

Forgiveness and Letting Go

Volume 3

Deep Research Sunday School Lessons

A 24-Volume Comprehensive Series

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Deep Research Sunday School Lessons

Forgiveness and Letting Go

Volume 3

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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

Forgive and Comfort

Restoration After Discipline, When does moving to forgiveness enable continuing wrong?

2 Corinthians 1:23, 2:11

Instructor Preparation

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

The Passage

2 Corinthians 1:23, 2:11 (NIV)

23 I call God as my witness, and I stake my life on it, that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

1 So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? 3 I wrote as I did, so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. 4 For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

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

*in the sight of Christ for your sake, **II** in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

Context

Paul had written a stern letter to the Corinthian church addressing serious problems in their community. Someone in the church had grieved Paul deeply, likely challenging his authority or causing division. The church responded by disciplining this person, but now the situation has shifted. Paul's harsh letter accomplished its purpose: the church took action, and the offending person experienced genuine repentance. The community stands at a critical juncture between accountability and restoration.

Paul is navigating the delicate balance between maintaining standards and showing mercy. The disciplinary action has been "sufficient", it served its purpose. But now the pendulum threatens to swing too far toward punishment rather than redemption. Paul sees that excessive sorrow could destroy rather than restore, opening the door for Satan to exploit the situation through either bitter unforgiveness or crushing despair.

The Big Idea

Church discipline must include a clear path to restoration through forgiveness, comfort, and love reaffirmation to prevent excessive sorrow that destroys rather than redeems.

This isn't about avoiding difficult conversations or skipping accountability altogether. The sequence matters: discipline led to repentance, and now that repentance must be met with intentional restoration. The church learned that holding people accountable works, but Paul teaches them that stopping at punishment without moving to restoration can become just as destructive as ignoring the original problem.

Theological Core

- **Restoration After Discipline.** Effective church discipline isn't complete until it produces restoration. The goal is always redemption, not punishment for its own sake.
 - **Excessive Sorrow Prevention.** When accountability achieves repentance, continued punishment becomes counterproductive and spiritually dangerous, potentially driving people away from God
-

rather than toward Him.

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- **Love Reaffirmation.** After confrontation and discipline, relationships require intentional acts of forgiveness, comfort, and love reaffirmation to rebuild trust and community.
 - **Satan's Schemes Recognition.** Both avoiding accountability and refusing restoration serve Satan's purposes, he wins when communities either ignore sin or crush repentant sinners with unending punishment.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- How to balance accountability with restoration, discipline must include a pathway back to community acceptance
 - When "excessive sorrow" becomes spiritually destructive rather than redemptive, and how to recognize the difference
 - That forgiveness, comfort, and love reaffirmation are active choices that require intentional effort, especially after conflict
 - How Satan exploits both ignored sin and refused restoration, using either extreme to destroy community and faith
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Grades 4, 6

- Consequences should help people learn and change, not just make them feel bad forever
 - When someone is truly sorry, the right choice is to forgive them and help them feel loved again
 - Keeping someone in trouble after they've changed hurts them and hurts the friendship or family
 - It's okay to have big feelings about being hurt, but choosing to be kind after someone says sorry is important
-

Grades 1, 3

- When someone says sorry and means it, God wants us to forgive them
 - God loves people who make mistakes and wants us to love them too
 - We can help people feel better by being kind and friendly after they say sorry
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Skipping the Discipline Stage.** Don't let this lesson become an excuse to avoid necessary accountability. Paul's approach only works because proper discipline came first, the community addressed the problem and the person repented.
 - **Rushing to Forgiveness.** Avoid suggesting that forgiveness should be immediate regardless of repentance. Paul's sequence shows discipline → repentance → restoration. Each step has purpose and timing.
 - **Making Restoration Optional.** Don't treat forgiveness and comfort as nice add-ons. Paul uses strong language, "you ought to" and "I urge you", making restoration a moral obligation once repentance occurs.
 - **Ignoring Community Impact.** Remember this isn't just about individual forgiveness but about community restoration. The whole church was affected, and the whole church must participate in restoration to prevent future division.
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Handling Hard Questions

"What if the person isn't really sorry and just pretends to repent?"

Paul's language suggests genuine repentance had occurred, the person was experiencing "excessive sorrow," indicating real conviction. While we can't read hearts perfectly, we can look for fruit of repentance over time. The community should move toward restoration when evidence suggests genuine change, while still maintaining appropriate boundaries. Restoration doesn't mean pretending nothing

happened or returning immediately to previous levels of trust, it means actively choosing forgiveness and creating space for relationship to rebuild.

"How do you know when discipline has achieved its purpose?"

Paul indicates several markers: the punishment was "sufficient," the person was experiencing appropriate sorrow (not defiance), and the community had unified around addressing the issue. Look for evidence of changed behavior, genuine remorse, and willingness to make amends. The goal isn't perfection but direction, is the person moving toward repentance and restoration or remaining in rebellion? When you see movement toward repentance, it's time to shift toward restoration while maintaining appropriate accountability.

"Doesn't this enable people to keep doing wrong things if they know forgiveness is coming?"

Paul's approach actually creates stronger accountability, not weaker. When people know that genuine repentance leads to restoration, they're more likely to face their mistakes honestly rather than hiding or denying them. But when they know that repentance won't be met with mercy, they're incentivized to avoid accountability altogether. The key is maintaining the sequence: clear standards, appropriate consequences, genuine repentance, then active restoration. Each element strengthens the others.

The One Thing to Remember

Discipline without restoration becomes destruction, after accountability achieves repentance, forgiveness and comfort must follow to complete the redemptive process.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the tension between holding people accountable and moving toward restoration. Help them explore how forgiveness, comfort, and love reaffirmation work practically while maintaining healthy boundaries.

The Tension to Frame

When does moving to forgiveness enable continuing wrong? How do we know when discipline has achieved its purpose and it's time for restoration?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their experiences with both ineffective discipline and harsh unforgiveness, both extremes cause real damage
 - Honor the complexity that every situation requires discernment, there are no simple formulas for timing and boundaries
 - Let them wrestle with specific scenarios rather than giving abstract answers, they learn wisdom through guided discovery
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1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine you're part of a friend group where one person has been consistently lying, manipulating situations, and causing drama. It's gotten so bad that you all finally called them out, told them their behavior was unacceptable and that things had to change. It was an awkward, difficult conversation, but it needed to happen. And surprisingly, it worked. They actually listened, admitted what they'd done, and seem genuinely sorry.

Now what? Part of you is relieved they finally acknowledged the problem. Another part of you is still hurt and doesn't trust them yet. Some people in your group want to move on quickly, "They apologized, so we're good." Others want to keep them at arm's length indefinitely, "They hurt us, so they don't get to just waltz back in." And you're stuck in the middle wondering what the right response actually is.

This scenario plays out constantly in families, friendships, schools, and workplaces. We know that ignoring bad behavior doesn't work, it just enables more of the same. But we also know that holding grudges forever destroys relationships. So how do you navigate that space between accountability and restoration? How do you know when someone deserves another chance?

Today we're looking at a situation where the apostle Paul faced exactly this dilemma with a church community. Someone had caused serious problems, the community addressed it, the person repented, and now Paul has to guide them through the messy process of restoration. Pay attention to both the

sequence he describes and the reasoning behind his advice.

Let's start by reading this passage silently and seeing what strikes you about Paul's approach to post-discipline restoration.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly among students. This passage contains some complex relationship dynamics, so be available to help with context questions. Watch for early finishers and guide them to think about the emotional texture of this situation, the hurt, the repentance, the fear of making wrong choices about restoration.

As You Read, Think About:

- What sequence of events led to this moment?
 - Why is Paul concerned about "excessive sorrow"?
 - What specific actions does Paul recommend?
 - How would you feel in this situation, as the community, as the person being restored, or as Paul trying to guide them?
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2 Corinthians 1:23, 2:11 (NIV)

23 I call God as my witness, and I stake my life on it, that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.

1 So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? 3 I wrote as I did, so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. 4 For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

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

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers who are comfortable reading aloud. This passage contains emotional content, so choose confident readers who can convey the relational tension and Paul's pastoral concern.

Reader 1: Verses 1:23, 2:4 (Paul's explanation of his previous harsh letter) **Reader 2:** Verses 2:5-8 (The discipline, repentance, and call for restoration) **Reader 3:** Verses 2:9-11 (Paul's reasoning and warning about Satan's schemes)

Listen for the emotional complexity here, this isn't a simple situation with easy answers. Notice Paul's care for both justice and mercy.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

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

Get into groups of three or four. Your job is to come up with one or two genuine questions about what we just read, things you're actually curious about, confused by, or want to discuss. Good questions start with "Why..." or "How..." or "What if..." Focus on things that genuinely puzzle you about this situation. You've got three minutes. Go.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Let students drive the discussion with their questions. You're guiding discovery, not lecturing. Help them see patterns and implications rather than giving them answers.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes about timing, boundaries, discernment, and restoration. Start with questions most students can relate to from their own experience.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What evidence does Paul give that the discipline had accomplished its purpose?"
 - "Why does Paul focus on preventing 'excessive sorrow' rather than ensuring adequate consequences?"
 - "What's the difference between forgiveness and trust? How does Paul's advice address both?"
 - "What would happen if the church ignored Paul's advice and kept punishing this person indefinitely?"
 - "How does Paul balance the hurt of the community with the repentance of the individual?"
 - "In your experience, what makes restoration feel genuine versus forced or superficial?"
 - "What would this look like if the person hadn't shown genuine repentance?"
 - "Why does Paul connect restoration to preventing Satan's schemes? What schemes might he be talking about?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Paul isn't choosing between accountability and mercy, he's showing how they work together in sequence. First came the necessary confrontation, then genuine repentance, and now intentional restoration. Each step makes the others possible. Without accountability, there's no motivation for repentance. Without restoration after repentance, discipline becomes destruction rather than redemption. Paul's wisdom is knowing when to shift from one to the other.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you see this same tension playing out? Think about your families, friend groups, school situations, team dynamics, even online communities. Where have you seen discipline without restoration become destructive? Where have you seen restoration without accountability enable continued problems?

Real Issues This Connects To

- Friend groups dealing with someone who gossiped, lied, or betrayed trust, when they apologize, how do you rebuild?
 - Family situations where a sibling or parent hurt you, faced consequences, and now everyone's trying to figure out how to move forward
 - School conflicts where someone got in trouble for bullying or exclusion, what does genuine restoration look like?
 - Online communities where someone posted something offensive, got called out, apologized, how do you respond to genuine versus performative apologies?
 - Team dynamics where someone's behavior hurt the group, they've acknowledged it, how do you rebuild team trust?
 - Dating relationships where someone violated boundaries, showed genuine remorse, how do you discern between giving someone another chance versus protecting yourself?
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to fix them. Some situations require different approaches. Help them think through discernment principles rather than giving blanket advice. Every situation has unique factors that affect timing and boundaries.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone genuinely change after being held accountable? What convinced you their change was real?"
 - "What would help you move toward restoration when you've been hurt, what actions or words would rebuild trust?"
 - "How do you discern between genuine repentance and someone just trying to avoid consequences?"
-

- "What's the difference between wisdom and suspicion when someone asks for another chance?"
-

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you from today: healthy relationships require both accountability and restoration. Neither works alone. Accountability without restoration becomes cruelty. Restoration without accountability enables continued damage. The wisdom is knowing when to shift from one to the other, and Paul shows us it happens when genuine repentance meets the opportunity for redemptive relationship.

This week, pay attention to how you handle situations where someone has hurt you and is showing signs of genuine remorse. Notice your instincts, do you lean toward holding grudges or rushing to trust? Practice the middle path: acknowledge the hurt, look for genuine repentance, and when you see it, take small steps toward restoration while maintaining appropriate boundaries.

What impressed me about your discussion today is how honestly you wrestled with these complex situations. Keep asking these hard questions, this kind of thinking will serve you well in all your relationships. Wisdom isn't about having perfect answers; it's about learning to discern when forgiveness serves love and when boundaries serve love. You're developing that discernment.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that consequences should help people change, not just hurt them, and that when someone is truly sorry, the right response is forgiveness and helping them feel loved again.

If Kids Ask "What if they're just pretending to be sorry?"

Say: "That's a really smart question. We can't read minds, but we can watch how people act over time. When someone is really sorry, they try to change and make things right."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever had to sit in timeout or lose a privilege because you did something wrong. Keep it up, I think we've all been there! Now raise your hand if, after that consequence, someone in your family helped you understand why what you did was hurtful and then showed you they still loved you. Some hands went down, didn't they?

Now here's a harder question to think about: Have you ever been in a situation where someone kept bringing up your mistake even after you said sorry and tried to make it right? Maybe a sibling who kept saying "Remember when you broke my toy" weeks after you apologized. Or friends who kept giving you the cold shoulder even after you tried to fix what you'd done wrong. That feeling is really frustrating, isn't it?

Here's what's tricky: We know consequences are important, they help us learn and change. But sometimes people get stuck thinking that consequences should go on forever. They think that if they stop being upset with someone, it means what that person did wasn't really that bad. So they keep punishing someone even after that person has learned their lesson and changed.

This reminds me of what happens in Inside Out when Riley acts out because she's sad and angry about moving. Her parents have to address her behavior, but they also need to help her feel loved and supported afterward. The discipline helps, but so does the comfort and understanding. One without the other doesn't work well.

The tricky part is figuring out when someone has really learned from their mistake and is ready for help feeling better. How do you know when it's time to stop the consequence and start helping them feel loved and included again? That's not always easy to figure out.

Today we're going to hear about a time when the apostle Paul had to help a whole community of Christians figure out exactly this situation. Someone had done something really hurtful, the community addressed it, the person was genuinely sorry, and now they needed to learn what to do next. Let's find out what happened and what Paul taught them.

What to Expect: Kids might share examples from home or school. Acknowledge them briefly ("That sounds really hard" or "I bet that felt confusing") but keep momentum moving toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Picture a community of Christians in an ancient city called Corinth. They were like a big church family, they cared about each other, ate meals together, and tried to help each other follow Jesus. But like any family, sometimes they had problems.

One day, someone in this church family did something really hurtful. We don't know exactly what it was, but it caused a lot of pain and division. It was serious enough that Paul, who was like their pastor and teacher, had to get involved.

Paul cared deeply about this church family. So when he heard about the problem, he was really upset. He could have visited them in person to deal with it, but he was worried that if he came while he was still so hurt and angry, he might say things that would make the situation worse.

Instead, Paul wrote them a very serious letter. Imagine getting a letter from someone you respect telling you that your behavior was unacceptable and needed to change. Paul didn't write this letter to be mean, he wrote it because he loved them too much to let them keep hurting each other.

In his letter, Paul basically said, "This person's behavior is causing real damage to your community. You need to address it. You can't just pretend it didn't happen or hope it will go away on its own. Someone needs to face consequences for their actions so they can learn and so your community can heal."

And you know what? It worked! The church took Paul's advice seriously. They talked to the person who had caused the hurt. They helped them understand how their actions had affected everyone. They put some consequences in place. It was probably uncomfortable and awkward, but they did it because they cared about their community.

The amazing thing was that the person who had caused the problems actually listened. They didn't get angry or make excuses. They realized that what they had done was wrong, and they felt genuinely sorry about it. They wanted to make things right.

2 Corinthians 2:6-7 (NIV)

6 The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. 7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Now Paul had a different problem. The church had learned how to hold people accountable, but they didn't know when to stop! The person had learned their lesson and was genuinely sorry, but some people in the church were still treating them coldly. They were stuck in consequence mode and couldn't shift to restoration mode.

Paul looked at the situation and realized something important: the consequence had done its job. The person had changed. But now the continued punishment was starting to hurt rather than help. The person was beginning to feel hopeless and overwhelmed by sadness.

This is when Paul wrote another letter with very different advice. He said, "Stop. The consequence has worked. The person has learned their lesson. Now it's time to do something different. Instead of continuing to punish them, you need to forgive them and comfort them. You need to help them feel loved and included again."

2 Corinthians 2:8 (NIV)

8 I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.

Paul used strong words here. He didn't just suggest that they consider being nice again. He said they ought to forgive and comfort the person. It was the right thing to do. He urged them to reaffirm their love, to actively show that person they were loved and wanted in the community again.

Why was this so important? Paul explained that if they kept punishing someone who had already learned their lesson, it would become destructive. The person might lose hope. They might think that no matter what they did, they could never be truly forgiven or accepted back into the community.

Paul also knew that Satan, the enemy of God, loves it when communities get stuck in either extreme. Satan wins when people ignore hurtful behavior and let it continue. But Satan also wins when people refuse to forgive and restore those who are genuinely sorry. Either way, the community gets damaged.

So Paul taught them the beautiful balance: when someone does wrong, address it with appropriate consequences. But when someone shows genuine sorrow and change, respond with forgiveness, comfort, and love. Both parts are necessary for a healthy community.

The church learned that day that consequences should lead to restoration, not destruction. The goal isn't to make people feel bad forever, it's to help them change and then welcome them back into loving

relationship. That's how God treats us, and that's how we should treat each other.

Sometimes in our families, schools, and friendships, we face similar situations. When someone hurts us but then shows they're truly sorry and want to change, we have a choice: we can keep punishing them, or we can choose the harder but better path of forgiveness and restoration.

What Paul teaches us is that love includes both holding people accountable when they do wrong and helping them feel loved again when they're truly sorry. Both parts matter. One without the other doesn't work well. It's like a parent who gives a consequence but then, after the child learns their lesson, gives them a hug and says, "I love you, and we're going to be okay."

That's the kind of love God shows us, and that's the kind of love He wants us to show others. It's not always easy, but it's how communities stay healthy and how relationships get stronger rather than just falling apart when problems happen.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Hard Choice

Imagine your best friend spread a rumor about you that really hurt your feelings. When you found out, you were mad and told them how much it hurt. They felt terrible and apologized sincerely, you could tell they really meant it. Now some of your other friends say you should forgive them, but part of you still feels hurt. What would make it hard to choose forgiveness and comfort?

Listen For: "I'd still be mad," "What if they do it again," "It would be hard to trust them", affirm: "Those feelings make complete sense. It's normal to feel hurt even when someone apologizes."

Question 2: The Signs of Sorry

Paul could tell that the person in the story was genuinely sorry and had learned their lesson. In your experience, how can you tell the difference between someone who's really sorry and wants to change versus someone who just doesn't want to get in trouble anymore?

If They Say: If they mention actions versus just words, respond "That's really wise. You're looking for evidence, not just words."

Question 3: The Comfort Part

Paul didn't just say to forgive the person, he said to comfort them and reaffirm love for them. That means actively helping them feel better and loved. Why do you think the comfort part was so important? What happens if you forgive someone but don't help them feel loved again?

Connect: "That's exactly what Paul was worried about, someone could feel hopeless or think they'd never really be accepted again."

Question 4: The Consequences Question

Paul said the consequence had been "sufficient", it had done its job. In your family or at school, how do you know when a consequence has worked and it's time to move to forgiveness and comfort instead of continuing punishment?

If They Say: If they mention ongoing punishment being mean, respond "You're right. Paul was concerned that continued punishment would become harmful rather than helpful."

What I hear from your answers is that this balance is really hard but really important. You understand that both parts matter, the accountability and the restoration. That wisdom will help you build stronger relationships throughout your life.

4. Activity: Bridge Builders (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity reinforces the restoration process by having kids physically experience the movement from separation to reconnection. Success looks like kids discovering that both accountability and active restoration are necessary to rebuild relationship bridges.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to build "relationship bridges" with our bodies. I need you to form pairs and stand facing your partner about six feet apart. The space between you represents a relationship that's been damaged by hurtful behavior. Your goal is to build a bridge back to each other, but there are specific steps you have to follow.

First, both partners have to acknowledge the "hurt" by taking one step back, making the gap even bigger. Then, the person who "caused hurt" has to show genuine sorry by taking two steps forward and saying "I was wrong and I'm truly sorry." But here's the key: the bridge isn't complete until the "hurt person" also steps forward and says either "I forgive you" or "I choose to comfort you."

The challenge is that you can't complete the bridge until both people participate. One person can't do it alone. And you'll discover that just saying sorry isn't enough, someone has to actively choose to move toward restoration, just like Paul taught the church.

We're doing this because it's exactly like the situation Paul described, discipline creates distance, but restoration requires intentional movement from both sides to rebuild the relationship bridge.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Start with the initial gap, then have one person in each pair be the "hurt" person and one be the person who "caused hurt." Have them go through the steps slowly so they can feel the physical movement from separation to connection.

As they work through it, notice how it feels different when only one person moves versus when both people participate. The "hurt" person might feel reluctant to step forward, that's normal and important to acknowledge.

Coach them with phrases like: "Notice how much effort it takes from both people to rebuild the bridge" and "Pay attention to how it feels when someone meets your apology with movement toward you."

The breakthrough comes when they realize that restoration isn't automatic, it requires intentional choice from the person who was hurt to move toward comfort and reaffirmation, just like Paul urged the church to do.

Once they've successfully built the bridge, have them notice the difference between the beginning separation and the final connection. The bridge is actually stronger because both people chose to build it

together.

Watch For: The moment when the "hurt" person chooses to step forward and actively participate in restoration, this is the physical representation of Paul's teaching about forgiveness, comfort, and love reaffirmation.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when both people worked together to rebuild the bridge versus when only one person was trying? You just experienced exactly what Paul was teaching, restoration requires both genuine repentance and active forgiveness and comfort. When someone meets your apology by stepping toward you with comfort, the relationship can become even stronger than before.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: God wants consequences to help people change, not just to hurt them. When someone is truly sorry and shows they want to change, the right response is forgiveness, comfort, and helping them feel loved again. Both parts matter, the accountability and the restoration.

This doesn't mean we ignore when people hurt us or pretend everything is fine when it's not. But it does mean that when someone shows genuine sorrow and change, we choose to help them feel loved and included again rather than punishing them forever. That's how God treats us when we mess up and say sorry.

The amazing result is that relationships can become even stronger when we handle both accountability and restoration well. It's like rebuilding a bridge that's stronger than the original because both people worked together to make it.

This Week's Challenge

Pay attention to situations at home or school where someone has done something wrong and shown they're sorry. Practice Paul's advice: if appropriate consequences have happened and the person seems genuinely sorry, look for ways to show forgiveness, comfort, and love. Notice how it affects the relationship.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

God, thank you for teaching us how to balance accountability with restoration. Help us to hold people responsible when they hurt others, but also to forgive and comfort those who are truly sorry. Give us wisdom to know when it's time to move from consequences to comfort. Help us build stronger relationships by following your example of love. Amen.

Grades 1, 3

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that God wants us to forgive people who are sorry and help them feel better, not keep hurting them.

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 God's forgiveness to a parent who gives a consequence but then gives hugs afterward, then ask "How does that make you feel?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's love or forgiveness. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)," or "God's Love Is So Wonderful." Use movements: point up to God during "love" lyrics, hug yourself during comfort words, reach out to others during friendship phrases.

Great singing! Now let's sit in our story circle because I have an important story to tell you about someone who learned about God's love and forgiveness. Come sit in our horseshoe so everyone can see and hear!

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 concerned when talking about the hurt, sound gentle when talking about Paul's love, sound happy when talking about forgiveness.

Today we're going to meet a man named Paul who loved God and loved people very much!

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Paul had friends in a place called Corinth. They were like a big church family who loved God together. But one day, someone in that family did something really mean that hurt a lot of people.

[Use sad facial expression]

Paul felt very sad when he heard about it. He didn't want his friends to keep getting hurt. So he wrote them a letter that said, "Someone needs to have consequences for being mean so they can learn to be kind."

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

And do you know what happened? The person who was mean felt very sorry! They realized they had hurt people and they wanted to change. They said, "I'm sorry. I don't want to be mean anymore."

[Move to center, speak with gentle authority]

When Paul heard this, he was happy that the person was sorry. But then he noticed something that worried him. Some people were still being mean to the person who said sorry. They wouldn't forgive them or be kind to them.

[Move to side, sound concerned]

Paul saw that the person who said sorry was getting very, very sad. They felt like no one would ever love them again, even though they were trying to be good now.

2 Corinthians 2:7 (NIV)

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

[Pause and look around at each child]

Paul said, "Stop! The person has learned their lesson. Now you need to do something different. You need to forgive them and help them feel better. Don't keep being mean to them!" Do you think Paul was right? Yes!

[Move to center, speak with warmth]

Paul told his friends, "You need to show this person that you love them. Help them feel happy and included again. That's what God wants us to do!"

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

Paul knew something very important. When someone is really sorry and wants to change, God wants us to forgive them and be kind to them. He doesn't want us to keep hurting them forever.

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

So Paul's friends listened to him. They forgave the person who was sorry. They started being kind to them again. They helped them feel loved and included in their church family.

[Speak with excitement]

And you know what happened? Everyone felt so much better! The person who was sorry felt loved again. The friends felt happy that they chose to be kind. Their church family became stronger and more loving.

[Pause dramatically]

Paul learned something important that day: God wants us to forgive people who are truly sorry and help them feel loved again. That's how God treats us when we say sorry to Him!

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes in our lives, someone might hurt our feelings but then say they're really sorry. Maybe a friend at school, or a brother or sister at home, or someone on the playground. When they're truly sorry, God wants us to forgive them and help them feel better.

[Move closer to the children]

When someone says sorry and means it, you can choose to forgive them and be kind to them. You can help them feel loved and happy again. That's what God would do!

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves everyone, even when they make mistakes. And He wants us to love people too, especially when they say sorry and want to do better. That's how we show God's love to the world!

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 together! 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.

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 sorry person felt when people forgave them?

2. Have you ever felt really sorry about something you did?

3. How does it feel when someone forgives you after you say sorry?

4. What would you do if a friend hurt your feelings but then said sorry?

5. Why do you think Paul wanted people to help the sorry person feel better?

6. How can you help someone feel loved after they say sorry?

7. What makes you feel better when you're sad about a mistake?

8. Have you ever forgiven someone at school?

9. How does your family handle it when someone says sorry?

10. Who helps you feel better when you make a mistake?

11. Why do you think God wants us to forgive people?

12. What's the difference between someone who's really sorry and someone who's not?

13. How does God show us that He loves us even when we mess up?

14. Have you ever had to say sorry to someone?

15. What would happen if people never forgave each other?

16. How can you be kind to someone who hurt your feelings?

17. What does it mean to help someone feel loved?

18. How do you know when someone really means their apology?

19. What would you want if you said sorry to someone?

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

Great discussions! Let's come back together in our circle. Who wants to share something you talked about with your partner?

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Select a song about forgiveness or kindness. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "Forgiveness" or "God's Love Never Fails." Include movements: hands over heart for love, reaching out for forgiveness, hugging motion for comfort.

Beautiful singing! Now let's get ready to pray. Sit cross-legged in rows, fold your hands, and bow your heads. 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 the story about Paul and his friends.

[Pause]

Help us to forgive people who say sorry and really mean it. Help us to be kind to them and help them feel loved again.

[Pause]

Thank you for forgiving us when we say sorry to you. Help us remember that you love us even when we make mistakes.

[Pause]

Thank you for your love that never gives up on us. Help us love others the same way. 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 brother" or "Thank you for loving me when I mess up."

Remember this week: when someone says sorry and means it, God wants you to forgive them and help them feel loved. You can show God's love by being kind to people who are truly sorry. Have a wonderful week!

Works and Rewards

Earning Our Way, How does merit relate to grace?

2 Esdras 8:31-39

Instructor Preparation

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

The Passage

2 Esdras 8:31-39 (NIV)

31 And do not be angry with us, but spare your people and have mercy on your inheritance, for you have mercy on your own creation. 32 For even though we and our ancestors have conducted our lives in ways that bring death, it is because of us sinners that you are called merciful. 33 For if you have desired to have pity on us, who have no works of righteousness, then you will be called merciful. 34 For the righteous, who have many good works laid up with you, shall receive their reward in consequence of their own deeds. 35 But what are mortals, that you could be angry with them? Or what is a corruptible race, that you could be so bitter against it? 36 For in truth there is no one among the living who has not transgressed, and among the departed, no one who has not done wrong. 37 For in this, O Lord, your righteousness and goodness will be made known: when you are merciful to those who have no store of good works." 38 He answered me and said: "Some things you have spoken correctly, and it will come to pass according to your words. 39 For indeed I will not concern myself about the fashioning of those who have sinned, or about their death, their judgment, or their destruction."

Context

This passage comes from 4 Ezra (2 Esdras in some traditions), a Jewish apocalyptic text written after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. The prophet Ezra is engaged in an intense dialogue with

an angel about divine justice and human suffering. The Jewish people are questioning how God can be just when the righteous suffer and evil seems to prosper.

Ezra is pleading for God's mercy on behalf of his people, acknowledging their sinfulness while appealing to God's character as merciful. The tension in the passage reflects the broader theological struggle: if God rewards based on merit, how can sinful humanity ever receive blessing? This conversation sits at the heart of debates about works, grace, and divine justice that continue today.

The Big Idea

The relationship between human works and divine reward creates tension between earning what we deserve and receiving mercy we don't deserve.

This passage holds both truths simultaneously, that righteous works merit reward, and that everyone needs mercy because no one is perfectly righteous. The complexity lies in understanding how these truths work together rather than trying to resolve the tension by eliminating one side. The text suggests God operates with both justice and mercy, though how they integrate remains mysterious.

Theological Core

- **Divine accounting.** God keeps track of human deeds, both good and bad, suggesting moral actions have lasting significance and consequences.
 - **Merit theology.** Righteous works create a "store" with God that merits reward, indicating human actions have real value and deserve recognition.
 - **Universal sinfulness.** "No one among the living has not transgressed," establishing that all humans fall short and need mercy beyond merit.
 - **Mercy paradox.** God's greatest goodness is shown not in rewarding the deserving, but in being merciful to those who have "no store of good works."
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- The tension between merit-based rewards and grace-based mercy reveals the complexity of divine justice
 - Both earning rewards for good works and needing undeserved mercy can be true simultaneously
 - This theological tension appears throughout Scripture and requires careful, nuanced thinking
 - Wisdom means holding both truths rather than forcing artificial resolution
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Grades 4, 6

- God notices and values our good choices, they're not meaningless or forgotten
 - Everyone makes mistakes, even people who try to do right most of the time
 - God's mercy is greatest when He helps people who can't earn His help
 - Feeling guilty about mistakes is normal, but we can still ask for and receive forgiveness
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Grades 1, 3

- God sees and remembers when we make good choices
 - God loves us and forgives us when we make bad choices
 - We can always ask God for help, even when we mess up
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Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Oversimplifying the tension.** Don't resolve the complexity by saying "it's all grace" or "it's all works." The passage intentionally holds both truths, and the tension is theologically significant rather than a problem to solve.
 - **Confusing reward with salvation.** The text may be discussing rewards within relationship with God, not how to initially gain God's favor. Works-based rewards and grace-based relationship aren't necessarily contradictory.
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- **Dismissing the merit principle.** The passage clearly states that righteous works create a store of merit, don't negate this to protect grace theology. The complexity requires holding both truths.
 - **Ignoring universal need for mercy.** Even with the merit principle, the text emphasizes that everyone has transgressed and needs mercy beyond what they've earned.
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Handling Hard Questions

"Doesn't this contradict salvation by grace through faith?"

This passage may be addressing rewards for those already in relationship with God rather than how to initially gain that relationship. Many theological traditions distinguish between justification (how we become right with God) and sanctification (how we grow in that relationship). This passage might describe the latter, God rewarding growth in righteousness while still providing mercy for ongoing failures. The tension between works and grace appears throughout Scripture and requires careful study of each context.

"If everyone has sinned, how can anyone have 'many good works laid up'?"

The text suggests that imperfect people can still accumulate genuine good works that God values, even while acknowledging their ongoing need for mercy. This reflects the complexity of human moral life, we're capable of real goodness and real failure simultaneously. The passage doesn't resolve this paradox but presents it as the reality of human existence before God.

"How do we know which of our works actually count as 'righteous'?"

This passage doesn't detail what qualifies as righteous works, focusing instead on the principle that God keeps account of human deeds. Other biblical texts provide more specific guidance about righteous living. The emphasis here is on God's character as both just (rewarding good) and merciful (helping those who can't earn help), rather than on defining specific righteous acts.

The One Thing to Remember

God values our good works and offers mercy for our failures, both truths reveal different aspects of His character and our relationship with Him.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the theological tension between earning divine rewards through righteous works and needing undeserved mercy. Help them see that this complexity appears throughout religious thought and requires careful, nuanced thinking rather than simple answers.

The Tension to Frame

If God rewards people based on their good works, but everyone needs mercy because no one is perfectly righteous, how do these two truths work together?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate students' instinct to want clear, simple answers while helping them appreciate theological complexity
- Honor both the merit principle and the mercy principle rather than forcing resolution
- Let students wrestle with the tension rather than providing easy explanations

1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

You've been working incredibly hard on a group project for weeks. You've stayed late, done extra research, covered for teammates who didn't show up. Meanwhile, another group has barely tried, they procrastinated, did sloppy work, and one person did nothing. When grades come back, your teacher gives both groups the same A because "everyone tried their best in different ways."

Part of you feels frustrated because your effort deserved recognition. You earned that grade through genuine hard work. But part of you also knows that sometimes people struggle for reasons you can't see, and maybe the other group needed that mercy more than you needed the recognition.

Today we're looking at an ancient prayer where someone is wrestling with something similar about God. If God rewards people for their good works, which seems fair and right, what happens to people who need help more than they need what they've earned?

As we read, notice how the prayer holds both ideas: that righteous works deserve reward, and that everyone needs mercy beyond what they've earned. Pay attention to whether the writer tries to resolve this tension or simply presents both truths.

Open your Bibles to 2 Esdras chapter 8, starting at verse 31. We'll read silently first to let the words sink in.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. This is dense theological writing, help students who struggle with vocabulary. Watch for early finishers and encourage them to reread slowly. Let them feel the weight of these big questions about justice and mercy.

As You Read, Think About:

- What is the person praying for, and why do they feel their people need it?
 - How does the prayer describe "righteous" people versus everyone else?
 - What seems to surprise or concern the person praying?
 - If you were in this conversation with God, what would you want to ask?
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2 Esdras 8:31-39 (NIV)

31 And do not be angry with us, but spare your people and have mercy on your inheritance, for you have mercy on your own creation. 32 For even though we and our ancestors have conducted our lives in ways that bring death, it is because of us sinners that you are called merciful. 33 For if you have desired to have pity on us, who have no works of righteousness, then you will be called merciful. 34 For the righteous, who have many good works laid up with you, shall receive their reward in consequence of their own deeds. 35 But what are mortals, that you could be angry with them? Or what is a corruptible race, that you could be so bitter against it? 36 For in

truth there is no one among the living who has not transgressed, and among the departed, no one who has not done wrong. 37 For in this, O Lord, your righteousness and goodness will be made known: when you are merciful to those who have no store of good works." 38 He answered me and said: "Some things you have spoken correctly, and it will come to pass according to your words. 39 For indeed I will not concern myself about the fashioning of those who have sinned, or about their death, their judgment, or their destruction."

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers who are comfortable reading aloud. This passage has complex sentences, choose confident readers and let students pass if they prefer. The tone should be earnest and pleading.

Reader 1: Verses 31-33 (The plea for mercy) **Reader 2:** Verses 34-37 (The tension between merit and mercy) **Reader 3:** Verses 38-39 (God's response)

Listen for the emotional tone, this isn't academic theology, it's someone wrestling with life-and-death questions about justice and mercy.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Form groups of 3-4 students. Give exactly 3 minutes. Walk between groups to listen to their discussions. If groups get stuck, suggest: "What surprised you most?" or "What made you uncomfortable?"

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 already know the answer to, but things you're actually curious or confused about. Maybe something that surprised you, or seemed to contradict something else, or made you uncomfortable. You have three minutes. These questions will drive our discussion.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students drive with THEIR questions, you facilitate and probe deeper. Guide discovery rather than lecturing. Honor the complexity rather than providing simple answers.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes around justice vs. mercy, works vs. grace, fairness, and the tension between verses 34 and 36.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What evidence do you see that the prayer-writer believes good works actually matter to God?"
 - "How can verse 34 ('righteous...shall receive their reward') and verse 36 ('no one...has not transgressed') both be true?"
 - "What's the difference between deserving something and needing something?"
 - "When the writer says God's 'goodness will be made known' through mercy to the undeserving, what does that suggest about God's character?"
 - "Do you think the writer is trying to solve the tension between justice and mercy, or just acknowledging that it exists?"
 - "How might this apply to rewards versus salvation, are they different categories?"
 - "What would change if God operated only on merit? What would change if God operated only on mercy?"
 - "Why might this tension between earning and receiving be built into the nature of the relationship between humans and the divine?"
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Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? The writer isn't trying to resolve the tension between people earning rewards for good works and people needing undeserved mercy. Instead, he's saying both are true and both reveal something important about God's character. God values righteousness enough to reward it, and God is merciful enough to help those who can't earn help. The complexity itself might be the point.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you see this same tension between earning what you deserve and needing mercy you haven't earned? Think about school, family relationships, friendships, and how you treat others.

Real Issues This Connects To

- Academic achievement, working hard for grades versus needing understanding when life gets complicated
 - Family dynamics, earning privileges through good behavior versus needing grace when you mess up
 - Friendship conflicts, friends earning your trust versus extending forgiveness they don't deserve
 - Social media justice, calling out people who earned consequences versus offering second chances
 - Economic inequality, people who work hard and struggle versus people who need help they can't earn
 - Personal motivation, doing right because it's rewarded versus doing right because it's right
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Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to answers. Some situations call for emphasis on merit, others on mercy. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket rules.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen the value of both working to earn something and receiving mercy you didn't earn?"
 - "How do you decide whether a situation calls for more justice or more mercy?"
 - "What's the difference between enabling someone and showing them grace?"
 - "How might holding both truths, merit and mercy, make us more mature in how we treat others?"
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5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: the tension between earning rewards for good works and needing undeserved mercy isn't a problem to solve, it's a complex truth about both divine and human relationships. God values righteousness enough to reward it, which means your good choices matter. God is merciful enough to help people who can't earn help, which means everyone has hope even when they fail.

This week, pay attention to moments when you face this tension, when someone hasn't earned your kindness but needs it anyway, or when you're tempted to think your good works make you better than people who struggle more. Notice how holding both truths might change how you respond.

The good thinking you did today, wrestling with complexity instead of demanding simple answers, that's exactly the kind of theological maturity this passage calls for. Keep asking hard questions. Faith that can't handle complexity isn't very strong faith.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that God notices and values their good choices, but that everyone makes mistakes and needs forgiveness, both truths show how much God cares about us.

If Kids Ask "Why do good kids have bad things happen to them?"

Say: "That's one of the hardest questions people ask. This passage shows that God notices good choices AND helps people when bad things happen. Both are true because God loves us."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever worked really, really hard on something, maybe a school project, or helping at home, or being kind to someone who was mean to you. Keep your hands up! I can see that most of you have worked hard on good things.

Now here's a harder question. Raise your hand if you've ever made a big mistake, maybe you were mean to someone, or broke something, or didn't tell the truth. You can put your hands up or keep them down, but I bet everyone here has messed up sometimes. That's okay! Part of you probably felt proud when you worked hard, but another part felt bad when you messed up.

Those feelings make total sense. It's confusing when you try to do good things but you also make mistakes sometimes. Maybe you wonder if the good things count when you also do wrong things.

Maybe you wonder if the mistakes cancel out all your good choices.

This is like in the movie *Inside Out*, where Riley has all different feelings at the same time, Joy and Sadness and even Anger all mixed together. Sometimes we feel proud of our good choices and ashamed of our bad choices, all at once.

The tricky part is figuring out what God thinks about all this. Does God only care about the good stuff? Does God only notice the mistakes? Does God keep track of both? And what does God do when someone really needs help but hasn't earned it?

Today we're going to hear about someone who was asking God these exact same questions. He was worried about his people because they had made a lot of mistakes, but he also knew some of them had tried really hard to do good. Let's find out what happened when he talked to God about it.

What to Expect: Kids will relate to feeling both proud and ashamed. Acknowledge both feelings briefly: "You're right, it's confusing to feel both things." Keep momentum toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Long ago, there was a man named Ezra who loved God very much. His people had been through really hard times, and Ezra was worried about them.

Ezra knew that some of his people tried hard to make good choices. They helped their neighbors, told the truth, and tried to do what God wanted. But Ezra also knew that everyone, including himself, sometimes made mistakes. Everyone had done wrong things sometimes.

This made Ezra feel confused and worried. If God only rewarded people for their good choices, what would happen to people who needed help more than they needed what they had earned? But if God only gave mercy to people who messed up, what about the people who worked so hard to do right?

Imagine how mixed up Ezra felt. It's like when your teacher says she'll give stickers to everyone who finishes their math homework, but then she sees that one kid couldn't finish because his family had to move houses that night and everything was crazy. Does the kid get a sticker for trying even though he didn't finish? Do the other kids still get their stickers for finishing? It's hard to figure out what's fair!

So Ezra decided to pray. He wanted to ask God how all this worked. Ezra said, "God, please don't be angry with us. Please show mercy to your people. We've made mistakes, we and our families have done

things that hurt others and hurt you."

Ezra felt scared as he prayed, but he kept going. "God, you are called merciful because you help people like us who have messed up. If you want to show kindness to us, even though we haven't earned it, then everyone will see how merciful you are."

But then Ezra said something that showed he was thinking about both sides of the problem. He said, "The people who are righteous, the ones who have done many good works that you remember, they will get rewards because of the good things they've done."

2 Esdras 8:34 (NIV)

34 For the righteous, who have many good works laid up with you, shall receive their reward in consequence of their own deeds.

This part of Ezra's prayer showed that he believed God noticed and remembered good choices. When people worked hard to do right, God saw that and would reward them. Their good works were like treasures stored up with God, nothing was forgotten or wasted.

But then Ezra said something else that showed he understood how big the problem was. He asked God, "What are humans that you would be angry with them? What are people that you would be bitter against them?"

And then Ezra said the most important thing: "Really, there is no one alive who has never done wrong. There is no one who has died who never made mistakes."

2 Esdras 8:36 (NIV)

36 For in truth there is no one among the living who has not transgressed, and among the departed, no one who has not done wrong.

So here was Ezra's big realization: Even the people who did many good works had also done wrong things. Even the most righteous people sometimes made bad choices. Everyone, EVERYONE, needed mercy sometimes, even the people who tried hardest to do right.

Then Ezra said something beautiful about God. He said, "God, this is how people will see your goodness: when you are kind to people who don't have a big store of good works to point to."

God listened to Ezra's prayer, and God said, "Some of the things you have said are right, and they will happen the way you said."

God was agreeing with both parts of what Ezra had said! Yes, God does notice and reward good works, when people make good choices, God sees and remembers. AND yes, God shows mercy to people who need help even when they haven't earned it.

It's not that God picks just one way to treat people. God does both because God loves us so much. God cares about our good choices because they matter. God helps us when we mess up because we matter.

Sometimes in our lives, we work hard and do good things, and it's good that our efforts are noticed and valued. Sometimes in our lives, we mess up or things go wrong, and we need help we can't earn. Both times show how much God cares about us.

What we learn from Ezra's prayer is that God is both fair and kind. God is fair enough to notice and reward good choices. God is kind enough to help people who need mercy they haven't earned.

The amazing truth is that we don't have to choose between God being fair or God being kind. God is both, and that's exactly what people like us need, people who sometimes do good and sometimes mess up.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Feelings

Think about a time when you worked really hard to help someone or do something good, and nobody noticed. Maybe you cleaned up without being asked, or you were kind to someone who was sad, or you did extra work on a project. How did it feel when nobody seemed to notice your good choice? Would it have mattered to you if God noticed, even if people didn't?

Listen For: "Sad," "frustrated," "like it didn't matter", affirm: "That makes sense. It's hard when good things we do seem invisible. God seeing would make a difference."

Question 2: The Hard Choice

Now imagine a friend who has been mean to you and hasn't said sorry, but then something really bad happens to them and they need help. Part of you might think "They haven't been nice to me, so why should I help them?" But part of you might think "They really need help right now." What would you do? What would help you decide?

If They Say: "I wouldn't help them", respond "That's honest. It would be hard. What might help you want to help anyway?"

Question 3: The Surprise

Ezra said that even really good people have done wrong things sometimes. Does that surprise you? Why do you think even people who try really hard to do right still make mistakes? What does that tell you about why everyone needs God's help?

Connect: "This is exactly why Ezra was asking for mercy, even good people need help sometimes."

Question 4: The Amazing Result

If God notices both your good choices AND helps you when you mess up, how does that make you feel about trying to do good things? Does it make you want to try harder, or does it make you think good choices don't matter? Why?

If They Say: "Good choices don't matter", respond "What if someone you loved noticed every kind thing you did? Would that make them matter more?"

You're all thinking about this so well. The amazing thing about God is that He doesn't have to choose between being fair or being kind. He can notice and care about our good choices AND help us when we need mercy we haven't earned. Let's try an activity that shows how this works.

4. Activity: The Helping Chain (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity reinforces that both earning help through helping others and receiving help you haven't earned are valuable. Success looks like kids discovering that a community works best when people both contribute what they can and receive help when they need it, regardless of what they've "earned."

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play The Helping Chain. Everyone stand in a big circle. I'm going to give each person a different "job", some people will be helpers, some will be people who need help, and some will be in between.

Helpers, your job is to help anyone who needs help by standing next to them and linking arms. People who need help, raise your hand and wait for helpers to come to you. People in between, you can help others, but you also need some help yourselves.

Here's the twist: helpers can only help if someone else is already helping them first. So if you're helping someone but nobody is helping you, you have to sit down. We're doing this because it's exactly like what Ezra discovered, even people who help others need help sometimes.

The goal is to see if everyone can be connected in one big helping chain where everyone is both giving help and getting help.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Start the activity and watch as some helpers try to help but then have to sit down because no one is helping them. Let them struggle with this for about a minute before offering coaching.

As they encounter the challenge, watch for kids who realize they need to help the helpers. Some may figure out that even the strong people need support. Guide them without giving away the answer.

Coach with phrases like: "I notice the helpers need something too..." "I wonder if there are others who could help the people who are helping..." "What happens when everyone both gives AND receives?"

Celebrate when someone realizes that even the helpers need help, this is the physical representation of Ezra's insight that even righteous people need mercy.

Once they've succeeded in creating a chain where everyone is connected, have them notice how different it feels when everyone is both giving and receiving compared to when some people were left out.

Watch For: The moment when someone helps a helper, this is the physical representation of the lesson's truth that everyone needs both to contribute and to receive.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when only some people were giving help versus when everyone was both giving AND receiving help? In the working chain, people contributed what they could, but they also got support when they needed it. This is exactly what Ezra was praying about, God notices our good works AND gives us mercy we need. Both together make everything work better.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: God notices and remembers your good choices, they matter to God and they're like treasures stored up. But God also gives you mercy when you mess up because everyone makes mistakes sometimes, even really good people.

This doesn't mean good choices don't matter or that mistakes don't matter. It means God cares about you enough to value your efforts AND help you when you need it. Both show how much God loves you.

The amazing result is that you don't have to be perfect to be loved by God, but your good choices still count and matter. That's exactly what people like us need, people who sometimes do great and sometimes need help.

This Week's Challenge

This week, pay attention to two things: notice when you do good things and remember that God sees those choices too. Also notice when you need help or mercy, and remember that God wants to help you even when you haven't earned it. Try to be like God by both noticing good things others do AND being kind to people who need help they haven't earned.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you for seeing our good choices and remembering them. Thank you for also helping us when we mess up and need mercy we haven't earned. Help us this week to make good choices and also to be kind to people who need help, just like you are kind to 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 sees and remembers when they make good choices, and God loves and forgives them when they make bad choices.

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 memory to a treasure box where He keeps all our good choices safe, then ask "What good choice could you put in God's treasure box today?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's love and care. Suggestions: "God is So Good," "Jesus Loves Me," or "This Little Light of Mine." Use movements: point up to God during verses about God, point to heart during verses about love, and clap hands during upbeat choruses.

Great singing! I could hear everyone's voices praising God. Now let's sit down in our story shape so we can hear about someone who had a very important talk with God. Make a horseshoe on the floor facing me.

2. Bible Story Time (5, 7 minutes)

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

Animated Delivery: Use big gestures, change your voice for different characters, move around the space. Keep energy high! Sound worried when you're Ezra praying, sound warm and strong when you're talking about God.

Today we're going to meet a man named Ezra who loved God very much and wanted to talk to Him.

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe, look worried]

Ezra was worried about his friends and family. Sometimes they made good choices, but sometimes they made bad choices too.

[Use a confused expression and scratching your head]

Ezra felt confused. He wondered, "Does God see when we do good things? Does God still love us when we mess up?"

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, fold hands like praying]

So Ezra decided to pray. He talked to God and said, "God, please don't be angry with us. Please love us and help us."

[Move to center, speak with gentle authority]

Then Ezra said something very important. He said, "God, some people try really hard to make good choices. They help others and share and tell the truth."

[Move to side, speak thoughtfully]

And then Ezra said, "Those people who do good things, you see all their good choices, God. You remember every single one!"

2 Esdras 8:34 (NIV)

The people who do good things will get good rewards because of their good choices.

[Pause and look around at each child with a big smile]

That means God has a special way of remembering every good choice you make! When you help your mom, God sees. When you share with your friend, God remembers. When you tell the truth, God stores it up like a treasure!

[Move to center, speak with gentle concern]

But then Ezra realized something else. He said, "God, everyone makes mistakes sometimes. Even good people mess up."

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe, speaking gently]

Ezra told God, "Every single person who is alive has done wrong things. Everyone needs your help and forgiveness."

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

So Ezra asked God to be kind to people, even when they hadn't earned it. Even when they had made mistakes and needed help.

[Speak with warm excitement]

And you know what? God listened to Ezra's prayer! God said, "Yes, what you said is right!"

[Pause dramatically]

So God does BOTH! God sees and remembers your good choices, AND God loves you and helps you when you make mistakes!

[Speak directly to the children with warmth]

Sometimes in your life, you make really good choices, like sharing toys or helping clean up or being kind to someone. God sees every single one and remembers them like treasures!

[Move closer to the children]

Sometimes in your life, you make mistakes, maybe you're mean to your brother or you don't listen to your parents. When that happens, you can ask God for help and forgiveness.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves you so much that He cares about your good choices AND He helps you when you mess up. Both things show how much God loves 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 partner and stand together. I'm going to give you each something to talk about. You'll have about one minute to share with each other. There are no wrong answers!

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. What's a good choice you made this week?
2. How do you feel when someone notices something good you did?
3. What makes you feel better when you make a mistake?
4. What would you do if your friend needed help but was mean to you yesterday?
5. How do you think God feels when you make good choices?

6. How do you think God feels when you mess up?

7. What's something good you could do to help someone today?

8. Who helps you when you need it?

9. What makes someone a good friend?

10. How can you show love to someone who is sad?

11. What good choice is sometimes hard to make?

12. When do you need help the most?

13. What does it mean that God remembers good choices?

14. How can you be kind like God is kind?

15. What would you tell someone who thinks their mistakes don't matter to God?

16. How does it feel to know God sees your good choices?

17. What good choice could you make at home?

18. What good choice could you make at school?

19. How can you help someone who made a mistake?

20. What's your favorite way to show God you love Him?

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

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Select a song about God's love or making good choices. Suggestions: "I've Got the Joy Joy Joy Joy Down in My Heart," "If You're Happy and You Know It" (adapted with verses about good choices), or "God is Good to Me." Include movements: clap hands for joy, point to heart for love, and march in

place for energy.

Beautiful singing! I love hearing you praise God with your voices. Now let's sit down for our prayer time. Sit criss-cross applesauce in your rows with hands folded.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

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

Dear God, thank you for seeing all our good choices like treasures.

[Pause]

Help us this week to make good choices that make you happy. Help us share and be kind and tell the truth.

[Pause]

When we make mistakes, help us remember that you still love us and want to forgive us. Thank you for loving us no matter what. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Alternative, Popcorn Prayer: If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about good choices or God's love. Examples: "Thank you God for loving me" or "Help me be kind today."

Remember, God sees your good choices and keeps them like treasures, and God loves you even when you mess up. Have a wonderful week making choices that show God's love!

Love Your Enemies

Forgiving Those Who Hurt Us, Is This an Impossible Standard?

Acts 7:54-8:3

Instructor Preparation

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

The Passage

Acts 7:54-8:3 (NIV)

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

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

1 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

Context

Stephen was one of the first deacons chosen to serve in the early church. As a man "full of God's grace and power," he performed great signs and wonders among the people. His powerful preaching about Jesus drew fierce opposition from religious leaders. They accused him of blasphemy and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court.

In Acts 7, Stephen delivered a sweeping speech defending his faith and challenging the religious establishment. He accused them of resisting the Holy Spirit and killing the prophets, including Jesus. The court erupted in fury. This is the moment of Stephen's death, and his final words that would echo through history.

The Big Idea

Stephen's dying prayer reveals that following Jesus means loving enemies even when they're killing you, the ultimate test of what faith actually believes about forgiveness.

This isn't merely good advice or moral inspiration. Stephen's prayer directly echoes Jesus's words from the cross ("Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"). The pattern passes from Jesus to his disciple, showing that the teaching has become internalized. Yet we must acknowledge the complexity: this seems like an impossible standard that defies human nature and justice.

Theological Core

- **Enemy-love as ultimate discipleship.** Stephen demonstrates that following Jesus means praying for those who persecute you, even unto death.
 - **The Jesus pattern replicated.** Stephen's words mirror Christ's crucifixion prayer, showing how deeply the gospel had transformed his heart.
 - **Prayer as final testimony.** In his last moments, Stephen chooses intercession over condemnation, making his death itself a witness to God's love.
 - **Forgiveness with eternal impact.** Stephen's prayer may have planted seeds that contributed to Saul's later conversion, showing that enemy-love can have transformative power across time.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Enemy-love is the pinnacle of Jesus's teaching, tested in the most extreme circumstances
 - Stephen's prayer wasn't weakness but the ultimate expression of faith in God's character
 - Forgiveness can have long-term effects we don't immediately see (like Paul's conversion)
 - Wrestling with impossible standards reveals what we truly believe about God's way versus the world's way
-

Grades 4, 6

- Praying for enemies doesn't mean letting them keep hurting people
 - Sometimes being kind to mean people can help change their hearts
 - God gives us strength to do hard things like forgiving
 - It's okay to feel angry and still choose to pray for someone
-

Grades 1, 3

- God wants us to pray for people who are mean to us
 - Jesus helps us love people even when they hurt our feelings
 - Praying for someone who was mean can help their heart feel better
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Promoting doormat theology.** Stephen's prayer doesn't mean Christians should passively accept abuse or injustice. He died defending the truth and didn't shrink from confronting sin, he simply refused to curse his killers.

- **Making it cheap or easy.** Don't diminish the radical difficulty of what Stephen did. This was humanly impossible apart from divine grace, acknowledge that this defies natural instincts for revenge.

- **Ignoring the justice question.** Students will rightly wonder if forgiveness means evil goes unpunished. Help them see that Stephen entrusts justice to God rather than taking personal vengeance.

- **Missing the supernatural element.** Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit", this wasn't mere human effort but divine empowerment. Don't present enemy-love as achievable through willpower alone.

Handling Hard Questions

"Isn't this just letting bad people win?"

Stephen wasn't passive, he boldly confronted sin and defended truth even knowing it would cost his life. His prayer shows trust that God will handle ultimate justice while refusing to let hatred poison his own heart. Sometimes the most powerful resistance to evil is refusing to become evil yourself, even when you're dying.

"How can you forgive someone who doesn't even ask for it?"

Stephen's forgiveness wasn't dependent on his killers' repentance, it was about his relationship with God and his freedom from bitterness. Forgiveness can be unilateral, releasing resentment for your own spiritual health while still hoping for the other person's eventual repentance. Notice that Stephen prayed for God not to hold their sin against them, which actually assumes they needed forgiveness.

"What if this just makes you a target for more abuse?"

Stephen's situation was unique, he was being martyred for his faith, not choosing to stay in an abusive relationship. Enemy-love sometimes requires wisdom about boundaries and safety. The principle is

about heart posture, not foolish endangerment. We can pray for enemies while also protecting ourselves and others from harm.

The One Thing to Remember

Enemy-love isn't weakness, it's the hardest thing Jesus asks us to do, and it has the power to change both us and them in ways we never expected.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle honestly with the tension between their natural desire for justice and Jesus's call to enemy-love. Help them see that Stephen's prayer wasn't naive idealism but the ultimate test of what faith actually believes about God's way.

The Tension to Frame

Is praying for your enemies while they're literally killing you an impossible standard that sets people up for failure, or does extreme persecution reveal what enemy-love actually means?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their instinctive desire for justice, it's not wrong to want evil punished
 - Honor the genuine difficulty of what Stephen did, don't make it sound easy
 - Let them wrestle rather than rushing to neat conclusions; some tensions remain difficult
-

1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine you're scrolling through social media and you see a story about a school shooter. During the trial, some of the victims' families stand up and publicly forgive the shooter. They say they're praying for him. How do you react to that? Part of you might admire their courage, but another part might think,

"Are you kidding me? That person doesn't deserve forgiveness."

Now imagine reading the comments section. Half the people are calling the families saints and heroes. The other half are saying they're enablers, that forgiveness without consequences just encourages more violence. Both sides are angry at each other. Both sides think they're fighting for what's right.

This tension isn't new. Two thousand years ago, a young man named Stephen faced this same impossible choice, except he didn't have time to think about it. Rocks were flying at his head. Religious leaders were trying to kill him for preaching about Jesus. And in that moment, with his final breath, he had to decide: curse them or pray for them.

Today we're going to look at what he chose and wrestle with whether it's realistic, naive, or something else entirely. As you read, pay attention to Stephen's exact words and ask yourself: Could I do this? Should I do this? And what does this tell us about what Jesus actually expects from his followers?

Open your Bibles to Acts 7:54. We're going to read about the most challenging prayer in the New Testament outside of Jesus himself.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly around the room. This is heavy material, let them feel the weight of what's happening. Help with any difficult words, but mostly let them absorb the drama and intensity of Stephen's final moments.

As You Read, Think About:

- What exactly is Stephen doing and saying as he's being killed?
 - Why are the religious leaders so furious with him?
 - What surprises you about Stephen's response to being murdered?
 - How would you honestly feel and react in Stephen's situation?
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Acts 7:54-8:3 (NIV)

54 When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

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

1 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Ask for volunteers who are comfortable reading dramatic material. Let students pass if they prefer. Choose confident readers for the intense emotional content.

Reader 1: Verses 54-56 (The vision and escalating rage) **Reader 2:** Verses 57-58 (The mob violence begins) **Reader 3:** Verses 59-8:3 (Stephen's final prayers and aftermath)

Listen for the contrast in tones, the fury of the crowd versus the peace in Stephen's voice. This isn't just information; it's life-and-death drama playing out.

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 hit you hardest?" or "What doesn't make sense?"

Get into groups of 3-4 and come up with one or two questions you're genuinely curious about after reading this passage. Not Sunday School questions you think you should ask, but things you actually want to discuss. Like, "Why would Stephen pray for people who are literally killing him?" or "Is this realistic for normal people?" You have three minutes, go.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

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

Collecting Questions: Start with questions most students will connect with emotionally. Look for themes around justice, realism, and motivation.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What specific words does Stephen use in his prayer, and how do they echo Jesus's words from the cross?"
 - "Why do you think the text mentions that Stephen was 'full of the Holy Spirit' right before this happens?"
 - "Is Stephen's prayer about letting his killers off the hook, or is he trusting God to handle justice differently than humans do?"
 - "What's the difference between Stephen's response and just being a doormat or victim?"
 - "How do you reconcile wanting justice for evil with Jesus's command to love enemies?"
 - "Look at verse 58, Saul was watching this happen. How might Stephen's prayer have affected someone who later became Paul?"
 - "If Stephen had cursed his killers instead, how would that have changed the story?"
 - "What does Stephen's response tell us about what he actually believed about God's character and power?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Stephen isn't just randomly choosing to be nice to mean people. His words directly mirror what Jesus said on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." The teaching has become so internalized that even while dying, Stephen instinctively responds the way Jesus did. This is enemy-love in its ultimate form, not when it's convenient, but when it costs everything.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives for a minute. You're probably not facing martyrdom anytime soon, but you do face situations where someone hurts you and your instinct is to hurt them back. Where do you see this same tension between justice and forgiveness playing out?

Real Issues This Connects To

- When someone starts a nasty rumor about you at school and you want to destroy their reputation in response
 - When a family member constantly criticizes you and you're tempted to cut them off completely
 - When a friend betrays your trust and you have to choose between revenge and reconciliation
 - When you see injustice online and have to decide between hostile confrontation and constructive engagement
 - When someone from a different political or social group attacks what you believe and you want to attack back
 - When you're deciding whether to pray for or curse people who have genuinely hurt you or others
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to give answers. Some situations are genuinely complex and call for wisdom about boundaries and safety. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket advice.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone choose Stephen's approach instead of revenge, and what was the result?"
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- "What would help you pray for enemies instead of cursing them when you're really hurt?"
- "How do you tell the difference between wise enemy-love and naive enabling of bad behavior?"
- "What's the difference between forgiving someone and trusting them again?"

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you today: Stephen's prayer wasn't weakness disguised as spirituality. It was the hardest thing a human being can do, choosing God's way when every instinct screams for revenge. It defied human nature because it came from a supernatural source. Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit," not full of his own willpower.

This week, pay attention to your instinctive responses when someone hurts you. Notice the anger, it's not wrong to feel it. But then ask yourself: What would it look like to pray for this person instead of plotting against them? You don't have to become a doormat, but you might discover that enemy-love is more powerful than revenge.

You wrestled with really difficult questions today and didn't settle for easy answers. That's exactly what faith looks like, holding tension, asking hard questions, and trusting God even when his way doesn't make human sense. Keep wrestling. It's making you stronger.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that forgiving people who hurt us is hard but possible with God's help, and that being kind to enemies sometimes changes their hearts.

If Kids Ask "Why didn't God save Stephen?"

Say: "Sometimes God does rescue people, and sometimes he gives them strength to stay faithful even when hard things happen. Stephen got to see Jesus right before he died, and his prayer helped change

someone else's heart later."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever had someone be really mean to you, like, say something hurtful or embarrass you in front of other people. Most of you, right? Now keep your hand up if your first thought was, "I want to be mean right back to them." Yeah, that's totally normal.

Here's a harder question: Imagine the person who was meanest to you at school suddenly needed help with something, and you were the only one around who could help them. Part of you might think, "Good, now they'll see what it feels like to need someone." But another part might think, "Maybe I should help anyway, even though they were mean to me."

Those feelings make perfect sense. When someone hurts us, our brains want to protect us by hurting them back or by staying far away. It's like when you touch something hot, you pull your hand away fast. Your heart does the same thing when someone is mean.

This reminds me of the movie Frozen when Anna keeps trying to help Elsa even though Elsa keeps pushing her away and accidentally hurting her. Anna could have given up and been mean back, but she kept choosing to love her sister even when it was hard and dangerous.

The tricky part is figuring out when to keep being kind to someone who's hurt you and when to protect yourself. Is it always good to be nice to mean people? What if they just keep being mean? What if being nice doesn't seem to help anything?

Today we're going to hear about a man named Stephen who faced the meanest people imaginable, people who were literally trying to kill him for talking about Jesus. And his response was so surprising that it's still being talked about 2,000 years later. Let's find out what happened.

What to Expect: Kids will relate to feeling hurt and wanting revenge. Acknowledge these feelings briefly as normal and keep building curiosity about Stephen's different choice.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Picture a courtroom full of angry people. Stephen, a young man who loved Jesus, stood in the middle facing the most powerful religious leaders in Jerusalem. These weren't just any leaders, they were the

same people who had convinced the Romans to crucify Jesus.

Stephen had been preaching about Jesus in the city, telling people that Jesus was alive and that he was the Messiah God had promised to send. Stephen was doing amazing miracles and many people were starting to believe. But the religious leaders hated hearing about Jesus.

They arrested Stephen and brought him to court, accusing him of saying terrible things about God. But instead of defending himself, Stephen told them the whole story of Israel and how they had always rejected God's messengers, including Jesus.

Imagine how you'd feel if someone accused you of hurting the person you loved most in the world. That's how angry these leaders were getting. Their faces were red, their hands were shaking, and they were grinding their teeth.

But then something amazing happened. Stephen looked up toward heaven, and his face started shining with joy. His eyes went wide with wonder.

"Look!" Stephen said, pointing upward. "I can see heaven open! I can see Jesus standing right next to God!"

Acts 7:55-56 (NIV)

55-56 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

That was the last straw for the angry leaders. Hearing Stephen say he could see Jesus was like pouring gasoline on a fire. They covered their ears and started yelling so they wouldn't have to listen anymore.

Then the most terrible thing happened. The whole crowd rushed at Stephen like a pack of wolves. They grabbed him and dragged him outside the city. Someone started throwing rocks at him. Then everyone joined in.

As the rocks were flying and hitting Stephen, he did something nobody expected. Instead of screaming at his attackers or begging them to stop, he prayed. But not the kind of prayer you might think.

First he prayed, "Lord Jesus, please take care of my spirit." He was asking Jesus to take him to heaven when he died, just like Jesus had promised.

But then, as more rocks hit him and he fell to his knees, Stephen prayed something that shocked everyone within hearing distance.

Acts 7:60 (NIV)

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

Wait, did you hear what Stephen prayed? He asked God not to punish the people who were killing him! He was praying for his enemies while rocks were hitting his head!

You see, Stephen remembered that when Jesus was dying on the cross, he had prayed, "Father, forgive them because they don't understand what they're doing." Stephen had learned Jesus's heart so well that even while he was dying, he wanted God to forgive his enemies instead of punish them.

This wasn't Stephen being weak or letting people walk all over him. He had just spent the whole day boldly telling the truth about Jesus, even knowing it was dangerous. This was Stephen showing that God's love is stronger than people's hate.

And you know what? There was a young man named Saul watching all of this happen. Saul approved of Stephen being killed. He thought Stephen deserved it. But Stephen's prayer that day planted a seed in Saul's heart that would grow later.

A few years later, Jesus appeared to Saul on a road and asked him, "Why are you hurting my people?" Saul realized he had been wrong and became one of the greatest Christians who ever lived. We know him as the apostle Paul!

Stephen's prayer for his enemies helped change the heart of someone who became a hero of the faith. That's the power of asking God to help our enemies instead of hurt them.

Sometimes in our lives, we get to choose between getting revenge on someone who hurt us or asking God to help them change. It's one of the hardest choices we ever make. But when we choose to pray for our enemies like Stephen did, amazing things can happen.

Stephen learned that God can use our kindness to melt the hardest hearts. Even when people are mean to us, God can help us respond with love instead of meanness. And sometimes, just sometimes, our love helps change them.

God doesn't ask us to let people keep hurting us or other people. But he does ask us to keep praying for them and hoping they'll change, just like Stephen did.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Hard Choice

Imagine you're Stephen, and people are throwing rocks at you because you talked about Jesus. Your whole body hurts, you know you're about to die, and these people hate you. What would your heart want you to pray for? "God, make them stop!" or "God, please punish them!" or "God, this isn't fair!" Those would all make sense, wouldn't they?

Listen For: "Stop them," "Punish them," "Save me", affirm: "Those all make perfect sense. Our hearts want protection and justice when we're being hurt."

Question 2: The Big Difference

Stephen prayed for God NOT to punish his enemies. How do you think that felt different inside Stephen's heart compared to if he had prayed for God to hurt them back? What do you think happens to our hearts when we pray for people to be blessed instead of cursed?

If They Say: "It would feel weird" or "I don't know", respond: "Yeah, it would feel strange at first. What do you think might happen to angry feelings when we pray for someone to be helped instead of hurt?"

Question 3: The Ripple Effect

Saul was watching Stephen die and heard his prayer. A few years later, Saul became Paul, one of the greatest Christians ever. Do you think Stephen's prayer helped plant a seed that grew into Paul's changed heart? How might being kind to our enemies affect them, even if we don't see it right away?

Connect: "This is exactly why Stephen's prayer was so powerful, it had effects he never got to see, but God was working through his kindness."

Question 4: Our Lives

Think about someone at school or in your family who's been mean to you. What would it look like to "pray for your enemies" like Stephen did? What would you ask God to do for them instead of to them? How might that change how you feel about them?

If They Say: "But what if they keep being mean?", respond: "That's a really good question. Praying for someone doesn't mean we have to let them keep hurting us. We can ask God to help them change AND ask for protection."

Stephen's story shows us that even in the worst situations, we can choose love over hate, prayer over revenge. It's not easy, it's probably the hardest thing God asks us to do. But when we do it, we're acting just like Jesus, and amazing things can happen in people's hearts.

4. Activity: The Heart Chain Reaction (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity reinforces how choosing kindness instead of revenge creates positive chain reactions, while choosing meanness creates negative ones. Success looks like kids discovering that one person's choice to "pray for enemies" can break a cycle of hurt and start a cycle of healing.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play "Heart Chain Reaction." Everyone stand in a line. The first person is going to start a chain reaction by whispering either "Blessing" or "Curse" to the next person. But here's the twist, you get to choose what you pass on.

If someone whispers "Curse" to you, you can either pass on "Curse" to the next person OR you can break the chain and whisper "Blessing" instead. If someone whispers "Blessing," you can pass on

"Blessing" or sadly, you could choose to start a "Curse" chain.

We're going to see what happens when people choose to be like Stephen and break curse chains with blessings, versus when people choose to keep hurt going. This is exactly like real life when someone is mean to us and we have to choose: be mean back, or break the chain with kindness.

At the end, I want you to notice how it felt to pass on a curse versus how it felt to break a curse chain and start a blessing.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

First round: Start with "Curse" and see if anyone chooses to break it. Watch their faces as they decide. Some will automatically pass on what they received; others will pause and make the harder choice to break the cycle.

Second round: Start with "Blessing" and see if the positive chain stays positive or if someone introduces negativity. Notice how the whole line's energy changes based on individual choices.

Coaching: "Notice how it feels in your body when you receive a curse versus a blessing." "Notice what happens in your heart when you choose to break a curse chain." "See how one person's choice changes everyone who comes after them."

Third round: Start multiple chains from different ends and let them meet in the middle. Celebrate when someone chooses to be like Stephen and breaks a negative chain with kindness.

Point out the exact moment when someone chooses blessing over curse: "There! That's exactly what Stephen did, someone was sending him hate, and he sent back love instead. Look how it changed everything after that!"

Watch For: The moment when a child chooses to pass "Blessing" after receiving "Curse", this is the physical representation of Stephen's prayer breaking the cycle of revenge.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when you chose to break a curse chain with a blessing? That feeling of changing something negative into something positive, that's exactly what Stephen experienced when he prayed for his enemies. One person's choice to love instead of hate can change

everything that comes after. Your kindness has that same power.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: God wants us to pray for people who are mean to us, even when our hearts want to pray for them to get in trouble. It's one of the hardest things he asks us to do, but it's also one of the most powerful.

This doesn't mean we have to let people keep hurting us or that we can't ask for help when someone is being a bully. We can protect ourselves AND pray for the person hurting us. Both things can be true at the same time.

The amazing thing is that when we choose to pray blessings instead of curses, it changes our own hearts and sometimes helps change theirs too. Just like Stephen's prayer helped Saul become Paul, our prayers for enemies can do things we never expected.

This Week's Challenge

This week, when someone is mean to you or hurts your feelings, try praying a one-sentence prayer for them instead of planning how to be mean back. Ask God to help their heart feel better. See what happens inside your own heart when you do this.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you for Stephen's brave example. Help us remember that when people are mean to us, we can pray for you to help them instead of hurt them. Give us strong hearts like Stephen had so we can love our enemies just like Jesus did. 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 Jesus wants us to pray for people who are mean to us, and that God gives us love in our hearts even when our feelings are hurt.

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 praying for someone who was mean to asking God to give them a band-aid for their heart, then ask "How do you think God feels when we pray nice things for mean people?"

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," "God's Love is So Wonderful," or "Love, Love, Love." Use movements: spread arms wide during "love" lyrics, point up to God during "Jesus" or "God," and hug yourself during "me" or "wonderful."

Great singing! Now let's sit down for story time. Make a horseshoe shape on the floor so everyone can see me. Today we're going to hear about someone who loved Jesus so much that he even prayed for people who 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 amazed when you talk about Stephen seeing Jesus, sound angry for the mean people, sound gentle and loving for Stephen's prayer.

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

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Stephen lived in a big city, and he told everyone about how wonderful Jesus was. He said, "Jesus loves you! Jesus is alive!" And many people were so happy to hear about Jesus!

[Use happy, excited voice and big smile]

But some grumpy leaders didn't want people talking about Jesus. They got madder and madder at Stephen. Their faces turned red and they made angry sounds with their teeth!

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, make angry face and gnashing sounds]

The angry leaders grabbed Stephen and took him to court. They said he was saying bad things, but Stephen was only saying good things about Jesus!

[Move to center, speak with wonder and point upward]

Then something AMAZING happened! Stephen looked up to heaven and saw something wonderful! He saw Jesus standing right next to God!

[Move to side, sound like excited Stephen]

"Look!" Stephen said, pointing up. "I can see heaven! I can see Jesus right there with God!" Stephen was so happy to see Jesus!

Acts 7:55-56 (NIV)

55-56 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

[Pause and look around at each child with wide eyes]

Can you imagine seeing Jesus like that? Stephen felt so happy and safe because Jesus was watching! But the angry people got even MORE angry when Stephen said he could see Jesus.

[Move to center, speak with sadness but strength]

The mean people were so mad that they started throwing rocks at Stephen to hurt him. That was very, very wrong of them to do. Stephen was getting hurt, but he still loved Jesus.

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

And then Stephen did something that surprised EVERYONE. Instead of saying mean things back to the people who were hurting him, Stephen prayed to God! But not the kind of prayer you might think!

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

Stephen prayed, "God, please don't be angry at these people for hurting me. Please forgive them." Can you believe that? The people were being mean to him, and Stephen asked God to be nice to them!

[Speak with excitement and amazement]

Stephen was copying Jesus! When Jesus was on the cross, he prayed for the people who were hurting him too. Stephen learned how to love from Jesus, and even when people were mean, Stephen chose to love them back!

[Pause dramatically]

God loved Stephen's prayer so much. Stephen showed everyone that God's love is bigger and stronger than people's meanness. When we pray for people who are mean to us, we're acting just like Jesus!

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes kids at school might be mean to us, or someone might hurt our feelings, or a brother or sister might be annoying. We want to be mean back, don't we? But Stephen teaches us we can pray for them instead!

[Move closer to the children]

When someone is mean to you, you can ask God, "Please help their heart feel better. Please help them be kind." That's what Stephen did, and God loves it when we pray like that!

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

Jesus gives us love in our hearts so we can love even mean people. And you know what? Sometimes when we're kind to mean people, it helps their hearts change and they become kind too! God's love is the most powerful thing in the whole world!

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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

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

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

Discussion Questions

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

1. How do you think Stephen felt when he saw Jesus in heaven?
 2. When someone is mean to you at school, what does your heart want to do?
 3. Why do you think Stephen prayed for the mean people instead of getting mad?
 4. What would you do if someone took your toy and wouldn't give it back?
 5. How do you think the mean people felt when Stephen prayed for them?
 6. What does it mean to ask God to help someone's heart?
 7. When has someone been kind to you when you were grumpy?
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8. What happens when we say mean things back to mean people?

9. How can we be like Stephen at home with our family?

10. Who in your life needs you to pray for them?

11. Why did God love Stephen's prayer so much?

12. How does Jesus help us love mean people?

13. What does God want us to do when someone hurts our feelings?

14. How can we ask God to help someone who was mean to us?

15. What's the difference between being kind and being mean?

16. What did you learn from Stephen's story?

17. How can we remember to pray instead of being mean back?

18. What would Jesus want us to do if someone pushed us?

19. How do you think God feels when we pray for mean people?

20. How can we have brave hearts like Stephen?

Great discussions! Let's all come back together in our circle. Who wants to share something you talked about with your partner?

4. Closing Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in straight lines facing forward

Choose a song about being kind or loving others. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "Love One Another," or "This Little Light of Mine." Use movements: point to yourself during "I," point to others during "you," make heart shape with hands during "love," and shine hands up high during "light."

Beautiful singing! Now let's get ready to pray together. Sit down in rows, fold your hands, and bow your heads. Let's talk to God.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

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

Dear God, thank you for Stephen who showed us how to love mean people...

[Pause]

Please help us remember to pray for people who are mean to us instead of being mean back. Give us kind hearts like Stephen had so we can love like Jesus...

[Pause]

Help us remember that your love is bigger and stronger than anyone's meanness. Help us pray for people who hurt our feelings...

[Pause]

Thank you for loving us so much and for teaching us how to love others. Thank you for Jesus who shows us the best way to live. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Alternative, Popcorn Prayer: If your class is comfortable with it, invite kids to offer short one-sentence prayers about loving mean people. Examples: "God, help me be kind to my sister when she's grumpy" or "God, help me pray for kids who are mean at school."

Remember, when someone is mean to you this week, you can pray, "God, please help their heart feel better." Jesus will give you love in your heart to share with them. Have a wonderful week being like Stephen!

Trading Hearts

Emotional Transformation, How do we handle the anger inside that feels justified?

Ephesians 4:25-32

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

Ephesians 4:25-32 (NIV)

25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 26 "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Context

Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus about what Christian community should look like in practice. He's just spent three chapters explaining the theological foundation, God's grace, Christ's work, the church as God's household. Now he gets concrete: here's how transformed people actually live together.

This isn't abstract morality; it's community survival manual.

The immediate context shows Paul addressing specific behaviors that destroy community, lying, unresolved anger, stealing, harmful speech. He's building toward the climax in verses 31-32, which function as both summary and transformation blueprint. The stakes are high: grief the Holy Spirit (v.30) or grieve each other. Paul presents a stark choice between patterns that destroy and patterns that heal.

The Big Idea

Emotional transformation requires both elimination and replacement, six specific destructive patterns must be actively removed while three positive patterns, modeled on divine forgiveness, take their place.

This isn't about emotion management or anger suppression. Paul presents a complete heart renovation project where the motivation for change comes from experiencing God's forgiveness. The complexity lies in distinguishing between righteous anger (v.26) and the destructive anger patterns listed in verse 31, requiring discernment rather than blanket rules.

Theological Core

- **Active Elimination.** Bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice require intentional removal, not passive hope they'll fade away.
 - **Replacement Principle.** Empty spaces left by removed emotions must be filled with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness to prevent relapse into old patterns.
 - **Divine Modeling.** God's forgiveness toward us provides both the motivation and the template for how we forgive others, freely, completely, sacrificially.
 - **Community Impact.** Individual emotional transformation affects the entire body of Christ; our inner work has outer consequences for relationships and witness.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- How to distinguish between righteous anger and destructive anger patterns that poison community
 - Why emotional transformation requires both active elimination and intentional replacement, not just willpower
 - How receiving God's forgiveness provides both motivation and method for forgiving others
 - When to address harmful emotions in ourselves and others with grace and truth
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Grades 4, 6

- Six specific emotions and behaviors that hurt relationships and need to be stopped
 - Three positive actions that heal relationships and build trust with others
 - How our choices to be kind or mean affect everyone around us, not just ourselves
 - Why remembering God's kindness to us helps us be kind to others even when we don't feel like it
-

Grades 1, 3

- God wants us to choose being kind instead of being mean
 - God is always kind and forgiving to us, even when we mess up
 - We can ask God to help us be kind when it's hard
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Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Anger Elimination Confusion.** Don't teach that all anger is sin, contradicting verse 26's allowance for righteous anger. Instead, help students distinguish between anger at injustice and the destructive anger patterns listed in verse 31.
 - **Behavioral Modification Focus.** Avoid reducing this passage to a behavior checklist without addressing heart transformation. The motivation matters, change rooted in divine forgiveness looks different than change rooted in guilt or social pressure.
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- **Forgiveness Cheapening.** Don't present forgiveness as easy or automatic. God's forgiveness cost Christ's life; our forgiveness may require real sacrifice and intentional choice against our natural impulses.
 - **Individual vs. Community Balance.** While personal transformation is essential, don't miss that Paul's concern is community health. Individual emotional work serves corporate flourishing, not just personal peace.
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Handling Hard Questions

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

Forgiveness doesn't mean removing all boundaries or consequences. Just as God forgives but still allows natural consequences for sin, we can forgive while protecting ourselves from ongoing harm. Forgiveness releases our right to revenge and bitterness, but it doesn't require unlimited vulnerability. Sometimes loving someone means establishing boundaries that protect both of you from further damage.

"How is the anger in verse 26 different from the anger in verse 31?"

Verse 26 describes anger as an initial emotional response to witnessing wrong, this can be righteous and appropriate. Verse 31 describes anger that has become a settled attitude, often mixed with bitterness and revenge fantasies. The difference is duration, motivation, and fruit. Righteous anger motivates justice and protection; sinful anger seeks to wound and control.

"What if I can't feel forgiving? Does that mean I'm not really forgiven by God?"

God's forgiveness of us isn't dependent on our performance in forgiving others, it's the secure foundation that makes our forgiveness possible. Sometimes forgiveness begins as a decision of the will before the emotions follow. Start with choosing not to pursue revenge or nurture bitterness, and ask God to transform your heart over time. Feelings often follow obedient actions.

The One Thing to Remember

Transformation happens when we receive God's extravagant forgiveness and let it overflow into our relationships, replacing destructive patterns with healing ones.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the difference between justified anger and destructive emotional patterns, helping them discover that God's forgiveness toward them provides both the motivation and the template for emotional transformation in relationships.

The Tension to Frame

How do we handle the anger inside that feels completely justified, especially when someone has really wronged us or others we care about?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their experiences of injustice and the anger that comes with it, don't rush to "Christian answers"
 - Help them distinguish between initial anger (often righteous) and settled bitterness (usually destructive)
 - Let them discover the connection between receiving grace and giving grace rather than lecturing about it
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1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Picture this: You find out that someone you trusted has been spreading rumors about you at school. Not just harmless gossip, but things that could damage your reputation and friendships. Your initial reaction is anger, righteous anger, because what they're doing is wrong. But as days pass, you find yourself replaying the betrayal, imagining confrontations, feeling your stomach tighten every time you see them.

That anger feels completely justified, doesn't it? They wronged you. They deserve consequences. Part of you wants them to experience the hurt they've caused you. It makes sense that you'd feel this way, anyone would. The anger itself isn't the problem; it's what the anger is turning into that gets dangerous.

Today we're looking at someone who understood this progression intimately, the apostle Paul, writing to a community where people had been deeply hurt by each other. He's not writing to people who've lived charmed lives. He's writing to people who know betrayal, injustice, and the weight of carrying anger that feels entirely reasonable.

As we read, pay attention to two things: first, how Paul distinguishes between different types of anger, and second, what he says provides the power to actually change these destructive patterns. Notice that he doesn't just tell people to "get over it", he points to something much more profound.

Let's open to Ephesians 4, starting at verse 25. Read silently first, and let the tension sink in.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly among students. Some may need help with words like "unwholesome" or "malice." Watch for early finishers and quietly encourage them to reread, looking for the progression Paul builds. Let them feel the weight of what real forgiveness costs.

As You Read, Think About:

- What specific emotions and behaviors does Paul list, and why might he choose these particular ones?
 - What's the difference between the anger mentioned in verse 26 and the anger mentioned in verse 31?
 - What three positive behaviors replace the negative ones, and what makes them possible?
 - How would your life change if you actually lived this way consistently?
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Ephesians 4:25-32 (NIV)

25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 26 "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you

are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

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 climactic verses 31-32.

Reader 1: Verses 25-27 (Truth, anger management, spiritual warfare) **Reader 2:** Verses 28-30 (Work, speech, grieving the Spirit) **Reader 3:** Verses 31-32 (The transformation climax)

Listen for the progression Paul builds, he's constructing an argument that reaches its peak in the final two verses. This isn't random moral advice; it's strategic community transformation.

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 the passage. Walk between groups, listening to their discussions. Help stuck groups by asking "What surprised you most?" or "What feels hardest to actually do?"

Get into groups of three or four. Your job is to come up with one or two questions that you're genuinely curious about from this passage. Not questions you think you should ask, but things you actually want to understand. For example, "Why does Paul say anger can be okay in verse 26 but not okay in verse 31?" or "How is forgiving someone supposed to work when they've really hurt you?" You have three

minutes, go!

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students drive the conversation with their questions. You facilitate and probe deeper. Guide discovery rather than delivering answers. Their wrestling is more valuable than your explanations.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes around anger management, forgiveness difficulty, and practical application. Start with questions most students seem engaged by.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What's the difference between the stealing Paul mentions and the sharing he promotes, what's the heart change there?"
 - "Why do you think Paul connects our forgiveness of others to God's forgiveness of us? What's that relationship supposed to look like?"
 - "If bitterness and malice are so destructive, why do they feel so satisfying in the moment?"
 - "What would change in your family, friend group, or school if people actually lived verses 31-32?"
 - "How do you know when anger is righteous (fighting injustice) versus when it's becoming sinful (seeking revenge)?"
 - "What does it look like practically to 'get rid of' bitterness? Is that even possible when someone has really wronged you?"
 - "What if someone in your life exhibits all six of those negative behaviors? How do kindness, compassion, and forgiveness work then?"
 - "Why does Paul say this matters for the Holy Spirit? What's the connection between our relationships and our relationship with God?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Paul isn't just giving moral advice, he's describing a heart transplant. The six things to eliminate and the three things to embrace aren't random lists; they're

describing two completely different ways of operating in relationships. And the motivation for change isn't guilt or social pressure, it's the stunning reality that God has already forgiven us more than we could ever owe anyone else. That changes everything about how forgiveness works.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives for a minute. Where do you see these patterns playing out? Think about your family dynamics, your friend groups, what happens at school, how you handle conflict online. The six destructive patterns and the three healing ones, they show up everywhere.

Real Issues This Connects To

- When a teacher treats you unfairly and you're tempted to badmouth them to other students
 - Family situations where someone has genuinely wronged you but you still have to live together
 - Friend betrayals where trust has been broken and you're deciding whether to seek revenge or restoration
 - Social media interactions where someone's post makes your blood boil and you're crafting the perfect comeback
 - Witnessing injustice toward others and feeling angry enough to want to make the perpetrators pay
 - Personal decisions about whether to hold grudges or let go when forgiveness feels like letting someone "win"
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to solutions. Honor the complexity, some situations require boundaries, others require grace, many require both. Help them think through discernment rather than giving blanket advice.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone exhibit the three positive qualities, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and what was the result?"
 - "What would help you in moments when you know the right response but your emotions are pulling you toward bitterness or revenge?"
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- "How do you discern between righteous anger that motivates justice and sinful anger that seeks to wound?"
- "What's the difference between biblical forgiveness and just being a doormat who lets people walk all over you?"

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: transformation happens when we receive God's extravagant forgiveness and let it overflow into our relationships. This isn't about suppressing anger or being fake-nice to people who've hurt you. It's about letting the reality of how much God has forgiven you change how you respond to others. That's not easy, it's actually much harder than holding grudges.

This week, pay attention to your anger. Notice when it starts righteous and when it turns toxic. Experiment with asking God to help you see people the way he sees you, as someone who desperately needed forgiveness and received it freely. See what changes when you start there instead of starting with what people owe you.

You guys did some real thinking today about hard things. Keep wrestling with these questions, that's exactly what following Jesus looks like. You don't have to have it all figured out, but you're on the right track when you're honestly grappling with what love actually costs.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids recognize specific destructive emotions in themselves and others, then learn concrete replacement actions that heal relationships, all motivated by understanding how kind God has been to them.

If Kids Ask "What if someone is really mean and won't stop?"

Say: "Forgiveness doesn't mean letting people keep hurting you. You can forgive someone and still get help from adults to stop unsafe behavior. Forgiveness means you don't try to hurt them back."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever had someone do something that made you really, really angry. Keep it up, yeah, that's everyone. Now raise your hand if that anger lasted more than just a few minutes. It stuck around for a while, didn't it? Maybe every time you saw that person, you remembered what they did and felt angry all over again.

Here's a harder question: raise your hand if you've ever been so mad at someone that you wanted other people to be mad at them too. Or maybe you said mean things about them when they weren't around. Or you imagined ways to get them back. Put your hands down, this is getting pretty personal, isn't it?

The tricky thing is, your anger might have been totally fair. Maybe someone really did treat you badly. Maybe they broke something that mattered to you, or said something cruel, or left you out on purpose. When someone hurts you, feeling angry makes perfect sense. Anyone would feel that way.

It's kind of like what happens in *Inside Out* when Riley's emotions get all mixed up and Anger starts taking over the control panel. At first, Anger is trying to protect Riley from being hurt. But when Anger stays in charge too long, it starts making decisions that hurt Riley and everyone around her. The anger that was supposed to help actually starts causing more problems.

The tricky part is figuring out what to do with anger when it feels completely justified. How do you handle it when you have every right to be mad, but being mad is starting to change you into someone you don't like? How do you let go without feeling like you're letting the other person win?

Today we're going to hear about a wise teacher named Paul who wrote a letter to his friends about exactly this problem. He understood what it was like to be really angry at people who had hurt him, and he learned something amazing about how to handle those feelings. Let's find out what he discovered.

What to Expect: Kids will relate strongly to the anger scenarios. Some may share specific situations. Acknowledge briefly but keep momentum moving toward Paul's solution.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

Imagine you're living in a city called Ephesus about 2,000 years ago. You're part of a group of people who follow Jesus, but you're all still learning how to get along with each other.

Some people in your group used to be enemies before they met Jesus. Some came from different countries and spoke different languages. Some were rich, some were poor. Some had hurt each other badly in the past. Now they were all trying to be one big family, but it wasn't easy.

People were getting into arguments. Some were lying to each other. Some were stealing. When someone did something wrong, others would get angry and stay angry for days. They would gossip and say mean things about each other behind their backs. The anger was spreading like a disease, making everyone miserable.

Paul loved these people, but he could see that their anger was poisoning their relationships. He knew that if they kept going this way, their group would fall apart. So he sat down and wrote them a letter to help them understand what was happening and how to fix it.

Paul knew about anger himself. People had been mean to him, unfair to him, even tried to hurt him physically. He understood what it felt like to want revenge. But he had learned something that changed everything for him.

In his letter, Paul told his friends that there were six specific attitudes and behaviors that were like poison in relationships. He made a list so they could recognize these things in themselves and stop them before they spread.

Ephesians 4:31 (NIV)

31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Let's break this down. Bitterness is when you hold onto hurt feelings and let them turn sour in your heart. Rage is explosive anger that makes you want to yell or throw things. Anger here means the kind that settles in and won't leave, not the quick anger that protects you from danger, but the slow-burning anger that wants revenge.

Brawling means fighting with words or fists. Slander means saying untrue or mean things about someone to damage their reputation. Malice means wanting bad things to happen to people who've hurt

you. Paul said these six things were like cancer in relationships, they had to go completely.

But Paul knew that just telling people to stop being angry wouldn't work. You can't just empty your heart and leave it empty. So he told them what to fill their hearts with instead.

Ephesians 4:32 (NIV)

32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Instead of bitterness, choose kindness, doing good things for people even when they don't deserve it. Instead of rage and anger, choose compassion, feeling sorry for people instead of wanting them to suffer. Instead of fighting and saying mean things, choose forgiveness, letting go of your right to get people back.

But here's the amazing part, Paul didn't just tell them to be nice people. He gave them the secret that makes it possible. He said, "Remember how much God has forgiven you." Think about all the times you've messed up, all the times you've hurt God or other people, all the times you've done things you knew were wrong.

God saw all of that, and instead of staying angry at you, he chose to forgive you completely. Not because you earned it or deserved it, but because he loves you. Jesus even died on the cross to pay the price for all the wrong things you've done, so that you could be completely forgiven and loved.

When you really understand how much God has forgiven you, Paul said, it changes how you treat other people. If God can forgive you for all your mistakes, then you can find the strength to forgive others for theirs.

This doesn't mean you let people hurt you over and over. It doesn't mean you don't tell adults when someone is being unsafe. It means you choose not to carry poisonous feelings in your heart. You choose kindness, compassion, and forgiveness because that's how God chooses to treat you every single day.

Paul's friends learned that when they filled their hearts with these three good things instead of the six poisonous things, their relationships started healing. People began to trust each other again. The group became a place where people felt safe and loved instead of attacked and bitter.

The same thing can happen in our families, our classrooms, our friendships. When we choose to get rid of the six poisonous attitudes and replace them with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, we become people who heal relationships instead of hurting them.

And the beautiful thing is, we don't have to do it alone. God promises to help us make these choices, especially when they feel really hard. He gives us his strength to choose love even when our feelings want to choose revenge.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Poison List

Think about the six things Paul said were like poison in relationships: bitterness, rage, anger that won't go away, fighting, saying mean things about people, and wanting bad things to happen to them. Which one of those do you think is hardest to recognize in yourself? Why do you think these feelings can feel good in the moment but actually hurt you in the long run?

Listen For: "I don't notice when I'm being bitter," "It feels good to imagine getting someone back", affirm: "That's honest. These feelings can be tricky because they feel like they're protecting us."

Question 2: The Replacement Challenge

Paul said to replace the bad feelings with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. Think of someone who's really hurt your feelings recently. What would it look like to show kindness to that person this week, even if you don't feel like it? What makes this choice so hard?

If They Say: "That's not fair" or "They don't deserve it", respond: "You're right, fairness would say they should suffer first. What do you think changed Paul's mind about what people deserve?"

Question 3: The God Connection

Paul said we should forgive others the same way God has forgiven us. Think about a time when you really messed up but someone forgave you anyway. How did that feel? How might remembering God's

forgiveness toward you help you forgive someone who's hurt you?

Connect: "When we remember how much we've been forgiven, it's easier to be generous with forgiveness toward others."

Question 4: The Ripple Effect

Imagine if everyone in your class decided to practice Paul's three replacement actions, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, instead of the six poisonous ones. How do you think your classroom would feel different? What about your family dinner table? Your friend group?

If They Say: "People would think I'm weird" or "Nobody else would do it", respond: "What if just one person choosing these actions inspired others to try it too?"

These are really hard choices, but you're thinking like Jesus wants us to think. The amazing thing is that when we choose Paul's way, we often discover that relationships can heal in ways we never expected. Let's try an activity that shows how this works.

4. Activity: The Heart Renovation (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity physically demonstrates the replacement principle by having kids experience what happens when we try to remove negative behaviors without replacing them with positive ones, versus when we actively fill the space with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. Success looks like kids discovering that empty space gets filled with something, the question is what.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to do an activity called Heart Renovation. Everyone form a large circle. Six of you will be the Poison Emotions, bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice. Start in the center of the circle, walking around slowly and taking up space.

The rest of you are the Heart. Your job is to remove the Poison Emotions by gently guiding them to step outside the circle. But here's the catch: every time you remove a Poison Emotion, that space wants to be filled with something. If you don't actively fill it with one of the three good things, kindness, compassion, or forgiveness, the poison will try to sneak back in.

Once you've removed all six Poison Emotions, three of you need to volunteer to be Kindness, Compassion, and Forgiveness and take their place in the center. Your job is to keep the center filled with good things so the poison can't return.

We're doing this because it's exactly like what Paul discovered, you can't just empty your heart of bad things and leave it empty. You have to actively fill it with good things, or the bad things will come right back.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

Watch what happens when we just remove the Poison Emotions without replacing them. Kids will struggle to keep the center empty because empty space feels uncomfortable and unstable. Let them wrestle with this for about a minute.

Coach them: "What do you notice about the empty space? Is it staying empty? What wants to fill it?" Help them see that the removed emotions keep trying to return because there's nothing actively taking their place.

Now guide them toward the solution: "What if three people volunteer to be the replacement emotions and actively fill that space?" Watch as the dynamic completely changes when positive emotions actively occupy the center.

Celebrate the breakthrough: "Look at the difference! When kindness, compassion, and forgiveness actively fill the space, what happens to the poison emotions? They can't get back in because there's no room!"

Have everyone notice the transformation from chaos to peace, from struggle to stability. The center goes from being a battleground to being a place of safety and strength.

Watch For: The moment when the three positive emotions take their place in the center and the struggle stops. This is the physical representation of Paul's replacement principle at work.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt when the center was empty versus when it was filled with the three good things? Just like in this activity, our hearts need to be actively filled with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, or the old poisonous feelings will try to move back in. Paul discovered that transformation happens when we don't just remove the bad stuff, we replace it with God's good stuff.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: God wants us to get rid of six things that poison our relationships, bitterness, rage, anger that won't leave, fighting, saying mean things about people, and wanting bad things to happen to them. But we can't just empty our hearts and leave them empty.

This doesn't mean you have to be best friends with people who hurt you, or that you can't tell adults when someone is being unsafe. It means you choose not to let poisonous feelings grow in your heart where they'll hurt you and everyone around you.

The amazing result is that when we fill our hearts with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, our relationships start healing. People begin to trust us. We become the kind of person others feel safe around. We become more like Jesus, who chose to forgive us even when we didn't deserve it.

This Week's Challenge

Pick someone who has hurt your feelings recently. Instead of thinking about what they did wrong, ask God to help you show them one specific act of kindness this week. It doesn't have to be big, maybe a genuine compliment, helping them with something, or choosing not to join in when others are criticizing them. See what happens in your heart when you choose kindness instead of payback.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

God, thank you for forgiving us completely even when we mess up. Help us remember how much you've forgiven us when it's hard to forgive others. Give us your strength to choose kindness, compassion, and forgiveness instead of bitterness and anger. Help us become people who heal relationships instead of hurting them. Amen.

Grades 1, 3

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that God wants us to choose being kind instead of being mean because God is always 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 choosing kindness to choosing the right medicine when you're sick, it might not taste good, but it makes you better.

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about kindness or God's love. Suggestions: "God's Love is So Wonderful," "Be Kind to One Another," or "This Little Light of Mine." Use movements: spread arms wide for "wonderful," point to others for "one another," hold hands up high and wiggle fingers for "light."

Great singing! Now let's sit down in our story horseshoe and hear about someone who learned something very important about being kind. Everyone find a spot on the floor where you can see me clearly!

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 concerned when talking about mean behaviors, sound warm and happy when talking about God's kindness.

Today we're going to meet a man named Paul who wrote letters to help people learn how to be kind!

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

Paul had some friends who were having trouble getting along. Some of them were being mean to each other. Some were saying angry words. Some were fighting and saying things that hurt people's feelings.

[Make a sad face and use a sad voice]

When people were mean to them, they wanted to be mean right back. They wanted to say mean things too. Their hearts were full of angry, yucky feelings that made everyone sad.

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, change to hopeful tone]

But Paul knew something wonderful! He knew that God didn't want their hearts to be full of mean, angry feelings. God wanted their hearts to be full of kind, loving feelings instead.

[Move to center, speak with authority and warmth]

So Paul wrote his friends a letter. He told them to stop being bitter and angry and mean to each other.

[Move to side, speak gently]

But Paul didn't just tell them to stop the bad things. He told them what to do instead!

Ephesians 4:32 (NIV)

32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

[Pause and look around at each child]

Paul said, "Instead of being mean, be KIND! Instead of wanting to hurt people back, be GENTLE! Instead of staying mad, FORGIVE them!" Do you think that sounded easy or hard to his friends?

[Move to center, speak with excitement]

But then Paul told them the most amazing thing! He said, "Remember how kind God has been to you! Remember how God forgives you when you mess up!"

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe]

God sees every time we make mistakes. He sees every time we say something we shouldn't or do something wrong. But instead of staying mad at us, what does God do? He forgives us! He's kind to us! He loves us anyway!

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

Paul said, "Since God is so kind and forgiving to you, you can be kind and forgiving to others too!" When someone is mean to you, you can choose to be kind back!

[Speak with excitement]

And do you know what happened? Paul's friends started choosing kindness instead of meanness! They started forgiving instead of staying mad! Their hearts felt so much better!

[Pause dramatically]

Paul learned that God can help us be kind even when it's really, really hard. When someone hurts our feelings, God can help us choose kindness instead of being mean back!

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes in our lives, people are mean to us too. Maybe a friend says something that hurts our feelings. Maybe someone takes our toy or cuts in line or leaves us out. We might feel angry and want to be mean right back!

[Move closer to the children]

But God wants to help us choose kindness instead! When someone is mean, we can ask God to help us be kind. When someone hurts us, we can ask God to help us forgive them.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves it when we choose to be kind! And the best part is, God promises to help us make those good choices, especially when they feel really hard!

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

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

Find a partner and stand facing each other! I'll give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, just tell your partner what you think! You'll have about one minute to talk.

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

Discussion Questions

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

1. How do you think Paul's friends felt when people were mean to them?
 2. What's something kind you could do for someone who hurt your feelings?
 3. Why do you think Paul told them to remember God's kindness?
 4. What would you do if someone took your favorite toy and wouldn't give it back?
 5. How do you think it feels when someone chooses to be kind instead of mean?
 6. What are some ways God is kind to you every day?
 7. When is it hardest for you to choose kindness?
 8. How could you be kind to someone at school this week?
 9. How could you be kind to someone in your family this week?
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10. Who do you know who is really good at being kind to others?

11. Why do you think God wants us to forgive people?

12. How can we ask God to help us be kind when we don't feel like it?

13. What do you think would happen if everyone chose kindness?

14. How do you know when someone has forgiven you?

15. What's the difference between being kind and being mean?

16. What did Paul's friends learn about God?

17. What's something you want to remember from this story?

18. How can you pray when someone is mean to you?

19. What would happen if nobody ever chose to be kind?

20. How can you be like Jesus when someone hurts your feelings?

Great discussions! Let's come back together in a 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

Choose a song about kindness or forgiveness. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves the Little Children," "Love One Another," or "God is So Good." Use movements like hugging yourself for "love," pointing to friends for "one another," or clapping hands for "good."

Beautiful singing! Now let's sit quietly for our prayer time. Find a spot on the floor and sit criss-cross with your hands folded and your heads bowed.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

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

Dear God, thank you for being so kind and loving to us every day.

[Pause]

Help us remember your kindness when someone is mean to us. Give us your help to choose kindness instead of being mean back.

[Pause]

Help us be like Jesus, who was always kind and forgiving. Thank you for always forgiving us when we make mistakes.

[Pause]

Thank you for loving us so much and helping us love others. In Jesus's name, Amen.

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

Remember, God wants to help you choose kindness this week! When someone is mean, you can ask God to help you be kind instead. Have a wonderful week practicing God's love!

Check Your Stones

When Sinfulness Meets Stone-Throwing, Who Really Has the Right to Judge?

John 8:1-11

Instructor Preparation

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

The Passage

John 8:1-11 (NIV)

1 Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Context

This confrontation occurs during Jesus's public teaching ministry, when religious leaders are actively trying to trap him. They've brought a woman caught in adultery to test whether Jesus will contradict Moses's law or contradict his message of mercy. The setting is the temple courts during morning teaching time, with crowds of people watching this high-stakes religious and legal drama unfold.

The Pharisees have created a perfect trap: if Jesus says to stone her, he appears harsh and contradicts his message of forgiveness; if he says not to stone her, he appears to contradict biblical law. They believe they have him cornered, but Jesus will shift the entire framework from the woman's guilt to the accusers' moral standing, a move that exposes their own spiritual condition.

The Big Idea

Personal sinfulness should dramatically temper our eagerness to punish others' sins, because moral authority comes from moral standing.

This doesn't eliminate all judgment or accountability, but it reveals how often our enthusiasm for executing judgment far exceeds our qualification to do so. Jesus exposes the gap between the accusers' moral certainty and their actual moral condition, a gap that exists in all of us when we're quick to condemn others.

Theological Core

- **Shared Sinfulness.** All people fall short of God's perfect standard, which creates a common ground of humility rather than a hierarchy of moral superiority.
 - **Judgment Authority.** The right to execute punishment requires moral standing; sinlessness becomes the qualification for stone-throwing in Jesus's framework.
 - **Self-Examination Before Condemnation.** Before eagerly punishing others, we must honestly assess our own moral condition and whether we have the standing to execute such judgment.
 - **Mercy Over Punishment.** When judgment is tempered by awareness of personal sin, mercy becomes the more appropriate response than eagerness to condemn.
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Age Group Overview

What Each Age Group Learns

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

- Personal sin should create humility about our authority to condemn others' sins
 - Moral standing affects our right to execute judgment, enthusiasm for punishment often exceeds qualification
 - Jesus doesn't eliminate all judgment but challenges us to examine our own condition first
 - Shared sinfulness should lead to mercy rather than eagerness to condemn
-

Grades 4, 6

- Before we get excited about someone else being in trouble, we should remember our own mistakes
 - When we want to "throw stones" at others, we need to think about whether we're perfect enough to do that
 - Everyone needs forgiveness sometimes, so we should offer grace instead of judgment
 - It's okay to feel upset when people do wrong things, but we can still choose to be merciful
-

Grades 1, 3

- Jesus wants us to be kind to people who make mistakes
 - God loves everyone, even when they mess up
 - We can choose to help people instead of being mean to them when they do wrong
-

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- **Eliminating All Judgment.** This passage doesn't create a world without accountability or consequences, but rather challenges the spirit and authority behind our judgments. We can still address wrongdoing while maintaining humility about our own moral condition.

- **Ignoring the Trap.** The Pharisees aren't genuinely concerned about justice, they're trying to trap Jesus. Their motives matter, and this reveals how judgment can be weaponized rather than pursued for righteousness.

- **Missing the Progression.** The older accusers leave first, suggesting that maturity and life experience increase awareness of personal sin. Age and wisdom should increase humility, not moral superiority.

- **Textual Complexity Distraction.** While this passage's manuscript history is complex, the principle aligns with Jesus's teaching throughout the Gospels. Focus on the theological truth rather than getting lost in textual criticism.

Handling Hard Questions

"Does this mean we can never call out wrongdoing or hold people accountable?"

Jesus doesn't eliminate all forms of judgment, he even tells the woman to "leave your life of sin." The issue is our eagerness to execute punishment versus our qualification to do so. We can address wrongdoing while maintaining humility about our own moral condition. The key is examining our heart: Are we pursuing justice or satisfying our desire to condemn? Do we have the moral authority to execute the punishment we're eager to give?

"What if someone's sin is really serious and obvious, shouldn't someone speak up?"

The passage doesn't create a hierarchy where "worse" sins require "better" people to address them. Jesus, who was actually sinless, offered mercy instead of punishment. Serious wrongs do need addressing, but our approach should be shaped by awareness of our own need for grace. The goal shifts from punishment to restoration, from condemnation to accountability that heals.

"How do we know if we're qualified to judge something?"

Jesus suggests that sinlessness qualifies someone to throw stones, which effectively eliminates human stone-throwing. This doesn't paralyze all moral action, but it should create serious pause before we eagerly pursue punishment. Ask yourself: Am I pursuing this because justice demands it, or because condemning feels satisfying? Do I have the moral standing to execute the judgment I want to give, or should I offer mercy instead?

The One Thing to Remember

Our eagerness to condemn others should be tempered by honest awareness of our own need for mercy, shared sinfulness calls for shared grace.

Grades 7, 8 / Adult

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

Your Main Job Today

Guide students to wrestle with the tension between justice and mercy, helping them discover how personal sinfulness should shape their approach to others' wrongdoing. Your role is to facilitate their discovery of why moral authority matters in judgment.

The Tension to Frame

Does being aware of our own sinfulness eliminate our ability to address wrongdoing in others, or does it change how we approach it?

Discussion Facilitation Tips

- Validate their desire for justice, the Pharisees weren't wrong to care about right and wrong
 - Honor the complexity, this isn't about eliminating all accountability but examining our hearts and authority
 - Let them wrestle with the implications rather than giving quick answers to hard questions
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1. Opening Frame (2, 3 minutes)

Imagine you're scrolling through social media and you see a story about someone your age who got caught cheating on a major test, not just looking at answers, but selling test answers to other students for money. The story goes viral, complete with their name, school, and photo. Within hours, thousands of people are commenting, calling for them to be expelled, banned from college applications, publicly humiliated. You find yourself wanting to add your own comment about how wrong this was.

But then you remember that time last month when you didn't exactly cheat, but you definitely didn't stop your friend from showing you their answers during a quiz. And that time you copied homework when you were running late. And those group projects where you let others do most of the work but took equal credit. Suddenly your fingers pause over the keyboard. Do you still post that condemning comment?

Here's what makes this complicated: the person did do something wrong. Cheating for money is serious, and there should be consequences. But something about joining the pile-on of condemnation feels... off. Like maybe your own academic integrity isn't spotless enough to warrant the satisfaction you'd get from publicly condemning theirs.

Today we're looking at Jesus in a situation where everyone agreed someone had done wrong, but he shifted the entire conversation from the person's guilt to the accusers' qualifications. Pay attention to how he handles the gap between wanting justice and having the moral standing to execute it.

Open your Bibles to John 8, starting at verse 1. We're going to read about a confrontation that will challenge everything you think about judgment, mercy, and moral authority.

2. Silent Reading (5 minutes)

Managing Silent Reading: Walk quietly among students. This passage has drama and tension, let them feel the weight of the confrontation. Help with difficult words like "adultery" if needed, but let the story create its own impact.

As You Read, Think About:

- What are the Pharisees trying to accomplish with this confrontation?
 - Why does Jesus respond the way he does instead of just answering their question?
-

- What's surprising about how this situation resolves?
- How would you have felt if you were one of the accusers in this moment?

John 8:1-11 (NIV)

1 Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

3. Discussion (15, 18 minutes)

Oral Reading (2, 3 minutes)

Selecting Readers: Choose confident readers who can bring drama to this confrontation. Let students pass if uncomfortable. This is high-stakes religious drama, not casual conversation.

Reader 1: Verses 1, 6 (Setting up the trap) **Reader 2:** Verses 7, 8 (Jesus's challenge) **Reader 3:** Verses 9, 11 (The response and resolution)

Listen for the tension and drama here. This isn't just a theological discussion, it's a confrontation with real stakes for everyone involved.

Small Group Question Generation (3, 4 minutes)

Setup: Groups of 3-4, exactly 3 minutes to generate questions. Walk between groups to listen. If groups are stuck, suggest: "What surprised you most about Jesus's response?"

Get into groups of three or four. Your job is to come up with one or two genuine questions about what you just read, not questions with obvious answers, but things you're actually curious about or confused by. For example, you might wonder why Jesus wrote on the ground, or what qualified someone to throw the first stone, or why the older ones left first. You have three minutes to discuss and come up with your best questions.

Facilitated Discussion (12, 14 minutes)

Remember: Students drive with their questions. Your job is to facilitate and probe deeper, guiding discovery rather than lecturing. Let them wrestle with the tension.

Collecting Questions: Write student questions on the board. Look for themes around judgment, mercy, moral authority, and fairness. Start with questions most students relate to.

Probing Questions (to go deeper)

- "What evidence do you see that this was a trap rather than a genuine concern for justice?"
 - "Why do you think Jesus made sinlessness the qualification for throwing stones?"
 - "What's the difference between caring about right and wrong versus being eager to punish wrongdoing?"
 - "Why do you think the older accusers left first, what does that suggest?"
 - "How does knowing you're not perfect change how you approach someone else's obvious mistakes?"
 - "Where do you see this same pattern in social media pile-ons or cancel culture today?"
 - "What would have happened if someone had actually been sinless enough to throw a stone?"
-

- "What's the difference between accountability and condemnation in this story?"
-

Revealing the Pattern

Do you notice what's happening here? Jesus doesn't say the woman did nothing wrong, he tells her to stop sinning. But he shifts the focus from her guilt to their qualification to punish it. The right to execute judgment requires moral authority, and shared sinfulness should create shared humility. When we're honest about our own need for grace, it changes how we approach others' need for accountability.

4. Application (3, 4 minutes)

Let's get real about your lives. Where do you see this same tension playing out? You encounter wrongdoing, maybe serious wrongdoing, and part of you wants justice, wants consequences, maybe even wants to see someone get what they deserve. But if you're honest about your own moral record, how does that change your approach?

Real Issues This Connects To

- Social media call-outs when someone posts something offensive, joining the pile-on versus addressing it constructively
 - Family situations when a sibling gets caught in major trouble and you want to add your own criticism
 - School drama when someone cheats, lies, or betrays trust, your desire for them to face consequences
 - Online situations where someone's past mistakes get exposed and everyone piles on with condemnation
 - Witnessing injustice in your community and deciding between pursuing punishment versus restoration
 - Personal conflicts when someone wrongs you and you want revenge versus reconciliation
-

Facilitation: Let students share examples without rushing to answers. Acknowledge that some situations do require addressing wrongdoing, but help them think through the heart behind their approach.

Discussion Prompts

- "When have you seen someone address wrongdoing with humility instead of condemnation?"
 - "What helps you remember your own need for grace when someone else messes up obviously?"
 - "How do you tell the difference between wanting justice and wanting to condemn?"
 - "What's the difference between accountability that heals and punishment that satisfies?"
-

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what I want you to take with you: your eagerness to condemn others should be tempered by honest awareness of your own need for mercy. This doesn't mean wrongdoing gets ignored or that there are no consequences, but it means shared sinfulness calls for shared grace. When you're tempted to throw stones, remember that you're not sinless either.

This week, pay attention to your heart when you encounter someone else's obvious wrongdoing. Notice the difference between wanting justice and wanting to condemn. Experiment with leading with humility about your own moral condition before you pursue accountability for theirs. See what changes when you approach others' failures with the same grace you hope to receive for your own.

You did some excellent thinking today about really complex issues. These tensions between justice and mercy aren't easy to navigate, and your willingness to wrestle with hard questions instead of settling for simple answers shows real maturity. Keep thinking, keep wrestling, keep growing in wisdom.

Grades 4, 6

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

Your Main Job Today

Help kids understand that before we get excited about someone else being in trouble, we should remember our own mistakes and need for forgiveness.

If Kids Ask "Does this mean bad people never get in trouble?"

Say: "Jesus didn't say the woman did nothing wrong, he told her to stop sinning. But he wants us to remember that we all need forgiveness sometimes, so we should be kind instead of mean when others mess up."

1. Opening (5 minutes)

Raise your hand if you've ever seen someone get in trouble at school, maybe they were caught cheating, or lying to a teacher, or being mean to another student. Keep your hands up if, when you saw them get in trouble, part of you felt like, "Good! They deserve that!" or "I'm glad they got caught!"

Now here's a harder question. Put your hand down if you've never done anything wrong yourself, never cheated, never lied, never been mean to someone, never disobeyed your parents, never been selfish or unkind. Look around. Anyone still have their hand up? Probably not, because all of us have done things we shouldn't have done.

Here's what gets confusing: when someone else gets caught doing something wrong, it's easy to think they should be punished. And sometimes they should face consequences! But there's something inside us that gets excited about seeing someone else get in trouble, especially when we don't like them very much. We forget that we've done wrong things too and needed forgiveness.

This is like in the movie "Toy Story" when all the toys want to get back at Sid for being mean to them. They have good reasons to be upset, Sid really was cruel! But when they finally get their chance for revenge, they have to decide whether to be mean back or find a better way to handle the situation.

The tricky part is figuring out the difference between wanting good consequences to help someone learn and wanting someone to get hurt because we're angry at them. Sometimes we think we want justice, but really we want revenge.

Today we're going to hear about a time when Jesus met some people who were really excited about punishing someone else's wrong, but he helped them think about whether they were the right people to do the punishing. Let's find out what happened.

What to Expect: Kids will relate to the "glad they got caught" feeling. Acknowledge it briefly, it's normal, but keep momentum moving toward the story.

2. Bible Story Time (10 minutes)

One morning, Jesus was sitting in the temple courtyard, teaching a crowd of people who had gathered to hear him speak. It was probably a beautiful day, and everyone was sitting on the ground, listening carefully to Jesus's words about God's love.

But then, suddenly, the peaceful teaching time was interrupted. A group of religious leaders called Pharisees came marching into the courtyard, and they were dragging a woman with them. They made her stand right in front of Jesus and all the people, like she was on trial.

The woman was probably scared and embarrassed. Imagine how you would feel if you got in trouble and someone made you stand in front of your whole school while they announced what you did wrong. That's what was happening to this woman.

Imagine how frightening this must have been, all these important religious men standing around you, pointing at you, while a crowd of people stared. Your heart would be pounding, your face would be red, and you'd probably want to disappear.

The Pharisees were not trying to help this woman or make things right. They were trying to trap Jesus! They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught doing something very wrong, adultery, which means she was unfaithful to her husband."

Then they continued, "The Law of Moses says that women who do this should be stoned to death. So what do you say we should do?" They thought they were so clever, because they believed they had trapped Jesus with an impossible choice.

If Jesus said, "Yes, stone her," then he would seem harsh and unloving. If he said, "No, don't stone her," then they could accuse him of not following God's law. They were rubbing their hands together, thinking they had won.

But Jesus didn't answer right away. Instead, he did something very strange. He bent down and started writing something on the ground with his finger. We don't know what he wrote, maybe he was drawing, maybe he was writing words. But he just kept writing quietly.

The Pharisees kept asking him, "Well? What's your answer? What should we do?" They were getting impatient because Jesus wasn't falling into their trap the way they expected.

Finally, Jesus stood up slowly and looked at all the men who were so excited about punishing this woman. And what he said next completely surprised everyone:

John 8:7 (NIV)

"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

Jesus was basically saying, "Whoever among you has never done anything wrong, never lied, never been selfish, never been mean, never disobeyed God, that person can go ahead and throw the first stone." And then he bent down and kept writing on the ground.

Suddenly, the courtyard got very quiet. All these men who had been so excited about punishing someone else started thinking about their own lives. Had they ever done anything wrong? Had they ever lied or cheated or been unkind? Of course they had!

Then something amazing happened. One by one, the accusers started walking away. First the older men left, maybe because they had lived longer and remembered more of their own mistakes. Then the younger men followed.

Think about what each man was thinking as he walked away: "I can't throw a stone at her for doing wrong when I've done wrong things too." "I've lied to my wife." "I've been greedy with money." "I've been mean to people I don't like." One by one, they remembered that they weren't perfect either.

Soon, everyone was gone except Jesus and the woman. Jesus stood up and looked around at the empty courtyard. All the men who had been so eager to punish her had disappeared. Then Jesus asked the woman gently:

John 8:10-11 (NIV)

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Jesus, who was the only person there who actually had never done anything wrong, was the only one who had the right to punish her. But instead of throwing stones, he chose to show mercy. He told her that her life mattered, that she could start over, and that she should make better choices going forward.

The deeper meaning is this: Jesus was teaching that before we get excited about someone else being punished, we should remember our own mistakes. Since all of us need forgiveness sometimes, we should offer grace instead of being eager to see others get in trouble.

What happened next was that the woman got a chance to change her life instead of being hurt by a mob of angry people. Jesus's kindness gave her hope instead of shame, and the chance to do better instead of just being punished.

The religious leaders learned that getting excited about punishing others isn't the same as caring about right and wrong. When you remember that you're not perfect either, it changes how you treat people who mess up.

Sometimes in our lives, we see someone get caught cheating or lying or being mean, and we get excited about them getting in trouble. But Jesus wants us to remember that we've done wrong things too, and we needed forgiveness.

What we learn is that everyone needs grace sometimes. Instead of being happy when others get punished, we can choose to be kind and help them do better next time.

The core truth is that God wants us to remember our own need for forgiveness when we see others who need forgiveness too. When we all need mercy, we should all offer mercy.

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

3. Discussion (5 minutes)

Question 1: The Feeling of Getting Others in Trouble

Think about a time when someone in your class or family got in big trouble for something they really did wrong. Maybe they broke something important, or lied about their homework, or were really mean to someone smaller. How did you feel when they got caught? Did part of you feel happy that they were getting consequences, especially if you didn't like them very much or if they had been mean to you before?

Listen For: "I felt glad," "They deserved it," "Good!", affirm: "That's a really honest answer. Most of us feel that way sometimes."

Question 2: Remembering Our Own Mistakes

Now think about times when you've done something wrong and really needed someone to be kind to you instead of making you feel worse. Maybe you broke something by accident, or said something mean when you were angry, or forgot to do something important. How did it feel when someone chose to forgive you instead of making you feel terrible about your mistake?

If They Say: "It felt good," "I was relieved", respond: "That's exactly how the woman in our story must have felt when Jesus chose kindness."

Question 3: The Stone-Throwing Test

Jesus said that only someone who had never done anything wrong could throw the first stone. Why do you think he made that the rule? What would happen if we used that same rule today, only people who have never lied, never been mean, never been selfish could punish others for lying, being mean, or being selfish?

Connect: "This is exactly why all those men walked away, they realized they weren't perfect either."

Question 4: Choosing Grace Over Punishment

Jesus was the only person there who actually could have thrown a stone, because he never did anything wrong. But instead, he chose to be kind and give the woman a chance to do better. What do you think would have happened to the woman if Jesus had chosen punishment instead of kindness? And what happened because he chose grace?

If They Say: "She would have been hurt" or "She got to start over", affirm both responses and connect to how grace gives people hope to change.

You guys have been thinking really well about this. The big idea is that when we remember our own mistakes and need for forgiveness, it helps us be kind to others when they mess up too. Now we're going to do an activity that shows what it feels like when people choose grace instead of punishment.

4. Activity: Grace Circle (8 minutes)

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

Purpose

This activity reinforces the pattern of choosing grace over punishment by having kids physically experience what it feels like to be surrounded by judgment versus surrounded by acceptance. Success looks like kids discovering that grace creates safety and hope while judgment creates fear and isolation.

Instructions to Class(3 minutes)

We're going to play "Grace Circle." I need one volunteer to start in the middle, this person will represent someone who made a mistake. Everyone else, form a big circle around them, about ten feet away. You represent the people who saw the mistake and have to decide how to respond.

In round one, when I say "judge," everyone in the circle will cross your arms, turn your backs to the person in the middle, and take two steps away from them. This shows what it feels like when people respond to your mistakes with rejection and punishment.

In round two, when I say "grace," everyone will turn back toward the middle person, uncross your arms, take two steps toward them, and reach your hands toward them like you're offering help. This shows what it feels like when people respond to your mistakes with forgiveness and support.

We're doing this because it's exactly like what happened in our Bible story, the woman was surrounded by people ready to punish her, but Jesus chose to offer grace instead, which changed everything for her.

During the Activity(4 minutes)

First round: "Judge!" Watch what happens to our person in the middle. They're now alone, with everyone's backs turned to them, and everyone moving away. Person in the middle, how does this feel? Cold, scary, lonely, right?

Notice how the person in the middle looks smaller when everyone turns away. See how they might want to hide or disappear? This is what judgment and punishment feel like, even when someone did do something wrong.

Now, without anyone moving yet, I want the circle to think: have you ever made a mistake? Have you ever needed forgiveness? Remember Jesus's rule, only someone who's never done wrong gets to stay turned away.

Second round: "Grace!" Look at the change! Now our middle person is surrounded by people facing them, offering help, coming closer instead of moving away. Person in the middle, how does this feel different?

See how the person in the middle stands up straighter now? See how they look hopeful instead of scared? This is what grace feels like, it gives people courage to change instead of just shame about their mistakes.

Watch For: The moment when the circle turns toward the middle person with open hands, this is the physical representation of Jesus's choice to offer grace instead of stones.

Debrief(1 minute)

What did you notice about how it felt different to be in the middle during "judge" versus "grace"? The same person, the same mistake, but completely different outcome based on how the people around them chose to respond. When we remember that we need grace too, it helps us offer grace instead of getting excited about punishment.

5. Closing (2 minutes)

Here's what we learned today: before we get excited about someone else being in trouble or getting punished, we should remember our own mistakes and need for forgiveness. Everyone messes up sometimes, so everyone needs grace sometimes.

This doesn't mean wrong things don't have consequences, or that we should never address bad behavior. Jesus still told the woman to stop sinning. But it means we can choose to help people do better instead of being mean to them when they mess up.

The amazing result is that when people receive grace instead of just punishment, they get hope and courage to change their lives, just like the woman in our story got a chance to start over.

This Week's Challenge

This week, when you see someone get in trouble or make a mistake, pause and remember a time when you needed forgiveness. Instead of being happy about their consequences, see if you can find one way to show them kindness or help them do better next time.

Closing Prayer (Optional)

Dear God, thank you for showing us grace when we mess up instead of just punishing us. Help us remember our own mistakes when we see others make mistakes, so we can choose to be kind instead of mean. Help us offer the same forgiveness we need to receive. 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 Jesus wants us to be kind to people who make mistakes, just like we need kindness when we mess up.

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 throwing stones to saying mean things when someone messes up, then ask "How does it feel when people are kind to you when you make a mistake?"

1. Opening Song (2, 3 minutes)

Formation: Standing in a circle

Select a song about God's love and forgiveness. Suggestions: "Jesus Loves Me," "Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)," or "God's Love Is So Wonderful." Use movements: spread arms wide during "love," point up during "God," and hug yourself during "forgiveness" words.

Great singing! You know what? God loves us even when we mess up. Today we're going to hear about how Jesus was super kind to someone who made a big mistake. Let's sit in our story horseshoe so I can tell you about it!

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 gentle when you're Jesus, sound mean when you're the angry men, sound scared when you're the woman.

Today we're going to meet a woman who made a big mistake, and Jesus who chose to be kind instead of mean.

[Walk to one side of the horseshoe]

One day, Jesus was sitting in God's special house, teaching people about God's love. Everyone was sitting quietly, listening to his kind words.

[Use angry voice and stomping feet]

But then some angry men came stomping in! They were dragging a woman with them, and they were really mad at her because she did something very wrong.

[Walk to other side of horseshoe, sound scared]

The woman was so scared! All these men were pointing at her and saying mean things. She probably wanted to hide or run away.

[Move to center, sound mean and bossy]

The angry men said to Jesus, "This woman did something very bad! Our rules say we should throw rocks at her until she dies! What do you think we should do?"

[Move to side, sound confused and hopeful]

But Jesus didn't answer right away. He bent down and started drawing in the dirt with his finger. Maybe he drew flowers or wrote his name, we don't know!

John 8:7 (NIV)

"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

[Pause and look around at each child]

Do you think those angry men had ever done anything wrong? Yes! They had lied and been mean and disobeyed God too!

[Move to center, speak with gentle authority]

Jesus was saying, "If you've never, ever done anything wrong, then you can throw rocks. But if you've made mistakes too, then maybe you should be kind instead."

[Walk slowly around the horseshoe, sounding sad]

One by one, all the angry men remembered times when they had been naughty. They put down their rocks and walked away, feeling ashamed.

[Stop walking and face the children directly]

Soon, only Jesus and the scared woman were left. Jesus looked at her with kind eyes and said, "Where did all the mean men go? Did they hurt you?"

[Speak with excitement and love]

The woman said, "No, they all left!" And Jesus said, "I'm not going to hurt you either. But go and don't do bad things anymore."

[Pause dramatically]

The big truth is that Jesus could have thrown rocks because he never does anything wrong. But instead, he chose to be kind and help her do better!

[Speak directly to the children]

Sometimes kids at school or your brother or sister do something wrong, and we want them to get in big trouble. But Jesus wants us to remember that we mess up sometimes too.

[Move closer to the children]

When someone makes a mistake, you can choose to be kind and help them do better, just like Jesus did.

[Speak warmly and encouragingly]

God loves everyone, even when they mess up, and he wants us to love others the same way!

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 to stand with! I'm going to give each pair one question to talk about. There are no wrong answers, and you can take turns sharing 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 woman felt when all the angry men were pointing at her?
2. Have you ever been scared when you got in trouble for something?
3. Why did all the men walk away when Jesus talked about throwing rocks?
4. What would you do if you saw someone being mean to a kid who made a mistake?
5. How did the woman's feelings change when Jesus was kind to her?

6. Why did Jesus choose to be nice instead of throwing rocks?

7. What happened because Jesus was kind instead of mean?

8. When has someone been kind to you after you messed up?

9. How does it feel when people are nice to you when you make mistakes?

10. What's one way you can be kind to someone who messes up?

11. Why do you think Jesus wants us to be kind to people who do wrong things?

12. How can you help someone do better instead of being mean to them?

13. What does it mean that God loves us even when we mess up?

14. Why is it good to remember our own mistakes when someone else makes mistakes?

15. How can being kind help someone who did something wrong?

16. What should we do when we want to be mean to someone who messed up?

17. How does Jesus want us to treat people who make mistakes?

18. What's the difference between helping someone and being mean to them?

19. Why is it important to forgive people like Jesus forgives us?

20. How can you be like Jesus when someone does something wrong?

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

Choose a song about forgiveness and kindness. Suggestions: "Be Kind to One Another," "Forgive One Another," or "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Include movements: point to others during "one another," make heart shape with hands during "love," and give hugs during "forgiveness" words.

Beautiful! Now let's sit down quietly for prayer time. Criss-cross applesauce, hands folded, eyes closed.

5. Closing Prayer (1, 2 minutes)

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

Dear God, thank you for Jesus being so kind to the woman who made a mistake.

[Pause]

Help us remember to be kind to people when they mess up, just like we want people to be kind to us when we mess up.

[Pause]

Help us be like Jesus and choose to help people do better instead of being mean to them when they do wrong things.

[Pause]

Thank you that you love us even when we make mistakes, and help us love others the same way. 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. Examples: "Help me be nice when my sister is naughty" or "Thank you for forgiving me when I mess up."

Remember, Jesus wants us to be kind helpers, not mean rock-throwers! Have a wonderful week choosing kindness when others make mistakes, just like Jesus chose kindness for you!
