

WEEK 9: How does forgiveness relate to prayer?



We are approaching the end of our journey through some of the huge questions around prayer. This week, we delve into the thorny question of how our relationship with God and others might affect our prayers.

Is there a link between forgiveness—or our lack of it—and our spiritual lives? Do we need to forgive and be forgiven before we approach God with our intercessions?



This week's core reading will be the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18.21-35

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

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he, his wife, his children, and all that he had to be sold to repay the debt.

"At this, 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, cancelled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. 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 it back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he had him imprisoned until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all your debt 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 handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he paid back all he owed.

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

Possible supplementary readings are Ephesians 4.25-32 (Paul's advice to the church in Ephesus or Old Testament: Psalms 51.1-12 (David's prayer after being confronted with his sin by the prophet Nathan)



Key Themes and Lessons

The context of Matthew 18:21-35 is crucial to understanding the parable. This chapter begins with the disciples asking Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus responds by placing a child among them and stating they will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless they become as humble as children. He emphasises the importance of not causing these 'little ones' to stumble.

Jesus then shares the Parable of the Lost Sheep, highlighting the importance of each individual in the eyes of the Great Shepherd¹. He follows this with guidance on handling conflict within the church, emphasising the goal of reconciliation. The common thread in these teachings is the call to abandon calculative thinking when dealing with relationships.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant extends these teachings by emphasising the importance of limitless forgiveness. The central issue is not justice but reconciliation.

The parable begins with Peter asking Jesus how often he should forgive a brother or sister who sins against him. Peter suggested it seven times, likely considering it a generous offer. However, Jesus responds by saying not seven but seventy-seven times, indicating that forgiveness should be limitless.

The parable tells the story of a servant who owes an enormous debt to a king. When the servant cannot pay, the king forgives the debt with great mercy. However, when this forgiven servant encounters another servant who owes him a much smaller debt, he refuses to show the same mercy and has the second servant thrown into prison.

Upon hearing this, the king is angry and hands the unforgiving servant over to be tortured until he can repay his original debt. The parable ends with a warning that this is how God will treat those who do not forgive their brothers and sisters from their hearts.

This parable teaches us about the nature of forgiveness. It illustrates that forgiveness is not a matter of keeping count but a reflection of God's abundant mercy. The forgiveness that Jesus speaks of is beyond our capacity to keep tabs on or offer on our strength or ability. It also highlights the hypocrisy of the unforgiving servant who, having been shown great mercy, refuses to extend even a small amount of mercy to another. It prompts us to reflect on our actions and attitudes towards others, particularly when we have received mercy or forgiveness.

Practical Application

Here are some practical applications from the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) that ordinary Christians can apply to their devotional and prayer life.

- **Forgiveness is not optional.** In the parable, the servant who was forgiven much did not forgive someone who owed him far less, which led to his punishment. We Christians are called to forgive others just as God has forgiven us. This can be a point of reflection in our prayers and devotions.
- **Understand the magnitude of God's forgiveness:** The debt that the servant owed his master was astronomical and impossible to pay back. This represents our spiritual debt of sin that Jesus paid on the cross. When we grasp the enormity of our forgiven debt, it should move us to be forgiving towards others.

- **Pray for a forgiving heart:** Forgiveness is not always easy, especially when the hurt runs deep. We can use our prayer time to ask God to give us a heart that forgives, just as He forgives us.
- **Live out forgiveness:** Forgiveness isn't just something we receive; we must also give. In our daily lives and interactions with others, we should strive to show the same grace and forgiveness we have received.
- **Regular confession and repentance are key in our walk with God.** The servant in the parable was in denial about his inability to repay the debt. We, too, can sometimes be in denial about our sins.

Remember, these applications are not just to be understood but to be lived out. As James 1:22 reminds us, *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”*



Online resources

Why forgiveness is a big deal

<https://guideposts.org/prayer/how-to-pray/why-forgiveness-is-a-big-deal/>

Eight steps to forgiveness

<https://lchristiancounseling.com/articles/learning-how-to-forgive-8-steps-to-true-forgiveness>

Four things that hinder our prayers

<https://harvest.org/resources/gregs-blog/post/4-things-that-will-hinder-your-prayers/>

When you believe in God but won't forgive

<https://faithgateway.com/blogs/christian-books/believe-forgive>

Significant research has been conducted on the topic of forgiveness. Here are some key findings:

1. **The Science of Forgiveness:** Research has begun to address what forgiveness is, how it can be measured effectively, whether it is healthy, and whether different cultures and religious groups have the same views.
2. **Psychology of Forgiveness:** Studies have suggested that forgiving improves psychological and physiological wellness and protects against future upsets. Forgiveness training also leads individuals to become emotionally stronger, experience greater confidence, and be increasingly optimistic.
3. **Forgiveness and Mental Health:** Research has shown that forgiveness is linked to mental health outcomes such as reduced anxiety, depression, and major psychiatric disorders, as well as fewer physical health symptoms and lower mortality rates.

4. **Forgiveness and Physical Health:** Observational studies suggest that forgiveness is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and hostility, reduced substance abuse, higher self-esteem, and greater life satisfaction.

Research has been conducted on what people are generally willing to forgive and what they find difficult to forgive. Here are some key findings:

- **Predisposition to Forgive:** A study from the University of Oxford suggests that when assessing the moral character of others, people cling to good impressions but readily adjust their opinions about those who have behaved badly. This flexibility in judging transgressors might help explain how humans forgive and why they sometimes stay in bad relationships.
- **Unforgiveness and Mental Health:** Research indicates that unforgiveness correlates with mental and physical health issues. People with low self-esteem and negative self-worth don't readily accept themselves and their mistakes, leaving less room for them to forgive others.
- **Forgiveness and Negative Emotions:** Studies have suggested that people who are disinclined to forgive are more likely to be prone to anger, anxiety, and other negative emotions.
- **Difficulty in Forgiving:** Some research has shown that forgiveness can be challenging for individuals, especially when deeply hurt or wronged. Not forgiving may cause individuals to experience persistent negative emotions, which can affect their mental health.

It's important to note that the willingness to forgive can vary greatly among individuals and can be influenced by various factors, including the nature of the offence, the relationship with the offender, cultural and religious beliefs, and personal attitudes towards forgiveness. It's a complex and deeply personal process.



"If we really want to love, we must learn to forgive." *Mother Teresa.*

"Forgiveness is, above all, a personal choice, a decision of the heart to go against our instinct to pay back evil with evil." *Pope John Paul II.*

"To err is human; to forgive, divine." *Alexander Pope.*

"Always forgive your enemies – nothing annoys them so much." *Oscar Wilde.*

"The lesson is that you can still make mistakes and be forgiven." – *Robert Downey Jr.*

"You can't forgive without loving. And I don't mean sentimentality. I don't mean mush. I mean having enough courage to stand up and say, 'I forgive. I'm finished with it.'" *Maya Angelou*

"As we know, the forgiveness of oneself is the hardest of all the forgiveness." *Joan Baez.*

"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." *Mahatma Gandhi*

"Forgiveness is not an occasional act but a constant attitude." *Martin Luther King Jr.*

"As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison." - *Nelson Mandela.*



Here's a suggested outline for your sermon on the theme of forgiveness, using the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) as the text:

I. Introduction

Briefly introduce the theme of the sermon: The relationship between the spiritual and prayer life of Christians and the willingness to forgive. Mention the text for the sermon: The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35).

II. Context of the Parable

Provide the context in which Jesus told this parable. Discuss Peter's question about how often we should forgive and Jesus' response.

III. Explanation of the Parable

Explain the parable, focusing on the key elements: the king, the first servant, and the second servant. Highlight the contrast between the first servant's enormous debt and the second servant's small debt.

IV. Theological Implications

Discuss the theological implications of the parable, emphasising God's forgiveness of our sins and our duty to forgive others. Highlight the consequences of unforgiveness as illustrated in the parable.

V. Practical Applications

Discuss practical ways Christians can apply the lessons from this parable to their spiritual and prayer life. Suggest specific prayers or spiritual practices that can help cultivate a forgiving heart. Share personal reflections or stories that illustrate the power of forgiveness. Encourage the congregation to reflect on their own experiences with forgiveness.

VI. Conclusion

Summarise the main points of the sermon. Challenge the congregation to practice forgiveness daily, just as God has forgiven them.

Wrap up the sermon with a prayer, asking God to help us forgive as we have been forgiven. Remember, the sermon's goal is to teach about forgiveness and inspire the congregation to live out these teachings daily. May your sermon touch and transform many lives!



Suggested Hymns and Songs

STF H&P

440	215	Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
495	673	Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
20		Be still for the presence of the Lord
426	521	Hark, my soul, it is the Lord
556	697	Just as I am without one plea
427		I'm accepted, I'm forgiven
507	536	O for a heart to praise my God
655		We cannot measure how you heal
248	136	I heard the voice of Jesus say
636	685	O love that will not let me go
		O Lord, hear my prayer — Taize

Call to Worship

In a world often marked by division and discord,
we gather here as seekers of peace and agents of reconciliation.

Let us come together with open minds and compassionate hearts.

So, let us lift our voices in songs of praise,
our prayers of gratitude, and our acts of kindness
as we celebrate God's boundless mercy and grace.

**May our worship today be a testament to
the transformative power of forgiveness,
inspiring us to extend grace now and always.
Amen.**

Prayers of Approach:

Gracious and loving Creator,
As we gather in your presence today,
We come with hearts burdened by the weight of our mistakes,
And the hurts we've inflicted upon others.
Yet, we come also with hope, knowing that your mercy knows no bounds,
And your forgiveness is offered to all who seek it.
Grant us the courage to release our grip on resentment,
And the humility to ask for forgiveness from those we've wronged.
May this time of worship be a journey of healing and reconciliation,
Guided by your boundless love.
Amen.

or

Merciful God,
In this sacred space, we are reminded of your unfailing love,
A love that extends beyond our faults and failings,
A love that offers forgiveness without measure.

As we come before you, we confess the times we have fallen short,
The words we have spoken in haste, the actions we regret.
Grant us the grace to forgive others as we have been forgiven,
And to release the chains of resentment that bind us.

May your spirit of reconciliation dwell among us,
We seek to embody your love and forgiveness in all we do.

Amen.

Penitence

Let us now humble ourselves before the presence of the Divine,
acknowledging our need for forgiveness and reconciliation.
In the spirit of repentance, let us pray:

For the times when we have turned away from love,
choosing instead the path of selfishness and indifference,
Let us confess our failings:

Lord, have mercy
Lord, have mercy.

For the moments when we have caused pain to others through our words, actions, or
inactions, failing to live as instruments of peace and compassion, let us seek forgiveness:

Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

For the grace to forgive those who have wronged us,
and to seek reconciliation with those whom we have harmed,
let us offer our prayers:

Lord, have mercy
Lord, have mercy.

(Short period of silence for personal reflection)

Leader:
With hearts uplifted and minds renewed,
let us receive the assurance of forgiveness,
trusting in the boundless love of our Creator.
Amen.

or

Merciful God,
We confess the times we have strayed from your path,
the moments we have chosen darkness over light,
and how we have hurt others through our words and deeds.

Forgive us, O Lord, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
Grant us the courage to seek forgiveness from those we have wronged
and the strength to walk in your ways of love and compassion.
"Come now, let us settle the matter," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." - Isaiah 1:18 (NIV)

May the assurance of forgiveness and the promise of renewal found in these biblical declarations bring comfort and peace to our hearts.

Amen.

Collect

O God, whose mercy knows no bounds,
Grant us the grace to forgive as we have been forgiven,
And reconcile with those we have wronged.
May your love guide our hearts, and your compassion guide our actions,
That we may embody the spirit of forgiveness
In all our relationships and encounters.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Intercessions

1. For forgiveness for the shortcomings of the church:

God of compassion, we lift to you the shortcomings of your church, acknowledging the times when we have failed to embody your love and grace. Forgive us for moments of pride and arrogance, for divisions that have weakened our witness, and for times when we have turned away from the marginalised and the oppressed. Grant us the humility to seek forgiveness and reconciliation within our communities. May your church be a beacon of forgiveness and reconciliation, reflecting your boundless mercy to the world. Strengthen us to live out the Gospel message of love and forgiveness in all we do.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

2. For forgiveness between nations:

God of peace, we pray for forgiveness and reconciliation between nations torn apart by conflict and strife. Forgive us for how we have perpetuated violence, hatred, and division. Heal the wounds of past injustices and guide leaders towards paths of peace and understanding. Grant wisdom to those in positions of power so that they may seek reconciliation instead of retaliation. Help us to see one another as brothers and sisters, united in our shared humanity. May forgiveness pave the way for lasting peace and cooperation among nations.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

3. For forgiveness within families and communities:

Loving God, we bring the brokenness within families and communities where hurt and resentment have taken root. Forgive us for the words spoken in anger, actions that have caused pain, and barriers that prevent reconciliation. Grant courage to those wounded to extend forgiveness and humility to those who have caused harm to seek reconciliation. Heal relationships strained by misunderstanding and bitterness and restore the bonds of love and unity. May forgiveness flow like a river, bringing healing and renewal to all.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

4. Forgiveness for ourselves:

Merciful God, we come before you with hearts burdened by guilt and shame, seeking forgiveness for our shortcomings and failures. Forgive us for when we have fallen short of your glory, our mistakes, and how we have hurt ourselves and others. Grant us the grace to let go of self-condemnation and embrace your boundless mercy and love. Help us to forgive ourselves as you have forgiven us and to move forward with faith and hope. May your forgiveness free us from guilt and empower us to live fully as your beloved children.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Sending Prayers (Benediction)

Gracious God, as we prepare to depart from this sacred space, we carry with us the gift of forgiveness that we have received and the call to extend it to others. Grant us the strength and courage to live as forgiving and forgiven people in the week ahead.

**May our words and actions be guided by your love and grace,
bringing healing and reconciliation wherever we go.**

Empower us to embody the spirit of forgiveness in all our relationships, reflecting your mercy to a needy world.

Go with us, O God, and may your peace dwell within us always. Amen.

or

Eternal God, as we depart from this place of worship,
may the spirit of forgiveness continue to dwell within us,
shaping our thoughts, words, and deeds.
Grant us the wisdom to recognise the opportunities for reconciliation
that come our way and the humility to extend forgiveness to those who seek it.
May our lives be a testimony to your boundless mercy and grace,
drawing others into the embrace of your love.
Guide us in the days ahead, that we may live as instruments of your peace,
bringing healing and wholeness to a broken world.
And now, as we go forth, may the peace of Christ go with us,
empowering us to forgive as we have been forgiven.
Amen.



Prayer Activity: Symbolic Forgiveness

To dovetail with this theme, we have a couple of ways to embed the idea of personal forgiveness into our lives through a practical prayer exercise.

Either

Flame Prayer

- Write down anything you want to confess on a small piece of paper.
- Find a SAFE and practical way to destroy this paper with fire—perhaps tearing it up into small pieces and burning it in an empty food tin.
- As you watch the paper burn, reflect on how God purges sin and purifies our lives.

Or

'Wash me Clean, Lord'

- Spend some time thinking of what we need God to wash from our lives. You might want to write these down, but you don't have to.
- Wash your hands under the tap—soap is optional! As you do so, think about God's promise of new life. If you wrote something down, you could soak the paper before disposing of the congealed mess that will now be unreadable (symbolising the removal of the effect of those things and the impact of God's grace)

Prayer Activity: The Forgiveness Tree

The Forgiveness Tree is a meaningful and creative group activity that encourages participants to reflect on forgiveness by contributing personal prayers or intentions to a symbolic tree. This activity suits various group settings, including religious gatherings, retreats, workshops, or community events. Here's a detailed guide to setting up and conducting The Forgiveness Tree activity.

Before this activity, create a prayer tree from branches or twigs in a suitably sized pot. Also, cut out many leaf shapes from paper and have pens and string available.

Gather the group around the tree. Explain the concept of the Forgiveness Tree: a place to leave behind feelings of resentment or guilt and to seek or offer forgiveness.

Hand out paper leaves, pens, and string to each participant.

Provide a brief instruction on what they will be writing on the leaves (e.g., a person they want

to forgive, a personal prayer for forgiveness, or an apology they wish to make).

Give participants time to reflect and write their thoughts or prayers on the leaves. Encourage them to be honest and open, knowing this is a personal act and others will not read the leaves. Have participants punch a hole in their leaf and tie it to the tree using the string. As they hang their leaves, they can silently or quietly express their intentions for forgiveness.

Once all the leaves are on the tree, lead a collective prayer focusing on forgiveness, healing, and letting go of past hurts. You might include a moment of silence for personal reflection.

Thank the participants for participating and encouraging them to continue practising forgiveness daily. Optionally, leave the tree in a prominent location for a set period as a reminder of the commitment to forgiveness.

Decorative Ideas: Wrap small LED lights around the tree for a warm and inviting ambience. Place stones or candles around the base for added decoration and symbolism.

You could play soft, reflective music in the background to create a contemplative atmosphere. There are lots of instrumental calming music playlists available on YouTube or Spotify.

Ice Breakers

Here are three icebreaker questions and activities related to forgiveness that are more grounded in everyday life. They are designed to prompt thoughtful discussion while being relatable and practical.

1. The Apology Autopsy

Consider a recent time someone apologised to you for something minor, like bumping into you or cancelling plans at the last minute. How did you feel about their apology? Did it feel genuine or forced, and how did it affect your willingness to forgive them?

This question encourages participants to reflect on everyday interactions and the role of sincerity in forgiveness.

or

2. Forgiveness in Daily Acts

Pair up with someone and share a small, everyday incident where you had to forgive someone, like being cut off in traffic or a friend being late. Discuss how you handled it and what made forgiving easy or hard in that situation.

This activity helps participants realise that forgiveness is a daily practice and not just for significant events, promoting a habit of quick reconciliation in minor conflicts.

or

3. Forgiveness Inventory

Ask participants to list three recent minor grievances against friends, family, or colleagues. Then, have them share one item from their list and discuss what it would take for them to let go of that grievance fully.

This activity encourages introspection and sharing, helping participants understand that

holding on to minor grievances can impact relationships and well-being.

Bible Study

Here are six multiple-choice questions based on the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18:21-35.

These questions aim to engage participants with different levels of familiarity with the parable, prompting them to think critically and humorously about the text and its teachings on forgiveness.

Print out copies of these questions for members of your group or meeting. First, read the Parable together, then ask members to pick ONE answer from the six provided.

Question 1: What prompted Peter to ask Jesus about forgiveness?

- A) He was trying to impress Jesus with his generosity.
- B) He was dared to do it by his brother, Andrew
- C) He was curious about the limits of forgiveness.
- D) He had a disagreement with a fellow disciple.
- E) He wanted to test Jesus' knowledge of the Torah.
- F) He had read about it that morning in the Jerusalem Times.

Question 2: How did Jesus respond to Peter's question on how often to forgive?

- A) "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times seventy-seven."
- B) "Not seven times, but seventy times seven."
- C) "You must forgive as many times as it takes."
- D) "Forgive seven times a day, every day. But not on the Sabbath."
- E) "You should forgive only once if the apology is sincere."
- F) "It depends on the severity of the offence."

Question 3: What was the debt owed by the servant in the parable?***

- A) 100 talents
- B) 10,000 talents
- C) 10 trillion talents
- D) 100 denarii
- E) 30 pieces of silver
- F) 10,000 gold coins

Question 4: What action did the king take regarding the servant's debt?

- A) He ordered the servant and his family to be sold into slavery
- B) He forgave the entire debt.
- C) He reduced the debt to 100 denarii.
- D) He imprisoned the servant until the debt was paid.
- E) He gave the servant more time to pay.

F) He demanded that he be flogged in public as an example to others

Question 5: How did the forgiven servant react when he found a fellow servant who owed him money?

- A) He forgave his fellow servant's debt.
- B) He went to the pub and drowned his sorrows
- C) He demanded immediate repayment.
- D) He went berserk and immediately complained to the king.
- E) He gave him more time to pay.
- F) He asked for a loan to help cover his expenses.

Question 6: What was the king's final decision regarding the unforgiving servant?

- A) He shrugged his shoulders and went back to his business.
- B) He reinstated the debt and handed him over to the jailers.
- C) He banished the servant from the kingdom.
- D) He forgave the servant again.
- E) He ordered him to work in the palace kitchen.
- F) He commanded him for his tough stance.

After group members have had a few minutes to circle their answers, you can have time for feedback and discussion. Do this quickly as you want to move to the more in-depth questions which follow. However, it is definitely worth getting some quick feedback on these questions first.

Discussion Questions

1. In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus emphasises an almost limitless capacity for forgiveness. How do we balance this teaching with situations where repeated offences occur? At what point, if any, is it acceptable to set boundaries or distance oneself from a harmful relationship?
2. Why is forgiving oneself often more challenging than forgiving others? How does self-forgiveness align with Christian teachings on grace and redemption?
3. To what extent should forgiveness be dependent on the offender's repentance or acknowledgement of wrongdoing? Can and should we forgive someone who does not seek forgiveness or continues to harm us?
4. How can we cultivate a culture of forgiveness within our Christian community or church? What practical steps can we take to model and encourage forgiveness among members?
5. Are there offences that seem unforgivable in our human capacity? How do we understand the command to forgive in cases of extreme harm or evil?*
6. The phrase "forgive and forget" is often quoted in churches, but is it realistic or even advisable? How should we remember past wrongs in a way that aligns with Christian forgiveness?
7. Forgiveness is often described as a process rather than a single event. What are the stages or steps in this journey, and how can we navigate them effectively?
10. How can prayer facilitate the process of forgiveness? What specific prayers or practices have you found helpful in your journey towards forgiving others or yourself?