

Forgiveness and Letting Go

Volume 1

Deep Research Sunday School Lessons

A 24-Volume Comprehensive Series

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Deep Research Sunday School Lessons

Forgiveness and Letting Go

Volume 1

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About This Series

Welcome to Deep Research Sunday School Lessons, a meticulously researched collection of Sunday School lessons designed for thoughtful, transformative learning.

Our mission is simple: to return Sunday School to school, a place where deep conversations happen, where difficult questions are welcomed, and where faith and intellect work together.

Each volume is organized around a central biblical theme such as forgiveness, community, justice, anger, or character. Within that theme, you will find multiple lessons, each based on a specific Scripture passage and developed for three age groups.

A Note on Scripture Sources

These lessons draw primarily from the 66 books of the Protestant canon, using the New International Version (NIV) as our primary translation. Occasionally, lessons may reference the Deuterocanonical books (also called the Apocrypha), which are accepted as canonical by Catholic and Orthodox traditions and valued as historical literature by many Protestant scholars.

We include these texts sparingly but intentionally, because we believe they offer valuable historical and theological context for understanding the world of the Bible and the development of Jewish and Christian thought.

Whether or not the Deuterocanonical books are part of your personal faith tradition, we invite you to engage with them as literature that shaped the faith of millions and provides insight into the intertestamental period.

Above all, we believe that Christians should be inclusive of other Christians. The body of Christ is large, and our differences should draw us closer together in mutual respect, not push us apart in division.

How to Use This Book

For Teachers and Group Leaders

Each lesson in this volume is designed to stand alone, allowing you to teach them in any order that fits your curriculum or group needs.

The discussion questions provided at the end of each lesson are starting points, not scripts. Allow your group to explore tangents and raise their own questions as the Spirit leads.

For Individual Study

If you are using this book for personal devotion or self-directed study, we encourage you to take your time with each lesson, journaling your thoughts and prayers as you go.

For Families

These lessons can be adapted for family devotion time. Parents may wish to simplify certain concepts for younger children while using the discussion questions to engage older children and teens.

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*We pray that this volume blesses your study, enriches your teaching,
and draws you ever closer to the heart of God.*

The 1611 Press Team

Forgiveness as Warfare

Strategic Forgiveness, How do we balance motivations for forgiveness?

2 Corinthians 2:5-17

Instructor Preparation

Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

The Passage

2 Corinthians 2:5-17 (NIV)

5 If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent, not to put it too severely. 6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. 7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. 9 Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 10 Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven, if there was anything to forgive, I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, 11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

12 Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, 13 I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia. 14 But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? 17 Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity,

as those sent from God.

Context

Paul is writing to the Corinthian church about someone who had caused significant grief and division in their community, likely the same individual mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. This person had been disciplined by the church majority, but Paul is now concerned that the punishment has achieved its purpose and needs to transition to restoration. The situation has become a test case for how the community handles both accountability and grace.

The immediate context reveals Paul's pastoral heart balancing justice with mercy. The offender has experienced "sufficient" punishment and is at risk of being "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." Paul sees this as a crucial moment where the church must demonstrate that discipline aims toward restoration, not destruction. The community's response will either demonstrate Christ's love or fall prey to Satan's strategy of division.

The Big Idea

Forgiveness is spiritual warfare, unforgiveness gives Satan strategic advantage over communities, making grace both a moral duty and a tactical necessity.

This truth carries significant nuance. The passage acknowledges that discipline and consequences can be appropriate ("the punishment... is sufficient"), but warns that prolonged unforgiveness becomes a weapon in Satan's hands. The challenge lies in discerning when restoration should replace discipline, and whether strategic motivations for forgiveness compromise its authenticity.

Theological Core

- **Corporate Forgiveness.** Paul says "anyone you forgive, I also forgive", forgiveness operates as a community practice, not merely individual choice, strengthening the body's unity.
 - **Satan's Strategic Use of Unforgiveness.** Extended resentment and division serve Satan's purposes by fracturing Christian community and hindering gospel witness to the watching world.
 - **Disciplinary Purpose.** Church discipline aims toward restoration, not punishment for its own sake, with clear endpoints when its purpose has been achieved.
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- **Aware Spiritual Warfare.** Paul claims "we are not unaware of his schemes", effective Christian living requires conscious recognition of how Satan operates through relational dysfunction.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Unforgiveness creates spiritual vulnerability that enemies of the faith can exploit for division and damage
 - Balancing justice with mercy requires wisdom, consequences can be appropriate but should serve restoration, not revenge
 - Strategic motivations for forgiveness (protecting the community) don't necessarily compromise its authenticity when combined with genuine love
 - Spiritual warfare operates through relational dynamics, requiring conscious awareness and intentional countermeasures through grace
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Grades 4, 6

- Holding grudges doesn't just hurt you and the person who wronged you, it hurts your whole community or family
 - When someone has faced consequences and shown they're sorry, continuing to punish them can become the new wrong
 - Forgiveness helps protect everyone from the sadness and division that comes from ongoing fights
 - Sometimes doing the hard thing of forgiving actually feels scary, but it's still right even when feelings resist
-

Grades 1, 3

- When someone says sorry and has learned their lesson, God wants us to forgive them
 - God helps communities and families stay happy when people forgive each other
 - We can choose to be kind even when we still feel hurt
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Overspiritualizing ordinary conflict.** Not every disagreement or hurt involves Satan's schemes, discern between normal human friction and patterns of division that threaten community unity and gospel witness.
 - **Using "Satan's schemes" to pressure premature forgiveness.** While unforgiveness can be exploited, genuine healing takes time and forced forgiveness often breeds deeper resentment rather than authentic restoration.
 - **Dismissing the legitimacy of consequences.** Paul affirms that "punishment inflicted by the majority is sufficient", accountability and boundaries can be appropriate before moving toward restoration.
 - **Assuming strategic motivations corrupt forgiveness.** Paul's reasons include protecting the community from Satan's advantage, mixed motivations don't necessarily invalidate genuine forgiveness when combined with authentic love for the offender.
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Handling Hard Questions

"Doesn't using fear of Satan's schemes make forgiveness manipulative rather than genuine?"

Paul balances strategic awareness with authentic care, notice he also urges them to "comfort him" and "reaffirm your love for him." Strategic motivations don't corrupt forgiveness when they're combined with genuine concern for both the offender and community. The goal isn't mere tactical advantage but genuine restoration. Fear of manipulation shouldn't prevent wise recognition of how unforgiveness damages everyone involved.

"How do we know when consequences have been 'sufficient' and it's time to forgive?"

Paul suggests watching for signs that discipline is achieving its purpose versus becoming destructive, when someone might be "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow," consequences may be doing more harm than good. Look for repentance, changed behavior, and willingness to make amends. The goal of discipline is restoration, not punishment for its own sake. Wise communities seek counsel and pray for discernment rather than following rigid timelines.

"What if the person hasn't really changed or shown genuine repentance?"

Paul doesn't explicitly address this scenario, but the principle suggests forgiveness doesn't require naive trust or removal of all boundaries. You can release resentment while maintaining appropriate caution and protective measures. Forgiveness is primarily about freeing yourself and the community from the poison of perpetual anger, not about pretending nothing happened or immediately restoring full access and influence.

The One Thing to Remember

Forgiveness protects communities from spiritual attack, making grace both a gift to offenders and strategic resistance against forces that thrive on division.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the tension between strategic and pure motivations for forgiveness. Help them see that protecting community from spiritual attack doesn't compromise authenticity when combined with genuine love.

The Tension to Frame

If we forgive someone partially because it protects us from Satan's schemes, does that make our forgiveness self-interested rather than truly gracious?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their instinct that mixed motivations feel complicated, this discomfort shows moral sensitivity
 - Honor the complexity that consequences can be appropriate while unforgiveness becomes destructive
 - Let them wrestle with balancing individual grace and community protection rather than giving easy answers
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1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine someone in your friend group did something that really hurt everyone, maybe they spread rumors, betrayed a confidence, or started drama that divided people. After weeks of tension, they finally apologize and seem genuinely sorry. But now your group faces a choice: do you welcome them back, or keep treating them like an outsider?

Part of you might want to forgive because it's the right thing to do. But another part recognizes that holding grudges is exhausting everyone and making your friend group toxic. Some people are taking sides, others are avoiding the whole group, and what used to be fun now feels tense and divided.

Now here's the complicated part: if you forgive partially to save your friend group from falling apart, does that make your forgiveness less genuine? Is it still real grace if you're also motivated by protecting everyone from ongoing drama and division?

Today we're looking at a situation where the apostle Paul faced something remarkably similar, except he saw spiritual forces at work in the division. Someone had hurt the church community, faced consequences, but now Paul was worried that continued unforgiveness was serving Satan's purposes by keeping everyone fractured.

As we read, notice how Paul balances concern for the individual who caused harm with concern for protecting the entire community from spiritual attack. Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 2, verses 5 through 17.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. Help with difficult words like "reaffirm" or "outwit." Watch for early finishers and encourage them to reread verses 10-11. Let them sit with the weight of Paul's strategic thinking about spiritual warfare.

As You Read, Think About:

- What happened to the person who caused problems, and what's Paul's concern now?
- Why does Paul connect forgiveness to Satan's schemes and spiritual warfare?
- What different motivations for forgiveness do you notice in this passage?
- How would you feel if you were either the offender or someone in the community?

2 Corinthians 2:5-17 (NIV)

5 If anyone has caused grief, he has not so much grieved me as he has grieved all of you to some extent, not to put it too severely. 6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. 7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him. 9 Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. 10 Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven, if there was anything to forgive, I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, 11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. 12 Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, 13 I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia. 14 But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? 17 Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers for dramatic sections. Choose confident readers for Paul's emotional appeal. Let students pass if they prefer not to read aloud.

Reader 1: Verses 5, 8 (The case for restoration) **Reader 2:** Verses 9, 11 (Strategic forgiveness) **Reader 3:** Verses 14, 17 (Gospel integrity)

Listen for the tension between compassion for the individual and protection of the community. Notice Paul's strategic thinking about spiritual warfare.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4 students. Give exactly 3 minutes. Walk between groups to listen and guide. Help stuck groups with "What surprised you most about Paul's reasoning?"

Get into groups of 3-4. Come up with 1-2 genuine questions about what you just read. Don't ask questions you already know answers to, ask about what genuinely puzzles or challenges you. For example: "Why does Paul think Satan cares about church forgiveness?" or "How do you know when consequences have been enough?" You have 3 minutes to discuss and formulate your best questions.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students drive with THEIR questions. You facilitate and probe deeper. Guide discovery rather than lecture. Write their questions on the board and look for themes.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes around motivation, spiritual warfare, justice versus mercy. Start with questions most students will relate to.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What evidence do you see that this person had already faced appropriate consequences?"
- "How does Paul balance concern for the individual with concern for the community?"
- "Why might ongoing unforgiveness serve Satan's purposes in a church or friend group?"
- "Is it possible to have mixed motivations for forgiveness while still being genuine?"
- "When have you seen unforgiveness create division that went beyond just two people?"

- "What would change in your relationships if you viewed forgiveness as spiritual warfare?"
- "What if someone forgives you partially to stop drama, how would that feel?"
- "How do we discern when consequences have served their purpose versus becoming vengeful?"

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Paul sees a pattern: unforgiveness doesn't just hurt individuals, it creates exactly the kind of division and bitterness that destroys communities and discredits the gospel. He's saying that sometimes the most loving thing we can do is forgive strategically, not just for the offender's sake, but to protect everyone from spiritual attack through ongoing resentment.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you see this same pattern playing out, situations where holding grudges isn't just hurting the people directly involved, but creating division that affects whole groups? Think about your school, friend groups, family dynamics, online communities, even broader social conflicts.

Real Issues This Connects To

- Friend group drama where taking sides creates lasting division beyond the original conflict
 - Family situations where one person's mistake leads to extended tension affecting everyone's relationships
 - School conflicts where holding grudges creates toxic social dynamics that make environments hostile for others
 - Online communities where unresolved disputes lead to harassment, pile-ons, and factional warfare
 - Social and political divisions where refusing to engage with people who've caused harm perpetuates cycles of dehumanization
 - Church or youth group situations where individual conflicts create broader congregational division
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to solutions. Acknowledge that some situations call for different responses. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket advice about when to forgive.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen forgiveness actually protect a group from ongoing toxicity?"
- "What would help you distinguish between wise boundaries and unhelpful grudge-holding?"
- "How do you discern when consequences have served their purpose versus becoming destructive?"
- "What's the difference between strategic forgiveness and manipulation or people-pleasing?"

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: forgiveness isn't just about being nice or morally superior. It's actually a form of spiritual warfare that protects communities from the kind of division and bitterness that destroys relationships and discredits what we claim to believe. Having strategic motivations doesn't corrupt your forgiveness when it's combined with genuine concern for everyone involved.

This week, pay attention to situations where unforgiveness, yours or others', is creating division that goes beyond just the original conflict. Notice when holding grudges starts affecting whole groups or communities. Ask yourself: is this resentment serving anyone's good, or is it just feeding cycles of division and toxicity?

I'm impressed by the thoughtful questions you asked today and your willingness to wrestle with these complicated dynamics. Keep thinking deeply about how your choices affect not just individuals but entire communities. You have more power than you realize to either feed division or starve it through strategic, genuine forgiveness.

Grades 4, 6

Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand how holding grudges hurts everyone in a group, and that sometimes we need to forgive to protect our whole community from sadness and fighting.

If Kids Ask "What if the person doesn't deserve to be forgiven yet?"

Say: "Paul shows us that sometimes people have learned their lesson and continuing to punish them starts to hurt everyone. The goal is helping people change, not just making them feel bad forever."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever been in a situation where two people in your class or friend group got in a fight, but it ended up affecting everyone else too. Maybe people had to pick sides, or the whole group felt tense and uncomfortable even though most of you weren't part of the original problem.

Now here's a harder question. Imagine someone in your group did something really wrong, maybe they cheated and got everyone in trouble, or they were mean and hurt people's feelings. They got consequences, apologized, and seem genuinely sorry. But some people in your group are still angry and don't want to forgive them. What happens to your whole group?

Here's what makes it tricky: part of you might think, "They hurt people, so they deserve to feel left out." But another part notices that all the ongoing anger and tension is making everyone miserable. Nobody's having fun anymore. People are stressed and sad, even people who weren't originally involved in the problem.

This is like what happens in the movie Finding Nemo when Marlin stays angry at Bruce the shark even after Bruce tries to be friendly. Marlin's fear and refusal to trust makes their whole underwater adventure more dangerous and stressful for everyone, not just Bruce.

The tricky part is figuring out when someone has learned their lesson and continuing to punish them actually starts hurting your whole group more than helping anyone. Sometimes forgiveness isn't just about being nice, it's about protecting everyone from ongoing sadness and division.

Today we're going to hear about a church leader named Paul who faced exactly this situation. Someone had hurt his church community, but Paul realized that holding grudges forever was actually making things worse for everyone. Let's find out what he discovered about forgiveness protecting whole

communities.

What to Expect: Kids will relate to group dynamics and taking sides. Acknowledge their experiences briefly: "That sounds really hard when that happens." Keep momentum moving toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

In a city called Corinth, there was a church community that was like a big family. These people cared about each other, prayed together, and tried to follow Jesus together.

But then something bad happened. One person in their church family did something that really hurt everyone. We don't know exactly what he did, but it was serious enough that it made people angry, sad, and confused.

The church leaders had to make a hard decision. They told this person, "What you did was wrong and hurtful. You can't participate in our community right now until you understand how much you've hurt people and you're truly sorry."

Imagine how that would feel if your whole school class decided you couldn't sit with them at lunch or play with them at recess because of something wrong you'd done. It would be really lonely and sad, wouldn't it?

Well, this person felt terrible about what he'd done. He realized how much he'd hurt people and became genuinely sorry. He wanted to make things right and be part of the community again.

But here's where the story gets complicated. Even though this person had learned his lesson and was truly sorry, some people in the church were still really angry with him. They wanted to keep punishing him and didn't want to forgive him.

Paul, who was like a pastor to this church, started to notice something troubling happening. The ongoing anger and refusal to forgive wasn't just affecting the person who had done wrong, it was affecting everyone.

People were taking sides. Some thought they should forgive, others thought they should keep being angry. Instead of being a loving community, they were becoming divided and bitter.

Paul watched this happening and realized something important: the ongoing fight and unforgiveness was actually hurting their church family more than the original problem had.

So Paul wrote them a letter. In it, he said something really wise:

2 Corinthians 2:7-8 (NIV)

7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

Paul was saying, "Look, this person has been sad and sorry long enough. If you keep punishing him forever, you're going to crush his spirit completely. And that's not what consequences are supposed to do, they're supposed to help people learn and change, not destroy them."

But Paul had an even more important reason for asking them to forgive. He understood that their enemy, Satan, was using their unforgiveness as a weapon against their whole community.

Then Paul said something that might surprise you:

2 Corinthians 2:10-11 (NIV)

10 Anyone you forgive, I also forgive... 11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.

Paul realized that Satan was smart and sneaky. Satan knew that if he could keep the church angry and divided, he could destroy their love for each other and make them unable to show God's love to other people.

It's like when you're playing a team sport and one player makes a mistake. If the whole team stays angry at that player forever, the team becomes weak and can't win games. But if they forgive, help the player learn from the mistake, and work together again, the team becomes stronger than ever.

Paul was saying, "Don't let Satan win by keeping you divided. Forgive this person, welcome him back, and show him love. When you do that, you protect your whole church family from the sadness and division that Satan wants to create."

So the church followed Paul's advice. They chose to forgive the person who had hurt them. They welcomed him back into their community and showed him love.

And you know what happened? Their church became stronger and more loving than before. Instead of being divided and angry, they became an example of God's grace and forgiveness for everyone around them to see.

Sometimes in our lives, we face similar choices. When someone has learned their lesson and is genuinely sorry, continuing to hold grudges can actually start hurting everyone around us more than it helps anyone.

What we learn from Paul's story is that forgiveness isn't just about being nice to the person who hurt us. Sometimes forgiveness is about protecting our whole family, class, or friend group from the sadness and division that comes when people hold grudges forever.

God wants our communities to be places of love and joy, and sometimes that means choosing to forgive even when it's hard, because it helps everyone heal and be happy together.

Pause here. Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Feelings

Think about how the person who did wrong must have felt when people kept being angry at him even after he was truly sorry. Have you ever felt like people wouldn't forgive you even after you apologized and tried to make things right? How would that feel if your whole class or family decided to keep being mad at you forever?

Listen For: "Sad," "lonely," "hopeless," "angry back at them", affirm: "Those feelings make perfect sense. It would be really hard to keep trying to be better if no one would give you another chance."

Question 2: The Group Effect

Paul noticed that the ongoing anger wasn't just affecting the person who did wrong, it was affecting everyone in the church. When have you seen a fight between some people in your group end up making

everyone else feel uncomfortable or sad too? What happens to the whole group when people refuse to forgive?

If They Say: If they describe taking sides or group tension, respond "Exactly! The anger spreads to people who weren't even involved in the original problem."

Question 3: The Hard Choice

Paul had to help the church figure out when someone had "learned their lesson" and it was time to forgive instead of keep punishing. How do you think you can tell when someone has really learned from their mistake and is genuinely sorry? What would you look for?

Connect: "These are exactly the things Paul was looking for when he decided it was time for the church to forgive and welcome the person back."

Question 4: The Protection

Paul said that forgiving wasn't just about being nice, it was actually about protecting their church from Satan's plan to divide them and make them miserable. If you were trying to hurt a really close family or friend group, how might you use their anger against each other to break them apart?

If They Say: If they mention gossip, taking sides, or escalating conflicts, affirm "Those are exactly the kinds of schemes that Paul was worried about."

You've shared some really thoughtful insights about how holding grudges affects everyone, not just the people who are directly involved. Now let's experience what Paul discovered about communities needing to work together.

4. Activity: The Broken Bridge (8 minutes)

Zero Props Required , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

Purpose

This activity reinforces that unforgiveness creates barriers that hurt entire communities by having kids physically experience how excluding someone weakens the whole group. Success looks like kids discovering that rebuilding connection makes everyone stronger and more capable.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to build human bridges! I need you to form groups of 6-8. Each group will stand in two lines facing each other about 3 feet apart, and hold hands with the person across from you to create a "bridge" that people can walk across.

Here's your challenge: one person from each group will be the "bridge walker" who needs to carefully walk across your bridge while you support their weight. But here's the twist: one person in each bridge will be "excluded", they have to stand behind their line with their arms crossed, not participating in holding up the bridge.

We're going to discover what happens when part of a community refuses to participate because they're holding a grudge. Will your bridge be strong enough to support the walker safely when someone is excluded? We're doing this because it's exactly like what Paul saw happening when people refused to forgive and participate in their church community.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

First phase: Let them try with one person excluded. They'll struggle to support the walker safely and feel unstable. Watch for wobbling, fear, and difficulty maintaining the bridge structure with missing support.

The struggle: As they realize the bridge is weak and unsafe, let them experience the frustration and worry. Some may want to give up or be afraid to walk across. This represents how unforgiveness makes communities unstable for everyone.

Coaching phrases: "I notice your bridge feels shaky... I wonder if there are people not participating who could help... What happens to everyone when part of your team refuses to help?" Guide them toward inviting the excluded person back.

The breakthrough: Celebrate when someone invites the excluded person to rejoin the bridge. Watch how much stronger and more confident they become when everyone participates. The walker can move safely and the bridge holders feel secure.

Completion: Once they've succeeded with everyone participating, have them notice the difference in how it felt when someone was excluded versus when everyone was working together to support and protect each other.

Watch For: The moment when someone chooses to invite the excluded person back, this is the physical representation of choosing forgiveness to strengthen the whole community.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when someone was excluded and your bridge was weak versus when everyone participated and you felt strong and safe? Just like in Paul's church, excluding someone because of past mistakes doesn't just hurt that person, it makes the whole community weaker and less able to support each other. When we choose forgiveness and include people who are truly sorry, everyone becomes stronger and safer together.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: holding grudges against someone who has learned their lesson and is genuinely sorry doesn't just hurt that person, it hurts everyone in your group, family, or class. When we choose forgiveness, we're actually protecting our whole community from the sadness and division that comes from ongoing anger.

This doesn't mean we ignore when people do wrong things or that there shouldn't be any consequences. Paul shows us that consequences can be appropriate to help people learn. But when someone has learned their lesson and is truly sorry, continuing to exclude and punish them can actually become the new problem.

The amazing result is that when we choose forgiveness wisely, our communities become stronger and more loving than they were before the problem happened. We become examples of God's grace for everyone around us to see.

This Week's Challenge

Pay attention to situations in your family, class, or friend groups where ongoing anger about past problems is making everyone feel tense or sad. Ask yourself: has this person learned their lesson? Is our unwillingness to forgive now hurting everyone more than helping? Look for one opportunity to choose

forgiveness that protects your whole group from division.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, help us understand when someone has truly learned from their mistakes and it's time to forgive them. Give us wisdom to see when holding grudges is hurting our whole family or group. Help us choose forgiveness that protects everyone and makes our communities stronger and more loving. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that God wants us to forgive people who say sorry because it helps everyone in our family or group be happy together.

Movement & Formation Plan

- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
 - **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
 - **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
 - **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
 - **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows
-

If Kids Don't Understand

Compare unforgiveness to keeping a bandage on a cut forever, it doesn't help healing and makes everything stay sore. Ask "How do you feel when everyone is happy together?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about forgiveness and community. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "I've Got Peace Like a River," or "This is the Day." Use movements: open arms wide during lyrics about love, hold hands during lyrics about togetherness, and gentle swaying motions.

Great singing! I love how your voices sound so happy together. Now let's sit down in our special story shape so we can learn about how God wants families and friends to forgive each other.

2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

Formation: Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

Animated Delivery: Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound sad when describing hurt feelings, sound happy when describing forgiveness and community restoration.

Today we're going to meet a man named Paul who helped people learn about God's love!

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Paul loved a group of people who were like a big family. They met together, prayed together, and tried to love God together. But one day, something sad happened in their family.

[Use sad facial expression]

One person in their big family did something very wrong that hurt everyone's feelings. All the people felt sad and angry. It was like when someone breaks your favorite toy on purpose.

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, change tone to more serious]

The family leaders said, "What you did was wrong. You need to sit by yourself and think about it until you're really, truly sorry." And you know what? The person DID feel sorry. He felt very sad about what he had done.

[Move to center, speak with gentle authority]

But some people in the family were still angry. They said, "We don't want to forgive him! He was mean to us!" Even though the person was sorry, they wanted him to keep feeling bad.

[Move to side, sound concerned]

Paul saw what was happening and felt worried. The person who did wrong was very, very sad. But also, everyone in the family was feeling grumpy and unhappy because of all the anger.

2 Corinthians 2:7 (NIV)

Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

[Pause and look around at each child]

Paul was saying, "This person is already very sorry! If you stay angry forever, he'll be too sad to ever be happy again. That's not what God wants!"

[Move to center, speak with gentle wisdom]

But Paul knew something else important. When people stay angry and won't forgive, it doesn't just hurt the person who did wrong. It hurts EVERYONE in the family!

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

Paul said that when families don't forgive, it makes everyone sad and grumpy. No one can be happy when there's anger all around. God's enemy, Satan, loves it when families fight because it makes them weak and unhappy.

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

So Paul told the family, "Forgive him! Give him hugs! Show him you love him! When you do that, your whole family will be happy and strong again!"

[Speak with excitement]

And guess what happened? The family chose to forgive! They welcomed the person back with hugs and smiles. Everyone felt so much better!

[Pause dramatically]

God was so happy because His family was loving each other again. When we forgive people who are truly sorry, it makes God smile and helps everyone feel joy together.

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes in our families or at school, someone does something wrong and says sorry. When we forgive them, it doesn't just help that person feel better, it helps everyone be happy together!

[Move closer to the children]

When someone hurts your feelings but then says they're really sorry, you can choose to forgive them. It might feel hard, but God will help you do it.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves it when His children forgive each other because it makes families and friends strong and happy. He'll give you a big, brave heart to choose kindness even when it's hard!

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Formation: Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

Find a partner and stand facing each other! I'll give each pair one question to talk about. You'll have about one minute, and remember, there are no wrong answers. Just share what you think!

Teacher Circulation: Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

Discussion Questions

Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.

1. How do you think the person felt when people wouldn't forgive him?
 2. When someone in your family says sorry, how does it feel to forgive them?
-

3. Why did Paul want the family to give the person hugs?

4. What would you do if someone was mean to you but then said sorry?

5. What changed when the family chose to forgive?

6. How does God help us forgive people?

7. How does everyone feel when a family forgives each other?

8. When have you seen someone forgive at school and everyone felt better?

9. How do you know when someone is really, truly sorry?

10. Who in your family is good at forgiving?

11. Why did God want the family to be happy together?

12. What happens when people stay angry for too long?

13. How can you tell if God is happy about forgiveness?

14. When is it hard to forgive someone?

15. How do you think Jesus feels when we forgive people?

16. What did you learn about forgiveness today?

17. How can you remember to forgive this week?

18. What would you tell God about forgiveness in prayer?

19. What happens to families when everyone forgives?

20. How can you be like Paul and help people forgive each other?

Great discussions! Let's come back together in our lines for our closing song. Who wants to share what they talked about with their partner?

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Select a song about God's love and forgiveness. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves the Little Children," "God is So Good," or "If You're Happy and You Know It" (adapted with forgiveness verses). Include movements: clapping during happy parts, hugging motions during love lyrics, and pointing up to God.

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down quietly for our prayer time. Fold your hands and close your eyes so we can talk to God together.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

Formation: Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

Dear God, thank you for Paul and how he helped the family forgive each other...

[Pause]

Help us remember that when someone says they're sorry, you want us to forgive them. Give us brave hearts to choose kindness even when our feelings are still hurt...

[Pause]

Help us remember that forgiveness makes families and friends happy together, just like you want. Help our families be full of love and joy this week...

[Pause]

Thank you for loving us and helping us love each other. Thank you that you always forgive us when we say sorry. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Alternative, Popcorn Prayer: If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about forgiveness. Examples: "Thank you God for helping families forgive" or "Help me forgive when someone

is mean to me."

Remember, when someone says sorry this week, God wants you to choose forgiveness because it helps everyone be happy together. Have a wonderful week showing God's love to your families and friends!

Reconciliation Ministry

Commissioned to Heal, How do we hold reconciliation and accountability together?

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Instructor Preparation

Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

The Passage

2 Corinthians 5:11-21 (NIV)

11 Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. 12 We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. 13 If we are "out of our mind," as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on

Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Context

Paul is writing to defend his ministry against critics who questioned his authenticity and methods. Some accused him of being inconsistent, self-promoting, or even mentally unstable. The Corinthian church was divided about whether to trust Paul's authority, with some preferring more impressive speakers who emphasized status and credentials.

In this passage, Paul shifts from defending himself to explaining the cosmic scope of his calling. He moves from personal vindication to universal mission, showing that his work isn't about his reputation but about God's reconciling work in the world. The stakes aren't just Paul's standing with the Corinthians, but humanity's relationship with God.

The Big Idea

Reconciliation is not optional ministry for some believers, it's the central vocation God has given to every person in Christ, modeled after God's own pattern of "not counting sins."

Yet this creates genuine tension: if we're commissioned with a message that sins aren't being counted against people, how do we maintain accountability for wrongdoing? Paul doesn't resolve this easily, he holds together both God's radical non-counting and the reality that sin has consequences requiring response.

Theological Core

- **Reconciliation as Commission.** Paul uses language of being "given" and "committed" this ministry, it's assigned work, not voluntary activity for those who feel called to peacemaking.
 - **Divine Pattern of Non-Counting.** God's method is explicitly "not counting people's sins against them", this becomes the template for how reconciling ministry operates.
 - **Cosmic Scope.** The reconciliation isn't limited to personal relationships but extends to "the world", suggesting systemic and societal dimensions beyond individual conflicts.
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- **Ambassadorial Authority.** Believers carry God's own appeal to the world, representing divine priorities and perspectives in all reconciling work.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Every believer is commissioned as a reconciling agent, this is central vocation, not optional specialty ministry
 - God's pattern of "not counting sins" provides the model, but this creates tension with accountability systems
 - Reconciliation work extends beyond personal conflicts to systemic and societal healing
 - Discernment is required to know when to emphasize restoration versus consequences
-

Grades 4, 6

- Following Jesus means being someone who helps repair broken relationships
 - Sometimes helping people get along means choosing forgiveness even when you don't feel like it
 - God gives us the job of helping others know they can be friends with Him
 - Being a peacemaker is hard work but it's what God's people do
-

Grades 1, 3

- God wants everyone to be His friend
 - God asks us to help other people become His friends too
 - When people are mad at each other, we can help them be friends again
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Cheap Grace.** Don't present "not counting sins" as meaning consequences don't matter or that injustice should be ignored. Paul maintains tension between mercy and accountability.
 - **Individual-Only Focus.** The text emphasizes "the world", avoid limiting reconciliation to personal relationship repair when systemic healing is also in view.
 - **Specialist Ministry.** Resist treating reconciliation as work for professional ministers or naturally gifted peacemakers, Paul presents it as universal commission.
 - **Conflict Avoidance.** Don't equate reconciliation ministry with avoiding difficult conversations, Paul himself engaged in vigorous defense and confrontation when necessary.
-

Handling Hard Questions

"If God isn't counting sins against people, why do bad people still face consequences?"

Paul holds together God's non-counting pattern with the reality that sin damages relationships and communities. "Not counting" doesn't mean pretending harm didn't happen, it means approaching people with restoration as the goal rather than punishment. Sometimes restoration requires accountability, boundaries, or consequences as part of the healing process.

"Does everyone really have to do reconciliation ministry, or is this just for people who are good at it?"

Paul's language is about commission, not giftedness, this is assigned work for anyone "in Christ." But reconciliation ministry takes different forms: some people work on interpersonal conflicts, others address systemic injustice, still others focus on evangelism. The calling is universal but the expression varies based on context and capacity.

"How can we reconcile with people who don't want reconciliation or keep causing harm?"

Reconciliation ministry doesn't require the other party's cooperation to begin, it starts with representing God's heart and perspective in the situation. Sometimes it means creating boundaries, advocating for

justice, or working to change systems. The goal is always restoration when possible, but safety and accountability matter too.

The One Thing to Remember

God has commissioned every believer as an agent of reconciliation, following His pattern of not counting sins while still working toward healing and restoration.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the tension between reconciliation and accountability. Help them discover that God has commissioned every believer as an agent of healing, but this doesn't mean ignoring harmful behavior.

The Tension to Frame

If we're commissioned with a message that God isn't counting people's sins against them, how do we handle situations where someone's actions genuinely harm others?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their experiences of being hurt by others, don't rush to "just forgive"
 - Honor the complexity of real situations where both mercy and justice matter
 - Let students wrestle with the tension rather than providing easy answers
-

1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

You're scrolling through social media and see someone from school posting something that's completely false about a friend of yours. It's not just wrong, it's actually damaging their reputation. Part of you wants to call them out publicly, part of you thinks you should just stay out of it, and part of you wonders

if there's some way to fix this mess.

Or maybe you're dealing with a family situation where someone keeps making the same hurtful choices over and over. You've tried being understanding, you've tried setting boundaries, you've tried having conversations. But they keep doing the same thing, and people keep getting hurt.

These are the moments where you realize that "just be nice" isn't actually helpful advice. Sometimes being nice enables harm. Sometimes trying to keep peace actually prevents real peace from happening. But going to war doesn't seem right either.

Today we're looking at a passage where Paul talks about what he calls "the ministry of reconciliation", basically, the work of healing broken relationships. But here's what's interesting: he doesn't present this as optional work for people who are naturally good at conflict resolution.

Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 5, starting at verse 11. As you read, pay attention to the language Paul uses about who gets this job, and notice what he says about how God handles people's wrongdoing.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. Help with difficult words like "reconciliation" or "ambassadors." Let them feel the weight of Paul's claims about universal commission and cosmic scope.

As You Read, Think About:

- Who is Paul talking to and what job is he describing?
 - What does Paul say about how God deals with people's wrongdoing?
 - What words suggest this is required work versus optional work?
 - How would you feel if someone told you this was now your responsibility?
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2 Corinthians 5:11-21 (NIV)

11 Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. 12 We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can

answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. 13 If we are "out of our mind," as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Choose confident readers for the complex theological language. Let students pass if they prefer not to read aloud.

Reader 1: Verses 11-13 (Paul defending his ministry) **Reader 2:** Verses 14-17 (Christ's love compels transformation) **Reader 3:** Verses 18-21 (The ministry of reconciliation)

Listen for the progression, Paul moves from defending himself to describing a cosmic mission that includes all of us. This isn't just about Paul's calling.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4 students. Give exactly 3 minutes for them to come up with genuine questions about what they just read. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with "What surprised you most?"

Get into groups of 3-4 and spend the next three minutes coming up with 1-2 genuine questions about what you just read. Not "what does reconciliation mean", questions about what you're actually curious

about. Like "How is this even possible?" or "What about when someone doesn't want to be reconciled?" Ask what you really want to know.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students drive with THEIR questions. You facilitate and probe deeper. Guide discovery rather than lecturing. Let them wrestle.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes. Start with questions that will resonate with most students.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What evidence do you see that this reconciliation job is given to everyone, not just pastors or naturally gifted peacemakers?"
 - "Paul says God is 'not counting people's sins against them.' How do you understand that phrase?"
 - "If God isn't counting sins, should consequences for wrongdoing just disappear?"
 - "What's the difference between 'not counting' sins and pretending they didn't happen?"
 - "When Paul says 'the world,' is he talking about individuals or something bigger?"
 - "Where do you see the pattern of reconciliation and accountability coexisting in real life?"
 - "What would change if you actually took seriously that you're an ambassador for God's reconciliation?"
 - "What makes reconciliation ministry different from just trying to keep everyone happy?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Paul presents reconciliation not as optional ministry for the spiritually mature but as assigned work for everyone in Christ. But he shows God's method: approaching people with restoration as the goal, not punishment, while still taking sin seriously enough to address it completely. The tension isn't resolved; it's held together.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you see broken relationships that need some kind of healing? We're talking school drama, family tensions, friendship conflicts, but also bigger things, racial division, economic inequality, political polarization. Paul says "the world" is being reconciled.

Real Issues This Connects To

- Friend groups split by gossip, betrayal, or misunderstanding
- Family members who have hurt each other and don't know how to move forward
- Classmates from different backgrounds who mistrust each other
- Online spaces where people attack rather than engage in good faith
- Community conflicts over resources, values, or representation
- Personal grudges you're holding that are poisoning other relationships

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to solutions. Different situations call for different approaches. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket advice.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone successfully balance accountability with restoration?"
- "What would it look like for you to represent God's heart in a specific broken situation?"
- "How do you decide when to prioritize healing versus when to prioritize consequences?"
- "What's the difference between being a peacemaker and being a people-pleaser?"

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: God hasn't just called some believers to reconciliation ministry, this is what everyone in Christ has been commissioned to do. It's not about having perfect conflict resolution skills or always knowing the right thing to say. It's about representing God's heart in broken situations.

This week, pay attention to one relationship or situation where you could be an agent of healing. Maybe it's choosing not to participate in gossip, maybe it's initiating a difficult conversation, maybe it's

standing up for someone who's being excluded. You're not responsible for fixing everything, but you are commissioned to represent God's reconciling heart.

The fact that you wrestled with these hard questions today tells me you're taking this seriously. That's exactly what the world needs, people who care enough to think deeply about how to heal rather than just win. Keep asking good questions.

Grades 4, 6

Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that being a peacemaker is part of following Jesus, it's not just being nice when you feel like it, but actually working to repair broken relationships.

If Kids Ask "What if someone keeps being mean to me?"

Say: "Being a peacemaker doesn't mean letting people hurt you. Sometimes making peace means getting help from adults or setting boundaries to keep everyone safe."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever been in the middle of a fight between two of your friends. Maybe they were mad at each other and both complaining to you about the other person. Your hand stays up if you felt really uncomfortable being stuck in the middle.

Now here's a harder question: raise your hand if you've ever had to choose between being loyal to one friend or the other. Like, you couldn't be friends with both of them because they hated each other, so you had to pick a side. That's really hard, isn't it?

Part of you might think, "Why can't they just get over it and be friends again?" But another part of you knows that sometimes people really hurt each other, and saying "just be friends" doesn't actually fix anything. The hurt feelings are still there, and maybe one person doesn't even think they did anything wrong.

This reminds me of those movies where kingdoms are at war, like in Narnia or Lord of the Rings. There are good guys and bad guys, but sometimes you also have characters whose job is to try to bring peace, to get enemies to stop fighting and work together. They're called peacemakers or ambassadors.

The tricky part is figuring out how you help people become friends again when one person really did hurt the other. How do you bring peace when someone actually deserves consequences for what they did? That's not easy to figure out.

Today we're going to hear about the apostle Paul writing to some Christians about a very special job that God gives to all of His people. It's the job of being a peacemaker, but not just any kind of peacemaker. Let's find out what happened.

What to Expect: Kids may share examples of friend drama or family conflicts. Acknowledge them briefly: "That sounds really hard" or "I bet that felt unfair." Keep momentum moving toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Paul was writing a letter to his friends in a city called Corinth. These Christians were having some problems, they were arguing about who was a good leader and who wasn't. Some people didn't trust Paul anymore.

Paul felt really sad about this because he loved these people and had worked hard to help them learn about Jesus. But instead of just defending himself or getting angry, Paul decided to tell them about something much bigger, something God wanted all of them to understand.

Picture Paul sitting down with his writing materials, thinking carefully about what to say. He wanted to help them see that following Jesus wasn't just about believing the right things or going to church. It was about having a special job.

Imagine how surprised they must have been when they heard Paul's letter read out loud in their meeting. Because Paul wasn't just talking about his own work as an apostle. He was talking about work that God gives to every single person who follows Jesus.

Paul started by reminding them about what Jesus did. Jesus died to bring people back to God, to fix the relationship between God and people that was broken because of sin. That's called reconciliation. It means bringing enemies back together as friends.

But then Paul said something really amazing. He said that God doesn't just reconcile people to Himself and then stop there. God gives His people the same job that Jesus had, the job of helping to fix broken relationships everywhere.

Paul called it "the ministry of reconciliation." That's a fancy way of saying "the work of helping people become friends again." But listen to how Paul described God's way of doing this work.

Paul said that when God was bringing people back to Himself, God chose not to count their sins against them. That means God didn't make a list of all the bad things people had done and say, "You have to pay for every single one of these before I'll be your friend."

Instead, God said, "I'm not going to count your wrongdoing against you. I'm going to make a way for us to be friends again." That way was Jesus dying on the cross to pay for all the wrong things people had done.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 (NIV)

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Now here's the really important part. Paul told the Christians in Corinth that God had given them this same work to do. They were supposed to help other people know that God wanted to be their friend, and they were also supposed to help people be friends with each other again.

But Paul didn't say, "If you feel like it" or "If you're good at making peace." He said God had committed this job to them. That means God was trusting them with something really important, the work of healing broken relationships.

Paul said they were like ambassadors. An ambassador is someone who represents a king or president in another country. They speak for the leader they serve. Paul said that Christians are God's ambassadors, which means when they work to bring peace, they're representing God Himself.

Think about what this meant for those Christians who were fighting with each other. Paul was saying, "Stop arguing about who's the best leader. You've all been given the same job, to help heal broken relationships, starting with your own."

Paul was teaching them that following Jesus means becoming a person who fixes things instead of breaking them. When people are mad at each other, a Christian's job is to help them become friends again. When someone feels far away from God, a Christian's job is to help them know that God wants them back.

But here's what made this really different from just trying to be nice. Paul said they should follow God's example, not counting people's sins against them. That doesn't mean pretending wrong things didn't happen. It means choosing to work toward friendship instead of punishment.

So when someone hurts you, instead of just trying to hurt them back or holding a grudge forever, you look for ways to repair the relationship. You might need to talk about what happened, you might need to set some boundaries to stay safe, but your goal is healing, not revenge.

This was revolutionary! Most people thought you had to get even with people who wronged you. But Paul said God's people do something different, they work to bring people together instead of driving them apart.

Sometimes this means forgiving people who hurt you. Sometimes it means helping two friends who are fighting to understand each other better. Sometimes it means telling people about God's love when they feel like God is mad at them.

The amazing result is that broken relationships can actually be healed. Enemies can become friends. People who felt far away from God can become part of His family. And Christians get to be part of making that happen, not just watching from the sidelines.

What we learn is that being a Christian isn't just about going to heaven someday. It's about helping to heal the world right now, one relationship at a time. God trusts us with the same work that Jesus did, bringing people together instead of leaving them broken apart.

Pause here. Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Hard Job

Imagine your two best friends had a huge fight and now they won't even sit near each other at lunch. They both want you to take their side and say the other person is completely wrong. But you know they both made mistakes. What would you do? How would you feel about being asked to help them become friends again?

Listen For: "It's too hard," "I'd stay out of it," "I'd tell them to grow up", affirm: "That makes sense. It's really hard work to help people make peace."

Question 2: Not Counting

Paul said God doesn't count people's sins against them. If your little brother broke your favorite toy on purpose, what would it look like to "not count" that sin against him? Does that mean he doesn't get in trouble, or does it mean something else?

If They Say: "He still has to get in trouble", respond "What's the difference between consequences that help fix things versus consequences that just punish?"

Question 3: God's Ambassadors

If you're God's ambassador at school, what would that look like when kids are being mean to each other? What would you do differently than someone who isn't representing God? Give me a specific example.

Connect: "This is exactly what Paul meant by the ministry of reconciliation, representing God's heart for healing."

Question 4: The Ripple Effect

What do you think would happen at your school if everyone who followed Jesus started acting like peacemakers instead of just trying to win fights or avoid problems? How would things change?

If They Say: "People would think Christians are weird", respond "Maybe. But would that be bad weird or good weird? What kind of different would it be?"

I'm hearing that you understand this is hard work, and it is! But you also see how it could really change things if people focused on healing relationships instead of just winning or avoiding conflict. That's exactly what Paul was challenging those early Christians to do.

4. Activity: Bridge Builders (8 minutes)

Zero Props Required , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

Purpose

This activity reinforces the ministry of reconciliation by having kids physically experience the work of connecting separated groups. Success looks like kids discovering that being a bridge-builder requires cooperation, sacrifice, and persistent effort, just like real reconciliation work.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to do something called "Bridge Builders." I need you to split into three groups. Group 1, go to this wall. Group 2, go to the opposite wall. Group 3, you're the Bridge Builders, stand in the middle of the room.

Here's the challenge: Groups 1 and 2, you want to get to the other side of the room, but you can't just walk there. You need the Bridge Builders to help you get across. Bridge Builders, your job is to figure out how to connect the two groups so they can safely reach each other.

The twist is this: Bridge Builders, you can't just tell people what to do from the sidelines. You have to actually become part of the solution. You have to use your own bodies to create the connection between the two groups.

We're doing this because it's exactly like what Paul said about reconciliation ministry, we don't just give advice about making peace; we actually become part of connecting people who are separated.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

First, let the Bridge Builders try to figure out their strategy. They might initially try just giving directions, but remind them they have to physically be part of the solution. Let them experiment for about a minute.

Watch for the moment when they realize they need to create a human chain or bridge with their bodies. Some might hold hands to form a line, others might create stepping stones by getting down on hands and knees.

Coach with questions: "I notice the groups are still separated. I wonder if there's a way to physically connect them? What could you use to build an actual bridge?" Don't give away the answer but guide toward discovery.

Celebrate when someone gets the idea to form a human bridge. Say things like "Now Groups 1 and 2 can actually reach each other! Look what happened when the Bridge Builders made themselves part of the solution!"

Once they've succeeded and people have crossed over, have everyone notice how different the room feels now, people who were separated are now together, and it happened because others sacrificed to be the connection.

Watch For: The moment when Bridge Builders realize they need to position themselves as the connecting point, this is the physical representation of reconciliation ministry requiring personal investment.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt to be separated versus when you were connected? Bridge Builders, what did it cost you to be the bridge? Groups 1 and 2, how did it feel to have someone help you reach each other? This is exactly what Paul meant, reconciliation requires people willing to position themselves as the connection between separated groups.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: God has given every Christian the job of being a peacemaker. Not just when it's easy or when we feel like it, but as part of what it means to follow Jesus. We help fix broken relationships between people and God, and between people and each other.

This doesn't mean you let people hurt you or that you pretend wrong things didn't happen. But it does mean your goal is always healing rather than revenge. You represent God's heart, which wants broken relationships to be repaired.

The amazing result is that you get to be part of something incredible, helping enemies become friends, helping hurting people find hope, helping lonely people become part of God's family. That's way more exciting than just avoiding conflict or winning fights.

This Week's Challenge

Look for one opportunity to be a bridge-builder this week. Maybe it's helping two friends who are fighting understand each other better. Maybe it's inviting someone who seems lonely to join your group. Maybe it's choosing not to gossip when others are tearing someone down. Be God's ambassador for peace in at least one situation.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

God, thank You for making us Your friends even when we didn't deserve it. Help us to be bridge-builders this week. When we see people who are separated or hurting, give us courage to help bring healing instead of just walking away. Help us represent Your love. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that God wants us to help people be friends with Him and with each other.

Movement & Formation Plan

- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
 - **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
 - **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
 - **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
 - **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows
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If Kids Don't Understand

Compare being God's helper to being a teacher's helper at school, you have a special job to help make things better.

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about helping others or being God's helpers. Suggestions: "I Want to Be a Helper," "Jesus Loves the Little Children," or "Make Me a Blessing." Use movements: point to self during "I/me" lyrics, point up to God during "Jesus/God" lyrics, reach out to others during "helper/blessing" lyrics.

Great singing! You sound like helpers already! Now let's sit in our special listening shape because I have an amazing story about a man named Paul who learned about being God's helper. Everyone find a spot on the floor facing me.

2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

Formation: Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

Animated Delivery: Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound excited when talking about helping, sound warm when talking about God's love.

Today we're going to meet a man named Paul who wrote letters to tell people about Jesus!

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Paul had friends in a city far away, but some of his friends were sad and confused. They were having fights with each other and didn't know how to stop.

[Make a sad face and speak gently]

Paul felt really sad for his friends. He wanted to help them, but he was too far away to visit. So he did what people did back then when they wanted to talk to someone far away, he wrote a letter!

[Pretend to write with big hand motions]

But Paul didn't just write "I'm sorry you're fighting." Instead, he wrote something amazing! He told them about a very special job that God gives to all His people.

[Move to center, speak with excitement]

Paul said, "Do you know what God did for us? God sent Jesus to help people become His friends again! And now God wants us to help other people become His friends too!"

[Move to other side, use gentle voice]

You see, sometimes people feel far away from God. Maybe they think God is mad at them, or maybe they just don't know how much God loves them. But God doesn't want anyone to feel far away!

2 Corinthians 5:18 (NIV)

18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

[Pause and look around at each child]

Do you know what that big word "reconciliation" means? It means helping people become friends again! God made us His friends, and now He wants us to help other people become His friends too!

[Move to center, speak with authority but warmly]

Paul said God gives this special helping job to everyone who loves Jesus. It's like being God's helper! When people are sad, we help them know God loves them. When people are fighting, we help them make up.

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

Paul told his friends that God doesn't keep a list of all the bad things people do. Instead, God says, "I forgive you! I want to be your friend!" And God wants us to help other people the same way.

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

So when Paul's friends were fighting with each other, Paul reminded them: "Stop fighting! Start helping! You're God's helpers now, and God wants you to help people become friends!"

[Speak with excitement]

And you know what? When people started being helpers instead of fighters, amazing things happened! People who were sad became happy. People who were fighting became friends again.

[Pause dramatically]

God can use anyone to be His helper, even kids like you! When someone at school is crying, you can help. When your friends are fighting, you can help them make up.

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes at home, your brother or sister might make you really mad. But instead of being mean back, you can remember that you're God's helper. You can choose to forgive and make things better.

[Move closer to the children]

When you see someone who looks lonely or sad, you can be God's helper by being kind to them. You can tell them that God loves them and wants to be their friend.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God chose you to be His special helper! He wants to use your kind words, your hugs, and your friendship to help other people know how much He loves them.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Formation: Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

Great job listening! Now find a partner and stand up. I'm going to give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, just tell each other what you think!

Teacher Circulation: Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

Discussion Questions

Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.

1. How do you think Paul's friends felt when they got his letter?

2. When have you helped two people become friends again?

3. What would you say to someone who feels sad or far away from God?

4. What would you do if you saw two friends fighting at school?

5. How can kids be God's helpers?

6. What does it mean that God wants to be everyone's friend?

7. How does it feel when someone helps you make up with a friend?

8. What makes someone a good helper?

9. When is it hard to be kind to someone who was mean to you?

10. Who in your family could use a helper today?

11. What would happen if everyone at school was God's helper?

12. How can you help someone know that God loves them?

13. What's the difference between fighting and helping?

14. When have you felt far away from God?

15. What makes you feel close to God?

16. How can you be a helper at home this week?

17. What would you do if someone was crying and alone?

18. How does it feel to know God chose you to be His helper?

19. What if someone doesn't want your help?

20. How can you show God's love without using words?

Wonderful discussions! Let's come back together in our lines. Who wants to share what they talked about with their partner?

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Choose songs about kindness and helping others. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "Love, Love, Love," or "I've Got the Joy." Include movements: spread arms wide during "love" lyrics, point to friends during "one another," clap hands during joyful sections.

Beautiful singing, helpers! Now let's sit quietly for prayer time. Cross your legs and fold your hands. Let's thank God for making us His special helpers.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

Formation: Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

Dear God, thank You for sending Jesus to be our friend...

[Pause]

Help us to be Your special helpers this week. When we see someone sad or lonely, help us be kind and caring...

[Pause]

Help us remember that You love everyone and want them to be Your friends. Help us share Your love with our family and friends...

[Pause]

Thank You for choosing us to be Your helpers. Thank You that You love us so much. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Alternative, Popcorn Prayer: If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about being God's helpers. Examples: "Help me be kind to my sister" or "Thank You for loving me."

Remember, you are God's special helpers! This week, look for ways to help people become friends with God and with each other. Have a wonderful week, helpers!

Love Your Enemies

Extreme Forgiveness, Can We Really Forgive Those Who Hurt Us Most?

Acts 7:54-8:1

Instructor Preparation

Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

The Passage

Acts 7:54-8:1 (NIV)

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Context

Stephen, one of seven deacons chosen to serve the early church, has just delivered a powerful speech to the Jewish religious leaders. His message traced Israel's history of rejecting God's messengers, culminating in their rejection of Jesus. The Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court, is enraged by Stephen's words, particularly his vision of Jesus standing at God's right hand, which they see as blasphemy.

What follows is not a legal execution but a mob lynching. The religious leaders abandon all pretense of due process, dragging Stephen outside the city to stone him. This moment marks the beginning of severe persecution against the early church. Notably, a young man named Saul, later the apostle Paul, witnesses and approves of this violence, setting up one of Scripture's most dramatic redemption stories.

The Big Idea

Stephen demonstrates that Jesus's pattern of forgiving enemies, even while they kill you, is not unique to Jesus but possible for his followers through the Holy Spirit's power.

This isn't a feel-good story about being nice to people who annoy you. Stephen models the most extreme form of enemy love imaginable: asking God to forgive your murderers while they're actively murdering you. The deliberate parallel to Jesus's cross prayer shows this wasn't exceptional divine grace unavailable to humans, but a pattern Jesus established that his followers can replicate.

Theological Core

- **Pattern Replication.** Stephen's words deliberately mirror Jesus's prayer from the cross, showing that Christ's sacrificial love isn't limited to his unique divine nature but is a pattern followers can embody through the Holy Spirit.
 - **Martyrdom Ethics.** When facing ultimate persecution, believers have a choice between cursing enemies or blessing them. Stephen demonstrates that even facing death, the Jesus way remains possible and powerful.
 - **Human Possibility.** The fact that Stephen, a human filled with the Spirit, could pray for his killers proves that extreme enemy love isn't beyond human capability when empowered by God.
 - **Redemptive Witness.** Stephen's forgiveness prayer in front of Saul plants seeds for the future apostle's conversion, showing how radical enemy love can transform observers even when it doesn't stop immediate violence.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Extreme enemy love represents the ultimate test of Christian ethics, forgiving those who are actively harming you
 - Stephen's example raises hard questions about whether this level of forgiveness is realistic for ordinary believers or requires extraordinary grace
 - The Holy Spirit's power makes humanly impossible forgiveness possible, but this doesn't minimize how difficult and costly it remains
 - Learning to discern when to pursue reconciliation versus when to practice forgiveness from a safe distance
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Grades 4, 6

- We can choose to forgive people even when they hurt us really badly
 - Our feelings of anger and hurt are normal and okay, but we don't have to let those feelings control our choices
 - When we forgive others, it helps us feel better and might even help them change
 - God gives us strength to do the right thing even when our feelings want us to get revenge
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Grades 1, 3

- Stephen chose to pray for people who were being very mean to him instead of being angry
 - God helped Stephen do something very hard and loving
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- When people are mean to us, we can ask God to help us pray for them instead of being mean back
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Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Minimizing the Cost.** Don't present Stephen's forgiveness as easy or natural. This was the ultimate test of enemy love, forgiving murderers while being murdered. Acknowledge the immense spiritual and emotional cost involved.
 - **Guilt-Trip Applications.** Avoid using Stephen's example to shame people struggling to forgive lesser hurts. The narrative shows this was possible through the Holy Spirit's power, not human effort alone.
 - **Ignoring the Injustice.** Stephen's forgiveness doesn't mean the killing was acceptable or that justice doesn't matter. His prayer was for God not to hold the sin against them, not that no sin had occurred.
 - **Missing Saul's Presence.** The narrative specifically mentions young Saul witnessing this event. Don't overlook how Stephen's forgiveness prayer may have planted seeds for the future apostle Paul's conversion and understanding of mercy.
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Handling Hard Questions

"Is it realistic to expect people to forgive their killers? Wasn't Stephen special?"

Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, but he wasn't more than human. The narrative deliberately parallels his words with Jesus's cross prayer to show this pattern is possible for followers, not just for Jesus. However, this doesn't mean it's easy or that we should judge those who struggle with lesser forgiveness. The Spirit's power makes the impossible possible, but it remains costly and difficult. We aim for Stephen's example while extending grace to ourselves and others in the process.

"Are we supposed to just let people hurt us and not protect ourselves?"

Stephen's forgiveness doesn't equal passivity or removing consequences. Notice that he was trapped and dying, forgiveness was his only remaining choice. In other situations, we can pursue both protection and forgiveness. Forgiving someone doesn't mean trusting them or removing boundaries. We can pray for those who hurt us while still seeking justice and safety. Wisdom helps us discern when each response is appropriate.

"What if someone doesn't want or deserve forgiveness?"

Stephen's prayer wasn't contingent on his killers wanting forgiveness or changing their behavior. Forgiveness is primarily about releasing our own hearts from bitterness and revenge, not about whether others deserve it. It's also about trusting God's justice rather than taking it into our own hands. Notice that Stephen didn't minimize their sin or excuse their behavior, he asked God not to charge them with it, which is different from pretending it wasn't wrong.

The One Thing to Remember

When the Holy Spirit fills us, we can choose forgiveness even toward those who hurt us most, not because it's easy, but because God's power makes the impossible possible.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the tension between Jesus's call to love enemies and the human reality of deep hurt. Help them explore whether Stephen's extreme forgiveness represents God's expectation for all believers or extraordinary grace for exceptional circumstances.

The Tension to Frame

Is forgiving your killers while they're killing you a realistic expectation for followers of Jesus, or does it represent extraordinary grace that most believers shouldn't expect to achieve?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate students' questions about forgiveness, many have experienced real hurt and need space to process honestly
- Honor the complexity of Stephen's situation, this wasn't everyday conflict but the ultimate test of enemy love
- Let students wrestle with the difficulty rather than providing easy answers, real faith grows through honest questioning

1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Think about the last time someone really hurt you. Maybe they betrayed your trust, spread rumors about you, excluded you from a group, or said something that cut deep. You probably felt angry, hurt, maybe even wanted to get them back. That's normal, that's human. The hurt was real, and your reaction made complete sense.

Now imagine if instead of just hurting your feelings or reputation, this person was actually trying to kill you. And imagine that while they were actively hurting you, someone told you that the right response was to pray for them. Your first thought would probably be "Are you insane?" Most of us struggle to forgive people who embarrass us online, how could we possibly forgive someone who's trying to end our life?

Today we're looking at someone who faced exactly that situation. Stephen was being executed by people who hated his faith, and his response was to ask God not to hold their sin against them. This wasn't a nice story told from a safe distance, this was happening to him, in real time, while stones were crushing his body.

As we read, I want you to notice two things: First, pay attention to how Stephen's words mirror what Jesus said on the cross. Second, watch for any clues about whether this kind of extreme forgiveness is something all followers of Jesus should expect to do, or whether Stephen represents an extraordinary example that most of us shouldn't feel guilty about not matching.

Let's read Acts 7:54-8:1 and see what we make of Stephen's choice.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. This is a heavy passage, let students feel its weight. Some may have questions about violence or persecution; acknowledge these briefly and let them know you'll discuss concerns after reading.

As You Read, Think About:

- What led to Stephen's execution and how the crowd responded
- Why the religious leaders reacted so violently to Stephen's vision
- What Stephen chose to say while dying and how it echoes Jesus's words
- How you think you would respond in Stephen's situation

Acts 7:54-8:1 (NIV)

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. The witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

8:1 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Choose confident readers who can handle the emotional weight of this passage. Let students pass if they're uncomfortable, this content is intense.

Reader 1: Verses 54-56 (Stephen's vision and the crowd's rage) **Reader 2:** Verses 57-58 (The stoning begins) **Reader 3:** Verses 59-8:1 (Stephen's final prayers and death)

Listen for the contrast between the crowd's fury and Stephen's response. This is raw human drama, notice the emotions and choices being made under extreme pressure.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4 students. Give them exactly 3 minutes to generate genuine questions about the passage. If groups get stuck, suggest: "What surprised you most?" or "What would you want to ask Stephen if he were here?"

Get into groups of 3-4 and come up with 1-2 real questions about what you just read. Not questions you think you should ask, but things you're actually curious or confused about. For example: "Why didn't Stephen try to escape?" or "How is this different from being a doormat?" You have 3 minutes, focus on what you genuinely want to understand better.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Let students drive with their questions. Your job is to facilitate discovery, not lecture. Guide them to see the parallels and wrestle with the implications.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes around forgiveness, realism, Stephen's state of mind, and parallels to Jesus.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What specific words of Stephen's echo what Jesus said on the cross?"
 - "What does it mean that Stephen was 'full of the Holy Spirit' in verse 55, was this a normal state or something special?"
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- "Do you think Stephen's forgiveness prayer was primarily for his killers' benefit or his own peace?"
- "How do you reconcile Stephen's forgiveness with the fact that what they did was clearly murder?"
- "What's the difference between forgiving someone and excusing what they did?"
- "If you had to choose between calling Stephen's response 'normal Christianity' or 'extraordinary grace,' which would you choose and why?"
- "What would have happened if Stephen had spent his dying moments cursing his killers instead?"
- "Why do you think the author specifically mentions that young Saul witnessed this?"

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Stephen's final words deliberately mirror Jesus's prayers from the cross, both asking God to receive their spirit and not to hold their killers' sins against them. This isn't coincidence. The author wants us to see that Jesus's pattern of enemy love isn't limited to his unique divine nature but can be replicated by Spirit-filled followers. Whether this represents God's expectation for all believers or extraordinary grace for exceptional circumstances is the tension we need to wrestle with.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Most of you will never face Stephen's situation, but all of you will face people who hurt you. The question isn't whether you should forgive people trying to kill you, the question is how Stephen's example informs forgiveness in situations you actually face.

Real Issues This Connects To

- Forgiving friends who betray your trust or spread rumors about you
 - Dealing with family members who consistently hurt or disappoint you
 - Responding to bullying, exclusion, or social cruelty at school
 - Handling online harassment, trolling, or cyberbullying
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- Processing anger toward people who hurt your family or community
- Navigating forgiveness when the person shows no remorse or continues harmful behavior

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to solutions. Some situations require boundaries along with forgiveness. Help them think through wisdom rather than giving blanket advice.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone choose forgiveness when they had every right to seek revenge?"
- "What's the difference between forgiving someone and trusting them again?"
- "How do you discern between situations calling for forgiveness versus situations requiring justice and protection?"
- "What would help you move toward forgiveness in a situation where you've been genuinely wronged?"

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: Stephen's example shows us that the Holy Spirit can empower us to choose forgiveness even in the most extreme circumstances. This doesn't mean forgiveness is easy or that we should feel guilty when it's hard. It means that when we're filled with God's Spirit, responses that seem humanly impossible become genuinely possible.

This week, pay attention to moments when you have a choice between holding onto hurt or moving toward forgiveness. Start small, maybe with someone who annoyed you rather than someone who deeply wounded you. Notice that choosing forgiveness doesn't mean pretending you weren't hurt or that what they did was okay. It means trusting God's justice rather than taking revenge into your own hands.

The questions you wrestled with today are good questions. Keep asking them. Faith that can't handle hard questions isn't very strong faith. I'm confident that as you continue to explore what it means to follow Jesus, you'll discover that the Holy Spirit really does make the impossible possible, not easily, but truly.

Grades 4, 6

Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that we can choose forgiveness even when others hurt us badly, and that God gives us strength to make this hard choice when our feelings want revenge.

If Kids Ask "What if someone keeps being mean even after you forgive them?"

Say: "Forgiving someone doesn't mean you have to keep letting them hurt you. You can forgive them in your heart and still stay away from them or ask adults for help keeping you safe."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever had someone be really mean to you. Maybe they called you names, left you out on purpose, said something that hurt your feelings, or even pushed you or took something from you. Keep your hands up, I see that almost everyone has experienced this.

Now here's a harder question: After someone was mean to you, did part of you want to be mean back to them? Maybe you wanted to say something hurtful back, or get them in trouble, or make sure other people knew how mean they were being. It's okay to admit this, these feelings are totally normal when someone hurts us.

Here's the thing: Those feelings make perfect sense. When someone hurts us, our brains immediately start thinking about how to protect ourselves or how to get them back. It's like having a little voice in your head saying, "That's not fair! They need to pay for what they did!" And honestly? That voice is trying to help you, it's trying to make sure you don't get hurt again.

This reminds me of a movie like "Frozen." Remember how Elsa accidentally hurt Anna with her powers, and then spent years hiding because she was afraid? Or think about "Toy Story" when Woody was jealous of Buzz and wanted to get rid of him. Part of Woody felt justified because Buzz was taking his place, but he had to learn a different way to handle those feelings.

The tricky part is figuring out what to do with those angry, hurt feelings. Do we have to act on them? Is there another way to handle it when people are really unfair to us? What if the person who hurt us was really, really wrong, not just a little mean, but truly awful?

Today we're going to hear about a man named Stephen who faced the meanest people you can imagine. They didn't just call him names or exclude him, they were actually trying to kill him. And his response was so surprising that people are still talking about it two thousand years later. Let's find out what happened and see what we can learn from his choice.

What to Expect: Kids may share examples of being hurt. Acknowledge them briefly: "That sounds really hard" or "I can see why that hurt." Keep momentum moving toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Our story takes place in Jerusalem, in the time right after Jesus went back to heaven. The first Christians were starting new churches and telling everyone the good news about Jesus. But not everyone was happy about this.

There was a man named Stephen who was one of Jesus's followers. Stephen loved God with his whole heart, and he was really good at explaining why Jesus was so special. He would tell people stories from the Bible and help them understand that Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for.

But there were some very important religious leaders who did not like what Stephen was saying. These were the same leaders who had wanted Jesus killed, and now they were angry that Stephen kept talking about Jesus being alive and being God's son.

Imagine how Stephen felt. He knew these people were powerful and dangerous. He probably felt scared sometimes. But Stephen was also filled with God's Holy Spirit, which means God was giving him special strength and courage to keep doing what was right.

One day, Stephen was brought before these angry leaders to explain himself. Instead of being quiet or apologizing, Stephen told them the truth about how they had rejected Jesus. He reminded them of all the times in history when God's people had refused to listen to God's messengers.

The leaders were getting angrier and angrier as Stephen talked. Their faces were red with rage, and they were grinding their teeth together. But then something amazing happened that made them completely

lose control.

Stephen looked up toward heaven, and God gave him a special vision. Stephen could see the glory of God, and he could see Jesus standing next to God the Father! It was like getting a peek into heaven itself.

Stephen was so amazed by what he saw that he said out loud, "Look! I can see heaven open, and Jesus standing at God's right hand!"

When the leaders heard this, they thought Stephen was lying and making fun of God. They covered their ears and started yelling at the top of their voices. They were so angry that they couldn't think straight anymore.

These grown-up leaders acted like a bunch of bullies. They grabbed Stephen and dragged him outside the city. They were planning to kill him by throwing stones at him, which was the punishment for people they thought were lying about God.

Now, think about how you would feel if a group of really mean people were dragging you somewhere to hurt you. You'd probably be terrified. You might be crying, or screaming for help, or begging them to stop. You would definitely be feeling angry at how unfair this was.

Acts 7:59 (NIV)

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

So Stephen's first prayer was asking Jesus to take care of his spirit when he died. He knew he was about to die, and he wanted to make sure he would be safe with Jesus. That makes sense, right?

But then Stephen did something that no one expected. Instead of yelling at the people who were killing him, instead of calling them terrible names, instead of asking God to hurt them back, Stephen made a different choice.

Acts 7:60 (NIV)

60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Stephen asked God NOT to punish these people for what they were doing to him. Even though they were being incredibly mean and wrong, Stephen chose to pray for them instead of against them. Can you imagine that?

This was exactly like what Jesus had done when he was dying on the cross. Jesus had also asked God to forgive the people who were killing him. Stephen remembered Jesus's example and chose to follow it, even in this terrible moment.

Now, this doesn't mean Stephen thought what they were doing was okay. It was definitely wrong to kill him. But Stephen chose to let God handle the punishment and justice part. He chose to focus on forgiveness instead of revenge.

After Stephen said this prayer, the Bible says he "fell asleep," which is a gentle way of saying he died. But here's the amazing thing: there was a young man watching all of this happen. His name was Saul, and he actually agreed with killing Stephen at that time.

But guess what? Stephen's prayer for forgiveness was so powerful that it stayed in Saul's memory. Later on, Saul became a follower of Jesus himself and changed his name to Paul. He became one of the most important people in spreading the good news about Jesus! Some people think that seeing Stephen forgive his enemies helped Saul understand how loving and forgiving Jesus really was.

Sometimes when we forgive people who hurt us, it doesn't change them right away. But it changes us. It keeps our hearts from getting hard and bitter. And sometimes, like with Saul, our forgiveness plants seeds that grow into something beautiful later.

Stephen learned that with God's help, we can choose forgiveness even when people are really, really mean to us. It doesn't mean we let them keep hurting us, and it doesn't mean what they did was okay. It means we trust God to handle the justice part while we focus on keeping our hearts loving.

God gave Stephen the strength to make this incredibly difficult choice. And God can give us that same strength when people are mean to us, maybe not as mean as Stephen's enemies, but mean enough to make us want revenge.

Pause here. Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Hard Choice

Imagine you're at school and someone starts a really mean rumor about you that isn't true. Other kids start avoiding you or laughing at you because of this lie. You know exactly who started the rumor, and you're feeling hurt and angry. Part of you wants to start an even meaner rumor about them. What do you think would be the hardest part about choosing to forgive instead of getting revenge?

Listen For: "It's not fair," "They don't deserve it," "Everyone will think I'm weak", affirm: "Those feelings make total sense. Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending it's not unfair."

Question 2: The Feelings

Stephen probably felt scared, hurt, and angry when people were being so mean to him. Those are normal feelings when people hurt us. But he chose to pray for his enemies anyway. Do you think Stephen stopped feeling angry, or do you think he felt angry but chose to act loving anyway? Why does that difference matter?

If They Say: "He probably wasn't angry anymore", respond "What if he still felt angry but chose love anyway? Would that make his choice even braver?"

Question 3: God's Help

The story says Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit," which means God was giving him special strength. When you think about forgiving someone who really hurt you, what kind of help would you need from God? What would be too hard to do without God's help?

Connect: "This is exactly why Stephen asked God for help. Even with God's strength, it was still a hard choice."

Question 4: The Results

Stephen's forgiveness didn't stop the mean people from hurting him that day, but it did something important for a young man named Saul who was watching. When you choose forgiveness instead of revenge, even if the person doesn't change right away, what good things might happen because of your choice?

If They Say: "Nothing good happens", respond "What happens to your own heart when you choose forgiveness versus when you choose revenge? Which one feels better in the long run?"

You guys are asking really smart questions about forgiveness. It's not easy, and Stephen's example shows us that even with God's help, it takes real courage. The good news is that God really does help us make loving choices when our feelings want to choose something else. Now let's do an activity that will help us experience what this looks like.

4. Activity: Blessing Bombs (8 minutes)

Zero Props Required , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

Purpose

This activity reinforces the pattern of choosing blessing over revenge by having kids physically experience how giving good things to "enemies" changes the whole dynamic. Success looks like kids discovering that responding to meanness with kindness creates something better than responding to meanness with more meanness.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play "Blessing Bombs." I'm going to divide you into two teams standing on opposite sides of the room. Each team will get a pile of imaginary "attack stones" that you can throw at the other team by gently tossing invisible balls.

But here's the twist: I'm also giving each team a secret supply of "blessing bombs." These are special invisible gifts you can throw that do the opposite of attack stones. When you get hit by an attack stone, you freeze. But when you get hit by a blessing bomb, you get energized and can move around freely helping others.

Here's the thing that makes this like Stephen's choice: You'll have to decide whether to throw attack stones back when people attack you, or whether to throw blessing bombs instead. Let's see what happens when you choose Stephen's way versus choosing the revenge way.

We're doing this because it's exactly like Stephen's situation, he could have asked God to attack his enemies, but he chose to bless them with forgiveness instead.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Start with attack stones only. Let them throw attacks at each other for about one minute. You'll notice that people start freezing and the energy becomes negative and competitive. Everyone gets stuck.

As they get frustrated with everyone being frozen, coach them with questions: "I notice a lot of people are stuck and can't move. What would happen if someone chose to throw blessing bombs instead of more attack stones?"

When someone starts using blessing bombs, celebrate it loudly: "Look! Someone just chose Stephen's way! See how that unfroze people and gave them energy to help others!" Encourage others to try blessing bombs too.

Watch for the moment when the whole dynamic changes, when teams start throwing more blessings than attacks. Point out how the room feels different, how people are moving freely, how everyone looks happier.

Let them experience the contrast: "Notice how different this feels from when everyone was throwing attacks. Everyone is moving, everyone is laughing, everyone feels good instead of frustrated."

Watch For: The moment when someone chooses blessing bombs over attack stones when they've been attacked, this is the physical representation of Stephen's choice to bless his enemies.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when everyone was throwing attacks versus when people started choosing blessing bombs? When we responded to attacks with more attacks, everyone got stuck and frustrated. But when we chose to respond with blessings, everything changed. People got unstuck, the energy became positive, and everyone felt better. That's exactly what Stephen discovered, choosing blessing over revenge doesn't just help our enemies, it creates something beautiful for everyone.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: Stephen chose to forgive people who were being incredibly mean to him, and God gave him the strength to make that hard choice. This doesn't mean we should let people keep hurting us or that we have to pretend mean behavior is okay.

This doesn't mean you should never tell adults when someone is being mean to you, or that you should just accept bullying. God wants you to be safe and to get help when you need it. You can ask for protection AND choose forgiveness in your heart at the same time.

The amazing result is that when we choose forgiveness and blessing instead of revenge, it keeps our hearts soft and loving instead of hard and bitter. And sometimes, like with Saul who watched Stephen, our choice to forgive plants seeds that grow into something beautiful later.

This Week's Challenge

This week, when someone is mean to you (even in a small way), try Stephen's approach. Instead of immediately thinking about how to get them back, take a deep breath and ask God to help you respond with kindness instead. You might be amazed at how this changes things, for them, but especially for you.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you for Stephen's brave example. Help us remember that when people are mean to us, we can ask you for strength to choose forgiveness instead of revenge. Give us courage to do the right thing even when our feelings want to do something else. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that Stephen chose to pray for people who hurt him instead of being angry, and that God can help us do the same when people are mean to us.

Movement & Formation Plan

- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
 - **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
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- **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
- **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
- **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows

If Kids Don't Understand

Compare Stephen's choice to choosing to share your toys with someone who was mean to you, then ask "How do you think that would make them feel?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's help or love. Suggestions: "God Is So Good," "Jesus Loves Me," or "God Will Take Care of You." Use movements: point up during "God" lyrics, hug yourself during "love" lyrics, reach out to friends during "care" lyrics.

Great singing! You know what? That song reminds me of someone from the Bible who knew God would take care of him even when things got really hard. Come sit in our story circle and let me tell you about a very brave man named Stephen.

2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

Formation: Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

Animated Delivery: Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound worried when you're Stephen, sound angry when you're the mean people, sound loving when you talk about God's help.

Today we're going to meet a man named Stephen who loved Jesus very, very much.

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Stephen liked to tell people about Jesus and how much Jesus loved them. But some people didn't want to hear about Jesus. These people got very angry when Stephen talked about Jesus.

[Make angry face and cross arms]

The angry people said, "We don't like what Stephen is saying! He needs to stop talking about Jesus!" They were being very mean to Stephen.

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, change to gentle voice]

But Stephen wasn't alone. God was with him! The Bible says Stephen was full of God's Holy Spirit. That means God was giving Stephen special strength to be brave and loving.

[Move to center, look up with wonder]

Then something amazing happened! Stephen looked up to heaven and God let him see Jesus standing next to God the Father! It was like getting to peek into heaven!

[Move to side, sound excited]

Stephen said, "Look! I can see Jesus in heaven!" He was so happy to see Jesus, even though the mean people were being really scary.

Acts 7:59 (NIV)

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

[Pause and look around at each child]

Do you think Stephen was scared when the mean people were hurting him? Yes! It's okay to be scared when people are being mean. But Stephen knew Jesus loved him and would take care of him.

[Move to center, speak with gentle authority]

But then Stephen did something very surprising. Instead of being angry at the mean people, instead of saying mean things back to them, Stephen chose to pray for them!

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe, speaking gently]

Stephen asked God not to punish the people who were being mean to him. He wanted God to forgive them! Can you imagine that? When someone is really mean to you, Stephen chose to ask God to be kind to them instead!

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

This was just like what Jesus did when he was on the cross. Jesus also prayed for the people who were being mean to him. Stephen remembered how Jesus acted, and he chose to act the same way.

[Speak with excitement]

And you know what? There was a young man watching this happen. His name was Saul. At first, Saul thought the mean people were right. But seeing Stephen pray for his enemies made Saul think about how loving and good Jesus really was.

[Pause dramatically]

Later, Saul became a follower of Jesus too! Some people think that watching Stephen choose love instead of being mean back helped Saul understand how wonderful Jesus is.

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes kids at school are mean to us. Sometimes kids at the playground are mean. Sometimes even our brothers or sisters are mean to us. When that happens, we can remember Stephen's choice.

[Move closer to the children]

When someone is mean to you, you can ask God to help you pray for them instead of being mean back. God will help you choose love, just like He helped Stephen choose love.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves you so much, and He will help you be brave and loving just like Stephen was. Even when people are mean, God can help you choose to be kind.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Formation: Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

Find a partner and stand where you can talk. I'll give you each a question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, just share what you think!

Teacher Circulation: Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

Discussion Questions

Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.

1. How do you think Stephen felt when the mean people were hurting him?
2. When someone is mean to you, what do you usually want to do?
3. Why do you think Stephen chose to pray instead of being mean back?
4. What would you do if someone took your toy and wouldn't give it back?
5. How do you think the mean people felt when Stephen prayed for them?
6. Who helps us choose to be kind when we want to be mean?
7. What happened to Saul after he watched Stephen?
8. When someone pushes you at school, what could you do like Stephen?
9. How can we ask God for help when people are mean?
10. What's the difference between being mean back and being kind?
11. Why do you think God wanted Stephen to forgive the mean people?
12. How do you feel when you choose to be kind to someone mean?
13. What can we pray when someone hurts our feelings?
14. How does God help us be brave like Stephen?
15. What would happen if everyone chose to be kind like Stephen?

16. Who in your life is good at forgiving people?

17. What did we learn about God from Stephen's story?

18. How can we remember to pray for people who are mean?

19. What would you tell Stephen if you could meet him?

20. How can we be like Stephen at home and school?

Great discussions! Let's come back together in our lines. Who wants to share what they talked about with their partner?

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Choose songs about kindness or God's help. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "God Is Good to Me," or "Love One Another." Include movements: hug motions during kindness words, pointing up during God references, reaching out to others during love lyrics.

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down in our rows for prayer time. Remember to fold your hands and close your eyes so we can talk to God together.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

Formation: Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

Dear God, thank you for Stephen who chose to be kind even when people were mean.

[Pause]

Help us remember that when someone is mean to us, we can ask you for help to be kind back instead of being mean too.

[Pause]

Give us brave hearts like Stephen, and help us pray for people who hurt our feelings. Thank you for loving us and helping us every day. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Alternative, Popcorn Prayer: If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about being kind to mean people. Examples: "Help me be nice when kids are mean" or "Thank you for helping Stephen pray for his enemies."

Remember, when someone is mean to you this week, you can ask God to help you be kind like Stephen. God loves you and will help you choose love instead of being mean back. Have a wonderful week!

Clothe Yourselves

Identity Changes Everything, What Are You Choosing to Wear?

Colossians 3:10-17

Instructor Preparation

Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

The Passage

Colossians 3:10-17 (NIV)

10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. 11 Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Context

Paul is writing to the church in Colossae to counter false teachings that emphasized human traditions and mystical practices over Christ's sufficiency. In the preceding verses, he has commanded them to "put to death" the earthly nature, sexual immorality, greed, anger, malice. He's called them to strip off the old self like removing dirty clothes. Now he pivots to the positive: what should replace those discarded behaviors.

This passage comes immediately after Paul's dramatic clothing metaphor, taking off the old self and putting on the new. He has just declared that in Christ, all social and ethnic distinctions dissolve. Now he explains what the "new self" looks like in daily practice. This isn't abstract theology, it's a wardrobe change with eternal implications.

The Big Idea

Identity as God's chosen, holy, and dearly loved people creates a moral obligation to deliberately clothe ourselves with five specific virtues, bearing with each other and forgiving as God has forgiven us.

This isn't external performance or religious activity, it's identity-based ethics. We act like who we already are. The clothing metaphor suggests intentional daily choices, deliberate putting-on of character traits that reflect our true identity in Christ. The ethics flow from the identity, not the other way around.

Theological Core

- **Identity-Based Ethics.** Our behavior flows from who we are in Christ, not from trying to earn God's love. We are chosen, holy, and dearly loved before we do anything.
 - **Virtue Clothing.** Character traits must be deliberately adopted like putting on clothes each morning. Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience don't happen accidentally.
 - **Divine Forgiveness Model.** Our forgiveness of others reflects the forgiveness we have received from God. It's not optional, it's the natural response of those who understand grace.
 - **Community Bearing.** We must bear with each other's weaknesses and differences because we are one body with diverse members who all belong to Christ.
-

Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Identity as chosen, holy, and dearly loved precedes ethical obligation, we don't earn God's love through behavior
 - The tension between deliberate virtue choices and authentic character transformation is real and worth wrestling with
 - Bearing with each other requires wisdom about when to speak truth and when to show patience
 - Forgiveness as God forgave us means understanding the depth of grace we've received before extending it to others
-

Grades 4, 6

- The five virtues, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, are choices we make every day
 - How we treat annoying or difficult people reveals what we really believe about God's love for us
 - Forgiving others doesn't mean pretending they didn't hurt us, but choosing not to hold it against them
 - Sometimes our feelings don't want to be kind, but we can choose kindness anyway because of who we are
-

Grades 1, 3

- God chose us and loves us very much, which makes us special
 - When God loves us, we can love others by being kind and gentle
 - We can forgive people who hurt us because God forgives us when we do wrong things
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Performance Pressure.** Don't present virtue clothing as a works-based system for earning God's approval. The identity comes first, we are already chosen, holy, and dearly loved. Behavior flows from identity, not toward it.
- **Emotional Minimizing.** Don't suggest that bearing with each other or forgiving means suppressing legitimate hurt or anger. The passage acknowledges genuine grievances, forgiveness doesn't require pretending they don't exist.
- **Instant Transformation.** Don't imply that putting on virtue clothing happens once. The metaphor suggests daily, deliberate choices. Character formation takes time and repeated practice.
- **Individual Focus.** Don't lose the corporate dimension. These virtues are specifically for community life, bearing with each other, forgiving one another. This is about how God's people relate together.

Handling Hard Questions

"If we're already chosen and loved, why do we have to work at being good?"

Great question, it's not about working to become good enough for God. Think of it like this: if someone adopts you into their family, you don't have to earn the right to be their child anymore. But you might want to learn the family's values and ways of doing things because you love them and you're grateful. The "therefore" in verse 12 is crucial, because you are chosen and loved, here's how you can live out that identity. It's response, not requirement.

"What if someone keeps hurting me? How many times do I have to forgive them?"

Forgiveness doesn't mean staying in harmful situations or pretending abuse is okay. "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" means recognizing that we've all needed grace and choosing not to hold grudges or seek revenge. Sometimes forgiveness includes setting healthy boundaries or getting help from trusted adults. The goal is freedom from bitterness, not becoming a doormat for others to walk on.

"This sounds fake, like pretending to be someone you're not. Isn't it better to be authentic?"

This is the heart of the passage's tension. Paul is saying that in Christ, compassion and kindness are actually who you really are, you're not pretending, you're becoming. It's like learning to play piano. At

first, your fingers feel clumsy and it seems artificial. But with practice, it becomes natural. The "clothing" metaphor suggests intentional daily choices that, over time, shape us into who God says we already are. Authentic doesn't always mean "whatever I feel like doing right now."

The One Thing to Remember

Because God chose you and loves you deeply, you can choose to wear compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience every day, not to earn love, but to express the love you've already received.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the central tension of virtue clothing: are we performing external behaviors to earn approval, or expressing our true identity in Christ? Help them discover that character formation happens through deliberate daily choices motivated by love, not obligation.

The Tension to Frame

Does choosing to "put on" virtues like clothes make them artificial performances, or does deliberate practice lead to authentic character transformation?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their experiences of feeling hypocritical when trying to be good, that tension is real and worth exploring
 - Honor the complexity of identity formation, we are becoming who God says we already are
 - Let students wrestle with the relationship between feelings, choices, and character rather than providing simple answers
-

1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine you're scrolling through social media and see a post that really irritates you. Maybe it's someone bragging about their achievements, or expressing political views you disagree with, or posting something you think is stupid. Your first instinct might be to leave a sarcastic comment or share it with friends to make fun of it. That feels authentic, you're expressing your real feelings, right?

But then you pause. You remember your values, or maybe your parent's voice in your head, or a conversation about kindness you had last week. So you choose not to comment. Maybe you even force yourself to like their post instead. But now you feel weird about it. Did you just fake your way through being a good person? Is choosing kindness when you don't feel kind actually being dishonest about who you really are?

Today we're looking at Paul writing to early Christians about this exact tension. He's telling them to "clothe yourselves" with virtues like compassion and kindness, to deliberately put them on like clothes every morning. But that raises a huge question: if you have to choose to be compassionate, is it real compassion? Or are you just performing goodness?

As we read Paul's words, pay attention to what comes before the commands. Notice the order of things. See if you can figure out whether Paul is telling people to earn something or to express something they already have.

Open your Bibles to Colossians 3, verses 10 through 17, and let's read silently first.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly among students. Help with difficult words like "Scythian" or "admonish." Watch for early finishers, let them reread and notice details. This passage has layers that reward careful attention to the sequence of ideas.

As You Read, Think About:

- What identity does Paul establish before giving any commands?
 - Why does he use the clothing metaphor specifically?
 - Which of the five virtues feels most challenging for you personally?
-

- How does forgiveness "as the Lord forgave you" change the expectation?
-

Colossians 3:10-17 (NIV)

10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. 11 Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers to read with expression. The tone should be warm but authoritative, this is loving instruction, not harsh commands.

Reader 1: Verses 10, 11 (Identity transformation) **Reader 2:** Verses 12, 14 (Virtue clothing and forgiveness) **Reader 3:** Verses 15, 17 (Peace, gratitude, and living in Jesus's name)

Listen for Paul's logic, notice what he establishes first and what he asks for second. This isn't random moral advice.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4. Give exactly 3 minutes. Walk between groups and listen to their emerging questions. If a group is stuck, ask "What surprised you most about Paul's approach here?"

Get into groups of three or four. Your job is to come up with one or two genuine questions about what we just read, things you're actually curious about or confused by. Not "What does verse 12 say?" but "Why does Paul use the clothing metaphor?" or "How is this different from just trying to be a good person?" You have three minutes. Go.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students drive with their questions. You facilitate discovery rather than lecture. Guide them to see the identity-before-behavior pattern Paul uses.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes around identity, authenticity, performance, and character formation. Start with questions most students can relate to.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What three things does Paul call them before he gives any commands about behavior?"
 - "Why might Paul specifically use clothing as his metaphor for virtue instead of, say, food or tools?"
 - "What's the difference between bearing with someone and just tolerating them?"
 - "How does 'forgive as the Lord forgave you' change the standard for forgiveness?"
 - "Is there a difference between choosing to be kind when you don't feel like it and being fake?"
 - "Which of these five virtues would be hardest for someone your age to put on consistently?"
 - "What would happen to a community if everyone actually lived out verses 12-13?"
 - "Why does Paul say we're holy and dearly loved before telling us how to behave?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what Paul does here? He establishes identity first, chosen, holy, dearly loved, then says "therefore" clothe yourselves with virtue. It's not "be good so God will love you," it's "because God already loves you, here's how to live out who you are." The clothing isn't a disguise; it's expressing your true identity. Character formation happens through deliberate choices motivated by love, not fear.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you face the choice between your first instinct and deliberately choosing virtue? Think about school, social media, family dynamics, friendships, or current events. Where would "clothing yourself" with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, or patience feel most challenging but also most needed?

Real Issues This Connects To

- Dealing with classmates who annoy you or exclude others
 - Responding to family members when they frustrate you
 - Choosing how to engage with friends who make poor decisions
 - Handling social media interactions with people who post offensive content
 - Responding to injustice or prejudice you witness in your community
 - Making daily choices about how to treat people who can't do anything for you
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to provide solutions. Help them see that different situations might call for different expressions of the same virtues. Focus on discernment, not blanket rules.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone model these virtues in a way that felt genuine, not performed?"
 - "What would help you remember to 'put on' virtue when your emotions are running high?"
 - "How do you tell the difference between healthy boundaries and refusing to forgive?"
 - "What's the difference between humility and letting people walk all over you?"
-

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: You are chosen, holy, and dearly loved by God, not because of how well you perform these virtues, but just because of who you are in Christ. That identity gives you the freedom to experiment with compassion and kindness without the pressure to be perfect. Character formation happens through practice, not perfection.

This week, pay attention to one of the five virtues Paul mentions. Pick the one that feels most challenging for you, maybe patience or humility or gentleness. Notice when you have the opportunity to "put it on." See what happens when you make deliberate choices based on your identity in Christ rather than just your feelings in the moment.

I'm impressed by the depth of your questions today and your willingness to wrestle with hard ideas. Keep asking these kinds of questions. The tension between authenticity and character formation is one that thoughtful people navigate their whole lives, and you're already thinking about it well.

Grades 4, 6

Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that their daily choices about how to treat others reflect who they really are, beloved children of God who can choose compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience even when their feelings don't want to cooperate.

If Kids Ask "What if someone is really mean to me? Do I have to be nice to them?"

Say: "Forgiving someone doesn't mean letting them hurt you. It means choosing not to hold a grudge. Sometimes being kind includes getting help from a trusted adult."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever been in your room getting dressed for school and couldn't decide what to wear. Maybe you tried on three different shirts, or you couldn't find your favorite pants, or your mom

told you to change because what you picked wasn't appropriate for the weather. Getting dressed can be complicated, right?

Now here's a harder question. Raise your hand if you've ever been around someone who was really annoying you, maybe a little brother who wouldn't leave you alone, or a classmate who was being rude, or someone who was bragging and showing off, and part of you wanted to say something mean to them, but another part of you knew you should be nice instead. Your feelings wanted to be grumpy, but you knew being kind was the right choice.

That feeling makes total sense! Sometimes our emotions want us to do one thing, but our best values tell us to do something else. It's normal to feel frustrated or annoyed. Those feelings aren't wrong, they're just information about what's happening around us. But we still get to choose how we respond.

It's kind of like in Frozen when Anna is hurt and angry at Elsa for shutting her out for years, but she chooses to save her sister anyway. Or in Inside Out when Riley feels angry about the move but eventually chooses to tell her parents the truth instead of running away. The characters have real, difficult feelings, but they make choices based on love, not just emotions.

The tricky part is figuring out how to be genuinely kind and forgiving when someone has genuinely hurt you or frustrated you. How do you choose compassion when you don't feel compassionate? How do you be gentle with someone who wasn't gentle with you?

Today we're going to hear about something Paul wrote to some early Christians about this exact challenge. He told them about putting on virtues like getting dressed in the morning, making daily choices about the kind of people they wanted to be. Let's find out what he discovered.

What to Expect: Kids will relate to the clothing struggle and the feeling of conflicted emotions. Acknowledge both experiences briefly before moving to the Bible story. Keep energy moving forward.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Picture a busy city called Colossae, about 2,000 years ago. It was a place where people from many different backgrounds lived together, some were rich, some were poor, some were from one country, others from completely different cultures.

In this city, a new group was forming, people who believed in Jesus and wanted to follow him. But they were struggling with something that sounds very familiar. They kept hearing different voices about how to live. Some people said, "Follow these complicated rules and rituals to be good enough for God." Others said, "Just do whatever feels right to you."

These new Christians were confused. They wanted to live in a way that honored Jesus, but they weren't sure what that looked like day by day. When their neighbor was rude to them, how should they respond? When someone in their group annoyed them, what should they do? When they felt angry or hurt, what choices should they make?

Think about what that would be like, wanting to do the right thing but not being sure what the right thing was, especially when your emotions were pulling you in different directions.

So Paul, who had started many churches and loved these people deeply, decided to write them a letter to help them understand something important. He didn't want to give them a big list of rules to follow. Instead, he wanted them to understand who they really were.

Paul sat down and thought carefully about what to write. He knew that how people act flows from who they believe they are. If you think you're worthless, you'll act one way. If you think you're deeply loved, you'll act another way. Identity shapes behavior.

So Paul started with the most important truth he could tell them. He reminded them that God had chosen them, not because they were perfect, but just because he loved them. He told them they were holy, set apart as special to God. And he emphasized that they were dearly loved, treasured by the creator of the universe.

Can you imagine receiving a letter that started by reminding you that you're chosen, holy, and dearly loved? How would that make you feel about yourself?

But Paul didn't stop there. He knew that understanding their identity was just the beginning. He wanted to help them know how to live out that identity in their daily choices. So he used a metaphor they would understand perfectly, getting dressed.

Imagine Paul saying to them, "Every morning, you wake up and choose what clothes to put on your body. Well, every day you also get to choose what character traits to put on your heart and mind."

Colossians 3:12 (NIV)

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Paul gave them five specific virtues to "put on" like clothes. Compassion means caring deeply about others' pain and wanting to help. Kindness means looking for ways to be helpful and encouraging. Humility means not thinking you're better than everyone else. Gentleness means being tender and careful with others' feelings. And patience means not getting angry or giving up when things take longer than you want.

But Paul knew this wouldn't always be easy. People in their community would sometimes be difficult or hurtful. They would have disagreements and conflicts. Some people would disappoint them or even betray them.

So Paul didn't just tell them to be nice all the time. He gave them specific guidance about what to do when relationships got hard. He told them they needed to bear with each other, which means putting up with each other's weaknesses and annoying habits, and forgive each other when someone genuinely hurt them.

But here's the key part. Paul didn't just say "forgive because it's the right thing to do." He gave them a much deeper reason.

Colossians 3:13 (NIV)

13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Paul was reminding them that they had all needed God's forgiveness for things they had done wrong. None of them were perfect. They had all said hurtful things, made selfish choices, and disappointed people they cared about. But God had forgiven them completely and loved them anyway.

When you remember how much you've been forgiven, it becomes easier to forgive others. When you remember how patient God has been with you, it becomes easier to be patient with your annoying little brother. When you remember how kind Jesus has been to you, it becomes easier to choose kindness even when you don't feel like it.

The early Christians who received Paul's letter started practicing this. When someone in their group was rude, they would remember to "put on" patience instead of snapping back. When someone disappointed them, they would choose to "clothe themselves" with compassion instead of holding a grudge.

It wasn't always easy. Sometimes their feelings still wanted to be angry or hurt. But they discovered something amazing: the more they practiced choosing these virtues, the more natural they became. The more they remembered they were chosen and loved, the easier it became to treat others with love.

Their community became known for something unusual. Instead of being a place where people had to earn acceptance by being perfect, it became a place where people could mess up and still be forgiven. Instead of being a place where the strongest or richest people got the best treatment, it became a place where everyone was treated with gentleness and kindness.

Sometimes the community faced really difficult situations. People from outside criticized them or even persecuted them. People inside the community sometimes disagreed strongly about important decisions. But they had learned to approach these challenges by first remembering who they were, chosen, holy, and dearly loved, and then choosing to clothe themselves with the virtues Paul had taught them.

What we learn from Paul's letter is that how we treat other people is really a reflection of what we believe about ourselves. When we remember that God chose us and loves us deeply, we have the security and confidence to treat others with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, even when they don't deserve it or when our emotions don't feel like cooperating.

The amazing result is that communities become places where everyone can flourish. Instead of everyone trying to protect themselves or get ahead of others, people start looking out for each other. Instead of holding grudges when someone messes up, people practice forgiveness and grace.

Pause here. Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Identity Foundation

Paul told the Christians they were chosen, holy, and dearly loved before he told them how to behave. Imagine you woke up tomorrow morning and really, truly believed that about yourself, that you're chosen and treasured by the God who made the universe. How do you think that would change the way

you treat your family at breakfast? How might it change the way you walk into school?

Listen For: "I'd be nicer," "I'd be more confident", affirm: "Yes! When you know you're loved, you don't have to protect yourself as much or try as hard to prove your worth."

Question 2: The Hardest Virtue

Paul listed five things to "put on" every day: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Think about your typical day, at home, at school, with friends, with siblings. Which one of those five would be the hardest for you to choose when you're having a bad day or when someone is being really annoying?

If They Say: "Patience" (most common), respond: "What is it about patience that feels so hard? What makes waiting or dealing with frustration so difficult?"

Question 3: The Forgiveness Challenge

Paul said to forgive "as the Lord forgave you." That's a pretty high standard! Think about a time when someone really hurt your feelings or was unfair to you. What would it look like to forgive them the same way God forgives you when you mess up? What would change about how you handle that situation?

Connect: "This is exactly what made forgiveness possible for those early Christians, remembering how much grace they had received made it easier to give grace to others."

Question 4: The Community Effect

Imagine your class at school or your family at home actually lived like this, everyone choosing compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience every day, and everyone forgiving each other when mistakes happened. What would be different? How would it feel to be part of a group like that?

If They Say: "It would be boring" or "Everyone would be fake", respond: "Do you think there's a difference between being fake nice and choosing to be kind even when you don't feel like it?"

These are all great insights. The beautiful thing about Paul's teaching is that it starts with love, not rules. When you know you're deeply loved by God, you have the freedom and security to risk being kind to others, even when they might not appreciate it or return it.

4. Activity: The Bearing Bridge (8 minutes)

Zero Props Required , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

Purpose

This activity reinforces the concept of "bearing with each other" by having kids physically experience supporting others while being supported themselves. Success looks like kids discovering that communities work best when everyone contributes their strengths to help others with their weaknesses.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to build something called a Bearing Bridge. I need everyone to find a partner and stand in two lines facing each other about arm's length apart. You're going to create a bridge by holding hands or linking arms with the person across from you.

Here's the challenge: one person at a time is going to try to cross your bridge by walking on your linked arms, but here's the twist. Each bridge pair has a specific weakness. Some of you will only be able to use one hand. Others will have to close your eyes. Others will have to stand on one foot. Your job is to still support the person crossing, even with your limitation.

The person crossing has to trust the bridge, and the bridge pairs have to bear with each other's weaknesses while still supporting the crosser. We're doing this because it's exactly like what Paul meant by "bearing with each other", supporting others even when you have your own struggles and limitations.

If your bridge breaks, that's okay! The person crossing will step down safely, and you'll try again. The goal is to discover how to work together despite everyone having different challenges.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Start with your assigned limitations. Bridge pairs, remember you're supporting someone who's trusting you, even though you have your own challenge to deal with. Crossers, you have to trust people who

aren't perfect, just like in real community.

I notice that some bridges are struggling, but they're not giving up on each other. Bridge pairs, what could you do to help your partner with their limitation? How could you compensate for their weakness while they help with yours?

Great! Some of you are figuring out that when one person has a weakness, their partner can provide extra strength. This is exactly what "bearing with each other" means, not just tolerating weaknesses, but actively helping to support each other.

Perfect! Look what's happening now, the bridges are getting stronger as partners learn to work together, and crossers are learning to trust imperfect but caring support. This is what Christian community looks like.

Finish your current crossing and then come gather around. Notice how it felt different when your bridge partners were working together versus when they were just trying to manage their own limitations.

Watch For: The moment when bridge partners start compensating for each other's limitations rather than just managing their own, this is the physical representation of bearing with each other in love.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt to trust a bridge that wasn't perfect but was trying to support you? How was it different to be part of a bridge team where you helped with your partner's weakness while they helped with yours? That's exactly what Paul meant by bearing with each other, it's not just putting up with people's limitations, it's actively supporting each other so the whole community can be strong together.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: God chose you and loves you so deeply that you can choose to clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, not to earn God's love, but because you already have it. When someone annoys you or hurts you, you get to decide what kind of person you want to be in response.

This doesn't mean pretending you don't have difficult feelings or that you should let people treat you badly. It means remembering that you're secure in God's love, so you can afford to risk being kind even

when others aren't kind back. You can choose to forgive because you know how much you've been forgiven.

The amazing result is that when people live like this together, communities become places where everyone can grow and flourish instead of places where everyone has to protect themselves and compete with each other.

This Week's Challenge

Pick one of the five virtues Paul mentioned, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, or patience. Every morning this week, choose to "put on" that virtue like you're getting dressed. Notice when you have chances to practice it, especially with people who are difficult or annoying. See what happens when you remember you're chosen and loved before you decide how to respond.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you for choosing us and loving us so much that we don't have to earn your approval. Help us remember who we are in you when we're deciding how to treat others. Give us courage to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, even when our feelings don't want to cooperate. Help us forgive others the way you've forgiven us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

Your Main Job Today

Help children understand that God loves them so much that they can be kind, gentle, and forgiving to others.

Movement & Formation Plan

- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
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- **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
- **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
- **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
- **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows

If Kids Don't Understand

Compare putting on virtues to getting dressed for school, then ask "What clothes does God want us to put on our hearts?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's love or being kind to others. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "Be Kind to One Another," or "God's Love Is So Wonderful." Use movements: point to self during "loves me," hug yourself during "love," and reach out to others during "be kind."

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down in our story horseshoe so we can hear about something special God wants to teach us about love and kindness. Come sit criss-cross-applesauce on the floor.

2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

Formation: Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

Animated Delivery: Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound excited when talking about God's love, sound gentle when talking about forgiveness.

Today we're going to meet a man named Paul who loved God very much and wanted to help other people love God too.

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Paul heard that some people who loved Jesus were confused about something important. They wanted to be kind and good, but they didn't know how to do it when other people were mean to them.

[Use facial expression showing confusion]

Have you ever wanted to be nice to someone, but they were being grumpy or mean to you? It's hard to be kind when someone is not kind to you, isn't it?

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, change tone to sound caring]

Paul wanted to help these people, so he wrote them a special letter. He wanted them to know the most important thing first: God chose them and loved them so very much!

[Move to center, speak with warmth]

Paul told them, "You are special to God! God picked you to be in his family! God loves you more than anything!" How do you think that made them feel?

[Move to side, use gentle teaching voice]

Then Paul taught them something really cool. He said, "Every morning when you get dressed, you pick out clothes for your body, right? Well, you can also pick out clothes for your heart!"

Colossians 3:12 (NIV)

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

[Pause and look around at each child]

Paul said we can put on kindness like putting on a shirt! We can put on gentleness like putting on socks! We can put on patience like putting on a jacket! Isn't that amazing?

[Move to center, speak with excitement]

But Paul knew something else that was important. Sometimes people would hurt their feelings or be mean to them. What should they do then?

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

Paul told them the most wonderful thing. He said, "When someone hurts you, you can forgive them. You can forgive them because God forgives you when you do something wrong."

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

Do you know what forgive means? It means choosing not to be angry anymore. It means choosing to be kind even when someone wasn't kind to you.

[Speak with gentle authority]

Paul said we can do this because God loves us so much. When we remember how much God loves us, it's easier to love other people, even when they're grumpy or mean.

[Pause dramatically]

The people who got Paul's letter started trying this. When their little brother was annoying, they would "put on" patience. When someone said something mean, they would "put on" kindness instead of saying something mean back.

[Speak directly to the children]

And you know what happened? Their families became happier places! Their friendships became stronger! People wanted to be around them because they were so kind and forgiving.

[Move closer to the children]

We can do the same thing! When someone at school is mean to us, we can remember that God loves us and choose to be gentle. When our brother or sister makes us mad, we can "put on" patience like putting on our favorite shirt.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves you so, so much that you can love others too. You can be kind, gentle, and forgiving because God is kind, gentle, and forgiving to you!

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Formation: Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

Stand up and find a partner! I'm going to give each pair one question to talk about. You'll have about one minute to share your ideas. There are no wrong answers, just tell your partner what you think!

Teacher Circulation: Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

Discussion Questions

Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.

1. How do you think the people felt when Paul told them God loved them so much?

2. What does it mean to "put on kindness" like clothes?

3. When is it hard for you to be kind to someone?

4. What would you do if someone said something mean to you?

5. How does it feel when someone forgives you after you do something wrong?

6. Why do you think God wants us to be kind to others?

7. What happened when the people started being more kind and forgiving?

8. When has someone been really kind to you at school?

9. How can you be gentle with your family at home?

10. Who in your life shows you kindness and patience?

11. Why is it easier to be kind when you know God loves you?

12. How could you forgive someone who hurt your feelings?

13. What does God's love help us do?

14. When do you need to be patient with others?

15. How can you show kindness to someone who's sad?

16. What should you remember when someone makes you angry?

17. How can you "put on gentleness" with your pets or toys?

18. What would you pray to ask God to help you with?

19. What would happen if everyone in your class was kind all the time?

20. How can you be like Jesus in the way you treat others?

Great discussions! Let's come back together and sit in our lines for our song. Who wants to share one thing they talked about with their partner?

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Sing a song about kindness or love. Try "The Fruit of the Spirit" (mentioning kindness, gentleness, patience) or "Love One Another" with movements: hug yourself for love, reach out to others for kindness, gentle hand motions for gentleness.

Wonderful singing! Now let's sit down quietly for prayer time. Criss-cross-applesauce in your spots, hands folded, eyes closed, and let's talk to God together.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

Formation: Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

Dear God, thank you for loving us so much and choosing us to be in your family.

[Pause]

Please help us remember to "put on" kindness, gentleness, and patience every day, especially when other people are grumpy or mean to us.

[Pause]

Help us forgive people who hurt our feelings, just like you forgive us when we do wrong things.

[Pause]

Thank you for being so kind and loving to us. Help us be kind and loving to others. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Alternative, Popcorn Prayer: If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about being kind or asking God for help being gentle. Examples: "Help me be patient with my sister" or "Thank you for loving me."

Remember, God chose you and loves you so much! This week, try to "put on" kindness every day like putting on your clothes. Have a wonderful week, and I'll see you next time!

Power to Forgive

When Purpose Transforms Pain, Does reframing harm as God's purpose risk minimizing genuine wrongdoing?

Genesis 45:1-15

Instructor Preparation

Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

The Passage

Genesis 45:1-15 (NIV)

1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! 5 And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. 6 For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. 7 But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

8 "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. 9 Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. 10 You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me, you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. 11 I will provide for you there, because five more years of famine are coming. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'"

12 "You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. 13 Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."

14 Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

Context

This moment caps decades of estrangement. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery twenty-two years earlier out of jealousy and hatred. Now, through an extraordinary series of events, Joseph has risen to become Egypt's second-in-command during a devastating famine. His terrified brothers stand before him, unaware of his identity, completely at his mercy. The power asymmetry is absolute, Joseph could destroy them with a word, and they would have no recourse.

The revelation scene unfolds in Joseph's private chambers after he can no longer maintain emotional control. His brothers' terror is palpable, they recognize him and immediately understand their vulnerability. Everything they feared might happen as consequence for their ancient crime now seems inevitable. Yet Joseph's first words after identification are not accusation or threat, but an invitation to physical closeness and emotional reassurance.

The Big Idea

When we possess power over those who have genuinely harmed us, we can choose theological reframing over justified retribution, but this choice involves costly grace that acknowledges real pain while refusing enmity.

The text reveals this isn't a simple or painless decision. Joseph's repeated weeping throughout the narrative suggests the emotional weight of choosing reconciliation over revenge. He doesn't minimize their wrongdoing or pretend it didn't hurt. Instead, he reframes their harmful actions within God's larger redemptive purpose while inviting them back into relationship through physical and emotional proximity.

Theological Core

- **Power Asymmetry Creates Choices.** When circumstances give us power over those who wronged us, we face genuine decisions about how to use that power, revenge becomes possible but not mandatory.
 - **Theological Reframing Transforms Meaning.** Understanding God's larger purposes can change how we interpret past harm without denying its reality or minimizing its impact on our lives.
 - **Proximity Replaces Distance.** Reconciliation requires deliberate movement toward those who caused harm, replacing the natural distance that enmity creates with intentional closeness.
 - **Costly Grace Acknowledges Pain.** Choosing forgiveness over retribution isn't emotionless, it involves grieving real losses while refusing to let harm define the relationship's future.
-

Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Having power over those who harmed us creates genuine ethical choices about revenge versus reconciliation
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- Reframing past harm within God's purposes can enable forgiveness without minimizing the reality of wrongdoing
- True reconciliation requires moving toward rather than away from those who caused pain
- Choosing forgiveness involves emotional cost and doesn't mean pretending harm didn't happen

Grades 4, 6

- When someone hurts us and we get the chance to hurt them back, we can choose a different way
- Our choices about revenge or forgiveness have consequences that affect many people
- It's possible to forgive someone while still acknowledging that what they did was wrong
- Feeling hurt and angry is normal, but we can choose what to do with those feelings

Grades 1, 3

- God helps us be kind to people who have been mean to us
- God is powerful and good and uses even bad things for good purposes
- We can choose to be close to people instead of staying angry

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Minimizing Real Harm.** Don't suggest that reframing suffering as "God's will" means the harm wasn't real or didn't matter. Joseph acknowledges the betrayal directly, he doesn't pretend it was okay or that it didn't hurt deeply.
- **Demanding Instant Forgiveness.** This story represents the culmination of decades of processing. Joseph's repeated weeping shows this isn't easy or immediate. Don't pressure anyone to "get over" harm quickly.
- **Ignoring Power Dynamics.** Joseph could afford this grace because he held all the power. This response might not be appropriate or safe for those who remain vulnerable to their abusers.

- **Theological Oversimplification.** Saying "God works everything for good" can sound dismissive to those experiencing real suffering. Joseph's approach involves genuine wrestling with purpose and pain, not platitudes.
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Handling Hard Questions

"Doesn't saying 'God sent me here' let his brothers off the hook for what they did?"

Joseph actually names their crime directly, "the one you sold into Egypt", before reframing it. He doesn't deny their responsibility or say their actions were okay. Instead, he chooses to interpret their harmful actions within a larger story of God's redemptive purposes. This allows relationship to continue while acknowledging wrongdoing. It's both accountability and grace working together, not one canceling out the other.

"What if someone keeps hurting you? Do you have to keep forgiving them?"

Notice that Joseph's forgiveness comes from a position of power and safety. He can afford this grace because he's no longer vulnerable to their harm. Forgiveness doesn't mean staying in situations where you continue to be hurt. Sometimes love requires boundaries. Joseph's brothers had to travel to Egypt and depend on his mercy, they couldn't hurt him anymore. Forgiveness and wisdom about safety can both be true at the same time.

"How do you know if God really meant for something bad to happen to you?"

This is one of life's hardest questions, and Joseph wrestled with it for decades. He doesn't claim to understand everything, but he can see how his suffering positioned him to save lives during the famine. Sometimes we can only see God's purposes looking backward, and sometimes we never see them at all in this life. What matters more than understanding God's purposes is trusting God's character, that God is good even when life isn't.

The One Thing to Remember

Power over those who harmed us creates the choice between revenge and reconciliation, and choosing reconciliation through theological reframing involves costly grace that honors both pain

and purpose.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the complex dynamics of power, forgiveness, and accountability. Help them discover that having power over those who wronged us creates genuine ethical choices, and that choosing reconciliation requires both emotional honesty about harm and theological vision about purpose.

The Tension to Frame

When we have the power to punish those who genuinely hurt us, how do we decide between justice and mercy? Does reframing harm as part of God's larger purpose minimize real wrongdoing or enable healing?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate students' instincts about justice, wanting fairness when wronged is natural and healthy
 - Honor the emotional complexity, Joseph weeps repeatedly, showing this isn't a simple decision
 - Let them wrestle with the tension rather than rushing to easy answers about forgiveness
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1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine you're scrolling through social media and see that someone who really hurt you, maybe they spread rumors about you, excluded you from something important, or betrayed your trust, has just posted about struggling with something. Maybe they're asking for help, or their family is going through a hard time. And here's the thing: you actually have the power to help them or make their situation worse. Maybe you know something they need to know, or you're connected to someone who could help them, or you're in a position where your word carries weight.

Part of you thinks, "They deserve whatever's happening to them. After what they did to me, why should I help?" That reaction makes perfect sense, they hurt you, and now they're vulnerable. There's a certain satisfaction in watching people face consequences for their actions. Your anger is justified, and stepping back feels like justice.

But another part of you wonders, "What if I responded differently? What if this situation is bigger than just what happened between us?" Maybe you start thinking about how your response could affect other people, or how it might change things for the better. Maybe you even wonder if there's some larger purpose to you being in this position of power right now.

The easy response is to follow your initial instinct, either help because you're "supposed to" be nice, or don't help because they "deserve" consequences. But what if neither of those automatic responses captures the full picture? What if there's a third way that's more complex but ultimately more powerful?

Today we're looking at someone who faced exactly this dilemma, except the stakes were life and death, and the hurt went back decades. Open your Bibles to Genesis 45, and let's see what happens when ultimate power meets ultimate forgiveness.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. This passage has emotional depth, let students feel the drama and weight of the moment. If someone finishes early, encourage them to read it again and notice Joseph's emotional responses throughout.

As You Read, Think About:

- What emotions do you notice in this scene, from Joseph and from his brothers?
 - Why do you think Joseph sends everyone else away before revealing his identity?
 - What's surprising about Joseph's response to his brothers?
 - How would you have reacted if you were in Joseph's position of power?
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Genesis 45:1-15 (NIV)

1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! 5 And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. 6 For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. 7 But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

8 "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. 9 Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. 10 You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me, you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. 11 I will provide for you there, because five more years of famine are coming. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'"

12 "You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. 13 Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."

14 Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for confident volunteers who can convey emotion. This is high drama, Joseph's revelation is the climax of a decades-long story. Let them hear the emotional weight in the text.

Reader 1: Verses 1-3 (Joseph's emotional breakdown and revelation) **Reader 2:** Verses 4-8 (Joseph's theological reframing) **Reader 3:** Verses 9-15 (Joseph's practical provision and physical reconciliation)

Listen for the emotions in this scene. This isn't just information being exchanged, these are people experiencing shock, terror, relief, and overwhelming joy all at the same time.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4 students. Give them exactly 3 minutes to come up with 1-2 genuine questions about what they just read. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with "What surprised you most?" or "What would you want to know more about?"

Get into groups of three or four. Your job is to come up with one or two genuine questions about what you just read, not questions you think you're supposed to ask, but things you're actually curious about. Maybe something surprised you, or confused you, or made you wonder about someone's motivations. Maybe you're thinking about what you would have done differently. You have three minutes to discuss and write down your best questions. Go!

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Let students drive with THEIR questions. You facilitate and probe deeper, guiding discovery rather than lecturing. Write their questions on the board and look for themes.

Collecting Questions: "Let's hear your questions. I'll write them up here, and then we'll dig into the ones that seem most important to you."

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What evidence do you see that this isn't easy for Joseph? Why do you think he's weeping so much?"

- "How does Joseph balance acknowledging what his brothers did wrong with offering them forgiveness?"

- "What's the difference between saying 'God meant this for good' and saying 'what you did was okay'?"

- "Joseph could have destroyed his brothers with a word. What do you think gave him the power to choose differently?"

- "Do you think Joseph's response would be appropriate in every situation where someone has hurt you? Why or why not?"

- "How do you know when forgiveness is wise versus when it's enabling more harm?"

- "What would it look like if Joseph had chosen revenge instead? How might that have changed history?"

- "When have you seen someone use power to heal rather than hurt? What made that possible?"

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Joseph doesn't deny the harm or pretend it didn't hurt. But he also doesn't let the harm define the relationship's future. He chooses to reframe their betrayal within God's larger purpose, not to excuse what they did, but to create space for relationship to continue. This is what happens when someone has enough power to choose revenge but enough vision to choose redemption instead.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. You probably don't have the power to save entire civilizations from famine, but you do have moments where you could use power to hurt or heal. Think about your relationships at school, your family dynamics, your online presence, even how you handle conflicts in this community. Where do you see these same patterns playing out?

Real Issues This Connects To

- When former friends who excluded you need help with something you're good at
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- When family members who've hurt you become vulnerable or need support

- When classmates who've been mean to you face consequences and you could make things better or worse

- When you have information that could embarrass someone who embarrassed you

- When you're in a position to stand up for someone who didn't stand up for you

- When you become successful at something after others said you'd fail

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to answers. Some situations might call for different responses than Joseph's. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket advice about always forgiving.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone choose to help rather than hurt when they had the power to get revenge?"

- "What would help you in a situation where you're deciding between justice and mercy?"

- "How do you tell the difference between wise forgiveness and being a pushover?"

- "What's the difference between reframing hurt within God's purposes and just making excuses for people who harm you?"

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: When life gives you power over people who've hurt you, you get to choose what kind of person you become. You can use that power to settle scores, or you can use it to heal relationships and serve larger purposes. Neither choice is simple or painless, and there's no formula for when each is appropriate.

This week, pay attention to moments when you have even small amounts of power in relationships, times when you could make someone's day harder or easier, when you could escalate conflict or de-escalate it, when you could exclude or include. Notice what influences your choices. Ask yourself whether your response serves justice, mercy, or some combination of both.

I'm proud of the way you wrestled with these hard questions today. Keep asking them. Keep thinking deeply about power and forgiveness and purpose. The world needs people who can hold all of these things together without choosing easy answers. You're becoming those people.

Grades 4, 6

Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that when someone hurts us and we get the chance to hurt them back, we can choose a different way, one that helps people instead of hurting them more.

If Kids Ask "Why didn't Joseph punish his brothers for being so mean?"

Say: "Joseph could have punished them, but he decided that helping his family was more important than getting even. Sometimes choosing to help instead of hurt makes better things happen for everyone."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever had someone be really mean to you, like they excluded you from something fun, said something hurtful about you, or broke something that belonged to you. Keep your hands up if it made you feel angry or sad or frustrated. Yeah, that's all of us. It's totally normal to feel upset when someone hurts you.

Now here's a harder question: Have you ever gotten a chance to be mean back to someone who was mean to you first? Maybe they needed help with homework and you were good at that subject. Maybe they were in trouble and you could have said something to help them or make things worse. Maybe they were being excluded and you could have included them or let them stay left out. Part of you thinks, "They were mean to me, so I don't have to be nice to them." And that makes sense!

But another part of you might think, "Maybe I should do the right thing even if they didn't." Those feelings are confusing because they're both true at the same time. You deserve to be treated well, and they made a bad choice when they hurt you. But you also get to choose what kind of person you want to be when you have power to help or hurt them.

It's like in the movie Frozen when Anna could have left Elsa trapped in her ice castle after Elsa accidentally hurt her with ice magic. Anna had every right to stay away and be angry. But Anna decided that saving her sister was more important than staying mad, even though Elsa had really hurt her.

The tricky part is figuring out when it's smart to help someone who hurt you and when it's better to protect yourself. How do you decide? And what happens when your choice affects more people than just you and the person who was mean?

Today we're going to hear about a man named Joseph who faced this exact situation, except the person who hurt him was his own family, and his choice ended up affecting entire countries. The people who had been really mean to him were starving, and Joseph was the only person who could save them. Let's find out what happened.

What to Expect: Kids will relate strongly to being hurt and wanting fairness. Acknowledge their feelings briefly but keep momentum moving toward the story. Some may share specific experiences, listen but don't get sidetracked.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Long ago, there was a family with twelve sons, and one of those sons was named Joseph. Joseph was different from his brothers, he had special dreams and wore a beautiful colorful coat that his father gave him. And his brothers hated him for it.

When Joseph was seventeen years old, his brothers did something terrible. They grabbed him, threw him into a deep pit, and then sold him to strangers like he was a piece of property instead of their brother. They told their father that a wild animal had killed Joseph. Can you imagine how scared and hurt and confused Joseph must have felt?

Joseph ended up in Egypt as a slave, far away from his family and everything he knew. He probably cried himself to sleep many nights, wondering why his own brothers would do something so cruel. But something amazing happened, even though bad things kept happening to Joseph, God was with him and helped him succeed at everything he did.

Imagine being taken from everything you love and having to start over in a place where you don't know anyone and don't even speak the language. But God gave Joseph wisdom and strength, and slowly, Joseph began helping the Egyptian people with his special gifts.

Years passed. Many years. Joseph grew up and became one of the most important people in all of Egypt, almost like a king! When Pharaoh had confusing dreams, Joseph was the only one who could explain what they meant. The dreams warned that a terrible famine was coming, no food would grow for seven years.

Because Joseph understood the dreams, Egypt was able to prepare. They stored up huge amounts of food during the good years. When the famine came and people in other countries were starving, Egypt was the only place that had food to sell.

And guess who came to Egypt, desperate and hungry, begging to buy food? Joseph's brothers. The same brothers who had been so cruel to him twenty-two years earlier. They stood in front of Joseph, bowing down to this powerful Egyptian official, not knowing that he was the little brother they had betrayed so long ago.

Think about what that would feel like. The people who hurt you the most are now completely powerless, and you're the only one who can help them. You could say, "Remember me? I'm Joseph, the brother you sold! Now you're going to pay for what you did!" Joseph had the power to throw them in prison, or refuse to sell them food, or even have them killed. No one would have blamed him.

But Joseph didn't do any of those things. Do you know what he did instead?

Joseph couldn't stop crying. He cried so loudly that people in other parts of the palace could hear him. All the hurt from those years, all the loneliness and fear and sadness, came pouring out. This wasn't easy for him, it was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

And then Joseph said something that changed everything:

Genesis 45:4-5 (NIV)

"Come close to me. I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."

Can you imagine how shocked his brothers were? They were terrified! They thought, "Oh no! Now he's going to get revenge on us!" But Joseph said, "Don't be afraid. Don't even be angry at yourselves. I think God used your mean choice to put me in the right place at the right time to save lots of people's

lives."

Joseph wasn't saying that what his brothers did was okay, it definitely wasn't! Selling your brother into slavery is terrible and wrong. But Joseph was saying, "God is so powerful and so good that He can use even the bad things that happen to create something good."

Instead of punishing his brothers, Joseph did something amazing. He told them to go get their father and all their families and come live in Egypt where he could take care of them during the famine. He was going to use his power to save the people who had tried to destroy him!

The brothers were crying. Joseph was crying. They hugged each other and started talking like a real family again. Joseph chose to save his family instead of punishing them, and because of that choice, an entire nation of people survived the famine.

What Joseph did wasn't easy. He had to work through years of hurt and anger and sadness. But when the time came to choose between getting even and getting his family back, he chose love instead of revenge.

Sometimes in our lives, we get the chance to choose between hurting someone back or helping them instead. Joseph shows us that choosing to help, even when it's hard, even when they don't deserve it, can create something beautiful that helps way more people than just us.

Joseph learned that when we choose to forgive and help instead of getting revenge, God can use our choice to do amazing things. It doesn't mean the hurt wasn't real, but it means we don't have to let the hurt control what happens next.

Pause here. Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Scared Feelings

Let's talk about what everyone in this story was feeling. Joseph was probably scared and angry when his brothers sold him. His brothers were definitely terrified when they realized who he was. If you were Joseph, standing there looking at the people who had been so mean to you, what do you think you would be feeling inside? And be honest, what would you want to do?

Listen For: "Get them back," "Make them pay," "Be angry", affirm: "Those feelings make total sense. Joseph probably felt some of those things too. Your brain wants to protect you."

Question 2: The Hard Choice

Joseph had to make a choice between two things: he could punish his brothers for what they did (and lots of people would say that was fair), or he could help them and save their lives. Why do you think he chose to help them instead of punish them? What made him decide to do something so difficult?

If They Say: "Because he was nice" or "Because that's what you're supposed to do", respond "What do you think helped him be brave enough to do something so hard when he was feeling hurt?"

Question 3: God's Big Plan

Joseph said he thought God had a plan, that God used the bad thing his brothers did to put Joseph in the right place to save lots of people during the famine. What do you think about that idea? Do you think God can use bad things that happen to us to create something good later?

Connect: "This is exactly what made Joseph's choice so amazing, he could see a bigger picture than just his hurt feelings."

Question 4: What Changed

Think about what happened because of Joseph's choice. His family got saved from the famine, they got to be together again, and an entire nation of people survived. But what if Joseph had chosen to get revenge instead? How do you think the story would have been different? What would have changed?

If They Say: "Everyone would have died" or "It would have been bad", respond "So one person's choice about forgiveness or revenge can affect way more people than just them. That's pretty powerful."

Joseph's story teaches us that when someone hurts us and we get the chance to hurt them back, we have a choice. We can choose revenge, or we can choose to help. And sometimes, choosing to help creates something so much better than getting even ever could.

4. Activity: The Trust Bridge (8 minutes)

Zero Props Required , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

Purpose

This activity reinforces Joseph's pattern of choosing connection over distance by having kids physically experience how choosing to trust and help each other creates stronger outcomes than staying separated. Success looks like kids discovering that working together accomplishes more than staying apart, even when trust feels risky.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play something called The Trust Bridge. I'm going to divide you into two groups, and you'll start on opposite sides of the room. Your challenge is to get your entire group from one side to the other side, but here's the catch: the floor in the middle is "rushing water" that you can't touch.

Each group has to figure out how to build a "bridge" using only your bodies and your willingness to work together. You'll need to trust each other, help each other, and cooperate to make it across. The trick is that you might need to rely on people from the OTHER group too, which means you have to choose whether to help each other or compete against each other.

This is exactly like Joseph's situation, you could choose to work against each other and probably both fail, or you could choose to help each other and probably both succeed. But you have to decide if you're willing to trust people who started out on the opposite side.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Let them start by trying to solve it within their own groups. They'll quickly realize that they need to reach across the "river" to each other, some will need to form human bridges or chains that connect both sides.

As they struggle with the physical challenge, watch for the moment when someone suggests working with the other team. Some kids will resist this, they'll want to compete. When this happens, ask questions like: "What would happen if both groups helped each other instead of competing?"

Coach with phrases like: "I notice you're struggling to reach across this gap... I wonder if there are people on the other side who want the same thing you want... What if the goal isn't to beat the other team but to get everyone across safely?"

When someone makes the breakthrough decision to cooperate instead of compete, celebrate it loudly! "Look what happened when you chose to help instead of compete! Now everyone can get across!"

Once they've succeeded, have them notice the difference: "Look around. Everyone made it across because you chose to work together instead of against each other. How is this different from if you'd stayed on opposite sides refusing to help each other?"

Watch For: The moment when someone chooses to reach toward the "enemy" group instead of staying separate. This is the physical representation of Joseph's choice to move toward his brothers instead of keeping them at a distance.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when you were on separate sides refusing to help each other versus when you decided to work together? This is exactly what Joseph did, instead of staying angry and keeping his brothers far away, he said "come close to me" and worked together with them to save everyone. When we choose to help instead of hurt, amazing things become possible that couldn't happen when we stay separated.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: When someone hurts us and we get the chance to hurt them back, we can choose to help them instead. This doesn't mean what they did was okay, Joseph's brothers really did something wrong when they sold him. But Joseph shows us that choosing to help instead of hurt can create something amazing.

This doesn't mean you have to be nice to people who keep being mean to you, or that you can't have boundaries with people who hurt you. Sometimes the smart thing is to stay away from people who are being harmful. But when God gives you the chance to help someone who hurt you, and it's safe for you to do that, amazing things can happen.

God can use our choice to forgive and help others to create good things that are way bigger than just our own hurt feelings. When we choose love instead of revenge, we're working with God to make the world better.

This Week's Challenge

This week, pay attention to times when you could choose between getting someone back or helping them instead. Maybe someone who wasn't nice to you needs help with something, or someone who left you out wants to be included in what you're doing. Ask yourself: "What would happen if I chose to help instead of hurt?" Then try it and see what happens.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you for Joseph's story and for showing us how to choose helping over hurting. When someone is mean to us and we feel angry or sad, help us remember that we can choose what to do with those feelings. Give us courage to help others even when it's hard, and help us trust that you can use our good choices to create amazing things. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that God helps us be kind to people who have been mean to us.

Movement & Formation Plan

- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
 - **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
 - **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
 - **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
 - **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows
-

If Kids Don't Understand

Compare Joseph's brothers being mean to him to someone taking your favorite toy and breaking it, then ask "How would you feel if that person needed your help later?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about forgiveness and kindness. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "Love One Another," or "Be Kind to One Another." Use movements: open arms wide during verses about love, point to others during verses about kindness, and hold hands during the chorus.

Great singing! Now I want you to sit in our story spot in a horseshoe shape. We're going to hear an amazing story about someone who chose to be kind when he could have been mean instead. Are you ready to hear what happened?

2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

Formation: Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

Animated Delivery: Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound sad when Joseph is hurt, sound strong when he's powerful, sound surprised when brothers realize who he is.

Today we're going to meet a man named Joseph who had some very mean brothers.

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Joseph had eleven brothers, but they were jealous of him because their dad loved Joseph extra much. So you know what his mean brothers did? They sold Joseph like he was a toy instead of a person! They sent him far, far away to a place called Egypt.

[Make a sad face and use a sad voice]

Joseph was so sad and scared! He missed his dad and his home. But God was with Joseph even when sad things happened to him. God helped Joseph be strong and smart.

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, change to happy tone]

Years and years passed, and something amazing happened. Joseph grew up and became very important in Egypt. He was almost like a king! God gave Joseph special wisdom to help the king understand his

dreams.

[Move to center, speak with authority]

Joseph's dreams told him that no food would grow for many years. So Joseph told everyone in Egypt, "Save up lots of food now, because later there won't be any!" And they did!

[Move to side, sound worried]

Sure enough, no food grew anywhere! People in other countries were getting very hungry. But Egypt had plenty of food because they listened to Joseph.

Genesis 45:4-5 (NIV)

"Come close to me. I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."

[Pause and look around at each child]

Do you think Joseph's brothers were scared when they heard that? Yes! They thought Joseph would be very mad and punish them for being so mean!

[Move to center, speak with warmth]

But you know what Joseph did? Instead of being mean back to his brothers, he was kind! He said, "Don't be scared. God used your mean choice to put me here so I could help save lots of people!"

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

Joseph told his brothers to bring their whole family to Egypt where he would take care of them and give them food. He chose to help the people who had been mean to him!

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

The brothers were so happy and surprised! They all hugged each other and cried happy tears. Joseph's family was back together because he chose to be kind instead of mean.

[Speak with excitement]

Because Joseph chose to help his family instead of punish them, lots and lots of people didn't go hungry! His kind choice saved so many people!

[Pause dramatically]

Joseph learned that God can use even bad things to make good things happen. God helped Joseph be kind when his brothers were mean to him.

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes in our lives, people are mean to us too. Maybe someone at school says something that hurts our feelings, or someone takes our toy, or someone doesn't let us play with them. It's okay to feel sad or mad when that happens!

[Move closer to the children]

But God can help us choose to be kind even when others are mean to us. When someone who was mean to you needs help, you can choose to help them instead of being mean back.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves you so much, and He can help you be kind just like Joseph was kind. When you choose to be kind instead of mean, God can use your choice to make good things happen!

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Formation: Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

Everyone find a partner! I'm going to give each pair of friends one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, and you'll have about one minute to share your ideas with each other. Ready?

Teacher Circulation: Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

Discussion Questions

Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.

1. How do you think Joseph felt when his brothers were mean to him?

2. What would you do if someone was mean to you?

3. Why do you think Joseph's brothers were scared when they saw him?

4. What would you have done if you were Joseph?

5. What changed when Joseph chose to be kind?

6. How does God help us when people are mean to us?

7. What happened because Joseph helped his family?

8. Has someone ever been mean to you at school?

9. Has someone ever been mean to you at home?

10. Do you know someone who chooses to be kind?

11. Why is it hard to be kind when someone is mean to you?

12. How can you be kind to someone who was mean to you?

13. What is God like when bad things happen?

14. How can we ask God for help to be kind?

15. What do you think would happen if Joseph was mean back?

16. What if someone needs your help but they were mean to you before?

17. What should we remember from Joseph's story?

18. How can we pray when someone is mean to us?

19. What would happen if everyone chose to be kind instead of mean?

20. How can we be like Joseph when people hurt our feelings?

Great discussions! Let's come back together in our circle. Who wants to share what they talked about with their partner?

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Select songs about God's love and being kind to others. Suggestions include "Jesus Loves the Little Children," "Love, Love, Love," or "I've Got the Joy." Use movements like clapping hands, swaying side to side, and pointing up to God during verses about His love.

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit cross-legged in rows for our prayer time. Fold your hands and bow your heads as we talk to God together.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

Formation: Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

Dear God, thank you for Joseph's story...

[Pause]

Help us to be kind to others even when they are mean to us. When our feelings get hurt, help us remember that you love us and you can help us choose kindness.

[Pause]

Help us remember that you can use our kind choices to make good things happen, just like you did with Joseph and his family.

[Pause]

Thank you that you are always with us and that you love us so much. Help us to be like Joseph this week. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Alternative, Popcorn Prayer: If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about being kind or asking God for help. Examples: "Help me be nice to my sister" or "Thank you that you love me when I'm sad."

Remember, God can help you choose kindness even when someone is mean to you, just like he helped Joseph! Have a wonderful week being kind to others!

Neither Do I Condemn You

Grace Before Transformation, How do we balance mercy with calling people to change?

John 8:1-11

Instructor Preparation

Read this section before teaching any age group. It provides the theological foundation and shows how the lesson adapts across developmental stages.

The Passage

John 8:1-11 (NIV)

1 But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Context

This story unfolds in the temple courts during the days following the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus has been teaching publicly, and his authority has been increasingly questioned by religious leaders. The

Pharisees and teachers of the law are seeking grounds to discredit or arrest him, caught between their desire to eliminate this threat and their fear of the crowds who follow him.

The trap they spring involves forcing Jesus to choose between mercy and the Mosaic Law. If he advocates stoning, he loses credibility with the common people and violates Roman law (which reserved capital punishment to Roman authorities). If he opposes stoning, he appears to reject Moses' commandments. It's a carefully designed no-win scenario that reveals their malicious intent toward both Jesus and the woman they've dragged before him.

The Big Idea

Jesus demonstrates that true authority to judge sin belongs only to those aware of their own sinfulness, and such awareness leads not to condemnation but to merciful calls for transformation.

This passage reveals the profound complexity of how grace and moral expectation work together. Jesus doesn't dismiss sin or ignore moral standards, but he reorders the sequence: mercy comes first, creating space for transformation. This challenges both permissive attitudes that ignore sin and judgmental attitudes that condemn sinners.

Theological Core

- **Self-examination precedes moral judgment.** Jesus's challenge exposes how awareness of our own sin disqualifies us from condemning others, creating humility rather than self-righteousness.
 - **Grace creates space for transformation.** The order matters deeply, "neither do I condemn you" comes before "leave your life of sin," showing that acceptance enables change rather than judgment forcing it.
 - **Mercy and moral expectation coexist.** Jesus neither excuses sin nor condemns the sinner, demonstrating that we can hold firm moral standards while offering grace to those who fall short.
 - **True authority serves restoration.** Only Jesus, who truly was without sin, had the right to judge, and he chose mercy paired with a call to new life, showing that authority should serve healing rather than punishment.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Self-examination should precede moral judgment, when we're honest about our own failures, it changes how we respond to others' sin
 - True mercy doesn't excuse sin but creates space for transformation, there's a difference between accepting people and accepting their behavior
 - The sequence matters: grace first, then call to change, condemnation shuts down transformation, while mercy opens it up
 - Authority is properly used for restoration, not punishment, having the right to judge doesn't mean we should use it destructively
-

Grades 4, 6

- When someone does something wrong, remembering our own mistakes helps us respond with kindness instead of meanness
 - Helping people want to change works better than making them feel ashamed
 - We can be against bad choices while still being for the person who made them
 - Sometimes feeling upset about someone's behavior is okay, but we can choose what we do with those feelings
-

Grades 1, 3

- Jesus helps people who make bad choices instead of hurting them
 - God forgives us when we do wrong things and helps us do better next time
 - We can be kind to people even when they make mistakes
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Treating this as simple moral relativism.** Jesus doesn't say sin doesn't matter or that all choices are equally valid. He maintains clear moral expectations while refusing to condemn the person. The call to "leave your life of sin" is a genuine expectation, not mere suggestion.
 - **Ignoring the self-examination challenge.** The passage isn't primarily about not judging others, it's about how awareness of our own sin should transform our approach to others' sin. Self-righteousness is the real target here, not moral discernment itself.
 - **Missing the strategic order.** "Neither do I condemn you" comes before "leave your life of sin" for a reason. Grace creates the safety needed for genuine transformation. Reversing this order typically produces shame-based behavior modification rather than heart change.
 - **Overlooking the textual debate.** While most manuscripts don't include this passage in its current location, its theological consistency with Jesus's pattern throughout the Gospels gives it teaching authority. Focus on the truth it conveys rather than getting sidetracked by manuscript issues.
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Handling Hard Questions

"Doesn't this mean we can't ever call out sin or hold people accountable?"

The passage actually shows Jesus holding moral standards, he calls the woman to leave her life of sin. The key insight is about the heart and method behind accountability. When we're aware of our own failures, we approach others' sin with humility and a goal of restoration rather than superiority and punishment. The question isn't whether to address sin, but how to do it in ways that open rather than close the door to transformation.

"What if someone keeps sinning after receiving mercy? How many chances do they get?"

This passage doesn't address repeat offenses directly, but it establishes principles that apply: our approach should still be shaped by awareness of our own need for grace, and the goal remains restoration rather than punishment. However, mercy doesn't eliminate consequences or boundaries. We can maintain limits to protect others while still refusing to write people off as hopeless. The challenge is

holding both accountability and hope simultaneously.

"Was Jesus just being nice, or does God really not judge sin?"

Jesus explicitly calls the behavior sin and commands the woman to leave that life behind, he's not minimizing moral standards. But he demonstrates that judgment belongs ultimately to God, and God's heart is toward restoration. The cross shows that God takes sin seriously enough to deal with it decisively, while mercy shows God's desire that people be saved rather than condemned. Divine justice and mercy aren't opposites but work together for redemption.

The One Thing to Remember

Those who truly understand their own need for grace respond to others' sin with mercy that calls for transformation rather than condemnation that shuts it down.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

Ages 12, 14+ • 30 Minutes • Student-Centered Discussion

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the tension between mercy and moral standards. Help them discover how self-examination transforms our response to others' failures, moving from judgment that condemns to grace that calls for transformation.

The Tension to Frame

How do we hold firm moral convictions while responding to moral failure with mercy rather than condemnation? Can we be against sin while being for the sinner?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their desire for justice, feeling upset about wrongdoing is appropriate and healthy
 - Honor the complexity, there aren't always simple answers to questions of accountability and mercy
-

- Let them struggle with the paradox rather than rushing to resolution, the wrestling is where the learning happens
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1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine you're scrolling through social media and you see a post about someone from your school who got caught cheating on a major test. Not just looking at someone else's answers, they were selling answer keys to multiple tests for money. They got suspended and might not graduate on time. The post has dozens of comments, and people are going off. "They got what they deserved." "Cheaters never change." "Hope this follows them to college applications." You know this person. They're not close friends, but you've talked. You know they're stressed about family finances and college costs.

Part of you feels like the comments are justified, cheating is wrong, especially when it affects other students' grades and the integrity of the whole system. It's not like they accidentally made one bad choice; they set up an ongoing operation. The consequences seem appropriate, maybe even necessary to deter others from doing the same thing.

But another part of you wonders about the pile-on happening in the comments. You can picture this person reading every harsh word, and you know they're already dealing with consequences from the school. The comments aren't really about justice anymore, they feel more like a chance for everyone else to feel superior and vent their own frustrations about fairness.

Today we're looking at Jesus facing a similar scenario, someone caught in serious moral failure, religious leaders demanding punishment, and a crowd waiting to see what happens. What Jesus does surprises everyone and reveals something profound about how grace and moral standards can work together rather than against each other.

As we read, pay attention to the order of what Jesus says and does. Notice how he responds to both the accusers and the accused, and think about what this might mean for how we handle moral failure in our own relationships and communities.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. This passage contains some mature content, so be prepared to help students with questions about adultery. Watch for early finishers and have them reread focusing

on the different characters' motivations and emotions. Let them feel the tension and drama of the scene.

As You Read, Think About:

- What are the religious leaders trying to accomplish with this confrontation?
- Why might Jesus write on the ground instead of immediately responding?
- What causes the accusers to leave "one at a time, the older ones first"?
- How would you feel if you were the woman in this situation?

John 8:1-11 (NIV)

1 But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers and let students pass if they're not comfortable. Choose confident readers for the dialogue sections where emotional tone matters.

Reader 1: Verses 1-3 (Setting the scene) **Reader 2:** Verses 4-6 (The accusation and trap) **Reader 3:** Verses 7-11 (Jesus's response and resolution)

Listen for the different emotions and motivations in each section, this isn't just information but a dramatic confrontation with real people facing real stakes.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4 students. Give exactly 3 minutes. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with "What surprised you most?" or "What confused you?"

Get into groups of 3-4. Your job is to come up with 1-2 genuine questions about what you just read, things you're actually curious about, confused by, or want to explore further. Good questions might start with "Why did..." or "What if..." or "How come..." Don't worry about having answers; focus on asking what you really want to understand. You have three minutes starting now.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students drive with THEIR questions while you facilitate and probe deeper. Guide discovery rather than lecturing. Let them wrestle with the tensions.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes and start with questions most students will connect with emotionally or practically.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What evidence do you see that this was a trap rather than genuine concern for justice?"
 - "Why do you think the older ones left first? What might that suggest about experience and self-awareness?"
 - "What's the difference between 'neither do I condemn you' and 'what you did was okay'?"
 - "How does remembering our own failures change the way we respond to others' mistakes?"
 - "When have you seen someone change because they felt accepted rather than judged?"
 - "What's the difference between accountability and condemnation in how we treat people who mess up?"
-

- "What would have happened if Jesus had said 'leave your life of sin' before 'neither do I condemn you'?"
- "Why does this story matter for how we handle moral issues in our school, family, or friend groups?"

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? The people with the authority to judge, the religious experts who know the law, can't actually go through with it once they examine their own lives. And Jesus, who truly does have the right to judge, chooses mercy paired with a call to transformation. It seems like the more aware we are of our own need for grace, the more likely we are to offer it to others. But that grace doesn't ignore the problem, it creates space for real change.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives for a minute. You deal with moral failure all the time, your own and others'. Whether it's friends lying, classmates cheating, family members breaking promises, or your own struggles with choices you know aren't right. How we respond to these situations matters more than we might think.

Real Issues This Connects To

- Social media responses when someone from school gets in trouble for poor choices
- How you handle it when a close friend lies to you or breaks your trust
- Your family's response when someone in the household makes a significant mistake
- Group dynamics when one person's choices affect the whole team or friend group
- Community responses to public figures or leaders who fall short of moral expectations
- Your internal dialogue when you mess up and are deciding whether to seek help or hide

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to easy answers. Help them see that different situations might require different responses, but the principles of self-examination and mercy-toward-transformation still apply.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone respond to moral failure in a way that actually helped the person change?"
 - "What would it look like to be against someone's behavior while still being for them as a person?"
 - "How do you tell the difference between healthy accountability and destructive judgment?"
 - "What's the difference between consequences that restore and consequences that just punish?"
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5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: Those who truly understand their own need for grace respond to others' failures differently. Instead of rushing to condemn, they create space for transformation. This doesn't mean lowering standards or ignoring consequences, but it changes our heart posture from "you got what you deserved" to "how can healing happen here?"

This week, pay attention to your first instinct when you encounter moral failure, your own or others'. Notice whether your gut reaction moves toward condemnation or restoration. Try asking yourself, "What would mercy that still upholds truth look like in this situation?" Sometimes the most revolutionary thing you can do is refuse to participate in tearing someone down, even when they've genuinely messed up.

You've wrestled with some complex questions today, and I'm proud of how thoughtfully you've engaged. Keep asking these hard questions, they matter more than you might think. The world needs people who can hold both grace and truth, and you're learning how to do that. That's not easy work, but it's some of the most important work there is.

Grades 4, 6

Ages 9, 11 • 30 Minutes • Interactive Storytelling + Activity

Your Main Job Today

Help students understand that helping people change works better than shaming them, and that remembering our own mistakes makes us kinder when others mess up.

If Kids Ask "What is adultery?"

Say: "It means a married person being romantically involved with someone who isn't their husband or wife. It breaks trust and hurts families."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever been in trouble for something at home or school. Keep it up if the thing you did was actually wrong, not just a misunderstanding, but you really did make a bad choice. Now raise your other hand if someone's reaction made you feel even worse about what you did, like they were piling on extra shame on top of the consequence you already knew you deserved.

Here's a harder question: Think about a time when someone in your class or family made a choice that affected you in a bad way. Maybe they broke something of yours, or didn't do their part of a group project, or said something hurtful. Part of you probably felt angry and wanted them to get in trouble. But another part might have also felt sorry for them, especially if you could see they already felt bad about it.

It's totally normal to have mixed feelings when someone does something wrong. You can be upset about what they did and still care about what happens to them. Sometimes we want justice, but we also want people to be okay. Sometimes we want to make sure they learn their lesson, but we don't want to crush them in the process.

This is like when Elsa accidentally hurts Anna with her ice powers in Frozen. Anna could have been angry and demanded that everyone stay away from Elsa forever. Instead, she kept believing that her sister wasn't a bad person, even though what happened was genuinely dangerous. Anna wanted Elsa to learn to control her powers, but she also wanted to help her sister, not destroy her.

The tricky part is figuring out how to respond to someone's bad choices in a way that actually helps them want to do better next time, instead of just making them feel terrible about themselves. Sometimes when we're hurt or angry, we want to hurt back, but that doesn't usually fix anything.

Today we're going to hear about a time when some religious leaders brought a woman who had made a very serious bad choice to Jesus. They wanted to see if he would punish her according to the rules. But

Jesus surprised everyone with how he handled the situation. Let's find out what happened.

What to Expect: Kids may share personal stories of being in trouble. Acknowledge briefly without getting sidetracked. Keep momentum moving toward anticipation for the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

It was early morning in Jerusalem, and Jesus was sitting in the temple courtyard teaching people about God. Families and workers and children had gathered around to listen to him, sitting on the ground in the shade of the big stone walls.

Suddenly, there was a commotion. A group of important religious leaders, the kind who wore fancy robes and knew all the rules, came pushing through the crowd. They were dragging a woman with them, and she looked scared and ashamed. Her hair was messy, her clothes were wrinkled, and you could tell she'd been crying.

The leaders made the woman stand right in the middle of the circle, where everyone could see her. Imagine how embarrassing and frightening that would be, like being called to the front of the classroom when you're in the worst trouble of your life, except this classroom has hundreds of people in it.

The religious leaders stood up tall and spoke loudly so everyone could hear. "Teacher," they said to Jesus, trying to sound respectful but really setting a trap, "this woman was caught doing adultery, being romantic with someone who wasn't her husband. According to the Law of Moses, people who do this should be stoned to death. What do you say we should do?"

This was a trap, and everyone could sense it. If Jesus said, "Yes, stone her," people would think he was cruel and mean. If he said, "No, don't stone her," they could say he was ignoring God's laws. They thought they had him trapped no matter what he said.

But Jesus didn't answer right away. Instead, he did something unexpected. He bent down and started writing in the dirt with his finger. We don't know what he wrote, maybe he was writing the names of sins the religious leaders had committed, or maybe just thinking and praying about what to say.

John 8:7 (NIV)

7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

Jesus was basically saying, "Whoever has never done anything wrong can throw the first stone." Think about how that must have felt for the religious leaders. They came to trap Jesus, but suddenly they had to think about all their own mistakes and wrong choices. Had they ever been greedy? Had they ever been mean to someone? Had they ever lied or been prideful or hurt someone's feelings?

Jesus bent down and started writing in the dirt again, giving them time to think. And slowly, one by one, they began to walk away. The older men left first, probably because they'd lived long enough to know how many mistakes they'd made in their lives.

Soon, everyone who had come to accuse the woman was gone. It was just Jesus and the woman standing there, with the crowd watching quietly. Jesus stood up and looked at the woman kindly. He didn't look angry or disgusted. He looked at her the way you'd want someone to look at you when you've messed up badly.

"Woman," Jesus said gently, "where are they? Has no one condemned you?" The woman looked around at the empty space where her accusers had been standing. "No one, sir," she said quietly.

John 8:11 (NIV)

11 "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Notice what Jesus said first: "Neither do I condemn you." He didn't say what she did was okay, but he also didn't attack her or make her feel worse. Then he said, "Go now and leave your life of sin," which means "go and make better choices from now on."

Jesus helped her understand that what she did was wrong, but he did it in a way that gave her hope and strength to change, not in a way that crushed her spirit. He showed her that she was still valuable and loved, even though she had made a serious mistake.

The religious leaders wanted to use this woman's mistake as a weapon against Jesus. But Jesus turned it into a lesson about mercy and second chances. He reminded everyone that we all need forgiveness, and when we remember that, it changes how we treat people who mess up.

Sometimes in our lives, we're like the religious leaders, quick to point out when someone else does something wrong, forgetting about all the times we've needed forgiveness too. Sometimes we're like the woman, caught in a mistake and feeling ashamed and scared. But Jesus shows us a different way.

When we remember our own mistakes, it makes us kinder to others when they mess up. And when we treat people with kindness instead of cruelty, it helps them want to do better instead of just making them feel hopeless.

Jesus didn't pretend the woman's choice was okay, but he also didn't destroy her. He offered her mercy and a chance to start over. That's what mercy looks like, helping people change instead of just punishing them.

Pause here. Let the story sink in for 5 seconds before moving on.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Trap

The religious leaders thought they had set the perfect trap for Jesus. They wanted him to choose between being mean or breaking the rules. But their plan backfired. What do you think happened inside their heads when Jesus said, "Let anyone who has never done anything wrong throw the first stone"?

Listen For: "They remembered their own bad choices," "They felt embarrassed," "They realized they weren't perfect either", affirm: "Yes, suddenly they had to think about their own mistakes instead of just judging hers."

Question 2: The Order

Jesus said two things to the woman: "Neither do I condemn you" and "Go and leave your life of sin." He could have said them in the opposite order. Why do you think he chose to say "I don't condemn you" first and "stop sinning" second? How might that order make a difference?

If They Say: "It made her feel safe first" or "She wasn't scared anymore", respond "What do you think that safety might have helped her do?"

Question 3: The Difference

Imagine two different scenarios: In the first, your teacher catches you cheating and announces it to the whole class, embarrassing you in front of everyone. In the second, your teacher talks to you privately, explains why cheating hurts your learning, and gives you a chance to redo the work honestly. Both teachers are addressing the same wrong behavior. What's different about how these two approaches might affect you?

Connect: "This is exactly why Jesus's approach was so powerful, it made the woman want to change, not just feel terrible."

Question 4: When We Mess Up

Think about a time when you messed up and someone responded to you the way Jesus responded to this woman, not excusing what you did wrong, but treating you with kindness and helping you figure out how to do better. How did that make you feel? How did it affect whether you wanted to change your behavior?

If They Say: "It made me want to do better" or "I didn't feel so bad about myself", affirm these insights while honoring that some kids might not have experienced this kind of response.

You're noticing something really important: When people feel safe and valued, even after making mistakes, they're more likely to want to change for the better. When they feel condemned and worthless, they often either give up or just get better at hiding their problems. Jesus knew this, and that's why his approach was so effective.

4. Activity: The Bridge Builders (8 minutes)

Zero Props Required , This activity uses only kids' bodies and empty space.

Purpose

This activity reinforces the lesson's core principle by having kids physically experience how mercy creates bridges while condemnation builds walls. Success looks like kids discovering that helping someone cross over to the "good choice" side works better than pushing them away or trapping them on the "bad choice" side.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play The Bridge Builders. I need you to imagine that this room has an invisible line down the middle. One side represents "Good Choices" and the other side represents "Bad Choices." I'll divide you into three groups: Good Choice People, Bad Choice People, and Bridge Builders.

Here's the challenge: The Bad Choice People start on their side but want to cross over to the Good Choice side, they want to change and do better. The Good Choice People's job is to decide how to respond. But here's the twist: you can either be Wall Builders who try to keep the Bad Choice People away, or you can work with the Bridge Builders to help them cross over.

The Bad Choice People can only move toward the good side if they feel welcomed, not pushed away. If they feel condemned or rejected, they have to stay where they are or move further back. We're doing this because it's exactly like what happened in our story, condemnation traps people, but mercy creates a path for change.

Let's see what works better for helping people want to change: building walls or building bridges.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

First, let's try the Wall Builder approach. Good Choice People, show through your actions and words that you don't want the Bad Choice People to come near you. Bad Choice People, pay attention to how this makes you feel and whether it makes you want to change or just give up.

Notice how this feels for everyone. Bad Choice People, are you feeling motivated to change, or are you feeling hopeless? Good Choice People, how does it feel to keep people away? Watch what happens to the distance between the two groups.

Now let's try the Bridge Builder approach. Good Choice People and Bridge Builders, work together to welcome the Bad Choice People across, but make it clear that crossing over means leaving the bad choices behind. Bad Choice People, notice how this different approach affects your motivation.

Look at the difference! When people feel welcomed and supported, they want to move toward the good choice side. When they feel rejected and condemned, they either stay stuck or move further away. This is exactly what Jesus understood about how real change happens.

The Bridge Builder approach doesn't ignore that bad choices are bad, crossing over still means leaving those choices behind. But it focuses on helping people get to where they need to be, rather than just

keeping them away from where you are.

Watch For: The moment when Bad Choice People start moving eagerly toward the Good Choice side during the Bridge Builder phase, this is the physical representation of how mercy creates space for transformation.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt to be welcomed versus rejected? How did it affect your motivation to change? This is exactly what Jesus did, he built a bridge for the woman instead of a wall. He made it clear that crossing over meant leaving sin behind, but he also made it possible and appealing for her to make that journey.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: When someone does something wrong, remembering our own mistakes helps us respond with kindness instead of meanness. And helping people want to change works better than making them feel ashamed. Jesus didn't pretend the woman's choices were okay, but he also didn't destroy her with his words.

This doesn't mean we pretend bad choices are good choices, or that we don't have consequences for harmful behavior. It means we can be against someone's bad choices while still being for them as a person. We can want justice and mercy at the same time.

The amazing result is that when people feel valued and safe, even after making mistakes, they're more likely to actually want to change. When they feel condemned and worthless, they often either give up trying or just get better at hiding their problems. Jesus's way creates real transformation, not just fear-based compliance.

This Week's Challenge

This week, when someone around you makes a mistake or bad choice, whether it's a sibling, classmate, or friend, try to remember a time when you needed forgiveness for something. Let that memory help you respond with kindness instead of judgment. You don't have to ignore the problem, but see if you can be part of helping them do better rather than just making them feel worse.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear Jesus, thank you for showing us how to treat people with mercy when they make mistakes. Help us remember our own need for forgiveness when others mess up. Give us courage to be bridge builders instead of wall builders, helping people change instead of just pushing them away. In your name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

Ages 6, 8 • 15, 20 Minutes • Animated Storytelling + Songs

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that Jesus helps people instead of hurting them, and God forgives us and helps us do better.

Movement & Formation Plan

- **Opening Song:** Standing in a circle
 - **Bible Story:** Sitting in a horseshoe shape facing the teacher
 - **Small Group Q&A:** Standing in pairs facing each other
 - **Closing Song:** Standing in straight lines
 - **Prayer:** Sitting cross-legged in rows
-

If Kids Don't Understand

Compare the religious leaders to tattletales who want to get someone in trouble, then ask "How does it feel when someone helps you instead of getting you in trouble?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's love and kindness. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "God Is So Good," or "L-O-V-E." Use movements: point up to God during verses about God, hug yourself during verses about love, and reach toward friends during verses about helping others.

Great singing! I love how you remembered to use your movements. Now let's sit down for our story about how Jesus helps people. Make a horseshoe shape on the floor so everyone can see.

2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

Formation: Kids sitting in a horseshoe shape on the floor facing you. Move around inside the horseshoe as you tell the story.

Animated Delivery: Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound stern when you're the religious leaders, sound kind when you're Jesus.

Today we're going to meet Jesus when some mean people tried to trick him!

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Jesus was sitting in the temple, teaching people about God's love. Families were sitting around listening to his wonderful stories. Everyone was happy and peaceful.

[Use stern voice, walk quickly across]

Suddenly, some angry religious leaders came stomping in. They were dragging a woman with them. The woman looked scared and sad. Her eyes were red from crying.

[Point dramatically]

The mean leaders made the woman stand in front of everyone. That was very embarrassing! They wanted to get her in big trouble. They also wanted to trick Jesus.

[Move to center, speak with warm authority]

"Teacher," they said to Jesus in fake-nice voices, "this woman did something very wrong. Our rules say she should be punished by throwing rocks at her. What do you think we should do?"

[Bend down, pretend to write]

But Jesus didn't answer right away. He bent down and started writing in the dirt with his finger. He was thinking about what to say.

John 8:7 (NIV)

7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

[Stand up tall, speak clearly]

Jesus said, "Anyone who has never done anything wrong can throw the first rock." Do you think anyone has never done anything wrong? No! Everyone has made mistakes!

[Walk slowly, looking down]

The religious leaders started thinking about all their own mistakes. "Oh no," they thought, "I've been mean before. I've told lies. I've been selfish." One by one, they walked away, feeling embarrassed.

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

Soon, all the mean people were gone! It was just Jesus and the scared woman. Jesus looked at her with kind eyes, not angry eyes.

[Speak gently]

"Woman, where did everyone go? Is anyone here to hurt you?" Jesus asked softly. "No one, sir," she said quietly.

John 8:11 (NIV)

11 "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

[Speak with warmth and love]

Jesus said, "I'm not going to hurt you either. But I want you to make good choices from now on." He didn't pretend her wrong choice was okay, but he was kind to her!

[Move closer to the children]

The woman felt so happy! Jesus helped her instead of hurting her. He gave her another chance to do better. That's what love looks like!

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes in our lives, we make wrong choices too. Maybe we're mean to our brother or sister, or we don't listen to our parents, or we take something that isn't ours. When that happens, Jesus wants to help us do better, not just make us feel terrible!

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves us even when we make mistakes. He forgives us and helps us learn to make better choices. And he wants us to be kind to other people when they make mistakes too, just like Jesus was kind to this woman.

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Formation: Have kids stand up and find a partner. Pairs scatter around the room with space to talk.

Find a partner and stand facing each other. I'll give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, so just share what you think! You'll have about one minute to talk together.

Teacher Circulation: Walk around to each pair. Listen to their discussions. If a pair is stuck, ask "What do you think?" or rephrase the question more simply. Give them time to think, some kids need extra processing time.

Discussion Questions

Select one question per pair based on class size. Save unused questions for next time.

1. How do you think the woman felt when the mean people were being mean to her?
 2. How do you think she felt when Jesus was kind to her instead?
 3. Why do you think the religious leaders walked away?
 4. What would you have wanted Jesus to say if you were the woman?
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5. What changed when all the mean people left?

6. Why do you think Jesus helped her instead of hurting her?

7. How did Jesus show love to the woman?

8. What would happen at school if someone made a mistake and everyone was kind instead of mean?

9. How does it feel when someone helps you after you do something wrong?

10. Who in your family is kind to you when you make mistakes?

11. Why is it better to help people than to hurt them?

12. How can we be kind like Jesus when someone makes a mistake?

13. What does it mean that God forgives us?

14. When is it hard to be kind to someone who did something wrong?

15. What if the woman had been your friend, how would you want people to treat her?

16. How does Jesus help us when we make bad choices?

17. What did the woman learn about Jesus that day?

18. What can we pray for when someone makes a mistake?

19. What would happen if everyone acted like Jesus in this story?

20. How can we remember to be helpers instead of hurters?

Great discussions! Let's come back together in our lines. Who wants to share what they talked about with their partner?

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Choose a song about kindness and helping. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "Help Somebody Today," or "If You're Happy and You Know It" (with helping actions). Include movements like reaching out to help others, hugging motions during kindness words, and pointing to Jesus during verses about God's love.

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down for prayer time. Cross your legs, fold your hands, and bow your heads.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

Formation: Sitting cross-legged in rows, heads bowed, hands folded

Dear Jesus, thank you for being kind to people when they make mistakes.

[Pause]

Help us remember that you love us even when we do wrong things. Help us say sorry and do better next time.

[Pause]

And help us be kind to other people when they make mistakes too, just like you were kind to the woman in our story. Thank you for always helping us instead of hurting us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Alternative, Popcorn Prayer: If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about being kind to people. Examples: "Help me be nice when my brother makes mistakes" or "Thank you for forgiving me when I'm bad."

Remember, Jesus loves you and wants to help you make good choices. When you make mistakes, you can always come to him for forgiveness and help. Have a wonderful week being kind to others!
