



# Exploring Christianity:

## Forgiveness

**iFOLLOW**

Meeting with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

## About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

### Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

### Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

### Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

### Credits

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# Forgiveness

*This presentation is designed for people who have not yet come to a point in their spiritual journey where they have decided to become a follower of Jesus.*

## Learning Objectives

1. Consider areas in your life where you need to be forgiven
2. Consider people in your life who you need to forgive
3. Learn what forgiveness is, what it is not, and how to release its power in your life

## Content Outline

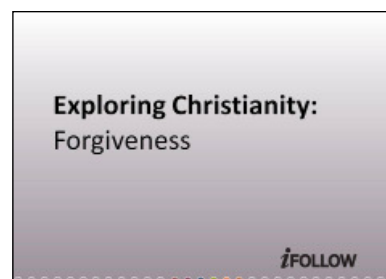
1. Simon Weisenthal and the SS Trooper
2. What is forgiveness?
3. A story Jesus told about forgiveness
4. What happens when we choose forgiveness
5. Conclusion: The Drowning Man Ritual

## Background Material for the Presenter

Simon Wiesenthal, the Jewish Holocaust survivor who later became the famous Nazi hunter, writes about being in a Polish concentration camp during the Nazi regime. One afternoon he was assigned to clean rubbish out of a hospital that Germans had improvised for wounded soldiers carried in from the Eastern front. A nurse walked over to him, took his arm, ordered him to come with her, and led him upstairs. They walked along a row of stinking wounded to the bedside of a young soldier. The boy's head was wrapped in yellow, pus-stained bandages. He was dying. He was a 22-year-old SS trooper.

The soldier, whose name was Karl, reached out and grabbed Wiesenthal's hand tightly. "I have to speak to a Jew," he gasped. "I have to confess the terrible things I've done so that I can be forgiven. So I can die in peace."

His ugly story came gushing out. He was fighting near a



Russian village where a few hundred Jewish people had been rounded up. His group was ordered to plant full cans of gasoline in a certain house. Then they marched about 200 people into the house, crammed them in until they could hardly move. They threw grenades through the windows to set the house on fire. The soldiers were ordered to shoot anyone who tried to jump out of a window.

“We shot,” the soldier gasped, tears streaming down his face. “Oh God ... I shall never forget it; it haunts me every minute of every day!”

The young man paused and then said, “I know that what I’ve told you is terrible. I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. I know that what I’m asking is almost too much, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.”

Imagine how Wiesenthal felt at that moment. This soldier’s ugly story didn’t simply concern unnamed, faceless strangers far away. At least 89 of Wiesenthal’s own relatives had been killed by the Nazis. And now he was locked in a concentration camp, doomed to die with all the others. This soldier owed him and his people a horrendous debt. Wasn’t it time to demand payment?

Even the best among us spend time demanding payment, don’t we? Think about it. Doesn’t someone owe you something? An apology? A second chance? A fresh start? An explanation? A thank you? A childhood? A marriage?

If we were to think about it, we could all make a list of lots of people who are in our debt. Parents should have been more protective and nurturing. Children should have been more appreciative. Spouses should be more sensitive. Employers should have been more attentive and understanding. And the list goes on.

The question is, what are we going to do with those in our debt? Here’s what Simon Wiesenthal did at the bedside of that dying and repenting Nazi soldier. “I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands, his pleading eyes. At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.” So the German died without the forgiveness he so much wanted and needed.

Wiesenthal survived the concentration camp. But he couldn’t forget that SS trooper. He wondered, troubled, for years whether he should have forgiven the soldier. He told his story in the book *Sunflower* and ended it with the haunting question for every reader. “What would you have done?” What do you do with those who are in your debt?

## What is Forgiveness?

Dealing with this kind of debt lies at the heart of wholeness and health. In fact, in one of the most well-known and recited prayers of all time—the one called The Lord’s Prayer—at

the heart of the prayer is the famous phrase, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” (Matthew 6:12)

Could it be that this prayerful acknowledgement and request, lying in the middle of Jesus’ prayer, indicates that this experience of debt and what we do about it is core to spirituality? Notice the wording. Two very powerful words are synched together: “debt” and “forgiveness.”

The word “debt” means “to owe someone something.” The implication here is significant. This prayer, being prayed to God, admits that we owe God something – we’re in debt to God. Some translations of the Lord’s prayer use the word “trespasses,” and some use “sins,” but the implication remains the same despite nuances in meaning. We are in debt to, have trespassed against, have sinned against God. And Jesus ties in acknowledging that reality with the ability to forgive others their wrongs against us.

In fact, Jesus tells a fascinating story (Matthew 18:22-34) about this in response to a man’s question about how many times he should forgive someone who “sins” against him. A certain king begins to settle his accounts payable with his servants. He discovers that one of the servants owes him big money, 10,000 talents. Considering the reality that in those days one talent was the equivalent to 6,000 days of work, this servant’s debt to the king represented 191,693 years of work. In other words, an immensely humungous debt. The servant falls on his knees, pleading for the mercy of extra time to pay the money back (an obvious impossibility given the infinite nature of his debt).

And yet, as the story continues, the king feels sorry for his servant; he feels compassion for him. So he tells him he doesn’t have to pay it back. He cancels the debt, stamps “Paid in Full” across that ledger entry. The king willingly swallows the huge loss to himself. Then he lets the servant go free (instead of throwing him into jail, as the law called for in those days, forcing his wife and children into slavery to pay back the debt for him). Imagine what should be a feeling of freedom for this servant as he walks away from the king, a totally forgiven man, his account wiped clean.

But in a shocking twist of irony, as Jesus continues the story, the servant encounters a colleague who owes him money equivalent to a few months of wages (a measly amount in comparison). But instead of compassion like the king, the servant responds in anger, choking his debtor by the neck, demanding immediate payment or face the consequences. The man (using the same words the servant used with the king) pleads for the mercy of extra time to pay the debt back (in this case an obvious possibility with such a small debt). But the servant refuses and has the colleague thrown into jail, forcing his family to pay the debt back.

When the king hears about this, he’s enraged. How could someone act so ruthlessly and heartlessly after having been forgiven so much? So the king says to his servant, “You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn’t experiencing such kindness compel you to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy, too?” So the king has him thrown into jail after all until he pays back his entire debt.

What's the dynamic here? Jesus tells this story in response to the question, how many times do I need to forgive a person who's wronged me? And the questioner, trying to be generous, adds, "Up to seven times?" The Jewish law in those days talked about forgiving someone three times as evidence of compassion and kindness. So this man figures he's going to try to look big by doubling that amount and then throwing in an extra one for good measure to get it up to the perfect number seven (to seal the deal of his image of generosity). "Up to seven times?"

What's Jesus' point? He responds to the question by saying, "No, not up to only seven times, but seven times seventy!" In other words, think big, think way bigger than you're used to thinking. Think, not three, not even the seven of perfection, but 490. In other words, live your life continuously with an attitude of forgiveness.

So what's Jesus' point? Why does he tell the story in answer to the man's question? We can observe two points here:

**1. Our ability to forgive is in direct proportion to our acknowledgement that we're debtors, too.** We're not perfect. We've failed many times. We've hurt others. We compiled debts in our lives, just like everyone else. We're no better than anyone else. Until we first admit that human reality about ourselves, we're not in a position to let others go.

Here's how that works. When the king confronts the servant with his incalculable debt, the servant's immediate response is, "Give me more time. I can pay it back." Didn't he see that his debt was too huge for him make a dent in?

Did he really think he could extend his life for another 190,000 plus years? Or did he simply have the life view that you only get what you deserve? There's no such thing as a free meal. You work for everything. So his automatic response was, "I can do this! I can pay off my debt if I just had more time! So give me more time and I'll clear it all up!"

This paradigm of life doesn't acknowledge the existence of grace in the mix. It simply operates on the "pay back" system. You do your work, you get your reward. No work, no reward. And so, since that is what you expect from yourself, that is what you expect from others. Hence, the servant, who though his debt was graciously cancelled by the king still operated under the "I can pay you back" paradigm, comes across his indebted colleague and, rather than cancel his debt, throws him into jail until the man's debt is paid back to him. No grace, no forgiveness. You only get what you deserve, what you are willing to work for.

So, at the heart of Jesus' model prayer is an acknowledgement of a very significant spiritual reality: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It begins with confession of our own indebtedness – that we're no better than anyone else; that we're in debt to others and to God, too. And that the only way we have hope is through grace, a kindness



toward us that we could never deserve but only accept – forgiveness of our debts that can never be repaid no matter how many extra years are added to our lives.

Living in that truth empowers us to live in humility – a humble recognition of our own humanity, our own frailness and brokenness, our own need of grace and kindness and acceptance beyond our ability to repay our debts or to work off our sins and failures against God, others and ourselves.

**2. Living in this truth empowers us to forgive others. Like the little four-year-old prayed:** “Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.” Not a bad paraphrase! But certainly difficult to do sometimes, isn’t it?

*Time* magazine some years ago told about a Sarajevo man named Pipo. He was partners in a restaurant with a Muslim man. They were good friends. Until Pipo’s mother was jailed and beaten by Muslims.

“When she got out,” Pipo recalled, “she wouldn’t talk about it. That’s when I picked up a gun and began shooting Muslims. I hate them all!”

So Pipo vowed to live his life in revenge and hate against any Muslims he could find. He became a sniper and through the years shot and killed 325 people. But the more he killed, the less free he felt. It took a toll.

“All I know how to do is kill,” he told a reporter. “I’m not sure I’m normal anymore. I can talk to people, but if someone pushes me, I’ll kill them. In the beginning I was able to put fear aside, and it was good. Then with the killings I was able to put my emotions aside, and it was good. But now they’re gone. I have no feelings anymore. I went to see my mother in Belgrade, and she hugged me, and I felt nothing. I have no life anymore. I go from day to day, but nothing means anything. I don’t want a wife and children. I don’t want to think.”

Straight talk from a person who has chained himself to the past, who refuses to let go. Now he has nothing. Even the feelings of hate that empowered him and drove him and compelled him are gone and he’s simply become a robot who breathes and walks and shoots. Trying to imprison others, he’s become a prisoner himself.

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive others.” Jesus is letting us in on one of the most profound secrets to liberated living: our willingness to forgive others the wrongs they’ve done to us. Our willingness to no longer demand payment from them. As we did with our own sins and short-comings and failures we do with theirs – we take them to God and let them be cancelled by God’s compassion and love. We let them go. And by doing this, we liberate ourselves from our own prison of anger, resentment, hate, and bitterness.





## Why Choose to Forgive

Paul and Barbara Sanders, in their book *Choosing Forgiveness*, suggest several reasons why forgiveness is so important to healthy living.

**1. Acknowledging our own humanity first enables us to live in honesty with ourselves and others.** Admitting that we, too, are in debt because of our personal failures and mistakes empowers us to live with integrity. Honesty is central to a life of integrity and authenticity which in turn are crucial to healthy living. When we live in alignment and congruence with who we are and what we value most, we are more deeply fulfilled and satisfied and enjoy meaning and transformation.



And that personal honesty about our own shortcomings, combined with our willingness to receive forgiveness from God and others who offer it to us, empowers us to be forgiving, gracious people to those who are in our debt. These two experiences are bound together like yin and yang. Each needs the other to exist. To receive the gift and yet not pass it on is the highest form of insanity and ingratitude.

No wonder, in Jesus' story, the King responds in absolute shock and anger when he finds out that the servant whose infinite debt he just canceled went out and refused to forgive a colleague's miniscule debt. It's inconceivable that this should ever happen!

Our ability to forgive is directly proportional to our ability to both admit our own indebtedness and to accept free grace and forgiveness for it. Doing both is living in honesty.

**2. Forgiveness aids our own recovery.** Forgiveness doesn't just benefit the receiver, it also benefits the giver. Revenge, anger, hate and bitterness take their toll on our feelings. Remember Pipó the sniper. He lived in a wasteland of his bitterness and hate.



To live a life of unforgiveness is to live in continual pain, a pain that will never heal itself. Continually demanding payment from the wrong-doer turns bitterness inward. It's like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. It ultimately eats out our innards. That's why Pipó described himself literally as a zombie. The walking dead. The final end of refusing to forgive.

Lewis Smedes, in his book *Forgive and Forget*, puts it this way: "The only way to heal the pain that will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurt you. Forgiving stops the reruns of pain. Forgiving heals your memory as you change your memory's vision. When



you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life ... and the prisoner you set free is yourself.”

### 3. Forgiveness releases the wrongdoer’s power over

**you.** If you and I are living a life of anger, resentment, and unforgiveness from our hurts, we’re still being controlled by the person who hurt us. Revenge, anger, bitterness, and hatred bind us like glue to the person. We might as well be Siamese twins, joined at the heart. Because everywhere we go, we’re taking them with us.



But when we choose to release that person from debt, when we no longer demand payment from them, when we forgive, we engage in one of the most empowering acts possible. We choose our freedom.

Jesus described this reality this way: “If someone forces you to go with him one mile, go with him two miles.” (Matthew 5:41)

Jesus is referring to the hated practice by Roman soldiers of demanding that a Jew carry his load for him. Imagine feeling the helplessness and powerlessness of being forced to do something against your will. If you’ve ever been raped or sexually abused or physically or emotionally been taunted and tormented by someone stronger or having more power and authority than you, you understand this feeling.

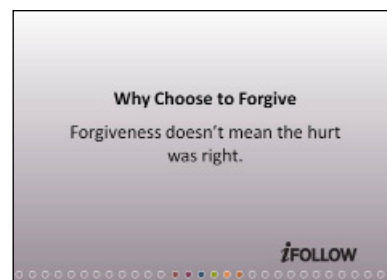
So when Jesus tells them to go the second mile, the Jews shake their heads in anger. “Forget it! We’re not going one extra inch for them!”

But think about the dynamics here. Paul and Barbara Sanders make this point in their book: in the first mile, the soldier has you under his control. You’re trapped. If you stop there, you walk away in anger and bitterness. You lose!

But when you choose to go the second mile, you’re under your own control. In the first mile he has you. In the second optional mile, you have him. Your act of power, responsibility and choice sends you away in freedom.

That’s what choosing to forgive your debtor does to you. Lewis Smedes comments: “Only a free person can choose to live with an uneven score. Only free people can choose to start over with someone who has hurt them. Only a free person can live with accounts unsettled. Only a free person can heal the memory of hurt and hate.”

**4. Forgiveness doesn’t mean the hurt was right! Jesus isn’t talking about cheap forgiveness.** It’s not cheap with God. God paid an infinite price to offer forgiveness to us, showing that he refuses to minimize our debt. The king, in Jesus’ story, swallowed a multi-million dollar debt. His willingness to forgive the debt meant that he took the loss. Not cheap!



Forgiveness is never cheap. It always looks at the hurt and the one who did the hurt directly and honestly. And it calls sin for what it is. “What you did to me was wrong! Unacceptable! And you owe a debt to me! And I have the right to demand payment!” Only realists can be forgivers.

That’s why forgiveness is so difficult and so few do it. As the Sanders put it, forgiveness faces the pain and the struggle of humanity. We wrestle with the hurt and with our own weaknesses. We stop making excuses for ourselves or for others. We face our own needs and responsibilities as well as others’. We acknowledge and feel and embrace the pain caused to us and call it for what it is. We don’t deny it or sweep it under the rug or pretend it never happened or simply pass it off. Impossible and ineffective! We face it squarely and are willing to hold the debtors responsible.

But then, as we did with our own sins and short-comings and failures, we do with theirs – we take them to God and let them be cancelled by God’s compassion and love. We let them go. We let go of our demand for our right to debt payment from the ones who hurt us by giving them to God’s compassion and love. This is forgiveness at its most expensive and effective level. Because by doing this, we liberate ourselves from our own prison of anger, resentment, hate, and bitterness.

## Conclusion

The movie *The Interpreter*, starring Nicole Kidman as a United Nations interpreter (Silvia Broome), is a powerful story about the human struggle between forgiveness and revenge when you’ve been hurt and wronged.

The story begins when Silvia overhears an assassination threat against a foreign president scheduled to speak at the UN. Instead of just a threat against a well-known dignitary, however, the threat is against a dignitary accused of genocide. Even more than just a tragedy Silvia has heard about on the news, the deaths that surround President Zuwani’s name are her countrymen, her neighbors, and her family. This is not only professional, it’s personal.

In struggling with her anger and grief, she tells the secret service agent assigned to protect her (who himself struggles with anger over the loss of his spouse in a tragic car accident) about an African ceremony in her native country.

“Everyone who loses somebody wants revenge on someone, on God if they can’t find anyone else. But in Africa, in Matobo, the Ku believe that the only way to end grief is to save a life. If someone is murdered, a year of mourning ends with a ritual that we call the Drowning Man Trial. There’s an all-night party beside a river. At dawn, the killer is put in a boat. He’s taken out on the water and he’s dropped. He’s bound so that he can’t swim.



The family of the dead then has to make a choice. They can let him drown or they can swim out and save him. The Ku believe that if the family lets the killer drown, they'll have justice but spend the rest of their lives in mourning. But if they save him, if they admit that life isn't always just ... that very act can take away their sorrow."

How do you react to that ritual? Would it be helpful if you had been hurt or wronged? What does it suggest about the dynamics of dealing with loss and hurt?

Sylvia Broome suddenly finds herself confronted with the most important choice of her life - what to do about the man responsible for so many deaths in her life. Should she let him be assassinated by simply not saying anything about what she's heard? Should she feel jubilation at the thought of this man's just death? Should she seek revenge in some other way or simply refuse to deal with it and try to keep on living with the hurt and pain of her past? It's clear that she's locked into her pain which has turned to resentment and bitterness for life. She's faced with the choice in her own Drowning Man Ritual. Is it possible that forgiveness is one of the keys that would unlock the prison door of her grief from the hurts she didn't deserve?

Jesus said, "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Not an easy prayer or process! But ultimately the most effective tool for personal and relational liberation.

## Handout in this Package

1. Participant's Notes



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Action Plan  
& Presenter  
Notes

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## Additional Resources

Nouwen, Henri J.M. (1992). *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Sandford, John, Paula Sandford and Lee Bowman (1996). *Choosing Forgiveness*. Greene, NY: Clear Stream Inc. Publishing.

Smedes, Lewis B. (1996). *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. New York, NY: HarperOne.

Smedes, Lewis B. (1997). *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Tibbits, Dick (2008). *Forgive to Live: How Forgiveness Can Save Your Life*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Tibbits, Dick (2009). *Forgive to Live: God's Way*. Orlando, FL: Florida Hospital.

Volf, Miroslav. *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## Podcast

"Getting Revenge and Forgiveness (2008)." Speaking of Faith, with Krista Tippett, American Public Media. [speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2008/revenge\\_forgiveness/](http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2008/revenge_forgiveness/)

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## Discussion Questions

1. Share some of the feelings and thoughts you've had about forgiveness, what it is, what it isn't, and how easy or hard it is.
2. Has this presentation made a difference in your views?
3. Share a time when you found it hard to forgive.
4. Share a time when you found it easy to forgive.
5. Is there something you are willing to share that you feel you need forgiveness for?

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## Group Activities

**Purpose:** To take into oneself through role play some of the realities of difficult forgiveness.

**Preparation:** Print out copies of the stories from this unit: Wiesenthal, Pipo the sniper, and the Drowning Man story. Have several copies of each. You could include Jesus' parable of the debtors, too, if you wish.

**Assignment:** Tell the group you are going to role-play some stories in which forgiveness was very difficult. Ask if they have any (short and simple) stories to add. Ask for pairs of volunteers to take turns acting out the different stories. Spend a couple of minutes at the beginning of each role play helping the players do their best to really feel the way they would if they were the person they are playing. Give each pair five minutes to play their scene, then allow five to ten minutes of reactions from the group as a whole. Try to involve as many as are willing to be involved.

**Debrief:** It will depend on your group how deep they are willing to get into this exercise. If they have some stories of their own they wish to role play, so much the better. Ask for reactions from all sides of each story: How would you feel if you were the one who did the hurting? The one who was hurt? Have you felt these things in your life? What have you learned or experienced about forgiving in your life?

**Time:** Allow a few minutes for group members to choose stories and try to get "inside the skin" of the people being acted out. Give each pair five minutes for their role play, then five or ten minutes for reactions from the group. Leave 15 minutes at the end for general discussion.

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# Handout

## Forgiveness

### Participant Notes

#### 1. Simon Wiesenthal and the SS Trooper

Personal Reflection: What would you have done in Simon Wiesenthal's place and why?

#### 2. What is Forgiveness?

A. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12)

B. "Debt" = \_\_\_\_\_

C. Jesus' story of the Forgiven Servant (Matthew 18:22-34)

Debt = 10,000 talents = 191,693 years of work

Jesus' Point:

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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## HANDOUT

### Exploring Christianity: Forgiveness

### 3. Why Forgive?

A. \_\_\_\_\_

B. \_\_\_\_\_

“The only way to heal the pain that will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurt you. Forgiving stops the reruns of pain. Forgiving heals your memory as you change your memory’s vision. When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life ... and the prisoner you set free is yourself.” (Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, p. 133)

C. \_\_\_\_\_

“Only a free person can choose to live with an uneven score. Only free people can choose to start over with someone who has hurt them. Only a free person can live with accounts unsettled. Only a free person can heal the memory of hurt and hate.” (Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, pp. 142-143)

D. \_\_\_\_\_

“Only realists can be forgivers.”

### 4. The Drowning Man Ritual

**Personal Reflection:** What is one wrong that has been done to you that you still feel deeply hurt over? Are you stuck in anger, resentment, or even hate over it? What have you heard in this presentation that would help you deal effectively with it? How could you do “the drowning man ritual” to this situation?