

# CHAPTER 5, SESSION 29: THE RECONCILING COMMUNITY

## CHAPTER CHALLENGE

The challenge of forgiving others has haunted many Christians. In the context of a group discussion it is often difficult to discuss the ways we have been hurt and the people we need to forgive. Hopefully at this stage in the class, members feel comfortable being open and honest with one another, however, this may not be the case for a number of reasons. As the leader, be aware of your responsibility to create a safe and inviting space for participants to open up. Also, be prepared to direct people to additional help if they need it. For example, there may be an individual in your group who needs to receive counseling in order to work through their experiences. Your encouragement and resources could help them get the support they need.

Also, please note, to help with the flow of this session the time of reflecting on the soul-training exercise has been combined with “Experiencing Transformation.” It would be helpful to the group to explain this change at the beginning of class.

## SUPPLIES

- ☞ A simple wooden cross that can have nails driven into it
- ☞ Nails and hammers
- ☞ A solid table for the cross
- ☞ A CD player and song for the “Experiencing Transformation” component

## OPENING TO GOD [5 minutes]

Have the person who volunteered last week offer their reading as a lead-in to 5 minutes of silence.

These 5 minutes of silence allow the members of the group to become fully present to the moment. At the conclusion of the silence someone in the group may offer a brief prayer, ring a meditation chime, or simply say “Amen.”

## ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [30-40 minutes]

Please note, if time is limited, read through the following questions and identify which ones you especially want to discuss, and then begin with those questions.

1. The author begins the chapter with the story of Stan. How did this story make you feel? What role did narratives, community and soul-training play in his transformation and healing?
2. The false narrative stated in the chapter is: “Only when we forgive will we be forgiven and healed” (p. 110), but the true narrative is: “Only when we know we have been forgiven will we find healing and begin learning to forgive” (p. 111). As a group, reflect on the parts of these narratives that you agree and disagree with.
3. Who do you most identify with in Jesus’ story of forgiveness in Matthew 18:23-35? Why?
4. Clarifying that forgiveness is not something we generate from our own willpower, the author explains “Jesus . . . is both the *pattern* and the *power* of forgiveness and reconciliation” (p. 117). When have you experienced the power of Jesus which allows you to forgive someone? Discuss this experience with your group.
5. The author recounts his experience of confession with Richard Foster (pp. 117-18). As a group name your own experiences with confession. When have you experienced deepened trust through the confession of sins and the affirmation of God’s forgiveness?
6. Review the two sections titled “Keeping Boundaries of Forgiveness” (pp. 118-19) and “The Forgiveness Ambush” (pp. 120-21). How are these sections helpful? What difficult questions about forgiveness still remain for you?

## ENGAGING THE WORD [10-20 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud the following Scripture passage and quote from the book:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor 5:18-19).

In response to this passage the author writes:

This is a clear explanation of the finality of the cross. God—in Christ—is not counting our sins against us. God stopped counting and apparently never took it back up. God is no longer dealing with us on the basis of our sins but on our faith. Jesus died for all of the sins of all of the people for all time—and that means you. Do you know that? Do you have that peace that passes understanding? Do you have the joy of knowing that God has nothing against you (p. 112)?

1. Discuss as a group times you have experienced the finality of the cross and the joy that message brings.
2. How has your knowledge of God's forgiveness empowered you to be a minister of reconciliation to others?

## EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION WITH SOUL-TRAINING [30 minutes]

For this session it was a natural fit to combine the reflection for the soul-training exercise with a time of "Experiencing Transformation." The group will begin with the normal questions that go with the soul-training exercises. After this discussion, you may want to move to a different room that is more worshipful. In this second room, you will need a simple wooden cross with hammers and nails. Near the end of the exercise, participants will be able to nail their reflections to the cross. Take time prior to class to test the process and see if everything works as planned. While the group is nailing their creations to the cross, you may want music playing in the background. A song that deals with reconciliation would be great or an instrumental piece.

If you are in a group of six or more people, divide into groups of three or four. The soul-training exercises involve various steps toward and ways to experience forgiveness. Each of these three questions correlates to the three soul-training exercises; in groups of three or four answer the questions that apply.

1. If you allowed others to forgive for you, discuss the ways this practice affected you. If you were bearing the burden of unforgiveness for someone, describe your experience of daily prayer and what happened within you.
2. The author gives two steps toward forgiving someone who has hurt you: "identity" and "perspective" (p. 123). If you focused on either of these steps, explore with your group how they helped and what challenges you encountered.
3. The third practice was seeing something new in the Lord's Supper. If this was your practice, reflect on what you noticed for the first time in the Lord's Supper and how it relates to forgiveness and reconciliation.

To help us experience transformation, we will combine the ideas from 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 with the soul-training exercise of forgiving. It is important to remember that we cannot force ourselves to forgive someone, so if any member of the group is not ready to express forgiveness toward someone, that is completely acceptable because we trust the Holy Spirit to lead us to whatever place we need to be.

Begin with a moment of silence to allow the group to re-center in God's loving presence.

After the silence, give everyone a blank sheet of paper. Invite them to write down or draw something that expresses a time they felt completely forgiven and fully reconciled to God. It might be a time they were in nature and felt totally at peace. It may have occurred during a retreat or mission trip. It may be a relationship with a family member or friend.

Give the group about 10 minutes to reflect and create. If possible, provide colored pencils, markers or crayons to help folks express themselves.

After 10 minutes, call the group back together and ask them to share what they created or wrote about if they are comfortable. As folks share, ask questions that help them express the deep feelings that were associated with that experience of forgiveness.

Now invite the group back into silence. This time they will have 10 to 15 minutes to reflect on a person they need to forgive. Again, give them blank paper to either describe the way they have been wounded by this person or draw something depicting their pain.

When the 15 minutes have passed, invite everyone to share what they have created. The point of the sharing is not to force forgiveness out of the group members, so discourage the group from trying to “fix” any situation. The main point of this activity is to help us name the areas of woundedness in our lives. The group will be most helpful to those who share by simply listening closely.

After everyone has had an opportunity to explain their creation and the area of pain they have experienced, explain that they will have a time for quiet reflection while music plays. If they feel led by the Spirit to invite God into the situation to bring healing, freedom and perhaps even forgiveness, they can symbolically accept that invitation by folding their artwork or journal entry and nailing it to the cross. Ask for questions. Once the questions have been answered begin the music and enter the quiet.

Once everyone has participated who wants to, offer a prayer of your own or the following:

*God of forgiveness and reconciliation, we give you thanks that before we even realized we were separated from you, you were already reaching out to us. We give you thanks that through the teachings, life, death and resurrection of your son we can see your desire to heal us from our transgressions, deliver us from evil and bring us fully into the reality of your kingdom. With our identity rooted in the good news of your love, may we be free to go into the world and live as your ministers of reconciliation, letting everyone know that you desire to be in relationship with them. We ask this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

When dealing with the ways people have suffered, certain shared hurts may need to be dealt with by trained professionals. Pay attention to anything that should be referred to a counselor and take personal responsibility to help that group member find help.

### GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Conclude your time by having everyone find a partner and pray with and for them to know God’s forgiveness and reconciliation in a deeper way

### FOR THE COMING WEEK

The next chapter explores encouragement and accountability within the Christian community. The soul-training exercise is meeting with an accountability friend. You will need to work out the details for this meeting early in the week.

Finally, recruit a volunteer who will bring a Scripture, prayer, poem or song for the next class as a lead-in to the opening silence.