“Forgiving Others”

Forgiving others is something that we generally know we should do as Christians. However, we can feel very confused about it and find ourselves with lots of questions, such as:

- What does it mean to forgive?
- Why can’t I forgive?
- Does forgiveness mean that they are getting away with it?
- I know I should forgive, but how exactly do I forgive?

Tonight hopefully you should leave here with some answers to these questions, as well as practical understanding of how we go through the process of forgiving those who hurt us and wrong us. We want to help you understand what forgiveness actually is.

**Group Discussion: (3mins) Turn in pairs. “When we feel hurt by someone or they wrong us we can feel …”**

Possible answers:

*Feel not understood, hurt, angry, confused, crushed, disappointed (which speaks of expectations), vengeful, resentful, betrayed etc.*

Forgiveness can help us deal with all of these emotions and thoughts.

**The need to forgive others**

We have already said that we generally know that God wants us to forgive others but the ‘how’ is the thing we find difficult. However as we start our evening it is good to remind ourselves of God’s commands to forgive each other:

When others hurt us or wrong us we are called to forgive. Forgiveness is a command, it is an issue of obedience for Christ’s followers – Matthew 18:21-35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37; Colossians 3:13

Forgiveness wasn’t just a New Testament command, but it was an also an implicit Old Testament one too – Leviticus 19:18 says “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.”

The Lord Jesus taught us that we should forgive as we ourselves have been forgiven (Matthew 6:12, 14; Luke 11:4). Forgiveness is about restoring the image of God in us – we are called to imitate Christ (Ephesians 4:32-5:1).

Forgiveness will always be an ongoing issue for us in our lives. We need to forgive on a daily basis. Eph. 4:26 says “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let
the sun go down while you are still angry” or in other words deal with your anger and forgive on the day the offence happens, don’t store it up and don’t allow it to cause you to do worse things as well.

The phrase “time heals” is a fallacy. Time doesn’t heal but just allows us to bury our hurt. We need to forgive the offences and not store them up thinking that time will heal.

So we can see that forgiveness is an important part of the Christian life.

**What exactly does it mean to forgive?**

**Definition:** The word ‘forgive’ basically means:

To let something go, to stop keeping hold of something, to free someone from an obligation, to let off a debt, give up your resentment and bitterness against someone for an event, to stop holding a grudge against.

To forgive is to give up any claim to vengeance (the desire to see the person suffer for what they have done to us) or restitution (the desire for compensation or repayment). When we forgive we surrender our right to get revenge. This includes the subtle ways in which we get revenge eg. someone who hurt us asks us to do something and as a way of revenge we just happen to “forget” (but in reality we knew all along they asked us to do it!)

One of the pictures of Forgiveness in the Bible is the cancellation of a debt which is owed (Matthew 6:12, 18:21-27; Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4). When someone wrongs us they owe us the debt of doing the right thing. Forgiveness therefore incurs the cost of us letting that debt go. You cancel the debt the debt of love that someone else owes you. You may feel that the person who has wronged you owes you an apology, an explanation or should at least have the decency to acknowledge they are wrong. Cancelling the debt means that they owe you nothing – you choose to cancel that debt and no longer desire, expect or try to extract anything from them.

The essential idea of forgiveness is about letting the wrong done against you go and not holding it against the person anymore.

If we are truly honest we all find the idea of forgiveness unnatural. Our natural response when people wrong us is that we want vengeance, we want revenge or we want the person to pay for what they did. This is the natural reaction of our sinful natures since the fall of Adam and Eve. Instead of responding with love our sinful natures lead us to respond in a whole host of negative other ways.

Forgiveness is an expression of love as “love doesn’t keep a record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:5; See also Proverbs 11:12; 1 Peter 4:8). When we forgive someone we are showing them love, however we need to be prepared
for the fact that our love may not be returned as the person may continue to reject us.

Biblically forgiveness is not conditional on the offender doing something and it isn’t something to be earned. Jesus says forgive no matter what the offender does.

Biblically forgiveness is also unlimited (Matthew 18:21-22 – “Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times”). This means that we really do have to keep forgiving someone, regardless of how many times we have forgiven them before. But we do not have to enable them to have the opportunity to harm us time and time again. So the abused wife should forgive her husband every time he harms her, but forgiveness doesn’t mean that she has to stay physically close to him and give him the opportunity to do it again and again.

It is important to realise that forgiveness is:

- not denial they did wrong OR approval of what they did (it still recognises that that happened was wrong)
- not indifference or saying that what happened didn’t concern me (it is because it did concern me that we have to let it go!)
- not a complete pardon from the consequences of what the person did. We may release the person from the debt they owe us, but they may still have to face the legal consequences. So we may forgive someone for murdering a relative, but our forgiveness does not let them out of jail, when they’re serving a life sentence.
- not reconciliation (forgiveness deals with the offence – rebuilding the relationship would need to begin after that if it is at all possible)
- not condoning or excusing (forgiveness doesn’t negate the seriousness of the offence but recognises all too well its seriousness)

When you forgive it is not about saying that the behaviour of the other person is alright, excusable or that you desire it to happen again. What you are saying you can’t control the other person, so you choose to surrender and love them as they are.

Forgiveness doesn’t deny the reality of your pain, but releases the person from the debt they owed you which caused you the pain. Forgiveness in this way deals with the anger of an offence done to me.

Forgiveness is not a cheap or simplistic idea but the only way to deal with conflict, broken relationships and the effects of sin. Forgiveness is not necessarily easy.
The consequences of forgiving

Forgiveness leads to psychological and spiritual health. Forgiving helps us in the following ways:

- To resolve conflict with others
- To begin to love others the with the love of God again. It enables us to move beyond our negative feelings towards love.
- Take down the barriers we put up to people when we feel hurt by them. Our hurt divides us from others, forgiveness enables us to begin the process of moving back towards them.
- Forgiveness brings freedom. If we hold onto a grudge, the only ones we usually end up hurting is ourselves. Unforgiveness keeps the past as part of the present. We become an emotionally trapped and made prisoner by the anger, resentment and loss in the past, while the person who hurt us is free to move on! We allow what happened to control us instead of allowing holiness to be the central aim of our life.
- However, even if the person who hurt us does move on, we still keep them in “jail” and trapped by what they did in the past if we hold a grudge. We don’t allow them the chance to be different as whenever we see them we are reminded of their sin and this keeps us separated from them. Forgiveness allows the offender to have the chance of being different and changing in our eyes.
- Forgiveness is the only way to settle the debt of love someone owes us. What was lost in the past can never be repaid / made up for in the present, nothing will compensate us adequately for what happened.
- Forgiveness helps us move beyond self pity and playing the victim. We can nurse our wounds and we think “poor me, look what they’ve done to me. I’m the victim of what they’ve done”. Forgiveness allows us to break free from what they’ve done and no longer play the victim.
- Forgiveness deals with anger. Revenge doesn’t deal with our anger as it is never enough. (eg. Tit for tat revenge attacks between Israel and Palestine) Revenge can never restore what was lost. Revenge says that “I want them to suffer as I’ve suffered”, yet the reality is that we always feel as they have never suffered enough. True forgiveness is the only thing that can release us from anger and the gnawing desire to get revenge.

Forgiveness moves us away from division and conflict and towards unity and peace. Forgiveness heals our wounds and it is about choosing God’s way of living and pathway, and this enables God’s love to flow through us. In Matthew 5:43-48 says:

‘You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what
are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

A major consequence of forgiveness is that love can begin to flow in our relationships with everyone again, both relationships with enemies as well as friends.

How do I forgive?

It only takes one person to forgive – it doesn’t depend on the other person involved in the conflict. Forgiveness goes on inside us. Forgiveness is an internal process personal to us – it doesn’t depend on anything or anyone external, apart from God. This means that you don’t have to be face to face to forgive and in fact it is better that you work through it yourself rather than involving the other person.

There are essentially four stages to forgiving another:

- Recognising that a wrong has happened and there is a debt of love owed that needs repaying.
- Counting the cost of what happened.
- Making the decision to release the person who hurt us from the debt they owe and we choose to pay / cover the full cost ourselves.
- Living out the decision to forgive in our lives.

We are going to look at these four stages in turn.

1st Stage of Forgiveness: Recognising that a wrong has happened and there is a debt of love owed that needs repaying

Forgiveness is not about denying that what the person did was wrong. The first part of forgiving is recognising that the person did something wrong that should not have happened. We can try to avoid this step by:

- Making excuses for the person (eg. “She was having a bad day”)
- Trying to rationalise what happened away (eg. “he’s had a hard life, it comes from his childhood, if his parents would have treated him differently it would be like he is today”)
- Trying to deny the importance of what happened (eg. “Oh it doesn’t matter to me” when you are obviously angry!)

There may be some truth in the excuses or rationalisations we make, however the person is still responsible for behaving in a way that is wrong even if there is truth in them.

The first step to forgiveness is recognising that “Yes a wrong happened, there is no excuse for it. It shouldn’t have happened but it did and nothing can
change that now. Making excuses, rationalising it away or denying its importance cannot change the fact that it was wrong.”

The person owes you a debt of love because of what happened.

You may sit there thinking I don’t need to forgive anyone but, think – is there someone that you complain about, are negative about, get at, gossip about – why is that? You may say ‘I just don’t like them’, but why is it that we ‘just don’t like them’? We never ‘just don’t like people’, there is always a reason and a conflict that needs resolving at the bottom of it. Perhaps you’ve never liked them since that time they ignored you in church? We need to admit that they wronged us and seek to begin to resolve it.

2nd Stage of Forgiveness: Counting the cost of what happened

The Biblical picture of forgiveness includes the picture of freeing someone from a debt owed (See Matt. 18:23-24). Forgiveness therefore has to involve counting the full cost a debt owed to us before we can let it go. Forgiveness needs to be specific (ie. counting the full cost) and not general. Simply saying “I forgive you” won’t be very effective because we haven’t taken time to consider the fullness of the debt you are forgiving. Simply saying “I forgive you” is too simplistic, forgiveness is not cheap it cost us something. To truly forgive we need be willing to face counting the full cost of what happened.

To count the full cost of the wrong done to us we need explore fully the effects of what happened:

- What emotions did we feel as a result of what happened?
- What negative thoughts went through our heads has a result of what happened?
- What did we come to believe about the other person OR ourselves in response to what happened?
- What expectations (possibly unreasonable?) did you have of the person? How did they disappoint you? What did you want them to be like?
- How has what happened affected us?

We count up what their wrong cost us so we know what we are letting go.

3rd Stage of Forgiveness: Making the decision to release the person who hurt us from the debt they owe

Ultimately forgiveness is a free act that we can choose with God’s help. We must choose to forgive (ie. want to and decide to) for forgiveness to be truly effective. We cannot be forced to forgive. One reason why forgiveness doesn’t work sometimes is that we try to forgive before we are truly ready inside of us to let go of the sin and hurt. We try to forgive because we know that it is what we should do, but deep down we don’t really want to let go of what happened as we still want the person to pay for their actions. Before we
can forgive we need to go through the process of overcoming all the hindrances and barriers to us making the decision to forgive.

We have to go through the process of getting to the place of being willing to make the decision to forgive. This is something we can do on our own but sometimes we may need the help of another person to talk it through with to help us overcome the barriers we have to forgiving. Working it through with person who wronged you is never a good idea it needs to be someone independent from what happened and someone you can trust.

To forgive fully we take the full cost for what has happened and we make the decision to let every aspect of that cost go. We forgive people for specific things and not generally. If we forgive generally we simply say “I forgive you dad for walking out on us as a family” but this doesn’t really touch the full cost of what happened. We need to forgive specifically and say “I forgive you Dad for rejecting me and not taking into consideration how hurt I would be when you left mum. I forgive you for coming home from work that day you left when I was a teenager and leaving when I was the only one in the house. I forgive you for effectively forcing me to watch as you emptied your wardrobes in to black plastic bags, loading them in the car and leaving. I forgive you for not even trying to explain why. Dad today I decide to let all these things go and not hold them against you anymore." Can you see the difference between forgiving specifically each aspect of the cost and forgiving generally. Forgiving specifically is more real and it enables us to forgive things to a deep level.

When we have truly forgiven there can be a feeling of release inside of us. A feeling that a weight or a burden has been lifted.

4th Stage of Forgiveness: Living out the decision to forgive in our lives with God’s help

It is important to realise that there is nothing magical about the above steps. Following them like a ritual won’t magical make everything right. All they simply do is help you to count the cost of what happened and make the decision to forgive. After we have made the decision to forgive then we need to live out the reality of that decision in our lives with God’s help.

If you have truly forgiven your behaviour towards the offender must change – you are no longer looking for any form of payment, you are not seeking revenge etc. If someone ever says to you they have forgiven someone but their behaviour doesn’t show it, then they haven’t forgiven the person.

How can we go through these four stages of forgiving in practice though? We can do this in various ways:

- We can write a letter that we will never send. (See Handout)
- After we have grasped the steps in the letter we probably won’t need to actually write it, we can do it our minds. In our minds after we count up
the cost we can go through the process of making the decisions in our minds “I forgive X for …” and repeat this statement till you have covered every aspect of the cost.

- Another way of going through the four stages of forgiveness is go into an empty room with a couple of chairs in. You sit in one and imagine the person who offended you is in the other chair. Tell them (speaking out loud) what happened and what the cost was for you. Then go through specifically speaking out “X I forgive you for …” and repeat this statement till you have covered every aspect of the cost.

Something just to note, when you have forgiven someone, is that its not always wise to tell the person whom you have forgiven that you have forgiven them because they may not even realise their offence. The time it is wise to tell the person you have forgiven them is when it benefits them eg. they feel terrible and guilty about what they did OR if they have sought your forgiveness in the past and you withheld it.

**How do I know I’ve forgiven someone?**

This may seem a silly question, but have you ever made the decision to forgive someone only to find out a day, week later that actually what they did still really annoys you. This begs the question, how do we know we’ve really forgiven.

To put it simply when we have truly forgiven someone for something, we will be able to remember the event with out any negative feelings, it will be only a memory of something wrong which has happened, rather than a memory which instigates, anger, hurt, sadness or resentment. Forgiveness means letting go and if we have truly let go it shouldn’t still affect us. After we have let go we should be able to say ‘So-what? Something bad happened but ‘so-what’ if it did. I’m no longer affected by it as I’ve let it go. It doesn’t matter. I’ve dealt with it and I’m trusting in God for what happens. It no longer affects or causes me emotional pain. I’m at peace with it, what happened no longer disturbs me. I’ve let it go.”

Being able to say ‘so-what’ regarding the offence is about coming to the place such that whatever the wrong was it no longer defines us and how we live life. We are not going to allow it ruin the rest of our lives and we’re going to move on.

Forgiveness also needs to be accompanied with the decision to love the offender. Jesus says we are to love our neighbours as ourselves and this means even those who wrong us.

1 Cor. 13:5 – “Love keeps no record of wrongs.” True forgiveness doesn’t keep reminding the person of what they did. It doesn’t keep a long list of wrongs to bring out in an opportune moment when your in the middle of an argument so that you can get the upper hand by showing the other person
how bad they are. Keeping reminding the person of what they did indicates you want them to feel guilty and you want them to pay for what they did i.e. you haven't truly forgiven!!

If you have truly forgiven then you are willing to conceal the issue. You don't want others to know how badly they treated you because “Love covers over wrongs” (Prov. 10:12, 17:9; 1 Peter 4:8). Forgiveness doesn't continue to gossip to others about what the person did.

Forgiveness means that you want to see the person blessed by God and are actively willing to seek that (Matthew 5:44-48; Romans 12:17-21)

**Why can’t I forgive?**

Why can’t I forgive? In reality “I can’t” essentially means “I do not feel ready to forgive and therefore I won't at this moment in time”. God never calls us to do something we can’t do. Forgiveness is always an option for us with God's help. There can be a number of reasons as to why we won't forgive at this moment in time. Some of these are due to misunderstandings about what forgiveness is and some are simply about us just not wanting to let go.

As we have talked so far, what we have said may have raised many questions and even objections for you. We are going to try and answer some of the most common questions regarding forgiveness.

1) What happened to me is too painful to deal with – I can't cope with it at this time, I need to heal a bit first.

Well – the process of forgiving is painful, that is true, as we have to remember what happened to us and face up to the fact of how we really feel about it, but the benefits of forgiving far out way the temporary pain. Ultimately forgiveness is the thing that sets us free from the pain as we let it go. As for needing to heal a bit first healed first – we have to remember that “You don't heal to forgive, but you forgive in order to heal.”

2) I can’t forget what happened, so I haven’t really forgiven

Forgiveness does not mean we forget what happened. We are only human and we can not erase things from our minds! Forgiveness doesn't alter the facts of what happened. The healing that forgiveness brings is to change the effect of the past, it does not change the past itself. After we have forgiven when we do remember what happened the pain is no longer there, as we've let it go. We need to forgive and deal with our conflict so we can look back with no pain, only grace and love.

3) Does forgiveness ignore the fact that a wrong has been done?

No – on the contrary, the process of forgiveness, first requires us to look at the seriousness of the wrong that has been done and the effect it has had on
our lives. We need to count the cost of what happened not deny it happened. But then we can move beyond that to the place of saying, what happened was not ok but I forgive you anyway.

4) I won’t forgive them as they don’t deserve it

It is true, You can’t deserve forgiveness! Who does deserve it? How can you deserve it? No-one can earn it. Just as we can’t earn forgiveness from God, others cannot earn forgiveness from us. Forgiveness is a gift we give to another.

5) If I forgive someone, do I have to have a relationship with them?

Not necessarily. Forgiveness, does not mean we have to be reconciled to the offender, as, reconciliation depends upon 2 people being willing to be restored into a loving relationship. We can still forgive without the offender having to be part of our lives again, as forgiveness is dependent upon us alone. After forgiveness we then build an appropriate relationship with the person who wronged. Reconciliation with the offender may be inappropriate, dangerous or even impossible, if the person has died. We can however still forgive.

6) If I forgive them, does that mean I give them permission to do it again?

By forgiving, we cancel a debt, but we cannot control what other people do, so in forgiving we do take the risk that they will do it again, and for each time they do something against us, we need to forgive. We do however have to be wise and in forgiving we do not say that the offenders actions are ok. So if we are being abused or in danger, we do not need to in the moment of danger stay.

7) How can I forgive, they haven’t said sorry?

If we are looking for someone to say sorry we are looking for some kind of payment. We want them to earn their forgiveness. The Biblical idea of forgiveness requires no repentance on behalf of the offender. In many Bible passages we are simply called to forgive no matter what. The offender doesn’t need to be sorry for me to forgive. It is a debt which is owed to me and which I choose to cancel.

8) “I don’t want to forgive”

In other words “I don’t think I should have to”. God does give us the freedom to choose this option, but it is essentially rebellion.

We also may have to realise that sometimes we don’t want to forgive because Unforgiveness is useful eg. your unforgiveness makes the person feel guilty so they do things for you. Unforgiveness here can be used as tool of manipulation.
There may be other questions, which you have, please do ask us, we don’t promise to have all the answers, but we can help you find them out and work through the process.

And finally …

Just because we have forgiven something now it doesn’t mean that we won’t need to revisit the issue in the future. Forgiveness is an ongoing process. In the future we may realise other aspects of the cost of what happened which we hadn’t known before and we will need to go through the process of forgiving again eg. a young women involved in an car accident with a drunk driver where she is seriously injured. She goes through the process of forgiving the drunk driver. When she gets married she finds she is unable to have children because of what the accident did to her body. She is faced with an aspect of the cost of what happened which she did not know before. She therefore needs to go through the process of forgiving again. So with things we forgive it may be necessary to revisit the issue again in future.

Forgiveness is something we will need to practice our entire lives, as we do live in such a fallen world. So maybe tonight you think, oh well I’m fine, I've got no-one to forgive, but believe me I’m sure you’ll have to forgive someone in the future and you may well have to forgive one person for a number of things. So if you go away from here tonight and work through the steps of forgiveness, you hopefully will find you are able with God’s help to forgive, but you may also find you still have negative feelings towards the offender – that’s not necessarily because you haven’t forgiven them for the offence, but because they may have also wronged you in other ways that you need to forgive – that’s why counting the cost is an important stage in the process of forgiveness, so that you realise all the things you need to forgive.

You could get the impression from what we’ve done tonight that you can forgive in an instant. The reality is that few people can forgive that quickly. Taking time to go through the process of counting the cost of the debt owed up, taking time for us to overcome the hindrances we have to forgiving, taking the time to make the decision to forgive generally is not something that happens in an instant. Sometimes we have to wrestle with God in getting to the place of being able to forgive. Coming to the place of forgiveness may take some people 20yrs. What is important though is that we are willing to begin that journey and continue on that journey until it is done, never giving up.
LifeLines – Session 2 (Forgiving Others)
Handout

One way in which we can go through the process of forgiving another is by using a letter writing technique. The most important thing that must be said about this technique is that the letter is NEVER intended to be shown to the person who hurt you or who wronged you. The letter is simply a way of helping us to count the cost of what happened and also helping us make the decision let go of what happened.

Write a letter to the person including the following steps:

Step 1: Acknowledging that a wrong was committed

- “Dear X, I am writing to you to talk to you about when … (event) … What you did was wrong and it hurt me deeply.”

Step 2: Counting the cost of what happened

- In your letter tell the person exactly what happened from your perspective.
- In your letter tell the person exactly how what happened made you feel eg. “Dad when you laughed at I felt rejected, belittled and uncared for.
- In your letter tell the person how what they did has affected your life eg. How it has scarred you (“a day doesn’t go by without me thinking about what you did”), how it has harmed your relationships (“because of what happened I find it hard to trust people now”) etc.
- In your letter tell the person what you expected them to be like and how they didn’t meet your expectations (“Mum, I expected you to be a loving and caring mother to me. You let me down when you walked out on us as a family.”)
- Add anything else that you feel you need to say to them because of what happened.

Step 3: Making the decision to forgive

- In your letter write “X today I realise that what happened can never be undone. I can’t change what happened however much I want to or however much I try. X you cannot repay or make up for your wrong, because everything you can do will never be enough to undo what was done. So today X I make the decision to forgive you for what happened what happened.”
- Go through writing statements of forgiveness for everything which you wrote down in the counting the cost section, being specific ie. “X I forgive you for rejecting me. X I forgive you for belittling me. X I forgive you for walking out on us as a family.”
- Write “X today I choose to let all these things go and not hold them against you anymore. I surrender my right to get even and my right for revenge. I forgive you from the bottom of my heart.”
• Write “Today X I choose to love you with the love of Christ. I no longer want our relationship to be defined by what happened and my bitterness about that. I choose that our relationship from this point on will be defined by love. X I accept that you may never change, but this day I decide to love as you are. X, I love you and will act towards you with love.”
• Sign off the letter.

Next go into an empty room (with no one around) and read the letter out loud to yourself making sure you mean every word of it. Afterwards because you have made the decision to let go of the wrong do something which symbolises this and means you will never show the letter to the person eg. tear up the letter, burn it, throw it away, shred it etc.

**Step 4: Living out the decision to forgive**

Next turn to God and pray about what you have done. Ask for God’s forgiveness for harbouring bitterness and negative thoughts towards the person who wronged you. Ask for God’s help in living out the decisions you made in the letter.

Now live out the decisions you made in the letter in your relationship with the person who wronged you.

**NOTE:** This process is not a magical formula which if you go through all the steps will automatically make you feel better. We can try to forgive because we know that it is what we should do, but deep down we don’t really want to let go of what happened as we still want the person to pay for their actions. For this process to work we have to truly mean each step of it. Simply going through the above steps because you feel want to forgive whilst at the same time feeling you can’t forgive won’t work. Each step needs to be truly meant, knowing that it is possible. You need to come to the place of knowing that you can forgive with God’s help first.

**For Further Reading**


