



abcLinks

connecting personal and small group studies with this week's sermon

For the sermon on August 22-23, 2009

this week's coreverse

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Matthew 18.21-22

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Personal Bible Studies (inside pages)

- Personal studies that explore Scripture passages related to this week's sermon. They are broken down into three or four days. Some days you will simply read, meditate or think about a passage of scripture. Other days you will be asked to dig into a passage through reading, studying, answering questions.

Small Group Discussion (back page)

- Small group questions that connect with the sermon and your personal Bible study. This series of questions act as a funnel to help your group discussion flow in a purposeful point.
- If you are not in a small group, contact one of our small group staff members to get more information on ABC Small Groups or go to adable.org>smallgroups.

See adable.org>message recaps & Links for *ABCLinks* archives.



Part Five of a Five Part Sermon Series

"The Window of Forgiveness"

Chances are you've heard of a card game known as Texas Hold 'Em. It's a poker game where every player is given two cards known as "hole cards" that only he can see. There are also "community cards" laid out face up that everyone in the game sees. But it's the hole cards that make the game interesting. Not knowing what the other players are holding in those two cards means you don't know if you'll win or lose. Players may drop out and not show their hole cards. Eventually the "call" is made and players still in the game must expose their hole cards for all to see.

Several years ago I was in a group of guys I would have considered my closest friends. We would meet on a weekly basis for Bible study and accountability—at least we thought it was accountability. It was more like accountability, Texas Hold 'Em style. Each week we would all throw out our struggles and pray for each other. The struggles we shared were like community cards. They were things we weren't afraid of everyone seeing. All the time I thought this was accountability, but I was still holding back my cards. We were supposed to be showing our entire hand, but I couldn't bring myself to do so. I was too ashamed of what I held. I thought my cards were so dark, so awful, so ugly that if I put them on the table the guys in my circle would run in shock. So I played the game always keeping my cards to myself ... only playing with the community cards. That was until the day when God called me on my hole cards.

The cards I held tight to my chest were ripped from my hand and placed on the table for all to see. Sitting there with my head hung low, my darkest secrets exposed, I was afraid to look up. When I finally lifted my head I expected to see empty chairs pushed away in haste with the door closing behind the guys as they bolted from the room. I was not prepared for what I saw. When I looked up there were five sets of eyes looking straight back at me ... all welling up with tears. No one left the table. No one was throwing stones. No one was casting judgment. They just sat there and wept. They wept with me. They wept for me. They wept for themselves.

I wish I had words to explain the power of that moment. I was a dude who was badly broken, completely exposed and full of fear, guilt, and shame. Yet in an honest moment, where I expected rejection, I found acceptance. Where I expected deeper pain, I found healing. This concept of accountability and confession had its doors blown off. I was brought to a whole new reality of the power of sharing my burdens with my brothers. And that was just the beginning. Because with confession came something equally as powerful—I experienced forgiveness. For the first time I was real. And to my shock I was accepted in spite of who I really was. These guys showed the character of God as they loved me for who I was... and loved me enough to desire that I didn't stay that way.



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personal bible studies

Imagine you come to an old house. From the outside, you can tell it has some tremendous character and history. But it's a tad rundown and unkempt. As you walk up the driveway, you see that the trees and bushes are overgrown, hiding the beautiful windows that once brought light and fresh air to the inside. Dark and dreary is what you feel in the room as you step through the door. Smells of mustiness and mold are made more potent by the humidity in the room. Light and fresh air are what the place needs first and foremost.

You grab some tools and attempt to pry open the shutters, only to realize that the windows have been painted shut. It takes a lot of effort to free the windows from the caked paint. When the windows are hoisted open, you feel the light burst on your face and you smell the freshness of the outdoor air replace the musty, mildew stench. The building now has hope. Life is returning.

I once heard a Christian counselor with 30 years of experience say, "The vast majority of the issues that I face in my counseling practice stem from one thing—lack of forgiveness." Forgiveness could be the hardest thing to do in all human experiences. When people hurt us, they owe us. Forgiveness means to cancel the debt. Spend enough time on this broken planet and you'll get hurt. The alternative to forgiveness is to throw down that window to our soul and nail it shut. We'd often rather live in the stale, musty room of unforgiveness than do the hard work of the heart by canceling the debt.

This week's study examines the heart of God, and the high value he puts on forgiveness and confession.

Part One | The Parable

Read Matthew 18.21-35.

Peter begins this passage with an interesting question about how many times he is required to forgive someone. Jewish religious tradition said if someone caused you harm, you need to forgive them seven times. It was a good tradition that recognized how difficult forgiveness can be, and that it may actually take you a few attempts to truly forgive. However, what happens after seven? Technically, you were then free to be bitter and vengeful.

What was Jesus' answer to Peter's question? What was his point?

Does this mean we are free to become embittered at 491? ($7 \times 70 = 490$) Why do you suppose Jesus chose this formula for forgiveness?

Jesus follows his answer with a story, or parable. Take a minute to rewrite the story in your own words.

Who do the characters in the parable represent?

In one sentence, what is the point of the parable? What does this parable have to do with Jesus' conversation with Peter regarding forgiveness? What is the motivation for forgiveness according to this parable?

Refusing to forgive someone can look very different from person to person and from situation to situation. Some are clearly observed while others are more subtle. Read through the methods of unforgiveness below. Which ones have you used? Unforgiveness means you demand they "pay you back" for something they did to you. How do you demand payment?

Silence: *I'll collect by not speaking to them. That will make them pay!*

Cold, rigid, formal: *I'll collect by speaking to them but with coldness and distance. That will make them pay!*

Withholding kindness: *I'll collect by holding back something good. That will make them pay!*

Revenge: *I'll collect by getting back. That will make them pay!*

Gossip and slander: *I'll collect by turning others against them. That will make them pay!*

(fill in the blank) _____ : *I'll collect by _____ . That will make them pay!*

Meditate on this verse for a few minutes. Mull over this thought, "God forgave me—over and over." Let this verse retrain your heart. Ask God to give you the strength to let go of the emotional debts people owe you.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4.32

Part Two | Confession

Forgiving someone who has caused you harm is only one side of the forgiveness equation. What about when **you** hurt someone and need forgiveness? What about when you hurt God? Confession is the beginning of restoration. It simply means that you acknowledge you did wrong. It acknowledges sin. Mediate on these verses:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1.9

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. James 5.16

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Proverbs 28:13

Spend time in confession to God today. List the sins that come to mind. Finish each confession by claiming 1 John 1.9. Thank him for his forgiveness. Your relationship is restored because he forgives freely.

Is there someone from whom you need to seek forgiveness? Confess your sin without strings attached. Say you're sorry and don't attach a phrase that begins with the word, "but." Take responsibility.



small group discussion



leanin

What's your favorite revenge movie? Why do you think movies with a strong revenge theme are so popular?

lookdown

Read together Matthew 18.21-35.

Have someone retell the parable in this passage.

What conversation did this story follow? What do you think was behind Peter's question?

What do you think was Jesus' purpose for answering Peter's question the way he did (7 X 70)?

What is a good definition of forgiveness based on the parable? What's the motivation given for forgiveness?

lookout

Why is forgiveness so difficult? What alternatives to forgiveness do you see in our culture? What do people try to do instead?

lookin

What is your tendency when you don't want to forgive? How do you try to make people pay for hurting or disrupting you? (See the list on the previous page.)

Have someone read Ephesians 4.32. What is the motivation for forgiveness here?

When we have a heart that refuses to forgive, what does this say about how we view God forgiving us? How about the opposite—what does a forgiving heart say about our view of God?

Is there someone in your life you are really struggling to forgive? Is there someone you want to "pay back" for their sins against you? Take a moment to pray for this situation together. Ask God for the supernatural ability to let their debt against you go. Acknowledge that forgiveness can be a process, and that you know you may ask God for this strength over and over (70 x 7).

Read together the verses on confession on the previous page. Discuss the concept of confessing your sins to one another. Describe the type of relationship that would be conducive to confession. What needs to be within that relationship for this to work? Do you have what it takes?