



Human Flourishing Program - Global Forgiveness Movement

“Sermon Starters” for Christian Ministers

**Global
Forgiveness
Movement**

How to use this resource

Hello and welcome! Please make this resource your own by adapting it to your community's needs. Feel free to reorganize the structure, separate them into more sermons, use only portions, or make edits. We have included scripture we think is helpful, but feel free to use other passages.

Though these materials were written for use as sermons during liturgy, you could use them in reflection time outside of liturgy as well; this may be a more feasible option for churches following a set schedule of scriptures for your sermons.

As you know, the topic of forgiveness can be a heavy one and can stir up deep emotions from experiences of hurts and harms. Your congregation may find it healing to incorporate liturgies of lament into a forgiveness deep dive. It can be helpful to preface discussions of forgiveness with an offer for participants to step out of the room to collect themselves if needed, or talk to you or another member of the pastoral staff later.



Sermon #1 - Scientific and Theological Views on Forgiveness

Key takeaway: *Jesus's command to forgive aligns with the health and psychological research on forgiveness.*

I. Core Scripture

Matthew 18:21-35 (The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant)

Story Summary

Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him—up to seven times? Jesus replies, “Not seven, but seventy-seven times,” meaning there should be no limit to forgiveness. Jesus tells us to forgive often. Then Jesus tells a story: A king forgives a servant who owes him an enormous, unpayable debt. But that same servant refuses to forgive a fellow servant who owes him a small amount and has him thrown in prison. When the king finds out, he is furious and reverses his forgiveness, punishing the unforgiving servant. Jesus ends by saying that God will treat us the same way if we don’t forgive others their trespasses against us.

Story Analysis

In this parable, Jesus exhorts us to forgive as we have been forgiven by God. When Peter asks if he should forgive up to seven times, Jesus responds no, he should forgive seventy-seven times.

- One scholar thinks Peter may have suggested seven because it is the perfect number. But Jesus refuses to put a limit on forgiveness.

Jesus teaches us to forgive over and over again, but we need to distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is letting go, while reconciling is restoring the relationships. Not all relationships should be restored; some relationships are toxic and need boundaries. If someone is harming you repeatedly, you forgive them but you do not need to put yourself in harm’s way by remaining in relationship with them.

II. The Science of Forgiveness

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is replacing ill will with goodwill to those who have wronged us.

- This means desiring the flourishing of the offender, but without necessarily forgetting or forgoing justice.
- Forgiveness is compatible with accountability and truth. For many people, forgiveness is the first step towards justice.
- Forgiveness requires a two-fold movement:
 - a decision to forgive, and
 - replacing negative emotions towards the offender with more positive emotions.

Why should we forgive?

Harvard research shows that forgiveness is good for individual and communal health:

- Forgiving those who have harmed us promotes flourishing because it allows us to let go of negative feelings that can undermine our health and wellbeing.
- Forgiveness lowers depression and anxiety.
- Forgiveness can, over time, help free one from rumination and hurt.

II. The Science of Forgiveness (cont.)

Let's look at the research

Introducing the Nurses' Health Study (NHS):

- You've probably heard that trans fats are unhealthy, smoking is dangerous, and exercise can reduce your risk of certain cancers, right? The Nurses' Health Study is to thank for these breakthroughs and many others. Thousands of scientific studies have been published using its data. (Source)
- The study was founded in 1976, initially to study the long-term effect of oral contraceptive pills on women's health. It quickly expanded to investigate holistic health. The study's investigators chose nurses because of their medical knowledge. (Source)
- The Nurses' Health Study is an invaluable resource. It is one of the longest running and largest investigations of factors affecting health and disease risk. It follows more than 275,000 participants across their lives (Source).
- Participants answer regular questionnaires, share their medical records, give biological samples, and are observed through major life events like pregnancy and illness (Source.)

Since inception the study has enrolled nurses from across the United States. It has even extended to the nurse's children; 25,000 of them participate in a next-generation study to learn even more about health across the lifespan. In 2015 the study started to enroll male nurses.

II. The Science of Forgiveness (cont.)

Let's look at the research

Details of Harvard's forgiveness study using the NHS data:

- Researchers at Harvard used this data set to look at forgiveness. They analyzed a survey question about spiritually motivated forgiveness: "Because of my spiritual or religious beliefs, I have forgiven those who hurt me." (The possible answers were Always/Almost always; Often; and Never/Seldom.)
- They found those who forgave most frequently (versus those who never or seldom forgave) reported substantially higher levels of positive emotions and social integration, as well as substantially lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, hopelessness, and loneliness. ([Source](#))

From this study, we can take away that forgiving often is crucial. We can think of it as building up a forgiveness muscle. We can start by practicing forgiveness for small harms and slights, and as we strengthen our forgiveness muscle, we'll be able to forgive those who have committed more significant and hurtful trespasses against us.



III. A Forgiveness Story

Everett Worthington's forgiveness story

(Sources: [Link](#) to TED Talk, article "[Forgiving the Man Who Murdered My Mom](#)")

- Everett Worthington is a clinical psychologist and professor who has studied forgiveness for over 40 years. He is also a Christian who has had life-changing moments of spiritual awakening. ([source](#))
- He describes his journey with God as hiking to a mountaintop – always climbing, and making many decisions to forgive along the way ([Source](#))
- Tragically, his mother was murdered in 1996. She lived alone, and a stranger broke into her home on New Year's Eve and bludgeoned her to death in what investigators think was an attempted burglary gone wrong. ([Source](#))
- This tragedy was a terrible blow to his family, and a test of his faith and life's work on forgiveness. Worthington used the model of forgiveness he created to forgive his mother's murderer. He was inspired by his personal relationship with Jesus to push back against his instinct to huddle down in pain. Instead, motivated by Christ's death on our behalf to make possible God's forgiveness of our sins, he tried to see things through his mother's murderer's eyes and sit with that fear and anger. By empathizing with the murderer—but not condoning or accepting his actions—he forgave him. ([Source](#))
- Everett Worthington has been a pioneer in the psychology research on forgiveness. He developed the REACH model of forgiveness, a path to reaching decisional and emotional forgiveness. He speaks of forgiveness as making an altruistic gift to those who have hurt us that heals the hearts of those offering it.
- He distinguishes **decisional forgiveness** from **emotional forgiveness**.

Sermon #2 - RECEIVE Divine Forgiveness

Key takeaway: *Forgiveness is divine.*

I. Core Scripture

Luke 15:11-32 (Parable of the Prodigal Son)

Story Summary

A father had two sons. His younger son asked his father to receive his inheritance early; he moved to a far-away place and squandered it all. A famine took place, and he was hungry; he hired himself out to feed pigs, and envied the pigs their food. He regretted his choices and decided to return home and apologize to his father for his sins. The prodigal son did not expect his father to welcome him back and felt unworthy to be called his son. He planned to ask his father to “treat me like one of your hired hands.” The prodigal son confessed and repented, telling his father, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.” Unexpectedly, his father welcomed him joyfully and threw a celebratory feast for his return. The elder son had stayed at home and worked for his father many years. He was angered by his father’s warm welcome of the prodigal son, and confronted him, saying it was unfair to reward the son who had squandered his inheritance and give him more than the loyal elder son.

The father replied, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”



Story Analysis

God is like the father in this parable. He is immediately forgiving and desires our happiness and wellbeing; he is delighted to be reunited with us. At different points in our lives, we may identify with the father, older brother, and younger brother. For those who identify as the older brother who felt the prodigal son's forgiveness was unfair and seemed to envy how his father treated him, consider how the father says to him "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." This is a reminder that God's graciousness is a gift to everyone. Perhaps the elder son did not enjoy it or felt entitled to more. Blessed are those who choose to enjoy God's graciousness. The Parable of the Prodigal Son provides a glimpse into God's love for us. God's love far exceeds our own expectations. The parable also reminds us that no matter what we have done, no matter who we are, no matter how far we think we have fallen, the fullness of God's loving forgiveness for us remains on offer. God's forgiveness isn't something we earn. That is, it's not part of some transaction in response to good behavior. Forgiveness isn't earned at all by us mere humans. Rather, God's forgiveness is always available to those who are contrite. It is just that sometimes we struggle to experience God's forgiveness even though it is already on offer. And we are always called to forgive as the father forgives. However, God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are different. Unlike God, we are finite. When we accept God's forgiveness we are reconciled with Him. As finite humans, we can forgive others, but we may not choose to reconcile. Forgiveness means letting go; reconciliation means coming together. Some human relationships need to end because they are toxic, and some need boundaries. But for God, forgiveness and reconciliation is one move. By forgiving, we are agents of God's plan.

II. A Metaphor about God and Forgiveness

Embodied Exercise

(source: *RECEIVE Divine Forgiveness Workbook* pages 38-39)

- Imagine you are in a dark room full of furniture and objects you can't see. You slowly make your way over to the window and draw back the curtains, letting the light in.
- In this metaphor, the light represents God's forgiveness.
- When we sin, it is as if the light from the window has been blocked because the curtain has been drawn closed by our sin.
- God offers forgiveness all the time, even when we have blocked ourselves from fully receiving it.
- By confronting our sin we open ourselves up to fully receive God's forgiveness.



III. RECEIVE Divine Forgiveness

Background

Accepting God's forgiveness—or stepping into the light in the prior metaphor—can be hard. Researchers at Harvard's Human Flourishing Program have developed a Do-it-Yourself workbook with exercises to help you more readily accept God's forgiveness. The workbook is designed around the acronym **RECEIVE**. *(The workbook is meant to support, not supplant, your denominational and congregational penitential practices.)*

Let's look at the acronym:

RECEIVE divine forgiveness

R - **Remember** God's love for you

E - **Explore** how God forgives

C - **Confront** your sin

E - **Engage** with God to make amends

I - **Internalize** God's forgiveness

V - **Venture** toward renewal and virtue

E - **Establish** a plan to keep experiencing God's forgiveness

III. RECEIVE Divine Forgiveness (cont.)

Remember God's love for you

- God is love
- God wants good for us
- God wants the deepest friendship possible between himself and you.
- Because of God's love he refuses to let sin prevent a loving relationship with us.
- "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

Explore how God forgives

- Both love and grace, forgiveness and gift, are poured out from God into us as vessels that receive as much of these things as we are capable of receiving.
 - Water faucet metaphor
- "For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you." — Psalm 86:5

Confront your sin

- Sin is moments of turning away from God
- Confronting sin requires identifying what we did or didn't do, and digging deeper to identify the deeper insecurities or misplaced desires the sin flows from.
- Pride and Idolatry
- Confess your sin to God.

III. RECEIVE Divine Forgiveness (cont.)

Engage with God to make amends

- Fixing what's gone wrong due to our sin—that is, addressing its impact on oneself, our relationship to God, and others—is the process of making amends. This can involve apology, but it also includes an intentional effort on our part to repair any damage brought about by our actions (or inactions) insofar as we are able.
- Remember that Because you are “in Christ” you are “a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being” (2 Corinthians 5). You are not defined by your former sin. [more here?]

Internalize God's forgiveness

- Let go of your sin and negative feelings you have about yourself because of it to fully move forward.
- These feelings of guilt and shame now only weigh you down. Without them you can better fulfill the purpose of your life.
- Jesus offers us peace.
- God's grace is stronger than our sin.
- Offer a prayer of gratitude to God for his grace and forgiveness.

Venture toward renewal and virtue

- Though we are already forgiven by God, we are always in the process of becoming more sanctified—more holy—increasing our capacity to receive his love, by growing in virtue and pursuing holiness.
- Cultivating habits of holiness
 - Praying the Examen
 - Learning from our mistakes

III. RECEIVE Divine Forgiveness (cont.)

Establish a plan to keep experiencing God's forgiveness

- Memorize a piece of scripture that comforts you when you doubt God's forgiveness.
- List supports to draw on in moments of doubt, like praying, speaking with a spiritual leader, or talking with a friend

You can download the Human Flourishing Program's *RECEIVE Divine Forgiveness Workbook* here: <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/forgiveness>

Sermon #3 - Forgiveness Interventions

Key takeaway: *Jesus forgave on the cross. Like Jesus, we are called to forgive one another.*

I. Core Scripture

Luke 23:26-43 (The Crucifixion of Jesus)

Story Summary

Though Jesus was innocent, Pilate gave into the crowd's demands to execute him. Roman soldiers brought Jesus to be crucified. He was nailed to the cross between two criminals. A large crowd watched on, sneering at him and mocking him. Jesus could have responded in a variety of ways—anger, retaliation, hatred, etc.—but he chose the divine response of love. He chose forgiveness. And so he cried out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Even when the Roman soldiers mocked and taunted him, he did not retaliate against them. When one of the criminals he is being crucified with observes Jesus has done nothing wrong, Jesus replies “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”



II. Theological Understandings of Forgiveness and the Role of Psychology (source [here](#))

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is replacing ill will with goodwill to those who have wronged us.

- This is not the same as reconciliation, which is about reconnecting a relationship.
- And forgiving does not mean forgetting or forgoing justice.
- It does not mean hiding the truth.
- Forgiveness is compatible with accountability.

Misuse of Forgiveness

Theologians and philosophers warn against:

- “Cheap forgiveness” — used to hide problems instead of addressing them.
- Placing an unfair burden to forgive on victims and survivors

Challenges in Practicing Forgiveness

Forgiveness is central to Christian teaching and has proven mental health benefits: it decreases depression and anxiety and increases overall flourishing. However, the peaceful effects are not always immediate.

Common struggles are:

- Persistent feelings of anger, hurt, or sadness.
- A sense that forgiveness hasn't fully “stuck.”

II. Theological Understandings of Forgiveness and the Role of Psychology (cont.)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu on Forgiveness

Emotional pain doesn't disappear just by choosing to forgive:

- Quote: "I don't know that you yourself are able, by an act of will...to let go of the pain" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uo2LGGqtjqM>)

Forgiveness involves a decision of the will:

- Choosing not to seek revenge or payback.
- Refusing to remain a victim consumed by anger or resentment.
- However, hurt feelings may still linger despite this decision.

Our feelings alert us to what is going on and potential harm to us. We may want to lament the harm caused, the relationship ruptured, or the sadness, loss, and injustice. That can be an important part of the healing process. When we are ready, the REACH process helps us let go of those hard feelings.

- Forgiveness does not always bring immediate emotional peace.
- Theological frameworks clarify what forgiveness is but, they often fail to address or relieve emotional suffering.
- Forgiveness is hard and we often need guidance on how to do it.

III. Psychology can support theology by teaching us ways to forgive

Emotional vs. Decisional forgiveness

Psychologist and researcher Everett Worthington is a pioneer of the psychological study of forgiveness. He studies the emotions involved in forgiveness, focusing on the psychological distinction between decisional forgiveness and emotional forgiveness. One can and must make a decision to forgive (decisional forgiveness), but emotional forgiveness requires replacing negative emotions with more positive emotions. This takes **time** and is hard, but can be cultivated.

REACH Forgiveness

Worthington has developed a model to help people to emotionally forgive, the REACH model. This model has been proven to promote forgiveness and mental health. His REACH Forgiveness model is one of the most widely tested models of forgiveness.

REACH stands for:

R - Recall the hurt

E - try to Empathize with the offender

A - give an Altruistic, undeserved gift of forgiveness

C - make a voluntary Commitment to forgive

H - Hold onto forgiveness through difficult times

II. Theological Understandings of Forgiveness and the Role of Psychology (cont.)

REACH Workbooks

The REACH Model is synthesized in a Do-It-Yourself workbooks that take just a few hours to complete. Harvard researchers at The Human Flourishing Program and others comprehensively tested the workbook in a randomized control trial. They recruited 4,500 participants across five relatively high conflict countries: Colombia, South Africa, Ukraine, Indonesia, and Hong Kong:

- The results indicate that the workbook is effective in:
 - **increasing forgiveness**
 - **reducing anxiety**
 - **reducing depression, and**
 - **increasing flourishing**

You can download a digital copy of the workbook here:

<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/forgiveness>

Communities can take part in deep dives in forgiveness that allow the whole community to reflect on forgiveness.

(*The Importance of Forgiveness Campaigns* by Tyler J. VanderWeele)

These are shown to have mental health benefits, including reducing anxiety, reducing depression, and increasing flourishing