

the fifth step

Through prayer and reconciliation come to forgive all who have hurt us, seeking God's blessing for them and the ability to love them as Christ loves us

The 'sermon on the mount' (*Matthew, chapters 5-7*) is remarkable for a number of reasons. In what must have been among the most intense learning experiences ever, Jesus revealed the *real meaning* of the Law to his followers. They were given deep insights into the nature of God, and how they should relate to him. In his opening remarks, Jesus swept aside 'conventional wisdom', replacing it with a true wisdom that could only come from God... *before* the sermon on the mount, **everyone knew** the poor in spirit and the persecuted were *curled* - not blessed; **everyone knew** the meek would inherit *nothing*. That same conventional wisdom said 'revenge is sweet', but Jesus said, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*"

'Love your enemies...' 'Do not judge, or you too will be judged'... 'turn the other cheek'... 'anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment' - they all come from the sermon on the mount. How we relate to each other is so important that it is a major theme of Christ's 'keynote address'. It even comes up in the Lord's prayer- "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" If we think about that for a moment, we will begin to see *why* our attitude to others (and forgiveness in particular) is so important. *There is a direct connection between how we deal with others, and how God deals with us!* In the Lord's prayer, we are asking for forgiveness *on the basis* that we have forgiven those who have offended or transgressed against us - *our* 'debtors'.

As we noted in the Third Step, the Lord's Prayer is an endless source for sermons - but the one concept Jesus himself chose to expand on was forgiveness. Immediately after teaching the prayer, Jesus said this: "*For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive your sins.*"

The same principle can be seen in the 'parable of the unmerciful servant'

In that illustration, a servant is forgiven a huge debt by a king. But this servant then has a fellow worker punished, for not paying him a small amount *he* owes. When the king hears about it, he is so angry that he has the wicked servant jailed, where he will suffer until he has paid back everything. Jesus ends the story with these words: "*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you, unless you forgive your brother from your heart.*" (*Matthew 18:21-35*).

Why is it absolutely essential for us to forgive? When we forgive, *we meet a condition on which our own forgiveness depends.*

Forgiveness, of course, is also about freedom, healing and restoration, though these aspects are commonly misunderstood. Conventional wisdom acknowledges these blessings occur as a result of forgiveness, but can only see them in terms of the person being forgiven. In reality, when we forgive we receive *our* freedom, *our* healing, and *our* restoration. *We* are set free from the crushing burden of anger and resentment, *we* can deal with our wounds - wounds no longer infected by the poison of hatred - and *we* can be restored to harmony with God, and often with the person who has hurt us. To forgive someone is not to say what they have done doesn't matter - it is to say our well-being and our relationship with God *matters more.*

Forgiveness is primarily for *our* benefit. *It so blesses the one who forgives, it could almost be seen as a selfish act.* Perhaps that is one of the reasons why our loving Father insists upon forgiveness - because it is so beneficial to his children. Even so, we should not overlook the message of 'the unmerciful servant', which is simply this: Our ability to receive God's forgiveness is dependent on our willingness to forgive others *from our hearts*. As this is so important to our relationship with God, we need to be clear on what forgiving from the heart really is. A couple of examples of forgiveness in the most extreme circumstances will give us an idea of what that *can* mean. These examples not only demonstrate the quality of true forgiveness, but may also put the incidents we are called to forgive into a proper perspective.

When Jesus was being crucified, bearing our sins so that we might be forgiven, his pain - mental, spiritual *and* physical - must have been unimaginably severe. Naked and alone, being tortured to death in front of a hostile crowd, he carried the weight of each sin every person had committed, was committing or would ever commit. On the cross, his thoughts turned to his tormentors and, despite all his suffering, he managed to speak a few words. He said this: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:24)

Soon after the crucifixion, in the early days of the church, a follower of Jesus was arrested. Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power - through whom God performed great wonders and miracles - was charged with blasphemy. At his trial, he spoke the truth boldly, which so enraged his captors that they dragged him outside to be stoned to death. As the rocks were hitting him, he fell to his knees and cried out to God. This was his prayer: "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*" (Acts 7:60)

Jesus set the standard for forgiveness, and Stephen followed. We can be grateful that we have Stephen's example, because we might otherwise have thought that such a quality of forgiveness could only exist on the cross of Christ. Stephen was being brutally murdered. He cried out God, but what did he say? Did he ask God to strike down his enemies? No. He didn't ask to be avenged, or even for a painless death. His only concern was that those who were killing him should be forgiven by God.... and the reason he was so desperate for God to forgive them was that *Stephen loved his enemies!*

Stephen followed the standard set by his master, but that standard was not set on the cross. Christ's forgiveness of those who executed him was a perfect example of the standard already set out in the sermon on the mount. Jesus says this: "*But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.*" (Matthew 5:44-45) Stephen *loved* his enemies, and with his last breath he *prayed* for those persecuting him.

The quality of forgiveness that God requires is more than just wiping the slate clean, though that is part of it. It is loving our enemies to the point where we actively seek God's best for them *-including his* forgiveness.

The ability to love enemies is not a natural characteristic of the human race. When Jesus told us to love those who hate us, he was giving yet another command which could only be obeyed in a relationship with him. As ever, the power to do the seemingly impossible is freely available to all who follow Christ, and this is no exception. Unconditional forgiveness (and the ability to love our enemies) flows from our love of Christ. When we forgive we are obeying God, but we are also demonstrating that his love is in us - and that (unlike the unmerciful servant) we have a real appreciation of what has been done for *us*. In short, *forgiveness of others is both a requirement and a measure of our relationship with God.*

The closer we walk with God, the easier it becomes to forgive. As we see others increasingly through the eyes of Christ (the subject of our next session) we will find forgiveness comes more readily...yet, if we wait until we are in a perfect relationship with the Lord before we forgive others, we will never be in that relationship, and we will never forgive. Unforgiveness and resentment have to be dealt with as soon as they are recognised, because our own forgiveness - and therefore, our relationship with God - depends upon how we respond to our 'debtors'.

who do we need to forgive?

The question is an important one, and should not be confused with '*who needs our forgiveness?*' The simple answer is that we need to forgive anyone for whom we do not have Christ's love, because of something they have said or done. In that, we can include anyone - alive or dead - who has ever caused us offence which still adversely affects how we think or feel about them, and anyone with whom our relationship is not as good as it would have been, had they behaved differently. Within these parameters, the need to forgive may cover such things as (at one end of the scale) abusive parents and betrayal by a husband or a wife, right down to being snubbed by someone, or perhaps just knowing they have gossiped about us. The *scale* of the transgression does not affect the need to forgive - it only affects the level of release and freedom we feel when we get rid of our resentment. The greater the offences, the more we will be blessed in forgiving the offenders - *but we have to forgive them all!*

practical forgiveness

Forgiveness is a wonderful thing - it is part of God's provision for our spiritual welfare, and it is also very practical. It is practical in its outcome, because we get the best possible result from a bad situation. Even when there are lasting physical consequences to deal with, forgiveness will ensure *spiritual* wholeness and draw us closer to our heavenly Father. It is also practical in its application, because *anyone* in a relationship with God can forgive *anything* - as long as they are willing. As ever, God gives the power to succeed to all who seek to obey him. For our part, there are a few things we may need to do to get the full benefit of forgiving others. Whether we are addressing issues of the past or dealing with circumstances as they arise, we can make use of some simple, *practical* steps:

1. **Deciding to forgive.** Forgiveness is an act of obedience to God which involves an act of the will. We choose to forgive. We choose to be free from resentment, and we choose to follow the example of Jesus. We will later confirm that decision in prayer and seek God's power to turn our desire to forgive into a real experience, so that we know beyond doubt we have forgiven from the heart.
2. **Contemplation - getting things in perspective.** Contemplation is not about dwelling on our resentment. One of the remarkable properties of resentment is that it requires no effort to maintain and only a little thought to make it flourish and grow. Instead, we should consider the following:
 - a) The 'human condition' - the fact that everybody sins, everybody 'gets it wrong'.
 - b) The price Jesus paid so that people could be forgiven for sin.
 - c) Our own 'human condition'. We, personally, have sinned - and we sometimes still do.
 - d) The price Jesus paid for our personal forgiveness.

We may also like to remind ourselves of Christ's teaching with regard to forgiveness, love and unity - from the sermon on the mount and elsewhere.

- 3. The 'offender' and the 'offence'.** We are now ready to give some thought to who and what has caused us a problem. The first thing we need to apply is the 'principle of divorce' - we must separate the offender from the offence. We do this because Jesus has done it for us. The offender is a person that God created, and that Christ thought worth saving, even at the price of the cross.

The offence (however bad) is a manifestation of the human condition - the same sinful nature we find in ourselves. Our concern here is not to judge the person for what they have done, even by thinking we would have behaved better in their place. Rather, it is to identify the similarity between their situation and our own. They are sinners who are loved by God - and so are we. Christ's teaching on forgiveness recognises this basic equality between the offender and the one offended. When we withhold forgiveness from another person we may think we are better than they are, but we are really only declaring ourselves guilty and inviting God's judgment - because we, too, fall short of his standards.

We all need forgiveness - from God and from each other. As we identify our offender less with the offence and more as a person like us, we will begin to want for them what we want for ourselves - God's best plan for their lives, including forgiveness and restoration.

- 4. Prayer.** Let's begin by asking to be forgiven ourselves. What do we need to be forgiven for? At the very least, we have judged another human being. We know we have judged someone, because twenty minutes (or twenty years) ago there was an incident, and ten minutes ago we decided to forgive. We are not perfect, and we all judge others - if only for a moment - and being aware of that helps us to identify with our offender. They may have fallen short of God's standards in different ways to us, but we have all fallen short at some point. We can then declare in prayer our decision to forgive, and ask that God forgives the person, too. We ask to experience real love for our offender, the same love that Christ has shown to us. We should pray that this person will enjoy every blessing that God provides, especially that deep relationship we seek for ourselves. We can also pray about any difficult situation that we know this person faces.

A commitment to regular prayer for an 'enemy' brings great blessings, but we should (at the very least) decide we are going to pray for them any and every time we feel negative about them. Sometimes we may need to persist in these prayers before we really know the joy of our forgiveness at a heart level, but our thoughts about our 'enemy' will soon come to reflect the love of Christ.

We have already looked at the benefits of forgiveness. These practical steps will ensure that we enjoy them all, and will likely open another gateway to blessing - the opportunity to become a *peacemaker*.

blessed are the peacemakers...

... for they shall be called the Sons of God (Matthew 5:19). Being called a son - or a child - of God is not about mere public recognition. This and the other blessings from the sermon on

the mount, such as a stake in the kingdom of heaven, inheriting the earth and everlasting life, come directly from the hand of God. To be a peacemaker is to arouse the proud Father in God - it is to have *him* say 'that's my boy' or, 'that's my girl'. *To be a peacemaker is to display the family likeness.*

Peacemaking is not some optional involvement in the affairs of others. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus was talking to his ordinary followers primarily about *their own* everyday relationships. Though peacemaking applies to any situation where there is disagreement or conflict, it can often be *forgiveness in action*. Peacemaking (in this context) may require a little effort, but as we experience genuine forgiveness and love for those who have hurt us, we will develop a natural desire to make peace with them.

who do we need to make peace with?

Where possible, we should try to make peace with all whose behaviour has adversely affected our relationship with them - from those who have caused us major problems, to those who irritate us from time to time. In short, we want to make peace with everyone we have needed to forgive. We should also seek peace with people we have offended, apologising swiftly and making it as easy as we can for people to forgive *us*. From those who cause us offence, however, we are not looking for an apology or for them to make amends - we are looking for a relationship as good as (if not better than) ever before. We want them to *experience* our forgiveness, to *know* that we have Christ's love for them.

Peacemaking - our forgiveness in action - is really just about building a better relationship. There are no 'rules' as to how we do it - we only take and create opportunities to draw close to the person concerned. We do it because it is what Jesus wants and, as we truly forgive, it also becomes what we want.

Summing up forgiveness...

- 1. Forgiveness is absolutely essential.** We need to forgive everyone who offends us, and everyone who has ever offended us. In doing so, we are meeting the requirement of our own forgiveness from God, showing our appreciation of that forgiveness, and demonstrating that his love is really in our lives. People who harbour resentment cannot enjoy a good relationship with God. In truth, their relationship with God is only as good - or as bad - as their relationship with the person they will not forgive!
- 2. Forgiveness is for our own benefit.** We 'do ourselves a favour' when we forgive. We not only remove an obstacle to our own forgiveness, we are set free of the burden of resentment - a burden which can sometimes be so powerful that it destroys lives. If we have been hurt emotionally, forgiveness is fundamental to the healing process - and also essential to restoring relationships.
- 3. Forgiveness is unconditional.** It does not depend on the other person apologising, 'owning up' or making amends. It doesn't matter if they are sorry, unrepentant or even if they are determined to do it again. The seriousness of the offence (or the number of times it has been repeated) should not be relevant to a decision to forgive - because **forgiveness is primarily a response to Christ, not a response to circumstances.**
- 4. Forgiveness is not just a truce.** 'Ceasing hostilities', or not 'punishing' those who offend us may be a natural part of forgiveness - one of its results - but it can never be a

substitute for forgiveness itself. **We can refuse to retaliate and still not forgive... though we cannot truly forgive and still retaliate.** Forgiveness is more than just 'turning the other cheek', because it involves positive action - we 'identify' with the offender (as we are all offenders ourselves) and earnestly seek God's best for them. Peacemaking is just a continuation of this positive action. Peace is not the absence of war - it is the presence of love. As we pray, we will come to see our 'enemy' through the eyes of Jesus. We will feel his love for them, and we will want to make our relationship with them as good as possible.

... and a word of caution

True forgiveness is not a way to point out faults. We are called to forgive everybody who offends us, but not to use 'forgiveness' as a means of telling them that they are in the wrong. 'I forgive you' should only be said to those who have admitted fault, or who are otherwise clearly aware of their guilt. Such people need to know they are forgiven. People who are not aware of their failures need to be forgiven too, but they do not need to know about it. Obviously, if they have a fault that might harm themselves or others, they may need some guidance, but that should only be offered by someone in a good relationship with them (and in Christ's love) - never by anyone who is still hurt or angry.

putting it into practice

We have seen that forgiveness is absolutely essential in our relationship with God, and that it also brings other great blessings to those who are willing to do it. *The only thing we lose by forgiving, is the resentment we never wanted in the first place.* In '**Practical forgiveness**' we have a plan which will work in any circumstances, bringing us peace, healing and restoration. We will probably need to use it from time to time, but we may need to use it *now*. If there is anybody we can't love because of what they have done to us - anybody we have never really forgiven - then we must put that right. We simply cannot afford to harbour resentments, old or new. We might be fully aware of some resentments even now, but sometimes they can exist at a deeper level, only surfacing when the offender comes to mind. We have to be sure that all unforgiveness is dealt with, so we will want to ask our heavenly Father to bring to mind *anyone* we have not completely forgiven. Before we do that, and whether or not we are shown that there are people we need to forgive now, we can commit ourselves to the principle of heartfelt forgiveness:

A prayer of commitment

Father God,

I thank you for the forgiveness you have shown me. I thank you that I am restored to a relationship with you - set free from the consequences of my sin. As you have forgiven me, so I choose to forgive others. I commit myself to following Christ's example - forgiving swiftly and completely all who cause offence. From today, I will pray for every person I need to forgive. I ask that I will be given your love for them, that they, too, will experience that love, and that you will bless me with opportunities to be a peacemaker.

I make this commitment for the hurts of the past, present and future, and will repent and deal with any unforgiveness I know of now. I also ask you to bring to my mind anyone in the past who I haven't truly forgiven, so that I can pray for them, begin to love them and be entirely free of unforgiveness and its effects.

I thank you in the name of Jesus, Amen.

The fifth step -

Through prayer and reconciliation come to forgive all who have hurt us, seeking God's blessing for them and the ability to love them as Christ loves us

- is about obedience, but it is also about liberty. In maintaining the attitude of our prayer, we will remain free of the shackles of resentment that can be such a handicap on a personal and spiritual level. Forgiveness is not a price we pay for freedom in Christ, it is really part of that freedom.

comments and questions for the group meeting

the journal...continued

Morning Prayer

Before doing anything else, a short time of prayer containing the following elements: Thanks to God for who He is, what Jesus has done, and for His love and provision (including the new day). Commit the day to Him, asking for His protection and presence.

Through the day

Involve God in your daily life, seeking His guidance in situations as they arise, and endeavour to respond to people as you believe Jesus would.

In the evening

Set aside a little time, every evening, to pray, complete your journal and consider the readings. Prayer should include thanksgiving, repentance, prayer for others and for yourself - particularly that God's perfect will should be completely fulfilled in your life. Pray for each member of your group (by name). Matters arising through the day, personal situations or difficulties should also be brought before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers, and be open to His leading.

Day One

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Matthew 6:14-15

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about...*When we forgive, we meet a condition on which our own forgiveness depends!*

Day Two

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Matthew 18:21-25

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about...*When we forgive we receive our freedom, our healing, and our restoration. We are set free from the crushing burden of anger and resentment, we can deal with our wounds - wounds no longer infected by the poison of hatred - and we can be restored to harmony with God, and often with the person who has hurt us.*

Day Three

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Colossians 3:12-17

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about... *The seriousness of the offence (or the number of times it has been repeated) should not be relevant to a decision to forgive - because forgiveness is primarily a response to Christ, not a response to circumstances.*

Day Four

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Acts 7:55-60

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about...*People who harbour resentment cannot enjoy a good relationship with God. In truth, their relationship with God is only as good - or as bad - as their relationship with the person they will not forgive! Forgiveness of others is both a requirement and a measure of our relationship with God.*

Day Five

The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

Bible Reading - Matthew 5:44-45

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about...*Forgiveness is primarily for our benefit. It so blesses the one who forgives, it could almost be seen as a selfish act.*

Day Six - The weekly review

In your relationship with God, what has been the highlight of the week?

What have you found most challenging or difficult?

Have you been aware of God's care for you this week?

Has God intervened in your life - answers to prayer etc.?

Have you been able to pray consistently throughout the week?

Can you think of any areas in your relationship with God that could be improved and, if so, how are you going to tackle them?

In times of trouble or temptation, how easy is it for you to seek the help of

a) God

b) other Christians?

What has been the most encouraging aspect of this past week?

The 'weekly review' is intended to bring our relationship with God into focus, and perhaps give us a little encouragement. Though it is for 'our eyes only', we can share aspects of it in the group - if we feel it might be beneficial to ourselves or others.

PREPARATION FOR THE SIXTH SESSION

Please prepare for the sixth session by *prayerfully* reading the next chapter, noting down any comments or questions that you'd like to bring up in the group

