

CHRISTIAN LIVING

Bible Studies

LEADER'S GUIDE

When We're Afraid to Forgive

If we long to receive mercy, why is it so painful to give it?

As Christians, we are awed and humbled by God's gracious forgiving of our sin and failure. Yet we seem reluctant and sometimes rebellious when the Lord commands us to forgive those who have wronged us. Why do we hold back? What do we fear? Who suffers most when we hoard God's mercy for ourselves and withhold it from those whom we refuse to forgive?

Lesson #27

Scripture:

Matthew 6:12–15, 18:21–35; Ephesians 4:32; Mark 8:34–38, 11:25; Galatians 6:7–10; Colossians 3:12–13; Hebrews 12:1–3; 1 Peter 2:19–23

Based on:

"Fear of Forgiving," by Allen C. Gueizo, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, February 1993, page 42



INTERNATIONAL

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PART 1

The Issue

Note to leader: Prior to the class, provide for each person the article "Fear of Forgiving" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY (included at the end of this study).

I heard Paul Yonggi Cho speak a few years back. Yonggi Cho is pastor of the largest church in the world. Several years ago, as his ministry was becoming international, he told God, "I will go anywhere to preach the gospel—except Japan." He hated the Japanese with gut-deep loathing because of what Japanese troops had done to the Korean people and to members of Yonggi Cho's own family during WWII. The Japanese were his Ninevites.

Through a combination of a prolonged inner struggle, several direct challenges from others, and finally an urgent and starkly worded invitation, Cho felt called by God to preach in Japan. He went, but he went with bitterness. The first speaking engagement was to a pastor's conference—1,000 Japanese pastors. Cho stood up to speak, and what came out of his mouth was this: "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you." And then he broke and wept. He was both brimming and desolate with hatred.

At first one, then two, then all 1,000 pastors stood up. One by one they walked up to Yonggi Cho, knelt at his feet and asked forgiveness for what they and their people had done to him and his people. As this went on, God changed Yonggi Cho. The Lord put a single message in his heart and mouth: "I love you. I love you. I love you."

Sometimes God calls us to do what we least want to do in order to reveal our heart—to reveal what's really in our heart. How powerful is the blood of Christ? Can it heal hatred between Koreans and Japanese? Can it make a Jew love a Ninevite? Can it make you reconciled to...well, you know who?

—Mark Buchanan, Your God Is Too Safe (Multnomah, 2001)

Discussion starters:

- [Q]** When do you think we find it most difficult to forgive others?
- [Q]** What do we often fear as we face forgiving a serious wrong?
- [Q]** Gueizo says that forgiving does not mean pardoning or excusing.
 - a. How do you find this explanation helpful?
 - b. Do you disagree with any of his conclusions?

PART 2

The Scriptures

A teacher once told each of her students to bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to school. They were instructed to call to mind every person they had a grudge against. For every person they refused to forgive, they chose a potato, wrote on it the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag. They were told to carry this bag with them everywhere, putting it beside their bed at night, on the car seat when driving, on their lap when riding, next to their



desk during classes. Some bags became quite heavy. Lugging this around, paying attention to it all the time, and remembering not to leave it in embarrassing places was a hassle. Over time the potatoes became moldy, smelly, and began to sprout "eyes."

Often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the other person, but it clearly is a gift to ourselves.

—www.TimTimmons.com

[Q] Write a phrase from each passage that tells why or how we are to forgive others.

☞ Matthew 6:12–15

☞ Ephesians 4:32

☞ Mark 11:25

☞ Colossians 3:12–13

[Q] In the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21–35), what do you learn:

- About God?
- About people?
- About yourself?

[Q] How might the following portions of Scripture be applied to forgiving those who have wronged us?

☞ Mark 8:34–38

☞ Hebrews 12:1–3

☞ Galatians 6:7–10

☞ 1 Peter 2:19–23

PART 3

The Application

[Q] How is forgiveness (letting go and not seeking personal revenge) an unnatural act, contrary to our human nature and view of things?

[Q] In what ways have you discovered forgiving to be both an event and a process?

[Q] How would you counsel a Christian friend who finds it impossible to forgive another person?



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ARTICLE

Fear of Forgiving

If we long to receive mercy, why is it so painful to give it?

By Allen C. Guelzo, for the study, “When We’re Afraid to Forgive”

If one of the sweetest words in the Bible is *forgiveness*, why do many Christians find it so bitter?

The answer is plain, brief, and painful: The kind of forgiveness we love to sing about—that flows down from God to us through Christ—is not the only forgiveness that matters. We are called to another forgiveness that often tastes bitter, the kind that flows from us to other people, especially other Christians.

God forgives us because of what Jesus has done for us; but then he obliges us to forgive others because of what Jesus is doing in us. The proper match to Jesus’ prayer from the cross, “Father, forgive them,” is Jesus’ imperative, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:25).

When Forgiveness Is Hard Work

The first and most obvious reason Christians need to be forgivers is the simple command of Jesus himself. Not only are we told to forgive anyone who has provoked us; we also learn we cannot enjoy forgiveness ourselves if we are not exercising it toward others.

In the most universal prayer Jesus gave his disciples (Matt. 6:9–15), he makes it clear that we can pray for forgiveness only as we forgive those who trespass against us.

But consider a second reason why we should forgive: When we refuse to do so, we in effect try to keep God from forgiving someone else. When we withhold forgiveness, we are really saying that the person who has offended us is no proper object of God’s forgiveness. After all, if that person is not worthy of our forgiveness, how could he or she possibly merit God’s forgiveness?

Or worse, we say (in effect) that the other person is no person at all, but subhuman. *Persons* can be forgiven; but if the object of our hatred or mistrust is not worth the trouble of forgiveness, then what else can that mean but that they’re not persons? In that case, we not only “kill”



another person, we kill a little bit of ourselves, too. By withholding forgiveness, we deprive another person of what could lead to repentance and eternal life, and we deprive ourselves of the inner healing and wholeness that could come from being part of that renewal.

And yet, despite all these seemingly obvious reasons why Christians need to be forgivers, the secret truth for many Christians is that we find it infinitely easier to be forgiven by God than to forgive others. The reasons for that cold reluctance are as varied as Christians themselves. There are Christians who were hurt years ago by the breakup of their parents' marriages, and hurt is buried so deep, or festers so close to the surface, that they see no way to forgive. There are Christians who have been wronged on the job or who have been gossiped about in the church. And all of them together think, "I cannot, just cannot find it in me to forgive them."

We struggle to extend forgiveness because the wrongs done to us by others hurt so much. At the same time, we are not completely sure what forgiveness really is or what it might involve. It is not that we *cannot* forgive someone, but that we are *afraid of* what it might cost.

Throwing Away Resentment

Let us grasp the nettle of the question: What did Jesus mean by *forgiveness*? What, exactly, does he expect us to do in response to his words to forgive if we have anything against anyone?

Three Greek words are usually translated as *forgive*. One speaks about having an attitude of mercy or love (as in Eph. 4:32: being tenderhearted and forgiving one another). Another word describes the cancellation of an obligation (as in Luke 6:37: forgive and you will be forgiven). But the word Jesus uses in Mark 11 is the most common and the most vigorous New Testament word for forgiveness. Literally, it means to release, to hurl away, to free yourself from something. The Jews of Jesus' day picked up this term to describe what happened in the Law when sacrifices were offered in the temple to cover the sins of God's people. Jesus uses this word to describe the obligation of his disciples when anyone has wronged them.

To forgive, as Jesus intended the word, means willingly to throw away our resentment at being wronged. This entails not just *containing* or *restraining* our resentment, but letting go of it entirely so we can be truly free of its influence.

This approach, however, may strike us as phony and sanctimonious, as if we are expected to greet every piece of rottenness dished out to us with a saintly smile and an understanding, "There, there, you didn't mean that, did you?" Because we fear that this is exactly what forgiveness means, we find it unpalatable. We are willing enough to suffer, if need be, for Christ, but there is something in us that does not want merely to be exploited, even for righteousness' sake.

Neither Pardon nor Excuse

Fortunately, forgiveness means more than just rolling over and playing dead.



There are a few things that forgiveness is *not*, and these may balance the picture. Forgiveness does not mean *pardon*. Forgiveness is personal: it refers to the impact an offense has on you and your need to release the resentment you feel. Pardon is legal rather than personal, concerned only with the legal status of the offense, not the relationship between offender and victim. And pardon, unlike forgiveness, means letting someone off the moral hook and releasing them from the punishment they deserve.

It is possible to have pardon without forgiveness—a murderer can be pardoned by the governor, but that does not mean the victim’s family has forgiven him. And there can be forgiveness without pardon. In 1986, Michael Saward, a well-known Anglican evangelical, answered the door of his London vicarage. The three men who stood in his doorway pounded Saward over the head with a cricket bat, fracturing his skull. Then they broke into the vicarage, raped Saward’s daughter, and beat up her boyfriend. The three were quickly arrested, and in a television interview shortly afterward, a badly battered Saward touched the British nation by publicly forgiving his assailants. But when the men were sentenced to prison terms of three to five years, Saward frankly criticized the sentences as too lenient. Saward had forgiven them, but that did not mean he wanted them automatically pardoned for their crimes.

A second thing forgiveness does not mean is *excuse*. When we excuse someone, we suggest that if we could only understand how a person’s actions were shaped or motivated by environment or genetic makeup, we would see that he or she had no alternative. And it is true that understanding someone’s difficulties or shortcomings can help us forgive. But understanding is not the same as forgiving, because all the difficulties and shortcomings in the world do not negate the fact that fully conscious trespassers remain responsible for what they do. To suggest otherwise means we cannot be responsible for our obedience, either. In that case, Jesus should have said, Father, *excuse* them, because, like machines, they cannot exercise free choice.

Forgiveness, as Jesus used the word, cannot be watered down to mere “understanding.” People cannot be trivialized into machines, and forgiveness cannot be trivialized into excuse. C. S. Lewis wrote,

There is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says: “Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology, I will never hold it against you and everything between us will be exactly as it was before.” But excusing says: “I see that you couldn’t help it, or didn’t mean it, you weren’t really to blame.” If one was not really to blame, then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites.

If this is true, we need not be afraid that in practicing forgiveness we are somehow tolerating wrong or condoning evil. Forgiveness does not mean “ceasing to blame,” but rather, “letting go of resentment.” Lewis, once again, says it all:

Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt,



meanness and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.

Practicing forgiveness

Once we understand what forgiveness is, how do we put it into practice? Many of us have trouble forgiving others because we fail to understand what forgiveness means, or because we confuse forgiveness with something it is not. But for others, forgiveness is frightening because we misunderstand the process of forgiving, or we fear that practicing forgiveness will hurt more than receiving the original offense.

Ethicist Lewis Smedes identifies four stages in the process of forgiveness: The first occurs at the point of our hurt. We have been injured in some way, spiritually, emotionally, or materially, and we *feel* the injury.

Second, we hate. The injury we feel boils into an active resentment of the person who committed the injury. And this, too, is a natural response. So we experience resentment or actual hatred.

Third, we heal. At this point, we finally let go; it is the critical moment of forgiveness. And, unlike hurting and hating, it is anything but natural. This is the moment only a Christian can really appreciate, because to let go of hatred means we need a strength to operate on us that will work entirely in the opposite direction of our hurting and hating.

Perhaps *moment* is the wrong word to use here. The healing of forgiveness can *sometimes* occur in one immense rush of relief and compassion. But more often it takes much longer. Forgiveness looms as a goal to be worked toward rather than a prize to be grasped; and it is something on which we may repeatedly lose or gain ground. It is possible to achieve a spiritual attitude resembling forgiveness toward someone and wake up the next week with the old hate burning as hotly as ever and the whole work needing to begin all over again. Wisdom may lie less in expecting forgiveness to occur as a spiritual drama on our own personal Damascus Road, and more in spending time in prayer over our hurt, in patiently pushing aside its incessant demand for attention, and in watching it shrink slowly and fitfully into remission.

Finally, as we heal, we must then *forget*. This does not imply some kind of sentimental amnesia. Nor is it really possible simply by the force of will literally to “forgive and forget.” Rather, forgetting means we no longer allow our past resentments to be the judge of the trespasser. The way we do that will vary with the trespassers themselves.

We have to be prepared for trespassers who either do not think they need forgiveness or who do not really care whether you or anyone else forgives them for anything. We need to make a distinction here: In the case of someone who shows no desire for our forgiveness, forgiveness means we stop thinking up ways to hurt them. But then there are cases where our act of forgetting *does* become a catalyst for change and repentance in the other person. By our unnatural act of letting go and not seeking personal revenge, we may surprise an offender into another unnatural act: reflecting on their sins.



In that case, when someone repents and confesses his or her shame to us, forgetting must take the form of trust, because trust is surely the most compelling evidence of forgiveness. Trust is exactly the evidence that Jesus shows us concerning our own experience of forgiveness. He says to Peter, who failed him, “Feed my sheep.” To Paul, who persecuted his people, he says, “Preach my gospel.” With those examples before us, we, too, must learn to trust again.

Reducing forgiveness to a prescription runs the risk of making it sound easy, of course. It is not: the power to forgive must ultimately come from God. But at the same time, it must be pursued, because the whole point of Jesus’ command to forgive dangles on the consequence he draws from forgiveness: “that your Father in heaven may forgive you.”

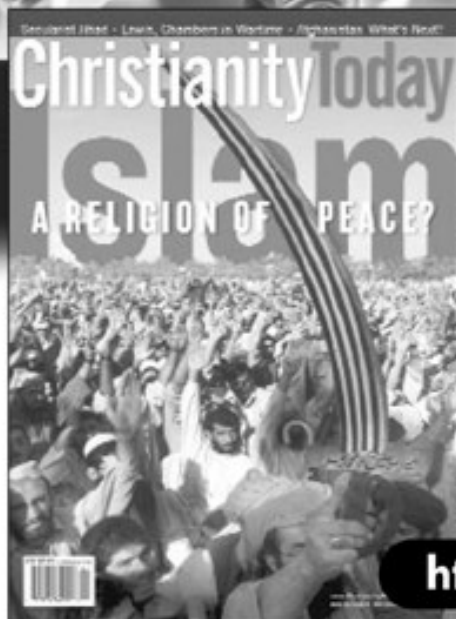
If we want to know the power of the Cross, if we want to see whether the Cross still has the power to change lives today, if we want to know what the forgiveness of our sins really means and what it really cost, then we will know those things only as we forgive. And only then will we begin to sample the full sweetness of the word *forgiveness*.

—Allen C. Guelzo is Dean of the Templeton Honors College at Eastern University, Saint Davids, Pennsylvania.

“Fear of Forgiving,” by Allen C. Gueizo, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, February 1993, page 42



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