



from the Market Harborough Methodist Circuit

Session 1.5: FORGIVENESS

INTRODUCTION: THINKING ABOUT FORGIVENESS

It is part of God's nature to be forgiving and merciful, and we see this throughout the Old Testament in God's relationship with the people of Israel. In their Covenant relationship, God gives them laws to live by and ways of worship by which they can show their sorrow for sins and be assured of God's mercy and forgiveness. It is a relationship that was not always straightforward, and reached breaking-point with various leaders who clearly strayed from God's way on a massive scale. When the nation seemed to be turning completely against God, the consequences were exile from their land and a sense that God had left his holy Temple, separated from the people. Despite this, God held them forever in love and longing, and promised through the prophets that one day God would return, the Messiah would come, and this would bring in a new age of 'forgiveness of sins', when the Covenant is renewed and opened up to all nations.

Through Jesus Christ, the Messiah, we are offered our place in this Covenant, which begins for us with forgiveness of sins and a commitment to try to live God's way. This is always expressed clearly in Christian baptism, confirmation, and when we renew our

commitment in our Methodist Covenant service each year, and it is also expressed in prayers of confession, the Lord's Prayer, and every time we share Holy Communion. Forgiveness is part of what God offers us in our ongoing relationship.

Contrary to how we sometimes picture it, forgiveness has *always* been part of God's nature; God has always been able and willing to forgive. What Jesus does for us in his death and resurrection is not to enable God to forgive, but rather to open up the New Covenant to all. It begins with an awareness of where we have been opposed to God in the past, a resolution to live now in the way of Christ, confession and the assurance of forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life with God as redeemed people: forgiven, loved and free.

In our relationship with God and one another, however, we are not perfect, and we still need the ongoing mercy and forgiveness of God time and time again.

In the reality of life on earth, forgiveness is not an easy subject. When God forgives, there is also the expectation of repentance (turning away from sin). Sometimes this can be hard, when we have ingrained human habits or compulsions, and we may need help or support to truly find freedom.

In Christian circles, there is the expectation that 'a good Christian' should be able to quickly forgive others. Again, this can be difficult where the hurt, loss or abuse is painful or deep. The ability to forgive can take time and space for healing and reflection. To expect someone to forgive immediately, or to call their faith into question, could be simply a different kind of abuse.

And there is also the question of justice. When a church is too quick to proclaim forgiveness without seeking evidence of change or repentance, we run the risk of being kinder to the perpetrators than the victims. Forgiveness may also need to go alongside appropriate penalty or punishment. In a world of sin, we can all sin in some way or another, but there are also many who are victims, and Christ needs to be on the side of the sinned-against.

PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Are there issues of hurt in your life? Perhaps unresolved issues where you have not yet been able to forgive?

Are there matters of sin in your life? Things that remain unconfessed, either to God or to the relevant people?

Just be aware that this session might raise up these issues, so please spend some time preparing to address them with God. Know that God is with you. You might like to read and repeat these words from Psalm 103 (verses 8-13, NRSV):

*The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.*

Group leaders: you might want to have some small pieces of paper and pens ready for the prayer activity later, and maybe some appropriate music to accompany it.

STARTING THE SESSION: PRAYING TOGETHER

- Ask God to be with you in this time together;
- Bring to God any prayers for members of the group, or for others you know who are in need;
- Pray for those who are suffering in our world or community;
- You might like to **say the Lord's Prayer**.

FINDING OUR ROOTS

Share with your group or just think by yourself:

How easy or hard do you find it to forgive?

How does forgiveness affect the person being forgiven?

How does it benefit the person doing the forgiving?

A PRAYER

God of grace,
You love us with an everlasting love,
and, in Christ, you experienced the frailty of being human.
You love us as we are, but your love wants only the best for us
and for the world you have created.

In mercy, you come to us and offer us a new start.
In Christ, you define us not as sinners, but as your children.
In love, you see not only what we are, but what we can be.

Help us to live in your love every day,
to remember our calling to be your people,
and to live in the light of forgiveness, justice, and grace,
through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES

Remember when Simon Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, after Jesus had been arrested? John tells us that Peter had been warming himself around a charcoal fire (John 18:18). Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that after the cock crowed Peter broke down and wept bitterly. Peter knew he had let Jesus down in his hour of need, and been unfaithful to his calling as a disciple.

In the days after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to them several times and Peter seemed rather quiet and subdued. In one story, however, Jesus seems to address the matter that is on Peter's mind. Forgiveness is not mentioned here, but it is implied, as Jesus reminds Peter of his calling, and gives him an opportunity to serve him afresh.

Seven of the disciples had returned to Lake Galilee (here called Tiberias) where they had previously worked as fishermen. They were out all night and caught nothing. A figure on the shore helped them to catch a magnificent haul of fish. They soon realised it was Jesus, and Peter dived in and swam for shore while the others pulled in the bulging nets.

John 21: verses 9-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.' ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.'

¹⁶ A second time he said to him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'

¹⁷ He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

¹⁸ Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish

to go.’¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)

After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

DIGGING DEEPER

What do you make of this part of the story?

Would this incident remind them of another episode with Jesus?

How would Peter be feeling as he met with Jesus on the beach?

What clues are there that Jesus wanted Peter to know his forgiveness?

Why do you think Peter seemed annoyed at Jesus repeating the question three times?

What effect do you think it has on Peter to be restored in his standing with Jesus?

Peter’s sin was known only to Jesus (or God). It did not affect anyone else. *Are there times when sin needs to be brought out into the open and consequences faced, in order for true forgiveness to be found?*

Jesus could tell that Peter was repentant about his cowardice and denial. *How do you know if someone is sorry? What does true repentance look like?*

A traditional prayer says we can sin through ‘ignorance’, ‘weakness’, or ‘our own deliberate fault’. What do you think is the difference?

How does the church deal with forgiveness, and how do we look after victims of sin and abuse?

Do you know who to turn to if you have any concerns about your own safety or the safeguarding of others?

Do you know where to turn if you would like help in being able to forgive someone who has hurt you?

Do you need to know the forgiveness Jesus offers?

ACTIVITY: BRINGING OUR SINS TO GOD

There are two choices with this activity, for each individual to decide:

At this moment, do you need to forgive, or to be forgiven?

Take a piece of paper and a pen.

Thank God for the times when you have been forgiven in the past, or pray for God's help to forgive others.

After a period of quiet thought or reflection, you may wish to write down a word or a person's name (either something you would like to be forgiven, or someone you feel you want to forgive).

If you are asking for forgiveness: think first about the steps you might take to own up to your sin, to apologise or show true repentance, to change your behaviour, or to try to ensure it doesn't happen again. If you feel you have done these things, then ask for God's forgiveness and rip up the piece of paper. If there is still work to do, take the paper home and ask God's strength for what you have to do.

If you are wanting to forgive someone: think about someone who can help you talk through what they have done to you; think about whether you can (or need to) safely contact the person, and how it would feel to be free of the burden of all that you feel against them. If you feel ready now to move on, rip up the paper and offer them to God, giving your forgiveness. If there is still work to do, take the paper home and ask God's help and strength for what you want to do. (You might feel able to share with your group, so that they can support you and pray with you.)

A CLOSING PRAYER - A traditional prayer of confession
adapted from *the Methodist Service Book* (1975) – optional

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you and against our neighbour,
in thought and word and deed,
in the evil we have done
and in the good we have not done,**

**through ignorance, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us,
forgive us all that is past;
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life
to the glory of your Name. Amen.**

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
Hear then the words of grace:
Your sins are forgiven.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

(You might also like to look and see how the seeds are growing from last time, and remind one another of the New Life you have in Christ.)

MORE TO EXPLORE – THREE SONGS

Available on YouTube using the links below:



Listen to these songs and reflect on all three. Which do you like best and why? They all sing of forgiveness but from different perspectives. Which one do you find the most helpful right now?

***Song of Repentance* – song by Matthew Leon Band**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnt4flrqRCE>

***Forgiveness* – song by Matthew West**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1Lu5udXEZI>

***A Heart that Forgives* – song by Kevin LeVar**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=indCvnD4Ji4>