

Receiving Forgiveness¹

Praise:

Begin to prepare your heart and mind for the study by listening to and/or singing the worship songs from the services. Choose at least three songs from the following list:

<i>Build Your Kingdom Here</i> – Rend Collective	<i>Where the Spirit of the Lord Is</i> – Chris Tomlin
<i>I Know Who I Am</i> – Israel & New Breed	<i>White Flag</i> – Chris Tomlin
<i>All Who Are Thirsty</i> – Kutless	<i>Mighty to Save</i> – Hillsong
<i>Jesus Paid It All</i> – Kristian Stanfill	<i>All Things New</i> – Elevation Worship
<i>Forgiven</i> – Sanctus Real	<i>Healer</i> – Hillsong

Prayer:

Following the praise music, pray for understanding of the scripture, enlightenment that the Holy Spirit may guide your understanding, discernment that you may see how this lesson applies to you, and courage to surrender those things that hinder your spiritual growth.

Preparation:

(5-10 min)

1. Ask each person to write on a piece of paper three sentences that describe or summarize the message, “Receiving Forgiveness.”
2. Have each person read aloud his/her summary. After all have presented, discuss the descriptions/summaries for the remaining few minutes (of the 10 total).

Reviewing the Scriptural Basis:

(5 min)

Read aloud the following scripture. Have different participants read each verse. Take a moment to reflect on the verses and what they mean for you.

Psalm 32:1-5 (TLB)

¹⁻² What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven! What joys when sins are covered over! What relief for those who have confessed their sins and God has cleared their record. ³ There was a time when I wouldn't admit what a sinner I was. But my dishonesty made me miserable and filled my days with frustration. ⁴ All day and all night your hand was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water on a sunny day ⁵ until I finally admitted all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, “I will confess them to the Lord.” And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.

Breaking it Down

(30 min)

Break into smaller groups of three or four people. Read the key segments of today's message, and answer together the questions related thereto.

The Healing Power of Christ

This morning's message marks the fourth lesson in our current sermon series, “The Healing Power of Christ,” which is based on the reality that, through His work on the Cross, Jesus set us

free from the power of sin and provided us a way to be made whole and well. It was as the prophet, Isaiah, predicted, "...by His wounds we are healed." (Isaiah 53:5 NIV)

The book we've been using as an additional resource to this series is *Life's Healing Choices*, by John Baker. In it, he correctly points out that the Christian life is a *decision* followed by a *process* (p. 78). In other words, in the Christian life, we make a decision to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord, and then we begin a life-long PROCESS of becoming Christ-like. In a similar way, God's healing comes to us as a decision followed by a process. The first three studies in this series have explained the decision phase of healing: (1) recognizing our need while admitting we are powerless to "fix" our hurts, hang-ups, and habits; (2) reaching out to God and plugging into His power; and (3) letting go and giving God control over our lives. Our study today, "Receiving Forgiveness," is the beginning of the **process** phase of healing.

Understanding Guilt

Scripture tells us, "happy are those whose hearts are pure" (Matthew 5:8 TLB), but what does it mean to have a pure heart? "A pure heart is one that is free and clean of impurities. It is a heart free of all the junk that weighs us down, washed clean of all the hurts, hang-ups, and habits that plague our lives. Those who are truly pure in heart aren't afraid of their pasts." (p. 102)

There's not one person who can look at his past and not wish s/he could have a "do-over." Everyone has regrets...choices we wish we hadn't made, or choices we wish we had; things we didn't say, or things we *did* say. Revisiting our past and knowing we can't undo what we've done (or what was done to us) eventually leads to guilt. We feel guilty about our responsibility in an action that we regret. Guilt makes us feel paralyzed in the present by something that happened in our past. It is the greatest destroyer of emotional energy, and it allows no room for happiness and pure hearts.

God has an answer for guilt: forgiveness. The psalmist describes it this way, "What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven! What joys when sins are covered over! What relief for those who have confessed their sins and God has cleared their record." (Psalm 32:1-2 TLB). It is God's forgiveness that sets us free from the past, and His forgiveness enables us to receive the healing power of Christ. Gaining a better understanding of guilt will provide us the means to overcome the destroyer's hold on our lives.

Guilt is both a fact and a feeling.

Dictionary.com gives one definition of guilt as "the *fact* or state of having committed an offense, crime, violation, or wrong, especially against moral or [legal] law" (emphasis added). The fact of the matter is that all of us are guilty. Every human being at some point in his/her life has committed an offense, crime, violation, or wrongdoing. In fact, scripture affirms this in Romans 3:23 (NIV): "all [of us] have sinned." We cannot escape the fact that each of us has guilt.

Oftentimes throughout our lives, guilt can eat away at us; the consequence of holding onto our guilt is that it can produce fear. Dictionary.com defines guilt another way, as well: "a *feeling* of...remorse for some offense, crime, or wrong committed, whether real or imagined" (emphasis added). Baker puts it this way: "Guilt is the fear that I'll be caught or that people will realize I'm not all that I say I am..." (p. 103).

Understanding these two characteristics of guilt will provide a firm foundation for learning how to overcome our guilt. Furthermore, while guilt is both **real** and **imagined** (review the second definition above), it is critical that we also learn the primary sources of guilt in order to protect ourselves from falling into a guilty trap.

1. Recall a time that you felt guilty about something. How did you come to understand that feeling?
2. Describe some examples of imagined guilt.

Sources of Guilt

1) What others have done to us.

It's probably fair to say that each of us has experienced rejection or abandonment. Many of us have suffered abuse (verbal, physical, psychological) by someone we trusted; we've been hurt by infidelity, betrayal, lies. Yet, although we have a role in our plight, the real guilt is not ours to bear, especially in the cases of abuse. Know that you are "NOT GUILTY for the abuse that was done to you. No part of that sin committed against you was your fault. Renounce the lie that the abuse was your fault." (p. 108) If you've been carrying an enormous burden of guilt or even shame (maybe for decades) because of what other people have done to you (especially regarding physical or sexual abuse), know that you did absolutely nothing to deserve it. Accordingly, God wants you to know you are "not guilty."

1. What have you felt guilty about, when, in truth, you bore no responsibility for what happened? (i.e., it was a result of someone else's choice)
2. What are some of the traps that ensnare us into believing we are guilty of things others have done to us?

2) What others around us have done.

This source of guilt is more about what others have done to *themselves* (not to us), yet we choose to carry their guilt as if it's our own. For example, we may have had an alcoholic parent, a rebellious child, or an adulteress spouse. But, while we may be in close relationship with that person, we bear no responsibility for his/her actions. What that person did was his/her own free will. We are not to feel guilty for the choices others around us have made.

1. Why do we feel guilty for what others around us do?
2. What guilt have you tried to own that wasn't yours to own?
3. Where does pride or ego fit into this source of guilt?

3) What we have done.

Now we're talking true ownership—this is the real, "substantiated" guilt that we have to confront: what we have done (yikes!). While the two aforementioned sources of guilt should have no place in our lives, we do "need to be honest and face the truth about ourselves" (p. 108). Some of us are conditioned, guilt-carrying veterans, but some of us try to deny it, repress it, or blame other people for it. Ultimately, though, we have to own this guilt because it has our name on it.

As we learned earlier in this study, guilt can produce fear; to that end, this source of guilt (over what we have done) has a detrimental and destructive effect on our lives...and the lives of those around us. It can make us physically sick, and it can damage our relationships with others. It can cause us to overreact (e.g., explode in anger because of buried resentment); it can cause us to overcompensate (e.g., parents who feel guilty about a divorce unwisely indulge their children),

and guilt can cause us to overcommit (e.g., we feel guilty, so we try to make up for it by doing whatever anyone asks us to do). But, we can overcome our guilt...by receiving God's forgiveness.

1. What are some ways we deal with guilt? How effective are these methods?
2. What kind of a toll has guilt taken on your health? (examples might be sleeplessness, fatigue, physical ailments, etc.) How did you overcome it?

Overcoming Guilt

Recall verse 5 from today's lesson, wherein the psalmist reveals where forgiveness is found and how it is experienced: "...I finally admitted all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide them. I said to myself, 'I will confess them to the Lord.' And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone." By following the process in the psalmist's experience, we, too, will receive forgiveness when we acknowledge before God who we really are (sinners) and then confess our sins to Him. Essentially, we take responsibility for our sins, and then we confess them.

To admit or confess means that we agree with God about the sin in our lives. We are saying, 'God, You're right. What I did or am still doing is wrong.' That's what it means to confess. And you will be forgiven! (p. 110).

Sounds simple enough, right?—perhaps in theory... To see what this process looks like in practical application, we're going to walk through the necessary steps that will allow us to overcome our guilt and ultimately receive the healing power of Christ. It won't be an easy walk, and it may seem too daunting to tackle; however, know—and trust—that it's a step that you're not taking alone: "[B]e strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:9 NLT) You can do this. Believe...and receive.

1) Take a personal moral inventory.

Taking a moral inventory of our lives is one of the most productive and important things we can do. Think of it as "spring cleaning"—it's a bit of a chore, but it can be very rewarding and liberating. On one hand, you may find some junk that you didn't even know you had—stuff that is unrecognizable and may be stinking up your entire house (*there's* that sippy cup of milk we lost last year). On the other hand, you may find some unexpected treasures—your grandfather's watch that was passed down to you or a favorite toy or blanket you had as a child. It's when we go into the inner closets and attics of our lives that we'll step in some messes but uncover some gems, too.

It is imperative that you make a few preparations before you start your personal inventory:

- a) Get a piece of paper and a pen. Title one side, "What's Right with My Life," and the other side, "What's Wrong with My Life."
- b) Remove ALL distractions (turn off phones, tablets, computers/laptops, TVs, music—any device that can tempt you to disengage from your inventory);
- c) Give yourself ample time—don't rush through this critical piece of the process. [Note: if you're using this discussion guide in your Small Group, you will not be able to complete your personal inventory during your meeting.]

Once you've done the minor prep work, begin by giving God permission to reveal what you need to see. Say aloud, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test my thoughts. Point out anything you find in me that makes you sad and lead me along the path of everlasting life." (Psalm 139:23-24 TLB) As you add to your inventory, be as specific as possible, and be brutally

honest with yourself. Confessing generalities (“Lord, I really messed up”) will get you general forgiveness; confessing specifics will get you specific forgiveness and real healing.

1. Describe some things that are right with your life? What good and godly traits do you exhibit?
2. What are some hurts that haunt you?
3. Do you have any hang-ups that cause you pain? What habits have you developed that mess up your life?

2) Accept responsibility for your faults.

Take a long hard look in the mirror and own up to what belongs to you on your list. Even if others may be at fault, God holds us responsible for our part. Simply be honest. If you find yourself rationalizing or blaming others for your hurts, hang-ups, and habits, try putting another person in place of yourself in that circumstance. How does it look when it’s someone else’s circumstance?—who’s at fault now? The point is not to deceive yourself by absolving yourself of responsibility for the role you play in the problem.

1. What are some ways in which we rationalize our faults?
2. Have you ever had someone unjustly blame you for their problems? How did you react?

3) Ask God for forgiveness.

No matter what you’ve done or who you’ve hurt, ultimately all sin is against God. “Against you, and you alone, have I sinned.” (Psalm 51:4 NLT) Go to God with the confidence that, through the work of Jesus on the Cross, each of us has already been forgiven. Paul’s letter to the Colossians affirms this, “God...forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13b-14 NLT) We don’t have to beg, bargain or bribe God to forgive us. He forgives freely, instantly, and completely the moment we ask.

1. Knowing how freely God gives us His forgiveness, why do you think it’s difficult to forgive ourselves?
2. Share a fault that you’ve thought was too bad, too dark or too shocking for God to forgive?
3. What are some ways in which we bargain, beg, or bribe God for His forgiveness?

4) Admit your faults to another person.

The Bible makes it clear that we were created to be in relationship with one another; therefore, it stands to reason that “the root of our problems is relational” (p. 110). God’s instruction to share our moral inventory is underscored by James: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” (James 5:16a NLT) Because our hurts, hang-ups, and habits are relational, when we share them with someone else, we discover that we’re not the only one who has ever done “such-and-such” and that other people face the same troubles, the same trials, and the same tribulations. There’s something very freeing and therapeutic about confessing our faults to another person; the greatest reward is the healing that comes from it.

1. Describe a time when you experienced the power of confession? What happened, and how did it make you feel?
2. Why are we reluctant to follow the biblical admonition to “confess our sins to each other?”

5) Receive God's forgiveness and "let it go."

That's it: receive God's forgiveness, and let it go. There is nothing else to be done because Jesus has already done it. "Christ gave himself to God for our sins as one sacrifice for all time.... Now, when sins have once been forever forgiven and forgotten, there is no need to offer more sacrifices to get rid of them." (Hebrews 10:12, 18 TLB) Not only are our sins forgiven and forgotten, Paul writes, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1 NIV) If God does not condemn us, we should not condemn ourselves. It's time to let it go and look to the Cross, for it is there we experience the healing power of Christ and receive forgiveness.

1. If God doesn't hold our sins against us after we confess them, why is it so difficult to forgive ourselves?
2. Where do you struggle with forgiveness—either in receiving it or in extending it, whether to yourself or to another?

In Closing:

Guilt keeps us from becoming all God wants us to be; however, we know that by understanding it, recognizing the source of it, and letting go of it, we can overcome it. We do this by receiving His forgiveness.

Close in Prayer:

Father, thank you for the timing of this study. I want to be free of the guilt, to be healed of my hurts, hang-ups, and habits...but I'm not sure I'm ready to take this step. Please send Your Spirit to comfort me and to give me courage to face—and own—the truth about myself...the truth that You know, the truth I need to see. Help me not to condemn myself all over when I look at my past, but help me to see myself the way that You see me—NOT condemned, but forgiven. I pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Blessingⁱⁱ (say this as a group):

*'Cause we all make mistakes sometimes
And we've all stepped across that line
But nothing's sweeter than the day we find
Forgiveness, forgiveness
And we all stumble and we fall
Bridges burn in the heat of it all
But nothing's sweeter than the day,
sweeter than the day we call
out for forgiveness*

*No matter how lost you are, you're not that far, you're not too far
No matter how hurt you are, you're not that far, you're not too far
No matter how wrong you are, you're not that far, you're not too far
No matter who you are, you're not that far, you're not too far
From forgiveness
Ask for forgiveness
[Receive forgiveness]*

Action Items for the Week Ahead:

Review the key points of today's message and the scriptures related thereto. In the week ahead, reflect upon those scriptures, and consider the following:

1. PRAY about it: Ask God to give you the strength and courage to begin your moral inventory this week. Thank Him in advance for His forgiveness. Read the suggested prayer on page 115 of *Life's Healing Choices*.
2. WRITE about it: Take a sheet of paper and divide it into five columns. In column one, list the person or object you resent or fear. In column two, list the cause of the hurt. In column three, list how that hurtful action has affected your life. In column four, write down what basic needs of yours have been damaged. In column five, honestly list how you have sinned or hurt others. In all cases, be specific. See fuller description of this process on pages 115-117 of *Life's Healing Choices*.
3. SHARE about it: Find a person in your small group or another person whom you trust; then, share your moral inventory with them, and ask them to pray with you to receive and live in God's forgiveness.

ⁱThis sermon series, "The Healing Power of Christ," is based on the book, *Life's Healing Choices*, by John Baker. ©2007 by Richard D. Warren and John E. Baker. All quotes used in this discussion guide are taken from this book and annotated accordingly.

ⁱⁱ Song lyrics from "Forgiveness," by tobyMac, featuring Lecrae. For audio, go to <http://youtu.be/xfkhqpl81NA>