

Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life

Small Group Guide: “Forgiving”

(LifelongFaith Associates)

Advanced Preparation

Several video presentations are recommended in this session. Please review the study guide to determine which videos you will use. Be sure to preview the DVDs to select the ones that would work best with you audience.

Part 1. *Yearning*: The Hunger for the Practice—Stories of Forgiveness

This small group session focuses on the Christian practice of Forgiving. Read the two opening stories on pages 6.2–6.3 in *Living Well*: “Mending Tears” and “Darkness in a Relationship.” Think about how these stories reflect the challenge of forgiving and how they connect with your own experience.

Use the following questions to discuss with the group your experience of forgiveness. Take a few minutes for reflection and then begin. This is a storytelling experience so be sure to give each person time to share his or her story without interruptions or discussion.

- Tell the story of one of your most vivid experiences of forgiveness.
- How is forgiveness a part of your daily life?
- How do you benefit by being a forgiving person?

Part 2. *Reflecting*: Reflection on the Hunger for Forgiveness

Complete the Forgiveness Quiz: “Why Should We Forgive.” Rate each of the eight statements from 1-4. (The quiz has been developed from the work of Robert Enright, summarized on page 6.5 of *Living Well*.)

After everyone has completed the quiz, take each statement and share your rating and the reason why you chose that rating. Proceed in the same manner with each statement.

At the conclusion of the final question, share your reflections on the quiz: What did you learn about forgiveness from the activity?

Take a few minutes to read the commentary on page 6.6 in *Living Well*. Be sure to read the and identify the “first steps toward change” in the box on page 6.6. Share your insights and reflections with your group.

Part 3. *Exploring*: The Christian Practice of Forgiving

1. The Challenge of the Christian Practice of Forgiving: Film Presentation

To introduce the challenge of forgiveness show the video NOOMA 007 *Luggage* by Rob Bell or NOOMA 010 *Lump* by Rob Bell (order from www.nooma.com).

Luggage - NOOMA 070 by Rob Bell

DVD 13 minutes 2004

English with subtitles in French, German, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Spanish
Includes as 32-page discussion book [\$10 from www.nooma.com + \$3 shipping]

Maybe a friend turned their back on you. Maybe someone you loved betrayed you. We all have wounds and we end up carrying around these things that people have done to us for weeks, months, and sometimes even years. It isn't always easy to forgive these people and after a while these hurts can get really heavy. So the only way to feel better seems to be somehow getting back at the people that hurt us, to get revenge. But does revenge ever truly satisfy? Maybe forgiving isn't something you do for someone else to let them off the hook. Maybe forgiveness is about you. God didn't create you to carry these wounds around. God created you to be free.

Lump - NOOMA 010 by Rob Bell

DVD 13 minutes 2004

English with subtitles in French, German, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Spanish
Includes as 32-page discussion book
\$10 from www.nooma.com (\$3 shipping)

A lot of us have done things in our lives that we're ashamed of. Some are small things, and some of us have really big and devastating things. Some of us even have things that people close to us don't know about. Personal junk that we keep to ourselves so we don't have to deal with it. Because we don't know how to deal with it, do we? We're afraid that if we try it's just going to make everything worse. But no matter how big our junk is, no matter how much what we've done has impacted the way other people feel about us or how we feel about ourselves, it hasn't changed how God feels about us. God loves us, he always has and always will, and there's nothing we can do to change that.

After the video presentation share your emotional response to what you experienced and then what the video taught you about forgiveness and the challenging of forgiving others.

2. Exploring the Christian Practice of Forgiving

The "Exploring" section presents Biblical teaching on forgiveness and is organized into five parts:

1. Forgiving Involves Courage (Story of Joseph in Genesis 45)
2. Forgiving Involves Mercy (Story of the Unforgiving Servant in Luke 18)
3. Forgiving Involves Faith and Love (Story of the Sinful Woman in Luke 7)
4. Forgiving Involves Restoring Relationships (Story of Prodigal Son in Luke 15)
5. The Way of Forgiveness (Matthew 5)

Divide your group into five working teams, have each group take one of the five sections, and prepare a short presentation for the whole group summarizing the Biblical teaching on forgiveness. Groups can develop an aural presentation or use a creative technique such as art, music, or drama to share their summary to the whole group. Here are several other ideas for creating a presentation:

Option 1. Rewrite a Bible Story

Groups can rewrite the Bible story/passage for today's world, using a contemporary setting or forgiveness issue. Here are several examples:

- Rewrite the Bible story using a contemporary setting or issue and a contemporary style.

- Rewrite a Bible story from a first person point of view, describing the events as though you were there participating. Conclude the story with a dialogue between Jesus and yourself, discussing what happened.
- Rewrite a Gospel story as an eyewitness account of something Jesus did or as an interview script of a person who met Jesus (e.g., a person Jesus healed). Rewrite an Old Testament story as an eyewitness account.
- Rewrite a Bible story from a particular point of view, e.g., the different characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan.
- Rewrite a Bible story using creative methods such as storyboards for a TV show or a movie, a TV newscast, a commercial, and/or a newspaper or magazine story.
- Rewrite a Bible story using a letter format. Tell people to think of the Bible as God's letter to them. Read the passage and then ask them to respond by writing their reflections on God's Word in the form of a prayer. Ask them to use a letter format (Dear Jesus... or Dear God...) and include what they learned from reading the Bible story, how they will try to live what God has said, and what they need from God now so they can live what God has asked them to do.

Option 2. Dramatize a Bible Story or Passage

Groups can create a dramatic re-enactment of their Bible story, using a contemporary setting or forgiveness issue. People can do this in silence by simply acting out the passage or act the story while someone is narrating or assign different parts of the story to individual actors. Groups can also rewrite the story in contemporary form and act it out.

Option 3. Create a Forgiveness Advertisement

Create an ad to present a Bible story in contemporary language and setting. Teams can use a variety of advertising methods (a 30 second TV or radio ad, a song, an ad in a magazine, poster advertisement, a billboard). They should write the content for an advertisement (e.g., a script for a commercial or magazine ad); identify or create artwork, symbol, images, photos to accompany the content; develop the final product; and then present it to the group. Here are several suggestions for creating an ad:

1. *Focus the Ad:* In short phrases clearly identify what you want to communicate.
2. *Select the Advertising Approach:* Think about all the types of advertisements in magazines and on the radio and television. Select your approach.
3. *Design the Ad:* Combine your content or message with your advertising method to create your unique promotion.

Film Option

Conclude your exploration of the Christian practice of forgiving by showing the video: *Prodigal Sons – Modern Parables: Living in the Kingdom of God* (Modern Parables) followed by a discussion of the meaning and application of the Parable of the Prodigal Son for life today.

Prodigal Sons – Modern Parables: Living in the Kingdom of God

DVD 21 minutes English [\$24.95 from www.modernparables.com]

Study Guide and Leader's Guide Online resources at www.modernparables.com

Modern Parables is an original film-based Bible study curriculum on Jesus' parables. It uses short films of the parables combined with teaching by pastors and in-depth study materials to create an entirely new learning experience. Modern Parables seeks to re-create the emotional immediacy that Jesus' first century audience felt when hearing the parables. It does this by using some of the best parable scholarship and exploring it through creative filmmaking. The gut-level understanding made possible by the films is intended to drive listeners into a deeper understanding of the Bible.

3. Exploring the Christian Practice of Forgiving

After each group has made their presentation, discuss the following questions:

- What did you discover about the importance of forgiveness in Jesus' ministry?
- Why was forgiveness so central to Jesus' ministry?
- What are the implications of Jesus words and actions for us today?

Conclude this section by reading and then discussing the six insights on forgiveness in "The Path Toward Forgiveness." Which of the insights really speak to you about the meaning of forgiveness?

Part 4. *Living*: Application of the Christian Practice to Daily Life

1. Film: The Power of Forgiveness

To illustrate the practice of forgiving in action watch two segments from the video *The Power of Forgiveness* by Martin Doblmeier: "The Amish" and "Paths to Forgiveness." (Order from www.journeyfilms.com.)

The Power of Forgiveness by Martin Doblmeier
DVD 78 minutes Divided into individual stories/sections English
Online guides for community conversations available at www.journeyfilms.com.
\$24.95 from www.journeyfilms.com (\$5 shipping)
Additional Resources: www.thepowerofforgiveness.com

The Power of Forgiveness explores recent research into the psychological and physical effects of forgiveness on individuals and within relationships under a wide variety of conditions and translates it into a popular, accessible documentary film for national public television. It includes feature stories on the Amish, the 9/11 tragedy and peace-building in Northern Ireland, along with interviews with renowned Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, best-selling authors Thomas Moore and Marianne Williamson and others. The film also explores the role forgiveness holds in various faiths traditions. It provides an honest look at the intensity of anger and grief that human nature is heir to. We see in the film that there are transgressions people find themselves unwilling or unable to forgive. Through character-driven stories the film shows the role forgiveness can play in alleviating anger and grief and the physical, mental and spiritual benefits that come with it.

Follow the film presentation with a discussion of the power of forgiveness, using the following questions:

- What was your emotional response to what you say in the two stories?
- Why did forgiveness work in these two situations? What practices made forgiveness work?
- What do the two stories teach us about the practice of forgiving? What are the implications for how you practice forgiving? How can use the insights from the two stories in your own life?

2. Developing the Practice of Forgiving

Take some quiet time to reflect on how you can strengthen your practice of forgiving. "Living" can serve as a guide for reflection and discerning what actions you (and your household) can take. Read the strategies in "How Forgiveness Can Grow and Flourish" and "Suggestions for Developing the Practice of Forgiveness" on pages 6.13–6.15 in *Living Well*.

After your reflection time, join together as a group and brainstorm additional ways to strengthen your practice of forgiveness. Together as a group develop a list of “Ten Ways to Forgive” based on your learning.

Now take several minutes to decide on which strategies you will use to strengthen your practice of forgiveness. Here is a simple process of moving from idea to action. Write your plan on piece of paper.

1. List three actions you would like to take to live the Christian practice of Forgiving in your daily life/family life.
2. Choose the action that you would like to do first.
3. List the potential roadblocks to implementing this action.
4. Develop strategies for overcoming these roadblocks.
5. Describe in detail the action you will undertake and the steps you will take to ensure that it will happen.

Share one of your commitments with the group.

3. Writing a Letter to Someone You Are Struggling to Forgive

Conclude by writing a letter to someone you are struggling to forgive using the suggestions on page 6.15 in *Living Well*. You can send this to the person or decide to meet them and share the contents of their letter.

Part 5. Prayer for the Practice

Conclude in prayer using the prayer on page 6.16.

Why Should We Forgive?

Rate your agreement with the following statements.
(1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree)

1 2 3 4	1. You forgive to quiet your angry feelings.
1 2 3 4	2. Forgiveness changes destructive thoughts into quieter, more healthy thoughts.
1 2 3 4	3. As you forgive, you want to act more civilly toward the one who hurt you.
1 2 3 4	4. Forgiveness of one person helps you interact better with others. Perhaps your anger with someone at work has spilled over to your relationship with your children. Forgiving that person would be a gift to your children.
1 2 3 4	5. Forgiveness can improve your relationship with the one who hurt you.
1 2 3 4	6. Your forgiveness actually can help the one who hurt you see his or her unfairness and take steps to stop it. Your forgiving can enhance the character of the one who hurt you.
1 2 3 4	7. You forgive because God asks you to do so. You forgive as an act of love toward God.
1 2 3 4	8. Forgiveness, as an act of kindness and love toward the one who hurt you, is a moral good regardless of how the other is responding to you. Loving others while protecting yourself from harm is a morally good thing to do.

The Costs and Benefits of Forgiveness

Think of a situation in your life where you find it hard to forgive or are struggling to forgive. Now use the questions below and your responses to assess the potential impact on you if you choose to forgive in this situation.

Costs: If I don't forgive the person:

- I feel _____ when I think of the person and the situation.
- The effects on my physical health are_____.
- I think about the person and the situation ___all the time ___often ___ sometimes ___never.
- I believe that the person deliberately intended to hurt me through his or her action and did not have any other reason to do what he or she did. Yes___ No___
- I feel like I'm the only person this has happened to. Yes___ No___
- I find it hard to move on with my life. Yes___ No___
- It is difficult for me to make good decisions because of the presence of that person/situation in my life. Yes___ No___
- I seek opportunities to tell other people about the person/situation as I see it. Yes___ No___

Potential Benefits: If I forgive the person, I will:

- Stop blaming the other person and be able to spend time on activities that move my life forward. Yes___ No___
- Take responsibility for the part I played in the situation. Yes___ No___
- Change my expectations for other people's behavior so that I don't take future situations personally. Yes___ No___
- Learn strategies and skills that make me better able to cope with future hurts. Yes___ No___
- Stop focusing so much on the situation/person. Yes___ No___
- Feel a physical sense of relief. Yes___ No___
- Find peace. Yes___ No___
- Become a more forgiving person in the future. Yes___ No___

Resources for the Christian Practice of Forgiving

Website: Campaign for Love and Forgiveness (www.loveandforgive.org)

A project of the Fetzer Institute, the Campaign for Love & Forgiveness uses PBS documentaries, community activities, online resources, and networking opportunities to encourage reflection and conversation about how love and forgiveness can effect meaningful change in individuals and society. Through community conversations, the campaign aims to create a meaningful national dialogue that will bring about positive changes for individuals, their relationships, and their communities. The campaign was created as an outgrowth of the work of the Fetzer Institute to foster the awareness of the power of love and forgiveness in the emerging global community. It was specifically designed to support, promote, and augment messages of love and forgiveness in three documentary films the Institute is funding.

Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy. Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Amish Grace explores the Amish response to the October 2006 murder and wounding of 10 girls. Before the sun had set on that awful October day, members of the Amish community brought words of forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain their children. *Amish Grace* explores the many questions this story raises about the religious beliefs and habits that led the Amish to forgive so quickly. In a world where religion spawns so much violence and vengeance, the surprising act of Amish forgiveness begs for deeper consideration.

Calm Surrender: Walking the Path of Forgiveness. Kent Nerburn. Novato, CA: New World Library. 2002.

This lyrical Midwestern writer has a knack for storytelling and extracting wisdom from the ordinary precincts of everyday life. His doctorate in religion and art coupled with his love of Native American lore adds firepower to his spiritual perspective. This down-to-earth volume on forgiveness has a natural feel to it and is peppered with accounts of real people facing steep challenges. Nerburn writes about forgiving ourselves, dealing with small slights, handling the limitations in our lives, letting anger and rage go with “a gentle almost invisible touch,” cultivating the seed of hope, embodying forgiveness, and seeing this spiritual practice as love put in action. Whether musing on his father’s goodness, his mother’s disappointments, his mother-in-law’s pain, the betrayal of Native Americans in Minnesota, or the grief of a mother over the death of her young son, Nerburn returns again and again to forgiveness as “a habit of the heart, an inclination of the spirit, a way of living our lives in homage to all the good choices and decisions we make each day.” This helpful and healing work about walking the hard road of forgiveness celebrates the triumph of the human spirit from start to finish. And equally important for Nerburn is the grace of God, a catalyst to compassionate living.

Facing Forgiveness: A Catholic’s Guide to Letting Go of Anger and Welcoming Reconciliation. Loughlan Sofield, Carroll Juliano, and Bishop Gregory M. Aymond. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007.

Out of the wealth of their shared experience, authors Sofield, Juliano, and Aymond have fashioned an inviting exploration of the process of forgiveness that blends compelling personal narrative, wise spiritual guidance, and sound practical suggestions. Written with Catholics in mind, this simple primer is designed to encourage the first steps in the process of forgiving with over twenty-five stories of real people who found their way to forgiveness or sometimes who choose not to forgive. As readers look into the faces of the wounded people profiled in this book they recognize forgiveness is indeed possible.

Forgiveness: Following Jesus into Radical Loving. Paula Huston. Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008.

Are you able to forgive those who have hurt you? If you find it difficult to forgive, this book is your encouragement. If you're having trouble accepting forgiveness for something you have done, this is your inspiration. With honesty, writing about her own failings, Paula Huston examines the intellectual, psychological, social, and spiritual meanings of forgiveness. She asks tough questions and then offers possible solutions, drawing a portrait of a truly forgiving person. "One of Jesus' most mind-boggling declarations is that we who hope to follow him must first be willing to forgive the people who have hurt us. Not only does this injunction show up at the heart of the prayer he offers to his disciples ("Give us this day our daily bread...") but he restates it as a requirement for salvation: "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions." (Mt. 6:11-15) "He also tells us that if we wish to live in relationship with God, we must first seek forgiveness from those we've hurt: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Mt. 5:23-24). Our damaged relationships with other people, especially when we are responsible for that damage, have a direct effect on our friendship with God."

The Forgiveness Book. Alice Camille and Paul Boudreau. Chicago: ACTA Publications, 2008.

What is forgiveness? Why is it so hard to forgive? In *The Forgiveness Book: A Catholic Approach*, award-winning authors Alice Camille and Paul Boudreau address these questions and many more by thoroughly examining what Scripture has to say about those who "trespass against us," and what it takes to accomplish the difficult act of forgiveness—all from a distinctly Catholic point of view. *The Forgiveness Book* asks tough questions and prayerfully investigates issues such as: Why should we forgive? What to do with sin? How do we accept forgiveness? and the power of forgiveness. The Appendix includes an examination of conscience, prayers of forgiveness, Bible verses on forgiveness, important books on forgiveness, and a list of films that focus on forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope. Robert Enright. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001.

Forgiveness Is a Choice is a self-help book for people who have been deeply hurt by another and caught in a vortex of anger, depression, and resentment. As a creator of the first scientifically proven forgiveness program in the country, Robert D. Enright shows how forgiveness can reduce anxiety and depression while increasing self-esteem and hopefulness toward one's future. This groundbreaking work demonstrates how forgiveness, approached in the correct manner, benefits the forgiver far more than the forgiven. Filled with wisdom and warm encouragement, the book leads the reader on a path that will bring clarity and peace. Enright is careful to distinguish forgiveness from "pseudoforgiveness" and to reassure readers that forgiveness does not mean accepting continued abuse or even reconciling with the offender. Rather, by giving the gift of forgiveness, readers are encouraged to confront and let go of their pain in order to regain their lives.

No Future Without Forgiveness. Desmond Tutu. New York: Doubleday/Image Books, 1999.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, was called out of retirement in 1995 by President Nelson Mandela to serve as chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). To heal the nation during its transition from despotism to democracy, it was necessary to look the beast of apartheid in the eye so that it would never rear up its monstrous head and fury again. It was decided that TRC would operate under the umbrella of restorative rather than retributive justice: Victims of human rights violations would be given a chance to tell their stories and to rehabilitate their civil and human dignity. TRC would grant amnesty to those confessing their crimes. The Archbishop discusses the challenges,

setbacks, and inner workings of the TRC process and offers excerpts from the victims and the perpetrators of apartheid. He writes: "To forgive is indeed the best form of self-interest since anger, resentment, and revenge are corrosive of that 'summum bonum,' the greatest good." Here is a sober and clear-sighted example of spiritual politics at its best.

The Power of Forgiveness. Kenneth Briggs. (Based on a film by Martin Doblmeier) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

This volume examines the mysteries of forgiveness. Companion to the Journey Film documentary of the same title, the book focuses on the personal struggles with betrayal, loss, grief, confusion that give rise to the need for mercy and pardon. Forgiveness is portrayed as a healing force that occupies a central place in religious traditions and whose benefits are being noted by social-scientific research. The book probes deeply how we can freshly engage the elusive quality of forgiveness. It also shows how forgiveness and reconciliation can transform the personal, social, political, and cultural scripts that plague us.

Radical Forgiveness. Antoinette Bosco. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009.

Antoinette Bosco lost one son to suicide and later another son and his wife to the hands of a murderer. Her life since has been a dramatic journey to radical forgiveness and inner peace. In *Radical Forgiveness* she shares with us what she has learned about life's most difficult, and most healing, virtue. "Few people, thank God," she writes, "must come to terms with life issues like these. But all of us must deal on a regular basis with thoughts about people we feel have hurt us, abandoned us, spoken badly about us, damaged our reputations, manipulated, provoked, or just plain annoyed us. They can be parents, relatives, friends, bosses, employees, or strangers." *Radical Forgiveness* brings us freedom from the awful, angry, unforgiving thoughts that gnaw at our consciousness, burn us, haunt us, and won't let us go until we let them go.

Reconciliation. Robert Morneau. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007.

A wise teacher, Bishop Robert Morneau, sheds new light on a sacrament that can bring us face to face with the merciful Christ. Chapters include: The Mystery of God's Mercy, The Mystery of the Human Person, The Context for Reconciliation, The Mystery of Sin, Principles of Reconciliation, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The Return of the Prodigal Son. Henri Nouwen. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

A chance encounter with a reproduction of Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son" catapulted Henri Nouwen on a long spiritual adventure. In this book he shares the deeply personal and resonant meditation that led him to discover the place where God has chosen to dwell. Nouwen probes the several movements of the parable: the father's restoration of sonship, the elder son's vengefulness, and the father's compassion. The themes of homecoming, affirmation, and reconciliation will be newly discovered by all who have known loneliness, dejection, jealousy, or anger.