

Talking about Forgiveness

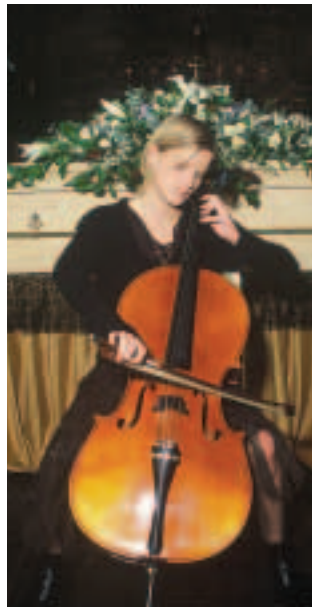
HEARTLINES film – Crossroads

Preparation for the discussion

Read the notes “Leading a discussion group around the eight values” on pages 2 & 3. It is recommended that you also read the Bible notes on Forgiveness in the ‘Go deeper’ section on page 16.

KEY THOUGHT to keep in mind when leading a discussion on forgiveness:

When we suffer an injustice, it is only through the realisation of our own need for God’s forgiveness that we are able to forgive others from the heart. This frees us from the bondage of bitterness and revenge.



Eliza



Allan

1) Introduce the discussion 3 Minutes

Briefly introduce the film “Crossroads” and the value of “forgiveness” that the film highlights. Read the following Scripture from Matthew 6:12 : “...Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”

2) Show the film 17 Minutes

Show the HEARTLINES film “Crossroads” as provided on the DVD in the back inside cover of this book. If you are extending the discussion over 2 sessions, and have already watched the film, read the summary at the start of the second session.

3) Start the film discussion 20 Minutes

1. What is the key message communicated in this film?
2. If what happened in the story happened to you, to whom would you most relate?
3. Why do you think Allan Colley (Matthew’s father) went on a campaign to get revenge for his son’s death?
4. What caused Eliza (the daughter) to eventually deal with her anger and to get to the point of forgiveness?
5. Jimmy, the priest, played a key role in helping Eliza to choose to forgive.
 - In what ways can others help us with forgiveness?
 - How can we help others to forgive?

[film summary]

In the film, Barend, an on-call policeman, drinks too much at a “braai” and is then called urgently to a crime scene. On his way he jumps a red traffic light and collides with another car killing a young talented man, Matthew Colley. For Matthew’s dad, Allan, the pain of this incident prevents him from forgiving the man who he feels is responsible for his son’s death. Allan uses his skills and contacts as a lawyer to get justice for his son and embarks on a personal vendetta. As the trial continues it becomes clear that his case against Barend is too weak. As his legal position slips, his pursuit for justice turns to revenge. He begins to lose all support for his cause and loses touch with his young daughter Eliza and eventually, his wife.

Desperate and alone, he is prompted by the witness of Eliza’s journey of forgiveness. He decides not to take justice into his own hands, but to forgive and thereby free himself from bitterness and hatred in order to put his life back together again.

4) Discuss the film quotes *15 Minutes*

Show the following clips as provided on the DVD and use the relevant quote as a springboard for discussion:

[CLIP 1] Isaiah introducing the film

"Forgiving someone is like setting a prisoner free, only to realise that it was you who was the prisoner."

[CLIP 2] Eliza talks to Jimmy (the priest) in the church

"By forgiving you'll be letting go and freeing yourself" (Jimmy)

"Well that's impossible because I am not a saint." (Eliza)

[CLIP 3] Eliza talking on the phone to her father Allan

"This whole thing is like a test. We can either choose to let this guy [Barend] wreck our lives or we can choose to forgive him."



Bridget and Eliza

[film discussion summary]

Jesus says that we are to never stop forgiving others, no matter what has been done to us - "seventy-seven times" and counting (Matthew 18:22) - but a small hurt is more easily forgiven than a great injustice.

In this film, Eliza lost her brother due to one man's negligence and irresponsibility. Her grief and anger were justified because Matthew's death could have been prevented. There is no one in this group who has not been done an injustice. Some of us have been robbed of loved ones, or of material possessions; some of us have been abused, whether by a person or a system; some of us have been physically harmed; some of us have been emotionally assaulted. At some point all of us will face a great hurt that requires a great effort to forgive - an effort that we perhaps feel is beyond us.

"What debt do you feel people owe you?"

5) Discuss: How can we practise forgiveness? *25 Minutes*

1. Ask people in your group to share experiences where they had to forgive someone or where someone forgave them.
2. Is there anything painful that someone has recently done to you or someone you know? In Matthew 6:12 and 18:21, Jesus describes sin as "debt". What debt do you feel people owe you because of things they have done to you?
3. **Christ teaches us in the Lord's Prayer** "...Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors ... But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:12-15). If we are not willing to forgive someone else their sin, why would Jesus say that God will not forgive us our own sin?



Barend and Jeanette

Group discussion on Forgiveness

4. **Jesus' unjust day** - If we consider the last 24 hours of Jesus life, we see how He experienced one serious form of abuse after another. He was plotted against, His friends abandoned Him, He was betrayed by one close to Him, He was unjustly tried, unjustly convicted, brutally beaten and finally executed.

In His dying moments, with His body wracked with pain and His friends but a memory, Jesus said: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"* (Luke 23:34)

Q: Is there any debt that cannot be forgiven? Are there any conditions we demand before we are willing to forgive someone?

[leader's note]

Jesus regularly described sin as a form of debt to whomever we have offended. It is impossible to repay these debts. No-one can take back a lie, give back a life, or compensate for wasted time. Yet Jesus clearly expects us to forgive such debts, no matter what they are, no matter the guilty party's attitude. We will receive God's forgiveness only when we are prepared to forgive those who have wronged us. Sometimes forgiveness becomes easier when we start with acts of forgiveness and kindness.

5. Christ teaches us in Matthew 5:23-24 that when someone does something against us, we must take the first step to healing the relationship by reaching out and forgiving them: *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."*

Q: What makes it hard to take the first step to reconcile with someone who has wronged us? Why does Jesus say it is important to do this before those times we set aside to worship God?

[it is in His nature to forgive]

Exodus 34:6-7 says, "The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, [is] slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and **forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.**" We can never repay God for our debts against Him. But we have a tremendous hope, because forgiveness is a gift that comes from God. All of His work in history climaxed on the cross: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

His forgiveness is available to us, to receive in faith. All the debts we owe to God as well as to fellow men and women, are taken care of by Christ in his sacrificial death. Jesus has made peace with God on our behalf (Romans 5:1). Surely we can now grant the same peace to those who have sinned against us.



Isaiah

"First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift."



Allan

[time to think...] 10 minutes

Read the following and ask each person to think about forgiveness in their own lives.

Reflect on any sins in your life for which you need to ask God's forgiveness. Think of any people who you need to forgive:

- What can you do to show them that they have been forgiven by you? e.g. Write a letter, make a phone call, visit them, give them a gift, etc.
- Pray and ask God to help you to continue to forgive.
- Remember that forgiving others often takes time and is a process.

At home this week:

Encourage the group to read Matthew 18:15-35 and to ask these questions: What steps does the Bible give us to confront someone who has wronged us? Why do you think Jesus tells the story about a man who owes money to the King immediately after the instructions on how to confront someone? What debts do you need forgiveness for? What debts do you need to forgive in others? **Encourage everyone to memorise Ephesians 4:32** *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*



Eliza

6) Talking about HIV&AIDS (Optional) 10 minutes

1. Do we sometimes contribute to the stigmatization of people who are HIV positive? If so, how?
2. How does forgiveness play a part in relating to people with HIV&AIDS or in accepting an HIV positive status?



[leader's note]

Forgiveness is integrally linked to HIV&AIDS. Many of the people who have contracted HIV did not choose to engage in the activity that led to them becoming infected. In other words, as a result of someone else's actions they have become infected. Forgiving the person who gave them HIV will be an important part of them being able to live positively with HIV. Likewise, many people with AIDS have experienced the stigma associated with the disease. They will need to forgive those who have stigmatized them so that they do not become bitter.

7) Forgiveness in Action: Ideas to make a difference in your community

- Are there any divisions that you know of in your church, or in your community? Think of ways in which you can take the initiative towards reconciliation. Any action that you decide to take will need to be grounded in prayer (Psalm 127:1).
- How can you demonstrate acceptance, love and care for HIV positive people in your community? Think of ways in which your church can become a safe haven for those who have been stigmatised or rejected in their communities.



Jimmy



What God says about Forgiveness

HEARTLINES film – Crossroads

Jesus says that we are to never stop forgiving others, no matter what has been done to us—“seventy-seven times” and counting (Matthew 18:22) – but a small hurt is more easily forgiven than a great injustice.

In the HEARTLINES film – **Crossroads** – Eliza lost her brother due to one man’s negligence and irresponsibility. Her grief and anger were justified because Matthew’s death could have been prevented. There is no one reading this who has not been done an injustice. Some of us have been robbed of loved ones, or of material possessions; some of us have been abused, whether by a person or a system; some of us have been physically harmed; some of us have been emotionally assaulted. At some point all of us will face a great hurt that requires a great effort to forgive – an effort that we perhaps feel is beyond us.

JESUS’ unjust day

In **Matthew 26-27**, we are drawn into the dark and terrible final hours of Jesus’ life. It might seem strange to use Jesus as an example of someone who suffered terrible injustice. We might think, “but He’s God! He’s not like us!” However, Philippians 2:5-7 tells us that Jesus, “[though] in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing [literally, ‘emptied himself’].” This means He left behind His divine attributes in order to live fully as a man. His only supernatural resource was the Holy Spirit and we too as believers have the same resource. So Jesus is in fact our best example of how to respond to injustice.

In the last twenty-four hours of His life, Jesus experienced one serious form of abuse after another. It might be helpful to see these listed:

- Jesus was plotted against. The religious leaders “plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill him” (26:4). Furthermore Judas one of His closest friends became part of the plot and accepted money to betray Jesus and then “watched for an opportunity to hand him over” (26:16).



Barend

- Jesus' friends abandoned Him in His darkest hour. They had made wonderful promises of allegiance to Him: "Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And all the other disciples said the same" (26:35). None of the disciples kept these promises. This is one area in which many of us experience deep hurt: when friends don't keep their promise to help us because they're afraid of the price they'll pay.
- Jesus was betrayed by intimacy. Judas' signal to Jesus' enemies was a kiss of greeting (26:49)! It is a terrible thing when a friend uses intimacy - a phone call, a chat over coffee, a hug, or anything else - as a means to let you down. As the soldiers arrested Jesus, "all the disciples deserted him and fled" (26:56).
- Jesus was unjustly tried in a religious court. He was not tried according to proper Jewish procedure and "many false witnesses came forward" (26:60). I'm sure this will remind some of unfair trials staged in our history. In this joke of a court Jesus was beaten and mocked (26:67). When questioned by spectators of the trial, Peter persistently denied he even knew Jesus! Later "he ... wept bitterly" in shame, but Peter's regret was no help to Jesus in his time of crisis (26:75).
- Jesus was unjustly convicted in the State's court. He was questioned by Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea. Again He was wrongfully accused, and the legal system could not find anything of which He could be found guilty. But that did not stop them from bowing to the wishes of Jesus' enemies. Pilate sentenced Jesus to death (27:24-26).
- Jesus was brutally beaten. Pilate handed Him to his soldiers "to be flogged" (27:26). Roman floggings were extremely cruel and sometimes resulted in the disembowelling of the victim. The soldiers "twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head... They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again" (27:29-30).
- Jesus was executed unjustly as a criminal (27:32ff). A Roman crucifixion was deliberately designed to be excruciatingly painful but also to allow the victim to suffer for as long as possible. During all this the soldiers gambled over his clothes (27:35) and those watching "hurled insults at him" (27:39).

As we have seen, Jesus faced this all as an ordinary man, not as some supernatural being. And yet His response was anything but ordinary.

**"Jesus was plotted against...
...abandoned
...betrayed
...unjustly tried
...denied
...brutally beaten
and executed unjustly."**



Bridget, Eliza and Allan

THE RULES of forgiveness

In His dying moments, with His body wracked with pain and His friends but a memory, this is what Jesus said:

[from the word]

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"

Luke 23:34



Eliza and Jimmy

He did not say, "Father, forgive them if they apologise." He did not say, "Father, forgive them if they show a change of heart." He did not say, "Father, please be understanding and forgive the ones who folded under pressure." Jesus extended forgiveness to them all: the fickle friends, the traitor, the hateful religious leaders, the spiteful spectators, the violent Roman government.

There is no indication as to how many of these people accepted Jesus' forgiveness. But what we do see is that forgiveness can be given without being asked for by the guilty party. What conditions do we demand before being willing to forgive someone?

Jesus regularly described sin as a form of debt to whomever we have offended (e.g. Matthew 18:21-35). It is impossible to repay these debts. No-one can take back a lie, give back a life, or compensate for wasted time. Yet Jesus clearly expects us to forgive such debts, no matter what they are, no matter the guilty party's attitude. In fact, He makes the somewhat shocking statement that "...if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:15). Why does God qualify his forgiveness?

[from the word]

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Matthew 6:14-15



Jeanette

**"Forgiveness
can be given
without being
asked for by the
guilty party"**

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, a barrier to forgiveness

The bottom line of forgiving others is this: we cannot truly grant forgiveness until we grasp just how much we are in need of it ourselves.

Jesus once compared a certain prostitute with a religious leader and said "I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47). It is not that the religious leader hadn't sinned much and therefore didn't need to be forgiven much. It is that he was unaware of his own profound guilt as a human being before God (see Romans 3:23). Therefore he could only relate to those around him such as the prostitute, from a perspective of judgement. If we deny another person forgiveness, it shows that we have not grasped our own need of forgiveness and *therefore are not in a position to receive such forgiveness from God.*

The self-righteous person is therefore imprisoned in hate and judgment towards others. But the person who knows his own need of forgiveness and receives it from God, can relate to others with freedom and humility. God's forgiveness frees us from our debt of sin and also from the barriers of shame and guilt which the sin puts up between us and other people. This freedom then allows us to move towards others in humility and without fear, to love them: because as a forgiven person we are secure in God's love.

IT IS IN HIS NATURE to forgive

Exodus 34:6-7 says, "The LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, [is] slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." We can never repay God for our debts against Him. But we have a tremendous hope, because forgiveness is a gift that comes from God. All of His work in history climaxed on the cross: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Jesus' parting words to the prostitute mentioned above were, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50). This same forgiveness is available to us. It is for us to receive it in faith. All the debts we owe to God as well as to fellow men and women, are taken care of by Christ in his sacrificial death. Jesus has made peace with God on our behalf (Romans 5:1). Surely we can now grant the same peace to those who have sinned against us.



Allan

"The person who knows his own need of forgiveness and receives it from God, can relate to others with freedom and humility"

"Jesus has made peace with God on our behalf"

How can we practise Forgiveness

1. Share an experience where you had to forgive someone or where someone forgave you.

2. Is there anything painful that someone has recently done to you or someone you know? In Matthew 6:12 and 18:21, Jesus describes sin as "debt". What debt do you feel people owe you because of things they have done to you?

3. Christ teaches us in the Lord's Prayer *"...Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors ... But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins"* (Matthew 6:12-15). If we are not willing to forgive someone else their sin, why would Jesus say that God will not forgive us our own sin?

4. **Jesus' unjust day** - If we consider the last 24 hours of Jesus life, we see how He experienced one serious form of abuse after another. He was plotted against, his friends abandoned him, He was betrayed by one close to Him, He was unjustly tried, unjustly convicted, brutally beaten and finally executed.

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5. Christ teaches us in Matthew 5:23-24 that when someone does something against us, that we must take the first step to healing the relationship by reaching out and forgiving them: *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."*

What makes it hard to take the first step to reconcile with someone who has wronged us? Why does Jesus say it is important to do this before those times we set aside to worship God?

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