ACTIVATE: Forgiveness

**MS & HS CURRICULUM**

**Connect Groups**

**August 15, 2021**

**Lesson 45:** To Forgive Others

**What we want students to learn:** That because God has forgiven us, we must, in turn, strive to show the same level of forgiveness to others.

**What we want students to do with what they’ve learned:** To commit to extending forgiveness where it is needed.

**Scripture Focus:** Matthew 6:13-15, Matthew 18:21-35

**Overview:** When was the last time you were excited to share something with another person? A funny gif? A new restaurant? A crazy news headline?The motivation to share is born out of the value we attach to a certain experience. If it is uniquely positive (or even negative, in some cases) we are motivated to share it with others, partly, because we want them toexperience the same emotions. As people who have experienced the greatest gift possible, God's sweeping forgiveness of our sins, shouldn't we be the most excited to share forgiveness with others? It's a convicting thought, one you'll help your students wrestle with in this lesson.

**Bible Background**

The *Bible Background* is designed to help you provide some context for the Scripture you’ll be studying. *The Details* gives you background info for each book. *The Setting* informs you of what’s happening in and around the passage. *The Main Point* gives you an overview of how the passage will be used in the lesson.

* ***What do we mean by “context”?*** In every **YM360** Bible Study lesson, you’ll notice we make a point to encourage you to provide the context for the passages you study. By “context” we mean at the very least helping students know *who* wrote the book, *when* it was written, and *why* it was written.

***What’s the big deal?*** When we teach the Bible without giving context, students don’t get a “big picture” understanding of the story of the Bible. But this view is vital to grasping the story of God’s plan of redemption for humankind. As you teach, use the *Bible Background* to help summarize the context.

**The Details**

Matthew

* **Author:**Matthew, a former tax collector, was a disciple of Jesus and a firsthand witness to the stories he relates in his Gospel.
* **Timeframe:** Most people hold to Matthew’s Gospel being written in the late A.D. 50s or 60s, though there are some who think it was written after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.
* **Purpose:** Matthew was writing to a primarily Jewish audience to convince them that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. But he was probably aware of a Gentile audience, as his Gospel makes the case that the saving truth of Christ is for all nations.

**The Main Point**

It’s important to make this point as you teach these passages: our forgiveness isn't conditional on anything other than faith in Christ. If this were true, if we had to forgive others for Christ to forgive us, this would be works-based salvation. Salvation would depend on our actions and not on faith alone. We know this would be in direct conflict with our theological understanding of salvation. And so, we have to ask, what is Jesus saying here? This is an example of hyperbole, a rhetorical tool common in rabbinical culture. Jesus is overstating the point intentionally to help His audience realize He is calling them to a higher standard, God’s standard. Essentially, as people who have experienced the radical forgiveness of God, we should be the MOST forgiving. You will help students understand that as Christ-followers, they should lead the way in extending mercy and forgiveness to others.

**Lesson Plan**

The **Lesson Plan** contains three elements: An introductory activity called *The Lead In*; the Bible study section called *The Main Event*; an application-focused segment called *The Last Word.*

**The Lead In**

* **Goal:** To help students see that because they are a Christ-follower, there is an expected way to act.
* **Set-Up:** You’ll want a dry-erase board to make a list. You’ll want to do this before class starts, if possible.

FIRST, explain that based on the situations we find ourselves in, or the roles we play, there are certain actions that result. For example, we might say that because they are in school, they have homework. And of course, ALL of your students do their homework.

THEN, direct students' attention to the list on your dry-erase board. Explain that what they see are various representations of roles or responsibilities they have as teenagers. With each of these, there are expectations of their behavior. Explain that you're going to take turns working through the list, filling in the blanks as you go with the behavior that results from the role. Encourage students to be funny and to have fun. You may even consider awarding prizes for the most hilarious responses.

NEXT, work through your list. These are some examples. Feel free to provide your own.

* **Because I have brothers or sisters, I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**
* **Because I’m too young to drive, I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**
* **Because I play on the football team, I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**
* **Because my parents make me put my phone in the kitchen when I go to bed, I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**
* **Because I have a test on Friday, I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**
* **Because my crush is in my Math class, I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**
* **Because my dad always comments on my Instagram posts, I \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

FINALLY, wrap up this introductory activity by saying something like:

* **Here’s the deal: as we’ve talked about forgiveness, we’ve focused on what God’s role is. What we’re about to see today is that because we have been forgiven by God, we have an expected response. Let’s take a closer look.**

**The Main Event**

* **Goal:** To show studentsthat because God has forgiven us, we must, in turn, strive to show the same level of forgiveness to others.
* **Set-Up:** None

FIRST, have students remind you of what you studied in the last lesson. Feel free to use the following bullet points to help guide your review:

* **God is able and willing to forgive us of our sins.**
* **All sin, no matter who is hurt by it, is sin against God.**
* **That through Jesus’ work on the cross, all who believe in Him are presented to God as completely forgiven.**

NEXT, have students think of a time when someone offered them forgiveness for something they knew they had done wrong. If they are feeling particularly brave, have them share what they did and how they were forgiven. Even if they don’t feel like sharing the specifics of the situation, have students share how it made them feel being forgiven. Encourage students not just to share positive emotions, but any non-positive emotions too (guilt, etc.). Then, explain that what we’re about to see is that God knows forgiving others can be super hard. And yet, His expectation of our commitment to forgiveness is pretty high.

THEN, have students turn to Matthew 6:13-15. While they are finding it, provide some context for the book by referencing the Bible Background portion of your lesson. When you’re ready, read or have a student read the verses. When they’ve finished, explain that while this is only a few verses, there is a ton of depth here. Then, lead students in a brief discussion. Ask:

* **OK, you’ve probably all cheated and looked at the header in your Bible, but just in case you didn’t, where do these verses come from?** 
  + *Answer*: The Lord’s Prayer
* **Just so we’re all on the same page, what exactly is the Lord’s Prayer? What was the context for it?**
  + *Answer*: Jesus' disciples were looking around them at the current religious leaders of the day and spotting some inconsistencies in the way in which they approached God in prayer. They were confused. And so they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.
* **Someone summarize verses 14 and 15 for me. What is the overall message Jesus is conveying here?** 
  + *Answer*: Expect your students to say that if we don’t forgive others, God won’t forgive ours. If this is what is said, allow it to stand.
* **What happens to us when we come to saving faith in Jesus?** 
  + Answers may vary. But look for something like “our sins are forgiven.”
* **When we come to saving faith in Jesus, our sins are forgiven. This is pretty much the heart of the Gospel. Based on what you know about the salvation that God offers us, which includes being forgiven the penalty of our sins, do we have to do anything to earn it? The better question may be, CAN we do anything to earn it?**
  + *Answer*: No. We can never do anything to earn forgiveness. We only receive forgiveness through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8-9, Rom. 10:9-11).

Explain that at this point, it seems you’re at a place where you have a problem. It appears that the Bible is contradicting itself. And since we know that God's Word can't contradict itself, we have to figure out what's going on. Is our forgiveness dependent on something we have to do? Can we merely forgive others and be forgiven? What about Jesus' sacrifice on the cross? Encourage students to embrace this tension for just a moment longer.

NEXT, have students turn to Matthew 18:21-35. Encourage them to follow along with you as you read the narrative. When you are finished ask:

* **How would you describe the actions of the servant?** 
  + *Answer*: Everyone recognizes that the servant's actions are pretty outrageously wrong. He was shown great forgiveness, and then he immediately turned around and acted harshly. He failed to extend the forgiveness shown to him.
* **How is this similar to what we just read in the Lord’s Prayer?**
  + *Answer*: In both cases, Jesus passes along the same warning: If you don’t forgive, you won’t be forgiven.

THEN, explain to students that you’re right back where you started. Explain that it appears Jesus is saying that we can only be forgiven if we forgive others. But that flies in the face of ALL of the rest of Scripture that attests to the fact that we are saved through faith (and only faith) in the work and person of Jesus. So what gives? Ask if students want to take a stab at what Jesus is saying here. Allow them to guess. Then, bring the conversation full circle by saying something like the following:

* **There are likely three factors in play here. The first and most likely is that Jesus is exaggerating on purpose to get people’s attention. It’s a rhetorical technique that Jewish rabbis used in teaching called “hyperbole.” You may recognize this term from English class. It’s a way of exaggerating in purpose to make a point. It’s like you saying, “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.” I mean, you’re probably not literally going to eat a horse. But you exaggerate to make your point. It’s likely that Jesus is exaggerating to make one thing very clear: Anyone who has experienced the total forgiveness God offers BETTER be experts at forgiving others. It’s like Jesus is saying How dare you welcome the forgiveness God offers and then withhold forgiveness from others? This is most likely what’s going on.**

**The second factor is that Jesus may be making the argument that the only way you can truly forgive someone is if you have been saved by faith in Jesus. Therefore, if you can’t forgive others, you must not have been truly saved by God in the first place. Your lack of a forgiving heart is evidence that you have not been made new through saving faith in Jesus. This is an option, but most scholars believe the first option, that Jesus was speaking in hyperbole, is the most likely.**

FINALLY, so ask students what they think the takeaway is from this lesson. Knowing what they know, what do they think God is trying to tell them? Help affirm their responses and wrap up your Bible study time by saying something like:

* **This has been good Bible study! We dug deep and figured out that what Jesus is really after is calling us to a higher standard. His standard! God expects us to be experts on what it feels like to be forgiven. We should be falling all over ourselves to forgive others. Now, that doesn't mean forgiveness is easy. It's not. In some cases, it's EXTREMELY difficult. But as people who have a relationship with God only because we have been forgiven, it’s tough to think we could ever withhold forgiveness from others. Let’s look at this a little closer as we prepare to wrap up.**

If there are no more thoughts or comments, transition into The Last Word.

**The Last Word**

* **Goal:** The goal of this is to commit to extending forgiveness where it is needed.
* **Set-Up:** None

FIRST, ask students why forgiveness is so hard. Ask: **What is it about forgiveness that is so challenging?** Allow for responses.

THEN, remind students that when we fail to forgive someone, we rob them of experiencing God‘s grace through us, and we poison ourselves by holding onto bitterness and anger. Say something like:

* **What Jesus knows is that forgiveness is the ultimate way of setting ourselves free from the pain syndrome causes. That’s one reason He was so insistent that His followers be people of forgiveness.**

NEXT, inform Students that the practical application of this lesson is quite simple in some ways, but in other ways, it could be extremely difficult. Explain to them that today you are not going to do any closing activities or any creative games or anything like that. Explain to them that you are merely going to give them one question to think about: **Who in your life have you withheld forgiveness from?** Let this question hang in the air for a moment.

Explain to students that you know some of them have people who have really hurt them. For some of the people in the room, forgiveness is something that can’t happen overnight. It is a process of God working on their heart to come to a place where they can extend forgiveness to others. It may be worth reminding your students that the forgiveness they have to offer doesn’t have to wait on the other person. Some of the students in your room will need to forgive people who will never be sorry for the actions they’ve done to cause such harm. You have to encourage the students to forgive anyway.

FINALLY, explain to students that the only way they can extend forgiveness is in the power of the Holy Spirit. As sinners, we do not have it in our hearts to forgive on our own. It is only the power of the Holy Spirit working in us that we can ever forgive anyone. It is the grace of God flowing through us to others.

Allow time to process this. It will be a much bigger deal to some of your students than others. (And be sure to make yourself available after your group time.)

When you have finished, close in prayer.

* Don’t forget to distribute the devotions to your students this week. If you’re posting them on Instagram, or some other means of electronic distribution, make sure you inform students of when they will be receiving them.
* Use the *Social Media* guide to stay in touch with students via text or Instagram, and to encourage them to follow through with reading their devotions.

**We Want To Hear From You . . .**

* Do you have questions about a lesson?
* Something that worked particularly well you want to share?
* Something that didn’t work you want to bring up?

We value your feedback! Please do not hesitate to email us with your questions, comments, or concerns, at feedback@youthministry360.com.