

On your marks

The experience of forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian gospel. It is a forgiveness won by Christ's work on the cross, which Christians believe is where God's love and justice meet. The need for forgiveness is universal because everyone in some way shares in the guilt of messing up their own lives or the lives of others, or the generous gift of this world to us by God. We need to feel pardoned, and there is a longing to start again with a clean sheet. The experience of being forgiven through the mysterious work of the cross is the motivation for Christians to love and change, and to live differently and better. God promises the gift of his Holy Spirit to help them do just that.

Get set

After Pentecost, Peter went everywhere inviting people to change their mind (or 'repent') about God and be forgiven because of what Jesus had done at Easter. Forgiveness was at the heart of his message but he hadn't always found forgiveness that easy to understand. His question about forgiveness and Jesus' parable about it can be found in Matthew 18:21-35. You can find a retelling of this story in The Barnabas Children's Bible (story 286). The following outline explores forgiveness and the parable with some practical suggestions as to how to earth it in the children's experience.

Go!

Some conversation starters

Jesus told Peter that we should go on forgiving people not just seven times but seventy times seven, by which he meant there should be no limit. Playing with the number 7, here are some discussion starters to get everyone thinking about forgiveness.

- *1 in 7*: Is forgiving others too steep a hill to climb? What would your limit on forgiving be?
- *7 to 1*: Isn't forgiveness a bit of a gamble? Is it just being soft on others who have hurt you? Are there things you could never forgive?
- *07/07*: What about forgiving terrorists who kill innocent people? Do you think it's possible to demand justice at the same time as offering forgiveness?
- *007*: Surely tough people don't forgive and forget. Do you agree? Isn't forgiveness a sign of weakness?
- *On the seventh day*: People say that unless we learn to forgive, we can never rest easy and we only hurt ourselves in the end with a destructive desire for revenge. Do you agree?
- *Seven and heaven - an incidental rhyme?* How can we expect to get to heaven if we can't forgive people? What might God say about that? After all, didn't Jesus say on the cross 'Forgive them'?

Some more 'active' ways to explore the theme

1. Take a piece of A4 paper and see how many times you can keep folding it in half. It is suggested that seven times is an absolute limit and you might not even get that far.
 - Is our ability to forgive equally limited?
 - Is it just a physical, emotional and psychological impossibility?
 - So, is Jesus asking the impossible of people?
2. Saying sorry and being prepared to forgive others are two sides of an equation that can help to rebuild a broken relationship. Which of the two is harder, do you think? Using a thesaurus or dictionary, try to find some other words for forgiveness. Do these help you explore what it really means? Find out what the British sign language for forgiveness is.
3. Make a dice from cardboard and fix one of the following six statements on each of the sides. Ask someone to roll the dice and then try, as best as he/she can, to complete the sentence that falls uppermost:
 - I find it hard to forgive because...
 - I would find it easier to forgive if...
 - Forgiveness is easier for some people because...
 - One thing I can't forgive is...
 - Some things are easier to forgive, like...
 - I can say 'I forgive you', but...

Telling the story

Jesus tells a deliberately exaggerated parable about people in debt in Matthew 18:21-35 in order to help his listeners understand the importance of forgiveness.

Read the story to your group from a modern translation of the Bible. You could try acting it out. Explore what it feels like from the different perspectives of the people involved. What do you think about this story?

Why not make the parable very visible by piling up lots of coins of different denominations on one side of a table (include some notes if you dare!) and a comparable but much smaller pile of just a few pence on the other side. Imagine the reactions to being let off from one or the other of these different amounts by a bank or credit company.

Exploring the story

The Lord's Prayer has some key lines about forgiveness. Find out what these are and then try putting them in your own words (see Matthew 6:12). Make a poster that expresses your thoughts about what the prayer is saying about forgiveness.

For further ideas on this section of the Lord's Prayer, including more stories, craft, drama and prayer suggestions, see [The Lord's Prayer Unplugged](#).



Unwillingness to forgive creates barriers between people, which grow harder and harder to break down the longer the situation is allowed to continue. Read what Jesus had to say about this in Matthew 5:25-26.

Now look at Matthew 5:43-44, where Christians are told they should forgive even their enemies. How can people ever hope to do this 'impossible thing'?