

MARK OF A DISCIPLE

Disciples of Christ offer forgiveness and mercy to others (Ephesians 4:32).

SCRIPTURE

MATTHEW 18:21–35

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Peter's question would have seemed quite merciful on the surface. Suggesting that the disciples should forgive seven times was very generous, considering it was more than double what the rabbis of his day traditionally taught: you should forgive someone only three times.¹ Jesus' response of 77 times (or 70 times 7, depending on the translation) wasn't meant to put a precise number on the amount of forgiveness we should offer. Jesus' answer and the following parable teach us that our forgiveness should be limitless, just as God's is.

Check out the *Teacher Prep Video* for this lesson: <https://vimeo.com/1065899501>



FACILITATOR NOTE: We're giving you a lot of teaching material. Don't feel like you should cover everything here. You know your group better than anyone. Choose the material that will best fit your students and skip over the rest.

OPENING

PRAYER

1–2 minutes

Start your small group by asking the Lord to bless your discussion and time together.

OPTIONAL: Give students an opportunity to lead the prayer.

OPENING QUESTIONS

3–5 minutes

- How was the week? What's the best thing that's happened? Anything major going on?
- Describe a time when you experienced something that truly surprised you.



EXPLORE

EXPLORE GOD'S WORD

3–5 minutes

When Peter approaches Jesus in this passage, he probably thinks he is being incredibly forgiving. He suggests that disciples should forgive others seven times. Seven times was more than twice the amount expected of someone living in the customs of that day. However, Jesus replies that we must forgive even more than that. Jesus tells us a story that shows that God's forgiveness is boundless. Because of all we have been forgiven, we must always forgive as well. After all, how can someone who has been released from a fortune of debt hold someone guilty of a small amount?

Read Matthew 18:21–27 and discuss 1–2 of these questions:

7–10 minutes

- **Why does Jesus say to forgive “seventy-seven times” (v. 21)?**
Jesus doesn’t mean that on the seventy-eighth time, we can stop forgiving. Instead, seventy-seven is a large number that implies that we should always forgive.
- **How would it feel to be forgiven such a large debt?**
It would be life-changing. The man in this parable was facing slavery, but he was set free and given a new start in life.
- **What is the most significant debt that we are facing?**
All of us are born with sin and continue to sin in our lives. We can never earn enough to pay off that debt, but through Jesus, our debt has been paid.



Say something like: The Bible teaches us that we have all sinned against God (Rom. 3:23). Each of us owes an outstanding debt. But Jesus shows us that God’s Kingdom has the most amazing debt forgiveness imaginable. None of our sins are too great for God to forgive.

Read Matthew 18:28–31 and discuss 1–2 of these questions:

7–10 minutes

- **In what ways are we like the wicked servant?**
Sometimes, we hold grudges against others over little things when God has forgiven us an enormous debt.
- **Why do you think this story includes the other servants?**
It shows how ridiculous the wicked servant is and how our unforgiveness hurts our witness as Christ’s disciples.
- **What do you think the other servants thought about the master and the ungrateful servant?**
Answers will vary, but probably incredibly impressed by the master’s act of mercy and extraordinarily shocked and disappointed by the servant’s unwillingness to follow his master’s example.



Say something like: The wicked servant in this passage is genuinely shocking. It’s hard to imagine someone being so cruel after being forgiven so much. Jesus knows that we tend to forget how much God forgives us.

FACILITATOR NOTE: If you have extra time, go through the next set of questions. If not, skip to the **Connection** section.

Read Matthew 18:32–35 and discuss 1–2 of these questions:

7–10 minutes

- **Why does forgiveness matter so much to God?**
Refusing to forgive has its roots in pride and ungratefulness. When we refuse to forgive, we often pridefully believe that we are better than others. It’s foolish to expect forgiveness and understanding from God and others while simultaneously refusing to give it to others.
- **How does it feel to forgive others?**
When we forgive others, it frees us from wallowing in our pain, bitterness, and resentment. Forgiving others sets them and us free.



Say something like: We have been forgiven more than we can ever know. Because of this, we must extend forgiveness to others. Not only is it in honoring to God, but it heals our hearts and brings us joy.



CONNECT & APPLY

CONNECTION

5-7 minutes

Show your students how Scripture connects to their lives: Use the example below OR share a personal story of how God helps us forgive even in extreme situations.

Example: One of the most famous Americans in history is Frederick Douglass. Douglass was born into slavery and escaped from his owner's family at the age of twenty. He became a leading abolitionist, writer, speaker, and Christian leader. Even though many people at the time used Christianity to defend slavery, Douglass found the true Gospel and became a disciple of Christ. Around 1860, more than twenty years after escaping slavery, he wrote to his former slave owner, Hugh Auld, asking to meet. Douglass wrote in his letter, "I feel nothing but kindness for you all – I love you, but hate Slavery."² Not only did Frederick Douglass forgive in his heart, but he reached out and blessed the man who held him in captivity. This incredible act of forgiveness reminds us that no matter what we've experienced, we can always forgive others.³



- How can Douglass's story inspire us to forgive others?

Answers will vary, but Douglass's story reminds us that even large debts may be forgiven by followers of Christ.

MARK OF A DISCIPLE

2-3 minutes

Disciples of Christ offer forgiveness and mercy to others (Ephesians 4:32).

Use the Mark of a Disciple to reinforce the lesson and challenge students to apply it to their lives.

APPLY IT

5-10 minutes

Take some time this week to pray and journal about forgiveness. First, ask God to forgive you, then ask for him to reveal any people you need to forgive. Finally, meet with a trusted friend or leader regarding how best to extend forgiveness.



Be specific:

- What are you going to do?
- When are you going to do it?
- Is there someone who can keep you accountable?



FACILITATOR NOTE: Allow students who are comfortable to share their plans for application. This may encourage or spark ideas for other students, plus add a level of accountability.



CLOSING

PRAYER

2–3 minutes

Take a moment to ask for prayer requests. Spend some time praying that each of us will be able to receive and extend God's forgiveness.

Write down any prayer requests mentioned and ask your students about them at your next meeting.

MEMORY VERSE

Send the memory verse graphic included in your download to your students later this week to keep the conversation going.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

Ephesians 4:32 (ESV)

NOTES

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¹ Barbieri, L. A., Jr. (1985). *Matthew*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 2:62.

² Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, "I Love You but Hate Slavery: Frederick Douglass to His Former Owner," *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*. Accessed September 14, 2024, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/i-love-you-hate-slavery-frederick-douglass-his-former>.

³ Hudson, Ameen, "Frederick Douglass: Thundering Prophet to America," *The Gospel Coalition*, June 28, 2021. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/frederick-douglass-thundering-prophet-to-america/>.

