

## **Forgiven and Forgiving – By Faye Reynolds for Women in Focus**

If there is any one thing that singles out Christianity from all other faiths, it is the theology of forgiveness. It permeates every aspect of our journey together. We are forgiven and we forgive – that is pretty much the sum of the gospel message. It is the pathway to peace and the answer to cyclical violence. It is the heart of every relationship and the cornerstone to health and personal well-being. It is actually the means to the salvation of our world if we can get it right. Unfortunately, we rarely seem to get it right. We say we are forgiving, but hold grudges, or pretend to brush off an injury that is eating away at our heart. We sing songs assuring us of God’s salvation, but seek ways to earn God’s favor. Sometimes we just don’t get the magnitude of God’s grace in our lives and that lack of understanding hinders our ability to show grace and mercy to one another. We live in a world where everything has to be earned. In God’s upside-down kingdom, everything is a gift.

In the next seven weeks together, it is my desire to take a deeper look at living out the prayer that Jesus taught us; “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”. It is my prayer that together we might better understand how to heal our relationships and live more loving, enriched lives. What does it mean to love one another when relationships are just plain messy? I hope the following lessons will give some insight into this journey of being God’s people.

### **OUTLINE:**

Lesson 1: Forgiven by God: The role of grace

Lesson 2: Forgiven by God: The role of repentance

Lesson 3: Forgiving Ourselves: The role of Honesty

Lesson 4: Forgiving Ourselves: The role of Accountability

Lesson 5: Forgiving Others: “The Four Givings” – part 1

Stage 1: Giving Assurance

Stage 2: Giving Account

Lesson 6: Forgiving Others: “The Four Givings” – part 2

Stage 3: Giving Absolution

Stage 4: Giving a Gift

Lesson 7: Questions with no answers

## Lesson 1: Forgiven by God: The role of grace

One of the first baby steps of our Christian faith is understanding and accepting our forgiveness by God. *Share with one another how you came to accept that your sins were forgiven in Christ and what it meant to you at the time (as much as you can remember).*

Read Psalm 103

1. Remember that this Scripture precedes the coming of Christ. God has always been a loving, forgiving God. Consider verses 1 – 5. *What are the blessings given by God defined in these verses? Note that there are no “ifs” in these verses – that God will forgive “if” we do \_\_\_\_\_.* This is all about the nature and character of God. God is by his very nature a forgiving God. Forgiveness is not only an action – it is a character trait. *What does that say to you?*
2. Not only is God forgiving, he is incredibly generous – it seems that there is nothing that holds God back from filling us (crowning us) with goodness, kindness, compassion and mercy. (The Hebrew words in verse 4 hold all of those meanings). God not only forgives but also blesses and satisfies you. *How have you experienced satisfaction in your relationship with God?*

What is forgiveness? What does it mean? Is it forgetting a hurt someone has caused? We will spend several weeks exploring the actual meaning of forgiveness, but step one is this: **Forgiveness is wanting the very best for another, regardless of how they have treated you.** To wish another ill is the opposite of forgiveness. No matter how badly we may treat God or ignore him or displease him, he never wishes us ill but only desires our healing and wholeness.

3. Consider verses 6 – 9. God not only forgives our actions, he works in our environments to correct any oppression or injustice we may be facing. Most of our bitterness comes when we believe we have been treated unfairly, especially when systems continue to undermine our well-being. *Are there any situations where you feel you have been treated unjustly or feel oppressed that you would be willing to share? Do you see any evidence of God correcting unjust situations?*
4. Perhaps many of you have memorized verse 8 – it is such an incredible verse of hope and joy. Our God, who has every right to judge, chooses instead to be merciful (withholding punishment we may deserve) and gracious (giving gifts that we do not deserve). We are reminded in Micah 6:8 to “love mercy” as God is merciful. *We love mercy when we are the recipients, but how do you feel when*

*others who have done wrong are not punished? Does anyone “deserve” mercy?*

5. We all love a parent who is slow to anger, patience and abounding in steadfast love with their children! We cringe when we see a harsh reaction to a child’s misbehavior. God is such a good parent; so patient with us as we learn to live the life he desires for us. *In an effort to move beyond the theoretical to the practical, can you name ways that you have truly experienced God’s patience with you in an area of struggle?* If it is not easy to share out loud with others, please write it down and name the area that God is slowly working in your life for change, constantly forgiving and offering another chance for growth and success over sin.
6. Read again verses 10 – 14. Verse 14 is really the key to understanding God’s grace and forgiveness. “He knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust”. God has the perfect expectations for us because he understands who we are from the inside out. God forgives from a place of knowledge and understanding. He knows our background, our insecurities and crutches. He knows where we have been wounded and the scars and how that affects our behaviors. He doesn’t expect us to be divine or holy, because we were made mortal, dependent, fallible and frail creatures. He **does** expect us to be fully dependent upon him – and in that way we can become holy, we can become good and righteous and loving and forgiving. Everything depends upon our dependency upon God. The greatest sin we commit is independent thinking and acting apart from God. Even then, he is merciful and does not deal with us according to our failure to trust him and depend upon him. His steadfast love is so great that his compassion always outweighs our failures. *What hope does it give you that God knows you so totally and completely? How does understanding another’s story help you to be more compassionate?*
7. Read now Ephesians 2: 1 – 10. How do you understand grace and forgiveness in this passage and does it reflect the same message as Psalm 103?
8. There is one requirement on our part, found in verse 11 and verse 13 of Psalm 103. His love and compassion are for “those who fear him”. *Define those words – what do they mean to you. How do you fear the Lord? Why or how does lack of fear for God hinder his compassion from reaching his beloved?*
9. Read verses 19 – 22 as a time of praise and thanksgiving as you go into a time of prayer together.

## **Lesson 2: Forgiven by God: The role of repentance**

This is a very important truth to understand. Forgiveness is NOT dependent upon repentance! Forgiveness is a quality of the heart and is freely given in love, regardless of the actions of the other. God's forgiveness through Christ's death on the cross was for all people for all time. We are forgiven. Period! In any relationship, the injured party, not the perpetrator, does all the work and bears the responsibility to bridge the gap and open the door to relationship. HOWEVER, if there is no understanding by the guilty party of their actions that caused harm or pain, it will be difficult for them to accept the forgiveness and therefore, the relationship will be strained. So lets look at the role of repentance in experiencing forgiveness.

Look up the following verses on repentance, observing what each verse says about repentance in light of the definitions below.

1. The Hebrew word, "Nacham" means to feel sorry, sad, regretful or to console oneself or another. The NIV rarely translates this word as "repent" but more often "relent", "grieve" or change one's mind. Look at Exodus 32:12 and Numbers 23:19 as an example. The word often refers to whether God might relent from bringing punishment. Also I Sam 15:29. Psalm 135: 14
2. The Hebrew word, "shuwb" means to "return". Look at I Kings 8:47, Isaiah 30:15, Isaiah 59:20, Jeremiah 15:19. *How does the idea of "return" fit your understanding of repentance?*
3. The Greek Word, "metanoeō" means "to change one's mind for the better". Read Matt. 4: 17, Matthew 21:32, Luke 5:32, Luke 15: 7 - 10, Acts 17:30. *How does this word and these verses shed light on repentance?*

If someone has hurt us, the first thing we want is an apology and this has become one of our understandings of repentance, but it is not particularly a Biblical understanding. The first Hebrew word carries the connotation of feeling sorrow and regret but it is not used in conjunction with forgiveness. As mentioned, it is most often used in reference to whether God might feel sorrow and change his mind on acts perceived as his judgment. "Can God repent" is a question for theologians but God is obviously not seeking forgiveness for his actions.

The more common word is "shuwb" which means, "to return" and I absolutely love that understanding of repentance. Rather than the traditional understanding of repenting as turning around and going in the opposite direction, I prefer the sense that we return to what we were created to be, which is a creature totally dependent upon the Creator.

We return to our true nature, rather than the broken person that sinned. Isaiah 30:15 has become a key verse in my life. “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.” When I return and rest in the arms of Jesus, when I quietly submit to his will and way, there is trust and peace and joy.

1. *What does the verse mean to you?*
2. *Discuss the difference between the two Hebrew understandings and what you personally have gleaned from what it means to repent.*

I want to say again that God’s forgiveness is not dependent upon our repentance, but if we want to be in right relationship with God, a change in our behavior is God’s goal for us. If God calls us to forgive 70 x 7 times, he certainly will forgive us an infinite number of times. However, sin will always hinder our relationship and God wants us to be whole, not broken.

And this brings us to the New Testament word, “metanoeo” which means to change the mind for the better. Think of the word, metamorphosis – changing from a caterpillar to a butterfly – breaking out of bondage and flying with new wings. The meaning is so much richer than apologizing with, “I’m sorry, God” but it is a commitment to change our ways, our attitudes, our dependencies, our insecurities, our idols – whatever is at the root of the behavior that turns us away from looking God in the eye.

3. Look up 1 John 1:9: *What is the role of confession in “changing for the better”? Does the verse mean that we are not forgiven if we do not confess? What are some tangible, but safe ways to confess in our protestant tradition? It is important to verbalize our sins so that we truly understand what we need to change. In your prayers, practice naming your failings before God so that you can become better aware of growth areas.*
4. As you reflect on your own spiritual journey, consider some areas of your life where you have had victory and in accepting God’s forgiveness, you were able to change for the better. Also consider prayerfully struggles in your life that you count on God’s infinite grace but long for the power to change your life. Share what you feel comfortable sharing with each other.
5. Read 2 Peter 3: 8 – 10. What is the hope you find in these verses? What is the warning or wakeup call?

Both John the Baptist and Jesus called people to repent. The Jewish people needed to change their attitudes and ways in order to understand and receive God’s gracious forgiveness. They were so either so caught up with keeping the laws or felt hopeless to ever be worthy enough. We do

need to change from “doing” or “earning” to simply receiving God’s mercy and grace with humble and open hearts. God doesn’t want us to do penance, to grovel for his attention. He doesn’t need to hear “I’m sorry” before he will welcome us back. His arms are open to receive us. If we do not think we’ve done anything wrong, our arrogance and pride will keep us from his embrace.

6. Close by praying Psalm 51: 1 – 12 as you express your heart’s desire to be honest and open before God and dependent upon His ways.

### **Lesson 3: Forgiving Ourselves: The role of Honesty**

We may fully accept that God has forgiven our sins and is ready to embrace us in this life and in the life to come, but it is much more difficult to forgive ourselves, especially as we endure the natural consequences of our actions. To be forgiven does not necessarily mean that we avoid all pain and consequences of our sin. Beyond those consequences, guilt, shame and low self-esteem can hinder our healing and ability to move forward.

#### **Read Psalm 32: 1 – 5**

Last week we talked briefly about the role of confession. Once again, we are reminded that it is not what we do that brings about God’s forgiveness, but if we are to live into that forgiveness and feel the joy and freedom of God’s forgiving love, we must face with honesty the truth about ourselves and our sinful patterns.

1. Verse 3: “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away”. *How does it feel when you cannot speak of your struggles and weaknesses? What happens to your spirit and soul? The Protestant tradition has lost a communal practice of confession. What are the pros and cons of the regular practice of confession?*
2. Verse 4: “Your hand was heavy upon me . . . “ *What role does the Holy Spirit play in convicting us of the need for confession and positive change? Does God try to make us feel guilty? Where does guilt come from? Read John 16: 8. The Greek word translated “convict” is better translated, “expose”. In this sense, the Holy Spirit does not want our emotions or actions buried but brought to light so that they can be dealt with. This may lead to temporary feelings of guilt as awareness sinks in, but also allows the healing process to begin as we feel God’s loving acceptance.*

The problem with stagnant guilt is that it does not tend to motivate change, but rather leaves feelings of inadequacy and failure that often stymie action. Guilt is more often a tool of God's Enemy to keep us away from God with feelings of unworthiness and shame.

3. Verse 5: "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and You forgave the guilt of my sin". The grammar seems strange with a present tense "will confess" and a past tense "You forgave" but it is absolutely correct. *Can you explain why???* Here the Hebrew word for "confess" literally means to "throw or cast" and is most often translated "give thanks"! The confession is a response to the love and forgiveness of God – not a begging for God's mercy. I find it interesting that God forgives the "guilt" as much as the sin itself. *Why is it so hard to forgive ourselves? How does our failure to receive forgiveness stifle our joy in living? Can you picture what it means to cast off your guilt with a sense of giving thanks? What does that experience feel like?*

Read Psalm 32: 6 – 12

4. "You . . . surround me with songs of deliverance." There is such hope in these verses – that the mighty waters of temptation won't reach us – that God will hide and protect us from our own weaknesses **if** we pray to God. *What is the role of prayer in the process of combating failure and guilt?*
5. Verse 8: God is offering us resources if we are willing to access them. *What are ways that we receive God's counsel and instruction? It sounds easy but it is not – what are the reasons we don't heed that counsel when it is the best for us?*
6. *What role do others play in helping us to find forgiveness for ourselves? How do you understand the concept of absolution?*

**absolution** [æbsəluʃən]

1. the act of absolving or the state of being absolved; release from guilt, obligation, or punishment
2. (Christianity / Roman Catholic Church) *Christianity*
  - a. a formal remission of sin pronounced by a priest in the sacrament of penance
  - b. the prescribed form of words granting such a remission [from Latin *absolūtiōn*- acquittal, forgiveness of sins,

In the Protestant tradition, we do not have a practice of hearing the words out loud, "You are forgiven". Though we may know in our heads that God has forgiven us, truly believing in our hearts is difficult. If we have wronged another, hearing their words of forgiveness go a long way

to helping us forgive ourselves. When we have had the opportunity to confess a wrong to a third party, hearing them tell us that we are not bad people also helps in our healing process. It is part of being honest with ourselves when we speak out loud our failing and feel the arms of acceptance from a friend. *What are some ways that we might be more deliberate in the act or gift of absolution?*

7. Verse 9: *What attitudes do these verses give reference to that hinder our process of healing and realizing the depth of God's forgiveness?*
8. Verse 10 reminds us of the woes that will continue in our lives if we do not change and return to dependency upon God. It also contains the promise of unfailing love when we trust God with our day to day living. *In what areas of your life do you find it easy to trust God to take care of you? What areas of your life are harder to turn over into God's hands?*
9. Read verse 11 in unison together and celebrate the joy you have known in trusting God and how he has been faithful. Celebrate his love for you and that you have been accepted exactly as you are today. Ask for your trust in that love to grow as you continue to accept your own weaknesses and strive to grow.

#### **Lesson 4: Forgiving Ourselves: The role of Expectations and Accountability**

One of the struggles in forgiving ourselves is that we set the wrong expectations for what is good and holy and right. Matthew 5:48 is a verse that can weigh heavily on our minds: "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect". How do we ever live up to that expectation???? If I expect perfection, then I am constantly disappointed in myself for my failures and mistakes. If we place the English expectations of "without flaw" upon the word, we certainly can never measure up. However, the Greek word, *telios* offers a broader definition of "completion" which allows much more room for growth. We are to one day be complete, as God is complete, but in the process we still make mistakes. Thanks to the apostle Paul for sharing his struggles in the letter to the Romans so that we better understand our struggles as fallible human beings.

#### **Read Romans 7: 14 – 8:1**

1. Verse 14 underlines our first truth. We are human. We are finite. We are fallible. We mess up! God made us to be limited creatures that must depend upon him. *How does this reality give a differing perspective on what God expects of us? How might this help you to be*

*more gracious and forgiving of yourself? What is the balance between accepting our mistakes, yet still striving to be holy?*

2. It was very Greek thinking to separate out the fleshly realm from the spiritual realm. In fact, they often made such a distinction that it didn't matter what one did in or to the flesh as it didn't affect the spiritual nature. Although Paul refers separately to his fleshly struggles from his spiritual desires, our Christian understanding holds to a holistic view of body, mind and soul. Health is needed in all areas to become complete in Christ. *What do you think Paul is saying in this passage about his struggle between his desires to please God and his human struggles? It isn't a matter of just "knowing" what is right, but doing what is right. How do we go from "knowing" to "doing"?*
3. Paul makes it clear that his fleshly desires do affect his spiritual health. This is not just referring to sexual struggles, but also to eating, exercise, the need to feel important, the need to be right . . . *what are some more of Paul and our struggles that cause us to sin and bring hurt to ourselves or others? What do you "know" but do not follow through and "do"?*
4. Our finite nature always limits our ability to truly think beyond our own needs. I only see the world through my eyes. The way I see green may not be the same green you see, especially if one of us is colorblind. So, by our very nature, we are self-centered or better put, self-oriented. I instinctively avoid pain, nurse my wounds, feed my hungers, and strive to attain my goals. It takes a deliberate act of consciousness to consider what your pains, hungers, goals and desires might be and how I might participate in your journey. That is why God invites us to love others "as we love ourselves". Even if we have low self-esteem, we still care for personal needs instinctively. It takes God's grace and power in our lives to consider how our actions affect others. *How do we fail one another because of our instinctive nature to center on our self? What do you believe is the root of sin in people's lives?*
5. The more we trust God to care for our personal needs, the easier it is for us to live beyond the flesh and focus on our spiritual nature. *Are there any clues in this passage as to how Paul works through this tension in his life?*
6. The first step in learning to forgive ourselves is learning what need drives us - why we might say something hurtful or selfish or fulfill a desire of the flesh. God knows that we are finite and fallible. "There is, therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ

Jesus.” HOWEVER, we are to be set free little by little, day by day from the tyranny of the self by depending more and more on the Spirit of Christ, who knows what it means to be human and flesh-bound, and yet was able to live beyond his flesh and care for others. *Discuss together what are some legitimate needs that we each have as fleshly humans. What are healthy ways to meet those needs and what are unhealthy ways to fulfill the longings? What are the verses of hope in this passage?*

7. This is much greater than just having “will-power”. Changing habitual sins and unhealthy practices is a matter of changing our center of trust. Do we trust only ourselves to look out for “number 1” or do we trust in our Creator to meet our needs and carry us through our temptations. Chapter 8:5 demonstrate a shift in mind focus. *How do you set your mind on the things of the Spirit? (Consider 8:5 - 9) What are some spiritual practices that can strengthen your mind focus?*
8. We are forgiven in Christ – we are understood and we are loved. But when we fail, we still live with the consequences. As an example; the parents of a teenager caught driving drunk may be forgive him, but that doesn’t mean he may not lose his driver’s license or spend some days in jail. The validity of his repentance will be seen in how sincerely he changes his behaviors. It will take time for trust to be rebuilt. If he hurt someone because of his behavior, forgiving himself may be difficult indeed. *How do we forgive ourselves for messing up, especially if we’ve hurt another in the process? How do we live with the consequences of destructive choices? What is our hope?*
9. Paul does not speak of accountability but it is well known that we have better luck beating our personal demons when we ask another to walk with us rather than struggle in secret. *What are the risks of sharing our struggles with another? What are the gains? Have you ever invited someone into your life at that level and what was the result?* Close in silent prayer considering if this is something God might be asking of you – to consider an accountability partner.

Supplimentary article: <http://www.webmd.com/balance/features/learning-to-forgive-yourself>

### **Learning to Forgive Yourself**

**We all mess up sometimes. So why is learning to forgive yourself a lot harder than forgiving others?**

By Jean Lawrence WebMD Feature Reviewed by Brunilda Nazario, MD

Your heart and mental health may depend on your ability to reduce hurt and anger, even at yourself. So effective is forgiveness that Stanford University is undertaking a project to learn how forgiveness can enhance health and relationships and even prevent disease. But first, you might have to forgive yourself. Did you cheat on your spouse? Hit a child in

anger? Steal something? Go off the wagon? The list of potential human misdeeds is long.

If someone else did these things, you might learn to forgive them or at least let go of the anger. That's because it's easier to forgive others. After all, they don't live in your head, reading you the same old riot act. All the world's major religions preach the power of forgiveness. But forgiveness is such an elusive act, quicksilver in its ability to be strongly felt one moment and then dart away beyond reach the next.

According to Stanford's call for volunteer subjects, the definition of forgiveness is a simple one, not a near-impossible requirement that a person apply for sainthood. **"Forgiveness," it says, "consists primarily of taking less personal offence, reducing anger, and the blaming of the offender, and developing an increased understanding of situations that lead to hurt and anger."**

Sharon A. Hartman, LSW, a clinical trainer at the Caron Foundation, a drug and alcohol treatment center in Wernersville, Pa., deals with the need to forgive every day. "These are such shame-based diseases," she says. "Forgiving oneself is of the more difficult parts of recovery."

A chronic state of anger and resentment interferes with life. Countless studies also show stress and anger can cause or worsen diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, and various autoimmune disorders. "When resentment is interfering with your life, it's time to forgive yourself," she says. **"So many people have a constant, critical voice in their heads narrating their every move."** She says she calls her critical voice "Gertrude" and tries to counteract Gertrude's eternal litany with positive affirmations -- that she is getting better, that she is less angry. "Forgiving doesn't mean not being angry with yourself, but not hating yourself. "No one," Hartman adds, "can beat us up better than we beat ourselves up."

"I think people often try to forgive themselves for the wrong things," says Joretta L. Marshall, PhD, a United Methodist minister and professor of pastoral care at the Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis. "We think we ought to forgive ourselves for being human and making human mistakes. People don't have to forgive themselves for being who they are or having some kind of handicap. **Forgiveness means being specific about what we did that needs forgiving.**"

"I think forgiveness is often confused with condoning or lack of accountability," Hartman says. "This is a world with high performance standards. People think they need to be perfect. Yet people do things -- intended or not -- that hurt others. You may not intend to harm, but the other person is no less hurt." That's when you need to stop at some point and forgive yourself.

**"It's about relinquishing a source of pain and letting go of resentment. People think forgiving yourself means you are letting yourself get away with whatever it was you did," Hartman goes on. "The pain and anger you are feeling are supposed to be your punishment."**

People want to feel pain and resentment? "Oh," exclaims Hartman, "resentment is a very attractive way of putting a barrier around yourself as protection against being hurt again."

If toting around self-loathing like a heavy backpack has advantages, how do you set it down?

It can be done without formal therapy, Marshall says. "But not without community of some kind. **It is in the context of our relationships (whether with therapists, pastors, counselors, churches, families, and friends) that we experience the grace of being forgiven and forgiving others.**" Grace, of course, is a peace of mind bestowed regardless of whether we deserve it or not.

"You need to talk to someone as a rule," Hartman says.

## **Lesson 5: Forgiving others: The Four Givings: Part 1**

The next two lessons are adapted from material by Walter Wangerine Jr. from his book, *As For Me and My House*, chapters 6 and 7. (This is the best book written on marriage and I highly recommend it!) Wangerine explains forgiveness as “four givings” that heal and restore relationship. In this lesson, we will look at the first two givings: 1) Giving Assurance and 2) Giving Account.

Quote from Wangerine, pg 79: *Forgiveness is a sort of divine absurdity. it is irrational, as the world reasons things, and unwise But “has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? It is a miracle maker, because it causes things to be that, logically, empirically, have no right to be. Forgiveness is a holy, complete, unqualified giving.”*

### **But first . . . Why is it hard to forgive?**

1. We feel a great injustice has been done and that justice needs to be served.
2. We feel power over the one who has wronged us, and power feels good.
3. We feel deeply wounded or are suffering great consequences due to the actions of another. They shouldn't get off “scot free”.
4. We learn from our mistakes, so trust that has been broken is not easily regained.
5. Hurt me – I might forgive: Hurt my loved ones – not so easy!

**Why must we forgive?** It is God's command to us. There is no out – no loophole or exception to the rule. We are not allowed to want anything but God's best for another person, regardless of their actions toward us, our values or our beloved. *Read Mark 11: 25; Luke 6: 37 – 38; Matt. 18: 21 – 22, Matt. 6: 12 - 15*

Quote by Lily Tomlin, "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past."

**So lets move forward to the future. How do we forgive?  
Let's look at four active stages of forgiveness.**

**STAGE 1: The Giving of Assurance and Love: I John 3:18 - Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.**

#### **a. Preparation**

- The first stage in getting ready to forgive someone who has wronged you is to pray for God to fill your heart with love for

him/her. The key to forgiveness is to believe that your relationship is stronger than the injury. We see this message through the crucifixion. Jesus was ready to bear unlimited amounts of pain because his love for us was greater than the wrong we have done to him. Consider Romans 5: 6 – 8 and what that means to you. This is the kind of love we are to extend to one who has harmed or betrayed us. No matter how grave the offence, while they are yet “sinners” – unaware of how they may have hurt us – we take on the pain, die to self and begin to pray for them.

- As you pray, you endeavor to identify with them. Why might they have acted in this way to cause the injury? What is going on in their life? Is there any way that you may have contributed to their pain? Can you understand their story in any way?
- Search your heart honestly. In what ways do you want the relationship restored? In what ways do you truly care about them? How involved will you be in their daily lives? The depth of the relationship determines how intense the path of forgiveness will be.

#### **b. The Gift**

- When you are ready, go to the one who has done injury and assure them of your love and care for them. You verbally affirm that in spite of the rough waters you are experiencing, you want to find healing for the relationship and you do love them. You may want to apologize for any insensitivity or lack of understanding that may have contributed to the situation. The primary gift you are giving is the assurance of your love for them and desire for their wholeness.

#### **Read 2 Cor 2:5 – 11**

*What principle is Paul outlining here in regards to offering forgiveness in a larger setting and how does stage one of offering affirmation apply?*

*As you consider stage 1, reflect on the variety of relationships you hold. How easy or difficult is this to do with a) your spouse, b) your children c) an extended family member d) a colleague or co-worker e) a close friend f) an acquaintance. Discuss the various depths of relationships and the role of forgiveness and assurance in relationship.*

#### **STAGE 2: Giving Account**

One of the mistakes that we make in offering forgiveness is we fail to notify the person of the seriousness of the injury done. We seem to think that minimizing the offence is the best way to deal with it. “Forget it - it

was no big deal”, when in truth we felt quite upset or hurt by their actions. Honesty is vitally important in the healing of all relationships and so we do not misrepresent the offence. Forgive and forget is not a Bible verse. When we feel we can’t forget, we believe we haven’t forgiven and this is not necessarily true.

Read Luke 17: 3 – 5. *What is this passage asking us to do in order to forgive?* The word “rebuke” in Greek is “epitimeo”. The root of the word, “timeo” means to hold in high regard or favor and “epi” is a prefix for above or outer. One definition is “to raise the price of”. How I understand this sense of rebuke is not to scold or put down the other person, but rather, raise the value of the offence. It is the opposite of saying, “it is no big deal”, to actually placing the correct value upon the action that caused injury and to be able to declare why it does matter.

**a. Preparation (Consider Matt 18:15)**

- a. Step 1: Wangerine Quote: *Unless you spend time and care to make an absolutely realistic assessment of the sin itself, unless you act from the truth alone, forgiveness will be swallowed up in exaggerations, emotions, imprecision, fusty attitudes, and war. So Wangerine invites you to reflect on the three following thoughts:*
- What was the sin exactly? (remove the words ‘always’ or ‘never’)
  - Against whom was the sin committed?
  - What exactly are the consequences of the sin? What was destroyed or damaged?
- Step 2: Remember your own forgiveness to remove any sense of superiority or righteous indignation.
- Step 3: Sacrifice your rights in prayer: Wangerine: *Forgiveness is stepping outside the rights of law and into the world of mercy. . . forgiveness always places the burden upon the one who suffered the mess. . . forgiveness is not simply speaking the correct words. It is given only when your whole being, your tone, expression, gestures, and intent seek the other’s healing.*

**b. The Gift**

- a. Go to the offender. It may seem saintly to suffer in silence but it does the offender no good, nor does it bring healing to you and the relationship. The purpose is not to accuse or lay blame but to impart information. This is the step that gentle people shrink from and angry people exaggerate. That is why taking time for reflection and analysis is crucial so that you can frame clearly in words the sin and its effects.
- b. Affirming your love for the other and your desire for a positive relationship, speak the truth in love. For example, “These words were said and this is why they hurt me.” You are not

asking for an apology. You are not looking for their justification; you are simply stating what you experienced. Hopefully this stage will open up an opportunity for dialogue and more affirmation of the relationship, but be prepared for the other to be defensive or offer excuses. Listen politely but do not drift from the main purpose – you are notifying of the injury committed, but affirming your desire for wholeness and healing.

*Share with one another how you would feel if one that you have harmed approached you in this manner. How would you respond? Are you open to these two steps as outlined so far? Pray that God might reveal any relationship that could benefit from this kind of honest communication.*

## **Lesson 6: Forgiving Others: The Four Givings Part 2**

First, we give an affirmation of our love and care for the one who has done harm and then we offer up a specific account of their action or words and the consequences that resulted.

### **Stage Three is to offer the gift of absolution – the very act of forgiveness**

#### **a. The Preparation: Are you ready?**

Take time as a group to **read and discuss I Corinthians 13**. If you are approaching the offender to offer forgiveness, your attitude must reflect the qualities of this famous love chapter. Everything that you are doing is motivated by this one thing – that you love this person, you desire God’s best for them and your relationship to them is stronger than the pain you are feeling. If this is not the center of your heart, you are not ready to forgive.

Forgiveness is the restoring of power in relationship back to mutual ground. When I wrong a friend, I am powerless to make the relationship right, no matter how I apologize, beg, plead or offer penance for my sin. The power solely rests in the one I’ve wronged to restore the relationship. My sin has removed me from the relationship and I have no power to return on my own. The gift of absolution is the door that welcomes the sinner back into the arms of the wounded one.

#### **b. The Gift – words of absolution “I forgive you”**

The word “gift” is vital to the process, for it must be freely given with no expectation in return. The person you desire to forgive may never acknowledge that they did anything wrong. They may be defense or deflective, throwing a wrong that you had done to them into the mess. It takes great discipline and desire to stay on the matter at hand.

What you are saying to the offender is that you have given notice of the action and described the pain and consequences that it caused you. Now you are letting it go – you will not bring it up again or return to the issue. It is forgiven. This “thing” between you will not change your heart toward the person. There is no room for bitterness, anger, resentment or ill wishes. If the person desires relationship, they are welcomed with joy.

Through this act, you have restored the right for the person to be in relationship with you. The power has been returned. It is now up to the person to receive your gift or reject it. If the offender cannot see that they have done anything wrong, they may not receive the forgiveness. In fact, they may feel offended by the offer. This will hinder them from entering into right relationship with you, but that becomes their problem. You have given the gift with no strings attached.

*Share together your experiences with forgiveness, either as one who forgave or one who needed to be forgiven. In what ways was it successful and in what ways was it difficult and perhaps not as successful as hoped? Do you understand why forgiveness cannot be dependent upon the repentance of the other? On the other hand, do you see why a relationship may not be restored if there is no repentance offered?*

God has one advantage in that He is always without sin and so when he offers us forgiveness, we cannot say, “Yeah, but you hurt me when you . . . “. We have many faults and failures and the picture is not so clean. The person who has hurt me may indeed be responding to an action from me that hurt them. Life is always messy! If that is the case, you may need to listen and hear the heart of the other and offer your own repentance where you have been insensitive or unaware of your part in the breakdown of the relationship. Your prayer will be that they might forgive as they have been forgiven.

#### **Stage 4: Giving a gift**

Read the story of the Prodigal “Father” (the word prodigal means lavish and wasteful as the Father lavishes his love upon the wayward son) Luke 15: 11 – 24

The response of the Father’s act of forgiveness was to throw a party for his son and give a ring for his finger. The giving of a gift assures the son that the Father’s love is truly lavish and unlimited. He will not make the son “repay” for his sin, but instead will continue to sacrificially give to his beloved.

The last stage of forgiving another is to offer a tangible gift of love. It may be an object or it may be an act of service. As Jesus washed one another’s

feet, so we serve the ones we love with joy and honor. Wangerine writes this of a marriage being healed. (pg 103)

*The Prodigal's father gave him what the guilty son knew he did not deserve: rings and shoes and a party. The father did not dispute his son's guilt, since guilt was natural and right. But by love he stripped him of his guilt (though not his humility) as though it were a dirty shirt. Serve her. Serve the guilty one. Had you cooked for her before she knew her sin, when she took your cooking for granted? Continue even now to cook, and you will serve her body and soul together. Your most common service, if it continues sincere, will strip the guilt and reveal precisely where certainty was in the marriage all along.*

*"You don't hate me?" So says her eyes when you set the plate before her.*

*"No, I never hated you." So says your food.*

*And she, by eating it, says, "I believe you."*

*The cut is healed. . . . The world cannot rationalize a truly sacrificial and persistent love. Indeed, the world cannot abide it. But the world is forced to deal with it only as you perform it – endlessly.*

*Share together some stories where you felt loved and forgiven by someone's acts of service and kindness, or in the receiving of a special gift. Most often, we think of the offender buying a gift in gratitude for being forgiven and that may happen, but the initiation of the giving by the one who is forgiving is most powerful in healing the relationship.*

## **Lesson 7: Questions with no answers**

Many factors can make forgiveness and the restoration of relationships difficult. In this lesson, I do not have answers for these difficult scenarios, but I invite you to discuss them in your group. See if you can find some possible approaches or words of hope for future resolution using the Scriptures as a guide.

1. What do you do when someone will not forgive you for your wrongdoing or falsely accuses you of something you did not do and holds it against you? (Matt. 5: 43 – 48) What if you endeavored to reverse the process outlined in the four givings? Consider going to the person and affirming your love for them and desire to make things better. Ask them to name your sin and be willing to listen completely without interrupting, whether you agree with their assessment or not. Apologize for the hurt you have caused, whether knowingly or unknowingly and again affirm your love and care for the person. What are some possible outcomes from this approach?
2. How does one forgive a painful past of abuse or neglect that occurred in childhood? It has been said that you can blame your parents for your problems up to the age of 21 but after that, you are responsible for

your own actions. What do you think about that statement? Read Romans 12: 14 – 21 and discuss possible applications.

3. How do you forgive someone who had not directly hurt you, but hurt a loved one? Is the process the same? Consider Matthew 18: 6 – 8 and to what situations might these words apply? They do not sound very forgiving!
4. How does one forgive reoccurring behaviors in another, such as problem drinking, gambling? How do we forgive while at the same time hold another accountable for their actions? Continue working with Matthew 18: 15 – 22 for any possible clues. When is it possible to forgive another, and yet not remain in the relationship? What are the possible scenarios or reasons for doing so?
5. Read I Corinthians 5: 1 – 5, and then II Corinthians 2: 5 – 11. What are the different situations that these two texts are dealing with and how do they give insight as to how we are to handle failure in the church?
6. Close by reading together I John 4: 7 – 5:5. Our goal is to love, no matter how difficult and to heal our relationships. Sometimes it is most loving to discontinue a relationship in order to bring another to accountability. Love isn't always "nice" but it fulfills our initial definition of forgiveness, "Forgiveness is wanting the very best for another – God's best for them, regardless of how we have been treated". Love desires God's best for another and that may mean our withdrawal from the relationship, but with no bitterness. Hold to this promise in 5:5 "for whatever is born of God conquers the world". Love is born of God, so dearly beloved let us love one another!