



“One of God’s better jokes on us was to give us the power to remember the past and leave us no power to undo it. We have all sometimes been willing to trade almost anything for a magic sponge to wipe just a few moments off the tables of time. But whatever the mind can make of the future, it cannot silence a syllable of the past. There is no delete key for reality. It is not as though forgiving were the remedy of choice among other options [which are] less effective but still useful. It is the only remedy.”

Lewis Smedes, [The Art of Forgiveness](#)

Dr. Gerry Breshears defines forgiveness this way: *“My personal act to release the one who sinned against me from my personal right to collect on the moral debt (to pay him back) for his offense, giving it over to God for His justice and mercy.”* This is a powerful concept that requires more than a Biblical proof-text and quick decision. This practice of Jesus, found throughout His life and ministry, may be one of the most difficult of His practices.

That said, the benefit is tremendous. As we will see, forgiveness is not just tied into the relationships we have with one another, but it deeply impacts the connection we have with God. Unforgiveness is deathly for our hearts, and it’s an insurmountable barrier to relationship with Jesus. As former Secretary General of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld wrote: *“Like a bee, we distill honey for our self-defense—what happens to the bee if it uses its sting is well known.”*

That’s the reason behind this short teaching series, as well as this booklet you hold in your hands (or on your phone). (You can find the teachings at www.yorkalliance.org/sermons) The ideal way to engage these truths is within a small community who can journey with you. You’ll find that this practice guide, while engaged individually, will be best utilized by an individual in community. Therefore, while there are certainly individual parts of this practice, you are also encouraged to engage them with your Discipleship Partner(s) as well as your Community Group. In fact, with most of the weeks contained in the series, you will have a practice which you will engage as a group as well as a practice you will engage individually and debrief as a group. Both of these are vitally important.

The specific exercises in this booklet will stretch over the next four weeks and will tie directly to the teachings from Sunday morning. There will be final teaching in the series for which there will not be a practice in this guidebook, in recognition of the fact that many of these practices will be difficult and take time. We believe that it is impossible to gain the life of Jesus without practicing the lifestyle of Jesus; and that lifestyle was certainly one of forgiveness. We also believe that real change doesn’t simply happen through more knowledge, but through practices and habits, in community, under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. That’s the heart of this guidebook.

I have tried to cite specific ideas and quotations where appropriate. Beyond those citations, these exercises have been developed in reliance on several sources: [The Art of Forgiving](#) and [Forgive & Forget](#) by Lewis Smedes, [Forgiving and Reconciling](#) by Everett L. Worthington, Jr., [Soul Care](#) by Rob Reimer, [Forgiving As We’ve Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace](#) by L. Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura, and the “Forgiveness” section of www.practicingtheway.org.

The weeks will be laid out as follows:

- Week One: Forgiving and Being Forgiven
- Week Two: Transforming our Pain
- Week Three: The Practice of Forgiveness
- Week Four: The Practice of Reconciliation
- Week Five: Living a Forgiving Lifestyle

Forgiveness is not a concept that needs to be studied and understood. Instead, it must be practiced and lived. It is quite possible to understand everything in this series as well as this practice guide and still be someone mired in bitterness. The call in this series, like all of our practice series, is not to learn, but to live. That said, this is hard. It’s possible—even quite likely!—that you will not be able to fully engage all that God brings to you over the next five weeks. Forgiveness is necessary because the pain we’ve experienced is real. I love the way Lewis Smedes says it: *“We eye the evil face to face and we call it what it is. Only realists can be forgivers.”* So don’t rush. You may need to revisit these concepts weeks, months, or years down the line as you are able, with the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, to work these out. Don’t give up. Forgiving as we’ve been forgiven is the only pathway to the fullness of life.

Week One: Forgiving and Being Forgiven

“Forgiveness is the heart of the gospel, and if we are to live lives that shine forth God’s good news, we have to learn the ways of living that make for peace. [And] If forgiveness is the heart of the gospel, it is the center of the church’s mission as well.”

Célestin Musekura

The powerful and sometimes painful truth is that we cannot be a follower of Jesus without forgiveness. Forgiveness is inherent in what it means to follow Jesus in the first place, and throughout the New Testament, Jesus along with the New Testament writers tie our forgiveness of others directly to the quality of our relationship with God. It’s not an overstatement to say that forgiveness is one of the foundational elements of the Christian faith.

This is, of course, complicated by the fact that we live in a broken world, polluted by sin and shame. Even the best of our relationships contain pain, loss, and disappointment, let alone the relationships that many of us experience that are marked by anger, manipulation, and abuse. The call of Jesus to forgive others, to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us are not just simple commands to be engaged without care or cost; they are difficult if not downright impossible without a supernatural power source. That power source is found in the fact of Jesus’ forgiveness of us, which becomes the foundation for our being able to forgive those around us.

Practice in Community

Have somebody read Luke 7:36-50. Discuss the following questions:

- What parts of the Pharisee’s attitude do you relate to?
- What is so compelling about the way that Jesus interacts with this woman?
- How have you seen the correlation between forgiveness and love in your own life?

Take time within the group setting to quiet your hearts and listen for the voice of the Spirit. It will often work best if one person guides everyone in the group through the following three questions. For some groups, it

may work the best for this practice to be done in gender specific groupings—do it in a way that is best for your group.

As each question is asked, give time for people to first listen, and then, as desired, respond. *It is perfectly appropriate for people to not have answers that they desire to share out loud with the group! However, it’s good to give people the opportunity to do so and allow the group to minister to them.*

- Is there anything in my life for which I need to repent?
- Is there anything in my life for which I haven’t fully received God’s forgiveness?
- Are there offenses, people, or circumstances in which forgiveness needs to take place?

It may be appropriate to ask people to share a simple “yes” or “no” to the second question, and for all that answer yes, invite the group to pray over those who need to fully receive and know the forgiveness of Jesus. It’s important for them to know that they don’t need to give specifics or disclose additional information for them to receive forgiveness.

Individual Practice

Between group meetings, consider anyone or anything that the Spirit revealed to you during the third question. Try to dig a bit deeper to fully understand the offense and the need for forgiveness. If you didn’t sense something specific during your Community Group, take time this week to continue to ask God if there are those you need to forgive. Give yourself grace to work through these situations, recognizing that forgiveness is a process, not an event, and that you will likely need to forgive in layers as God gives you grace to do so. If you don’t already have one, consider connecting with a Discipleship Partner so that you can be accountable to continuing to move forward in this process.

Questions for Community:

- Has your understanding of forgiveness changed this week? In what ways?
- What is your greatest fear when it comes to forgiveness?

Week Two: Transforming our Pain

“When the unbearable is born, space is created for things to be resolved later, by a new circumstance and a new power. In the meantime, we agree to carry tension, not for its own sake, nor even because the fire of tension can forge a noble soul, though it can, but in order to transmute that tension into something else. Whatever pain we don’t transmute we will transmit. Bearing the unbearable is waiting inside of tension in order that our souls can grow so that we don’t give back hurt for hurt, bitterness for bitterness, hatred for hatred.”

Ronald Rolheiser

In order to truly engage forgiveness, something must happen with the pain that we’ve experienced. Too often our hope is to minimize the offense and thereby minimize the pain, when in reality, the real solution is just the opposite.

Tim Keller calls forgiveness a “form of voluntary suffering.” One of the biblical metaphors for forgiveness is a *debt*. This concept is helpful in understanding how we handle the pain that is caused by sin, and how we handle the actions that are at the heart of the need for forgiveness. When someone seriously wrongs you, there is a clear and unavoidable sense in which that person owes you. This sense of indebtedness is impossible to escape—to deny it is to either deny reality or to admit to never truly being hurt. Our natural response to that debt is to compel that person to pay it down, usually through hurting them back, shaming them, yelling at them, or hoping something bad happens to them. In this way, pain is *transmitted* through us back to them again. The cycle continues.

Jesus, however, calls us to respond differently. By “forgiving our debtors” (an alternate translation of the prayer of Jesus in Matthew 6) we take that pain on ourselves instead of asking them to pay the debt. While from the outside the pain seems to “disappear,” just like a financial debt, there is no way for it to just go away. If someone breaks the computer I’m currently typing on, a debt of around \$1000 is incurred. If my response is “Don’t worry about it—I’ll take care of it,” they no longer owe the debt. But it certainly doesn’t disappear! Either I need to pay \$1000 for a new computer or go without one, thereby absorbing the debt myself.

The Way of Jesus is not just to release the right of payback to the one who has hurt me but to absorb that pain with God’s help. Further, Jesus calls us to allow God to take the woundedness and pain and transform them for good.

Practice in Community

Have somebody read Matthew 18:21-35. Discuss the following questions:

- What does Jesus mean by saying we need to forgive an offender 77 times?
- What do you think it looks like to forgive from your heart (vs. 35)?
- When have you seen someone truly move beyond forgiveness to blessing another?

As a group, discuss what it might look like to transform a wound from your past into blessing for others. First, take some time in silence to ask God to bring to mind a wound from your past that he wants to transform. Thinking of how you wish others would have responded to you in the moment often gives insight into how God might transform those wounds. Share ideas with one another and pray over one another.

Individual Practice

Take time this week to meditate and dream about how God might transform your past hurt for someone’s good. This will likely be challenging and even painful at times, but the goodness of Jesus and His heart for forgiveness calls us to move proactively toward the needs of others with the freedom that comes from forgiveness.

Consider taking a bit of time each day to consider the following steps toward transforming pain through the process of forgiveness, taking from practicetheway.org:

1. **Reflect on Forgiveness.** Take some time alone with a journal and ask God to bring to mind a time someone absorbed your offense and forgave you. Try to identify three instances and write briefly about each. Think about how you felt when you knew you had done wrong and hurt them. Recall the guilt, embarrassment, or shame you felt. How did you feel about the potential consequences? How did you try to justify your actions? Journal about what happened.

2. **Remember Being Forgiven.** Now try to remember the feelings and thoughts you had when you were forgiven. What was that like? Write about that experience. Consider what it would have felt like if the person you hurt made you feel guilty. What if they had tried to shame you or manipulate you?
3. **Give Gratitude.** Take a few minutes with Jesus to give thanks for the person who granted you forgiveness when you needed it. You may want to set a reminder to reach out to the person who forgave you and thank them.
4. **Imagine Forgiving.** Now ask the Spirit to bring to mind a time you were hurt by someone. Think about it for a moment, recall the hurt. Try to avoid seeing yourself as a victim or an avenger. Then remember again the time you were forgiven by another. Bring to mind the person who has hurt you and consider absorbing their offense just as another absorbed yours. Imagine forgiving your offender the way you were also forgiven.
5. **Grant Forgiveness.** If you are ready, you can pray this prayer of forgiveness for someone who has hurt you: "In the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, I commit to release the personal right to payback for their offense. I give the gift of forgiveness to _____. I choose to love this person who harmed me and to bless, not curse, them. Now I ask you, Spirit, to fill me anew with all that you have for me." (Wait in this posture and receive whatever God has for you. Ask for more of his love, joy, peace, kindness, power, or holiness).
6. **Dream About Blessing Others.** Take some time now to ask God what it would look like to do good for others out of a past wound. If you were hurt as a child or teenager, how could you work to protect or mentor young people? What do you wish someone had done for you that you can now do for others? Write ideas down, plan next steps, and share them with a trusted friend or your Community. End by giving Jesus thanks for his power to redeem all things – he is truly making all things new.

Questions for Community:

- What has been your experience with this practice so far?
- Has your understanding of forgiveness changed this week? In what ways?

SPACE TO JOURNAL:

Week Three: The Practice of Forgiveness

“We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

Martin Luther King Jr.

We began this practice with Dr. Breshears definition of forgiveness: *“My personal act to release the one who sinned against me from my personal right to collect on the moral debt (to pay him back) for his offense, giving it over to God for His justice and mercy.”* We’ve added to that idea the concept of absorbing the pain with God’s help so that it can be transformed to blessing. But this process can be laced with deep and powerful emotions. In the journey of forgiveness, we seek to move from anger and hatred to love and compassion.

How does that journey work? There are many different ways to delineate it. Jesus never gave us a singular teaching that encompasses the whole, but He often inferred to us how we might engage the process.

Practice in Community

Have somebody read Matthew 6:12, 14-15. Discuss the following questions:

- How do you react as you hear Jesus’ seeming “caveat” to grace in vs. 14-15?
- Why might our unforgiveness of others get in the way of being able to receive the forgiveness of God?
- How have you experienced a greater depth in your relationship with Jesus when you’ve chosen to forgive someone else?

For this week, the Individual Practice is detailed and for many will be somewhat intense. Take some time as a group to read through the practice and talk about the various aspects of it. What steps seem especially difficult to you? How might you best engage this practice? Take time to pray for one another.

Individual Practice

This practice will be one that will take multiple days during the week, and depending on the situation, may take multiple weeks or even months. It is built around the REACH model of forgiveness developed by Dr. Everett Worthington, which is built around the whole of the New Testament teachings on forgiveness. It’s likely this process will work the best if you journal your thoughts and emotions, usually starting with a smaller offense. Use the following journaling guide, and remember that forgiveness is a process, not an event. For some, particularly if you are unable to stop unwanted thoughts, you may want to seek the help of one of our pastors or a Christian therapist.

Recall the hurt. Get alone in a quiet place with your journal and begin with prayer. Ask God to help you recall an event that caused you pain.

1. Picture the event in your mind’s eye and identify the emotions with clear labels: How did you feel? Be mindful that don’t slip into fear, sadness, or anger. It’s ok to express negative emotion, but we want to avoid vengeful rumination.
2. As a memory comes observe the feelings that arise. Spend some time journaling about it. Try to be as precise as possible with regards to how it made you feel.
3. There will likely be pain in this, but keep in mind that the process is designed to move you beyond the pain and into a space of freedom. Sitting with the pain is a necessary step.

Empathize. Begin with prayer and ask God to activate empathy in you. These are four options for working through this step. Choose the one that prioritizes your emotional safety in this process, and if needed, seek counsel from a leader or therapist.

1. If you’re able and willing, sit down with your offender and ask to hear their story.
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal ways in which you could empathize with the offender and their brokenness.
3. Write a letter from the point of view of the offender. If this proves to be too difficult, that’s okay. The idea with this exercise is to build empathy, and for a lot of people that takes time.
4. Imagine a conversation with your offender. As you imagine speaking to them, imagine what they would say back to you. Spend some time reflecting on how that shifted your perspective.

Altruistic gift. This is the step of releasing the person from the debt they owe you—giving them the unmerited gift of forgiveness.

1. Remember a time you were forgiven by another person. Recall how it felt: the freedom it brought and the weight that was lifted. Take a minute to thank Jesus for this experience.
2. Now give that same gift to your offender. If you are ready, speak words of forgiveness out loud as if the person were in front of you. Tell them you want to give them the gift of forgiveness. For example: “(Name), I forgive you for (offense) and now release you from my judgments and expectations, present and future.”

Commit publicly to forgive. Public forgiveness is inviting a trusted person to bear witness to your act of forgiving. Two ideas for this:

1. Create a certificate that clearly notes when and that you chose to forgive. Sign it, date it and even consider putting it on the wall!
2. Write a letter of forgiveness to the offender. This does not have to be sent, it is more for therapeutic purposes. Invite the Holy Spirit to show you how to move ahead in relationship with the offender and how to steward that forgiveness with yourself and others.

Hold on to forgiveness. Forgiveness is hardly ever a one-time event. Because this is not a perfect process, there will be times when we doubt whether we’ve completely forgiven the offender. Remember that emotional pain does not mean you haven’t forgiven somebody.

1. Go back to when you first forgave that person.
2. Avoid letting your mind ruminate on negative thoughts about the person or event.
3. Reach out to a friend who walked with you during that time. Ask them to remind you of the forgiveness that took place.
4. Review this process again. It may seem redundant, but often there are steps we miss or further work the Spirit wants to invite us into that we may not have been ready for first time around.

Questions for Community:

- What has been your experience with this practice so far?
- Has your understanding of forgiveness changed this week? In what ways?

SPACE TO JOURNAL:

Week Four: The Practice of Reconciliation

“Forgiveness, as an act of love, is felt, not achieved. It can be given, but it may not always be received. It cannot be bestowed as either a triumph over another person, or as the means to secure their humiliation or acquiescence. It is most healing, most profound when it grows out of humility and realism, a hard-won sense that, whether you are entirely to blame in these events and I am blameless, there is in each of us insufficiencies and imperfections that can be our greatest teachers.”

Stephanie Dourick

“You cannot build a bridge by starting in the middle. Bridge-builders begin from the side they are on.”

John Paul Lecerac

As the Spirit works in our hearts and lives through this practice of forgiveness, He also graciously reveals the way that we have hurt others and births in us a desire to make it right. At that point, we are called to respond—this is an invitation from the Spirit not into guilt and shame, but to life and freedom.

Forgiveness is all about our personal act of releasing the one who sinned against us from our personal right to collect on the moral debt. (Breshears) This must happen with or without their participation. Reconciliation, however, is a move toward another in order to restore a broken relationship. Therefore, forgiveness only takes one, but reconciliation takes two.

Practice in Community

Have somebody read Luke 17:1-4. Discuss the following questions:

- Would you agree that sin in relationship is inevitable? Would you also agree that means you will inevitably hurt the people you love? How does that land on you?
- Does Jesus call to blanket forgiveness encourage you toward blanket repentance? Why or why not?
- How does the call to forgive relate to the call to reconcile with others when you are the one that sinned?

The second half of this corporate practice is best spent in smaller groups, maybe of 4-5 at the most. As you break up into groups, ask God to bring to mind those in your past that you have wronged. Have you reconciled with that person? What did that look like? Spend some time sharing and confessing what God has revealed.

Consider the key steps to repentance (taken from practicingtheway.org):

- Conviction—God showing you that you sinned against someone.
- Confession—Making a clear and unequivocal apology.
- Repentance—Committing to change your future behavior.
- Restitution—Restoring and repaying anything that was taken, broken, or lost due to your sin.
- Reconciliation—Developing a path forward in relationship together.

As you think about the situation you talked about above, did you follow all of those steps? What still needs to be done? Pray for one another.

Individual Practice

Take time on your own to ask the Spirit to reveal those against whom you have sinned. Spend time listening and asking Him to reveal people. If/When He does, consider the steps of reconciliation above and commit to walking through them at an appropriate pace. Depending on the severity of the offense, the other person may not be ready to enter the process of reconciliation. Be mindful of their journey. You are only called to be obedient to what the Spirit is asking of you, not to make them ready.

It may be appropriate with this journey to work through this with a counselor, a pastor, or a Community Group leader. Feel free to contact them and keep actively working toward reconciliation.

Questions for Community:

- What has been your experience with this practice?
- What is the hardest part of reconciliation for you?
- What are you going to take away from this practice series?