



The Ability to Forgive as a Barometer of Spiritual Health

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE



Forgiveness is a central theme in the teachings of Jesus, particularly highlighted in the parable found in Matthew 18:21-35:

Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down [a]t his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

This parable, which illustrates the importance of forgiving others, serves as a stark reminder of the magnitude of God's grace toward us. The story also includes some uncomfortable and challenging words, which we must take time to consider. However, closer examination reveals a more profound insight into the nature of our relationship with God. The essence of this parable is not about how forgiveness frees us from debt or helps us escape punishment, neither do we forgive to obtain a reward. It is about recognizing the grace we have already received and responding to it. It is out of the abundance of divine forgiveness we receive that we can forgive others. Therefore, forgiveness is not a transaction but a reflection of a heart transformed by God's love and mercy. The act of forgiveness is a result of grace, not an action to earn grace.

The connection with Matthew 25

To further understand this dynamic, we can look to Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus speaks about the final judgment, separating the sheep from the goats. Here, the criteria for this separation hinge on our actions towards those in need. When the righteous ask, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty... and not minister to You?" the Lord responds, "I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me". This teaching (becoming Matthew 25ers) emphasizes that our treatment of others is a direct reflection of our relationship with Christ. The righteous served those around them so much that it became a part of their nature; *they lived in the mind of Christ*. Jesus' life and teachings exemplified the principles articulated in this parable, particularly in His response to injustice and suffering. One of the most profound instances of Jesus embodying the message of Matthew 25 occurred during His crucifixion, when He forgave His assailants, in the midst of intense suffering (Luke 23:34). This act of forgiveness encapsulated the core message of the parable: the radical love and grace that transcend human notions of justice. In this light, the link between forgiveness and spiritual health becomes clearer. If we are to embody the mindset of Christ (Philippians 2:5), we must be willing to forgive. Our capacity to forgive demonstrates whether we have truly embraced the grace extended to us by God. When we withhold mercy from others, we reveal that our hearts may not fully understand or appreciate the enormity of the forgiveness we have received.

The magnitude of God's forgiveness

To grasp the significance of God's forgiveness, consider the parable's depiction of the servant who owed an insurmountable debt—10,000 talents. The sum of taxes in Judea and five neighboring regions for a year did not amount

to 1000 talents. This sum is so immense that it's hardly possible to make sense of it in the story. Yet, that is the point that Jesus is making. This astronomical sum underscores the vastness of God's grace towards us; it is boundless and without comprehension. In contemporary terms, this debt can be translated to approximately \$6 billion, highlighting the incredible magnitude of what has been forgiven.

When we consider the depth of our own sins, it becomes evident that the grace we receive from God is far beyond our ability to repay. But how do we tally up the sin against us? The fellow servant owed 100 denarii, while the first servant owed 60,000,000 denarii (1 talent = 6,000 denarii). The grace and forgiveness that we are called on to extend is just a fraction of what we have received. Yet, God's grace does not erase our personal responsibility toward others, as stated in the Lord's Prayer: *"...forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."* The example of the 100 denarii shows that, even though minuscule compared to what was received, God understands that forgiving others is not insignificant, it is not always easy, and requires effort. Forgiveness, therefore, is not just a duty but a response to the overwhelming love and mercy we have received. God's grace is unfathomable and unconditional, and while we cannot forgive in the same way, we should strive to imitate His capacity for forgiveness towards others.

Our captivity to bitterness and grudges

The last two verses of the parable present harsh and challenging statements regarding punishment, prompting deeper reflection on the nature of forgiveness and its implications for our spiritual health - *"And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*



At first glance, it may appear that the message is forgive or be damned. Yet we can understand these references to punishment and torture in a different light.

Despite understanding the importance of forgiveness, human nature often resists this call. A grudge is when we hold others to account, essentially putting ourselves in the seat of a judge. Holding onto grudges can feel more comfortable than letting go, and the pain of being wronged can create a cycle of bitterness and resentment. However, this reluctance to forgive only serves to imprison us in our own hurt. The metaphor of being punished for failing to forgive reflects the reality of emotional and spiritual bondage. However, we are allowing ourselves to be continually tortured by the pain others have caused us instead of letting go and freeing ourselves. This prison is locked from the inside and we could walk away from it if we chose to. When we refuse to forgive, we focus on our own suffering rather than the grace that has been offered to us, leading to a path of separation from God.

Further, many individuals struggle with forgiving others, particularly within the context of the church. It is not uncommon for some to harbor grievances against the church due to past hurts or injustices. However, it is essential to remember that while the church has a responsibility to address conflict (as outlined in Matthew 18:15-17), the goal is not to ostracize individuals but to foster reconciliation, healing, and preserve the fellowship of believers.

Holding a grudge against the church or its members can hinder our relationship with God. It is vital to differentiate between the initial pain of being wronged and the prolonged suffering that comes from refusing to forgive. Healing takes time, but it is crucial to allow ourselves to move past hurt and into a posture of grace.

God does not actively punish us; instead, our choices to hold onto anger and resentment lead us away from His presence. The Chief Apostle's assertion that "God is a God of love and not a God of punishment" echoes this sentiment. We have the freedom to choose forgiveness, and in doing so, draw closer to Him.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the ability and desire to forgive serve as indicators of our spiritual health and maturity. They reveal whether we are oriented towards God's vast grace and mercy or if we are allowing bitterness to take root in our hearts. Forgiveness is not merely an act of obedience; it is a profound reflection of our understanding of the Gospel and of God's love.

As we reflect on the lessons from Matthew 18 and 25, we are challenged to consider how our actions—specifically, our willingness to forgive—are connected to our faith in Christ. If we believe in His teachings and the salvation He offers, then we must strive to embody His grace in our relationships with others.

In the next part of this series, we will explore practical steps of reconciliation. We will delve into how we can cultivate a spirit of reconciliation in our lives, fostering healing not only within ourselves but also within our families, congregations, and communities. Forgiveness and reconciliation are steps in the journey of repentance, and understanding their significance is the first step towards a healthier, more vibrant spiritual life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Suggested Use: Distribute and review the corresponding article prior to your gathering. This discussion guide would be most effective distributed across three or four sessions.

Forgiveness

1. Share your thoughts on the possible motive of Peter's question to Jesus, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

2. Discuss how the parable of the unforgiving servant highlights the transformation that occurs when we truly understand and embrace God's forgiveness.

3. Explore the idea that forgiveness is not a transaction or an act to earn grace, but a response to the grace already given.

Practical steps to understanding God's forgiveness:

- Encourage members to spend time each day reflecting on the depth of God's forgiveness towards them. They can consider the personal ways in which God has extended mercy and grace in their life, recognizing that His forgiveness is immeasurable and undeserved.

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- Support those in your congregation to actively choose to let go of any desire for revenge or retribution. Together we pray for God's strength to release their need to "get even" and trust that He will deal with injustice in His perfect timing.
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Connection with Matthew 25

1. Discuss how the act of forgiveness, especially in the face of injustice and suffering, reflects the mindset of Christ. How can we, as ministers, embody the radical love and grace demonstrated by Jesus, particularly in situations where forgiveness is difficult or undeserved?

2. Consider the connection between forgiveness and spiritual health. In what ways can we help our congregation recognize that withholding forgiveness may indicate a lack of spiritual maturity or understanding of the forgiveness we have received in Christ?

Practical steps supporting Matthew 25:

- Encourage members to begin each day by praying for the mindset of Christ (Philippians 2:5). Ask God to help them see others as He does and to give them the strength to forgive as He forgave.

- Teach those around you that when they are hurt, they should pray for the specific person who has wronged them. Ask God to help forgive them and release any bitterness or anger.

The magnitude of God's forgiveness

1. Explore the tension between the immense grace God extends to us and the challenge of forgiving others who have wronged us, even in smaller ways (100 denarii).

2. Discuss the significance of the parable's depiction of the servant's enormous debt (10,000 talents) and how it illustrates the boundless nature of God's grace.

Practical ways to embrace God's forgiveness:

- Encourage one another to see forgiveness not just as a duty but as a natural response to the overwhelming love and mercy we've received from God.

- Introduce a gratitude journal where one regularly writes down instances where God has shown grace and forgiveness in their life, acknowledging and thanking God daily for forgiving their sins.

Our captivity to bitterness and grudges

1. Discuss how unforgiveness can act as a form of spiritual and emotional imprisonment, where the person holding onto a grudge is trapped in their own bitterness and pain.

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2. Consider the challenges that arise when grievances are held within your congregation. How can we encourage believers to differentiate between the initial pain of being wronged and the ongoing suffering caused by unforgiveness?

Practical steps that lead out of captivity:

- Create awareness for a member to recognize that unforgiveness may also be a reflection of their own need for repentance. Teach them to ask God to forgive them for holding onto the hurt and to replace that hurt in their heart with His love.

- When a member is wounded, assist them in acknowledging the pain, but have them consciously choose to focus on healing rather than dwelling on the offense.
