

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

February 23-29, 2020

Sermon Series: Forgive/Forgiven

Week Four: “Forgive Others”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

God of power unconquerable and light unquenchable, look with favor upon Your servants. By the power of Your Spirit at work within, transform and make fruitful our lives and ministry. In the name and Spirit of Christ. Amen.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

Forgiveness does not mean we cease to hurt. Learning to forgive means we don’t use the hurt as a weapon, and that we won’t continue to carry around those large and small “rocks” of hurt. Forgiveness means we move out of our comfort zone; we stretch and grow. How do you want this study of forgiveness to change the way you react to the “slings and arrows” that come your way? What will you do about old hurts and disappointments? In what ways will learning to forgive deepen your spiritual growth? In what areas do you need to meet new challenges?

Sunday Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:15-18 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What is the first step to take if a brother or sister sins against you? (18:15a)

What will happen if that person listens to you? (18:15b)

What is the second step to take, if that person does not listen to you? (18:16a)

Why should this be done second? (18:16b) Your Bible footnotes should indicate that this is a reference to Deuteronomy 19:15.

What is the third step, if they still don't pay attention to you? (18:17a)

What is the final recourse, if even the third step is unsuccessful? (18:17b)

What happens in heaven with regard to judgment/forgiveness (binding/loosing or fastening/loosening) in inter-personal relationships rendered by Christ-followers on earth? (18:18)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged.

The passage begins by talking about "if a brother or sister sins against you," which is early language for "fellow-Christian." Do these instructions, then, only apply to Christians interacting with other Christians? When you look at the process, why might that be?

One-on-one conversations can be hard. Can't we just jump to having an advocate with us? Why does the first step have to be one-on-one?

On the other hand, wouldn't involving two or three other people in my problems just do damage to their own relationship with the other person? What circumstances would make other people feel like they should come help me out?

And seriously, am I supposed to gather the entire church together, to come before them to settle it, when another member of the church has sinned against me but won't acknowledge it?

Did Jesus even really say this? Was there such a thing as "the church" when Jesus talked to His disciples about this?

How exactly were Gentiles and tax-collectors treated in Jesus' day? Is Jesus suggesting that it's OK to treat Gentiles and tax-collectors badly? Didn't He teach us elsewhere to love them and treat them accordingly? What is He implying by saying to treat people who won't repent of their sins against us the way we treat Gentiles and tax collectors?

Wait a minute – this verse about what is bound/loosened on earth being bound/loosened in heaven sounds like God is obligated to make the same judgments we make! What does this even mean? What kind of authority do we really have here on earth?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

Read also: Matthew 18:6-9; Matthew 18:10-14; Deuteronomy 19:15; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Matthew 18:20

The most basic premise of this passage is that interpersonal relationships between members of the Christian community are important. It is important that members of the Christian community not sin against each other ... but if it happens, Jesus lays out a procedure for handling it. This teaching of Jesus is actually the third in a set of teachings regarding sin within the community. In Matthew 18:6-9, Jesus has

warned about the danger of either personal falling into sin, or causing a “little one” (another Christ-follower-see 18:3-4) to sin. Then, in Matthew 18:10-14, He has taught the loving imperative to search for the one who has strayed from the faith, just as a shepherd will risk everything to recover the one sheep who has strayed from the flock. These stories set the stage for the subject of disciple-to-disciple relationships. No disciple should disrupt the saving purposes of God in the life of another disciple, and every disciple should hold every other disciple in the same esteem that God holds them.

These passages now set the stage for the obvious question – but what if my brother or sister in the faith DOES sin against me? The subject, then, turns to church discipline. Matthew presents a broad outline for community regulations where one member has sinned against another member. Many scholars point out that there is some anachronism in this passage – did Jesus truly speak of disciplinary procedures for “the church,” which would not really be founded as an organizational structure until years after His resurrection? The only other place in all four Gospels where the word “church” is used is just prior to this passage, in Matthew 16:18, in which Jesus calls Peter “the rock on which I will build my church.” The Gospel of Matthew was written in a time when such church organization DID exist. Likely, Matthew writes to his church community with a memory of what Jesus had to say regarding the community that He realized would be created after His death and resurrection, using the language common to that time – “the church” (“ekklesia” in Greek).

The context of the surrounding passages seems to indicate that while a broad variety of offenses may be in mind, the procedure laid out is for sins of a substantial, non-trivial, nature. In a nutshell, the steps to be followed, assuming each previous step has been unsuccessful, are 1) a private meeting, 2) a meeting with two or three others, 3) a meeting with the church leadership, and 4) ostracization. But the purpose of these steps should also be looked at more closely. One of the most important things to note is that this entire passage follows directly on the passage about seeking the lost sheep! What we have here is a practical laying forth of what “seeking a sheep who has strayed” looks like in real life.

The purpose of the private meeting is not to scold, accuse, or verbally abuse the other person – it is to bring the offensive matter to their attention in the hope that they will repent and seek forgiveness in order to be restored to full relationship with the members of the community. Damage has been done to that relationship through the sin – the church community cannot gather together harmoniously when two of its members have a broken relationship. This private meeting avoids unnecessarily spreading knowledge of the person’s sin, preventing rumor. The hoped-for outcome of this meeting is repentance and the seeking of forgiveness, which must be granted, thus resulting in the restoration of the sinner to full community ... “you’ve won over your brother or sister” ... just as the lost sheep has been restored to the fold.

If this step is fruitless, however, a second step must be taken. It is the same procedure as in step one, but in the presence of one or two other members of the community. The procedure clearly is based on Old Testament practice as laid forth in Deuteronomy 19:15, which is quoted. It is not an exact parallel, though – in Deuteronomy, the witnesses are witnesses to the actual crime, whereas here, they are to be witnesses to the integrity of the request from the offended party, and to the response of the offender. Other than the presence of the witnesses, the same purpose and hoped-for outcomes apply as in step one, but now, the issue becomes more of a “legal” matter. Several other New Testament passages describe the purpose of witnesses in “legal” matters, such as 2 Corinthians 13:1 and 1 Timothy 5:19.

If not resolved in the presence of witnesses, the matter is brought before the church community as a whole. In this third step, the entire church community makes the appeal to the offender to repent and seek forgiveness. And, in fact, this will be the final plea for repentance that will be made. If the person fails to respond even to this appeal, the only recourse left is for the person to be ostracized – treated like a “Gentile or tax collector.” Even then, the hope is that the loss of Christian community will drive the person to repentance where three personal appeals have not. Throughout the procedure, the emphasis has been on restoring the lost sheep to the flock, and this does not change in this final, drastic step. Thus, even if the offender is no longer welcome in the church fellowship due to unrepentant sin, the hand of forgiveness is still offered. Just as Jesus always welcomed the Gentile, the tax collector, and the sinner, inviting them into community, so must the church continue to act toward the one who is recalcitrant. If and when they finally do repent, they must be forgiven, welcomed back with open arms, and certainly not with an attitude that says “you had your chance!” The final verse, about binding and loosing is all about the authority the church has to take such actions. God extends the authority to determine membership in the local church community to the community itself. When exercised in the true Spirit of God, that authority reflects the reality of God’s judgment as well. Notice that two verses later, in verse 20 Jesus assures the community that if they gather in His name, Jesus is truly present with them, and He will be part of their decision-making process.

We must consider whether the details of such a procedure still have practical value in our context. To be cast out of the church in Matthew’s day left a person with no other options for Christian community. Today, someone could drive down the road to the next church, where the people know nothing about the sin that drove them out of the prior church. Furthermore, we must ask ourselves whether ostracizing someone from the community today will have the effect of bringing them to repentance, or will drive them further away from the faith. However, the dynamics of interpersonal relationships in the church remain critical to the life of the church. Christians must be accountable to a community. The specifics of the process itself will likely need to be adapted to the reality of each individual community. Still, the guidance has universal applicability. Do everything you can to restore the lost sheep, in the most grace-filled way possible.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

What specific steps have you ever taken when someone has sinned against you? How closely did those steps parallel the procedure laid out here?

What modifications to this procedure, if any, do you think are necessary in our context? Don’t forget that the point of the procedure is to restore a sinner to full relationship in the church community – and “full relationship” here implies being able to be in ministry and connection with YOU, the offended party.

How do you feel about the authority Jesus grants to the church community with regard to binding and loosing (carrying out a ruling, or extending forgiveness)? Would you trust your church community with such authority?

Why do you think the subject of “taking sides” does not come up in this passage? What does Jesus presume about the integrity of the person who claims to have been wronged? What does that say about the expectations of Christian behavior?

Have you ever left a church for another church because you felt sinned against by a member of the first church community? Did you take steps to seek reconciliation? What were the results?

What would be easier, to leave for another church if you felt wronged, or to initiate a private conversation to point out that you feel wronged, and seek reconciliation? Does Jesus usually call us to the easy path, or the difficult path?

How do you honestly think you would react, today, to being ostracized from the church community that you had long been a part of? Would it drive you further way, or give you cause to reconsider if you might actually be the one in the wrong?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, give us the courage to have difficult conversations. Give us hearts for the lost sheep, and give us grace to reach out in love even when we have been wronged. Teach us the value of Christian community, and to grow in our ability to live it out. Help us to always extend the hand of forgiveness, so that our community might be strengthened in love. In the name of Christ, our Savior. Amen.