



GROUP GUIDE: WEEK 8

CONVERSATION STARTER

What is something you're grateful for this week?

HOW OFTEN MUST WE FORGIVE?

Matthew 18:21-35

Jesus has been teaching his followers about the upside-down nature of God's kingdom, revealing what it looks like to live very practically as part of a new community. But his disciples naturally still have lots of questions about what this means for them. Peter comes to Jesus, asking, "*How often do I need to forgive the one who wronged me? Seven times, right?*"

Jewish tradition suggested you only needed to forgive someone *three* times. So Peter probably thought he was being bold and forward-thinking. Seven is the number of completion. But Jesus says, "Not so fast, friend."

"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

There is only one other biblical story where the number 77 features significantly. It takes place seven generations after Cain, the one who murdered his brother. In [Genesis 4](#), Cain's descendant, Lamech, boasts about taking vengeance upon a young man who wounded him. He proudly proclaims, "If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." In this way, Lamech comes to represent the ultimate unforgiveness, the anti-mercy, someone willing to do whatever they want to exact vengeance, regardless of who they hurt in the process.

Jesus nods to this story as a way of saying, "*You want to know how many times you need to forgive? Forgive until you become the opposite of that guy!*" To drive home his point, Jesus tells another parable about an unforgiving servant.

A servant goes before their king. He owes a debt that would've been impossible to pay—the equivalent of three lifetimes' salary! Can you imagine how much that debt would weigh on him? How it would have felt carrying that debt around, knowing there was no hope in ever paying it back? And his debt didn't impact him alone; his entire family was paying the cost.

And yet, the king has compassion on this servant; he forgives him and cancels the debt.

This is a beautiful picture of what it looks like to follow Jesus. We owe a debt far too great to ever pay off. Our sin, brokenness, and wounding are too much for us to cover on our own. And yet, our loving God has compassion on us and wipes the slate clean. Imagine that weight coming off your shoulders! God has given us freedom and a future filled with new hope and possibilities.

How do we respond to that kind of gracious generosity?

The servant in the story leaves the king and immediately hunts down a peer who owes him a hundred denarii—about three months of wages for a day laborer. He chokes the man, demanding repayment. He refuses the man's cries of mercy and puts him in prison.

Jesus wants us to see that when we refuse to have compassion and forgive those who owe us a debt, it's like we're keeping them behind bars. And eventually, we will end up in jail right beside them.

When the king hears about what's happened, he calls the servant to him. He decries his unforgiveness and delivers him to the jailers "until *he* should pay all *his* debt." Who should pay whose debt? In Greek, the word translated "pay" is often used for forgiving, canceling, or repaying debts, which means it's possible the king puts the servant in jail until he cancels or forgives *the other servants' debts* toward him! In other words, the original servant finds himself in a prison of his own making, and he holds the key to his own release.

"The key thing," says N.T. Wright, "is not that one should therefore swallow all resentment and 'forgive and forget' as though nothing had happened. The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one's goal. If confrontation has to happen, as it often does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge."

Spend a few moments talking through this parable with your group. What debts are you clinging to, hoping for repayment? What would it look like to be the one who takes the first step toward forgiveness and reconciliation? It doesn't mean you're saying what they did was right or OK. It means you're refusing to carry the weight of the debt around day after day.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. How has this week's reading added color to what you think about Jesus?
3. Where has the upside-down kingdom of Jesus been challenging you over the last two weeks? What values, ideals, or perspectives do you sense might need to shift in you as you follow Jesus?
4. How would you define forgiveness? What is it, and what is it not?
5. How have you typically responded to situations that require forgiveness?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Throughout Lent, we will be pulling these practices from our [Lenten Practice Guide](#). These practices invite you to either give something up or take something on, with the hope of simplifying our lives, standing in solidarity with those who are suffering, and becoming people who love God and others well. Our prayer is that God would meet you in the midst of these new rhythms so that you would experience in real, tangible ways the transforming love of Jesus Christ and the hope of the Resurrection.

Week Two: Daily Gratitude

Gratitude has the power to reshape the way we think and perceive the world. This week, take time each morning to journal and pray about at least five things you're thankful for. Try not to repeat items day to day. Get as specific as possible, and do yourself a favor by digging deeper than the obvious.

If you want to **take it a step further**, reach out to someone you're thankful for and share why you're grateful for them. This could be through a text message, email, or face-to-face conversation. Consider how you might make gratitude a regular part of your rhythm and routine.

At the end of the week, reflect on your experience: *How did beginning your day with gratitude change your outlook?*