

ED YOUNG

THE REAL F WORD

FORGIVENESS
THE REAL F WORD

**UNLEASHING THE POWER
OF FORGIVENESS**



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Small Groups are a vital part of how we do ministry at Fellowship Church, just as they are in many churches around the world. There are a number of different theories on how small groups should work and they are all great in different ways. The book you are holding is written with our model in mind. So take a minute to read the following explanation, then feel free to adapt as necessary.

Each of our small groups practices a three part agenda in every meeting. That agenda includes a social time, a discussion time, and a prayer time. Each of these elements share equal importance, but not necessarily equal time. To help you get the most out of this book we have included an explanation of each of the parts.

The first element of every small group meeting should be a time of socializing. This phase of the meeting should about 30% of your time together. Welcome everyone as they arrive at the host home, and make visitors feel welcome by introducing yourself and showing genuine interest in them. Enjoy some snacks, or if your group prefers, a meal together.

Then move on with second part of the meeting, the lesson. The lesson itself may take as much as 50% of your group's meeting time, but remember, it is not the most important element. You may want to start this phase of your meeting with a short "icebreaker" to get everyone talking. The questions in the "Start it Up" section of each chapter are what we refer to as "level the playing field" questions that everyone should be able to participate in, regardless of their level of spiritual maturity or Bible knowledge. As your group moves through the "Talk it Up" section in each chapter, remember that it is more important to finish on time than to finish each and every question. It is okay to skip some questions to be sure you allow enough time to take care of the third phase of the small group time: "Lift it Up."

The "Lift it Up" section is a vital part of every small group meeting and should be about 20% of the meeting. During this time you will be able to share with the group what God is doing in your life as well as asking the group to support you in specific prayers. To help focus this time, there are one or two questions at the end of each study that will prompt prayers based on the material you have just talked about. There is also a space for you to write down your prayer request(s) so you don't forget them and so you can communicate them clearly when it is your turn. Below that is a place to write down the prayer requests of the people in your group so you can remember and pray for each request throughout the week.

As an additional tool to assist you in your journey of spiritual development there is a "Step it Up" section at the end of each session. This section consists of five devotional thoughts that reinforce the lesson you've just completed and are designed to help you develop a regular quiet time with God. To get the absolute most from this study I challenge you to take five or ten minutes a day to read and apply these devotionals to your life. If your group meets twice a month or bi-weekly, choose five of the intervening days to incorporate these thoughts into your devotional life.

In select studies, we have incorporated special notes for youth groups using this material. You will notice a special icon (Y) used several times in each session. This indicates that there is a comment or question especially for youth included in the leader's guide for that part of the study. When you see that icon, simply turn to the leader's guide for that session in the back of the book and find the corresponding (Y) and letter (for instance, (Y)-a). These notes are designed to help each discussion time speak to the unique needs and issues of youth.

FORGIVENESS

Not too long ago, I was having a discussion with a friend and things got a little heated. There were some things, some hard things, I needed to say to this person, but I didn't say them in the best way possible. I don't regret what I said—everything I said was appropriate and needed to be addressed. But I do regret how I said it. When God started pointing out the error of my ways, I was reluctant to address it. But convicted me and prompted me to go back to this friend and ask for forgiveness. I didn't want to do it. It was uncomfortable and awkward, but seeking forgiveness from this person was a necessary step to restore our friendship and to restore my relationship with Christ.



Forgiveness is the cornerstone of the Christian life. Because of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christ-followers are completely and eternally forgiven from their sins. Christians celebrate the fact that a holy and righteous God died in our place, wiping the slate clean in our lives. We gravitate towards the biblical stories like the prodigal son who was completely exonerated from his selfish and stubborn rebellion. And we count on the fact that we can offer up a microwave prayer at anytime, anyplace to access God's gift of forgiveness.

Forgiveness feels great—as long as we are the beneficiaries. But like almost everything in life, there are two sides to the coin when it comes to forgiveness. We like being forgiven, but it's not very fun when you have to ask for forgiveness.

Or what about when we, as the offended, are asked to forgive someone else? We rush to be forgiven of our offenses, but we balk when it's time to forgive someone who has offended us. When someone has hurt us, we don't want any part of the forgiveness equation. We'd rather retaliate than release the offender.

Through this study, we will discover God's powerful truths about this highly-charged subject of forgiveness. We will discover the amazing benefits that come with forgiveness—both for the forgiven and the forgiver. And we will see how God can use "The Real F Word" to radically transform our lives!



START IT UP

A couple of weeks ago I was at a gas station. While I was filling my car, I saw this guy jogging with a monstrous Doberman Pinscher on a leash. I love dogs, so I was checking this scene out pretty intently.

The guy ran past me with the dog and stopped and began to tie the dog's leash to a bench just outside the front door—one that was anchored in concrete. After he tied the Doberman to the bench, he went inside to get something to drink.

All of a sudden, something spooked this dog. You could see the whites of his eyes as he made a mad dash toward the busy freeway. He took off with such force, with such torque, that he ripped the bench out of its cement supports! And as the Doberman took off dragging this bench behind him, sparks were flying everywhere. I remember thinking, "This dog is going to get smashed! He's going to get hit!"

Cars all over the road screeched to a stop. And as the dog ran towards a SUV that was turning left, the bench was barreling down. The dog stopped; the bench didn't. Instead, it kept going and slammed right into the side of the SUV. BAM! Parts went flying. Then the dog turned and ran towards a Volkswagen® behind the busted SUV. Once again, the dog stopped short, but the bench

did not. SLAM...right into the Volkswagen! The owner of the gas station came running out of the store, chasing the dog while the dog's master came out spilling Gatorade® everywhere trying to catch them both. I couldn't believe it!

1. What is the most outrageous event you have witnessed?

TALK IT UP

When it comes to today's subject matter, The Real F-Word, a lot of us are like that Doberman. We are leashed up to anger, resentment, and unforgiveness. We don't realize it, but we are dragging it all through life and it's causing some serious collateral damage in our relationships. It's damaging the potential God has for us and it's smashing up innocent bystanders who happen to get caught in our wake.

UNLEASHING UNFORGIVENESS IS UNNATURAL 📖-a

I've discovered something about the real F-word. Forgiving someone, or you could say unleashing unforgiveness, is unnatural. The bottom line is I don't like to do it, and you don't either. When someone hurts me, when someone damages me, when someone says something against me; I like to hold a grudge. I want to get back at them. When someone tells me I should forgive them, I don't like it because it flies in the face of every natural instinct I have.

2. Why do you think it is so unnatural to forgive someone who has hurt you?

I want you to think about something over the next several moments. Who is sitting on your bench? Could it be an ex-spouse, a parent, a coach, or someone who did something to you that no one really knows about except that person, yourself and God? Maybe someone messed you around in the business world or has said some hurtful things to you at school. Who is sitting on your bench?

3. Without being specific, why are these people on your bench?

Do you realize when we harbor unforgiveness we're saying, "Okay, you control my life. I'm the puppet. You've got the strings. You hurt me. You ruined my life. You keep me from all this potential." That's what we're saying when we remained leashed up to unforgiveness. 📖-b

I've lived that way before, and it's no way to live. Years ago a man hurt me and my parents deeply. For two years I remained leashed up to unforgiveness. I kept telling myself, "I'm going to make this guy pay. I'll get him back. I'll show him!"

I was leashed up to unforgiveness until something supernatural happened. God gave me the strength to get over it. And he can do the same for you too. Jesus talked about getting unleashed in Matthew 18.

Jesus had been talking about the real F-word. Simon Peter was listening and must have been dealing with unforgiveness in his life. He made some serious assumptions about forgiveness—assumptions that were wrong, but assumptions that we have all made.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Matthew 18:21

Check out the tenor of that question. Simon Peter is trying to show off because during that day, rabbis (Jewish teachers) taught that if you forgave

someone three times, that was monster forgiveness. Here's Simon Peter saying, "Hey Jesus, I am a disciple. I'm a spiritual stud. How about I prove my maturity by forgiving somebody who hurts me seven times? That's pretty amazing, isn't it Jesus? I mean, isn't that phenomenal?"

4. Imagine you found out someone in your life had spread some nasty lies about you. If that person came to you and asked for forgiveness, what would you do?

5. What if that same person kept spreading lies about you? How many times do you think you could offer that person forgiveness?

Simon Peter made the wrong assumption. He thought forgiveness was strictly for the person who did the crime, the person who was the offending party. **But forgiveness is more for the one who has been offended than the one who has carried out the offense.**

A lot of us think forgiveness is more for the person that hurt us, but that is not true. Forgiveness is more for us. Simon Peter didn't get it so Jesus launched into one of his classic stories.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. Matthew 18:23-25

If you take the amount of money this servant owed this king and put it into today's money, this servant owed \$10 million. That's a lot of money. So when the king called this guy into his palatial office and said, "It's payday," you know the borrower was in serious trouble.

Back then you couldn't file Chapter 11 or Chapter 13 bankruptcy. People that couldn't pay up could be sold into slavery to repay the debt. Read on to find out what happens to the servant.

The servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. Matthew 18:26-27

Now this king could have put the servant and his entire family on the auction block. But he didn't. Instead, this wealthy guy did something that was completely unexpected. He canceled the debt. Can you imagine owing \$10 million and then having your debt forgiven on the spot? That would be a serious party!

6. How do you think you would feel if you were late on a few mortgage payments and your mortgage company called you up to say, "Don't worry about it. We'll take care of the rest you owe"? ☹-c

You would think this forgiven servant would be in the forgiving spirit after his massive debt was forgiven. You would think the servant would be in such a great mood over what was done for him that nothing could bring him down. You would think that...

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

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

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

Matthew 18:28-34

The amount the forgiven servant was trying to collect was around \$11. Just think about that. He was just forgiven a debt of \$10 million and he was ready to fight over \$11. The king delivered this greedy servant from prison, and now, because of \$11, he put himself back in prison.

The same is true in your life and mine. We've been completely delivered as Christ followers. We've been set free. We've been forgiven. The debt's been taken care of. But when we harbor unforgiveness, we're putting ourselves back in prison. We're leashing ourselves back to the condition we had before we understood and appropriated the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

When someone has hurt us, when someone has trashed us, when someone has taken advantage of us, we feel like there is a debt that has been created. We think, "They owe me. They need to pay." And too often, we act like the first servant and try to make those who have offended us pay. We forget how much we have been forgiven and we hold on to the little debt.

7. Why do you think we so easily ignore how much we have been forgiven when it is our turn to offer forgiveness?

Jesus finishes his story with a scary warning. I wish this verse was not in the Bible. I wish I could take some white out, and erase it. It's so convicting and it messes me up. Here's how Jesus summarized this story:

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. Matthew 18:35

This guy had received forgiveness, but he hadn't really experienced forgiveness in the depth of his being. Because he hadn't really experienced it, he couldn't share it with others. I think we've all been in the same boat. We've received forgiveness from Jesus, but we've not really embraced it in the depth of our being. And because of this, we can't share it with others.

Here's what the Bible is saying. If we harbor unforgiveness toward others, if we are leashed up to the resentment and the animosity and the pain, God will hold us accountable. I wish it was not in there, but that's what the Bible says. If we refuse to forgive, we will live on a treadmill of torture. Can you imagine trying to run on a treadmill while you are leashed up to a bench with four, five, six or seven people on it? That's the picture that Jesus was trying to paint for us.

8. When you think about how God has forgiven you, how does it make you feel about the unforgiveness you are leashed to?

Let's go back to Simon Peter's question that sparked this entire story. Simon wanted to know if forgiving someone seven times was enough. Read Jesus' response.

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Matthew 18:22

The number seventy-seven is intended to be an illustration of forgiveness over and over again. Jesus told him that he was to offer forgiveness beyond what

he could count. Jesus was teaching that forgiveness should be a habit, part of our lifestyle.

Some of you are thinking, “Well, you don’t realize what’s happened to me. You don’t realize what my father did. You don’t realize what my mother did. You don’t realize what my uncle did or my friend or whoever. You don’t realize what that coach said to me. For me to forgive them would be to minimize what they did to me. I’m not going to let them off that easy. I’m going to make them pay. I’m going to make them suffer.”

You’re right; I don’t know what you’ve gone through. But, forgiving someone doesn’t mean you are minimizing their behavior. I don’t know what they did to you. And you don’t know what people did to me. Only God knows, and he tells us to cancel the debt, to forgive them. We’re not minimizing what they did. We’re freeing ourselves up. We’re giving ourselves a gift that money can’t buy.

Think about the word “forgiveness.” It has the word “give” in it. When we forgive, we give ourselves the ultimate gift. Also, we’re giving the other person who messed us around a gift. We’re *giving* them room to change. So don’t play the “I’m-going-to-get-you-back” game. Cancel the debt as Jesus did for you. Say, “You’re forgiven.”

Unforgiveness is really hard because we like to hold onto it for some reason. It can be fun. It can give us a rush. But God says, “By my power and my grace, I want you to do something that swims against the current of your instincts, something that flies in the face of everything you want to do naturally.”

That’s why unleashing unforgiveness is unnatural. And to go a little bit deeper, the reason we have a tough time with it is because we’re selfish human beings. We think life is all about us. And this attitude plays a huge part in putting up barriers that keep us leashed to the bench of unforgiveness.

THE SELF-DECEPTION BARRIER

Pride is one thing, but we also rationalize our way out many times. In other words, we tell ourselves lies. We say, “What I did to that person is no big deal. They totally overreacted. They’re an emotional basket case, anyway. It wasn’t that big of

a deal. It was a long time ago.” Or we say, “What my mother did to me.... Yes, she was an alcoholic, but it didn’t really affect me. I’ve swept it under the rug. It doesn’t affect me. What that coach, what that teacher said to me during my childhood.... The stuff that happened doesn’t really affect me today. Everything’s fine in my life. I’m fine.” Be very careful. That’s a barrier that will come back to hurt you.

9. How have you seen someone stay leashed to unforgiveness because of a self-deception barrier? (Y)-d

THE SELF-DEFENSE BARRIER

Another barrier is the self-defense barrier. That’s the one that we love. We say, “I’m going to get you back. You messed me around. You hurt me, so I’m going to get you back.”

For twenty-four months, I harbored the same kind of thinking with that guy that hurt me and my parents. “I’m going to get this guy back. I’m going to make him pay. I’m going to show him. Revenge! I’m going to take care of it.” (Y)-e

Have you ever stopped to realize this: Forgiveness is a great act of faith? It’s When we say, “Debt canceled. I forgive you. I release you,” we’re really saying, “God, you are the ultimate judge. God, I give the situation to you. You are going to take care of this person better than I can. God, I trust you.”

Do not take revenge, my 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

10. What could you do to help you trust God and give him control of the person who wronged you?

THE SELF-IMAGE BARRIER

There's another barrier—the self-image barrier. We say, “Hey, if you think I'm going to admit that I was wrong or I'm going to admit that they messed me around, you are wrong. I'm up here and I'd have to lower myself to do that.”

Actually, we are at our strongest when we admit the obvious to God and to others. We are in a great position of strength and influence when we say, “Debt canceled. I forgive.” Don't let the self-image barrier keep you from unleashing your unforgiveness. This barrier is really all about your pride. It is a desire to make yourself look stronger and better than others. When those feelings creep in, take them to God. Define your self-image on God's terms and you won't have to fight for it on your own. **Y-f**

THE SELF-PROTECTION BARRIER

Here is our final barrier—the self-protection barrier. A lot of you are breaking out into a cold sweat just thinking about having to do the work of forgiveness that needs to be done. You get nervous thinking about sitting across the table from someone that you are in conflict with. It makes you sick to think about sitting in someone's family room and saying, “I was wrong. Will you forgive me?” Don't let it keep you from being unleashed. **Y-g**

Unleashing unforgiveness is unnatural. I know that as well as anyone. But God wants to do this amazing work in your life. God wants to release all of us so we can discover the freedom, the joy and the amazing love that he has for us.

You might still be wondering what happened to the Doberman. The owner of the gas station ran out into the street. The dog owner ran out, spilling Gatorade®

everywhere. And when the Doberman saw his master, he completely relaxed. The master grabbed the leash, untied it from the tattered bench and led the Doberman to safety.

The picture of the Doberman and his master is what God wants to do in your life throughout this study. He wants to bring to your mind those names, those faces, those scenarios and situations you're holding on to. If you'll stop long enough to look to him, your Master will untie you and lead you to safety.

If we could see the amazing place where God wants to lead us, we wouldn't believe it. I'm talking about physically, spiritually, emotionally and relationally. That is the power of the Real F-Word—forgiveness.

WRAP IT UP

Take your hands and make a fist as you bow your heads for a moment. So often in my own prayer life, I've found it vital to do something physical as a reminder to me and God that I'm serious about doing what I'm praying. I want your clenched fist to represent something you're holding on to. What kind of unforgiveness are you holding on to? What kind of resentment, what kind of anger are you dealing with? Do you know what the word forgive means in the Bible? It means to release. Do you know what the word resentment means? It means to feel again. So many of us are feeling again, and again, and again the pain and hurt from what that person has done to us. We're playing our own movie clips of the hurts we're holding on to. It could be that person seated next to you. It could be someone you'll see tomorrow morning at work. It could be a family member. It may even be someone who passed away a long time ago.

Right now, as a physical sign to ourselves and to God, release your fists and say, “God, I forgive them. I release them. Debt canceled.” Quietly tell God, “I'm not minimizing what's happened. I'm just doing what you want me to do so I can discover the best you have for me. God, you have an awesome agenda that you want to lead me through and I know the only way to do it is by living a life of forgiveness. God, unleashing unforgiveness is unnatural. But because of your power, I open up my hands to you.”

Right now God is doing some wonderful things in all of our lives. Thank him for all those things that come to mind. And over the next several weeks we're

STEP IT UP

Take a step further over the next few days and spend some time reflecting on the following devotional thoughts that reinforce the previous session. Use these as reminders to take what you've learned and apply it to your everyday life.

DAY 1

Matthew 18:21-22

Do you know anybody who always takes it a step further than you were willing to go? When you play a simple prank by taking their stapler, this person retaliates by hiding everything in your office. You want to do something nice for your friend so you stop by the grocery store and pick up cookies; the other person shows up with an exotic, homemade dessert. You buy two boxes of Girl Scout® cookies to be nice, they buy twenty. Some people are just like that.

Jesus had a habit of taking things to the next level. One of the most prominent examples of Jesus taking it to the next level is in Matthew 5. Jesus went from topic to topic covered in the Old Testament, and then set the bar even higher. Laws of the Old Testament were expanded and upgraded in his teachings. The result was a way of life proclaiming love instead of just laws.

Today you read another example of Jesus taking it to the next level. Peter thought he was raising the bar by offering forgiveness 7 times instead of the required 3 times. Peter was offering much more forgiveness compared to what the religious leaders of the day prescribed. Then Jesus stepped it up even further. Depending on which translation of the Bible you read, Jesus said forgive "seventy-seven times" or "seventy times seven." The exact number was not the point Jesus was trying to make. The point was that forgiveness should be an abundant act that should not be measured.

When Jesus stepped up the expectations, it usually flew in the face of his culture. Jesus had a way of asking more than what society expected. Society expected you to forgive several times. Jesus asked you to forgive without limits. That might seem like a lot to ask, but don't forget the sacrifice that Jesus made for all of us. Society wanted a savior that wore a crown. Jesus saved all humanity by hanging on a cross. He went much further than people expected to prove his love for mankind.

Are there any situations in your life that need the work of forgiveness that society would ignore? In other words, are there any relationships in your life needing forgiveness that Jesus expects you to handle differently than what society tells you?

Notes:

Prayer Requests:

DAY 3

Matthew 18:34-35

It would be nice if we did everything out of the right motivation, but we don't. Most people don't pay their taxes because they want to finance the goals of the current President. They pay their taxes because they don't want special attention from the IRS. Most people don't drive the speed limit because they believe it is better for the environment and safer for others. They drive that speed because there could be highway patrol around the corner. Doing everything out of the right motivation would be nice, but it doesn't always happen.

Yesterday we discussed the noble reason for forgiving others. Jesus forgave us so we should forgive others. That is the type of reasoning that gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling knowing that you did the right thing. Today is about the not-so-noble reason. If we don't forgive others, God is coming for us. Today's reasoning has more of an IRS or highway patrol effect.

Forgiving others because God will discipline you if you don't will not give you warm and fuzzy feelings. You won't even get the same rewards for doing the right thing when you do it out of compulsion. Acting out of fear may not earn you the most treasures in heaven, but it will help you escape consequences in the present.

God is serious about forgiveness. He wants us to fully comply. He compels us to forgive out of the beautiful sacrifice Jesus made for us. But if that does not work, he will prod us towards forgiveness with the threat of his wrath. In both cases, he asks us to forgive because it is best for us. In the end, it may not be noble to forgive just because you are afraid of God, but God can use your obedience to change your motivation.

If you are struggling with obeying from the right motives, ask God to help you embrace the love he has for you so you can use it as a motivation for your obedience.

Notes:

Prayer Requests:



LEADER'S NOTES

1. What is the most outrageous event you have witnessed?

Y-a

Have each student write their name on a sheet of paper. Then, below their name have them try to write their name with the opposite hand. Compare the two writings and discuss how unnatural it was to write with the opposite hand. There was a time when writing with either hand was unnatural for you, but through practice it became something you were able to do. Forgiveness will not be natural at first. But, if you will make a commitment to forgiving you can overcome some of the unnatural obstacle.

2. Why do you think it is so unnatural to forgive someone who has hurt you?

The desire for revenge is something everyone experiences. It is stronger in some than others, but there is a breaking point that would make even the meekest of individuals want revenge. When someone hurts us, we want them to suffer at least as much as we have suffered. But, when we forgive we are taking the chance that the person who hurt us will not have to suffer. That goes against our desire for revenge.

Also, we all have a self-centered nature. This nature prompts us to look out for ourselves above all others. Combining that with the messages in society that "you will feel better if you get even" and "forgiveness is something you do only for the other person" makes forgiveness unnatural.

3. Without being specific, why are these people on your bench?

Tip: As your group is sharing, make sure to guard the identity of the people on the bench. Remember there are two sides to every story. You do not want to drag someone into the conversation without giving them the opportunity to share their side of the story.

As people are sharing, try to notice any common themes in their answers. It could be there are several key issues of unforgiveness in your group that will need to be addressed as the study goes on. By noticing these issues now, it can help you tailor your illustrations and the creative ideas for the needs of your group.

Y-b

Tip: Bring a video game controller to further emphasize this point. It is as if you give someone else the controls when you do not forgive them. For example, if you have an argument with someone at your lunch table then quit sitting at your lunch table because of that argument, you have just given that person your controller. Because of that unforgiveness you are being controlled by someone else.

What are other examples of how we can let others control us if we hold on to unforgiveness?

4. Imagine you found out someone in your life had spread lies about you. If they came to you and asked for forgiveness, what would you do?

Tip: Some people in your group might feel uncomfortable sharing what they would really do in this situation. They may feel like they need to say the “church” answer since the entire study is on handling these type situations in a biblical way. Encourage everyone to be honest with the emotions they would feel in this situation. Let them know it is normal to be angry or hurt. It is even okay to express that anger and hurt as long as it does not compromise a biblical principle.

5. What if that same that same person kept spreading lies about you? How many times do you think you could offer that person forgiveness?

Tip: Even the most kind and forgiving person has a breaking point. As people give their answers, ask them why? Why would they keep on forgiving that person so many times? Or, why would they not offer any more forgiveness. Some people in your group might feel they have been burned by offering forgiveness in the past so they are not willing to forgive now. Others might realize their continual need for forgiveness so they might be more willing to offer forgiveness. You could learn a lot about the condition of unforgiveness in your group from these answers.

6. How do you think you would feel if you were late on your mortgage payments and your mortgage company called you up to say, “Don’t worry about it. We’ll take care of the rest you owe”?

Tip: After they have shared, ask your group for real life examples of this type of gift. It might not be as significant as having a mortgage paid, but the goal is examples of unwarranted kindness. Let your group share how this real life unwarranted kindness impacted them.

Y-c

Imagine you had been in a class where you were late turning in a lot of your assignments and made bad grades on the rest. You knew if you did not get an “A” on the final you were going to fail the class and have to repeat it in summer school. A couple days before the final, your teacher asked you to stay after class. You were expecting to get a speech about “trying harder” and “taking responsibility” but it did not go as you expected. Your teacher told you that based on your work you deserved an “F” but there was help for you. Your teacher then handed you a copy of your upcoming final with all the answers and told you to study it and help the rest of your class. How would that make you feel?

If that scenario happened to someone else, what would you think if they did not share the answers to the test?

If someone was given such a generous gift, you would expect them to share that generosity with others. It would seem ridiculous for that person to be selfish after they had received such generosity. That type of selfishness is a picture of how many treat God. They accept his generous forgiveness then refuse to share it with others.

7. Why do you think we so easily ignore how much we have been forgiven when it is our turn to offer forgiveness?

One problem is that we have a way of ignoring our own faults while being aware of the faults of others. An insulting word said by us might be seen as the result of a bad day while if that same insult was said to us it would be a horrible offense.

Also, there are times we do not think about our offenses against God in the same light as offenses against others. Since we do not have the tangible presence of God with us, it is easier to make light of those offenses. We are taught that everyone sins so this can lessen our sensitivity to sin. The result is we can ignore how many times we are forgiven by God.

8. When you think about how God has forgiven you, how does it make you feel about the unforgiveness you are leashed to?

Tip: The forgiveness of God can be hard to grasp so try the following visual. Think about the millions of dollars the wealthy king from Jesus’ parable forgave. Try to imagine who large all that money piled up would be. Then, have them imagine the size of the few dollars the wicked servant would not forgive. Picture the two piles of money side by side. It seems ridiculous to hold on to something so small when you think about the amount that has been forgiven.

9. How have you seen someone stay leashed to unforgiveness because of a self-deception barrier?

It is easy to stay leashed to unforgiveness. There are so many reasons that seem reasonable when we are in the heat of the conflict. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is to step back and try to look at our reason for staying leashed to unforgiveness from an outside perspective. This can be done by getting the advice of a trusted friend or a counselor. By taking on this perspective we can break the barrier of self-deception.

Y-d

What are excuses you have made for not forgiving others or asking for forgiveness?

Y-e

Have you ever noticed how revenge can get out of control quickly? For example, think about toilet paper or shoe polish wars. It starts out wrapping someone's house with about 12 rolls. The retaliation is getting wrapped with 50 rolls. The payback for that is getting rolled with 100 rolls, plus staking it down with plastic forks in the front yard. It does not take much to get out of control. Or, a car gets a few words shoe polished on the windows. The retaliation is windows getting completely covered in shoe polish. That escalates to shoe polish, cellophane wrap around the entire body so the doors will not open and the car on blocks. When you get into the revenge game, it will always end badly.

10. What could you do to help you trust God and give him control of the person who wronged you?

Think about God's track record of faithfulness in the past. Consider the other "unnatural" things he has asked you to do that have proved good decisions. Then, be honest with God about your struggles of giving him control. Your honesty can free you up for God to overcome your fear. In your honest prayer, start praying for the person who wronged you. Do not just pray, "God, pay them back." Ask God to guide you as you pray so you can pray for their needs and other things that are going on in their lives.

Y-f

Think about prank shows like Punk'd. The funniest shows are when the people getting pranked will not let it go. We laugh at how foolish they look when they fight back and get angry causing more problems. They pout, cuss, fight and take it all personally. When they find out it was just a prank, they realize the ridiculousness of their actions. All of this could have been avoided if they had just let it go. Forgiveness can be one of the greatest tools for protecting your self-image. Learn to let it go before you see your actions for what they are and feel ridiculous.

Y-g

Have you had knots in your stomach? Your pulse is racing, your breath is a little short, your mind is producing scenarios and responses at a lightning quick pace. Then there are those knots in your stomach, the twisting and turning as you get ready to face that person. Describe the way it feels to you when you have to do the forgiveness work.

Forgiveness is not easy. Most of us have a difficult time with it, but that does not excuse us from doing the forgiveness work God has called us to do.

CREATIVE NOTES

ICEBREAKERS

Name Game

Have each member write their name with their non-dominant hand. Compare the awkward signatures and find out how it felt to write with their non-dominant hand.

BRIDGE – Unleashing unforgiveness can be as unnatural as writing with your non-dominant hand. But, if we will commit to forgive, by God's strength we can accomplish the unnatural.

Stinky Question

What are some smells that gross you out? What is the worst thing you have found when you cleaned out your refrigerator?

BRIDGE – There are certain smells that can repulse others. Stored up unforgiveness can have the same effect in our lives.

Great Rivalries

What are great examples of rivalries throughout history? For example: Hatfield's and McCoy's, Yankees and Red Sox, celebrity feuds, etc.

BRIDGE – Some of the greatest rivalries in history started over insignificant matters. If the issues had been dealt with quickly, there is a chance they would have never reached rivalry status.

HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES*Writing Race*

Pass out blank paper to members of the group then race to see who can write “I forgive you” seventy-seven times the fastest.

BRIDGE – Forgiveness should be a race. We should try to forgive as fast as we can, trying to cross the forgiveness finish line before bitterness and resentment can catch us (You could also use the completed papers as a visual reinforcement for forgiving 77 times).

Sweet Revenge

Break into several groups. Give all the groups a scenario where they were wronged then let them write out revenge plans making them as elaborate as wanted. Share the plans to see who had the best revenge plan. Then, discuss if those revenge plans would truly help deal with that wrong in the long run.

BRIDGE – Revenge can seem sweet at the time, but it is not a long term solution for the hurt and pain caused by others.

Extra Baggage

Load a piece of luggage until it is heavy. Pass the piece of luggage around and ask each member to pick it up and feel how heavy it is. As each person is feeling the weight of the luggage, discuss what life would be like if they had to carry that luggage every where they went.

BRIDGE – Unforgiveness weighs us down. God desires to lighten our load by teaching us to forgive.

VISUAL REINFORCEMENTS*Vinegar or Honey?*

Set out a container of vinegar and a container of honey. Compare the tastes of the two items.

BRIDGE – Unforgiveness can be bitter like vinegar. God desires us to experience the sweet taste of forgiveness.

Leash and collar

Place a dog leash and collar out so that everyone in the group can see it.

BRIDGE – We must be careful or we can get leashed to unforgiveness.

MEDIA REINFORCEMENTS*“Between You and Me” by DC Talk*

This song shows the struggle of a person wrestling with their need for forgiveness.

“The Heart of the Matter” by Don Henley

An ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend deals with the reality that their “ex” is moving on. In trying to deal with the hurt, they find out the only way they can survive is to forgive. Forgiveness is the heart of the matter.

TAKE HOME OBJECT (Reminders of the lesson)*Leash*

Pass out leashes with Matthew 18:21-22 written on them.

Chinese Finger Trap

Give Chinese finger traps from a party store as an illustration of how unforgiveness is a trap. We have the ability to get out of the trap if we will choose to let go.

OTHER*Can't Let Go*

What is the longest you have held a grudge? How did that grudge start and why did you wait so long to let it go? What would it take now to let it go? What would it have taken when it first happened to let it go?