

## ***Bitterness versus Forgiveness***

### **TEACHER TO TEACHER**

Teaching forgiveness principles is always fun for me. I enjoy seeing the “lights go on” in people’s mind. The questions asked are frequently challenging enough to really keep me on my toes. But, by far, the most exciting part of the experience is witnessing the healing and freedom that so often comes as people apply the principles and work through the forgiveness process. My experiences as a teacher, counselor, and minister tell me that forgiveness is often the single most important first step that hurting people can take toward emotional healing and spiritual freedom.

Holding on to anger or letting it turn to bitterness, as Paul said, really does give Satan and his dark angels a virtually unhindered opportunity to establish a foothold in the hurt and offended person’s life.

*And don’t sin by letting anger control you. Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27, NLT)*

Through our unforgiveness, demons can gain ground from which they can advance into an abundance of thought patterns rooted in the pain of offense and angry, vengeful thoughts.

We have all been angry. Some of us have been hurt very deeply by the sinful actions of others. For some, the devastating feelings of rejection and abandonment occupied more space in our emotional cup than did angry or resentful feelings. Remember, there is no sin in being angry. We sin when we choose to retaliate or to allow our anger to grow into a root of bitterness.

Within every offense there is a baited trap or snare set for us by the evil one. If we take the bait and spring the trap we become ensnared in sinful thoughts, attitudes, and actions. On the other hand, we prevent the devil’s demons from gaining control of our minds and actions by refusing to take the bait that is so tasty to our human nature. We maintain our spiritual freedom by quickly forgiving the one who offends and hurts. That is easy to say, but often is a very difficult path to choose. Our sense of justice demands restitution. We want accounts balanced. In our human nature, we want to get even.

In this lesson, you will find:

1. A list of common misconceptions about forgiveness which, if believed, make forgiveness a difficult option to choose
2. A definition of forgiveness and several biblical truths that dispel the misconceptions or deceptive false beliefs harbored by many
3. A description of the forgiveness process and the elements comprising the process
4. A step-by-step script for working through the forgiveness process

You will not be surprised to know that you will be asked to work through the process before you teach it to others. Your Bible Fellowship will also be offered an opportunity to work through the first step of the process as part of the application/closing step of the suggested lesson plan. They will have everything they need to finish the process during the week. I am hopeful that as a result of working through the steps to forgiveness, some will find a new level of healing and spiritual freedom. May you be blessed as you prepare and teach.

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## Studying the Word Together

*There is one and only one antidote for the spiritual disease of bitterness, and that is forgiveness. The Scriptures reveal God's will for us as we deal with the hurt, disappointment, and bitterness that can and does come from our painful interactions with one another. In Colossians 3:13, Mark 11:25, and Ephesians 4:32, believers are commanded to forgive without qualification. Jesus and Stephen give us powerful examples of forgiveness in action when they asked God to forgive their murderers (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60).*

— Dr. Steve Dowdle

*Bitterness is to the soul as cancer is to the body. Bitterness, like cancer, affects every part of our being. Forgiving from your heart those who have hurt you is God's way of removing the cancer. Tragically, this cancer of the soul is a communicable disease that can be spread to others. That is why the Word of God says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" (Heb. 12:15).*

— Dr. Neal Anderson

In the previous lesson I identified bitterness—also called unforgiveness—as one of the major areas of spiritual bondage for many Christians. Because bitterness is such a major stronghold for so many, we are devoting this lesson to learning about the:

1. Destructive nature of bitterness
2. Misconceptions about forgiveness
3. Meaning of forgiveness
4. Forgiveness process

### The Destructive Nature of Bitterness

**B**itterness in essence is unforgiveness. It is unresolved anger and always has a component of unhealed emotional pain. And it is destructive. Bitterness is debilitating to one's spiritual, mental, physical, and relational wellbeing.

#### ► The Relationship between Bitterness and Spiritual Warfare

**B**itterness is one of the seven areas of sin mentioned in the previous lesson that allow Satan to gain ground in our lives. A few familiar verses make clear the connection between bitterness

and our vulnerability to the enemy.

*If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven...I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. (2 Corinthians 2:10-11)*

*"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:26-27)*

Both passages directly associate unforgiveness to possible demonic activity in the lives of those who hold onto anger and do not forgive. Bitterness, indeed, can lead to a foothold from which Satan can advance and to a stronghold from which Satan may safely and freely operate in our lives.

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#### ► **The Impact of Bitterness upon Physical and Emotional Health**

Medical researchers have long known that high occurrences of some types of cancer, severe headaches, stomach problems, and muscular problems are found in patients who struggle with high levels of bitterness. In addition, anger recently has been scientifically linked to increased risk of heart disease, to lung disorders, and to irritable bowel syndrome.

Research has shown that anger may be related to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Anger is also linked to a number of emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety, as well as to eating disorders and addictions.

#### ► **The Impact of Bitterness upon Interpersonal Relationships**

Those with high levels of bitterness usually have been severely hurt either emotionally or physically. The resulting emotional pain usually leads to mistrust of others. Mistrust results in withholding care from others and an unwillingness to recognize or receive care when it is offered by others.

Relationships are shallow and unfulfilling. Chronic bitterness reduces intimacy within personal relationships; spouses and other family members usually are more guarded and less able to relax around the bitter one. They feel like they always have to “walk on eggshells.”

Research routinely demonstrates that bitter people have fewer friends and lack well-developed supportive networks. This is unfortunate, because having such support helps to ward off emotional problems and serious health conditions.

#### **Misconceptions about and Meaning of Forgiveness**

We live as Christians, knowing that our sins against God have been

forgiven through the work of Christ upon the cross. As believers, we also know that we live under a biblical mandate to forgive those who sin against us or offend us. We are compelled to forgive because we are forgiven. Jesus said, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:8). Most are well acquainted with some of the key Bible passages on forgiveness. But let’s briefly review three of the most familiar. The first is from the Lord’s Prayer:

*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:12, 14-15)*

As I have said before, I find this to be a very sobering passage. It directly links God’s forgiveness of me to my forgiveness of those who offend me. Again, the idea of “freely you have received, freely give” comes into play. (NOTE: For a more detailed exegesis of this passage refer to Lesson 3 in *Growing Wise*,<sup>1</sup> pages 3-4 through 3-7.)

The second passage is from Luke and speaks to a number of things. First, it addresses overall behavior as a “called out,” beloved people of God. Then it mandates forgiveness of people who wrong us, particularly those within the body of Christ. Finally, it relates all of the mentioned virtues to the unity of the Body of Christ.

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:12-14)*

The last of our trio of verses addresses the idea of how much forgiveness is to be an ongoing part of Christian lifestyle. It also hints at how difficult forgiveness may really be.

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*So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4)*

With each offense comes some emotional pain: disappointment, anger, fear, victimization, etc. In some instances, such as in emotional, spiritual, physical, or sexual abuse, the emotional wounding can be very intense. Our human nature wants to respond to such pain with self-protection, retaliation, or vengeance. Our hearts demand justice.

It is very difficult to forgive in such circumstances. However, if we fail to forgive we give the evil one an opportunity to harass and oppress not only through our disobedience, but also in our thinking distorted by our pain.

**W**e struggle to forgive others for numerous reasons. Some simply want to hold onto their right to extract revenge. Still others refuse to forgive because forgiveness is an affront to their sense of justice. More are reluctant to forgive because they are holding onto some misconceptions about forgiveness or lack a full understanding of what forgiveness really is.

### ► **Misconceptions about Forgiveness**

**A**fter many years of helping people work through the forgiveness process, I find that there five misconceptions that regularly serve as objections for those reluctant to forgive. These five are:

1. Forgiving means forgetting.
2. Forgiving is tantamount to giving the offender permission to offend again.
3. Forgiving means letting the offender "off the hook."
4. Forgiving is a sign of weakness.
5. Forgiving means I must immediately return to intimate relationship with the one who offended me.

Let's see if we can debunk some of these misconceptions before studying the complexities of forgiveness.

- ◆ **Forgiveness means forgetting:** I do not know who coined the admonition "forgive and forget." I do know that it is impossible for us to "forget" at will. This well-intended but confusing piece of advice is likely based upon a poor interpretation of Isaiah 43:25. Here, we find the prophet teaching about God's merciful heart toward His people.

*I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. (Isaiah 43:25)*

The phrase "remember your sins no more" does not mean that God forgets our sins. That would be contradictory to His attribute of omniscience. It simply means that He will not call up our sins from His memory and charge or confront us with them after they have been forgiven. The truth is that when we forgive someone for a sin, the memory of the sin may not go away. However, after our hurts have been comforted and healed the memory loses its sting and no longer has control over our lives (Gen. 45:4-7; 50:20).

- ◆ **Forgiving is tantamount to giving the offender permission to offend again:** Those who have been severely wounded by a traumatic offense or series of offenses are often reluctant to forgive because they imagine that forgiving their offender will free that offender to offend again. Releasing someone for offending us does NOT free them to recommit the same sin against us. It is often very necessary to put both physical and emotional boundaries in place to protect ourselves from the unrepentant sinner—but Christ teaches us to forgive them.

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- ◆ **Forgiving means letting the offender “off the hook”:** Those who are guided by this misconception believe that forgiveness violates their sense of justice. They want to hold on to their perceived right to “get even”—to personally extract vengeance. The truth is that when we forgive, we do let people off of our “hook,” but they are still on God’s hook. After all, it is God who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay” (Rom. 12:19).
- ◆ **Forgiving is a sign of weakness:** Believers holding to this idea somehow associate forgiveness with opening the door to further victimization. To them, forgiveness seems to be passive behavior that permits a painful litany to continue. On the contrary! Forgiveness is a courageous act that reflects the grace, kindness, and compassion of Christ.
- ◆ **Forgiving means I must immediately return to intimate relationship with the one who offended me:** When deeply offended by someone we have trusted and with whom we have been emotionally and/or physically intimate, we are prone to deep levels of mistrust. In such a case, the offended is likely to fear reentering the relationship at a significantly intimate level. The good news is that forgiveness does not demand that we reenter an abusive or toxic relationship with the unrepentant offender. If the offender is repentant, we can choose to establish boundaries, giving the offender—over a period of time—opportunity to demonstrate his trustworthiness which is a precondition to authentic intimacy.

Having briefly dealt with these five misconceptions, let’s turn our attention to better understanding the complexities of the true nature of forgiveness.

#### ► **The Meaning of Forgiveness**

We can begin to shape our understanding of forgiveness by considering how the word was used in the everyday Greek language of New Testament times. Seminary Professor Dr. Steven Tracy says that the Greek word we have translated as *forgiveness* “was widely and consistently used to mean ‘to release.’ This meaning is carried over into the New Testament, where it is used over 125 times and has different nuances of meaning. It is used to mean ‘to let go, to send away’ (Matt. 13:36; Mark 4:36); ‘to cancel, to remit’ (Matt. 18:27; Mark 2:5); ‘to leave’ (Matt. 4:11; John 10:12); ‘to give up, to abandon’ (Rom. 1:27; Rev. 2:4); and even ‘to tolerate, to permit’ (Acts 5:38; Rev. 2:20).”<sup>2</sup>

#### ► **Truths Concerning Forgiveness**

Just as there are common misconceptions of forgiveness, there are some truths about forgiveness that should be on everyone’s “radar screen:”

1. Forgiveness is an act of the will, a courageous choice.
2. Forgiveness means “canceling the debt” owed me by my offender.
3. Forgiveness means being willing to live with the consequences of the sin committed against me,
4. Forgiveness and healing are often not instantaneous. They take time.

- ◆ **Forgiveness is an act of the will, a courageous choice:** We are instructed by Christ to forgive. Therefore, we can expect that He will give us the grace to forgive. Just as we choose not to gossip, lie, commit adultery, or murder, we choose not to sin by withholding forgiveness from those who offend us. Often I have heard people say, “I don’t feel like forgiving.” Perhaps they are speaking from their

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pain, expecting that they be comforted and healed before they release their offender into God's hand. The truth is that healing of pain often follows extending grace to our offenders by forgiving them. Don't wait until you *feel like it* to forgive. *Decide* to forgive.

- ◆ **Forgiveness means “canceling the debt” owed me by my offender:** In the Hebrew way of thinking, when someone sinned against you, he or she became indebted to you and you had a right to collect retribution. When we forgive we “cancel the debt” that our offender has incurred with us. We release our right to “get even.” By canceling or forgiving the debt, we choose to let God extract whatever vengeance He desires. We also choose to let God extend grace to our offender in the same way we have.
- ◆ **Forgiveness means being willing to live with the consequences of the sin committed against me:** There is a price for forgiveness and when we choose to forgive we agree to pay that price—to live with the consequences of the sin committed against us. That usually means that we have to bear the pain associated with the offense. Christ had to pay a severe price for our sin. He paid a physical and emotional price. The good news is that there is healing available to us for the pain caused by others, just as there was resurrection for Christ.

### The Forgiveness Process

**F**orgiveness is a process. This means that it has a beginning and ending point with an expected outcome. The process is made up of several elements. **AND**—it takes time to complete the process. The greater the offense and associated pain, the more time it takes to work through the process. Let's briefly

consider some of the elements involved in the process. Remember that each element takes on greater significance as the gravity of offense increases.

**O**ne component in the process is *comfort*. There is always some hurt—some pain—associated with an offense. Sometimes that pain is minimal. Sometimes it is horrific. Scripture teaches us that healing hurts involves receiving comfort. There are several possible sources of comfort: God through the Holy Spirit, a caring spouse, an empathetic Christian friend, or a trusted counselor. Christians have been given a ministry of comfort. Look at the passage that follows:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.*  
(2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

We do not have time or space in this lesson to fully interpret this passage. However, I do want you to take note of some points:

1. God is the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort (v. 3). God is, by nature, caring. He grieves over our hurts and empathizes with us. By virtue of Who He is, He is the source of all comfort.
2. God takes action to comfort us—often through secondary agents—when we are troubled (v. 4).
3. God comforts us so that we can comfort others (v. 4). Notice the recurrence of the “freely you have received, freely give” principle.

**A**nother element in the forgiveness process is *understanding*. It is valuable for me to remember that those who sin against me are often operating out of their own pain. There is an old saying in counseling circles: “Hurting people hurt people.” Sometimes people sin against us



when operating out of a belief or value system that is contrary to ours. This is often the motivation behind persecution. At other times we become the victim of other people's sinful actions because they are simply behaving according to their depraved, fallen, sinful nature. If we can begin to understand some of the "why" behind the offender's actions, it is often easier for us to extend grace to him or her. I believe this is what was happening in Jesus' mind when He said from His cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

The third element of the process is *forgiveness*. This is the part of the process where we make the conscious decision to cancel the debt against our offender. In some cases, this phase will also involve seeking forgiveness for sins we might have committed while acting in anger against the one who offended us. If we have acted sinfully in anger, we need to also seek God's forgiveness and take the step of forgiving ourselves.

These elements do not necessarily have to occur in a particular order. Sometimes we receive comfort for our hurts, gain understanding of our offender's motives, and then decide to forgive. At other times, we may gain understanding, decide to forgive, and then receive comfort. It is also possible that we might decide to forgive, receive comfort, and later gain understanding. However, it is important that all three elements be addressed.

The ideal expected outcome of a forgiveness process is reconciliation. Certainly, God will always reconcile us to Himself by forgiving us as we confess our sins and repent. Certainly we desire to be reconciled to our family members and friends, as well as to our Christian brothers and sisters. However, this may not always be possible. If an abusive offender is unrepentant, it may not be safe for us to sustain the relationship. It may also be possible that an individual is incapable of appropriate behavior and unable to complete

his or her part of the transaction that would make reconciliation possible. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon us to take the steps to forgive those who sin against us.

## Application Ideas & Questions

I wish to approach this application section differently than that to which you are accustomed. May I ask you to step through the forgiveness process yourself before you teach it to your Bible Fellowship. Proceed in a step-by-step fashion. Complete each step before going to the next.

- ◆ **Step One:** Ask God to bring to mind the name of one person that you need to forgive. You might use a prayer like the one below:

*Father in Heaven, in the Name of Jesus, I ask you to bring to my mind a person who has offended me whom I have yet to forgive.  
I desire, in submission and obedience to you, to forgive him (her).*

Now sit quietly and let the Lord speak to you. When a name has come to mind, go to the next step.

- ◆ **Step Two:** When you have settled on an offender whom God has led you to forgive, consider each offense the person has committed against you that needs to be forgiven. Be aware of the hurtful feelings that you have experienced because of the offense. Write each offense down on a piece of paper, being careful to make note of the hurtful feelings associated with each offense. You might use a pattern sentence like this one:

*(Name or initials) sinned against me and hurt me by (specifically list all offenses) and as a result I felt (list all of the associated hurtful feelings).*

When you have completed your list, go to the next step.

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- ◆ **Step Three:** Take a moment to ask God to give you some understanding of the motives behind your offender's actions. Use a prayer like the one below.

*Father God, just as Jesus was able to understand why those who crucified Him did so, please help me gain understanding of why (name of offender) sinned against me. Amen.*

Receive what the Holy Spirit reveals with humility and gratitude. If He does not reveal anything to you at this time, be content to allow God to reveal this to you at a later time. Go on to the next step.

- ◆ **Step Four:** Use the pattern prayer that follows, or one like it, to act upon your decision to forgive.

*Lord Jesus, in submission to You and in obedience to Your Word, I choose to forgive (name of offender) for sinning against me by (name the offense). Please comfort my painful hurts and bring healing to them. In Your Name I pray. Amen.*

Be certain to pray the prayer for each offense. Don't offer blanket forgiveness. Then go to the final step.

- ◆ **Step Five:** Find a trusted person whom you believe will be able to both empathize with you and comfort you. Ask that person to listen as you describe the pain that you have experienced and then, in the Name of Christ, to extend comfort to you. Receive the comfort that is offered as if it is coming to you directly from God.

<sup>1</sup> Jerry Wilkinson, *Growing Wise*, copyright © 2006 by Casas Adobes Baptist Church, Tucson, AZ.

<sup>2</sup> Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul*, copyright © 2005 by Steven Tracy, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 183.

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*Please turn to the following page for Commentary.*

Notes 

# Commentary

## Categories of Forgiveness

*The material in this section is from the research and teaching of Dr. Steve Dowdle.*

Dr. Steven Tracy suggests three categories of forgiveness that are helpful as we try to put into perspective the complex nature of forgiveness and the important biblical mandate to forgive those who have offended us.

First is *judicial forgiveness*. It involves the remission or pardoning of sin by God and pictures a complete removal of guilt of one's sins (Ps. 51:1-9) and is available to all sinners (Ps. 32:1-5; 1 Cor. 6:10-11). "The judicial forgiveness of sin by God lies at the very heart of Christianity and the salvation experience. It is contingent on confession (1 John 1:9) and the acknowledgment of one's sin in repentance (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38)."<sup>1</sup>

Second is *psychological forgiveness*. This is usually what we think of when dealing with the hurt caused us by others. Dr. Tracy defines psychological forgiveness as "letting go of settled bitterness and rage and committing abusers to God, who is both loving and just."<sup>2</sup>

The application of this type of forgiveness means that we let go of our right to get revenge for the wrong done to us. It is the relinquishing over to God our right to play "judge, jury, and executioner." In doing so, we acknowledge that God will someday deal with the evil done to us, especially if the abuser is unrepentant. We let go of our bitterness and desire for revenge out of faith in God and confidence in the fact that He will bring judgment and create justice for all the harmful things done to us.

Psychological forgiveness also incorporates the concept of extending grace to those who have hurt us. One of the Greek

words used for human forgiveness in the New Testament means "to extend grace" (2 Cor. 2:7, 10; 12:13; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). The extension of mercy and grace to someone who has hurt us is based on the mercy and grace we ourselves have received from God. We then, out of obedience to God, choose to bless even our enemies.

The third type of forgiveness is *relational forgiveness*. Tracy states: "It is synonymous with reconciliation. From a biblical perspective, this forgiveness is always desirable, though it's not always possible. God's desire for the human race is for healing and reconciliation, both individually with himself (2 Cor. 5:18-21) and interpersonally with other humans (Eph. 2:11-14; Col. 3:10-13)."<sup>3</sup>

## Reconciliation

*The material in this section is adapted from the Bible Exposition Commentary.<sup>4</sup>*

Paul writes to the church in Corinth about reconciliation, saying:

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)*

Reconciliation is the principle point of this passage. Through rebellion, man fell out of fellowship with God and became His enemy. Through His completed work on the cross, Jesus brought God and man back together. Dr. Warren Wiersbe describes this reconciliation this way:

# Resisting the Enemy

## Lesson 8

### Bitterness versus Forgiveness

God has been reconciled and has turned His face in love toward the lost world. The basic meaning of the word reconcile is “to change thoroughly.” It refers to a changed relationship between God and the lost world.

God does not have to be reconciled to man, because that was accomplished by Christ on the cross. It is sinful man who must be reconciled to God. “Religion” is man’s feeble effort to be reconciled to God, efforts that are bound to fail. The Person who reconciles us to God is Jesus Christ, and the place where He reconciles us is His cross.

Imputation is another important point made in this passage. This is a word that comes from the banking business, meaning “to apply to one’s account.” For example, when you deposit money in the bank, the teller applies that amount to your account. Wiersbe says:

*When Jesus died on the cross, all of our sins were imputed to Him—put to His account. He was treated by God as though He had actually committed those Sins. The result? All of those sins have been paid for and God no longer holds them against us, because we have trusted Christ as our Saviour.*

He goes on to tell us:

*We are ambassadors with a message. God has committed to us the ministry and the word of reconciliation (2 Co 5:18-19).*

*In the Roman Empire, there were two kinds of provinces: senatorial provinces and imperial provinces. The senatorial provinces were made up of people who were peaceful and not at war with Rome. They had surrendered and submitted. But the imperial provinces were not peaceful, they were dangerous because they would rebel against Rome if they could. It was necessary for Rome to send ambassadors to the imperial provinces to make sure that rebellion did not break out.*

*Since Christians in this world are the ambassadors of Christ this means that the world is in rebellion against God. This world is an “imperial province” as far as God is concerned. He has sent His ambassadors into the world to declare peace, not war. “Be ye reconciled to God!” We represent Jesus Christ (Jn 20:21; 2 Co 4:5). If sinners reject us and our message, it is Jesus Christ who is actually rejected. What a great privilege it is to be heaven’s ambassadors to the rebellious sinners of this world!*

Notes 

<sup>1</sup> Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul*, copyright © 2005 by Steven Tracy, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, copyright © 1989 by Chariot Victor Publishing, an imprint of Cook Communication Ministries. All rights reserved; used by permission.

Notes **RESOURCES  
NEEDED:**

- ◆ 2-sided copies of Lesson Notes / Take-Home pages
- ◆ Pencils or pens for each person
- ◆ Dry erase markers and marker board or felt tip markers and a flip chart

**TIMEFRAME:**

- ◆ 35 minutes

**Suggested Lesson Plan**

**NOTE TO TEACHER:** This *suggested* lesson plan contains many elements that, if employed, will help maximize learning for life-change in your Bible Fellowship. If you are an experienced teacher, you have freedom to create your own plan based upon the “Studying the Word Together” section. If you are less experienced, we suggest that you “stick to the plan.” However, even less-experienced teachers should feel free to modify the plan based upon the needs of your Bible Fellowship. This plan is designed to be presented in 35 minutes. It is important, therefore, that you carefully plan your presentation so that you communicate the main points with brevity and clarity.

**Important Scripture  
References:**

- ◆ 2 Corinthians 2:10-11
- ◆ Matthew 6:12, 14-15
- ◆ Colossians 3:12-14
- ◆ Isaiah 43:25
- ◆ 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

**Teaching Goals:**

- ◆ **Learn:** Bible Fellowship members learn that forgiveness is a process that:
  1. Has a beginning and ending point
  2. Takes time
  3. Contains several elements: comfort, understanding, forgiveness
  4. Has reconciliation as its desired outcome, even though complete reconciliation is not always possible in interpersonal relationships
- ◆ **Experience:** Experience the benefits and blessings of forgiveness by working through the forgiveness process with at least one other person (Matthew 6:12, 14-15)

**Before Class Begins:**

- ◆ Distribute Lesson Notes / Reflections handout. *Wait until Step 5 to distribute Handout 2.*

**STEP ONE: GETTING  
READY TO LEARN  
(8 MINUTES)**

- ◆ Remind your Bible Fellowship that bitterness is an area of sin through which demons can establish a foothold or stronghold in their lives. Tell them that today’s lesson is about the antidote for bitterness—forgiveness.
- ◆ Explain that Christians sometimes struggle to forgive because they have misconceptions—deceptions—about the meaning of forgiveness.
  1. Refer your group to the list of misconceptions in the opening exercise found on their handout.
  2. Ask them to place a checkmark by any of the misconceptions with which they struggle or have struggled in the past.
  3. Ask them to listen for “truth” in today’s lesson that might “trump” any deceptive beliefs they might have had or currently may have regarding forgiveness.
  4. Using information from pages 8-3 to 8-5 and Scriptures on handout, highlight the biblical mandate to forgive and explain why each item is a misconception. Plan carefully. Keep your comments brief; do not allow discussion to take you on “rabbit trails.” The truths presented in the balance of the lesson will help them understand why these are, in fact, misconceptions.

### STEP TWO: THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF BITTERNESS (5 MINUTES)

Use the material found on pages 8-2 to 8-3 to prepare for this section.

- ◆ Have someone read Ephesians 4:26-27 from handout. Briefly discuss the relationship between bitterness and spiritual warfare.
- ◆ Summarize the impact of bitterness on physical and emotional health.
- ◆ Briefly discuss the impact of bitterness on interpersonal relationships.

### STEP THREE: THE MEANING OF FORGIVENESS (7 MINUTES)

Use the material on pages 8-5 to 8-6 to prepare for this section.

- ◆ **The Meaning of Forgiveness:** Tell your group that the Greek word we have translated “forgiveness” was widely used to mean “to release.” In the New Testament it has several nuances of meaning: to let go, to send away, to cancel, to remit, to abandon, and to give up.
- ◆ **Truths Concerning Forgiveness:** Explain why each statement is true.
  1. Forgiveness is an act of the will, a courageous choice.
  2. Forgiveness means “canceling the debt” owed me by my offender.
  3. Forgiveness means being willing to live with the consequences of the sin committed against me.
  4. Forgiveness and healing are often not instantaneous. They take time to complete.

### STEP FOUR: THE FORGIVENESS PROCESS (10 MINUTES)

Use the material on pages 8-6 to 8-7 to prepare for this section.

- ◆ Tell your group, “Forgiveness is a process.” It has a beginning and ending point with an expected outcome. The process is made up of several elements. AND—it takes time to complete the process.
- ◆ Mention the elements of the process: *comfort*, *understanding*, and *forgiveness*. Briefly describe each; use 2 Cor. 1:3-4 (on handout) to expand *comfort*.
- ◆ Inform your group that the expected outcome of the forgiveness process is reconciliation. Then explain why this is not always possible, but that each believer needs to forgive, even when complete reconciliation can’t occur.

### STEP FIVE: APPLICATION & CLOSING (5 MINUTES)

- ◆ Explain to your class that you wish to invite them to work through the forgiveness process this week, if they have someone they need to forgive. Distribute Handout 2 and point out its step-by-step instructions for how to complete the process. Take a moment to share your own experiences as you worked through the process while preparing for the lesson (or at a previous time when you learned to apply it in your life).
- ◆ Tell them that you will provide an opportunity for them to begin the process as a closing exercise. Then guide them through Step One.
- ◆ Close with prayer thanking God for forgiving us and for the comfort, healing, protection, and freedom He imparts to us as we extend forgiveness to those who have offended us.

Notes 

### LESSON NOTES BLANKS:

#### The Destructive Nature of Bitterness

1. It has a connection to spiritual warfare
2. It impacts our physical and emotional health.
3. It impacts our interpersonal relationships.

#### The Meaning of Forgiveness

... forgiveness ...  
used to mean  
to release.

#### Truths Concerning Forgiveness

1. ... an act of the will, a courageous choice.
2. ... “canceling the debt” ...
3. ... live with the consequences...
4. ... are often not instantaneous. They take time.

#### The Forgiveness Process

1. ... it has a beginning and ending point with an expected outcome.  
... it takes time ....
2. ... elements: comfort, understanding, and forgiveness.
3. The ideal expected outcome ... is reconciliation.  
... when an offender is abusive and unrepentant or is incapable of appropriate behavior.

## **The Forgiveness Process**

*Work through the following process in a step-by-step fashion, completing each step before going to the next.*

- ◆ **Step One:** Ask God to bring to mind one person that you need to forgive. You might use a prayer like this one:

*Father in Heaven, in the Name of Jesus, I ask you to bring to my mind  
a person who has offended me whom I have yet to forgive.  
I desire, in submission and obedience to you, to forgive him (her).*

Now sit quietly and let the Lord speak to you. Once a name has come to mind, go to the next step.

- ◆ **Step Two:** When you have settled on an offender whom God has led you to forgive, consider each offense the person has committed against you that needs to be forgiven. Be aware of the hurtful feelings that you have experienced because of the offense. Write each offense down on a piece of paper, being careful to make note of the hurtful feelings associated with each offense. You might use a pattern sentence like this one:

*(Name or initials) sinned against me and hurt me by (specifically list all offenses)  
and as a result I felt (list all of the associated hurtful feelings).*

When you have completed your list, go to the next step.

- ◆ **Step Three:** Take a moment to ask God to give you some understanding of the motives behind your offender's actions. Use a prayer like the one below.

*Father God, just as Jesus was able to understand why those who crucified Him did so,  
please help me gain understanding of why (name of offender) sinned against me. Amen.*

Receive what the Holy Spirit reveals with humility and gratitude. If He does not reveal anything to you at this time, be content to allow God to reveal this to you at a later time. Go on to the next step.

- ◆ **Step Four:** Use the pattern prayer that follows, or one like it, to act upon your decision to forgive.

*Lord Jesus, in submission to You and in obedience to Your Word,  
I choose to forgive (name of offender) for sinning against me by (name the offense).  
Please comfort my painful hurts and bring healing to them. In Your Name I pray. Amen.*

Be certain to pray the prayer for each offense. Don't offer blanket forgiveness. Then go to the final step.

- ◆ **Step Five:** Find a trusted person whom you believe will be able to both empathize with you and comfort you. Ask that person to listen as you describe the pain that you have experienced and then, in the Name of Christ, to extend comfort to you. Receive the comfort that is offered as if it is coming to you directly from God.

# Today in My Bible Fellowship

## Misconceptions about Forgiveness

Please read over the following list of misconceptions about forgiveness and place a checkmark by those which are or have been a struggle for you:

- Forgiving means forgetting.
- Forgiving is tantamount to giving the offender permission to offend again.
- Forgiving means letting the offender “off the hook.”
- Forgiving is a sign of weakness.
- Forgiving means I must immediately return to intimate relationship with the one who offended me.

## The Destructive Nature of Bitterness

1. It has a connection to \_\_\_\_\_ .
2. It impacts our physical and emotional \_\_\_\_\_ .
3. It impacts our \_\_\_\_\_ .

## The Meaning of Forgiveness

The Greek word translated *forgiveness* was widely and consistently used to mean \_\_\_\_\_ .

## Truths Concerning Forgiveness

1. Forgiveness is an act of the \_\_\_\_\_ , a courageous \_\_\_\_\_ .
2. Forgiveness means “canceling the \_\_\_\_\_ ” owed me by my offender.
3. Forgiveness means being willing to live with the \_\_\_\_\_ of the sin committed against me
4. Forgiveness and healing are often not \_\_\_\_\_ . They take \_\_\_\_\_ .

## The Forgiveness Process

1. Forgiveness is a process. This means that it has a \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ point with an expected \_\_\_\_\_ . The process is made up of several elements. AND—it takes \_\_\_\_\_ to complete the process.
2. The forgiveness process involves three elements: \_\_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_\_ , and \_\_\_\_\_ . These elements do not have to occur in a particular order, but it is important that all are addressed.
3. The ideal expected outcome of a forgiveness process is \_\_\_\_\_ . However, this may not be possible when an offender is \_\_\_\_\_ and unrepentant or is \_\_\_\_\_ of appropriate behavior.

## Today's Scriptures

**Matthew 6:12, 14-15:** Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

**Colossians 3:12-14:** Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

**Luke 17:3-4:** So watch yourselves. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

**Ephesians 4:26-27:** “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

**2 Corinthians 1:3-4:** Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

## Next Week's Lesson:

**Rebellion & Pride  
versus  
Submission &  
Humility**

**Daily Reflections**

**B**egin each daily reflection by meditating a few minutes on the suggested Scripture passage. Seek to listen to the Holy Spirit as He speaks to you. Then consider the comments and questions about the passage. Be aware of both your thoughts and your feelings. Respond to God through both.

**Monday:** *I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more. (Isaiah 43:25)*

Read this verse several times, placing emphasis on different phrases. For whose sake does God blot out transgressions? This verse tells you that God longs for unbroken relationship with you enough to remove your sins from consideration in His fellowship with you. Respond to Him from your heart.

**Tuesday:** *Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:12, 14-15)*

Do you long for intimacy with God? Are you willing to release others from their sin debt with you, so that your fellowship with Him is not broken by your unforgiveness? Confess any unforgiveness to God, seek His forgiveness, and then choose to release those who have offended you from their sin debt.

**Wednesday:** *If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven...I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. (2 Corinthians 2:10-11)*

The Apostle Paul reminds you here, as he did in Ephesians 4:26-27, that unforgiveness and bitterness provide demons an opportunity to gain a foothold or build a stronghold in your life. Thank God that through your forgiveness of others you can regain ground lost to evil spirits and that you can prevent future attacks as you quickly forgive others.

**Thursday:** *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:12-14)*

Are there any areas of unforgiveness in your life that might be hindering development of "perfect unity" in your Bible Fellowship? In your church? Ask God to search your heart. Then extend grace through forgiveness and seek to be reconciled to any brother or sister in Christ against whom you are holding a grudge—showing compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love toward them.

**Friday:** *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)*

Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind someone who is hurting because of an offense committed against him or her. Ask Jesus to give you compassion for the person. Then show them Christ's love by practicing the ministry of comfort described in this passage. Your expressions of comfort can be instruments of healing in God's hand.

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