



Unit 4: Disciple of Christ

Live life as a disciple of Christ and intentionally make disciples for the glory of God.

Lesson 7 Forgiving Others

Day One

Forgiveness from God

In Lesson 6: *New Covenant*, we studied God's foundational promise to forgive sin and restore fellowship with those who trust in His Son. The New Covenant is essential to our relationship with God and central to our ability to follow in Jesus' steps. Through this sacrificial blood covenant, we are forgiven in Christ and empowered to live as His righteous disciples.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of the New Covenant and calls for a deeper look. It is also an intensely personal subject, often involving emotional or physical wounds inflicted on us or our loved ones. The pain can run deep, leading to heartache, suffering, and even bitterness.

Who has not been sinned against? Few escape such experiences. We live in a fallen world where transgressions abound, and all are affected. Yet as disciples of Christ, we do not live by the world's standards of self-protection and retaliation, but by the way of God's kingdom—a life marked by grace and a call to forgive those who wrong us.

In Christ, all our sins are forgiven. Why then, since we have been forgiven so much, do many of us find it so difficult to forgive? It may be that we want to punish the offender, seek justice, take revenge, or protect ourselves from being hurt again. There is no single answer for everyone. But whatever the reason, choosing not to forgive reveals a lack of trust in God to work through our pain—and that lack of trust harms our relationship with Him.

Another issue we face when we withhold forgiveness is disobedience. Jesus clearly commanded us to forgive others. When we disobey, we grieve the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit's active presence in our lives, we lose peace, become bitter, and are ineffective in serving the Lord. Unforgiveness creates distance between us and God—hindering the Holy Spirit's work in and through us.

Action Step

1. Reflect on whether there is anyone—past or present—you have *not* forgiven. Now consider the alternatives: **To forgive:** Brings peace and a healthy relationship with God. **To withhold forgiveness:** Breeds bitterness and hinders your relationship with God. Which will you choose?

We hope you choose forgiveness. But if you are not yet ready, we pray that by the end of this lesson, you will be. The journey may be difficult—but you are never alone. The Holy Spirit walks with you, filling you with God’s love, empowering you to crucify the flesh, and helping you overcome every emotional and physical obstacle along the way.

In lesson 7, we will learn about (1) Forgiveness from God (pages 1–4) and (2) Forgiving Others (pages 4–22). Lesson 8 will cover (3) Forgiving Yourself and (4) Not Blaming God.

Blaming God is often a hidden form of unforgiveness. Because God is sovereign and all-knowing, we may wrestle with the thought: *He could have prevented this*. When tragedy strikes or deep wounds occur, we may feel angry, bitter, or disappointed with God—especially if we believe He failed to act in our best interest.

(1) Forgiveness from God

Biblical Definition: *Forgiveness* is a pardon, cancellation of an obligation, a punishment, and guilt. The Greek word *aphesis* (ἄφεσις), translated *forgive* in English Bible versions (such as in Colossians 1:14), refers to the *forgiveness* of sins—a full release from guilt.

Under the New Covenant, *forgiveness* is not merely a temporary passing over of sin (as in the Old Covenant), but a complete removal from the mind of God—a total taking away. The Greek word *aphesis* is also defined as release from captivity, liberation, deliverance.

Read Colossians 1:13-14 and answer questions 2–4:

For he [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves,¹ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:13–14

2. What has God rescued believers from (v. 13a)?
3. After believers are released from the dominion of darkness, where are they brought (v. 13b)?
4. In whom do we have redemption¹—the forgiveness of sins (vv. 13–14)?

We have all sinned (Romans 3:23), and every sin is ultimately against God. While our actions may harm others—or even ourselves—every wrong we commit is an act of rebellion against God and His commands. The lives of Joseph and David provide clear biblical examples of this truth.

Read Genesis. 39:7, 9 and answer questions 5–7:

¹ The word *redemption* refers to paying a required price—ransom—for someone’s release. In ancient times, this price could be paid to free a slave, a criminal, or a prisoner of war. Jesus described His death on the cross as “a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45).

...and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"
Genesis 39:7

"No one is greater in this house than I am. My master [Potiphar, Egyptian and captain of the guard] has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" Genesis 39:9

5. How did Satan try to tempt Joseph to sin (v. 7)?

6. Joseph has been sold into slavery by his brothers. He was alone and far from home. Did Joseph blame God or compromise His commands? Yes | No (Underline One)

7. Who did Joseph say he would be sinning against if he committed adultery (v. 9c)?

Joseph did not yield to the temptation—but was he hailed as a hero? No. Instead he was falsely accused and thrown into prison (a dungeon). Yet, years later God vindicated him, clearing him of all blame and exalting him to the second-highest position in Egypt.

In a far greater way, Jesus was also falsely accused and punished for the sins of others. But He, too, was vindicated by God—raised from the dead and now seated at the right hand of the Father.

When we do the right thing, we may still suffer for it. This does not mean God has forsaken us or that He is unaware. God has a purpose in everything He allows. He raised Joseph to leadership during a time of great famine to save many lives. Jesus was raised from the dead to save people from eternal death. This parallel is one reason many scholars see Joseph's life as a foreshadowing of Christ.

What about the times we do not do the right thing? David gave in to temptation and committed adultery with Bathsheba. He then compounded his sin by arranging for her husband, Uriah, to be sent to the front lines of battle—where he was killed.

While this is a tragic account, it also reveals God's great mercy to those who repent. David acknowledged that he had sinned against God and turned to Him for mercy and restoration.

8. Read Psalm 51:4. Who did David say he sinned against?

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Psalm 51:4

God forgave David, and his sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ. Christ's sacrificial death is retroactive, covering all sin—including the sins of those in the past who trusted in God (Hebrews 1:3, 10:10; Revelation 13:8). People today also deserve death for their sins, but we have been given eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

9. What does God's complete forgiveness through Christ mean to you personally, and how might it shape the way you live?

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answers #8–9 with your discipleship team.

If God did not forgive us, we would be condemned and punished. However, God chooses to forgive—through Christ Jesus. He does not blame, resent, or seek revenge for our sins.

10. Read Hebrews 8:12 and 10:17. In both these verses, the author of Hebrews is writing about the New Covenant. What does God choose to remember no more?

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."
Hebrews 8:12

Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." Hebrews 10:17

How often do you think about God rescuing you from the dominion of darkness through Jesus' death on the cross? How thankful are you that Jesus secured your release from captivity? Do you praise God for cancelling your punishment and choosing to remove your sin from His memory?

These are crucial questions we should all ask ourselves because the Christian life is based on God's forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice. As disciples we must understand and live out the principles of forgiveness to follow in Jesus' steps. It is only when we understand God's forgiveness of us can we begin to truly forgive others—and ourselves.

There is one group of Christians who take God's forgiveness seriously. It permeates their lives in a way that puzzles the world. Meet the Amish.

"The Amish are a group of people who follow the teachings of Jacob Ammann, a 17th-century citizen of Switzerland. It is a Protestant denomination, closely related to the Mennonites.² The Amish, most of whom live in the United States, follow simple customs and refuse to take oaths, vote, or perform military service. They shun modern technology and conveniences. Transportation for the Amish is by horse and buggy."³

Both the Amish and Mennonites come from the Anabaptist tradition, a 16th-century movement focused on adult baptism and discipleship. The Amish emphasize simplicity, nonviolence, and separation from the world. They stress imitating Jesus as a mark of the Christian life.⁴

—End Day One—

² Mennonites are members of a Protestant sect, mostly in the US and Canada, originating in Friesland (Netherlands) in the 16th century, emphasizing adult baptism and rejecting church organization, military service, and public office.

³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Amish-beliefs.html> (accessed 5/24/2023)

⁴ Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace, How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), 86–87.

Day Two

Forgiving Others

Walking as Jesus did, means forgiving others. Remember, forgiveness is the bedrock of the New Covenant, established in the blood sacrifice of Christ. Simply, disciples forgive others as we have been forgiven in Christ. We learn about forgiveness, pray to forgive, and choose to forget.

Yes, it is easier said than done. This is why *In Jesus Steps* includes focused lessons on forgiveness. After reading about (1) Forgiveness from God (pages 1–4), we turn to (2) Forgiving others (pages 4–22). Next, in lesson 8, we will address (3) Forgiving Yourself and 4) Not Blaming God.

While we are using the Amish as an example of forgiveness, this does not mean they should be emulated in every way. Faith communities model Jesus' teachings better in some respects than others. The Amish happen to practice forgiveness in a way that is worthy of study and imitation.

(2) Forgiving Others

Man Shoots 11, Killing 5 Girls, in Amish School

This was the *New York Times* headline reporting a devastating tragedy on October 2, 2006, at a small Amish schoolhouse near Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. The article read:

“The gunman, identified as Charles C. Roberts, 32, killed himself as the police stormed the West Nickel Mines Amish School, which is set back in a cornfield on a street of stone houses, barns and silos in Lancaster County, about 50 miles west of Philadelphia. Several of the wounded were in critical condition in area hospitals.”⁵

Tragedies like this put the challenge of forgiveness into sobering perspective. If we struggle to forgive neighbors, friends, or family for personal offenses or insults, how can anyone forgive a man who murdered five innocent girls?

The Amish community was devastated. Grief ran deep. Would they blame God? Would their faith endure? The authors of “Amish Grace” describe the communities' response:

The schoolhouse shooting in quiet Amish country shocked the world. Then, with a swiftness that also startled the world, the Nickle Mines Amish forgave the killer and offered grace to his family.

Even as outsiders were responding with compassion for the Amish community in the wake of the shooting, the Amish themselves were doing another kind of work. Softly, subtly, and quietly, they were beginning the difficult task of forgiveness.

⁵ David Kocieniewski and Gary Gately. “Amish School Shooting Stuns Community.” *The New York Times*, October 3, 2006. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/03/us/03_amish.html (accessed 5/24/2023).

The Amish quickly realized that Robert's widow and children were also victims of the shooting—victims who had lost not only a husband and father, but also their privacy. Unlike the Amish victims, the Roberts family had to bear the shame of a loved one inflicting such pain on innocent children and families. Within a few hours of the shooting, some Amish people were already reaching out to the killer's family.⁶

On the day of the tragedy, three Amish men visited Roberts' widow, Amy, and her children. They expressed sorrow and assured her they held nothing against them. One of the men also visited the killer's father, offering forgiveness and comfort. In the days that followed, more Amish families came to the Roberts home—offering support, grace, and even gifts.

But what about the parents of the slain children—did they forgive, too? Yes. Several of them invited members of the Roberts family to attend their children's funerals. When Charles Roberts was later buried, thirty-five to forty Amish people attended his funeral to show compassion and support.

Only a day after losing two granddaughters, an Amish grandfather was approached by a reporter. She asked:

Do you have any anger toward the gunman's family?
No.

Have you already forgiven them?
In my heart, yes.

How is that possible?
*Through God's help.*⁷

How is it possible to forgive? Through God's help. Through God's grace.

11. Read Philippians 4:13. How do we forgive others?

I can do all this through him [Jesus] who gives me strength. Philippians 4:13

Through the New Covenant, we are promised the strength of Jesus to accomplish whatever God commands or calls us to do—including forgiving those who have hurt or even abused us. It is not easy, but it is possible. God would not expect us to do something if it were impossible.

Forgiving someone does not mean we excuse or approve of their sin. The Amish did not condone Roberts' actions, and neither should we. God does not approve of sin, yet He calls us to forgive. Scripture teaches that judgment belongs to God alone.

⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁷ Ibid., 45.

Judgment lies in God's hands—not ours. It is not our job to judge, seek revenge, or demand satisfaction. Our role is to extend mercy, just as God has shown mercy to us. We must always remember that Jesus died a violent death to pay for our sins—and the sins of the world.

12. Read Colossians 3:13. What does the Bible tell believers about forgiving?

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Colossians 3:13 (Grievance is a cause for complaint, blame, or rebuke for a real or imagined wrong.)

We are called to forgive as the Lord forgave us. Jesus paid a great price so we could be forgiven. Yet, so often, we struggle to forgive even the smallest insult or neglect. This contrast is the focus of the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:23–35.

Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a king or master who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. These were not household servants, but subordinate officials. One man was brought before the king who owed him ten thousand bags of gold—but he could not repay it. When the king ordered that the man's possessions, including his wife and children, be sold to repay the debt, the servant begged for mercy. The king took pity on him and forgave the entire debt.

Later, that same man came across a fellow servant who owed him a hundred silver coins. The fellow servant begged for patience and mercy—just as the man had done with the king. But instead of showing compassion, he refused and had the man thrown into prison until the debt was repaid. When the other servants saw what had happened, they reported it to the king (master).

We addressed this parable in Unit 3: *Christian Leadership*, Lesson 15 on *Spiritual Warfare*. You may recall that unforgiveness is one of the enemy's key tactics against us. Forgiving others is central to discipleship, so it is worth revisiting what God expects from us.

Read Matthew 18:32–35 and answer questions 13–15:

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.’³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” Matthew 18:32–35

13. Why should the man have forgiven the debt of his fellow servant (vv. 32–33)?

14. How does our heavenly Father view and act upon His children who do not forgive others from their hearts (vv. 34–35)?

15. What does it mean to forgive from our hearts?

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answers #13–15 with your discipleship team.

Jesus tells us we must forgive from our hearts—genuinely pardoning those who have wronged us. This means letting go of grudges and thoughts of revenge. We do not withhold love, affection, or responsible kindness from the person.

Those who have physically harmed us or our loved ones are often seen as enemies. Even insults or offenses can make someone feel like an adversary. Yet we are not only to forgive, but also to pray for and bless them. When we forgive from the heart, we can sincerely ask God to enrich and prosper their lives.

Read Luke 6:27–28 and answer questions 16–17:

“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Luke 6:27–28 (Enemies include personal and national foes. To curse is to cause harm or persecute. To bless is to ask for God’s favor, benefit, and well-being.)

16. How are believers supposed to treat their enemies?

17. Why is it so difficult to ask God to bless those who have hurt you?

18. Read Luke 6:35. What are two reasons for loving and blessing our enemies?

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Luke 6:35

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answers #16–18 with your discipleship team.

To forgive from our hearts also removes excuses for avoiding the offender—unless the person remains a threat to our physical or emotional well-being. Jesus does not expect us to put ourselves in danger with someone who is physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive. Use godly wisdom and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in each situation.

In some cases, the offender is no longer present. This was true in the tragedy faced by the Amish community in 2006. Revenge—or even avoidance—was not possible. Charles Roberts, the gunman, had taken his own life after committing the crime at the schoolhouse and posed no further threat to the children.

Roberts was not Amish, but lived about a mile and a half from the Amish community with his wife and three children. He drove an eighteen-wheel milk truck pumping milk from several of the Amish farms. Yet beneath his ordinary life and daily routine, something dark was unfolding.

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What caused Roberts to commit this horrific crime?

Unforgiveness. Roberts blamed God for the death of his infant daughter, Elise, who died just 20 minutes after birth—an event that had occurred nine years earlier. He carried anger and hatred toward God, and in his twisted reasoning, he planned to get even by punishing Christian girls.⁸

Killing children to punish God is ludicrous. Yet, if we are honest, there are moments when we may also feel anger toward God—when He does not act as we hoped or expected. We may think our troubles would disappear if only God had done something differently. We will talk further about this in section (4), *Not Blaming God*, but first, consider a biblical perspective:

What was the Amish’s response to the death of their children?

Unlike Roberts, the Amish did not blame God for the loss of their children. Instead, they believe in God’s sovereign rule. They trust God and are willing to place everything, including death in His hands. The Amish do not require God to explain disappointment, tragedy, or injustice.

Still, the parents as well as the community were devastated and in pain. They just did not let their pain dictate their feeling toward God, Roberts, or his family. The parents repeated many times that their children were safe in the arms of Jesus. “An Amish woman in Iowa spoke for hundreds of Amish people: ‘My mind went to the following song many times: ‘Safe in the arms of Jesus / Safe on His gentle breast / There by His love o’er shaded / Sweetly my soul shall rest.’”⁹ And they forgave.

19. From the above two paragraphs, how are the responses of Roberts and the Amish to the death of their children differ?

The forgiving response of the Amish to the tragedy took center-stage on a national and international level. From the world’s perspective, the Amish were living out the Christian mandate to forgive. But how did they do it? Many Christians, regardless of the denomination, struggle to follow this biblical model and wonder, *How is it possible to forgive such a great offense as this, when I even have difficulty forgiving small ones?*

20. Why do you think it is so difficult to forgive those who have hurt us or our loved ones?

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answers #19–20 with your discipleship team.

—End Day Two—

⁸ Roberts also planned to molest the girls before killing them. The molestation did not happen because of the police’s quick response. However, it seems clear that Roberts was mentally ill and led by the devil.

⁹ Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver, *Amish Grace*, 27–28.

Day Three

Biblical View of Forgiveness

“Sister Joan Chittister, writing for the *National Catholic Reporter*, suggested that ‘it was the Christianity we all profess but which [the Amish] practiced that left us stunned.’ The Nickle Mines Amish, Chittister concluded, astounded the twenty-first century world the way the earliest Christians astounded the Roman world: simply by being ‘Christian.’¹⁰

The Amish do not only profess certain Christian truths; they teach, practice, and live them. Discipleship is central, with a strong focus on the New Testament and following Jesus. Forgiveness is one of those truths, and it is practiced daily. As a result, their forgiving response is not contrived or prearranged—it is the natural outflow of a life shaped by Scripture.

Nevertheless, some observers have seen contradictions between their forgiveness of outsiders and their practice of shunning. Social shunning occurs when an individual has violated Amish community guidelines and is excommunicated from the church. It is a form of intentional social avoidance.

“Amish practice shunning out of ‘tough love’ in order to get a deviant person to see the error in his ways, change behavior, and re-affirm his commitment to the church. Without rules and shunning, the integrity of the Amish church would rapidly disintegrate. Passages often cited in support of shunning include Matthew 18; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; 1 Timothy 5; 2 Corinthians 13:10 and numerous others.”¹¹

We can all deviate from the truth. Sin is universal. All humans—including Christians—sin. Every sin is a debt we owe to God, one we cannot repay. This is where the truth of “*Jesus paid it all*” becomes deeply personal. Jesus paid the debt for our sins so that we could be made holy and righteous in God’s sight. God’s forgiveness is not based on anything we do, but entirely on the blood of His Son.

When believers sin, we are called to confess and ask for forgiveness in the blood sacrifice of Christ. It is through His blood that we are completely forgiven. Since we have been forgiven so much and because we have the Holy Spirit within us, we forgive others. We do not forgive in our own strength, but in the grace God provides.

No matter how difficult it may be to forgive those who have wronged us, we should desire and seek God’s help to do so. As new creations in Christ, we are called to a higher standard. If we accept God’s grace for our own forgiveness but refuse to forgive others, it may point to a deeper issue in our faith.

Does our refusal to forgive others cancel God’s forgiveness toward us? Scholars have differing views. Most say it does not affect your salvation. Some believe it might. Still others suggest that a consistently unforgiving heart may reveal that a person was never truly saved. Whatever the

¹⁰ Ibid., 63–64.

¹¹ Amish America. <https://amishamerica.com/why-do-the-amish-practice-shunning/> (accessed 5/31/2023).

interpretation, the apostle Paul gives us wise counsel: “*Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2:12).

Jesus taught His disciples how to pray in what is now called *The Lord’s Prayer*—or the *Our Father*. The third line of the prayer asks our heavenly Father to forgive our debts (sins, transgressions, wrong-doings) as we also have forgiven those who have debts (sins, transgressions, wrong-doings) against us (Matthew 6:12). After teaching the prayer, Jesus emphasized this point, making clear the seriousness of forgiveness.

Read Matthew 6:12, 14–15 and answer questions 21–22:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. Matthew 6:12

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. Matthew 6:14–15

21. If we forgive other people when they sin against us, will our heavenly Father also forgive us (v. 14)? Yes | No (Underline One)

22. If we do *not* forgive others when they sin against us, will our heavenly Father forgive our sins (v. 15)? Yes | No (Underline One)

The Amish take these verses—and many others on forgiveness—seriously. An Amish woman interviewed a few days after the shooting said, “We have to forgive. We have to forgive him [Roberts] in order for God to forgive us.”¹² They genuinely believe and practice this biblical truth.

The Lord’s Prayer holds a high place of reverence and devotion within the Amish community. It is recited not only at every church service, but also during families’ morning and evening prayers, as well as at all church functions, including weddings and funerals.

23. Read Luke 6:37. Fill in the blank: Forgive, and you will be _____ (v. 37c).

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” Luke 6:37 (In this verse, “forgive” is an imperative verb—a command.)

24. Read Mark 11:25. What must we do so that our heavenly Father will forgive our sins?

“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” Mark 11:25 (In this verse, “forgive” is an imperative verb—a command.)

¹² Ibid., 49.

Jesus taught in Matthew, Mark, and Luke that we must forgive in order to be forgiven. It is not a lesson that everyone wants to hear. Some of us want to believe that we are forgiven in the blood of Christ no matter what we do—or fail to do. However, that belief is not supported by Scripture.

In Day One we learned that all sin is ultimately against God. Yes, we can sin against others, including ourselves, but sin is *always*, at its core, rebellion against God. Our transgressions oppose Him because they violate His commands and instructions.

The Bible is clear—we are commanded to forgive others. When we refuse to forgive, we are sinning against God (Matthew 6:14–15; James 4:17; Ephesians 4:32).

25. Have you ever considered that your unforgiveness toward others is a sin against God?
Yes | No (Underline One)

26. How will understanding that your unforgiveness is a sin against God affect your desire and ability to forgive others from your heart?

Jesus' teaching on forgiveness goes even deeper. Not only are we commanded to forgive others, but we are also called to do so *repeatedly*. No matter how many times someone sins against us, we are to continue forgiving.

27. Read Matthew 18:21–22. How many times are we to forgive those who sin against us?

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Matthew 18:21–22

Jesus is not giving a specific number of times a person must be forgiven. Rather, He is making the point that we are to continually forgive. Again, this does not mean we should put ourselves in harm's way or tolerate physical or emotional abuse. Jesus also taught that we are to be intelligent, prudent, sensible, and wise in the decisions we make, as well as pure, gentle, loving, and innocent (see Matthew 10:16). In other words, we are not called to needlessly place ourselves in dangerous or abusive situations.

Forgiving others is a tall order for most people. Some have endured horrific experiences, and the pain is almost unbearable. Others are so sensitive that even the least slight can send them into a tizzy. Yet, no matter how severe or minor the pain, we are commanded to forgive from our hearts.

It may be a difficult, long, and arduous process but forgiveness always begins with a single step : a willingness for God to work in our hearts. We must recognize that we cannot truly forgive in our own strength and humbly seek God's help.

The following five-point guide offers helpful advice for learning and working through the process of forgiving the people in your life— whether from the past, present, and future.

How do we forgive from our hearts?

(1) Pray for the Desire to Forgive: Pray for God to give you the desire to forgive all who have sinned against you. Ask God to work in your heart to always and sincerely forgive others.

(2) Seek God’s Perspective on the Pain: Tell God how and why you were hurt and ask His perspective on the situation. Ask God why you are having such a difficult time forgiving when He has forgiven you so much.

When someone hurts us or a loved one, whether physically or emotionally, it can cause psychological damage. We begin to believe the devil’s lies that we are not worthy and not loved either by God or by other people. These lies can cause loneliness, anxiety, anger, depression, and lack of confidence. We then see the perpetrator as the enemy who caused our inner pain. We may even feel entitled to the “noble” cause of blame and anger toward this person.

However, it is not “noble” to blame, hate, or hold unforgiveness in our hearts. It is noble to absolve, love, and forgive. It is honorable to be merciful. Although we may desire to be merciful and compassionate, it does not often come easy. We need to embrace Jesus.

(3) Embrace Jesus. He is *the* authority and role model on forgiveness.

Read Luke 23:34 and answer questions 28–29:

Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. Luke 23:34

28. What did Jesus pray while nailed to the cross for humanity’s sins?

29. Why did Jesus say they did not know what they were doing?

Luke 23:34 records the first of seven utterances Jesus made from the cross. Even as He was suffering, Jesus acted with mercy and purpose. It is likely that Jesus was being nailed to the cross when He called out to His Father to forgive His enemies. Jesus was praying for the Roman soldiers who were carrying out His execution because they did not know Jesus was the Son of God. Jesus may have also been praying for the rank-and-file Jews ignorant of the fact that their Messiah was being executed. He may have even had all sinners in mind.¹³

Jesus immediately began interceding for those torturing Him. Full of mercy and compassion, His forgiveness came from the heart. Jesus was not saying empty words—He meant what He said.

¹³ <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/23-34.htm> (accessed 6/3/2023)

Notice also that Jesus was not complaining or grumbling against His circumstances or others. His focus was on God the Father and forgiveness for His adversaries.

30. Read Acts 7:59–60. Before Stephen died (fell asleep), what did he cry out (v. 60)?

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. Acts 7:59–60

Stephen, disciple and first martyr, willingly and enthusiastically walked in Jesus’ steps. Embracing his calling as a follower of Christ, Stephen asked the Lord to forgive his murderers—then he died.

Stephen’s final words show that forgiveness is possible even in deep injustice. He trusted God’s greater purpose more than his pain—leading to the next point in forgiving from the heart.

(4) Recognize God’s sovereignty in suffering. Suffering at the hands of another can be used for good, both now and eternally. Consider that your antagonist is giving you an opportunity for blessings or good for you and other people.

Although the Amish parents who lost children in the schoolhouse massacre recognized God’s sovereignty, they still suffered in the loss of their loved ones. The whole tight-knit Amish community grieved but continued to trust God, not questioning His goodness and mercy.

How could God bring good out of such a tragedy? Certainly, the Amish’s forgiveness and loving response will be rewarded in heaven. But their reaction also brought comfort, healing, and testimony to the Roberts family and to people around the world. The excerpt below from *Amish Grace* gives a glimpse of how forgiveness can become a powerful witness of God’s love:

These concrete acts of grace were not lost on the widow’s family. “It’s hard to accept what has happened,” said one of Amy’s relatives, “but the kindness of the Amish has helped us tremendously . . . It helps us to know that they forgave us.” Another relative agreed, echoing what many commentators had already noted: “If this had happened to some of our own [non-Amish] people there would have been one lawsuit after another. . . But this experience brought everybody closer together.” In a public statement released ten days after the shooting, the Roberts family specifically thanked the local Amish community: “Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.” A confidant of the killer’s parents said, “All of the expressions of forgiveness provided a great freedom that enabled them to move on with healing despite all the sadness and sorrow. It gave them hope for the future and released them from the heavy burden.”¹⁴

—End Day Three—

¹⁴ Ibid., 47–48.

Day Four
The Replay Button

The ability of the Amish to forgive became the focus of hundreds of news stories around the world. In doing so, they modeled Christ, and the gospel was being preached through their actions. Their real-life response to suffering inspired many—especially fellow Christians—to consider what it means to truly forgive.

31. How does knowing that God can use suffering for good help you forgive more easily?

32. Read Romans 5:3–4. What is one way God uses suffering to your benefit?

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. Romans 5:3–4

Sometimes God allows us to be mistreated in order to sanctify us—to make us more holy. Pain often turns our focus inward, prompting us to examine parts of our lives we might otherwise ignore. In seeking God during these moments, we are transformed in ways that ultimately draw us closer to Him.

33. Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–4. What is one way God uses your suffering to benefit others?

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

As God comforts us in our pain, He also equips us to extend that same comfort and understanding to others—even those who have hurt us. This brings us to the final point in learning how to forgive from the heart:

(5) Mature in empathy. Develop empathy for your antagonist, who like you, is made in the image of God. Understanding the reasons behind another person’s actions can help soften our hearts and make forgiveness possible. Sometimes people hurt us without realizing it, or they may be carrying wounds that cause them to act out toward others. Hurting people hurt people.

Definition: *Empathy* is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person.

People—made in the image of God—live in a fallen world. Because of this, it is difficult to fully understand the pain others may have endured, whether in childhood or adulthood. Each of us has been hurt in different ways, and in turn, we have also hurt others.

Adding to this is a deeper reality: we have a spiritual enemy. Satan is constantly at work, seeking to bring ruin to every human life. He tempts people to wound one another, knowing that

unforgiveness is a sin that not only separates us from God but destroys relationships. The enemy wants to keep us stuck in pain, isolation, and resentment.

34. What do the virtues in Colossians 3:12 have in common with empathy?

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Colossians 3:12

When God forgives us, He chooses to forget our sins. *"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more"* (Hebrews 10:17). While God can forget, we struggle. Even after forgiving someone, we may still replay the offense in our minds.

It is as though we have a mental *replay button*—one we press again and again. There in full living color, is the transgressor saying, doing, or hurting us all over again. The torment can feel raw and relentless. Each replay not only stings afresh, but begins to etch itself into our hearts, leaving deep emotional scars.

This kind of repetitive thinking is called rumination. It means dwelling on painful events and the emotions tied to them. Left unchecked, rumination can give rise to bitterness, despair, anxiety, revenge, and the loss of joy. In the next section, we will explore how Scripture guides us in overcoming these five damaging emotions that often accompany unforgiveness.

Overcoming Five Negative Emotions

(1) Bitterness

Definition: The Greek word *pikria* (πικρία) translated as *bitterness*, was used to describe plants that produce inedible or poisonous fruit. Figuratively, it refers to a hostile, resentful, or angry attitude—characterized by deep resentment or animosity. In English, the word *bitterness* is defined as anger and disappointment at being treated unfairly; resentment —holding onto feelings of resentment.

Read Ephesians 4:31–32 and answer questions 35–37:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.
³² *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* Ephesians 4:31–32

35. Can you get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger if you are dwelling on negative feelings about how you have been treated? Yes | No (Underline One)

Definition: *Slander* is harmful, abusive speech that damages another person's reputation. It includes reviling, evil speaking, and making false or damaging statements about someone.

36. How can bitterness escalate into slander, character assassination, or badmouthing?

The Bible teaches that whatever we are thinking about will eventually come out through our words (Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 15:18–19.) If we are ruminating on how a person has wronged us and what a terrible person they are, these thoughts will flow out of our hearts and into our conversations with other people. We may begin to disparage, insult, or unfairly criticize that person in conversations with others.

But even if the person is truly at fault, God’s Word calls us to a higher standard. Jesus commanded us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43–45). Slander, fueled by bitterness, not only disobeys this command but further hardens our own hearts.

We pray for our enemies in various ways—but to be sure—we pray they recognize their sin and sin no more. Forgiveness is not blind to real injustice and wrongdoing. Those who break the law should be held accountable by the proper authorities. In fact, being called to account is often in the best interest of the offender, as it creates an opportunity for them to admit their sin, repent, and turn to God.

The Bible also gives clear instructions on reconciliation (Matthew 18:15–17), which we will address in Lesson 8. But before reconciliation is even possible, we must learn to forgive—and to forgive quickly. Forgiveness does not depend on the other person’s repentance or apology. It is a choice we make in obedience to God.

37. How are we to get rid of bitterness, slander and every form of malice (v. 32)?

We eliminate bitterness, slander, and all forms of evil by forgiving from our hearts. We replace wicked thoughts of unforgiveness by choosing to be good, kind, caring, compassionate, and tenderhearted toward those who have wronged us. This is not something we can do on our own—Jesus will enable us to overcome evil with good.

But even after we forgive, lingering emotional pain can still weigh heavily on our hearts. One common result of unresolved hurt and deep sorrow is despair.

(2) Despair

The Greek word for *despair* in 2 Corinthians 4:8 is *exaporoumeno* (ἐξαπορούμενοι), which means *to be utterly at a loss, to feel completely trapped, or to see no way out*. In English, *despair* is defined as the complete loss or absence of hope.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:8–10 and answer questions 38–39:

*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;
9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*
2 Corinthians 4:8–10

38. Even though the apostle Paul was persecuted and struck down, why did he not fall into despair (v. 10)?

39. What does it mean to you to carry in your body the death of Jesus—and how do you do that in your daily life?

Even when despair does not take hold, our minds can still become restless. Lingering questions, uncertainty, and emotional pain often lead us into the next negative emotion—anxiety.

(3) Anxiety

Definition: The Greek word for *anxiety* in Philippians 4:6 is *merimnate* (μεριμνᾶτε), which means to be pulled apart or distracted with care; to be overly concerned or worried. In English, *anxiety* refers to intense unease, nervousness, or fear about future events or outcomes.

40. Read Philippians 4:6. If we are experiencing anxiety over how we have been or how we are being treated, what does the Bible tell us to do?

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4:6

When anxiety about injustice or mistreatment festers, it can easily grow into a desire to get even. That leads us to our next emotion—revenge.

(4) Revenge

Definitions: The Greek word for *revenge* in Romans 12:19 is *ekdikountes* (ἐκδικοῦντες), also means to *avenge*. *Revenge* is the act of harming or punishing someone in return for a wrong. *Avenge* is similar, but emphasizes retaliation for a personal offense.

41. Read Romans 12:19. When we, or another person is wronged, what does God's Word tell us to do and not to do?

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. Romans 12:19

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answers #31–41 with your discipleship team.

We are not to seek personal revenge but must report wrongdoing—not only for our safety but for others' as well. God has appointed civil authorities for our protection (Romans 13:1–5).

The final negative emotion—*loss of joy*—will be addressed next on Day Five.

—End Day Four—

Day Five

More Thoughts on Forgiveness

To recap from Day Four, the “replay button” refers to repetitive thinking or rumination—dwelling on negative feelings, their causes, and consequences. Focusing on past hurts can lead to bitterness, despair, anxiety, revenge, and ultimately, the loss of joy. Today, we turn to what God’s Word says about this final emotional consequence.

(5) Loss of Joy

Whether we have been attacked aggressively or passively, we need to respond in the way Jesus has prescribed—forgive from the heart. As with the other negative emotions, replaying our hurts over and over again can be self-defeating and cause us to lose our joy.

The cure for loss of joy—and all the other consequences of ruminating on our pain—is to focus on Jesus. The Bible tells us to fix our eyes on Him. We are to consider Jesus, who endured opposition from sinners and yet, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross.

Read Hebrews 12:2–3 and answer questions 42–45:

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:2–3 (Scorn in this verse is to disregard; make light of; take no account.)

42. What was Jesus’ response to the shame of the cross and the people’s rejection of Him (v. 2)?

43. Do you think Jesus ever ruminated on how He was treated on earth? Yes | No (Underline One)

44. To keep from pressing the replay button in your mind, what should you consider (v. 3)?

45. How will you scorn (disregard; make light of; take no account) of the shame and pain from those who have sinned against you?

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answers #42–45 with your discipleship team.

Not only are we to consider Jesus so that we will not grow weary and lose heart, but we are also called to carry His death in our bodies (2 Corinthians 4:10). Just as Jesus died for our sins, we are to put to death all sin—including unforgiveness and ruminating on past offenses. We die to sin and live in true righteousness and holiness. But we do not do this on our own. The resurrection power of Christ lives within us to accomplish what would otherwise be impossible.

This is a good time to remember the Great Commission and our mission on earth. Paul and the other apostles suffered for sharing the gospel. Why are we suffering? If your suffering is for the sake of the gospel, we thank God for you. May you continue to stand firm in your faith.

However, for some of us, Satan may be trying to thwart our calling to make disciples—not with outright persecution but through relational wounds and offenses from those closest to us. These attacks keep us focused on ourselves rather than on Christ and the gospel.

Remember this: the devil can *only* operate within the boundaries of God’s will, and he has no more power in your life than what you allow. Jesus is greater—vastly more powerful than this pathetic fallen angel. Christ suffered according to God’s will and saved the world. Think of your suffering as a counterpart to the suffering of Christ. If you are suffering in God’s will, pray that others would see the power of the risen Christ in you.

It is also useful to prayerfully consider your suffering. Did you bring it on yourself by being rude, careless, or selfish? Are you seeking victim status? Are you irresponsibly placing yourself in danger? We may find that we are not “without sin.”

We have been given free will. Discipline your thinking. Decide to break your replay button. The Amish certainly did. They did not want the schoolhouse to become a memorial to their children’s deaths or a tourist attraction. To bring closure to this painful period, the Amish had the schoolhouse torn down about a week after the funerals.

The Amish hired outsiders to tear down the schoolhouse, load every scrap onto dump trucks, and haul it to a land fill. Effectively, they buried bad memories and started over. It was not about forgetting their beloved children, but about removing the visible tragedy from their midst. The grounds are now farmland, and a new schoolhouse was built in a different location with a different design.¹⁵

As we discussed in Day Four, replaying hurtful actions, words, rejections, and even instances of being ignored is neither healthy nor wise. The following will be helpful.

Top Three Ways to Stop Negative Thoughts:

- (1) Pray to stop the ruminating (Philippians 4:6)
- (2) Focus on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2–3)
- (3) Carry Jesus’ death in your own body (2 Corinthians 4:10).

Other Practical Ways to Stop Replaying Bad Memories:

- (4) Practice self-talk with Scripture, especially when the transgressor has made you feel less than others. Tell yourself who the Bible says you are and how to forgive and handle

¹⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/amish-schoolhouse-demolished-before-dawn/> (accessed 6/9/2023)

adversity. For example, disregard, make light of, and take no account of shame, disgrace, humiliation, or embarrassment (Hebrews 12:2). Care not what others think.

(5) Keep your mind and body active with good deeds and good works.

(6) Journal your thoughts, pray, and seek an outcome that will glorify God.

(7) Redirect your thoughts by reading the Bible, Christian books etc.

(8) Remind yourself—*Love keeps no record of wrongs* (1 Corinthians 13:5c).

46. What bad memories do you need to bury, and how will you do it?

Before ending this lesson, I want to share thoughts from R.T. Kendall's book, *Total Forgiveness*.¹⁶ It is an excellent resource, and I highly recommend it if you are struggling with unforgiveness.

Expect obstacles from your true adversary, the devil, when you are trying to forgive. He has all kinds of tricks to make your job more difficult. He may send thoughts your way like: *You are different, You are the exception to the rule. Surely, there are good reasons why your adversary deserves God's wrath . . . and yours.*

Sometimes, in our efforts to forgive, certain circumstances may arise that seem providential—as if God does not mind whether or not we forgive our enemies, family, or friends. But remember, we have a foe who wants us to disobey God and hold on to unforgiveness.¹⁷

This is true in all of the ways we follow in Jesus' steps. We seek God's will and Word, trust in the Spirit's guidance, receive godly advice, understand circumstances, and resist the devil. But be aware—if we are living in sin, such as unforgiveness, it may become harder to discern God's will and ways.

Another tactic of the devil is to tempt us to justify our sins. We may think, *I might hold on to unforgiveness, but at least I've never murdered or raped (or fill in the blank) anyone.* In other words, we convince ourselves our "small" sins are harmless compared to others' more serious ones. But this self-righteousness is a sin in itself. God knows what we are capable of and may allow us to fall into the very sin we are judging.¹⁸ Falling into the exact evil might be what finally cures our self-righteousness.

47. What kind of obstacles have you faced from the devil in trying to forgive those who have hurt or offended you?

¹⁶ R.T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness*, (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma Publishing, 2007).

¹⁷ Ibid., 181–182.

¹⁸ Ibid., 176–177.

Accountability: Be prepared to share your answers to #46–47 with your discipleship team.

After sharing the story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50), R.T. Kendall offers seven lessons drawn from Joseph’s interactions with his brothers when they meet again in Egypt. These self-explanatory points provide a powerful model of deep, godly forgiveness:

- (1) Do not let anyone know what someone said about you or did to you.
- (2) Do not allow anyone to be afraid of you or intimidated by you.
- (3) We will want them to forgive themselves and not feel guilty.
- (4) We will let them save face.
- (5) We will protect them from their greatest fear.
- (6) It is a lifelong commitment.
- (7) We will pray for them to be blessed.¹⁹

The temptation to return to bitterness and recall what had taken place is real. Some days will be harder than others, but we must be prepared to keep on forgiving—forever.

Kendall adds this wise caution:

“I must add one caution: never go to a person you have had to forgive and say, ‘I forgive you.’ This will be counterproductive every time unless it is to a person that you know is yearning for you to forgive them. Otherwise, you will create a stir with which you will not be able to cope. They will say to you, ‘For what?’ It is my experience that nine out of ten people I have had to forgive sincerely do not feel they have done anything wrong. It is up to me to forgive them from my heart—and then keep quiet about it.”²⁰

This concludes our study of two aspects of forgiveness: (1) Forgiveness from God, and (2) Forgiving Others. Lesson 8 will address: (3) Forgiving Yourself and (4) Refusing to Blame God.

—End of Day Five and Lesson 7—

Next—Lesson 8: Forgiving Yourself; Refusing to Blame God, Unit 4: Disciple of Christ

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¹⁹ Ibid., 57–74.

²⁰ Ibid., 76.