

Forgiveness and Letting Go

Volume 2

Deep Research Sunday School Lessons

A 24-Volume Comprehensive Series

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Deep Research Sunday School Lessons

Forgiveness and Letting Go

Volume 2

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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

Hope in Hard Times

Finding God's Redemptive Purpose, How do we distinguish discipline that heals from punishment that destroys?

Lamentations 3:25-33

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

Lamentations 3:25-33 (NIV)

25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; 26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. 27 It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.

28 Let him sit alone in silence, for the Lord has laid it on him. 29 Let him bury his face in the dust, there may yet be hope. 30 Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace.

31 For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. 32 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. 33 For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

Context

Lamentations is a collection of raw laments written during or just after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The city has fallen, the temple is destroyed, and the people are in exile. The prophet has experienced profound loss, everything that seemed permanent has crumbled. This is poetry born from genuine catastrophe, not theoretical suffering.

These words about hope emerge from the darkest chapter in Lamentations, where the author has described feeling like God's enemy. He has experienced divine discipline as warfare, arrows, siege, and imprisonment. Yet at the depths of despair, he begins to remember the character of God and speaks these famous words about God's compassions being new every morning.

The Big Idea

God's discipline serves redemptive purpose, not divine satisfaction in suffering, even when we can't see the purpose, we can trust that affliction is reluctant, temporary, and aimed at restoration.

This doesn't minimize real pain or suggest that all suffering comes directly from God. The passage emerges from genuine catastrophe, acknowledging that God sometimes allows or brings grief while insisting this grief is reluctant and purposeful. The prophet doesn't explain the mystery of suffering but grounds hope in God's unwillingness to afflict and His commitment to eventual compassion.

Theological Core

- **Divine Reluctance in Discipline.** God doesn't "willingly" bring affliction, there's no divine enjoyment in human suffering, only reluctant necessity for redemptive purposes.
 - **Temporary Nature of Divine Discipline.** "No one is cast off by the Lord forever", divine discipline always has an endpoint, unlike human vengeance which can be permanent.
 - **Compassion Following Grief.** "Though he brings grief, he will show compassion", divine discipline is always followed by divine restoration and mercy.
 - **Unfailing Love as Foundation.** God's unfailing love is the bedrock that guarantees both the reluctance of discipline and the certainty of restoration.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Divine character involves redemptive purpose in discipline, not permanent rejection or enjoyment of affliction
 - How to distinguish discipline that reflects God's pattern (temporary, redemptive) from human punishment that destroys
 - The difference between consequences that heal relationships and consequences that end them
 - How to receive and give correction with redemptive purpose rather than defensive anger
-

Grades 4, 6

- God never corrects us because He enjoys it, He does it to help us grow and be healthy
 - The difference between consequences given in love versus punishment given in anger
 - When we mess up, God doesn't give up on us, He works to restore us
 - We can trust that even when life is hard, God's love for us never changes
-

Grades 1, 3

- God's love for us never stops, even when we make mistakes
 - Sometimes we have consequences, but God still loves us
 - God wants to help us grow and learn, not hurt us
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Minimizing Real Pain.** Don't rush to explain away suffering or suggest it's always deserved. The passage emerges from genuine catastrophe and validates the reality of grief while offering hope.
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- **Blaming All Suffering on God.** The passage doesn't say God causes all affliction, it addresses times when God does discipline, distinguishing His reluctant, redemptive approach from human punishment.
- **Promising Easy Answers.** Don't suggest we can always see the redemptive purpose in our suffering. The passage grounds hope in God's character, not our understanding of His methods.
- **Ignoring the Context of Catastrophe.** These words come from genuine loss, not prosperity theology. Honor the reality that faith sometimes means trusting God's character when His purposes are hidden.

Handling Hard Questions

"If God loves us, why does He let bad things happen to us?"

That's one of the hardest questions people ask, and this passage doesn't give us all the answers. What it does tell us is that when God does discipline or allow hard things, it's never because He enjoys our pain. The Bible shows us a God who is reluctant to cause grief and always works toward healing. Sometimes we can see the good purpose; sometimes we have to trust His character even when we can't understand His ways. The key is knowing that His love is unfailing, even in hard times.

"How do we know if something hard is God's discipline or just life being unfair?"

Sometimes we can't know for certain, and that's okay. What matters more is how we respond. Whether something comes directly from God as discipline or is just part of living in a broken world, we can trust that God is working to bring good from it. The passage teaches us to look for God's redemptive purpose in all our struggles, rather than trying to figure out exactly what caused them. Focus on how God wants to use this situation to help you grow, rather than spending all your energy figuring out where it came from.

"What if the person disciplining me is doing it wrong, with anger or meanness?"

That's a really important distinction. Not all discipline reflects God's pattern. God's discipline is reluctant, purposeful, and followed by restoration. Human discipline can sometimes be angry, permanent, or meant to hurt rather than help. If someone in authority over you is disciplining in ways

that feel abusive or destructive, that's not reflecting God's heart. Look for trusted adults who can help you navigate that situation. God wants you to experience correction that helps you grow, not punishment that tears you down.

The One Thing to Remember

God's discipline, when it comes, is always reluctant, always temporary, and always aimed at restoration, even when we can't see it.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the difference between discipline that heals and punishment that destroys, helping them recognize God's reluctant, redemptive approach as a model for how they receive and give correction.

The Tension to Frame

How do we distinguish discipline that reflects divine pattern (temporary, redemptive) from punishment that reflects human vengeance (permanent, destructive)?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate that some of them may have experienced destructive punishment, not all authority figures reflect God's heart
 - Honor the mystery of suffering rather than providing easy answers about why bad things happen
 - Let them wrestle with the tension between trusting God's character and questioning His methods
-

1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Think about the last time someone corrected you, a parent, teacher, coach, or friend. Maybe they called you out for something you said, gave you consequences for breaking a rule, or confronted you about a pattern they saw in your life. How did you know whether they were correcting you because they cared about you, or because they were angry and wanted to hurt you?

Most of you can probably tell the difference. When someone corrects you with care, it feels different than when someone punishes you out of anger or revenge. The words might even be the same, but the heart behind them is completely different. One wants to help you grow; the other wants to make you pay.

Here's what makes it complicated: sometimes the people who are supposed to love us most, parents, teachers, even religious leaders, get it wrong. They discipline us in ways that feel more like punishment, more like they're trying to hurt us than help us. And that can mess with our heads about what healthy correction even looks like.

Today we're looking at one of the most profound statements about God's character in the entire Bible. It comes from someone who has experienced devastating loss, the destruction of his entire city, his whole way of life. Yet in the middle of that catastrophe, he makes this incredible claim about how God disciplines people he loves.

As we read, I want you to notice two things: first, what this passage says about God's attitude toward causing pain, and second, what pattern it establishes for what redemptive discipline looks like. Because if this is true about God, it should probably shape how we think about giving and receiving correction in our own relationships.

Let's open to Lamentations 3, starting at verse 25. Read silently first, and then we'll talk.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. This is heavy material, some students may connect it to difficult experiences with authority figures. Watch for emotional responses and be prepared to address them sensitively during discussion.

As You Read, Think About:

- What words does the author use to describe God's attitude toward causing pain?
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- What does this passage promise about the duration and purpose of divine discipline?
- What surprises you about this perspective, especially given the context of national disaster?
- How does this compare to your experience with authority figures who have corrected or disciplined you?

Lamentations 3:25-33 (NIV)

25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; 26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. 27 It is good for a man to bear the yoke while he is young.

28 Let him sit alone in silence, for the Lord has laid it on him. 29 Let him bury his face in the dust, there may yet be hope. 30 Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace.

31 For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. 32 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. 33 For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers and let students pass if they prefer. Choose confident readers for the emotional weight of verses 28-30. Read with appropriate gravity, this is poetry of pain and hope.

Reader 1: Verses 25-27 (The foundation of trust) **Reader 2:** Verses 28-30 (The experience of discipline) **Reader 3:** Verses 31-33 (The promise of restoration)

Listen for the emotional journey in these words, this isn't abstract theology, it's someone working through real pain to find reasons to trust God again.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4. Give exactly 3 minutes. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with prompts like "What made you uncomfortable?" or "What sounded too good to be true?"

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 or confused about, things that bothered you, or things that seemed too simple. Don't ask questions you think you should ask; ask questions you actually want answered. You've got three minutes starting now.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students lead with their questions, you facilitate deeper thinking. Some may have experienced harmful discipline from authority figures, hold space for that reality while exploring God's different pattern.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board, look for themes, prioritize questions about the tension between God's love and discipline.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What specific words tell us about God's attitude toward causing pain?"
 - "What's the difference between discipline that comes from love versus discipline that comes from anger?"
 - "Why do you think the author emphasizes that God doesn't 'willingly' afflict people?"
 - "How is temporary discipline different from permanent punishment?"
 - "When have you experienced correction that actually helped you grow versus correction that just made you feel worse?"
 - "What does 'unfailing love' look like when someone is being disciplined?"
 - "How would you recognize the difference between godly discipline and human revenge?"
 - "Why does this perspective matter for how we treat people who have wronged us?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you see what's happening here? The passage is giving us God's pattern for discipline: it's reluctant (He doesn't willingly do it), it's temporary (no one is cast off forever), it's followed by compassion, and it's grounded in unfailing love. This becomes our model for how to give correction and how to evaluate the correction we receive from others.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives for a minute. You're at ages where you're dealing with lots of correction, from parents, teachers, coaches, even friends. And you're also starting to be in positions where you need to correct others, younger siblings, teammates, friends making poor choices.

Real Issues This Connects To

- Parents who discipline out of anger versus parents who discipline with clear purpose and restoration
 - Teachers who give consequences to help you learn versus teachers who seem to enjoy making you suffer
 - Coaches who push you to grow versus coaches who break you down without building you up
 - Friends who confront you about destructive patterns versus friends who attack you to make themselves feel better
 - How you respond when someone younger than you needs correction or consequences
 - Social media call-outs designed to help people grow versus public shaming designed to destroy
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to fix everything. Some may need to process experiences with unhealthy authority. Guide them toward wisdom about recognizing healthy versus unhealthy patterns.

Discussion Prompts

- "When has someone corrected you in a way that actually helped you grow and change?"
 - "What would help you receive correction better, even when it's hard to hear?"
 - "How do you know whether someone correcting you has redemptive purpose or just wants to hurt you?"
-

- "What's the difference between consequences that restore relationships and consequences that end them?"
-

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: God's heart toward you is never punitive, He never disciplines you because He enjoys it or wants to make you suffer. When correction comes from God, it's always reluctant, always temporary, and always aimed at bringing you back to health and wholeness. That's the standard for evaluating all the correction you receive and all the correction you give to others.

This week, pay attention to the difference between correction that comes from love and correction that comes from anger or pride. Notice how it feels different to receive each kind, and notice which kind you tend to give when you're frustrated with someone else. Ask God to help you both recognize and offer the kind of discipline that reflects His heart.

I'm proud of the way you wrestled with these hard questions today. Keep asking the difficult questions, keep thinking deeply about what healthy relationships look like, and keep trusting that God's heart toward you is always redemptive, even when His methods are mysterious.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that God never corrects us because He enjoys it, He always corrects us because He loves us and wants us to grow, and there's a big difference.

If Kids Ask "Why does God let bad things happen to good people?"

Say: "That's one of the hardest questions anyone asks. This passage shows us that God's heart toward us is always love, even when hard things happen. Sometimes we can't understand why, but we can trust His heart."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever gotten in trouble for something you did, maybe breaking a rule at home, or talking when you weren't supposed to in class, or being mean to a brother or sister. Keep your hands up... okay, pretty much everyone! That's normal, we all make mistakes sometimes.

Now here's a harder question: Have you ever noticed that when different grown-ups give you consequences, it feels different? Like sometimes when your mom or dad gives you a consequence, you can tell they still love you and they're trying to help you learn. But other times, maybe with a different adult, it feels like they're just mad and want to make you feel bad.

Both times you might get the same consequence, losing privileges, having to apologize, cleaning up a mess you made, but somehow you can tell the difference. One feels like "I love you and I want you to grow," and the other feels like "I'm angry and I want you to suffer." Part of you knows that the person correcting you either cares about you or they don't.

It's like in the movie *Inside Out*, when Riley's parents discipline her for running away. You can tell they're scared and worried about her, not just angry. They want her safe and happy, not miserable. That's different from when someone disciplines you just because they're having a bad day and want to take it out on you.

The tricky part is figuring out which kind of correction you're getting, and learning how to give the caring kind when someone you love needs help changing their behavior. Sometimes even grown-ups get confused about this.

Today we're going to hear about someone who went through really hard times, his whole city was destroyed and he lost almost everything. But in the middle of all that pain, he figured out something amazing about God's heart toward people. Let's find out what he learned.

What to Expect: Kids may share examples of unfair punishment they've experienced. Acknowledge briefly:

"That sounds really hard. Let's see what we learn about God's different way."

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Long, long ago, there was a man living in the great city of Jerusalem. This was God's special city, where God's temple was, where people came to worship and learn about God.

But then something terrible happened. Enemy armies came and destroyed the city. They knocked down the walls, burned the beautiful temple, and took most of the people away from their homes. Everything this man loved was gone.

Can you imagine losing your house, your school, your friends, your church, everything familiar all at once? This man felt like his whole world had fallen apart.

At first, he was angry. He felt like God had abandoned him. He even felt like God was his enemy. Have you ever been so upset that you wondered if God was mad at you? This man felt that way, but much, much worse.

He sat in the ruins of his city, surrounded by broken stones and ashes. He was hungry. He was lonely. He was scared about the future. And he started to think about God and why terrible things happen to people.

But then something amazing happened. Even though he was still sad and scared, he began to remember things about God that he had forgotten. Important things. True things.

He remembered that God is not like mean people who hurt others because they enjoy it. God is not like bullies who pick on people to make themselves feel powerful.

And then he said some of the most beautiful words ever written about God's heart:

Lamentations 3:31-33 (NIV)

"For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone."

Do you hear what he's saying? God never gives up on people forever. When God has to let us experience hard things, He doesn't enjoy it. The Bible says He doesn't "willingly" bring pain, that means He doesn't want to, it makes Him sad too.

It's like when your parents have to give you medicine that tastes terrible because you're sick. They don't want to make you drink gross medicine, they wish they didn't have to. But they love you so much that they'll do the hard thing to help you get better.

Or it's like when a coach makes the team run extra laps because they're not working together well. The coach doesn't enjoy watching kids get tired and sweaty. But she loves the team and wants them to become strong and learn to cooperate.

This man realized that even when God has to discipline people He loves, God's heart is always, always love. Never meanness. Never revenge. Never "I want to hurt you because you hurt me."

God's discipline is different because God never gives up on us. He doesn't throw us away when we mess up. He doesn't stop loving us when we make bad choices. He keeps working to help us grow and heal and become who He created us to be.

The man also learned that God's unfailing love, love that never fails, never stops, never runs out, is what makes all the difference. Because when someone loves you with unfailing love, everything they do is trying to help you, not hurt you.

So even in the middle of losing everything, this man found hope. Not because his problems went away, but because he remembered who God really is. God is the parent who gives medicine because He wants you healthy. God is the coach who pushes you because she believes in what you can become.

Sometimes in our lives, we go through hard things. Sometimes we face consequences for choices we've made. Sometimes difficult things happen that we don't understand at all. But if we know God's heart, that He never willingly hurts us, that His love never fails, then we can trust Him even when we can't understand everything.

This teaches us that real love sometimes has to say "no" or give consequences. But the heart behind it is always "I want what's best for you," never "I want to make you suffer."

And it teaches us something about how we should treat other people too. When our little brother or sister needs correction, or when a friend is making bad choices, we can ask ourselves: "Am I trying to help them grow, or am I just mad and want them to feel bad?" God's way is always trying to help people grow.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Feelings

Imagine you broke something important that belonged to your mom, and you know you have to tell her. You walk into the kitchen where she's making dinner, and your stomach feels nervous. How do you think you would feel different if you knew for sure that your mom loves you no matter what, versus if you thought she might stop loving you when she finds out?

Listen For: "Still scared but not hopeless," "More brave to tell the truth", affirm: "Yes! When you know someone's love is unfailing, it changes how brave you can be."

Question 2: The Hard Choice

Think about a time when someone gave you a consequence that actually helped you learn and grow, versus a time when someone punished you in a way that just made you feel horrible. What was the difference? How could you tell what was in their heart?

If They Say: "One felt fair, the other didn't", respond: "What made it feel fair? Was it because you could tell they still cared about you?"

Question 3: The God Heart

The passage says God doesn't "willingly" bring pain, He doesn't want to, it makes Him sad too. Why do you think that matters? How is that different from someone who enjoys giving punishments or watching people suffer?

Connect: "This is exactly what made the man in our story able to hope again, he realized God's heart was sad, not mean."

Question 4: The Copycat

If we want to be like God when we have to correct someone, maybe a younger sibling or friend, what would that look like? What would be the goal, and what would be the heart attitude?

If They Say: "Help them learn, not make them cry", respond: "Yes! The goal is always to help them grow, never to hurt them."

You guys are really understanding this! The big idea is that God's love never fails, and that changes everything about how He treats us and how we should treat each other. Let's do an activity that helps us feel what this looks like.

4. Activity: The Building Bridges Game (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity reinforces the pattern of redemptive discipline by having kids physically experience being "corrected" in a way that leads to connection rather than separation. Success looks like kids discovering that loving correction builds bridges while angry punishment burns them.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play Building Bridges. Half of you will be "Builders" and half will be "Wanderers." Builders, you stand along this wall and your job is to create human bridges, hold hands and make arches for people to walk under. Wanderers, you start on the other side of the room and your goal is to get to the Builders.

But here's the catch: Wanderers, you have to walk in specific ways that I'll whisper to some of you, some of you will walk backwards, some will hop, some will spin. Your different walking styles represent making mistakes or poor choices. When a Builder sees a Wanderer having trouble, they can choose how to "correct" them.

Builders can either shout criticism from far away, or they can gently walk over and help the Wanderer figure out how to reach the bridge. We'll see which approach actually helps Wanderers successfully cross under the bridge.

We're doing this because it's exactly like the lesson, when someone needs correction, we can either yell at them from a distance or lovingly help them find a better way.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Start with Wanderers trying to reach the bridges. Let some Builders shout unhelpful criticism like "You're doing it wrong!" and watch how Wanderers respond, they usually get more confused or give up.

After 1-2 minutes of struggle, coach some Builders to try a different approach: "I wonder if there's a way to help instead of just pointing out the problem..." Watch for the breakthrough moment.

Guide Builders toward leaving their posts to gently help Wanderers: "What if you walked over and helped them figure out how to reach your bridge?" Celebrate when they start helping instead of just critiquing.

Notice out loud when a Builder helps a Wanderer succeed: "Look! When [Name] came over to help instead of just shouting, [Wanderer] was able to make it to the bridge!" This is the physical representation of redemptive correction.

Once several Wanderers have successfully crossed with help, have everyone notice the difference: "Look how many Wanderers made it across when Builders came to help versus when Builders just shouted corrections from far away."

Watch For: The moment when a Builder chooses to leave their comfortable position to help a struggling Wanderer, this is the physical representation of God's redemptive approach to our mistakes.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when someone shouted corrections from far away versus when someone came close to help you? The Builders who left their spots to help represent God's heart, He doesn't stay far away and just criticize our mistakes. He comes close, helps us figure out how to do better, and makes sure we reach our goal. That's exactly what unfailing love looks like!

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: God never corrects us because He enjoys it. When God has to discipline us or let us face consequences, His heart is always love, never meanness. He wants us to grow and be healthy, not to suffer and feel terrible.

This doesn't mean we won't ever have consequences when we make poor choices. But it does mean that God never gives up on us, His love never fails, and He's always working to help us become who He created us to be.

And it means when we need to correct someone else, like a little brother who's being mean, or a friend making bad choices, we can ask ourselves: "Am I trying to help them grow like God does, or am I just mad and want them to feel bad?"

This Week's Challenge

This week, when someone corrects you, try to notice whether their heart feels like love or anger. And when you need to correct someone else, ask yourself: "How can I help them grow instead of just making them feel bad?" Practice God's way of unfailing love.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you that Your love for us never fails, even when we make mistakes. Help us remember that You never want to hurt us, only help us grow. And help us treat others the same way, with love that wants to help, not anger that wants to hurt. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids know that God's love for them never stops, even when they need consequences or when life is hard.

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 God's love to mommy or daddy's love, even when you're naughty, they still love you. Ask: "Does mommy stop loving you when you disobey?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's unfailing love. Suggestions: "God's Love Is So Wonderful," "Jesus Loves Me," or "God's Love Never Fails." Use movements: arms wide during "wonderful," hug yourself during "love," point up during "God," and march in place during strong beats.

Great singing! I love hearing you sing about God's love. Now come sit in our story circle, we're going to hear about someone who learned that God's love never, ever stops. Find a spot where you can see me and sit crisscross applesauce!

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 emotions, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound sad when talking about the man's loss, sound hopeful when talking about God's love.

Today we're going to meet a man who learned something very important about God's love!

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

This man lived in a beautiful city with his family and friends. He had a house and food and people he loved. But then something very sad happened.

[Look sad, speak softly]

Bad people came and broke down his city. They broke his house and took away his food and made him leave everything he loved.

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, still looking sad]

The man felt very, very sad. He sat down and cried. He felt like maybe God didn't love him anymore because so many bad things happened.

[Move to center, speak with gentle authority]

But then God helped the man remember something true. God reminded him about His love!

[Move to side, sound amazed and happy]

And the man remembered: "Oh! God never stops loving people! Even when bad things happen, God still loves us!"

Lamentations 3:31-32 (NIV)

"For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love."

[Pause and look around at each child]

Do you know what "unfailing love" means? It means love that never stops! Never! Even when we're sad, even when we're naughty, even when we're scared, God's love never stops!

[Move to center, speak with warmth and excitement]

The man learned that God never wants to hurt us. Sometimes hard things happen, but God doesn't like it when we're sad. He wants to help us!

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

It's like when your mommy gives you medicine when you're sick. She doesn't want the medicine to taste yucky, but she loves you so much she wants you to get better!

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

Or like when daddy has to give you a consequence when you disobey. He doesn't like giving consequences, but he loves you and wants you to learn!

[Speak with excitement]

So the man learned that no matter what happens, God loves him! God loves him when he's happy, God loves him when he's sad, God loves him always and always!

[Pause dramatically]

And you know what? God loves you the same way! God's love never stops! Never ever!

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes you might feel sad. Sometimes you might get in trouble. Sometimes you might have bad days. But God loves you always and always!

[Move closer to the children]

When you feel scared, God loves you. When you feel happy, God loves you. When you make mistakes, God loves you. His love never, ever stops!

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

That's what "unfailing love" means, love that never fails, never stops, never goes away. And that's God's love for you!

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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

Find a friend and stand together! I'm going to give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, just tell your friend 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 man felt when he remembered God loves him?

2. When do you feel the most loved by your family?

3. What does it mean that God's love never stops?

4. How do you know when someone really loves you?

5. When is it hard to remember that God loves you?

6. How can you tell the difference between someone who's mad and someone who loves you?

7. What would you tell a friend who thought God stopped loving them?

8. When you get in trouble, how do you know your parents still love you?

9. What makes God's love special?

10. How does it feel to know God's love never ends?

11. What's the difference between being naughty and not being loved?

12. How can we show God's never-stopping love to other people?

13. What would change if you really believed God's love never stops?

14. When you're sad, how does knowing God loves you help?

15. What does unfailing mean?

16. How is God's love like your mommy's love?

17. What's your favorite thing about God's love?

18. How can you remember God loves you when you're scared?

19. What would happen if God's love could stop?

20. How can you love others the way God loves you?

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 a song about God's faithfulness or love. Suggestions: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," "How Deep the Father's Love," or "Amazing Love." Include movements: arms reaching up during "great," hands on heart during "love," and gentle swaying during quiet parts.

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down for our prayer time. Sit crisscross applesauce in nice rows, close your eyes, and fold your hands.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

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

Dear God, thank you that Your love for us never stops.

[Pause]

Help us remember that You love us when we're happy and when we're sad, when we're good and when we make mistakes.

[Pause]

Thank you that Your love is unfailing, that means it never goes away. Help us show that same love to our families and friends.

[Pause]

We love You, God, because You first loved 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 God's love. Examples: "Thank you that You love me always" or "Help me remember You love me when I'm scared."

Remember this week that God's love for you never, ever stops! No matter what happens, no matter how you feel, God loves you always and always. Have a wonderful week!

Forgiveness from the Cross

When Everything Falls Apart, How Can We Forgive When We're Being Hurt?

Luke 23:26-49

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

Luke 23:26-49 (NIV)

26 As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. 27 A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. 28 Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' 30 Then 'they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"' 31 For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Chosen One, the Messiah." 36 The soldiers also came up and

mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

38 There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

47 The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." 48 When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. 49 But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Context

This passage captures the crucifixion of Jesus, the culmination of his arrest, trial, and execution. Jesus has been beaten, mocked, and sentenced to die by crucifixion, the most humiliating and painful form of

Roman execution. The religious leaders have achieved their goal of eliminating what they saw as a threat to their authority, and the Roman officials have executed what they considered a political troublemaker.

The immediate context shows Jesus at his most vulnerable moment, stripped, nailed to a cross, surrounded by mockers and enemies. This is the moment when any reasonable person would be consumed with their own pain, anger, and desire for revenge. Yet it is precisely in this moment of ultimate injury and helplessness that Jesus speaks words that completely reverse every expected pattern of human response to mortal harm.

The Big Idea

At the moment of maximum injury and injustice, Jesus chooses forgiveness over revenge, understanding over condemnation, seeking the Father's mercy for those who are killing him.

This prayer for forgiveness creates profound tension because it comes while the harm is actively happening, not after a period of healing or reflection. Jesus grounds his request not in the executioners' remorse or change of heart, but in their ignorance. This raises difficult questions about accountability, justice, and whether understanding someone's limitations should lead to forgiving their actions.

Theological Core

- **Forgiveness transcends circumstances.** Even the most extreme harm does not disqualify the possibility of mercy; instead, it becomes the ultimate test and demonstration of forgiveness's power.
 - **Understanding enables grace.** Seeing perpetrators as ignorant rather than malicious opens the door to compassion that pure focus on their guilt would shut.
 - **Prayer changes perspective.** In the moment of being wronged, turning to God in prayer shifts focus from personal injury to divine mercy and creates space for unexpected responses.
 - **Death reveals character.** How someone faces their final moments strips away pretense and reveals their deepest values, Jesus chooses mercy even in death.
-

Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Forgiveness remains possible even while we're actively being harmed, though it requires seeing perpetrators as limited rather than purely malicious
 - There's tension between extending mercy and maintaining accountability, understanding someone's ignorance doesn't eliminate their responsibility
 - Prayer in moments of injury can shift our perspective from focusing on revenge to seeking God's mercy for those who harm us
 - Real forgiveness requires discerning when understanding enables grace and when it risks minimizing genuine harm
-

Grades 4, 6

- When someone hurts us, we can choose to respond with kindness instead of trying to hurt them back
 - Sometimes people do mean things because they don't understand how much it hurts or why it's wrong
 - We can pray for people who are mean to us, even when we're still feeling hurt or angry
 - It's okay to feel hurt when someone is mean to us, but we don't have to be mean back to them
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Grades 1, 3

- Jesus prayed for the people who hurt him instead of being mean back to them
 - God wants us to be kind even when other people aren't kind to us
 - We can pray for people who are mean to us and ask God to help them be better
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Cheap grace.** Don't suggest that forgiveness means ignoring harm or that understanding perpetrators eliminates accountability. True forgiveness acknowledges the reality of injury while choosing mercy.

- **Obligatory forgiveness.** Avoid presenting forgiveness as a requirement that victims must immediately perform. Jesus's prayer models possibility, not obligation, and different people need different timelines for processing harm.

- **Minimizing ignorance.** Don't dismiss the claim that the executioners "didn't know what they were doing" as obviously false. Explore how people can simultaneously be responsible and limited in their understanding.

- **Instant application.** Resist rushing to contemporary parallels without first wrestling with the theological significance. This prayer emerges from Jesus's unique identity and mission, not just his moral example.

Handling Hard Questions

"If the soldiers knew they were killing someone, how could they not know what they were doing?"

This gets at the heart of what "knowing" means. The soldiers knew the physical act of execution, but Jesus suggests they didn't understand the full significance, they were killing the Son of God. Sometimes people can be responsible for harmful actions while being ignorant of the deeper meaning or consequence. This tension between accountability and ignorance is real and doesn't have easy answers.

"Does forgiving someone mean they shouldn't face consequences for what they did?"

Forgiveness and justice serve different purposes and can coexist. Jesus's prayer for mercy doesn't eliminate the reality that crucifying an innocent person was wrong and harmful. In our lives, we can forgive someone while still maintaining boundaries, seeking accountability, or supporting just consequences. Forgiveness is about releasing the burden of revenge and bitterness, not about pretending harm didn't happen.

"What if someone keeps hurting us, do we have to keep forgiving them?"

This passage shows forgiveness is possible even in ongoing harm, but it doesn't mandate endless tolerance of abuse. Jesus's prayer comes from a position of understanding the executioners' limitations. In our situations, forgiveness might include removing ourselves from harmful relationships, seeking protection, or setting boundaries. The goal is responding from mercy rather than revenge while still protecting ourselves and others from continued harm.

The One Thing to Remember

Even in the moment of being killed, Jesus chose to see his executioners as ignorant rather than malicious and asked God for mercy on their behalf, forgiveness is possible in any circumstance, though it may require understanding perpetrators differently than our first instinct suggests.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the profound tension in Jesus's prayer, how understanding someone's limitations can enable forgiveness even in the moment of being harmed, while honoring the complexity of accountability and justice. Help them discover rather than dictate this insight.

The Tension to Frame

When someone is actively harming us, how do we balance understanding their ignorance or limitation with maintaining accountability for their actions? Does focusing on their limitations risk minimizing the real harm they're causing?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their discomfort with easy answers about forgiveness, this is genuinely complex territory
 - Honor the tension between mercy and justice rather than rushing to resolve it quickly
 - Let students wrestle with the implications rather than providing neat theological conclusions
-

1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine someone at school has been spreading lies about you for weeks. Not just casual gossip, but deliberate, hurtful lies that damage your reputation and friendships. You're walking down the hallway and you see them laughing with a group of your former friends, probably sharing another fabricated story about you.

Your first instinct makes perfect sense: you want to confront them, expose their lies, maybe even get back at them in some way. You're hurt, you're angry, and you want justice. Every part of you wants them to face consequences for what they've done to your life and relationships.

But then you remember something, this person's family is going through a terrible divorce, their parents are fighting constantly, and they've been struggling with depression. You realize they're probably spreading lies about you because their own life feels completely out of control, and hurting others gives them some sense of power.

Now you're stuck in a weird tension: understanding their situation doesn't make the lies okay, and it doesn't undo the damage to your reputation. But it does change how you see them, less like a villain and more like someone who's drowning and grabbing onto whatever they can, even if it means pulling others down.

Today we're looking at someone who faced the ultimate version of this dilemma, being killed by people who were just doing their jobs, and having to decide how to see them in his final moments. Open your Bibles to Luke 23, and let's see what he chose.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room, help with difficult words if needed, and watch for early finishers. Let them feel the weight and drama of this passage, it's the climax of Jesus's earthly life and ministry.

As You Read, Think About:

- What specific actions are being taken against Jesus, and who's involved?
 - What would you expect someone to say or feel in this situation?
-

- What surprises you about Jesus's words and actions?
- What would be going through your mind if you were watching this happen?

Luke 23:26-49 (NIV)

26 As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. **27** A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. **28** Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. **29** For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' **30** Then they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'" **31** For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. **33** When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals, one on his right, the other on his left. **34** Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Chosen One, the Messiah." **36** The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar **37** and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."

38 There was a written notice above him, which read: **THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.**

39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

47 The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." 48 When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. 49 But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers and let students pass if they prefer. Choose confident readers for the dramatic dialogue sections, as this passage has multiple voices and intense emotion.

Reader 1: Verses 26-31 (The journey to crucifixion) **Reader 2:** Verses 32-38 (The crucifixion and mocking) **Reader 3:** Verses 39-49 (The criminals' responses and Jesus's death)

Listen for the contrast between what's being done to Jesus and how he responds. This isn't just information, it's drama, tragedy, and ultimately something completely unexpected.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4 students, give exactly 3 minutes to develop 1-2 genuine questions about the passage. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with prompts like "What surprised you most?" or "What doesn't make sense?"

Get into groups of 3-4 people. Your job is to come up with 1-2 questions about what you just read, not questions you think you should ask, but questions you're genuinely curious about. Maybe something that surprised you, confused you, or made you want to know more. Good questions often start with "Why would..." or "How could..." or "What if..." You have three minutes.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Let students drive the discussion with their questions. Your job is to facilitate discovery and probe deeper, not to lecture or provide all the answers.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board, look for common themes, and start with questions that most students will connect with emotionally or intellectually.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What evidence do you see that the soldiers and bystanders knew they were hurting an innocent person?"
 - "Why might Jesus have focused on their ignorance rather than their cruelty or responsibility?"
 - "Is there a difference between forgiving someone and excusing their behavior? What's the difference?"
 - "How can someone be both responsible for harm and limited in their understanding at the same time?"
 - "When you're being hurt by someone, what makes it easier or harder to see them as ignorant rather than malicious?"
 - "What's the difference between someone not knowing the facts and not understanding the significance of their actions?"
 - "If someone forgives you but you still face consequences, has the forgiveness failed?"
 - "Why does this prayer for forgiveness matter, and how is it different from other teachings about forgiveness?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Jesus is in the moment of maximum injury, people are literally killing him, and instead of focusing on their guilt or seeking revenge, he's asking God to have mercy on them. He's choosing to see them as limited rather than malicious. This doesn't eliminate their responsibility, but it opens up the possibility of mercy that seeing them as purely evil would shut down.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you see this same tension playing out, situations where you have to decide whether to see someone who's hurting you as malicious or as limited in some way? Think about school drama, family conflicts, online interactions, or even bigger social issues you care about.

Real Issues This Connects To

- When classmates exclude you from social events or spread rumors about you
 - When parents or siblings say hurtful things during family conflicts
 - When friends betray your trust or break promises that matter to you
 - When you see others being bullied online or in person
 - When you encounter prejudice or discrimination based on who you are
 - When authority figures make decisions that feel unfair or harmful to you
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to provide solutions. Acknowledge that some situations genuinely call for different responses, and help them think through discernment rather than offering blanket advice.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone choose understanding over revenge, and what was the result?"
 - "What would help you focus on someone's limitations rather than their malice when they're hurting you?"
-

- "How do you discern when understanding someone enables mercy and when it risks minimizing genuine harm?"
- "What's the difference between choosing forgiveness and being forced to 'forgive and forget'?"

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you today: Jesus shows us that even in the moment of being killed, forgiveness is possible, but it requires seeing perpetrators differently than our first instinct suggests. Instead of focusing purely on their guilt, he chose to see their limitations and ignorance. This doesn't make their actions okay or eliminate accountability, but it opens the door to mercy.

This week, pay attention to moments when someone hurts or disappoints you. Notice your first instinct to see them as malicious, then experiment with asking: what might they not understand about the impact of their actions? How might their own pain or limitation be driving their behavior? This doesn't mean accepting harmful treatment, but it might change how you choose to respond.

I'm impressed by the thoughtful questions you asked today and your willingness to wrestle with complexity rather than settle for easy answers. Keep thinking about these hard questions, they're the kind that lead to wisdom, not just knowledge. This is exactly the kind of thinking that will serve you well as you navigate increasingly complex relationships and situations.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids discover that we can choose to respond with kindness instead of getting back at people who hurt us, especially when we remember that sometimes people do mean things because they don't understand how much it hurts.

If Kids Ask "Why didn't Jesus just escape or call angels to help him?"

Say: "Jesus had the power to escape, but he chose to stay because he was doing something more important than saving himself, he was saving everyone else. Sometimes choosing to help others means accepting hard things for ourselves."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever had someone push you, call you names, or say something really mean to you on purpose. Keep your hands up if it made you want to push them back or say something mean right back to them.

Now here's a harder question: Raise your hand if you've ever been really mad at someone, but then found out they were having a terrible day or going through something difficult at home. Suddenly you felt a little different about what they did, even though it still hurt your feelings.

I totally understand both of those feelings. When someone hurts us, our first thought is usually to hurt them back, that feels fair, right? But sometimes when we learn more about why someone was mean, part of us starts to feel sorry for them instead of just angry at them.

This reminds me of that moment in "Inside Out" when Riley is mean to her parents because she's scared and sad about moving, but her parents don't understand what's really going on inside her head. Or like in "Encanto" when Abuela is hard on everyone because she's afraid of losing her family again, but no one understands her fear.

The tricky part is figuring out what to do when someone hurts you but you realize they might not really understand how much it hurts or why it's wrong. Do you still get back at them? Do you just ignore it? Is there something else you can do?

Today we're going to hear about the most amazing example of this ever. Jesus was being hurt by people, actually killed by them, and he had to decide how to respond in his final moments. Let's find out what he chose to do.

What to Expect: Kids will eagerly raise hands for the first questions. Acknowledge their experiences briefly ("I can tell lots of you know what that feels like") and keep momentum moving toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

This story takes place on the darkest day in history. Jesus had been arrested the night before by soldiers who came with swords and clubs to capture him, even though he had never hurt anyone.

The religious leaders had convinced the Roman governor, Pilate, that Jesus was dangerous and needed to be executed. Pilate could tell Jesus was innocent, but the crowd was getting angry and demanding his death.

So Pilate gave the order. The Roman soldiers were told to take Jesus to a hill outside the city and crucify him, nail him to a wooden cross until he died. For the soldiers, this was just another day at work. They had crucified hundreds of people before.

Imagine what this felt like for Jesus. He could hear the soldiers joking with each other as they forced him to carry the heavy wooden crossbar on his shoulders. His back was bleeding from being whipped, his face was swollen from being punched, and thorns had been shoved down on his head like a cruel crown.

When Jesus was too weak to carry the cross any further, the soldiers grabbed a man from the crowd, Simon from Cyrene, and made him carry it the rest of the way. Jesus could barely walk, but he still tried to comfort the women who were crying for him.

Finally, they reached the place called "The Skull." The soldiers threw Jesus down on the wooden cross and began hammering nails through his hands and feet. Each blow of the hammer sent lightning bolts of pain through his body.

Then they lifted the cross upright and dropped it into a hole in the ground. Jesus hung there, naked and bleeding, struggling to breathe. Every breath was agony. Every movement sent fire through his torn hands and feet.

While Jesus was hanging on the cross in terrible pain, the soldiers sat down beneath him and started gambling. They were rolling dice to see who would get to keep his clothes. Can you imagine? They were playing games while he was dying right above them.

People walking by stopped to stare and make fun of him. The religious leaders shouted, "He saved other people, why can't he save himself? If he's really God's Son, let him come down from that cross!"

The soldiers joined in the mocking. They held up a cup of sour wine and laughed, "If you're really the king of the Jews, save yourself!" They thought it was hilarious that this beaten, dying man claimed to be a king.

Luke 23:34 (NIV)

34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

Wait, did you hear what Jesus said? He was being killed by these people, and instead of screaming at them or calling down curses on them, he prayed for them. He asked God to forgive them!

But notice what Jesus said about why they should be forgiven: "They don't know what they're doing." He wasn't saying they weren't responsible for their choices, but he was saying they didn't fully understand what they were doing. They thought they were just executing another criminal, but they were actually crucifying the Son of God.

The soldiers were just following orders. They had been trained to think of crucifixion as part of their job. They didn't understand that this innocent man was dying to save the world, including saving them.

The religious leaders thought they were protecting their religion from someone who was misleading people. They didn't understand that Jesus was exactly who he said he was, the Messiah they had been waiting for.

The people in the crowd were just going along with everyone else, shouting what they heard others shouting. They didn't understand that they were mocking the one person who could give them eternal life.

None of this made their actions okay. Killing an innocent person is always wrong, no matter what your reasons are. But Jesus chose to focus on their limited understanding instead of their guilt.

Later, as Jesus was dying, something amazing happened. One of the criminals hanging next to him realized who Jesus really was and asked Jesus to remember him. Jesus promised that criminal would be with him in paradise that very day.

Even a Roman centurion, the soldier in charge of the execution, looked at everything that happened and said, "This was surely an innocent man." Some people who had come to watch began beating their chests in grief when they realized what they had witnessed.

Jesus's prayer for forgiveness started changing hearts even while he was still dying. By choosing mercy instead of revenge, understanding instead of anger, he opened the door for people to see their mistakes

and change.

Sometimes in our lives, people are mean to us or hurt our feelings, and we want to be mean right back to them. That's normal, it's how everyone feels when they're hurt. But Jesus shows us there's another choice.

We can choose to remember that sometimes people do hurtful things because they don't understand how much it hurts, or because they're dealing with their own pain and problems. This doesn't make their actions okay, but it can help us choose kindness instead of revenge.

When we choose to pray for people who hurt us instead of trying to hurt them back, amazing things can happen. Hearts can change, relationships can be healed, and we can find peace instead of carrying anger around with us.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Feelings

Imagine you're hanging on that cross next to Jesus, and you can hear everything that's happening. The soldiers are laughing and gambling, the people are making fun of him, and he's in terrible pain. Then you hear him pray for the people who are killing him. How would that make you feel? What would you think about Jesus?

Listen For: "Shocked," "confused," "amazed", affirm: "That would be incredible to witness. No one expects someone to pray for their enemies while they're dying."

Question 2: The Choice

Jesus said the people didn't know what they were doing. The soldiers knew they were killing someone, so what do you think Jesus meant? What is it that they didn't understand? And does not understanding something make it less wrong, or just different?

If They Say: "They didn't know he was God's Son" or "They didn't understand they were hurting an innocent person", respond: "What difference do you think it would have made if they had understood that?"

Question 3: The Result

Think about what happened after Jesus prayed for forgiveness. The criminal next to him changed his heart, the Roman soldier realized Jesus was innocent, and people in the crowd started feeling sorry for what they had done. What do you think would have happened if Jesus had cursed them or called for revenge instead?

Connect: This is exactly why Jesus's choice was so powerful and so different from what anyone expected.

Question 4: The Application

Think about a time when someone was mean to you at school or home. Looking back now, can you think of any reasons why they might have done it that weren't just "because they wanted to be mean"? What might they not have understood about how their actions affected you?

If They Say: They have trouble thinking of examples, respond: "Sometimes people are mean when they're scared, or sad, or feeling left out themselves. They might not realize how much their words hurt."

Jesus shows us that even when people hurt us badly, we can choose to respond with prayer and kindness instead of trying to hurt them back. It doesn't mean we have to let people be mean to us, but it means we don't have to carry anger in our hearts. Let's see what this looks like in action.

4. Activity: The Kindness Chain (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity physically demonstrates how choosing kindness over revenge creates positive connections, while revenge breaks relationships and isolates people. Success looks like kids discovering that responding with kindness creates a chain reaction that benefits everyone, including themselves.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play "The Kindness Chain." I need everyone to spread out around the room, you each get your own space where you can't touch anyone else. When I call your name, I'm going to whisper something to you that represents someone being mean to you.

Here's your choice: you can either "get revenge" by sitting down with your arms crossed, or you can "choose kindness" by walking to someone else and gently placing your hand on their shoulder. If someone puts their hand on your shoulder, it means they chose kindness toward you, and now you get to make the same choice with someone else.

The challenge is that if too many people choose revenge and sit down, the kindness chain will break and everyone will end up isolated. But if enough people choose kindness, we can create one big connected circle where everyone is included.

We're doing this because it's exactly like what happened when Jesus chose to pray for his enemies instead of cursing them, his choice started a chain reaction of changed hearts that kept spreading.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Start by approaching 3-4 kids individually and whispering scenarios like "someone cut in front of you in line" or "someone said your project was stupid." Watch as some choose revenge (sit down) and others choose kindness (connect with someone else).

As the chain of kindness begins to form, continue approaching kids who haven't been included yet with new scenarios. The goal is to see whether the kindness chain can grow faster than the revenge responses can break it.

Coach with phrases like: "I notice some people are choosing to connect while others are isolating themselves. What do you notice about how it feels to be connected versus sitting alone? What happens to the group when someone chooses kindness instead of revenge?"

Celebrate breakthrough moments when a child who chose revenge earlier sees the growing kindness chain and decides to stand up and join it. This represents forgiveness and reconciliation.

As the activity concludes, have them notice the difference between where they started (everyone isolated) and where they ended up (connected in a chain or circle through acts of kindness).

Watch For: The moment when kids realize that choosing kindness creates connection while revenge creates isolation. This is the physical representation of Jesus's prayer creating community instead of division.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt to be sitting alone versus being connected in the kindness chain? When someone chose kindness toward you, how did that change your options? This is exactly what Jesus did, instead of choosing revenge and isolation, he chose prayer and forgiveness, which opened the door for people to connect with God and change their hearts.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: when someone hurts us, we can choose to respond with kindness and prayer instead of trying to hurt them back. Sometimes people do mean things because they don't understand how much it hurts or because they're dealing with their own problems.

This doesn't mean we have to let people be mean to us or that their actions are okay. We can still tell a trusted adult, set boundaries, or ask for help. But we don't have to carry anger and revenge in our hearts.

The amazing result is that when we choose kindness like Jesus did, it can start a chain reaction. People's hearts can change, relationships can be healed, and we find peace instead of staying angry. Just like in our activity, kindness connects us while revenge isolates us.

This Week's Challenge

This week, when someone is mean to you or hurts your feelings, try to think of one reason why they might have done it that isn't just "because they wanted to be mean." Then choose one small act of kindness instead of getting back at them. It could be praying for them, helping them with something, or just choosing not to say something mean back.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear Jesus, thank you for showing us how to choose kindness even when people hurt us. Help us remember that sometimes people do mean things because they don't understand or because they're hurting too. Give us the courage to pray for people who are mean to us and to choose

kindness instead of revenge. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids discover that Jesus prayed for the people who hurt him instead of being mean back to them, and God wants us to be kind even when others aren't kind 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 Jesus praying for mean people to choosing to help someone who pushed you on the playground, then ask "How do you think that person would feel?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

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

Beautiful singing, everyone! Now let's sit down in our story shape, make a horseshoe on the floor facing me. Today we're going to hear about something very special that Jesus did when people were being very mean to him.

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 Jesus's pain, sound mean when voicing the mockers, and sound gentle when Jesus speaks.

Today we're going to meet Jesus on the hardest day of his life.

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe, speak sadly]

Some mean people had told lies about Jesus and said he was bad, even though Jesus had only ever helped people and healed sick people.

[Use serious facial expression]

The soldiers came and arrested Jesus. They put him on a wooden cross, a very painful way that bad people were punished. But Jesus had never done anything wrong!

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, sound mean and rough]

The soldiers were very mean to Jesus. They hit him and made fun of him. They even took his clothes and played games to see who could keep them!

[Move to center, speak with pain but also love]

Jesus was hanging on the cross, and it hurt very much. He could have been angry at the mean people. He could have said mean things back to them.

[Move to side, sound like mocking people]

People walking by said mean things like, "If you're really God's Son, come down from that cross!" They laughed at him and made fun of him.

Luke 23:34 (NIV)

34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

[Pause and look around at each child with wonder]

Do you know what Jesus did? Instead of being mean back, he prayed! He talked to God and said, "Father, please forgive these people. They don't understand what they're doing."

[Move to center, speak with amazement]

Can you believe that? People were hurting Jesus, and he asked God to forgive them and help them! He didn't try to hurt them back or say mean words to them.

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

Jesus knew that sometimes people do mean things because they don't understand how much it hurts other people. The soldiers didn't know they were hurting God's Son.

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

So instead of being angry, Jesus chose to pray for them and ask God to help them understand and be better.

[Speak with excitement]

And you know what? Some of those people DID change! One of the soldiers looked at Jesus and said, "This man really was good!" Some people felt sorry for being mean.

[Pause dramatically]

Jesus showed us something amazing, when people are mean to us, we can choose to be kind instead of being mean back.

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes at school or home, someone might push you or say something that hurts your feelings. When that happens, you might want to push them back or say something mean.

[Move closer to the children]

But Jesus shows us we can choose a different way. We can pray for them and ask God to help them be kinder. We can choose to be kind even when they aren't kind to us.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God can help us be brave and choose kindness, just like Jesus did. When we pray for people who are mean to us, God can change their hearts and help them be better.

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'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 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 Jesus felt when people were being mean to him?

 2. What would you want to do if someone was hurting you?

 3. Why do you think Jesus prayed for the mean people instead of being mean back?

 4. What would you do if someone pushed you on the playground?

 5. How do you think the soldiers felt when Jesus prayed for them?

6. When someone is mean to you, who can you talk to about it?

7. What happened when Jesus chose to be kind instead of mean?

8. How can we pray for someone who is mean to us?

9. What does it mean to forgive someone?

10. Can you think of a time when someone was kind to you when you weren't kind to them?

11. Why do you think some people are mean to others?

12. How can God help us be kind when others aren't kind?

13. What can we learn from Jesus about how to treat people?

14. How do you feel when someone forgives you for something wrong you did?

15. What would happen if everyone chose to be kind like Jesus?

16. How can we remember to be kind when we're feeling angry or hurt?

17. What's the difference between being kind and letting people be mean to you?

18. How can we ask God to help mean people be nicer?

19. What would you tell a friend who wanted to be mean to someone who hurt them?

20. How does it feel when someone chooses to be kind to you?

Great discussions! Let's come back together in our horseshoe shape. 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, love, or prayer. Suggestions: "If You're Happy and You Know It" (with kind actions), "This Little Light of Mine," or "I've Got the Joy." Include movements like hugging yourself, reaching toward others, or marching in place.

Wonderful singing! Now let's sit down 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 Jesus and how he showed us love.

[Pause]

Help us remember that when someone is mean to us, we can choose to be kind instead of being mean back. Help us pray for people who hurt our feelings.

[Pause]

Help us be brave like Jesus and choose kindness even when it's hard. Help mean people learn to be nicer.

[Pause]

Thank you that you love us and help us be kind to others. Thank you for forgiving us when we make mistakes. 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 praying for others. Examples: "Help me be nice to my brother" or "Help the kids at school be nicer to each other."

Remember, when someone is mean to you this week, you can choose to be kind like Jesus did. You can pray for them and ask God to help them be better. Have a wonderful week being kind to others!

Clear the Channel

Forgiveness Opens the Path to God, How does God's forgiveness work when my forgiveness isn't perfect?

Mark 11:12-25

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

Mark 11:12-25 (NIV)

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 16 He would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

19 When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

22 "Have faith in God," Jesus replied. 23 "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Context

This passage occurs during Jesus's final week in Jerusalem, sandwiched between his triumphal entry and the increasing conflict with religious authorities. Jesus has just declared himself Messiah through his entry into the city, and now he's confronting the temple system that should represent God's presence but has become corrupt. The fig tree incident brackets the temple cleansing, creating a symbolic narrative about fruitless religious practice.

The immediate context moves from Jesus's dramatic action in the temple, overturning tables and declaring God's house should be a "house of prayer for all nations", to his teaching about prayer itself. The religious leaders are now actively plotting to kill him, making his words about forgiveness particularly poignant. This isn't abstract theology but practical instruction for disciples who will soon face betrayal, persecution, and the temptation toward bitterness.

The Big Idea

Prayer requires an unblocked channel to God, and unforgiveness creates spiritual static that prevents both receiving divine mercy and accessing prayer's full power.

This isn't simply about earning God's forgiveness through good behavior, but about the spiritual reality that resentment and mercy cannot coexist in the same heart. When we approach God seeking forgiveness while maintaining grievances against others, we create a contradiction that blocks the very

grace we're seeking to receive.

Theological Core

- **Prayer as Channel.** Prayer isn't just asking God for things, it's opening a communication channel between our heart and God's heart that requires clarity and authenticity.
 - **Forgiveness Connection.** Divine and human forgiveness are interconnected not because we earn God's mercy, but because unforgiveness makes us unable to receive the mercy God offers.
 - **Spiritual Blockage.** Holding grievances creates internal contradictions that prevent us from fully accessing God's power and presence in prayer.
 - **Heart Preparation.** Coming to God requires examining what we're carrying that might interfere with genuine connection and humble receptivity to divine grace.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Prayer effectiveness connects to the spiritual condition of our hearts, including how we treat others
 - The tension between grace-based and conditional forgiveness reflects deeper questions about divine-human relationship
 - Forgiveness isn't just about being nice, it's about removing barriers to spiritual power and divine connection
 - Authentic prayer requires honest examination of what grievances we might be carrying
-

Grades 4, 6

- Holding grudges makes it harder to feel close to God and receive good things in prayer
-

- Forgiveness is a choice we make even when our feelings haven't caught up yet
- When we forgive others, we open up space in our hearts for God's forgiveness to fill us
- Sometimes we have to choose between being right and being free

Grades 1, 3

- God forgives us when we do wrong things, and God wants us to forgive others too
- When we're mad at someone, it's hard to talk to God with a happy heart
- Forgiving means letting go of being angry and letting God take care of it

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Transactional Forgiveness.** Don't present this as "forgive others so God will forgive you" in a quid pro quo way. Instead, focus on how unforgiveness blocks our ability to receive the grace God is already offering. The emphasis is on spiritual readiness, not divine transaction.
- **Forced Feelings.** Avoid suggesting that forgiveness means feeling good about someone or that anger is inherently sinful. Forgiveness is a decision to release the demand for punishment, not an emotional state. Students need permission to feel hurt while still choosing release.
- **Oversimplified Grace.** Don't ignore the conditional language Jesus uses here. This creates theological tension that needs acknowledgment rather than quick resolution. Both divine initiative and human response are present in biblical forgiveness.
- **Prayer Magic.** Resist framing this as a formula where the right forgiveness attitude guarantees answered prayer. Instead, focus on how unforgiveness creates internal static that interferes with genuine prayer connection and spiritual receptivity.

Handling Hard Questions

"Does this mean God won't forgive me if I haven't forgiven everyone who hurt me?"

This touches the heart of grace versus works. God's forgiveness isn't contingent on our perfect forgiveness, but unforgiveness in our hearts can block our ability to receive and experience the forgiveness God offers. Think of it like a clogged drain, the water is available, but something is preventing flow. The goal isn't perfect forgiveness but honest acknowledgment of our grievances and willingness to release them to God rather than holding onto them.

"What if the person doesn't deserve forgiveness or hasn't apologized?"

Forgiveness isn't about what the other person deserves, it's about what we need for spiritual freedom. Forgiveness is releasing our demand that they pay us back for the hurt they caused. We can forgive someone without trusting them, excusing their behavior, or putting ourselves in harm's way. The question isn't whether they deserve it, but whether we want to carry the burden of resentment or give it to God.

"How can I forgive when I don't feel like forgiving?"

Start with honesty about your feelings, God can handle your anger and hurt. Forgiveness begins as a decision, not a feeling. You can choose to stop rehearsing the offense, stop planning revenge, and ask God to help you release the bitterness even while your emotions are still raw. Often the feelings follow the choice, but sometimes we have to keep choosing forgiveness until our hearts catch up with our will.

The One Thing to Remember

Unforgiveness creates spiritual static that blocks both God's grace coming in and our prayers going out, forgiveness clears the channel.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the complex relationship between divine and human forgiveness without resolving all the theological tension. Help them discover how unforgiveness affects their spiritual lives practically, not just theoretically.

The Tension to Frame

How do we understand Jesus's conditional language about forgiveness while still believing in grace? Is this forgiveness transactional or is something deeper happening about spiritual readiness?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate the theological complexity, this passage creates legitimate questions about grace and works
 - Honor their real experiences with unforgiveness and the difficulty of letting go of legitimate grievances
 - Focus on discovery through their questions rather than delivering answers you think they need
-

1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Think about a time when you were trying to have a serious conversation with someone, but they were distracted, scrolling their phone, thinking about something else, or still angry about an argument you had earlier. Even if you were saying important things, even if you were trying to connect, something was interfering with the communication. You could feel the static, the distance, the way your words weren't really landing.

That feeling of blocked communication is familiar to anyone who's tried to pray while carrying a grudge. You want to connect with God, you want to feel forgiven and loved, but there's this underlying tension, you're asking God to treat you with mercy while you're withholding mercy from someone else. Part of you knows the contradiction, even if you think your unforgiveness is totally justified.

Today we're looking at Jesus teaching his disciples about prayer and making a surprising connection, he links their ability to access God's forgiveness with their willingness to release grievances against others. This isn't happening in a classroom but right after Jesus has confronted corruption in the temple, when religious leaders are plotting to kill him.

As we read, pay attention to the context Jesus gives this teaching in, it's not abstract theology but practical instruction for people who are about to face betrayal, persecution, and every reason to become bitter. Notice how he connects prayer power with heart condition, and see what questions it raises about how forgiveness actually works.

Open your Bibles to Mark 11, starting at verse 12. We'll read the whole section to see how Jesus's teaching about forgiveness flows from his confrontation with religious hypocrisy.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. Some students will finish quickly, let them sit with the questions rather than rushing on. Watch for students struggling with the vocabulary and quietly help. Let them feel the weight of Jesus's words about forgiveness in this intense context.

As You Read, Think About:

- What's happening in the temple and why Jesus is so upset about it
- How the fig tree incident connects to the temple cleansing
- Why Jesus moves from talking about prayer power to talking about forgiveness
- What the conditional language in verse 25 suggests about how forgiveness works

Mark 11:12-25 (NIV)

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. 13 Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. 14 Then he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard him say it.

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 16 He would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

19 When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.

20 In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!"

22 "Have faith in God," Jesus replied. 23 "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers for dramatic sections. Let students pass if they prefer. Choose confident readers for Jesus's confrontational words in the temple and his teaching about prayer.

Reader 1: Verses 12-14 (Fig tree encounter) **Reader 2:** Verses 15-19 (Temple cleansing) **Reader 3:** Verses 20-25 (Prayer and forgiveness teaching)

Listen for the intensity in Jesus's words, this isn't calm classroom teaching but confrontation with corrupt systems and urgent instruction for disciples facing persecution.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4 students. Give exactly 3 minutes to come up with 1-2 genuine questions about the passage. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with "What surprised you most about Jesus's approach 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. Maybe something about

Jesus's actions in the temple, or the connection between the fig tree and forgiveness, or why he links prayer with forgiving others. You have 3 minutes to talk and come up with questions that represent your group.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Let students drive with their questions. You facilitate and probe deeper. Guide discovery rather than lecturing. Honor the theological complexity this passage creates.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes around forgiveness, prayer, Jesus's anger, and the conditional language in verse 25.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What do you think Jesus means when he says the temple should be 'a house of prayer for all nations'?"
 - "How does the temple cleansing connect to what Jesus teaches about prayer and forgiveness?"
 - "What's the difference between forgiving to get forgiveness versus forgiving because of some other reason?"
 - "Does verse 25 make God's forgiveness conditional on our forgiveness? How do you wrestle with that?"
 - "When have you experienced unforgiveness affecting your ability to pray or feel close to God?"
 - "What's the difference between forgiveness and excusing someone's behavior?"
 - "What if Jesus had not forgiven the people who were about to crucify him, how would that have changed everything?"
 - "Why might Jesus teach about forgiveness right after confronting corruption and knowing he's about to be betrayed?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Jesus is teaching that prayer isn't just about asking for things, it's about opening a clear channel between our hearts and God's heart. When we hold grudges, we create static on that channel. We're asking God for mercy while withholding mercy from others, and that

contradiction blocks the very grace we're seeking. It's not that God stops loving us, but that our unforgiveness makes us unable to receive what God wants to give.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you see this pattern playing out, times when holding onto resentment has affected your spiritual life, your relationships, or your sense of peace? Think about school drama, family conflicts, friendship betrayals, social media stuff, or even broader issues of injustice that make you angry.

Real Issues This Connects To

- When someone spreads rumors about you at school and you can't stop thinking about revenge
 - Family members who have hurt you repeatedly and you've given up on them changing
 - Friends who betrayed your trust and you're not sure you can ever be vulnerable again
 - People online who attack your beliefs or identity and you want to attack back
 - Systemic injustices that make you angry at groups of people or institutions
 - Past hurts that you replay in your mind during prayer or worship
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to fix or resolve everything. Some situations are complex and don't have simple answers. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket forgiveness advice.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone choose forgiveness even when the other person didn't deserve it, and how did that affect them?"
 - "What would help you discern when to forgive versus when to maintain boundaries for your safety?"
 - "How do you tell the difference between authentic forgiveness and just stuffing your emotions to be 'nice'?"
 - "What's the difference between forgiving someone and trusting someone?"
-

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: unforgiveness doesn't just hurt the people you're mad at, it creates interference in your relationship with God. Not because God stops loving you, but because resentment and grace can't coexist in the same heart. When you hold onto bitterness, you block the channel through which God's forgiveness flows into your life.

This week, pay attention to what you might be carrying that creates static in your prayers. Maybe it's time to name some grievances and ask God to help you release them, not because the people deserve it, but because you deserve the freedom that comes from an unblocked heart. Remember, forgiveness is a process, not a one-time decision.

I'm proud of the hard questions you asked today and the honest wrestling you did with this complex passage. Keep bringing your real questions to God, that's exactly the kind of authentic prayer that opens the channel for divine grace to flow.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that holding grudges makes it harder to feel close to God and receive good things in prayer, but forgiveness opens up space in our hearts for God's love to fill us.

If Kids Ask "What if someone really hurt me and doesn't say sorry?"

Say: "Forgiveness doesn't mean what they did was okay or that you have to trust them right away. It means you're choosing to let God handle it instead of carrying the heavy anger in your heart."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever tried to listen to music or watch a video while someone else was being really loud in the background, maybe a sibling was yelling, construction was happening outside, or

someone was arguing nearby. You want to hear what you're trying to listen to, but the noise keeps getting in the way.

Now here's a harder question: have you ever tried to pray or feel close to God while you were really angry at someone, so mad that you keep thinking about what they did to you and how unfair it was? Part of you wants to talk to God and feel peaceful, but another part of you is just replaying the hurt and thinking about how much that person doesn't deserve good things.

It's completely normal to feel that way when someone hurts you. Your feelings make total sense, and being angry about unfair treatment doesn't make you a bad person. But carrying that anger can be like having background noise during your prayers, it makes it harder to really connect with God and receive the good things God wants to give you.

This reminds me of the movie *Inside Out*, where Riley's emotions sometimes get so jumbled up that she can't think clearly or make good choices. When we're carrying grudges, it's like our hearts get cluttered with angry thoughts that make it hard for peaceful, loving thoughts to get through.

The tricky part is figuring out how to let go of legitimate hurt without pretending it didn't matter. How do you forgive someone when they actually did something wrong, and when forgiving them feels like you're saying it was okay?

Today we're going to hear about Jesus teaching his disciples about prayer and forgiveness right after he got really angry at people who were doing wrong things in the temple. He shows us that you can be upset about injustice and still choose forgiveness. Let's find out what happened.

What to Expect: Some kids will relate strongly to the anger scenario. Acknowledge their experiences briefly but don't get stuck in problem-solving. Keep momentum moving toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Jesus and his disciples were walking toward Jerusalem, and Jesus was hungry. He saw a fig tree in the distance that had lots of green leaves, so he walked over hoping to find some figs to eat.

But when he got there, the tree was full of leaves but had no fruit at all. It looked good from far away, but up close it was disappointing, all show and no substance. Jesus said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." His disciples heard this and probably wondered why Jesus was so upset about

a tree.

The next thing Jesus did was even more surprising. When they reached Jerusalem, he went straight to the temple courts where people were buying and selling things. But this wasn't like a nice farmer's market, people were cheating others and making money off of religion.

Imagine walking into your church and finding that someone had set up a bunch of stores in the sanctuary, and they were overcharging people for things they needed for worship. You'd probably feel angry that this sacred space was being used to take advantage of people.

That's exactly how Jesus felt. He started overturning the tables where people were exchanging money and knocked over the benches where others were selling doves. He wouldn't let anyone carry their merchandise through the temple courts.

Then Jesus explained why he was so upset. He said, "Isn't it written that God's house should be called 'a house of prayer for all nations'? But you've made it a place where robbers hang out!"

The people in charge, the chief priests and teachers, heard what Jesus said and saw what he did. They were furious with him because the crowds were amazed by his teaching, and they started plotting how they could kill him.

That evening, Jesus and his disciples left the city. Can you imagine how the disciples felt? Their teacher had just confronted the most powerful religious leaders, and now those leaders wanted him dead.

The next morning, as they walked along the same path, they saw something incredible. The fig tree Jesus had spoken to the day before was completely withered, dead from the roots up.

Mark 11:21-22 (NIV)

21 Peter remembered and said to Jesus, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!" 22 "Have faith in God," Jesus replied.

Jesus used this as a teaching moment. He told them that if they had faith in God, they could tell a mountain to throw itself into the sea and it would happen, if they really believed it without doubting.

Then he said something that must have seemed completely unexpected after everything they'd just been through with the temple confrontation and the religious leaders trying to kill him.

Mark 11:24-25 (NIV)

24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

Wait, what? Jesus had just confronted people who were doing wrong things. The religious leaders wanted to kill him. The disciples had every reason to be angry and scared and wanting to hold grudges against the people who were threatening their teacher.

But Jesus taught them that when you come to pray, if you're holding anything against anyone, you need to forgive them. Not because they deserve it, but so that God's forgiveness can flow freely into your own heart.

Think about it like this: if your heart is full of anger and resentment, there's not much room left for God's peace and love to fill you up. But when you choose to forgive, to let go of the demand that someone pay you back for hurting you, you create space in your heart for God's good things.

Jesus wasn't saying that wrong things are okay or that you should let people hurt you. He was saying that holding onto bitterness hurts you more than it hurts them, and it makes it harder for you to receive the good things God wants to give you.

Sometimes in our lives, we get hurt by friends who betray us, family members who let us down, or classmates who are mean to us. We have a choice: we can hold onto the anger and let it take up space in our hearts, or we can choose to forgive and let God handle the situation.

When we forgive, we're not saying what happened was okay. We're saying, "I'm not going to carry this heavy burden of anger anymore. I'm going to trust God to take care of it, and I'm going to make room in my heart for better things."

The amazing thing is that when we do this, we discover that forgiveness doesn't just help the other person, it frees us. It opens up the channel between our hearts and God's heart so that when we pray, we can really connect with God instead of having all that anger creating interference.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Heavy Backpack

Imagine you're carrying a backpack full of rocks, and each rock represents something someone did to hurt you or make you angry. Every time you think about what they did, you add another rock to the backpack. How do you think carrying all those rocks would affect your ability to run, play, or enjoy your day?

Listen For: "It would be heavy," "You'd be tired," "You couldn't have fun", affirm: "That's exactly what holding grudges does to our hearts."

Question 2: The Interference

Think about trying to have a conversation with someone you love while you're really angry at someone else and can't stop thinking about it. How would that anger affect your ability to feel close to and connected with the person you're trying to talk to?

If They Say: "You'd be distracted" or "You couldn't focus", respond: "That's the same thing that happens when we try to pray while holding grudges."

Question 3: The Hard Choice

Jesus had just confronted people who were cheating others and who wanted to kill him. He had good reasons to be angry. But he still taught about forgiveness. Why do you think he chose to teach about letting go of grudges right after experiencing such unfair treatment?

Connect: "Jesus knew that holding onto anger would hurt him and his disciples more than it would help them get justice."

Question 4: The Freedom

What do you think would happen if you took all those rocks out of your backpack and threw them away? How would that change how you feel and what you're able to do?

If They Say: "You'd feel lighter" or "You could run faster", respond: "That's what forgiveness does for our hearts and our prayers."

Jesus showed us that forgiveness isn't about being nice to people who don't deserve it, it's about freeing ourselves from carrying heavy burdens that interfere with our connection to God. When we forgive, we make space in our hearts for God's love to fill us up.

4. Activity: Clear the Channel (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity reinforces how unforgiveness blocks our connection to God by having kids physically experience how "holding onto" things prevents them from receiving good things. Success looks like kids discovering that they have to let go of one thing to receive something better.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play a game called "Clear the Channel." I need everyone to find a spot where you can stretch your arms out without touching anyone. Hold your hands in tight fists, like you're gripping onto something really important that someone tried to take from you.

I'm going to walk around and try to give each of you a special gift, but I can only give it to you if your hands are open to receive it. The challenge is that opening your hands means letting go of whatever you were holding onto, even though it feels important to you.

At first, most of you will probably keep your fists closed because letting go feels scary or unfair. But notice what happens when someone chooses to open their hands, they can receive something new and good. We're doing this because it's exactly like what Jesus taught about forgiveness and prayer.

When we hold tightly to our anger and hurt feelings, our hearts are like closed fists that can't receive God's love and forgiveness. But when we choose to let go, we open up space for God to give us better things.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Start with kids holding tight fists. Walk around offering imaginary gifts, but emphasize that you can only give them if their hands are open. Most will keep their fists closed at first, that's perfect.

As they struggle with the choice, some will start to realize they have to let go to receive. Others will hold on stubbornly. Don't rush this, let them feel the tension between holding on and receiving.

Use coaching phrases like: "I notice you really want this gift, but your hands aren't ready to receive it yet. I wonder what would happen if you let go of what you're holding onto?" Don't force anyone to open their hands.

When someone finally opens their hands, celebrate it: "Look how [Name] made space to receive something good by choosing to let go! Now their hands are free to catch what I want to give them."

Once they understand the pattern, have them notice the difference between the heavy feeling of closed fists versus the light, ready feeling of open hands.

Watch For: The moment when someone releases their grip to receive a gift, this is the physical representation of choosing forgiveness to make space for God's grace.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when your hands were closed tightly versus when they were open and ready to receive? When we hold onto grudges, our hearts are like closed fists, we can't receive God's love and forgiveness because there's no space for it. But when we choose to forgive, we open our hearts like open hands, ready to catch all the good things God wants to give us.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: God wants to fill our hearts with love, peace, and forgiveness, but when our hearts are cluttered with anger and grudges, there's not much room for the good stuff. Forgiveness isn't about saying that wrong things are okay, it's about making space in our hearts for God's better things.

This doesn't mean you have to be best friends with people who hurt you, or that you shouldn't have boundaries to protect yourself. It means you're choosing not to carry the heavy burden of anger, and you're trusting God to handle the situation instead.

The amazing result is that when you forgive, you become free. Free from the exhausting work of staying angry, free from the interference that keeps you from feeling close to God, and free to receive all the love and peace God wants to pour into your open heart.

This Week's Challenge

This week, when you feel angry at someone, try praying, "God, I don't want to carry this heavy feeling anymore. Help me let go of this grudge and trust you to handle it. Fill the space in my heart with your peace instead." Notice how it feels to choose open hands instead of closed fists.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you for forgiving us when we do wrong things. Help us to forgive others the same way you forgive us. When our hearts feel heavy with anger, help us choose to let go and make space for your love instead. Give us open hearts that are ready to receive all the good things you want to give us. 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 forgives us when we do wrong things, and God wants us to forgive others too.

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 holding grudges to carrying a heavy backpack full of rocks, then ask "How would that make you feel?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about forgiveness or God's love. Suggestions: "God's Love is So Wonderful," "Jesus Loves Me," or "I've Got Peace Like a River." Use movements: spread arms wide during "wonderful" or "love," point up during "Jesus," and hug yourself during "peace."

Great singing! Now I want you to sit in a horseshoe shape on the floor so everyone can see me. We're going to hear an amazing story about Jesus and about how God wants us to forgive people who hurt us.

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 upset when Jesus is angry at the unfair people, sound gentle when Jesus teaches about forgiveness.

Today we're going to meet Jesus when he was really upset about some people who were not being fair.

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Jesus and his friends were walking to a very special place called the temple, where people went to pray to God. But when they got there, something was very wrong.

[Use upset voice and facial expression]

People were selling things inside the prayer place and cheating others out of their money! It was like if someone came into our church and set up stores and was mean to people who came to worship.

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, sound more upset]

Jesus got really angry! He turned over their tables and said, "This is supposed to be God's house where everyone can pray! But you're making it a place where robbers hang out!"

[Move to center, speak with authority]

The leaders who were in charge heard what Jesus said, and they got so mad that they started planning to hurt Jesus. That wasn't fair at all!

[Move to side, sound concerned]

Jesus's friends were probably scared and angry too. These mean people wanted to hurt their teacher, and Jesus had done nothing wrong!

Mark 11:25 (NIV)

25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

[Pause and look around at each child]

Do you think Jesus and his friends had good reasons to be angry at the mean people? Yes! But Jesus taught them something very important about forgiving.

[Move to center, speak with warmth]

Jesus said that when we pray to God, if we're angry at someone, we should forgive them. Not because they deserve it, but because God forgives us when we do wrong things.

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

When we hold onto angry feelings, it's like carrying a really heavy backpack full of rocks. It makes us tired and sad, and it's hard to feel happy when we're carrying all that heavy stuff.

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

But when we choose to forgive, it's like taking off that heavy backpack and giving it to God. We say, "God, I don't want to carry these heavy angry feelings anymore. You handle it."

[Speak with excitement]

And you know what happens? We feel so much better! Our hearts feel light and happy again, and when we talk to God, we can really feel close to God instead of having all that anger in the way.

[Pause dramatically]

God can help us forgive even when it's really hard. God forgives us when we do wrong things, and God wants us to forgive others too.

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes in our lives, people are mean to us. Maybe someone at school says something hurtful, or a brother or sister is not nice, or someone takes something that belongs to us.

[Move closer to the children]

When that happens, we can choose to forgive. We can say, "I'm not going to stay angry. I'm going to let God take care of this and fill my heart with good feelings instead."

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God will help us forgive because God loves us so much. When we forgive, we make room in our hearts for God's love and peace.

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 them. I'll give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, and you'll have about one minute to share with each other.

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 Jesus felt when the people were being mean in God's house?

2. Have you ever felt angry when someone was not fair to you?

3. What do you think it feels like to carry heavy rocks in a backpack all day?

4. What would you do if someone took your favorite toy and wouldn't give it back?

5. How do you think Jesus's friends felt when the mean people wanted to hurt Jesus?

6. Why do you think God wants us to forgive people who are mean to us?

7. How do you feel when someone forgives you after you do something wrong?

8. What's something that makes you feel angry at school?

9. How does your family help you when you're mad at someone?

10. Who is someone you know who is good at forgiving others?

11. Why do you think carrying angry feelings makes us tired?

12. How can we ask God to help us forgive when it's really hard?

13. What good things can fill our hearts when we let go of angry feelings?

14. Do you think it's okay to feel sad when someone hurts you?

15. How can we forgive someone and still stay safe?

16. What did you learn about God from this story?

17. How does it feel when your heart is light instead of heavy?

18. What can we pray when we need help forgiving someone?

19. What would happen if everyone in the world chose to forgive?

20. How can we be like Jesus when people are not nice to us?

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 a song about kindness or forgiveness with movements. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "Love, Love, Love," or "This Little Light of Mine." Include specific movements: point to others during "one another," make heart shapes with hands during "love," or hold up one finger like a candle during "light."

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down for our prayer time. Sit cross-legged in rows and fold your hands quietly.

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 forgiving us when we do wrong things.

[Pause]

Help us to forgive others when they are mean to us or hurt our feelings. We don't want to carry heavy angry feelings in our hearts.

[Pause]

Help us remember that you will take care of everything and fill our hearts with your love and peace instead of anger.

[Pause]

Thank you for helping us have light, happy hearts that are ready to receive all the good things you want to give 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 forgiveness. Examples: "Help me forgive my sister when she's mean" or "Thank you for forgiving me when I mess up."

Remember, when someone hurts your feelings this week, you can choose to forgive them and let God handle it. That will make your heart feel light and happy! Have a wonderful week, and keep talking to God every day.

Beyond Counting

Forgiveness Without Limits, When does forgiveness become too much?

Matthew 18:15-35

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

Matthew 18:15-35 (NIV)

15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. 16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

18 "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times,

but seventy-seven times."

23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he said, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Context

Jesus has just finished teaching about community accountability and reconciliation when Peter asks his famous question about forgiveness limits. This conversation occurs within Jesus's broader discourse on how God's people should handle conflict, sin, and restoration within their community. The religious teachers of the day suggested forgiving someone three times was sufficient, Peter's proposal of seven times would have seemed remarkably generous.

Peter's question reveals a common human assumption: that forgiveness is a finite resource that can be depleted through overuse. His inquiry "up to seven times" shows he's thinking about forgiveness as a transaction, a generous but limited commodity that eventually runs out when dealing with repeat offenders. Jesus's response shatters this framework entirely.

The Big Idea

Jesus transforms forgiveness from a limited transaction to an unlimited disposition, not generous counting but abandoning the counting framework entirely.

This isn't about mathematical precision but about a fundamental shift in how we approach wrongdoing. The challenge lies in distinguishing unlimited forgiveness from unlimited exposure to harm, forgiveness can be continuous while still maintaining appropriate boundaries for safety and accountability.

Theological Core

- **Dispositional versus Transactional Forgiveness.** Jesus calls for forgiveness as an ongoing posture rather than discrete transactions with limits.
 - **Mathematical Excess.** The number "seventy-seven times" is deliberately excessive, designed to overwhelm our counting systems and push us beyond numerical frameworks.
 - **Received Forgiveness Creates Obligation.** The parable reveals that experiencing unlimited divine forgiveness creates moral obligation to extend unlimited forgiveness to others.
 - **Community Accountability.** The preceding teaching on church discipline shows that forgiveness operates within structures of accountability, not in isolation from consequences.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Forgiveness is not a finite resource but a continuous choice to abandon resentment and release claims for payment
 - Unlimited forgiveness doesn't require unlimited exposure to harm, boundaries and accountability remain important
 - The parable reveals that experiencing God's unlimited forgiveness creates obligation to extend the same to others
 - Wisdom involves discerning when to continue relationship versus when to forgive while maintaining distance
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Grades 4, 6

- Forgiveness means choosing not to stay mad or get revenge, even when someone hurts us multiple times
 - We don't keep score of how many times someone has wronged us, love doesn't count offenses
 - When we forgive, we're copying how God forgives us for all our mistakes
 - It's okay to feel hurt while still choosing to forgive, our feelings are valid even when we do the right thing
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Grades 1, 3

- God wants us to forgive people when they say sorry, even if they hurt us before
 - God forgives us when we make mistakes, so we should forgive others too
 - Forgiving doesn't mean we have to feel happy right away, but we choose to be kind
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Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Conflating Forgiveness with Relationship Restoration.** Forgiveness can be unilateral while relationship restoration requires mutual acknowledgment, repentance, and rebuilding trust. Don't teach that forgiving someone means everything goes back to normal.
 - **Ignoring Safety Concerns.** Unlimited forgiveness doesn't mean unlimited exposure to abuse or harm. Emphasize that forgiveness can coexist with boundaries, consequences, and protection of vulnerable people.
 - **Minimizing Real Harm.** Don't suggest that repeated offenses are no big deal or that victims should just "get over it." Acknowledge that some patterns of hurt are genuinely difficult and that forgiveness doesn't minimize the real damage done.
 - **Creating Impossible Standards.** The "seventy-seven times" isn't meant to create a new, higher counting system but to explode counting altogether. Don't burden people with guilt over struggling to forgive, acknowledge the process takes time.
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Handling Hard Questions

"Does this mean I have to keep letting someone hurt me?"

Absolutely not. Forgiveness is about releasing your right to revenge and choosing not to hold resentment, but it doesn't require putting yourself back in harm's way. You can forgive someone while still maintaining boundaries, seeking justice through proper channels, or ending a relationship that's harmful. Sometimes the most loving thing for everyone involved is to forgive while maintaining distance. Forgiveness is about the condition of your heart, not the structure of your relationships.

"What if someone keeps hurting people and never seems sorry?"

This is where the earlier teaching about church discipline becomes important. Jesus isn't naive about repeated harm, he gives a process for accountability in verses 15-17. Forgiveness doesn't mean ignoring patterns of harm or failing to protect others. Sometimes loving someone means holding them accountable for their actions. You can forgive while still working to prevent future harm and seeking appropriate consequences for serious wrongdoing.

"How can I forgive when I'm still really hurt and angry?"

Forgiveness isn't about feeling differently immediately, it's about making a choice about how you'll respond despite your feelings. It's normal to feel hurt and angry when someone wrongs you repeatedly. Forgiveness often begins as a decision you make before your feelings catch up. It's a process, not a moment, and it's okay if it takes time. The goal is to prevent bitterness from taking root, not to eliminate all difficult feelings right away.

The One Thing to Remember

Jesus calls us to abandon the counting game entirely, forgiveness flows from abundance, not scarcity, and transforms both the forgiver and the forgiven.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the tension between unlimited forgiveness and appropriate boundaries. Help them discover that Jesus isn't calling for naive exposure to harm but for a fundamental shift from scarcity-based forgiveness to abundance-based forgiveness.

The Tension to Frame

When does forgiveness become enabling, and how do we distinguish between unlimited forgiveness and unlimited exposure to harm?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their experiences with people who have hurt them repeatedly, this is genuinely difficult territory
 - Honor the complexity, unlimited forgiveness and appropriate boundaries can coexist
 - Let students wrestle with the tension rather than rushing to simple answers
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1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine you have a friend who borrows money from you and never pays it back. The first time, you think, "No big deal." The second time, you're annoyed but you let it slide. The third time, you're frustrated. By the fourth time, you're starting to think this person is taking advantage of you. You want to be forgiving, but you also don't want to be a doormat.

This scenario feels familiar because it captures something most of us have experienced, the point where forgiveness starts to feel like enabling. Your instinct to protect yourself makes complete sense. There's wisdom in recognizing patterns and setting boundaries with people who repeatedly take advantage.

Today we're looking at one of Jesus's most challenging teachings about forgiveness, a conversation where a disciple asks the question you've probably wondered about: "How many times do I have to forgive the same person?" Except Jesus's answer is going to completely flip the question on its head.

As we read this together, pay attention to how Jesus reframes the entire conversation. Notice what he's saying about the nature of forgiveness itself, and watch for clues about how unlimited forgiveness might actually work in real relationships where people get hurt repeatedly.

Open your Bibles to Matthew 18, and let's start by reading verses 21-22 silently. Take your time and think about Peter's question and Jesus's response.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room and let students feel the weight of Jesus's mathematically excessive answer. Some will finish quickly, encourage them to reread and think about what "seventy-seven times" actually means in practice.

As You Read, Think About:

- What assumptions is Peter making about how forgiveness works?
 - Why might Peter have chosen the number seven as his generous limit?
 - What is Jesus actually saying with "seventy-seven times", is this about math?
 - How would you feel if you were Peter hearing this response?
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Matthew 18:15-35 (NIV)

15 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. **16** But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' **17** If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

18 "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

19 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" **22** Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. **24** As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. **25** Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he said, 'and I will pay back everything.' **27** The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he

demanded.

29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers for the different parts. Let students pass if they prefer. Choose confident readers for the dramatic parable section where emotion matters.

Reader 1: Verses 15-20 (Teaching on church discipline) **Reader 2:** Verses 21-22 (Peter's question and Jesus's response) **Reader 3:** Verses 23-35 (The parable of the unforgiving servant)

Listen for the emotional weight in this conversation, Peter thinks he's being generous, Jesus explodes his categories, and the parable gets intense quickly.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4. Give exactly 3 minutes. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with "What surprised you most about Jesus's response?" or "What questions does the parable raise for you?"

Get into groups of 3-4. Your job is to come up with 1-2 genuine questions about what you just read, not questions you think I want to hear, but questions you're actually curious about. Maybe something that confused you, or something that seems unfair, or something you wonder about applying to your actual life. I want to know what you're really thinking. You have three minutes.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students drive with their questions, 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 around fairness, limits, practical application, and the parable's harsh ending.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What was Peter actually asking for when he suggested 'seven times'?"
- "Why do you think Jesus chose such an excessive number instead of just saying 'always forgive'?"
- "What's the difference between the two debts in the parable, why does that matter?"
- "How does the earlier teaching about church discipline (verses 15-17) relate to unlimited forgiveness?"
- "When might forgiveness and boundaries need to coexist?"
- "What's the connection between receiving forgiveness and giving forgiveness?"
- "What would change if that servant had remembered his own forgiven debt?"
- "How do we distinguish between forgiving someone and enabling their harmful behavior?"

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Peter is thinking about forgiveness like a bank account, you start with some funds, and eventually you run out. Jesus is saying forgiveness doesn't work that way at all. It's not about managing a limited resource but about living from abundance. The parable shows why: when you realize how much you've been forgiven, forgiveness stops being about what you can afford to give and starts being about what naturally flows from gratitude.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you find yourself keeping score of how many times someone has hurt or disappointed you? Maybe it's with parents, siblings, friends, teachers, or classmates. Maybe it's with people online who say things that trigger you. Where are you running up against Peter's question: "How many times do I have to forgive this person?"

Real Issues This Connects To

- A friend who repeatedly cancels plans or breaks promises but always has an excuse
 - Parents who say hurtful things when they're stressed, then apologize later
 - Classmates who make cutting comments disguised as "just joking"
 - Social media interactions where people repeatedly post things that feel personally attacking
 - Romantic relationships where someone keeps making the same mistakes despite saying they'll change
 - Making decisions about whether to maintain relationships with people who've hurt you multiple times
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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 what they should do.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone live out generous forgiveness in a way that actually helped a relationship heal?"
 - "What would help you move from counting offenses to choosing abundance-based forgiveness?"
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- "How do you discern when continuing a relationship is wise versus when forgiveness might mean loving someone from a distance?"
- "What's the difference between genuine forgiveness and being a pushover?"

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: Jesus isn't calling you to be naive about people who hurt you repeatedly. He's inviting you to live from a completely different foundation, not from scarcity where forgiveness runs out, but from abundance where you've received so much that you can afford to be generous. This doesn't mean putting yourself in harm's way, but it does mean refusing to let bitterness take root in your heart.

This week, pay attention to when you find yourself counting offenses, mentally keeping track of who owes you what. When you notice that happening, ask yourself: "What would it look like to choose abundance over scarcity in this situation?" Sometimes that might mean having a difficult conversation, sometimes setting a boundary, and sometimes just releasing your claim that the other person owes you something.

I'm impressed by the thoughtful questions you wrestled with today. Keep asking hard questions about how faith intersects with real relationships, that's how wisdom grows. You don't have to have this figured out perfectly, but you can start practicing forgiveness from abundance rather than scarcity.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that forgiveness isn't about keeping score but about choosing love even when people hurt us repeatedly, just like God does for us.

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

Say: "You can forgive someone and still tell a trusted adult if they're hurting you. Forgiving means choosing not to be mean back, but you should always stay safe."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever had someone apologize to you for the same thing more than once. Maybe a sibling who keeps taking your stuff, or a friend who keeps saying something that hurts your feelings, or someone who keeps "accidentally" bumping into you at school.

Now here's a harder question, raise your hand if you've ever thought, "Okay, I forgave you the first time, and the second time, but seriously? You're doing this AGAIN?" It's like part of you wants to be forgiving, but another part of you is thinking, "How many times do I have to forgive this person before I can just stay mad?"

Those feelings make complete sense. It's genuinely frustrating when someone keeps hurting you, even if they say sorry each time. Your brain starts to wonder if they really mean it, or if they're just going to do it again tomorrow. That's a normal way to feel when someone keeps letting you down.

This reminds me of what happens in movies sometimes, like in Frozen when Anna keeps trusting people who hurt her, or in other stories where someone has to decide whether to give a person another chance. The tricky part is figuring out when forgiveness is wise and when it's just setting yourself up to be hurt again.

The question that's hard to answer is: "How many times should you forgive the same person?" Is there a number where you get to say, "Okay, I'm done forgiving you"? Is three times enough? Seven times? When do you get to stop being forgiving?

Today we're going to hear about a time when one of Jesus's followers asked him exactly this question. And Jesus's answer is going to surprise you, because he completely changes what the question should be. Let's find out what happened when Peter thought he was being really, really generous.

What to Expect: Kids will relate to the sibling/friend scenarios. Many will raise their hands and nod. Some may share quick examples, acknowledge them briefly but keep moving toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Jesus had been teaching his followers about how to handle it when people in their community did wrong things. He gave them a whole process for talking to someone who hurt you and trying to work things out.

Peter had been listening to all of this, and his brain was working overtime. Peter was the kind of person who liked to get things right, but he also wanted clear rules so he'd know what to do.

Jesus had been talking about forgiveness, and Peter was thinking, "Okay, I want to be a good person. I want to forgive people like Jesus teaches. But there's got to be a limit, right? You can't just forgive the same person forever."

Imagine Peter sitting there, maybe counting on his fingers, trying to figure out what would be a really generous amount of forgiveness. The religious teachers of his day said you should forgive someone up to three times, after that, you could write them off.

But Peter wanted to go above and beyond. He thought, "I'll double it, and then add one more for good measure. Seven times! That's really generous. Jesus will be so impressed with how forgiving I'm willing to be."

So Peter walked up to Jesus with confidence. He probably felt pretty good about himself, like when you think you're going to get praise for being extra helpful or kind.

Peter said, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me?" Then he paused dramatically and said, "Up to seven times?"

You can picture Peter waiting for Jesus to say, "Wow, Peter! Seven times is so generous! You really get what I'm teaching about love and forgiveness!"

Instead, Jesus looked at him with this expression that probably said, "Oh, Peter, you're still not understanding how this works."

And then Jesus said something that made Peter's jaw drop: "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Matthew 18:21-22 (NIV)

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times,

but seventy-seven times."

Peter's eyes went wide. Seventy-seven times?! You can imagine him thinking, "Wait, does that mean I need to get a notebook and keep track? 'Okay, that's forgiveness number 23 for Jake, forgiveness number 45 for Emma...?'"

But Jesus wasn't really talking about counting to seventy-seven. He was trying to help Peter understand something much bigger. It's like if someone asked you, "How many times should I hug my mom?" and you said, "A million times!" You wouldn't really mean they should count to a million, you'd mean they should just hug her whenever she needs it.

Jesus was saying, "Peter, you're thinking about this all wrong. Stop trying to find the limit. Stop keeping score. That's not how love works."

Then Jesus told a story to help Peter understand. He said, "There was a king who was checking on money that people owed him. One of his servants owed him ten thousand bags of gold."

Ten thousand bags of gold! That's like owing someone a billion dollars today. There's no way anyone could ever pay that back. The servant was in huge trouble.

The king said, "Since you can't pay me back, I'm going to sell you and your whole family as slaves to get some of my money back." That was the punishment for owing money you couldn't pay in those days.

The servant fell down on his knees, terrified. "Please!" he begged. "Be patient with me! Give me time and I promise I'll pay back everything!" Of course, he couldn't really pay it back, but he was desperate.

Here's the amazing part: the king looked at this servant who owed him more money than anyone could imagine, and his heart was filled with compassion. The king said, "You know what? Forget about it. The whole debt is canceled. You don't owe me anything. You're free to go."

Can you imagine how that servant felt? He probably cried with relief. He was free! The impossible debt was gone! He could go home to his family!

But then something terrible happened. That same servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a hundred silver coins, just a tiny amount compared to what he'd been forgiven.

Instead of remembering how he'd just been forgiven an enormous debt, he grabbed this fellow servant and started choking him! "Pay me back right now!" he demanded.

Matthew 18:29-30 (NIV)

29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' 30 But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt."

The fellow servant said the exact same words: "Be patient with me and I'll pay it back!" But instead of showing mercy like the king had shown him, the first servant had him thrown in jail.

When the other servants saw this, they were outraged. They went straight to the king and told him everything that had happened.

The king was furious. He called the first servant back. "You wicked servant!" he said. "I canceled that enormous debt because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just like I had on you?"

The king was so angry that he handed the servant over to be punished until he could pay back the original debt, which meant forever, since he could never pay it back.

When Jesus finished the story, he looked at Peter and said, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Peter was starting to understand. The lesson wasn't about counting to seventy-seven. It was about remembering how much God has forgiven us. When you realize how much you've been forgiven, it changes how you think about forgiving other people.

Sometimes in our lives, people hurt us more than once. It might be someone who keeps breaking promises, or someone who says mean things, or someone who takes our stuff. And our first thought is usually, "How many times do I have to put up with this?"

But Jesus is saying: remember how many times God has forgiven you. Remember how patient God has been with all your mistakes. When you remember that, it becomes easier to choose forgiveness instead of keeping score.

That doesn't mean you have to let people keep hurting you, sometimes you need to tell a trusted adult, or sometimes you need to stay away from someone who's being harmful. But it does mean you don't have to carry around anger and resentment.

The amazing thing is that when we choose to forgive instead of keeping score, it actually makes us happier and freer. We don't have to waste energy being mad all the time.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Surprise

Imagine you're Peter in this story. You think you're being super generous by offering to forgive someone seven times, way more than most people would. Then Jesus says, "Actually, try seventy-seven times." How do you think Peter felt when he heard that? What would go through your mind if you were him?

Listen For: "Shocked," "confused," "overwhelmed", affirm: "Right! Peter probably thought he was going to get praise, but instead Jesus challenged him to think completely differently."

Question 2: The Debt Difference

In Jesus's story, one servant owed the king ten thousand bags of gold, and the other owed just a hundred silver coins. Why do you think Jesus made such a big difference between those two amounts? What was he trying to help people understand about forgiveness?

If They Say: If they struggle with this, ask: "If someone forgave you for losing their whole video game collection, how would you feel if they then got mad at you for spilling a tiny bit of juice?"

Question 3: The Heart Connection

Jesus said we need to forgive "from your heart." What do you think that means? Is there a difference between saying "I forgive you" with your mouth and forgiving someone from your heart? What would that look like in real life?

Connect: "This is exactly why Jesus told the story, he wanted people to understand that real forgiveness comes from remembering how much we've been forgiven."

Question 4: The Real Life Application

Think about someone who has hurt you more than once. Maybe they've said sorry, but then they did the same thing again. What would it look like to choose forgiveness without keeping score? What might change in your friendship or family relationship?

If They Say: If they bring up concerns about being hurt again, acknowledge: "You can forgive someone and still be wise about protecting yourself. Sometimes forgiving means loving someone but making different choices about the relationship."

You've raised some really thoughtful points about how hard this can be in real life. The good news is that Jesus understands it's not easy, that's why he gave Peter such a memorable way to think about it. Now let's try an activity that will help us understand how keeping score versus not keeping score actually feels different.

4. Activity: The Debt Collection Game (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity reinforces the lesson by having kids physically experience the burden of tracking debts versus the freedom of releasing them. Success looks like kids discovering that keeping score is exhausting while letting go of claims creates freedom and connection.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play "The Debt Collection Game." Everyone will start by scattering around the room. Each of you owes everyone else in the room one "favor point," and everyone owes you one favor point. Your job is to collect all the favor points people owe you while trying to avoid paying back the ones you owe.

Here's how it works: to collect a point someone owes you, you have to chase them down and tag them, then they have to follow you around for ten seconds carrying an invisible heavy box. To pay back a point you owe, when someone tags you, you have to follow them around carrying the heavy box.

The twist is this: while you're carrying someone's heavy box, you can't collect any points from other people. And while someone is carrying your box, you can't chase anyone else either. We're doing this because it's exactly like the story Jesus told, everyone owes everyone else, and the question is whether we focus on collecting what we're owed or releasing people from what they owe us.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Start the activity and let it run for about 2 minutes. You'll notice that everyone is chasing everyone else, people are constantly carrying heavy boxes, and it becomes chaotic and exhausting. Most kids will be frustrated because they can't accomplish their goal of collecting all their points.

Call a brief pause and observe how everyone feels, tired, frustrated, annoyed. Ask: "How is this working out for you? Are you having fun? Are you getting what you want?" Let them share their frustration briefly.

Now introduce the twist: "Here's a new option. Instead of trying to collect what people owe you, you can choose to forgive their debt. If you want to forgive someone, just walk up to them and say, 'Your debt is forgiven.' If someone forgives your debt to them, you don't owe them anything anymore."

Restart the activity and watch what happens. Some kids will continue the collection game, but others will start forgiving debts. As forgiveness spreads, those kids become free from the exhausting chase-and-carry cycle. They can move freely and help others.

After about 2 more minutes, call everyone to stop. Point out the difference between those who kept trying to collect and those who chose to forgive, who looks more tired? Who seems happier? Who was able to connect with other people?

Watch For: The moment when kids realize that forgiving others' debts frees them from the exhausting cycle, this is the physical representation of Jesus's teaching about abundance versus scarcity in forgiveness.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when everyone was trying to collect what they were owed versus when people started forgiving debts? The kids who chose forgiveness got to move freely and help others, while those still collecting stayed trapped in the exhausting cycle. This is exactly what Jesus was teaching Peter, when we stop keeping score and choose forgiveness, we become free to love and connect with people instead of constantly chasing what we think they owe us.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: Jesus doesn't want us to keep score when people hurt us. Instead of counting how many times we've forgiven someone, he wants us to remember how many times God has forgiven us, which is more times than we could ever count.

This doesn't mean you have to let people keep being mean to you. If someone is hurting you repeatedly, you should definitely tell a trusted adult. But it does mean you don't have to carry around anger and resentment, keeping track of who owes you what.

The amazing result is that when we choose forgiveness over keeping score, we become happier and freer. We don't waste energy staying mad, and our relationships can actually heal and grow stronger.

This Week's Challenge

This week, pay attention to when you find yourself keeping score, thinking about how many times someone has let you down or hurt your feelings. When you notice that happening, ask yourself: "What would it look like to choose forgiveness instead of keeping track?" Try releasing one "debt" that you've been holding onto.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you for forgiving us so many times when we make mistakes. Help us remember your forgiveness when other people hurt us. Give us hearts that choose love over keeping score, and help us be free from carrying around anger. When it's hard to forgive, remind us how much you love us. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Grades 1, 3

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that God wants us to forgive people when they say sorry, even if they hurt us before, because God forgives us too.

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 forgiveness to hugging, you don't count how many hugs to give someone you love, you just hug them when they need it.

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's love or forgiveness. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "God's Love is So Wonderful," or "I've Got Peace Like a River." Use movements: spread arms wide during "wonderful," point up during "God," and make a heart shape with hands during "love."

Great singing! Now let's sit down in our special horseshoe shape because I have an amazing story to tell you about Jesus and forgiveness. Come sit facing me so we can all see 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 excited for Peter, wise for Jesus, and dramatic for the king in the story.

Today we're going to meet Peter, one of Jesus's very best friends!

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Peter was a good man who loved Jesus very much. But sometimes Peter got confused about how things worked. One day Peter had a question for Jesus.

[Use curious, thinking voice]

Peter was thinking about forgiveness. He knew Jesus wanted him to forgive people who were mean to him or hurt his feelings. But Peter wondered: how many times do I have to forgive the same person?

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, sound proud]

Peter thought he had a really good answer! He walked up to Jesus and said, "Jesus, if my brother is mean to me, how many times should I forgive him? Seven times?" Peter felt very proud because seven seemed like a lot!

[Move to center, speak like Jesus with love and wisdom]

Jesus smiled at Peter and said something that made Peter's eyes go very wide. Jesus said, "Not seven times, Peter. Try seventy-seven times!"

[Move to side, sound amazed like Peter]

Peter's mouth dropped open! Seventy-seven times?! That's a lot of times! Peter probably tried to count that high and got very confused.

Matthew 18:21-22 (NIV)

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

[Pause and look around at each child]

Do you think Peter was surprised? Yes! He thought seven was a big number, but Jesus said something much bigger!

[Move to center, speak with gentle authority]

But Jesus wasn't really asking Peter to count to seventy-seven. He was teaching Peter that forgiveness isn't about counting at all!

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

Then Jesus told Peter a story about a king and his helpers. The king wanted to see how much money people owed him. One man owed the king SO much money that he could never, ever pay it back!

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

The king was going to punish the man for owing so much money. But the man said, "Please! Give me more time!" He was very scared and very sad.

[Speak with excitement]

The kind king looked at the man and felt sorry for him. The king said, "You know what? You don't owe me anything anymore! You're free! Go home to your family!" The man was SO happy!

[Pause dramatically]

But then something sad happened. That same man found someone who owed him just a tiny bit of money. Instead of being kind like the king was to him, he was very mean!

[Speak directly to the children]

When the king found out, he was very upset. He said, "I was so kind to you! Why weren't you kind to others?"

[Move closer to the children]

Jesus told this story to help Peter understand. God forgives us for so many things when we do wrong. So we should forgive other people too, even if they hurt us more than once.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

When someone says sorry to us, we can choose to forgive them. That means we choose to be kind instead of staying mad. God will help us do this!

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 special question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, just tell your partner 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 Peter felt when Jesus said seventy-seven times?
 2. Why do you think the king was kind to the man who owed him money?
 3. How did the happy man feel when the king forgave him?
 4. Why was it sad when the man wasn't kind to someone else?
 5. What does it feel like when someone forgives you?
 6. What does it feel like when you forgive someone else?
 7. Is it hard to forgive someone who hurt you before?
 8. How can God help us forgive people?
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9. What if someone takes your toy and says sorry?

10. What if your brother or sister is mean and then sorry?

11. Why does God want us to forgive people?

12. How many times does God forgive us?

13. What if someone at school is mean to you?

14. Is it okay to feel sad when someone hurts you?

15. What's the difference between feeling sad and staying mad?

16. How can we choose to be kind even when we feel hurt?

17. Who can you tell if someone keeps being mean?

18. What did you learn about forgiveness today?

19. How can you practice forgiving this week?

20. What should you remember when it's hard to forgive?

Great discussions! Let's come back together in our horseshoe. 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 or forgiveness. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "Love, Love, Love," or "If You're Happy and You Know It" (adapted with forgiveness verses). Include movements: gentle hand gestures during "be kind," heart hands during "love," and clapping during happy songs.

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down quietly for our prayer time. Sit cross-legged in your rows and fold your hands. 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 and forgiving us when we make mistakes.

[Pause]

Help us to forgive other people when they hurt our feelings or are mean to us. Help us remember that you forgive us lots of times too.

[Pause]

When it's hard to forgive someone, help us choose to be kind anyway. Thank you for always loving us no matter what.

[Pause]

Thank you for being such a good and loving God. Help us be good and loving like you. 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: "Help me forgive my sister" or "Thank you for forgiving me when I'm not nice."

Remember, God wants us to forgive people when they say sorry, just like he forgives us. Have a wonderful week, and ask God to help you choose kindness!

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# Connected Hearts

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*The Forgiveness Link, When does my unforgiveness block God's forgiveness?*

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**Matthew 6:5-15**

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## Instructor Preparation

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

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## The Passage

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**Matthew 6:5-15 (NIV)**

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*5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

*9 "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'*

*14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

## Context

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Jesus is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, teaching his disciples how to live as citizens of God's kingdom. He's just addressed issues of righteousness, anger, adultery, divorce, and oaths. Now he turns to prayer, contrasting kingdom prayer with the empty religious performance of his day. This isn't casual teaching, it's a manifesto about how God's people relate to their Father.

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Jesus has just given them the Lord's Prayer, including the line "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." But he doesn't move on. Instead, he stops and unpacks that one line with laser focus. Of all the petitions in the prayer, this is the only one he explains further. The connection between divine and human forgiveness isn't a side note, it's central to kingdom living.

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## The Big Idea

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**Divine forgiveness and human forgiveness are not separate transactions, they are two sides of the same spiritual reality.**

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This isn't about earning God's forgiveness through good works, nor is it about cheap grace that ignores justice. It's about the profound truth that unforgiveness creates a spiritual blockage that prevents us from receiving what God freely offers. The person who withholds forgiveness has, in that very act, stepped outside the circle of grace.

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## Theological Core

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- **Forgiveness Interdependence.** Divine and human forgiveness are not merely connected, they are interdependent realities that cannot be separated without destroying both.
  - **Unforgiveness Consequence.** Withholding forgiveness doesn't just hurt relationships; it creates a spiritual barrier that blocks our ability to receive God's forgiveness.
  - **Divine-Human Connection.** Our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with others are so intertwined that dysfunction in one immediately affects the other.
  - **Conditional Grace.** While God's love is unconditional, experiencing the full benefits of that love requires us to live in harmony with its character, which is fundamentally forgiving.
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## Age Group Overview

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### What Each Age Group Learns

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#### Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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- God's forgiveness and our forgiveness of others are spiritually connected in ways that affect our experience of grace
  - Unforgiveness doesn't change God's love, but it creates internal barriers that prevent us from receiving forgiveness fully
  - The call to forgive others isn't about ignoring justice but about choosing to live within the flow of divine grace
  - Discerning when and how to forgive requires wisdom about boundaries, repentance, and restoration processes
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#### Grades 4, 6

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- When we refuse to forgive others, it makes it harder for us to feel God's forgiveness in our own lives
  - Choosing to forgive doesn't mean pretending everything is okay or allowing people to hurt us repeatedly
  - Forgiveness is a process that starts with a choice and grows over time with God's help
  - Our feelings of anger or hurt are valid, and we can work through them while still choosing to forgive
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#### Grades 1, 3

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- God forgives us when we do wrong things, and he wants us to forgive others too
  - God helps us forgive people when it feels hard
  - When we forgive others, we feel closer to God
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## Common Pitfalls to Avoid

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- **Toxic Obligation.** Don't present forgiveness as an immediate requirement regardless of safety or repentance. Jesus's teaching assumes relationship restoration processes, not enabling abuse or ignoring justice.
  - **Earning Grace.** Avoid suggesting that we earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. The text shows connection and consequence, not merit-based salvation. God's love remains constant even when our experience of it is blocked.
  - **Minimizing Justice.** Don't ignore the reality that some wrongs require accountability, boundaries, and systemic change. Forgiveness and justice work together, not against each other.
  - **Cheap Resolution.** Resist the urge to make forgiveness sound easy or quick. Acknowledge that some hurts require time, process, and often professional help to work through properly.
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## Handling Hard Questions

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**"Does this mean God won't forgive me if I can't forgive someone who really hurt me?"**

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God's love for you never changes, but unforgiveness does create a spiritual blockage that makes it hard to receive that love fully. Think of it like having your hands clenched in fists, God is still offering gifts, but you can't receive them until you open your hands. Forgiveness is often a process that takes time and help, not a one-time decision. God walks with you through that process and understands the journey.

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**"What about situations where someone never apologizes or keeps hurting people?"**

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Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending everything is fine or removing all consequences. You can choose to release your right to revenge while still maintaining healthy boundaries, seeking justice, or protecting others from harm. Sometimes forgiveness means handing someone over to God's justice rather than trying to punish them yourself. Forgiveness and wisdom about safety can work together.

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**"Isn't this teaching people to be doormats and let others walk all over them?"**

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Jesus himself confronted wrongdoing, called out hypocrisy, and established boundaries throughout his ministry. Forgiveness isn't about becoming passive or enabling harmful behavior. It's about refusing to let bitterness poison your own heart while still addressing wrongs appropriately. True forgiveness often requires more courage than revenge because it seeks restoration rather than destruction.

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## **The One Thing to Remember**

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**Your ability to receive God's forgiveness is directly connected to your willingness to extend it to others, not because God's love changes, but because unforgiveness creates barriers in your own heart.**

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## **Grades 7, 8 / Adult**

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

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### **Your Main Job Today**

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Guide students to wrestle with the profound connection between receiving and extending forgiveness. Help them explore how unforgiveness might be blocking their own experience of God's grace while honoring the complexity of real-world hurt and justice.

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### **The Tension to Frame**

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If God's love is unconditional, why does our forgiveness of others seem to affect God's forgiveness of us? How do we balance the call to forgive with the need for justice and boundaries?

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### **Discussion Facilitation Tips**

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- Validate that some hurts are genuinely difficult to forgive and that students' resistance to cheap answers shows moral maturity
  - Honor the complexity by acknowledging that forgiveness and justice work together, not against each other
  - Let students wrestle with the tension rather than rushing to resolve it, the wrestling itself is where growth happens
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## 1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

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Imagine your best friend borrows something important to you, maybe your car, your favorite jacket, or expensive headphones, and completely destroys it. Not by accident, but through carelessness or even intentional disrespect. When you confront them, they shrug it off with "Whatever, it's just stuff." No apology, no offer to replace it, no acknowledgment of how their action affected you.

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Now imagine that same week, you accidentally damage something that belongs to someone else. You genuinely feel terrible about it and want to make things right. You're hoping for understanding and forgiveness. But there's something interesting happening in your heart, you find it almost impossible to receive that forgiveness or believe you deserve it while you're still burning with resentment toward your friend.

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Today we're looking at something Jesus taught that might explain this connection. He suggested that our ability to receive forgiveness and our willingness to extend forgiveness are linked in ways that go deeper than we might expect. It's not just about being consistent, it's about how the human heart actually works spiritually.

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As we read, notice how Jesus frames the connection between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness. Pay attention to whether this sounds like earning God's forgiveness through good behavior, or something else entirely. Also notice that this comes right after the Lord's Prayer, it's the only part of that prayer Jesus chooses to expand on.

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Open your Bibles to Matthew 6, and let's start with verse 5 to get the full context. We'll read silently first, then discuss what strikes you.

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## 2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

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**Managing Silent Reading:** Walk quietly around the room. Some students may finish early, let them reread or think about the questions below. If someone seems stuck on a word, quietly help them. Let the weight of verses 14-15 sink in, this is challenging teaching that deserves time to process.

### As You Read, Think About:

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- What does Jesus emphasize about prayer in the opening verses?
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- Why might Jesus single out the forgiveness line from the Lord's Prayer for special explanation?
- What's surprising or challenging about the connection Jesus makes between divine and human forgiveness?
- How would you feel if someone taught this to you for the first time?

### Matthew 6:5-15 (NIV)

*5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*

*9 "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'*

*14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

### 3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

#### Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

**Selecting Readers:** Ask for volunteers to read different sections. Let students pass if they're not comfortable. Choose confident readers for the Lord's Prayer section since it's familiar, and someone who can handle the challenging tone of verses 14-15.

**Reader 1:** Verses 5-8 (Jesus contrasting kingdom prayer with religious performance) **Reader 2:** Verses 9-13 (The Lord's Prayer) **Reader 3:** Verses 14-15 (The forgiveness connection explained)

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Listen for the shift in tone when we get to verses 14-15. This isn't casual teaching, Jesus is making an important point about how spiritual reality works.

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### Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

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**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 groups that get stuck with "What surprised you most?" or "What seems hardest to understand?"

Get into groups of 3 or 4. Your job is to come up with one or two questions that you're genuinely curious about from this passage. These should be real questions, things you actually want to understand better, not questions you already know the answer to. For example, "Why does Jesus connect these two things?" or "What does this mean for people who've been really hurt?" You have three minutes to discuss and agree on your questions.

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### Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

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**Remember:** Let students drive the discussion with their questions. Your role is to facilitate discovery, not lecture. Guide them to see patterns and connections rather than giving answers directly.

**Collecting Questions:** Write student questions on the board. Look for themes and start with questions that connect to their daily experience of relationships and forgiveness.

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### Probing Questions (to go deeper)

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- "What evidence do you see that Jesus considers this connection between divine and human forgiveness really important?"
  - "How is this different from saying 'You have to earn God's forgiveness by being good to other people'?"
  - "What might unforgiveness do to someone's heart that could block them from receiving forgiveness?"
-

- "How do we balance this teaching with situations where someone never apologizes or keeps causing harm?"
- "When is forgiveness wise and when might it be foolish or even dangerous?"
- "What's the difference between forgiving someone and trusting them again?"
- "If this is true, what would it look like in your relationships with family, friends, or people at school?"
- "Why might Jesus care more about our hearts toward others than just our vertical relationship with God?"

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### **Revealing the Pattern**

Do you notice what's happening here? Jesus isn't saying we earn God's forgiveness through our actions. He's showing us that unforgiveness creates a kind of spiritual blockage. When we hold tight to resentment, our hearts become closed fists that can't receive what God wants to give us. It's not that God's love changes, it's that our capacity to receive and experience that love gets blocked by the very attitude that's opposite to forgiveness.

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### **4. Application (3, 4 minutes)**

Let's get real about your lives for a minute. Where do you see this pattern playing out? Think about your relationships with family members, friends, classmates, teachers, or even people online. Where are you holding onto resentment, and how might that be affecting your ability to receive grace in your own life?

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### **Real Issues This Connects To**

- That classmate who spread rumors about you and never apologized, how does holding onto anger affect your peace?
  - Family members who've hurt you repeatedly, balancing forgiveness with healthy boundaries
  - Friends who betrayed your trust, deciding whether restoration is possible or wise
  - Online conflicts where people hide behind anonymity to hurt others
  - Systemic injustices where forgiveness intersects with demands for accountability and change
  - Personal failures where you struggle to forgive yourself and receive God's forgiveness
-

**Facilitation:** Let students share examples without rushing to fix everything. Some situations are genuinely complex and require different responses. Help them think through discernment rather than offering blanket advice that might not fit their circumstances.

## Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone choose forgiveness in a way that actually made things better?"
- "What would help you move toward forgiveness in a situation where you're genuinely stuck?"
- "How do you discern the difference between healthy forgiveness and enabling harmful behavior?"
- "What's the difference between genuine forgiveness and just pretending everything is fine?"

## 5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you today: Your heart is designed to work as an open channel of grace, receiving God's forgiveness and extending it to others. When you clench your heart closed against someone else, you also close it to receiving what God wants to give you. This isn't because God is keeping score, but because unforgiveness fundamentally changes how your heart operates spiritually.

This week, pay attention to any resentment you're carrying and how it might be affecting your ability to feel God's love and forgiveness in your own life. Notice where you might need to begin the process, and it is a process, of releasing your right to revenge and opening your heart back up to grace. Some situations may require help from others to work through safely.

You've wrestled with hard questions today, and that wrestling shows you're taking this seriously. Keep asking those questions. Keep thinking through what it means to live with an open heart in a world where people hurt each other. That's exactly the kind of thinking God honors and uses to help you grow in wisdom.

## Grades 4, 6

## Your Main Job Today

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Help kids understand that holding grudges makes it hard for them to feel close to God and receive his forgiveness in their own hearts, while still honoring that some hurts take time to heal.

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## If Kids Ask "What if someone keeps hurting me over and over?"

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Say: "Forgiving doesn't mean letting people keep hurting you. You can forgive someone and still stay safe by telling trusted adults and having good boundaries."

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### 1. Opening (5 minutes)

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Raise your hand if you've ever had someone break something that belonged to you. Keep your hand up if they never said they were sorry or tried to make it right. Now raise your other hand if you've ever broken something that belonged to someone else and hoped they would forgive you.

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Here's a harder question: Imagine you accidentally broke your mom's favorite mug, and you really want her to forgive you. But at the same time, you're still mad at your brother for breaking your game controller last month and never apologizing. Part of you wants forgiveness from Mom, but another part of you is thinking, "Why should I get forgiveness when my brother didn't give me any?"

---

That feeling makes total sense, doesn't it? When we're holding onto anger against someone who hurt us, it becomes really hard to believe we deserve forgiveness for the things we've done wrong. It's like our hearts get all tangled up and can't open up to receive good things when they're closed tight against other people.

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This reminds me of characters in movies like Elsa in "Frozen," who had to learn that keeping her heart closed to protect herself also kept her from experiencing love. Or like the Beast in "Beauty and the Beast," whose anger and bitterness made it impossible for him to believe anyone could really love him until he learned to open his heart again.

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The tricky part is figuring out how to open our hearts to receive love and forgiveness while also protecting ourselves from people who might hurt us again. Some hurts are small and easy to get over, but others are really big and need time and help to heal.

---

Today we're going to hear about something Jesus taught his disciples about prayer and forgiveness. Jesus noticed that our ability to receive God's forgiveness and our willingness to forgive other people are connected in surprising ways. Let's find out what he discovered about how our hearts work.

**What to Expect:** Kids may share stories about broken items or unfair treatment. Acknowledge their examples briefly: "That sounds really frustrating" or "I can understand why you'd feel hurt." Keep momentum moving toward the story.

## 2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Jesus and his disciples were sitting together on a hillside, and Jesus was teaching them about how to live as God's people. This wasn't just a casual conversation, this was some of the most important teaching Jesus ever gave.

The disciples had been watching the religious leaders of their day, and they'd noticed something troubling. These leaders would stand on street corners and pray really loudly so everyone could see how spiritual they were. They would use big, fancy words and go on and on, thinking God would be more impressed with longer prayers.

Jesus saw his disciples looking confused and maybe a little worried about how prayer was supposed to work. Were they supposed to perform like those leaders? Were they supposed to use special words or pray for a certain amount of time?

Imagine how relieved they must have felt when Jesus said, "Don't pray like that. When you pray, you're not performing for an audience, you're talking to your Father who loves you. Go somewhere private, close the door, and just talk to God honestly."

Then Jesus taught them a prayer that would become the most famous prayer in history. It was simple, honest, and covered all the things that really matter to God and to people.

He said, "Pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven, your name is holy. We want your kingdom to come and your will to be done on earth just like it is in heaven. Give us what we need for today. Forgive us for the wrong things we've done, just like we forgive people who do wrong things to us. And help us avoid temptation and protect us from evil.'"

The disciples probably thought Jesus would move on to the next topic after teaching them this prayer. But he didn't. Instead, Jesus stopped and focused on just one line from the prayer, the part about

forgiveness.

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Jesus looked at them seriously and said something that probably surprised them. He said, "This is really important, so I want to make sure you understand. If you forgive other people when they hurt you, your heavenly Father will forgive you too."

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**Matthew 6:14 (NIV)**

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*14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

That probably sounded pretty good to the disciples. It made sense that there would be a connection between forgiving others and being forgiven by God. But then Jesus said something that was harder to hear.

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He continued: "But if you don't forgive other people, your Father won't forgive your sins either." Jesus didn't say this to be mean or to scare them. He was explaining how their hearts actually work spiritually.

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**Matthew 6:15 (NIV)**

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*15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

The disciples might have felt confused or even worried. Was Jesus saying they had to earn God's forgiveness by being perfect at forgiving everyone? That would be impossible!

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But Jesus wasn't talking about earning God's love. God's love never changes. Jesus was explaining something deeper about how our hearts work. When we hold onto anger and refuse to forgive someone, our hearts become like clenched fists. And when your hands are closed tight in fists, you can't receive anything, even if someone is trying to give you exactly what you need.

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It's not that God stops offering forgiveness when we don't forgive others. It's that unforgiveness changes our hearts in a way that makes it really hard to receive and feel that forgiveness. Our hearts get all closed up and defensive, and we can't experience the peace and love that God wants to give us.

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When we choose to forgive, even when it's hard, even when it takes time, our hearts start to open back up. We become able to receive God's forgiveness and feel his love again. It's like unclenching our fists

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so our hands can be filled with good things.

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Jesus taught this because he wants us to live with open, free hearts that can both give and receive love. He knows that unforgiveness is like a poison that hurts us more than it hurts the person we're mad at.

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The disciples learned that day that forgiveness isn't just about being nice to other people. It's about keeping their own hearts healthy and open to God's love. When we forgive others, we're also setting ourselves free to experience all the good things God wants to give us.

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Sometimes in our lives, we get hurt by friends who leave us out, siblings who break our things, or even adults who let us down. When we hold onto that anger, it's like carrying around a heavy backpack full of rocks, it makes everything harder and keeps us from running freely.

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What we learn from Jesus is that God wants to help us put that heavy backpack down. When we choose to forgive, with God's help, we don't just free the person who hurt us. We free ourselves to feel light and loved again.

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This doesn't mean we have to pretend everything is okay or let people keep hurting us. But it does mean we can choose not to carry around anger that makes our own hearts heavy and closed.

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

### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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#### Question 1: The Heavy Backpack

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Think about a time when you were really mad at someone and held onto that anger for a while. How did it feel to carry that around inside you? Did it make you feel heavy, tired, or grumpy? Now imagine that anger as a backpack full of rocks that you have to carry everywhere. What would that feel like?

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**Listen For:** "Heavy," "tired," "made me sad too," "hard to have fun", affirm: "Yes! Anger really does make us feel heavy inside, doesn't it?"

#### Question 2: The Clenched Fists

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Jesus explained that unforgiveness makes our hearts like clenched fists that can't receive good things. Make fists with your hands right now and imagine I'm trying to give you your favorite candy. Could you take it with your hands like that? Now open your hands. What's the difference?

**If They Say:** "You can't take anything when your hands are closed", respond: "Exactly! That's how unforgiveness works in our hearts."

### Question 3: The Forgiveness Choice

Jesus said that when we forgive others, it opens up our hearts to receive God's forgiveness too. That doesn't mean forgiving is always easy or that feelings change right away. But why do you think choosing to forgive helps us feel closer to God?

**Connect:** "This is exactly what Jesus was teaching, forgiveness opens our hearts to feel God's love again."

### Question 4: The Safe Forgiveness

Sometimes kids worry that forgiving someone means they have to let that person hurt them again. But forgiveness and staying safe can both be true at the same time. How might someone forgive a person who hurt them while still being wise about protecting themselves?

**If They Say:** "Tell a grown-up," "stay away from them," "forgive but don't trust them yet", affirm these wise responses while honoring the complexity of real situations.

You've shared some really wise thoughts about forgiveness today. Now let's do an activity that will help us feel what Jesus was teaching about how our hearts work when they're open versus when they're closed.

## 4. Activity: The Circle of Trust (8 minutes)

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

### Purpose

This activity reinforces the truth that closed, defensive hearts can't receive good things, while open, trusting hearts can both give and receive freely. Success looks like kids discovering that opening up to help others actually makes it easier to receive help themselves, just like forgiveness opens our hearts to receive God's forgiveness.

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### **Instructions to Class(3 minutes)**

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We're going to play something called "The Circle of Trust." Half of you will start by standing in a tight circle facing outward with your backs to each other and your arms crossed. You're the "Closed Heart" group. The other half will spread out around the room as individual "Needy People" who need help with something.

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Each Needy Person has a simple task they can't do alone, like reaching something high, carrying something heavy, or getting past an obstacle. But here's the challenge: the Closed Heart group has their backs to everyone and their arms crossed, so they can't see who needs help or offer assistance.

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After a few minutes, I'll ask the Closed Heart group to turn around, uncross their arms, and spread out to help the Needy People. Then we'll switch roles so everyone gets to experience both sides.

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We're doing this because it's exactly like what Jesus taught about forgiveness, when our hearts are closed and defensive, we can't give help OR receive help. But when our hearts are open, we can do both.

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### **During the Activity(4 minutes)**

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First phase: Let the Closed Heart group stand with backs turned and arms crossed for about 90 seconds while the Needy People struggle with their tasks alone. Watch how frustrating it becomes for both groups when help is so close but can't be given or received.

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The struggle: As the Needy People get more frustrated and the Closed Heart group realizes they can't help, coach with phrases like: "I notice some people need help, but there are others right here who could help..." "I wonder what would have to change for help to flow..."

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Coaching phrases: Say things like "What would need to happen for the helpers to see the need?" and "What's keeping the help from reaching the people who need it?" Guide them toward the realization that opening up physically represents opening up emotionally.

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The breakthrough: When you tell the Closed Heart group to turn around and uncross their arms, celebrate the immediate change: "Look what happens when hearts open up! Now help can flow both ways!" Watch how quickly problems get solved when people can both give and receive.

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Completion: After everyone has helped and been helped, have them notice the difference between the closed phase and the open phase. "How did it feel when your backs were turned versus when you could face each other and help?"

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**Watch For:** The moment when someone in the Closed Heart group wants to help but realizes they can't because of their position, this is the physical representation of how unforgiveness blocks our ability to give and receive love.

### **Debrief(1 minute)**

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What did you notice about how it felt when your backs were turned and arms crossed versus when you could face each other with open arms? When we're closed off, we can't help others AND we can't receive help, just like unforgiveness closes our hearts to both giving and receiving God's love. But when we choose to forgive and open our hearts, suddenly we can both give help and receive help freely. That's the amazing thing Jesus was teaching about forgiveness!

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## **5. Closing (2 minutes)**

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Here's what we learned today: God wants our hearts to be open so we can both give forgiveness and receive forgiveness freely. When we hold onto anger and refuse to forgive, our hearts become closed like clenched fists, and it becomes hard to feel God's love and forgiveness in our own lives.

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This doesn't mean we have to pretend everything is okay when someone hurts us, or that our feelings don't matter. It's okay to feel angry or sad when someone treats us badly. But we can work through those feelings and choose forgiveness with God's help so our hearts stay open and free.

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The amazing result is that when we forgive others, we don't just help them, we help ourselves! We get to feel light and loved again instead of carrying around that heavy backpack of anger.

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### **This Week's Challenge**

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Think of one person you're holding onto anger against, maybe someone who hurt your feelings, broke your things, or left you out. Ask God to help you start the process of forgiving them. You don't have to

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do it all at once, and you don't have to trust them completely right away. Just ask God to help your heart start opening up again so you can feel his love more clearly.

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### **Closing Prayer (Optional)**

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*Dear God, thank you for forgiving us when we do wrong things. Help us to forgive others when they hurt us, even when it feels really hard. We don't want to carry around heavy anger that makes our hearts closed. Help our hearts stay open to your love and help us remember that forgiveness sets us free. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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## **Grades 1, 3**

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

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### **Your Main Job Today**

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Help kids understand that God wants us to forgive others because he forgives us, and that when we forgive, we feel closer to God.

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### **Movement & Formation Plan**

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- **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**

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Compare unforgiveness to holding tight to a toy and not being able to catch a ball someone throws to you. Then ask: "How is forgiveness like opening your hands?"

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## 1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

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**Formation:** Standing in a circle

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Select a song about God's love and forgiveness. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "God is So Good," or "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." Use movements: Point up to God during "Jesus loves me," hug yourself during "this I know," and open arms wide during "for the Bible tells me so."

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Great singing! Now let's sit down in our special story shape so I can tell you something important that Jesus taught about forgiving people. This is going to be a really good story!

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## 2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

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

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**Animated Delivery:** Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound peaceful when talking about prayer, sound serious but loving when sharing Jesus's teaching about forgiveness.

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Today we're going to meet Jesus and his special friends called disciples!

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*[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]*

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One day, Jesus and his friends were sitting on a hill, and Jesus wanted to teach them something very important about talking to God. Some people in their town would stand on corners and pray really loud so everyone would look at them and think they were super good.

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*[Cup hands around mouth and speak loudly like showing off]*

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But Jesus said, "Don't pray like that! When you pray, you're talking to God who is your loving Father. You can just talk to him honestly, like you talk to someone you love very much."

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*[Move to other side of horseshoe, speak gently]*

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Then Jesus taught them a special prayer. He said, "Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, your name is holy. Please give us what we need each day. And forgive us when we do wrong things, just like we forgive other people when they do wrong things to us."

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*[Move to center, speak with loving authority]*

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After Jesus taught them this prayer, he stopped and said something really important about the forgiveness part.

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*[Lean forward toward the children]*

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Jesus said, "Listen carefully! If you forgive other people when they hurt you, your heavenly Father will forgive you too!"

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**Matthew 6:14 (NIV)**

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*14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

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*[Pause and look around at each child]*

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Do you think that sounded good to Jesus's friends? Yes! They liked hearing that God would forgive them when they forgave others.

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*[Move to center, speak seriously but lovingly]*

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But then Jesus said something else that was harder to understand. He said, "But if you don't forgive other people, your Father won't forgive you either."

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*[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]*

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Jesus wasn't trying to be mean. He was teaching them how their hearts work! When we hold onto being mad at someone and refuse to forgive them, our hearts become like closed boxes. And when your heart is like a closed box, it's hard for God's love and forgiveness to get inside!

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*[Stop walking and face the children directly]*

---

But when we choose to forgive someone, even when it's hard, our hearts open up like flowers opening to the sunshine! Then God's love can fill our hearts up completely.

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*[Speak with excitement, opening arms wide]*

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Jesus taught this because he loves us and wants our hearts to be happy and free! When we forgive others, we feel closer to God and we feel peaceful inside.

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*[Pause dramatically]*

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God always loves us no matter what, but when we forgive other people, we can feel that love so much better! It's like cleaning the windows of a house so the sunshine can come in brightly.

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*[Speak directly to the children]*

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Sometimes in our lives, our brothers or sisters might break our toys, or friends at school might say mean things to us, or someone might not share when we wanted them to. When that happens, we might feel angry or sad.

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*[Move closer to the children]*

---

When someone hurts our feelings, we can choose to forgive them. That means we decide not to stay mad at them forever. We can ask God to help us forgive, and God is always ready to help us!

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*[Speak warmly and encouragingly]*

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And here's the best part: when we forgive others, our hearts feel light and happy again, and we can feel how much God loves us! Forgiveness is like a special gift we give that makes everyone feel better, including us!

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### **3. Discussion (5 minutes)**

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

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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 with each other. There are no wrong answers, just share what you think!

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**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**

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

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1. How do you think Jesus's friends felt when they heard about forgiveness?

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2. When someone hurts your feelings, how do you feel inside?

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3. What does it mean to forgive someone?

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4. If your friend said sorry for breaking your toy, what would you do?

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5. How do you think God feels when we forgive others?

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6. Who helps us when it's hard to forgive someone?

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7. How do you feel when someone forgives you?

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8. What happens when we don't forgive and stay mad for a long time?

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9. How is forgiving someone like opening a present?

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10. When have you forgiven someone and felt good about it?

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11. Why do you think Jesus wants us to forgive others?

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12. How can we ask God to help us forgive?

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13. What's the difference between a closed box heart and an open heart?

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14. How does it feel when someone you hurt forgives you?

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15. What would happen if nobody ever forgave anybody?

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16. How is God's love like sunshine coming through clean windows?

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17. Who is someone you could forgive this week?

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18. How can we pray about forgiveness?

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19. What would happen if everyone in the world chose to forgive?

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20. How can we be like Jesus when someone hurts us?

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

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#### **4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Standing in straight lines facing forward

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Select songs about love and forgiveness. Suggestions: "This Little Light of Mine," "If I Were a Butterfly," or "God is Love." Include movements: Make heart shapes with hands during love songs, point to self then others during "love one another," and spread arms wide during songs about God's love.

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Beautiful singing! Now let's sit down in our prayer rows. We're going to talk to God about forgiveness and ask him to help our hearts stay open and loving.

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#### **5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)**

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

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*Dear God, thank you for loving us so much and for forgiving us when we do wrong things.*

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*[Pause]*

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*Please help us to forgive our friends and family when they hurt our feelings or do things that make us sad or mad. Sometimes it feels really hard to forgive, but we know you can help us.*

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*[Pause]*

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*Help us remember that when we forgive others, our hearts feel happy and open, and we can feel your love even better. We want to be like Jesus and have loving, forgiving hearts.*

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*[Pause]*

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*Thank you for being our loving Father who always forgives us and helps us forgive others too. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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**Alternative, Popcorn Prayer:** If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about forgiveness. Examples: "Help me forgive my sister" or "Thank you for forgiving me when I'm not nice."

Remember this week that God loves you so much and wants to help you have a happy, forgiving heart. When someone hurts your feelings, you can ask God to help you forgive them. Have a wonderful week feeling God's love!

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# Love While Enemies

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*Divine Timing, What does love that waits for worthiness miss?*

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**Romans 5:1-11**

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## Instructor Preparation

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

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## The Passage

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**Romans 5:1-11 (NIV)**

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*1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

*6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

## Context

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Paul has just finished explaining how justification comes through faith rather than works, fundamentally challenging the religious framework his readers understood. This passage serves as the climactic proof of God's revolutionary approach to relationship. Paul writes to both Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome who are struggling with questions of worthiness, inclusion, and what qualifies someone for God's love.

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The immediate context follows Paul's argument about Abraham's faith and precedes his comparison between Adam and Christ. Paul is establishing the foundation for understanding grace, that God's love operates on completely different principles than human love. The stakes are enormous: if God's love requires worthiness first, then no one qualifies. Paul is demonstrating that divine love inverts every natural assumption about when and why love is extended.

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## The Big Idea

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**God's love operates precisely when we are enemies, not friends, while we are in active rebellion, not after we've reformed ourselves.**

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This challenges every human instinct about conditional love and reveals the radical nature of divine timing. God doesn't wait for improvement, repentance, or even basic human decency. The love comes while sin is active and enmity is real. This isn't overlooking sin, it's loving through it.

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## Theological Core

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- **Timing of Love.** Divine love operates during enmity, not after reconciliation. The "while still sinners" phrase demolishes any timeline that requires improvement before love.
  - **Love During Enmity.** Paul explicitly states we were "God's enemies" when Christ died for us. This isn't neutral indifference but active opposition that God loves through.
  - **Divine Initiative.** God demonstrates His love through action taken entirely from His side, without human cooperation, consent, or worthiness.
  - **No-Precondition Love.** The absence of requirements for receiving God's love establishes a pattern that challenges every conditional approach to loving others.
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## Age Group Overview

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# What Each Age Group Learns

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## Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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- Divine love operates during active opposition, establishing a pattern we're called to imitate
  - The complexity of loving people in their current failures rather than waiting for their improvement
  - How to apply enemy-love practically without enabling harm or avoiding boundaries
  - Discerning when love requires action during someone's worst behavior rather than after they change
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## Grades 4, 6

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- God's love doesn't depend on our good behavior, it comes while we're still making mistakes
  - We can choose to love bullies, annoying siblings, and difficult classmates right now
  - Loving someone doesn't mean letting them hurt us, but it does mean wishing them good
  - Our feelings about difficult people are normal, but we can love them anyway
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## Grades 1, 3

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- God loves us even when we disobey, His love never stops
  - God is always kind to us, even when we're not kind to Him
  - We can be kind to others even when they're not kind to us
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## Common Pitfalls to Avoid

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- **Minimizing Sin.** Don't soften the "enemies" language, Paul means real opposition to God. Divine love is radical precisely because it acts while enmity is genuine and active, not just theoretical.
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- **Enabling Harmful Behavior.** Enemy-love doesn't require accepting abuse or avoiding boundaries. God's love for enemies doesn't eliminate consequences or enable ongoing harm to others.
- **Creating Impossible Standards.** Don't present this as easy or natural, loving enemies goes against every human instinct. Acknowledge the difficulty while calling people to the divine pattern.
- **Ignoring the Cost.** Divine love toward enemies cost God everything, Christ's death. Don't present enemy-love as simple kindness without acknowledging it requires genuine sacrifice.

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## Handling Hard Questions

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### **"If God loves everyone while they're sinners, why do some people go to hell?"**

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This passage shows God's heart and initiative, love offered to all while they're enemies. But love can be rejected. God's love is universal in its offer but requires response. The cross demonstrates God's heart toward every enemy; hell demonstrates the tragedy of refused love. God's timing in offering love doesn't guarantee everyone's timing in receiving it.

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### **"Does loving enemies mean letting people walk all over us?"**

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Enemy-love doesn't mean accepting abuse or avoiding boundaries. God loves His enemies but still maintains justice. We can love people who harm us while protecting ourselves and others. Love seeks their good, but wisdom recognizes that enabling harmful behavior doesn't serve anyone's good. Boundaries can be expressions of love.

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### **"How can we love people who are actively hurting others?"**

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This is the heart of divine love, loving while someone is in active rebellion. It doesn't mean approving their actions or avoiding intervention. God loved us while we were enemies but still worked to stop the harm sin causes. We can love oppressors while opposing oppression, love addicts while fighting addiction's effects.

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## The One Thing to Remember

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**God's love comes while we're enemies, not friends, and this impossible timing becomes the pattern for how we're meant to love others in their worst moments.**

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## **Grades 7, 8 / Adult**

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

### **Your Main Job Today**

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Guide students to wrestle with the radical nature of divine timing, that God loves during enmity, not after reconciliation. Help them explore how this divine pattern challenges their assumptions about when and why to extend love to difficult people in their own lives.

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### **The Tension to Frame**

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If God loved us while we were His enemies, what does this demand regarding those currently opposed to us or in states of obvious failure?

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### **Discussion Facilitation Tips**

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- Validate their instinct to withhold love until people improve, it's completely natural and makes practical sense
  - Honor the complexity of boundaries, loving enemies doesn't mean accepting abuse or enabling harm
  - Let students wrestle with the impossibility rather than providing easy answers about enemy-love
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### **1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)**

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Imagine someone at school who's been spreading rumors about you for months. Every time you see them, they find a new way to make your life harder. They mock you publicly, sabotage group projects, and turn other people against you. Now imagine your mom telling you, "I want you to do something really nice for them today. Show them love."

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Your immediate response is probably, "Are you kidding me? They hate me! Why should I be nice to someone who's actively trying to hurt me? Let them apologize first. Let them prove they've changed. Then maybe we can talk." And honestly? That response makes perfect sense.

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Today we're looking at someone who faced something similar, except the stakes were infinitely higher. We're talking about God's relationship with humanity, not just people who were indifferent to God, but people who were actively opposing Him, living as His enemies. And the question is: when does God choose to love them?

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As you read this passage, pay attention to the timing. Notice when God acts and when we respond. Look for any requirements or conditions that had to be met before God's love showed up. This timing is going to challenge everything you think you know about how love works.

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Open your Bibles to Romans 5, starting at verse 1. We're going to read through verse 11, and I want you to read it silently first.

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## 2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

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**Managing Silent Reading:** Walk quietly around the room. Help with any difficult words. Watch for early finishers and let them reread. This passage has dense theology, let them feel the weight of phrases like "while we were still sinners" and "God's enemies."

### As You Read, Think About:

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- What words does Paul use to describe humanity's relationship with God?
  - When does God decide to demonstrate His love, what's the timing?
  - What surprises you about God's approach to enemies?
  - How would you feel if someone loved you while you were opposing them?
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### Romans 5:1-11 (NIV)

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*1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also glory in our*

*sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

*6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

### 3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

#### Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

**Selecting Readers:** Ask for volunteers who can read with expression. Let students pass if they're not comfortable. Choose confident readers for the dense theological sections to maintain momentum.

**Reader 1:** Verses 1-5 (Setting up the context of peace and hope) **Reader 2:** Verses 6-8 (The stunning timing of God's love) **Reader 3:** Verses 9-11 (The implications and assurance)

Listen for the emotional tone here. This isn't just theology, Paul is amazed by this timing. He's blown away by when God chose to act.

#### Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

**Setup:** Form groups of 3-4 students. Give them exactly 3 minutes to generate 1-2 genuine questions about what they just read. Walk between groups to listen and help stuck groups with "What surprised you most about the timing?"

Get into groups of 3 or 4. Your job is to come up with 1 or 2 genuine questions about what you just read, things you're actually curious about or confused by. Good questions might start with "Why does Paul..." or "What does it mean when..." or "How can God..." Don't worry about having answers; focus on asking what you're really wondering. You have 3 minutes. Go.

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### **Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)**

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**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 board. Look for themes around timing, enemies, love, and application. Start with observation questions most students will connect with.

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### **Probing Questions (to go deeper)**

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- "What specific words does Paul use to describe our condition when God loved us?"
  - "Paul calls us 'enemies', what does that suggest about our relationship with God before Christ?"
  - "Why is the timing so important, why does Paul keep emphasizing 'while we were still'?"
  - "What's the difference between loving someone who's reformed versus loving someone who's currently opposing you?"
  - "How do you tell the difference between genuine enemy-love and enabling harmful behavior?"
  - "Where do you see this same pattern playing out in your relationships today?"
  - "What would have happened if God waited for us to improve before loving us?"
  - "Why does this matter for how we treat people who are currently difficult or hurtful?"
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### **Revealing the Pattern**

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Do you notice what's happening here? God completely inverts the normal timeline of love. Usually, we love people after they prove they're worth loving, after they apologize, after they change, after they show improvement. But God demonstrates His love precisely while we're in active rebellion against Him. This isn't just overlooking sin, it's loving through enemy behavior. And if that's how God loved us, it changes everything about how we're supposed to love others.

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#### 4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

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Let's get real about your lives. Where do you find yourself waiting for people to improve before you're willing to love them? Think about school, social media, family dynamics, friendships. Who are the people you're withholding love from until they prove they deserve it?

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##### Real Issues This Connects To

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- The classmate who bullies you but is clearly struggling with family issues at home
  - The sibling who constantly annoys you and never seems to learn from consequences
  - The friend who betrayed your trust and hasn't yet apologized or shown real change
  - The person online who attacks your beliefs and seems determined to misunderstand you
  - The political figures or social groups you disagree with who you've written off as hopeless
  - The family member whose lifestyle choices disappoint or hurt you
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**Facilitation:** Let students share examples without rushing to answers. Some situations call for boundaries alongside love. Help them think through wisdom rather than giving blanket advice about loving everyone the same way.

##### Discussion Prompts

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- "When have you seen someone love a person who was actively opposing them?"
  - "What would help you love someone in their current failure rather than waiting for their improvement?"
  - "How do you discern between enabling harmful behavior and genuinely loving an enemy?"
  - "What's the difference between divine love and being a doormat for difficult people?"
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#### 5. Closing (2 minutes)

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Here's what I want you to take with you. God's love for you came while you were His enemy, not after you cleaned up your act, not after you proved you were worth it, but while you were in active opposition to Him. That impossible timing reveals the nature of divine love. And if that's how God

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loved you, it establishes the pattern for how you're meant to love others.

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This week, pay attention to your instinct to withhold love until people improve. Notice when you're waiting for apologies, change, or proof of worthiness before you're willing to extend genuine care. Experiment with loving one person precisely in their current state of difficulty or opposition, not enabling their harmful behavior, but genuinely wishing them well while they're still your enemy.

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The thinking you did today was excellent. You wrestled with genuinely hard questions about enemy-love without settling for easy answers. Keep wrestling with this, it's too important to figure out quickly, and too powerful to ignore. This divine timing changes everything about how we love.

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## Grades 4, 6

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

### Your Main Job Today

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Help kids understand that God's love doesn't wait for us to be good first, it comes while we're still making mistakes. This challenges them to love difficult people right now, not later.

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### If Kids Ask "Why should I be nice to people who are mean to me?"

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Say: "God was nice to us when we were being mean to Him. Being kind doesn't mean letting people hurt you, but it does mean wanting good things for them even when they're not being good to you."

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### 1. Opening (5 minutes)

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Raise your hand if you've ever had someone at school who just couldn't seem to stop bothering you. Maybe they cut in line, or took your supplies without asking, or said mean things about you to other kids. Your hand is up? Good, most of us have been there.

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Now here's a harder question. Imagine your mom tells you that kid is coming over for dinner, and she wants you to be really kind to them, share your favorite snacks, let them play with your best toys, and make them feel welcome. Part of you thinks, "But they're mean to me! Why should I be nice to them? Let them apologize first!" Another part of you thinks, "Maybe I should try, but what if they're just mean

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to me in my own house?"

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Those confusing feelings make perfect sense. It's genuinely hard to be kind to people who aren't kind to you. Your brain is trying to protect you, and being careful around people who hurt you is actually pretty smart most of the time.

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It's like in Disney movies when the main character has to be kind to someone who's been awful to them. Think about Belle being kind to the Beast when he was scary and rude, or Anna still loving Elsa when Elsa's powers were hurting people. The tricky part for the characters is figuring out how to love someone while they're still being difficult.

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The tricky part for us is figuring out when to be kind to people who aren't being kind back to us. How do you know when someone deserves kindness? Should you wait for them to be nice first, or should you be nice first and hope they change?

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Today we're going to hear about the most amazing example of kindness in history, about Someone who chose to be incredibly kind to people who were actively working against Him. This story is going to show us God's heart and teach us something surprising about when love shows up. Let's find out what happened.

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**What to Expect:** Kids may share stories about bullies or siblings. Acknowledge them briefly with "That sounds hard" and keep moving toward the Bible story. They're primed to connect their experience to the lesson.

## 2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

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There was a time when every single person on earth was living in a way that made God sad. Not just forgetting to follow God's rules, but actively choosing things that hurt themselves and hurt other people.

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People were lying, cheating, being cruel to each other, and ignoring God completely. They were making choices every day that went against everything God wanted for them. It was like the whole world had decided to be God's enemies.

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Now, if you were God, and you saw everyone you created choosing to rebel against you and hurt each other, what would your first instinct be? Maybe to say, "Fine! If you don't want to follow my ways, then figure it out on your own!" Or maybe to wait until people apologized and started being better before you helped them.

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Imagine if everyone in your class was being mean to you, breaking your things, and saying awful things about you behind your back. Would your first thought be, "I should do something really nice for them right now"? Probably not! You'd probably think, "Let them apologize first. Let them prove they've changed."

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But God had a completely different reaction. Instead of waiting for people to get better, instead of demanding an apology first, God looked at His enemies and decided to show them the most incredible act of love in history.

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God decided to send His only Son, Jesus, to earth. But not to punish people for being His enemies. Not to force them to apologize. Jesus came to die for them while they were still being enemies. While they were still making terrible choices.

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Think about what that means. Jesus looked at people who were actively opposing God, and He said, "I'm going to give my life for them right now, while they're still fighting against us. I'm not going to wait for them to deserve it."

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The Bible puts it this way:

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**Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

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*8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

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Did you catch those important words? "While we were still sinners." Not after we cleaned up our act. Not after we said sorry. Not after we proved we deserved love. While we were still messing up, God chose to love us with the biggest love possible.

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It gets even more amazing. The Bible also says we weren't just making mistakes, we were actually God's enemies. But God didn't wait for us to become His friends before loving us. He loved us while we were enemies and then made us His friends through that love.

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It was like someone coming to your school and seeing the kids who had been bullying you, and instead of waiting for them to apologize to you first, immediately giving them the best gift they'd ever received. Except infinitely more important than any school situation.

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**Romans 5:10 (NIV)**

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*10 For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

Jesus didn't just love His enemies, He died for them. The greatest act of love in history happened while people were still being awful. The timing is everything. God didn't wait for people to deserve love. God gave love first, while they were still undeserving.

And here's what happened when people realized what God had done. Many of them were so amazed by this incredible love that their hearts started to change. They couldn't believe someone would love them while they were being enemies. That amazing love started to transform them from the inside out.

But the love came first. Before any change, before any apology, before any improvement. God loved His enemies so powerfully that it changed enemies into children, rebels into family members, people fighting against God into people who wanted to be close to God.

Some people responded to this amazing love and let it change their hearts. Others walked away from it. But God offered the same incredible love to everyone while they were still in their worst condition. The love wasn't waiting for people to get better, the love was what made getting better possible.

Sometimes in our lives, we get frustrated with difficult people, siblings who annoy us, classmates who are mean, neighbors who aren't friendly. Our natural instinct is to wait for them to change before we'll be kind to them. "Let them be nice first, then I'll be nice back."

But God shows us a different way. God's way is to love people while they're still difficult, while they're still making bad choices, while they're still being unkind. Not because their behavior is okay, but because love has the power to change hearts.

This doesn't mean we let people hurt us or that we don't have boundaries. But it does mean we can choose to want good things for difficult people even while they're being difficult. We can choose to be kind even when they haven't earned it yet.

What we learn is that God's love doesn't wait for us to deserve it. God loves us while we're still making mistakes, while we're still messing up, while we're still learning how to be good. And if that's how God loves us, then that's the example we get to follow with other people.

The most powerful love in the world is love that shows up before people deserve it. And that's exactly the kind of love God has shown to every one of us.

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

### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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#### Question 1: The Surprise

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What surprises you most about God's timing? If you were in charge and everyone was being your enemy, when would you choose to help them? Would you wait for them to say sorry first, or would you help them while they were still being mean to you? Why is God's choice so different from what most people would do?

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**Listen For:** "I'd wait for them to apologize," "That doesn't seem fair", affirm: "Your reaction makes perfect sense. God's choice IS surprising because it's so different from how people usually love."

#### Question 2: The Feelings

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How do you think the people felt when they realized someone loved them while they were being awful? Have you ever had someone be unexpectedly kind to you when you knew you didn't deserve it? What did that feel like? Why might unexpected kindness be more powerful than kindness people have earned?

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**If They Say:** If they say "Confused" or "Suspicious", respond "Some people probably did feel confused! When love comes at a surprising time, it can take a while to believe it's real."

#### Question 3: The Application

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Think about someone in your life who's difficult, maybe someone who's mean to you or annoys you. What would it look like to show them kindness before they deserve it? What's the difference between being kind to enemies and letting them walk all over you?

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**Connect:** "This is exactly what made God's choice so hard and so amazing, loving people while they're still being difficult."

## Question 4: The Challenge

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If showing love to enemies has the power to change people's hearts, why don't we do it more often? What makes it hard to be kind to people who haven't been kind to us? What would help you be brave enough to love someone before they deserve it?

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**If They Say:** If they worry about being taken advantage of, affirm their wisdom while pointing to God's example: "God is both loving AND wise. We can be kind and still have boundaries."

Your insights are really good. You understand both how amazing God's love is and how challenging it is to love difficult people in our own lives. Now let's do an activity that will help us experience what this kind of love feels like.

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## 4. Activity: The Bridge Builders (8 minutes)

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

### Purpose

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This activity reinforces enemy-love by having kids physically experience the movement from opposition to cooperation. Kids will discover that love extended during conflict has the power to transform enemies into allies. Success looks like kids realizing that loving first creates possibility for relationship.

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### Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

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We're going to play "Bridge Builders." I need you to form two groups, and each group will stand on opposite sides of the room facing each other. You're going to start as enemies who can't trust each other.

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Here's your challenge: Both groups need to get to the other side of the room, but you can only travel by building a human bridge. You have to connect hands or arms to create a bridge that others can cross. But here's the twist, you can't build a bridge without help from the "enemy" group.

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You'll start by facing each other suspiciously. Then one person from either group will have to make the brave choice to extend their hand toward the enemy side, even though they don't know if the other group will help them or reject them. We're doing this because it's exactly like what God did, extending

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love toward enemies without knowing how they'd respond.

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Let's see what happens when one side chooses to love first, even when they don't know if the other side will love back.

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### **During the Activity(4 minutes)**

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Start by having groups stare at each other suspiciously for 30 seconds. Let them feel the tension of being "enemies" who don't trust each other. They should be uncomfortable with the separation and suspicion.

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Watch for the first brave person who extends their hand toward the other group. When someone makes this move, freeze the action and ask, "What's happening here? What choice is this person making?" Let them recognize the courage of loving first.

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Coach them with phrases like "Someone has to choose to love first" or "What if the other group rejects your offer?" or "Love is a risk, you might get hurt, but you might build a bridge." Guide them toward understanding that love is always a risk.

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When someone from the other group responds by taking the extended hand, celebrate that moment: "Look! Love created a response! One person's choice to love made it possible for enemies to become partners!" Let them feel the transformation from opposition to cooperation.

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Once they've connected and built their human bridge for others to cross, have them notice how the room feels different now, how enemies became partners, how one person's risky love changed everything for everyone.

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**Watch For:** The moment when someone chooses to extend their hand toward their "enemies" despite the risk, this is the physical representation of God's enemy-love in action.

### **Debrief(1 minute)**

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What did you notice about how it felt to be enemies versus how it felt when someone chose to love first? The person who extended their hand first took a huge risk, they might have been rejected. But their choice to love first made it possible for enemies to become partners and for everyone to reach their goal. That's exactly what God did for us, loved first, took the risk, and made it possible for enemies to become family.

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## 5. Closing (2 minutes)

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Here's what we learned today: God loved us while we were still His enemies. He didn't wait for us to apologize, improve, or prove we deserved love. He loved us while we were still making bad choices, and that amazing love had the power to change our hearts from the inside out.

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This doesn't mean we let people hurt us or that mean behavior is okay. It means we can choose to want good things for difficult people even when they're being difficult. We can love people while they're still learning how to be good, just like God loved us.

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The amazing result is that love shown to enemies has the power to turn enemies into friends. When we love people before they deserve it, we're following God's example and giving love the chance to change hearts.

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### **This Week's Challenge**

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Choose one person who's been difficult or annoying to you, a sibling, classmate, or neighbor. Instead of waiting for them to be nice first, find one way to be unexpectedly kind to them. You might help them with something, share something you like, or simply choose not to argue back when they're grumpy. See what happens when you love first.

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### **Closing Prayer (Optional)**

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*Dear God, thank you for loving us while we were still making bad choices. Help us to be brave enough to show kindness to people who haven't been kind to us. Give us wisdom to know how to love difficult people safely, and help us remember that your love for enemies can change hearts. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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## Grades 1, 3

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

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### **Your Main Job Today**

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Help kids understand that God's love never stops, even when we make bad choices.

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## Movement & Formation Plan

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- **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

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Compare God's love to a mommy or daddy's love that doesn't stop even when kids disobey, then ask "Does God stop loving us when we make mistakes?"

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### 1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

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**Formation:** Standing in a circle

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Select a song about God's love. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "God's Love Is So Wonderful," or "I Am Special." Use movements: point to yourself during "me," spread arms wide during "wonderful" or "big," and hug yourself during "love."

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Great singing! I heard some beautiful voices praising God. Now I want you to sit down in a horseshoe shape on the floor, facing me. We're going to hear an amazing story about God's love that never, ever stops!

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### 2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

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

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**Animated Delivery:** Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound sad when people make bad choices, sound amazed when talking about God's love.

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Today we're going to meet the most loving Person in the whole world. Can you guess who that is?

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*[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]*

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That's right, God! But there was a big problem in our story. All the people in the world were making bad choices. They were being mean to each other and not listening to God at all.

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*[Make a sad face and speak with a disappointed tone]*

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They were disobeying God every single day. They were being mean instead of kind. They were telling lies instead of telling the truth. God felt very sad watching his children make such bad choices.

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*[Walk to other side of horseshoe, change to hopeful tone]*

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But instead of being angry with them, God had a wonderful idea. God decided to show them the biggest love anyone has ever seen!

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*[Move to center, speak with warm authority]*

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God said, "I'm going to send my son Jesus to show these people how much I love them. And I'm going to love them even while they're still making bad choices!"

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*[Move to side, speak with amazement]*

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Can you believe that? God didn't wait for people to say sorry first. God didn't wait for them to start being good. God loved them while they were still being naughty!

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**Romans 5:8 (NIV)**

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*8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

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*[Pause and look around at each child]*

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Do you know what this means? It means God loves you even when you make mistakes! Even when you disobey mommy and daddy! Even when you're grumpy or mean! God's love never stops!

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*[Move to center, speak with excitement]*

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So Jesus came to earth to show people God's amazing love. But people were still making bad choices! They were still being mean to God!

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*[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]*

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And you know what Jesus did? He loved them anyway! He was kind to them anyway! He even died on the cross to save them anyway! While they were still being bad!

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*[Stop walking and face the children directly]*

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Some people felt so amazed by God's love that their hearts changed. They said, "Wow! God loves me even when I'm bad? That makes me want to be good!"

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*[Speak with excitement]*

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God's love was so big and so wonderful that it helped people want to make better choices. Not because they had to, but because they wanted to!

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*[Pause dramatically]*

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The big truth is this: God loves you no matter what! When you're good, God loves you. When you make mistakes, God loves you. God's love never, ever stops!

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*[Speak directly to the children]*

---

Sometimes we have people at school or in our neighborhood who aren't nice to us. They might take our toys, or say mean things, or not share. We can choose to be kind to them anyway, just like God is kind to us!

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*[Move closer to the children]*

---

When someone is mean to you, you can still choose to be nice. When someone takes your crayon, you can still use kind words. That's what God does for us!

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*[Speak warmly and encouragingly]*

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God's love is so big that it never runs out. And God helps us love other people the same way, even when they're not being nice to us!

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### 3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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

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

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**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.

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#### Discussion Questions

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

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1. How does it feel to know God loves you even when you make mistakes?
  2. When has someone been kind to you when you were grumpy?
  3. What would you do if someone took your toy but you wanted to be kind like God?
  4. Why do you think God loves us even when we disobey?
  5. What changes when someone is unexpectedly nice to you?
  6. How can you show God's love to someone who's mean?
  7. What's the difference between being kind and letting someone hurt you?
  8. Who at school or home is hard to be kind to?
  9. How does knowing God always loves you make you feel?
  10. What would happen if you were nice to someone who wasn't nice to you?
  11. Why did God decide to love people while they were being bad?
  12. How can we be like God in how we treat others?
  13. What does it mean that God's love never stops?
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14. When is it hard to be kind to someone?

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15. How do you think people felt when they realized God loved them anyway?

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16. What can you do when someone is mean to you?

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17. How is God's love different from other kinds of love?

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18. When do you need to remember that God loves you?

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19. What would our classroom be like if everyone loved like God?

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20. How can you show kindness to someone this week?

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

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#### **4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)**

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**Formation:** Standing in straight lines facing forward

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Select a song about kindness or love. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "Love One Another," or "This Little Light of Mine." Use movements: point to others during "one another," make a heart shape with hands during "love," hold up one finger during "little light."

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Beautiful singing! You really understand about God's love. Now let's sit down in rows for our prayer time. Fold your hands and close your eyes so we can talk to God together.

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#### **5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)**

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

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*Dear God, thank you for loving us even when we make bad choices.*

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*[Pause]*

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*Help us to be kind to people who aren't kind to us. Help us remember that your love never stops, not even when we disobey.*

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*[Pause]*

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*Show us how to love others the way you love us. Thank you for sending Jesus to show us your amazing love.*

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*[Pause]*

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*Thank you that your love is bigger than any mistake we could ever make. In Jesus's name, Amen.*

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**Alternative, Popcorn Prayer:** If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about God's love. Examples: "Thank you that you love me when I'm grumpy" or "Help me be kind to my sister when she bothers me."

Remember, God's love never stops! Even when you make mistakes, even when you're having a bad day, God loves you so much. Have a wonderful week, and look for ways to show God's love to others!

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