

Living in God's Kingdom

Lesson 3: Forgiveness

Notes for the leader: This is the third in a series of lessons about "Living in the Kingdom." This lesson focuses on the parable of the Unmerciful Servant and on Jesus's teachings how we need to be willing to forgive others in order to experience forgiveness ourselves.

Introduction

Wherever he went, Jesus told people about the Kingdom of God. "The time has come," Jesus said. "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." (*Mark 1:15*). It was the last thing he talked with his disciples about before he ascended into heaven (*Acts 1:3*). Jesus told people that the Kingdom of God is not a **place**. For those who have invited God's spirit to live in them, he said, "**the Kingdom of God is within you.**" (*Luke 17:20-21*)

If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you are part of God's Kingdom. Being a member of the Kingdom of God means a **new relationship with God** -- one that starts **here and now and lasts forever!**

Jesus told many stories, or parables, to help people understand how things are different in the Kingdom of God from the way they are "in the world." One of the most important principles of the Kingdom of God, which we will be talking about tonight, is the law of forgiveness.

Let's try to come up with a definition of "forgiveness" ...

Notes for the leader: Ask for suggestions about what "forgiveness" means. Try to find a positive point to reinforce in each suggestion. Try to draw out that forgiveness assumes that something wrong has been done. And forgiveness means not seeking revenge for this wrong.

A good definition of forgiveness is that it is a **decision** to relate to someone who has done wrong to you **as if it had never happened**. That's what God does for us — He forgives us, **He relates to us as if we had never sinned**, and then **He expects us to do the same to each other!**

Let's look at a parable Jesus told about forgiveness.

Matthew 18:21-35

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.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.

Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

Matthew 18:21-35 (continued)

"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'

The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'

In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Let's break into small groups and spend a few minutes talking about this parable. We'll see if we can figure out what Jesus was trying to tell Peter about forgiveness.

Notes for the leader: Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.

Follow-up Discussion

Notes for the leader: The main purpose of the follow-up discussion is to make sure that each small group has grasped the main ideas of the study. You can skim quickly through the answers if it seems clear that everybody understands them. If not, pick a group that "got it" and have them explain the answers.

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you know who "got it" and who didn't.

1. Who was Jesus telling this story to? What was the situation?

In this case, Peter had come to Jesus with a specific question -- about forgiveness. Peter had obviously been thinking about forgiveness. He had probably heard what other rabbis said:

"If someone does wrong against you and you forgive him, God is pleased. If he does wrong again and you forgive him again, God is very pleased. If he does wrong again and you forgive him a third time, that is all God expects of you."

Peter suspected that Jesus would have a different teaching. He suspected Jesus would say that three times isn't enough. So he doubled what the other rabbis said -- and then added one: seven times!

2. In the story, what was the first servant's problem? What did the king do?

He owed a debt -- a big debt -- he couldn't pay. He pleaded for another chance. The king had mercy on him and forgave his debt completely.

3. What was the second servant's problem? What did the first servant do?

He owed a debt -- a small debt -- but he couldn't pay. He pleaded for another chance. The first servant refused to show mercy to him, and had him thrown in prison.

4. Explain verse 33 in your own words.

"I gave you another chance -- a new start. Why wouldn't you show mercy to your fellow servant the way I showed mercy to you?"

5. Why do you think God cares about whether we forgive each other?

He loves us, and sent His Son into this world to "reconcile" us to Himself. "Reconcile" means to "bring us together" — to heal the split between God and Man that was caused by our sin. As that healing takes place, we find that our other relationships start healing as well — broken relationships within families and other people ... even enemies!

If our relationship with God is healthy, and we allow His spirit to work in us, we will begin to change. God's spirit will first begin to change what we think about ourselves, and this will begin to change our relationships with other people. When we experience God's forgiveness, we begin to learn to forgive others, and we begin to learn how to ask for forgiveness when we have hurt or offended someone even those in our own families that we have hurt. Sometimes this is hard to do, but we learn that it is one of the ways things work in God's Kingdom.

6. Did Jesus's story answer Peter's question? How?

The story itself was about financial debt, but the "deeper meaning" is about spiritual debt, or sin. The first servant had not really experienced the King's forgiveness. Maybe he thought he really could repay his debt somehow, and that he didn't need to be forgiven. Since he didn't understand forgiveness, he couldn't see why he needed to forgive his fellow servant.

Thinking that you don't need forgiveness is about the most serious spiritual mistake a person can make, and that's why Jesus told the religious leaders they were in deep trouble, even though they were very "religious."

In the last verse, Jesus says that God's forgiveness to us is closely related to how we forgive other people. Can you think of another example — a very well-known example — when Jesus said something like this?

Yes ... the Lord's Prayer! Jesus said we should ask the Father to forgive us in the same way we forgive others! This is a basic spiritual law, as fundamental as the law of gravity is in the physical world. Forgiveness leads to forgiveness, just as revenge leads to more revenge.

Jesus is talking about an attitude here. Let's go back to Peter's original question: how many times should I forgive someone? I think what Jesus is saying to Peter is, "Think of it this way, Peter. How many times would you like God to forgive you? That's how many times you should be willing to forgive someone else."

How many people here have committed the same sin over and over again? Hold up your hands if you have. I know that I have, and know that I want God to keep forgiving me! Let's look at Luke 17:3-4 .

Luke 17:3-4

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."

Here, Jesus says that if someone does us wrong, we should "rebuke" him: bring it out, talk about it, and deal with it. If he "repents" — sincerely wants to change — we should forgive him, even if we've been through that same situation many times before!

The important principle here is "repentance," which means a sincere desire and willingness to change. If you ask God to forgive you without repentance, you are "playing God for a fool," which is a very dangerous thing to do! God is not a fool! We may have trouble knowing if a brother who has sinned against us is sincere in his repentance, but God knows whether we are sincere or not. John put it this way:

1 John 1:9 – 2:6

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

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.

The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him:

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

If you have committed yourself to follow Jesus, this should always be your goal -- to walk as Jesus did. To deal with people as Jesus did. To be willing to forgive people as Jesus did.

Notes for the leader: Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the "Take-Home Thoughts" handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cell-mate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!

Small-Group Discussion Questions

Forgiveness *(Matthew 18:21-35)*

1. Who was Jesus telling this story to? What was the situation?
2. In the story, what was the first servant's problem? What did the king do?
3. What was the second servant's problem? What did the first servant do?
4. Explain verse 33 in your own words.
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Take-home Thoughts About ...

Forgiveness *(Luke 12:13-34)*

Forgiveness is a **decision** to relate to somebody who has done wrong to you **as if it had never happened.**

This is what God does for us if we sincerely repent and confess our sins to Him – **He relates to us as if we had never sinned!**

God expects us to **do the same to each other!** He says that He will forgive us in the same way we forgive others. (Remember this when you pray the Lord's Prayer!)

Do you want God to keep forgiving you, even when you commit the same sin over and over? Then you should be willing to forgive someone who keeps sinning against you! *(See Luke 17:3-4, as well as Matthew 18:21-35.)*

Forgiveness doesn't work unless the sinner sincerely wants to change! God knows the difference between sins we commit on purpose and those we commit because we are weak, even though we're sincerely trying to change.

When we learn to **experience God's forgiveness**, we begin to **learn to forgive others**, and we begin **to learn how to ask for forgiveness** when we have hurt or offended someone even those in our own families.

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