

LESSON 2

Forgiveness

“I hate you, and I will never forgive you,” screamed a teenager girl to her mother after an argument. The mother had decided to move to another city, which meant a change of schools, neighbors, friends, and familiar surroundings. Unresolved anger gripped both mother and daughter.

“He raped me and destroyed my life. I can never forgive him!” The woman in the courtroom testified before the jury about that horrible night and its sordid events. She still felt unsafe, insecure, and distrustful of men as the emotional trauma continued.

“I killed a man in a drunken rage. How can I forgive myself? I deserve to die.”

A condemned man sat in his prison cell rehearsing his actions that resulted in the death of another man—a husband and father of three children. The accused man’s own wife and children want nothing to do with him.

What do these and multitudes of other people around the world have in common? They have been deeply hurt or have hurt others. They feel strong emotions of loss, anger, fear, resentment, shame, and regret. Maybe you, too, have your own experiences of pain and need to forgive someone or to experience forgiveness. Every day we have to make choices about how we will respond to those who hurt us and those who are hurt by us.

Forgiveness begins with God, and it is a cornerstone of our Christian faith. Because of Jesus’ death on the Cross, God offers us the gift of complete forgiveness—no matter what we have done. Forgiveness is not easy for most people. For instance, rather than forgive, friends part in anger, marriages end in divorce, children become estranged from their parents, and siblings fight. Feuds even erupt in local church families. People remain angry,

bitter, and unhappy because they refuse to forgive. Unforgiveness can ruin the relationship between people for years and years. Many times, after such a long time, most forget what the point of contention was, but they know that they were hurt and still unforgiveness remains. Thus, what could have been years of growth and happiness in the relationship is squandered and shattered.

The apostle Peter once asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). The common teaching of that day was forgiveness could be extended up to three times to an offender. Peter must have thought he was being generous by offering to forgive up to seven times. Then, Jesus answered Peter: “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (v. 22). Jesus was presenting the idea of forgiving as many times as necessary—without limit.

Christian counselor Dick Dobbins says, “Forgiveness frees the offender from guilt and shame and it delivers you [the forgiver] from anger.” It is an act of will that brings wonderful freedom. Forgiveness allows those involved in an offense to go forward and experience God’s blessings rather than bitterness and ongoing pain. May you choose to forgive.

LESSON OUTLINE

God’s Forgiving Nature

Seeking Forgiveness

Forgiving Others

Forgiving Oneself

Your Responsibility

LESSON OBJECTIVES

When you complete this lesson, you should be able to:

1. *Describe God’s forgiving nature.*
2. *Explain how to seek forgiveness.*

3. *Understand the importance of forgiving others.*
4. *Discuss the importance of forgiving yourself.*
5. *Describe your responsibility to those you have wronged.*

God's Forgiving Nature

Objective 1:

Describe God's forgiving nature.

The Woman Caught in Adultery

Once, while Jesus was teaching, some religious leaders presented a woman whom they had caught in the act of adultery. They took the woman to Jesus and asked Him what should be done with her. They reminded Jesus that Moses had said adultery was an offense punishable by death. The leaders' intent was to trap Jesus into saying something they could use against Him. Jesus simply knelt down and wrote in the dirt. After awhile, He raised up and said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:2–11).¹

Perhaps Jesus was writing on the ground sins these religious leaders had committed against God and the Mosaic Law—the same Law they were now trying to use to condemn the adulterous. After making His statement, Jesus continued writing in the dirt. Then, "those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there" (v. 9).

After the accusers had departed, only the woman remained before Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared.

¹ The passage of John 7:53–8:11 is not found in the earliest manuscripts. However, almost all translations of the New Testament include it due to its inclusion in later manuscripts, wide acceptance, and agreement with the teaching and character of Christ.

‘Go now and leave your life of sin’” (vv. 10–11). Though the sin she had been accused of was grievous, Jesus willingly offered forgiveness. He did not condemn as the Jewish leaders did. Jesus opened the door of grace, and the woman was given the opportunity for a new beginning. The psalmist proclaimed, “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you” (Psalm 86:5).

The Immoral Woman Who Anointed Jesus

One day a woman boldly entered a house where Jesus was a guest of a Pharisee. She stood behind Jesus with tears streaming down her face, for she had lived an immoral life. Possibly she had engaged in prostitution. She may have heard Jesus speak prior to this encounter and desired to start a new life. Somehow Jesus had touched her heart, and she wanted to express her gratitude (Luke 7:36–37).

As she stood behind Jesus, some of her tears fell on His feet. The woman stooped to wipe them with her hair. In those days, only promiscuous women allowed their hair to hang loose; decent women typically wore a scarf or head covering. After wiping Jesus’ feet, the woman poured fragrant oil on them. Now, the Pharisee thought, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39). The fact is that Jesus knew indeed who and what she was, yet He allowed her to continue. Jesus pointed out that this despised woman had done for Him what His host, a prominent man, had not.

Jesus then shared a parable with this prominent host, named Simon. Jesus said, “Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” (vv. 41–42). The answer was obvious—the one who was forgiven more would love him more and be more thankful. Jesus continued by saying that Simon had offered Him no water to wash His feet, no kiss of greeting, and no anointing oil for His head. Yet,

this woman had washed Jesus' feet with her tears and hair; had not ceased kissing His feet; and had anointed them with fragrant oil. Jesus said her sins, which were many, were forgiven because she loved much. It seems there was not enough she could do to show how grateful she was for being set free from the burden of sin. Simon, however, though he understood much of God's law, failed to recognize the nature of God—that is, unconditional love.

It is God's nature to forgive. He takes no pleasure in seeing any sinner continue in his or her evil ways. We need to be confident of God's willingness to forgive us, too. The Lord's capacity to forgive is greater than our capacity to sin. Even today, we can picture Jesus eagerly waiting to respond to people who cry out, "Please forgive me!"

Seeking Forgiveness

Objective 2:

Explain how to seek forgiveness.

Many have said, "You do not know what I have done. God could never forgive me!" These words call into question the Lord's ability to do what is His nature to do. We must never forget that Jesus came to earth "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

There are religions around the world that require their adherents to perform extreme acts in order to obtain forgiveness. Washing in unclean water, pouring cow urine over their bodies, reciting prescribed prayers daily, offering repeated confessions, and making journeys for miles on their hands and knees are only a few. By these acts people hope that their god or gods will be impressed and inclined to forgive. However, there is no assurance. As a result, their acts of self-humiliation and repentance are repeated, daily, monthly, and annually.

What is different for the Christian? Do we have to go to Jerusalem and pray at the Wailing Wall? Do we have to make a pilgrimage to some distant place? Do we have

to beat ourselves, dip in filthy water, or say a certain amount of special prayers? No!

Read the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. It is a story of a young man who demanded his inheritance, left his father's home, and wasted his money in a distant land. He lived a wild life and spent days gratifying his carnal desires. The son eventually became so destitute that he found work on a pig farm. There, he longed to eat the pigs' food. Finally, he decided it would be better to return home, confess his sins to his father, and hopefully be allowed to labor in his father's fields as a servant (Luke 15:18).

There is no question—this young man had sinned greatly. He had treated his father with great disrespect and failed to take care of the possessions his father had given him. Though he was free to spend his inheritance as he wished, he wasted what should have been invested for his own future and that of his future children and grandchildren. He lived for the moment and lost everything. He was even willing to perform perhaps the most disdainful job any Jew could imagine—feeding pigs. Fortunately, he came to realize the futility of staying where he was. His only chance was to repent and return home.

Then something amazing happened: "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). Still, the young man said to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21). Though the son was willing to be hired as a mere servant, the happy father prepared a feast and restored his son.

Are you harboring sin in your life? Are you wondering if God will forgive and restore you? Whether you have never given your heart to Christ or whether you are a believer who has fallen into sin, there is hope! First John 1:9 states, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Self-belittling, endless confessions, physical pain, and personal humiliation do not bring

forgiveness of sin. Why wait any longer for freedom and forgiveness. Ask now and be set free! Confess to the Lord, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). He will be quick to wrap His arms of love around you and forgive you. Do it now! A simple prayer of "Father, forgive me," is a great place to start. Try it now.

Forgiving Others

Objective 3:

Understand the importance of forgiving others.

General James Edward Oglethorpe, an English general who founded the American colony of Georgia, was talking with the famous preacher John Wesley one day when the General confessed, "I never forgive!" Wesley replied, "Then, sir, I hope that you never sin." Oglethorpe's confession is not one that Christians should mimic. Since we have received God's forgiveness, we must show love and forgiveness to others, no matter how undeserving and unworthy they may seem. When we forgive others, we prove that our faith in Christ is genuine and that our own hearts have been changed.

Stephen, one of the early disciples, was arrested by hostile Jews because he did great wonders and miraculous signs (see Acts 6:8–11). In defense, he described God's miracles and faithfulness and Israel's rebellion. Convicted by the truth of those words, the Jews dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him. Before he died, Stephen cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). In asking God to forgive his killers, Stephen wanted his heart to remain free from anger and resentment. He followed the example of Jesus who prayed as He was crucified, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Can you imagine this? Here were two men, Jesus the Son of God and Stephen. Both of them preached truth,

were a part in healings and other miracles, sought the salvation of men and women, and did God's will. Yet they lost with their lives cruelly. Each was unjustly accused, tried, condemned, and murdered. But each was able to look at the accusers with compassion and forgive them. Can you think of someone or others who have done you wrong? Compare what that transgression was with what Jesus and Stephen endured. How does your heart for forgiveness line up against Stephen's and against Jesus'?

God expects us to be willing to forgive, too. Jesus made the point even clearer when He said, "But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:15). In other words, if you continuously refuse to forgive those who hurt you, you will eventually jeopardize your standing in God's kingdom. Is there anyone you need to forgive? Take the time now to forgive those whom the Holy Spirit brings to your mind. Call them or write them today.

Forgiving Oneself

Objective 4:

Discuss the importance forgiving yourself.

A little boy and his younger sister were playing tag. He chased her around a large chair, as both laughed. When the little girl abruptly stopped playing, the boy hurried to his pregnant mother and cried, "Mom, sis is not playing anymore." Rushing to where the child lay, the mother scooped her up just as the little girl drew her last breath. Later, it became clear that the little girl's finger had touched an exposed wire from a nearby lamp, while her body was on a heat register on the floor. This sent volts of electricity through her little body and killed her.

Whose fault was it that the child died? Was it the boy's, the mother's, the girl's?

Was it God's fault? Sadly, the mother would spend years holding herself and God responsible for the death

of her little girl. She would constantly ask herself, "Should I have watched them more closely? How could I not know about the lamp and wire? Why would God allow such a thing to happen?"

Sometimes, forgiving ourselves is the most difficult thing to do. We may think we should have known better, been watching more closely, or done things differently. We blame ourselves and perhaps God for mistakes or events that result in sorrow, pain, and even tragedy. Just as forgiving others is a choice, an act of your will, so is forgiving yourself.

God promises to forgive you. Once you have received God's mercy, you must choose to forgive yourself. The Lord does not want you wallowing in self-pity or regret. God does not wish to see you suffer. He still has a purpose and a plan for your life. So, accept His forgiveness, and stop punishing yourself.

If a painful experience or tragedy occurred that somehow involved you, realize that you are not alone. Others have suffered similar tragedies. It is part of what happens as we live in a fallen world. You cannot change the past or eliminate the consequences of that painful event. It is important, in such cases, that you forgive yourself. Doing so allows you to go on with life rather than become bitter over what cannot be changed. Do not destroy the future God has for you.

Overcome by evil and greed, Judas agreed to betray Jesus to the religious leaders for a sum of money. Later, wishing he had not done so, he hanged himself. It seems Judas could not bring himself to repent before God for his actions, nor could he forgive himself for what he had done. His failure destroyed him. Today, the name *Judas* still connotes betrayal.

The apostle Peter also sinned by denying Jesus repeatedly, yet he eventually went on to become a great leader of the early church. What was the difference? While Judas went out in grief and hanged himself, Peter wept bitterly in disgrace for what he had done. One could not forgive himself, but the other found forgiveness

in Jesus. Peter allowed Jesus' love for him to bring him back into a right relationship with Him. While Judas died a failure, Peter lived to bring great glory to the Lord. Which will you choose? I urge you to forgive yourself! Your life is valuable to God and precious in His sight. Let Him do great things through you.

Your Responsibility

Objective 5:

Describe your responsibility to those you have wronged.

Admitting failure, sins, and shortcomings is one of the most difficult things to do. When a person hurts or wrongs another, the offender may make excuses for what was done. There may even be an attempt to shift the blame elsewhere.

While it is a humbling experience to ask forgiveness, often more is required. When we have wronged someone, not only must we apologize for our actions, we must also be willing to make restitution when necessary. Restitution is not only right and fair but also demonstrates the sincerity of the apology. In Luke 19 is the account of Zacchaeus, a tax collector who had stolen money. Zacchaeus was also short in stature. One day, as Jesus was walking through Jericho, Zacchaeus made an extraordinary effort to see Him. The tax collector had heard so many incredible things about Jesus—His miracles, speeches, and teaching. Now was his chance to get a glimpse of this famous prophet from Nazareth. Zacchaeus raced ahead of Jesus and climbed a tree in order to see Him better. Much to his surprise, Jesus stopped specifically to talk to him and expressed His desire to dine with Zacchaeus. Delighted by Jesus' attention, Zacchaeus later responded,

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today

salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (Luke 19:8–10)

Notice that Jesus did not object to Zacchaeus’ plan to make restitution. Zacchaeus’ actions were evidence of a heart undergoing positive change.

An important lesson to learn from this story is that when a person’s heart changes due to repentance, it is proper for him or her to right the wrongs done in the past. This does not mean that God requires restitution *before* He forgives; rather, restitution demonstrates a true change of heart. Due to the circumstances, restitution may not always be easy. In fact, it may not even be possible in some cases, but it is right to attempt to do so—even if the person wronged chooses not to forgive the one making restitution.

Conclusion

It should be the goal of every believer to be like Christ. We are to have the attitude and manner of Christ. We are to preach His Word and sing His praises. Our desire should be to spend eternity with Him and to have our family, friends, and as many others as possible know Him, too.

Forgiveness is a vital aspect of the Christian life. Jesus taught us to pray, saying, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). As we learn to forgive and be forgiven, doors of blessing open wide. We experience God on a deeper level.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE TO MEMORIZE

Psalms 86:5

Psalms 103:12

Matthew 6:9–13

Luke 23:34

Colossians 2:13

1 John 1:9

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully, and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *We should be willing to forgive*
 - a) *seven times.*
 - b) *seventy times.*
 - c) *an unlimited number of times.*

2. *When I forgive others,*
 - a) *no restitution needs to be made.*
 - b) *it frees them from guilt and shame.*
 - c) *God will erase memories of the event.*

3. *The religious leaders thought the woman caught in adultery*
 - a) *should be grateful they were the ones who caught her.*
 - b) *should be stoned.*
 - c) *ought to marry the man she was caught with.*

4. *In dealing with the adulterous woman, Jesus*
 - a) *offered her forgiveness.*
 - b) *washed His hands of her.*
 - c) *turned her over to the authorities.*

5. *Jesus' purpose in coming to earth was to*
 - a) *condemn every person who had done wrong.*
 - b) *seek and save the lost.*
 - c) *get away from heaven for awhile.*

6. *If you want to be forgiven of sins, you must*
 - a) *simply ask Jesus to forgive you.*
 - b) *fast and pray and hope you are forgiven.*
 - c) *assume there is little hope for forgiveness..*

7. *The father of the prodigal son is a picture of God waiting*
 - a) *for just the right time to punish sinners.*
 - b) *anxiously to receive and forgive people.*
 - c) *for the chance to discipline wayward children.*

8. *When tragedy happens, God*
 - a) *does not care.*
 - b) *says we are responsible and should be more careful.*
 - c) *wants us to learn to forgive ourselves if necessary.*
9. *When you fail and wrong others, you must*
 - a) *ask them to forgive you.*
 - b) *hope they think it was someone else and not you.*
 - c) *try to hide the wrong you did.*
10. *You are to forgive*
 - a) *only after the person changes his or her life completely.*
 - b) *only when there is something in it for you.*
 - c) *as you are forgiven.*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *c* (2.1)
2. *b* (2.1)
3. *b* (2.1)
4. *a* (2.1)
5. *b* (2.2)
6. *a* (2.2)
7. *b* (2.2)
8. *c* (2.4)
9. *a* (2.5)
10. *c* (2.3)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

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