

Forgiveness: Five Steps in the Journey (Leader's Guide)

Beginning premises:

- Forgiveness is a *process*, not an instantaneous cure. Like healing, it cannot happen overnight.
- We likely have some warped notions of what forgiveness is from personal experiences, from what church has taught us, and from what the culture has taught us.
- Very few of us have been taught HOW to forgive; we just know that Jesus calls us to it.
- Forgiveness is costly. It costs us something to let go; most of what we have learned is “cheap grace.” We are often taught “forgive and forget, move on” – which is more about an addictive culture numbing out than about taking time to honestly consider our pain and grief, and then making a decision to “let go and let God.”
- By ourselves, we are incapable of forgiveness; only Christ in us can accomplish it.
- We need each other as support in this difficult and costly process.
- By our small acts of forgiveness we can be part of sowing seeds of “the peace that passes all understanding” in our world.

Journaling is encouraged as a way to talk to oneself on paper and as a way to track progress and see God's hand working to transform pain, grief, anger into something life-giving (swords into plowshares!).

The process will vary in different individuals and they should not grade themselves or set up a “success” valuation mode, but trust that God's help and the Spirit's presence are guaranteed to those who ask for them. However, forgiveness looks different for each person, and some really big hurts may take longer to heal. Just as a cut requiring stitches will heal faster than a shattered leg bone, so some hurts are deeper and more soul-shattering than others.

Weekly “check-ins” are a way to share progress and to encourage one another. Participants are encouraged to pray for one another in between sessions. With enough participants, prayer partners can be assigned, and they can meet for prayer between sessions, if the group agrees.

Confidentiality is a cornerstone. Pledging confidentiality to one another assures a safe atmosphere for sharing.

Step One: Taking responsibility for what we are holding onto.

Step Two: Confessing our pain.

Step Three: Looking for the good points (being gentle with ourselves).

Step Four: Considering what actions need to be taken.

Step Five: Looking to God.

SESSION ONE: Introduction and Group building.

- Let individuals say, to the extent to which they are comfortable, their names and their thoughts about forgiveness.
- Talk again about confidentiality and ask for consensus agreement.
- Take some time to exegete “forgiveness”– What is NOT forgiveness? What is it? Can we define it? The group participates in this discussion, but also be sure to guide carefully so that you can clarify what forgiveness IS and what it IS NOT. Also, talk a bit about the health benefits of forgiving and the health consequences that can come with carrying anger and resentment.
- Touch on journaling and give permission not to do it along with encouragement for those who think it would be helpful. Give a challenge to try it out.
- Talk about the five steps. Assign for the next week to come prepared to discuss Step One and to share, as willing and able, some past hurt or grievance they are holding onto.

SESSION TWO: Taking responsibility for what we are holding onto

- Opening Prayer
- Check in – Any ‘aha’ moments? Any struggles? Things that didn’t fit or with which you take issue?
- Exegete the notion of taking responsibility for what we are holding onto – that does NOT mean taking responsibility for the event or the hurt, only for our own anger and feelings.
- Bible study – Matthew 11:25-30
What does it mean to come to Jesus with our burdens? Take about ten minutes for this and discuss in large group setting.
- If your group is large, break into small groups of 5-6, otherwise stay together. Encourage sharing of what we hold onto, and then discuss the questions below. Be prepared to begin by sharing a burden of your own, as much as is appropriate, before dismissing into groups. This will help set the tone for the level of sharing.
1- Think of a specific person whom you need to forgive. (No need to share a name if not comfortable yet) Respond to these questions: a) When I think about forgiving this person, I feel.....b) When I cannot forgive this person, I feel.....

- 2- *Can you name any negative consequences you've experienced as a result of not being able or willing to forgive? To be forgiven?*
- Reconvene in large group setting and ask for major points or what they are willing to share with the whole group.
 - Assign for next week, "Confessing our Pain". Stress that persons need only share at the level at which they are comfortable; this can range from "I am harboring resentment about an old hurt" to "My brother was killed by a drunk driver and I can't get past hating the one who did it."
 - Close with Prayer.

SESSION THREE: Confessing our pain

- Opening Prayer
- Check in – Any 'aha' moments? Any struggles? Things that didn't fit or with which you take issue?
- Exegete and discuss "Confessing our Pain." Reiterate the importance of confidentiality and that persons need share only at a level which feels comfortable. Emphasize that our shared stories are gifts to one another, and that we share in the confidence of God's presence with us and in the knowledge that Jesus is one well-acquainted with grief and sorrow. Mention the health benefits of honestly admitting our pain.
- Bible study – Romans 8:24-26
What is our hope? Take about ten minutes and discuss in the large group setting.
- Break into small groups with discussion questions.
 - 1- *Growing up, what did your parents teach you about sharing your feelings? Anger? Sadness? Confusion? Fear?*
 - 2- *Who in your life models healthy sharing of emotions? Who does so in unhealthy ways?*
- Reconvene in large group setting, sharing insights and major points.
- Give the assignment for next week. "Looking for the good points" encourages group members to look for the hand of God in the healing process. The session also invites them to be gentle with themselves, slow down, and let the healing process take time by not have too high expectations of themselves. This is an exercise in trusting God to heal them and help them let go and forgive!
- Close with prayer – begin to take more and more time with this, allowing lots of space for silent prayer and for others to share petitions.

SESSION FOUR: Looking for the good points (being gentle with ourselves)

- Opening Prayer
- Check in – Any ‘aha’ moments? Any struggles? Things that didn’t fit or with which you take issue?
- Exegete and discuss “Looking for the good points” and give permission for participants to even be a little angry with that notion! Looking for the good points is not a ‘Pollyanna’ vision, but a deeper look at the hand of God with us at all times, lifting us up. Seeing the good points is a eucharistic way of looking at our life stories (“It is indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places offer thanks and praise...”). Be sure to challenge the idea that God visits bad things on people in order to teach them! Instead, God, who is grieved by our suffering and sadness, is with us in our pain, intent on bringing resurrection to our small dyings, renewing and refreshing us as we discover a new way.
- Bible study – Romans 8: 31-39
What does it mean for God to be ‘for us?’ Take about ten minutes for discussion in the large group setting.
- Break into small groups with discussion questions.
 - 1- *How can we be more patient, understanding, and gentle with ourselves?*
 - 2- *What does it mean to you to love yourself as you do your neighbor?*
 - 3- *What do you think God desires for you in all of this?*
- Reconvene in large group and share.
- Give assignment for the next week: “Considering what actions need to be taken.” Explain that these actions can include many things such as prayer with or for the other person, a letter to him or her (which may or may not be mailed), a one-to-one conversation with a pastor, or confrontation with the person who has wronged you. A participant who is trying to forgive himself or herself may want to plan a time of individual confession and absolution.
- Close with prayer – take time for this!

SESSION FIVE: Considering what actions need to be taken

- Opening Prayer
- Check in – Any ‘aha’ moments? Any struggles? Things that didn’t fit or with which you take issue?
- Exegete and discuss “Considering what actions need to be taken.”
- Bible study – Ephesians 6:10-17

How does putting on the “whole armor of God” strengthen us and give us courage? Take about ten minutes in the large group setting.

- Breakout into small groups with discussion questions.
 - 1- *Share a time when you've had to have a difficult conversation and tell someone else honestly that they had hurt you. How did that go?*
 - 2- *Can reconciliation happen without the other party's participation (for example, with someone who has died or is no longer reachable)?*
 - 3- *What will likely happen if you talk to the person, send a letter, confront him or her? What will likely happen if you don't?*
- Reconvene in large group and share.
- Give assignment for the next week: “Looking to God.” This is really about handing it over completely, so you might even want to weave a Service of Prayer and Healing into the sixth and last session. Let participants know about this ahead of time. This step is also about acknowledging that we, on our own, cannot accomplish forgiveness. It may be about repentance – giving up our wills and our stubbornness or pride. It may be about admitting that we are all in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. It may be about giving permission to let go and see what God might do with our hurts and painful experiences.
- Close with prayer.

SESSION SIX

- Opening Prayer
- Check in – Any ‘aha’ moments? Any struggles? Things that didn't fit or with which you take issue?
- Exegete the concept of “Looking to God.” Remind participants that forgiveness is completely counter-cultural and in fact an outrageous act which gives up the demand for justice and deserved punishment. Forgiveness embraces a Kingdom way of living; it is a letting go which gives freedom, to both the injured and the injurer.
- Bible study – Revelation 21:1-7
What does it mean to you that God is making all things new? Take about ten minutes in the large group setting.
- Breakout groups with discussion questions
 - 1- *What in your life needs to be renewed?*
 - 2- *What does your vision of new heaven and new earth look like?*
 - 3- *What one new thing, if anything, did you learn about yourself? About your situation? About persons who have hurt you?*

- Reconvene in large group and share briefly. Use the rest of the time for closing the group. Ask for reflections on where participants believe they are now, in contrast with the first session. What has God's Spirit been doing in and with them? Most will have experienced some kind of shift in perception. Some will have been able to express thoughts and feelings, either in person or through a letter (though perhaps it was never sent), to someone who has hurt them. Help participants see their progress. Conclude with some kind of ritual such as a Service for Prayer and Healing or other activity. Have them share Christ's peace and offer words of benediction and blessing to one another at the end.