

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

February 16-22, 2020

Sermon Series: Forgive/Forgiven

Week Three: "Forgive Yourself"

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.

Lord Jesus Christ, You have promised never to forsake or leave us. Teach us day by day the deep rewards of faithful ministry and most of all help us to know always the reward of being near to You. In the name of Christ, Amen.

This Week's Sermon Theme:

It's not so much that we forgive ourselves but that, in the words of Paul Tillich, "we accept that we are accepted." We all need to find ourselves opening up to the reality of our sin, the grace offered in Jesus Christ, and the ongoing growth in loving ourselves as God loves us, as well as in loving others. This is all made possible through God's pursuit of us.

Sunday Scripture Reading: 1 John 3:18-20 (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 words are used to address the people this passage is directed toward? (3:18)

What two ways of loving others are contrasted? (3:18)

Which way of loving others is recommended? (3:18)

What do we come to know by loving others in this way? (3:19)

What happens to a restless heart through this knowledge? (3:19)

Left on their own, how do our own restless hearts judge us? (3:20)

What (or who) has great enough power to overrule this judgment? (3:20)

What does God know? (3:20)

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.

What would loving only “with words or tongue” look like? What specific examples can you think of that would reflect loving “with actions and truth”?

What does it really mean to “belong to the truth”?

Why does John draw a cause and effect relationship between loving with actions and truth and the knowledge that we belong to the truth? How does one lead to the other?

Why would a heart be restless in the presence of God? What kinds of things make our own hearts condemn us? Does our own heart condemning us always lead us to the conclusion that God must condemn us, too?

Why is the idea that “God knows everything” is meant to comfort us, rather than to instill fear in us?

How do you react to the statement that “God is greater than our hearts”? What does the statement imply about the power our own hearts can ultimately have over us?

What connections can you draw between the command to love with actions and in truth, and the fact of God’s omnipotence? What do these connections have to do with solving the problem of our own hearts condemning us?

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: 1 Peter 5:7; Luke 12:22; Philippians 3:13; Romans 8:1; 1 John 3:21-24

The Bible has surprisingly little to say specifically about the idea of forgiving ourselves. From the biblical perspective, sin is directed either against God, or against others, and therefore, forgiveness is to be sought FROM God, or FROM the other who has been harmed, and extended TO the one who has harmed us. This is not to imply that the guilt and shame associated with a “guilty conscience” did not happen in biblical times. Rather, the “guilty conscience” was the result of an inner awareness of the reality of guilt – the reality that a law had been broken or a relationship had been damaged. If reconciliation could be achieved through the forgiveness of the offended party, whether God or another person, the guilt itself was erased, and the “guilty conscience” would be eased as a result. Forgiveness of self was more a by-product of the awareness of the reality of the reconciliation than a goal to be sought in and of itself.

While not addressing the idea of “forgiving ourselves” directly, several New Testament passages do point to this idea of the inner conscience being eased by awareness of God’s forgiveness. Before we look

further into the passage from 1 John, let's look at some of these other verses. 1 Peter 5:7 says "Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." Within the context of 1 Peter, it seems likely that the main concern in view here is the anxiety associated with the threat of suffering for the name of Christ. However, from a broader perspective, Christians have long understood Christ's advice in Luke's Gospel, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear" (Luke 12:22) to suggest that we should let go of ALL worry or anxiety, regardless of the original cause – including the anxiety created in our hearts by the awareness of how we have hurt others. To trust in Christ for our salvation is to recognize that we no longer need to worry about the effects our past sins might have on our final standing in the sight of God, because we can have confidence in God's forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice. This is why the apostle Paul can speak of "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead" (Philippians 3:13). He has fully embraced the belief that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

This is the perspective that is in view in our primary Scripture for this week from 1 John 3. 1 John is an interesting book. We call it a "letter," but it lacks the typical structure of a letter, such as a salutation, greeting, a farewell, or a closing. Its main purpose seems to be to heighten the Christian reader's consciousness of the full impact of salvation through Christ on Christian life. This theme is addressed in several ways throughout the letter, but in 3:29-30, John takes on the problem of self-condemnation. He acknowledges that there are some readers whose hearts continue to condemn them in spite of the knowledge of their salvation – but there is a cure! These hearts can be put at ease by coming to a fuller awareness of the extent of their salvation – the awareness that "God is greater than our hearts"!

In fact, this is one of the great theological statements of 1 John, and embodies the good news of the God of grace and love. Even if our hearts condemn us, Christians are to embrace, in belief, the fact that this infinite God of grace and love can even overcome our own condemning hearts, our own guilty consciences, and set them at ease. God's wisdom and love are always greater than the human heart. This is why John goes on to speak to those whose "hearts do not condemn us" in verse 21! For those who have already experienced the full impact of salvation, for those who have fully grasped that "there is NO condemnation" (not even SELF-condemnation) "for those who are in Christ Jesus," the heart truly no longer condemns them! According to 1 John 3:21-24, such people approach God with confidence in prayer, receiving what they ask for because they only ask for what will please God. They truly love one another, they are obedient to God's commands, and they have an assurance of their reconciliation with God through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Such people are able to forgive themselves, because the all-powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, greater than their own hearts, has destroyed every sense of self-condemnation. Forgiving ourselves is, in truth, a by-product of our salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit, if we can fully embrace it.

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.

For what sins are you refusing to forgive yourself?

Have you sought forgiveness from God or from the one you have harmed first? If so, do you truly believe you have accepted this forgiveness?

If so, what do you sense is holding you back from forgiving yourself?

Have you considered the possibility that refusing to forgive yourself might actually suggest that you have not fully accepted God's forgiveness?

Do you truly believe that "God is greater than our hearts"? If so, do you believe God is powerful enough to wipe away your self-condemnation?

Have you specifically asked God to take it away? If not, will you say that prayer right now?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, we need Your help to forgive – even to forgive ourselves. As we gain a better understanding of forgiveness, teach us how Your love has the power to overcome even our own self-condemnation. Make us so fully aware of the inner presence of Your Holy Spirit that we experience for ourselves the reality that You are greater than our stubborn hearts. Destroy that which is still in our hearts, that seeks to destroy us by telling us we are not worthy of forgiveness. Put our hearts at ease, that we might know the full power of salvation. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, through whom forgiveness and healing is made possible. Amen.