why or why not?
- Note: Our ability to extend forgiveness comes only as we are able to recognize our own sin towards God and receive His forgiveness. As Luke 7:47 states, “He who has been forgiven much loves much.” Ultimately our sin towards another person or their sin towards us is rooted in sin towards God. The forgiveness process starts as I deal with my relationship with God first. Forgiveness towards others then overflows as I believe and receive the gospel.

Read the Article Together

Discussion questions:

- What important aspects of forgiveness did you learn from this article?

Transition to Exercise

Hand out the exercise and give people enough time to answer the questions on their own. *You will want people to share some of what they wrote down in the first part of the exercise. They don't need to share all of their answers, **and they definitely don't need to share names.***

- What did you think of this exercise? *This alone with a few follow-up questions may get enough sharing going to accomplish what you want. If not, go to #2.*
- Walk through 2-7 and have various people share their answers.
- As a group, take some of the situations that have been shared and make application of the gospel:
 - How can the gospel empower you to have compassion and genuine love toward the people you need to forgive?
 - Describe some of the specific steps of love you will now take in these relationships *(for some it may be initially repenting and believing the gospel first for themselves and then asking the Spirit to give them the next steps).*
 - Have the group pray for one another as they engage those people in love and forgiveness this week.

Wrap-up

- Does anyone have any additional questions or comments about what we learned today?
- How has what you learned impacted you?
- Have a group member close in prayer.

The Gospel Empowers Us To Forgive

WEEK EIGHT ARTICLE

When the gospel really takes root in our lives, it begins to affect our interactions with people. Forgiveness is one practical area where gospel transformation should be working itself out. Theologian and counselor Dan Allender has captured how the gospel moves us toward forgiveness in an article entitled “Feeding Your Enemy,” abridged below.

Most of us struggle to forgive those who harm us. And the greater the damage, the more difficult it is to forgive. We often feel confused about what it means to forgive: “Should I just ignore the affair and somehow live as if it didn’t happen?”

Forgiving others is not an easy concept to understand, let alone to apply. But there is not a more important subject in the Christian life. Let us then explore the question, What does it mean to love my enemy: the one who sexually abused me; my angry and insensitive spouse; my friend who gossiped behind my back and damaged my reputation; or even my child who snarls at my offer to go for a walk?

What is Forgiveness?

Perhaps the best place to start in understanding what forgiveness is all about is to look at the way God forgives. God’s forgiveness of us is a passionate movement of *strength* and *mercy* toward us, the offenders. His bold *strength* is the force of His holiness, which will not rest until all sin is destroyed and his glory shines as the sun. His bold *mercy* constantly beckons us to return to His embrace, a place of rest and joy. He forgives our sin, but strongly moves to destroy the cancer within us that limits our joy and vitality; simultaneously, He extends arms of mercy to receive us as we turn back to Him.

Let me state a working definition of forgiveness, based on the scriptural picture of God’s forgiveness. *To forgive another means to cancel a debt in order to provide a door of opportunity for 1) repentance and 2) restoration of the broken relationship.*

Once we have experienced God’s mercy and forgiveness [in the gospel], we will find the energy to cancel others’ debts. And we will not stop with offering forgiveness, but, following God’s example, we will pursue the one who hurt us for the purpose of reconciliation.

What Does A Forgiving Heart Look Like?

The driving passion of a forgiving heart is the desire to see, touch, taste, feel, and smell *reconciliation*. Most of us have experienced moments of tension with a friend. Though nothing is said, the air is heavy with an unknown, unstated offense. A forgiving heart seeks the kind of rest and joy we experience when the air is finally cleared and hearts are reconnected. Reconciliation is restored peace; true shalom, wholeness and health returned to something that was broken and diseased.

Reconciliation is costly for both the one offended and the offender. The offended forgives (cancels) the debt by not terminating the relationship, as might be reasonable and expected given the offense. The cost for the offender is repentance. Reconciliation is never one-sided. Forgiveness is an offer, but not the granting, of reconciliation.

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A forgiving heart cancels the debt but does not lend new money until repentance occurs. The offender must repent if true intimacy and reconciliation are ever to take place. That means that cheap forgiveness – peace at any cost – is not true forgiveness. Forgiveness that is offered without the deep desire for the offender to be restored to God, and to the one who was harmed, is at best antiseptic and mechanical. Forgiveness is far, far more than a business transaction; it is the sacrifice of a heartbroken father who weeps over the loss of his child and longs to see the child restored to life and love and goodness.

A forgiving heart does not wait passively for repentance to occur. Instead, it offers the offender a taste of mercy and strength designed to expose and destroy sin. It offers “good food” that exposes the sinner’s emptiness and tantalizes him to return to the Father’s fold.

Paul tells us to offer food and drink to our enemy: “In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:20-21). The idea of heaping burning coals on a head is a mixed metaphor that seems to symbolize God’s smoldering, hot justice (Ps. 140:9-10). Yet it is also a symbol of mercy: As a sign of favor, Bedouins gave hot coals to someone who was without fire. And it is a metaphor of shame – coals on one’s head turn the face red. What is the point of this complex metaphor? I understand it to mean that offering goodness has two effects: it conquers evil by surprising and shaming the sinner, and it invites the evildoer to pursue life.

Every time we give our enemy a gift of “good food” we expose his sin in the light of God’s goodness. Good food is any gift that simultaneously reveals both God’s *mercy* and *strength*. What will that look like in practice? Let me give a few examples.

One woman said to her angry, shaming husband: “Honey, when you speak to me so angrily, it reminds me of how strong I know you can be. But when you try to bully me, it makes you appear weak.” Her response pierced his rage and invited him to interact in a strong, passionate, and tender manner.

I know a woman who struggles with her negative next-door neighbor. Every time her neighbor visits she finds fault with something. For months my friend quietly endured the assaults. Finally, after much thought and prayer, she respectfully and kindly asked her, “Jane, you always seem to be struggling with some injustice. How do you deal with all the inner pain you must feel?” My friend’s good food was redemptive curiosity that highlighted both the neighbor’s negativism and her inner struggle.

We are to offer others a taste of the Cross, which is a demonstration of both wrath and mercy. It is both a warning (God hates sin) and an invitation (embrace God’s goodness and come under the blood of protection). Forgiveness involves more than merely releasing bitterness or saying, “I forgive you.” It requires us to deeply ponder certain questions: “What does it mean to give this person a taste of God’s character in both strength and mercy? How can I feed him a taste of goodness that will surprise and shame his wickedness?”

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Getting to the Heart of Forgiveness

WEEK EIGHT EXERCISE

Part 1 *(answer these questions before your meeting. You may need a separate sheet of paper.)*

1. Think of one or two people who you need to forgive (or forgive more deeply). If you are having a hard time thinking of someone, ask God to reveal someone to you. Also, here are some scenarios and feelings that might bring someone to mind: someone you have distanced yourself from, people you feel uncomfortable around, people you no longer enjoy, relational conflicts that you keep rehearsing in your mind, someone said or did something that hurt you, feelings of anger, bitterness, irritation, fear, gossip, or a critical spirit.

Write down one or two people who are coming to mind: _____

2. What irritates or disturbs you the most about this person?
3. What are the issues of "justice"? How have they wronged you, hurt you, and sinned against you?
4. What conditions do you instinctively want to place on them before you truly forgive? In other words, what does your heart want to require from them before you release them? What specifically would you desire them to say or do?
5. Describe your own debt before God and how it is far greater than the debt of the people you have listed (and yet it is cancelled and forgiven). Do not rush through this question; take time to describe specifically your indebtedness.
6. How has your previous way of relating to these people reflected a small view of your own debt and a small view of Christ's forgiveness?

This material was designed for Coram Deo Church Community small groups. Much of the content has been adapted from Sonship (© World Harvest Mission, 2006). Questions? Contact Will Walker (will@cdomaha.com) or Bob Thune (bob@cdomaha.com).