

Bible Study on Forgiveness *4 lessons with questions*

This Bible study on forgiveness moves from receiving to giving. It starts with David's relief at being forgiven in Psalm 32, then Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant, Paul's call to forgive as the Lord forgave you, and Joseph forgiving the brothers who sold him. Four lessons for a small group, a class or your own study.

Forgiveness is one of the hardest things the Bible asks of us, so go slowly and be honest. Each lesson prints the whole passage from the Berean Standard Bible, then gives the big idea, notes for the leader, questions to observe, understand and apply, a memory verse and a prayer. Some answers may be private; they can stay that way.

Be kind and tenderhearted to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.

— Ephesians 4:32 (BSB)

LESSON 1 OF 4

The relief of being forgiven

Read Psalm 32:1-7

The big idea: Forgiveness begins with God: when we stop hiding our sin and confess it to Him, He forgives, and the weight lifts.

Read

¹ Of David. A Maskil. Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ² Blessed is the man whose iniquity the LORD does not count against him, in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³ When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my

groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was drained as in the summer heat. Selah ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not hide my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah ⁶ Therefore let all the godly pray to You while You may be found. Surely when great waters rise, they will not come near. ⁷ You are my hiding place. You protect me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah

– Psalm 32:1-7 (BSB)

Notes

Psalm 32 is headed “Of David.” It opens with joy: “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.” Then David remembers what it was like before. While he kept silent about his sin, his strength drained away “as in the summer heat.” Hiding sin did not make it smaller; it made him weaker.

Everything changed when he confessed: “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and God forgave the guilt of his sin. We forgive others best when we know how much we have been forgiven. This lesson is first on purpose.

Questions

OBSERVE What does the passage say?

1. What three things does David say God does with sin in verses 1–2?
2. What happened to David while he kept silent (vv. 3–4)?
3. What did David do, and what did God do (v. 5)?

UNDERSTAND What does it mean?

1. Why do people try to keep silent about their sin?
2. What does it mean that sins are ‘covered’ and not ‘counted against’ us?
3. How does God become a ‘hiding place’ (v. 7) instead of someone we hide from?

APPLY What will I do with it?

1. Is there something you have kept silent about before God? Tell Him plainly this week.
2. How does knowing you are forgiven change how you see people who have wronged you?
3. Thank God in writing for one thing He has forgiven you.

Memory verse

Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not hide my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

— Psalm 32:5 (BSB)

Pray

LORD, I will not keep silent anymore. I confess my sins to You, without excuses, and I thank You that You forgive the guilt of my sin. Be my hiding place, and let the relief of Your forgiveness make me quick to forgive others. Amen.

LESSON 2 OF 4

The unforgiving servant

Read Matthew 18:21-35

The big idea: Jesus teaches that people who have been forgiven an unpayable debt must forgive the smaller debts others owe them, from the heart.

Read

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times! ²³ Because of this, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the

settlements, a debtor owing ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since the man was unable to pay, the master ordered that he be sold to pay his debt, along with his wife and children and everything he owned. ²⁶ Then the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Have patience with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ His master had compassion on him, forgave his debt, and released him. ²⁸ But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you back.’ ³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he went and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay his debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and recounted all of this to their master. ³² Then the master summoned him and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave all your debt because you begged me. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should repay all that he owed. ³⁵ That is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

– Matthew 18:21-35 (BSB)

Notes

Peter thought forgiving seven times was generous. Jesus answered, “not just seven times, but seventy-seven times,” then told a story. A servant owed his king ten thousand talents, a debt he could never pay. A denarius was a day’s wage for a laborer, and a talent was worth thousands of denarii. The king forgave it all.

That same servant then choked a fellow servant over a hundred denarii and threw him into prison. The king’s question is the center of the parable: “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?” Jesus ends with a sober warning (v. 35). Forgiveness received and forgiveness given cannot be separated.

Questions

OBSERVE What does the passage say?

1. What number does Peter suggest, and what does Jesus answer (vv. 21–22)?
2. Compare the two debts in the story. How different are they (vv. 24, 28)?
3. What does the master ask the first servant (v. 33)?

UNDERSTAND What does it mean?

1. Why does Jesus make the first debt so enormous?
2. Why did the forgiven servant act the way he did with his fellow servant?
3. What does it mean to forgive ‘from your heart’ (v. 35)?

APPLY What will I do with it?

1. Who owes you a ‘hundred denarii’? What would forgiving them look like?
2. Are you keeping count of someone’s wrongs? What would it take to stop?
3. Spend a few minutes remembering the debt God has forgiven you before you pray about others.

Memory verse

Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you?

– Matthew 18:33 (BSB)

Pray

Father, You forgave me a debt I could never pay. Forgive me for the times I have held small debts against others. Give me mercy like Yours, and help me forgive from my heart, not just with my words. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you

Read Colossians 3:12-17

The big idea: God's people are to bear with one another and forgive as the Lord forgave them, with love binding everything together.

Read

¹² Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with hearts of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and forgive any complaint you may have against someone else. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which is the bond of perfect unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, for to this you were called as members of one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

– Colossians 3:12-17 (BSB)

Notes

Paul writes to believers as people God has chosen and loves: “holy and beloved.” Out of that identity comes a new wardrobe: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Forgiveness is not a feeling we wait for; it is something we put on, like clothing.

The standard is high and clear: “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Over everything else, love is put on, and the peace of Christ is to rule in our hearts. Notice how many times thankfulness appears in these verses. Grateful people find it easier to forgive.

Questions

OBSERVE What does the passage say?

1. What five qualities are believers told to clothe themselves with (v. 12)?
2. What reason does Paul give for forgiving (v. 13)?
3. How many times is thankfulness mentioned in verses 15–17?

UNDERSTAND What does it mean?

1. Why does Paul remind us we are ‘holy and beloved’ before telling us to forgive?
2. What is the difference between bearing with someone and forgiving them?
3. How does the peace of Christ ‘rule’ in a heart (v. 15)?

APPLY What will I do with it?

1. Which of the five qualities in verse 12 is hardest for you to put on?
2. Is there a complaint you are still holding against someone in your family or church?
3. What could you do this week to let the peace of Christ rule in a strained relationship?

Memory verse

*Bear with one another and forgive any complaint you may have against someone else.
Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

– Colossians 3:13 (BSB)

Pray

Lord Jesus, You forgave me completely. Clothe me with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Help me bear with others and forgive the complaints I hold, as You forgave me. Let Your peace rule in my heart, and make me thankful. Amen.

Joseph forgives his brothers

Read Genesis 50:15-21

The big idea: Joseph forgives the brothers who sold him, trusting that God brought good out of their evil, and he speaks kindly to them.

Read

¹⁵ When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph bears a grudge? Then he will surely repay us for all the evil that we did to him." ¹⁶ So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Before he died, your father commanded, ¹⁷ 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I beg you, please forgive the transgression and sin of your brothers, for they did you wrong.' So now, Joseph, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. ¹⁸ His brothers also came to him, bowed down before him, and said, "We are your slaves!" ¹⁹ But Joseph replied, "Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, what you intended against me for evil, God intended for good, in order to accomplish a day like this—to preserve the lives of many people. ²¹ Therefore do not be afraid. I will provide for you and your little ones." So Joseph reassured his brothers and spoke kindly to them.

— Genesis 50:15-21 (BSB)

Notes

After their father Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were afraid he would finally take revenge for selling him into slavery years before. They sent a message asking for forgiveness, and Joseph wept when it came. Then they came and bowed before him.

His answer is one of the great lines of the Bible: "As for you, what you intended against me for evil, God intended for good." Joseph did not pretend the wrong was small; he called it evil. But he refused to put himself "in the place of God," and he chose to provide for his brothers and speak kindly to them. Forgiveness let him see God's purpose in his story.

Questions

OBSERVE What does the passage say?

1. Why were the brothers afraid after their father died (v. 15)?
2. How did Joseph react when their message came (v. 17)?
3. What two things did Joseph promise his brothers (v. 21)?

UNDERSTAND What does it mean?

1. What does Joseph mean when he asks, ‘Am I in the place of God?’ (v. 19)?
2. How can something be meant for evil by people and meant for good by God at the same time?
3. Does forgiving mean pretending the wrong was not wrong? How does Joseph answer that?

APPLY What will I do with it?

1. Where are you tempted to put yourself ‘in the place of God’ toward someone who hurt you?
2. Can you see any good God has brought out of a wrong done to you?
3. What would ‘speaking kindly’ to someone you have forgiven look like this week?

Memory verse

As for you, what you intended against me for evil, God intended for good, in order to accomplish a day like this—to preserve the lives of many people.

— Genesis 50:20 (BSB)

Pray

Lord God, You are in Your place and I am in mine. Some people have meant evil against me, and I give that to You. Help me forgive, trust Your purpose, and speak kindly, as Joseph did. Thank You for working good out of what was meant for harm. Amen.

Tips for leading this study

Go gently. Some in your group carry deep hurts. Never pressure anyone to share a story or name a person.

Separate forgiveness from trust. Forgiving someone is not the same as trusting them again or staying in danger. Say so plainly.

Start with God's forgiveness. Lesson 1 matters most. People forgive others best when they know they are forgiven.

Allow private answers. Give time to write an answer instead of saying it aloud.

Close by praying for each other. Not about the people who hurt you, but for the grace to forgive.

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The Romans Road to salvation

Bible memory verses for adults

Questions