

October: Forgive

Introduction

Jesus' ideas, like many of the greatest ideas throughout history, were often simple, powerful, and difficult. Simple enough that kids can understand them, so powerful that they really can change the world, and at the same time very difficult to pull off. Forgiveness is one of those ideas. Firstly, God forgives us. Romans 5:8 says "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Among other things, Jesus' death on the cross is God's expression of forgiveness for us. Often, when we know we've done something wrong, we usually want to try and make up for it by doing extra things, or we avoid the issue and break off the relationship so we don't have to be reminded of what happened. But we don't have to do either of these with God. The cross says "It's all done. There's nothing you have to do, it's all forgiven. As far as the east is from the west, that's how far I've removed your sins." That's quite a long way. Just a minuscule speck in the distance, way behind us. So there's nothing we need to do to make up for any of it. And we don't have to avoid the relationship either. That's the beauty of forgiveness. Forgiveness restores the relationship.

As Paul wrote in Romans 8, there is nothing we can possibly do that could separate us from God's love. The forgiveness is already there, ready and waiting. This is an amazing, unquenchable, unconquerable love. There's a beautiful old hymn that begins with these words: *Here is love, vast as the ocean; Loving kindness as the flood. When the prince of life, our ransom; Shed for us his precious blood.* The love Jesus showed us on the cross is one of the most powerful forces in the universe, more powerful even than death itself. The forgiveness never stops, because God is always looking to restore the relationship. Always. No matter what we've done. No matter what we still might do. This is perhaps the astounding message of the whole Bible in its simplest form: God is king, and he loves us. And it's a selfless, forgiving, wondrous, powerful kind of love.

Some of the challenges this month are about our relationship with God. About accepting this forgiveness and love and thanking God for it. Do we feel forgiven? Maybe this is a difficult one for you. Sometimes it helps to find some way to act out this idea of letting go of our guilt and pain, and accepting God's forgiveness and healing. Or maybe you could find some ways to express your thankfulness for this amazing forgiveness?

God's forgiveness is surely one of the great wonders of our world - a powerful force that can bring healing and restoration to even the deepest of hurts. But it's even more beautiful than that. God has given us the great gift of being able to experience this amazing force from both sides. As Jesus told us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." We receive forgiveness and we give it to others, and some of the challenges this month are there to help us with this second bit.

When someone does something to hurt us, forgiveness is the only way to peace and a restored relationship again. Denying the problem won't get you there. Avoiding the problem won't get you there. Revenge and hatred and bitterness definitely won't get you there. Forgiveness is so important because God knows it's the best way for us to live in harmony with each other. But it's not always easy, and it looks like even Jesus' closest disciples struggled with the concept. You can imagine the conversation... *Ok Jesus, I get that forgiveness is important, but what if you forgive someone, and then they do the same thing again? Just forgive them again. But what if they do it again? Forgive them again. Oh right.... But what if, you know, they do it again? Oh, well in that case, get even with them. Really? No, forgive them again. Ahhhh. Ok, so forgive them four times then? Or should we keep going? Maybe seven times? Nope, just keep going. At least seventy times seven.*

It's a big number that's meant to represent infinity. We never stop forgiving. It makes sense what the disciples are asking though, doesn't it? If someone keeps doing the wrong thing, over and over and over again, it doesn't seem right to just keep forgiving them. It doesn't seem like it's really helping. Jesus' answer to his disciples here really shows just how important Jesus thinks forgiveness is. It's like he's saying, Trust me, this is the only way.

Jesus calls us to show limitless forgiveness, like God does for us. Forgive others, just like God forgives you. At the end of the day, it's the only way to restore a friendship, or a marriage, or any other kind of relationship. It's the only way back to peace and life. Forgiveness also sets the other person free. This is really hard to fathom because if someone has done something wrong to us, we don't want them to be free. Usually we want to make their life difficult until they repent or say they are sorry. But forgiveness is an act of love. Just as God's forgiveness sets us free from guilt and a sense of having to try and "please" God, our forgiveness of other people does exactly the same thing. Our forgiveness sets others free from all that guilt and grovelling. Yes, they might do the wrong thing again, but as Paul wrote in the famous love chapter, "love keeps no record of wrongs." Love doesn't keep a tally or a scorecard of wrongdoings and mistakes. Love puts them aside out of commitment to the other person, and to the relationship.

Forgiveness means acting as if the wrongs caused by another no longer count in our relationship. It doesn't mean denying that anything ever happened, and it doesn't mean trying to right those wrongs. Instead it is an acceptance that stuff happened, but that stuff will not determine our present or future relationship. Forgiveness is always pointing toward the future by challenging the effects of the past. It is the constant hope that a relationship can get better, and if it doesn't, it won't be for lack of trying or a lack of forgiveness.

Challenges

There are challenges listed for each version of a Big Year. Please select the challenges that best suit you and your group or family. Also, feel free to rewrite the challenges, or create new challenges to better reflect Jesus' teaching in your day-to-day setting.



ADULTS



MONK

- Choose a symbol that reminds you of forgiveness. Write this symbol on a stone and carry it everywhere you go (in your pocket or handbag). Whenever you see or feel it, pray this prayer, "Thank you God for the forgiveness you offer. Help me to forgive others and treat them with love".
- Every day this month, recite the Lord's Prayer. Pay particular attention to the phrase, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us".
- Fill a backpack with heavy items and go for a short walk while carrying it. While you're walking, reflect on any resentment you might feel towards people who have hurt you. Ask God to help you forgive and take off the backpack. Enjoy the feeling of lightness. Keep the backpack somewhere visible for the next week and remember that while you haven't forgotten what happened, you have let go of the right to get even. Work out a way to remind yourself to stop for a few minutes three times a day. When you stop, think about the things that you're thankful for and pray a short prayer of gratitude.



CHEERLEADER

- Has someone apologised to you this month? Find a way to show that you have forgiven them - send a gift, do something nice for them or include them in something you're doing.
- Have a read through some stories on [The Forgiveness Project](#) website. Discuss your impressions and what you have learned about forgiveness with your Big Year crew.
- If you know you need to forgive someone but you can't talk to them, write them a [forgiveness letter](#). The person may never read this letter but you might find it helpful in letting go of your pain. If you think that this is impossible then find the courage to talk to someone in your Big Year crew (or a mentor or counsellor) about it. The long journey to freedom begins with one small but courageous step.



ACTIVIST

- If you feel that your relationships are largely free from unresolved tensions or resentment, then take some time to celebrate this. Never feel guilty for being free, feel grateful and ask God if you can help anyone else to find freedom this month.
- Is there a person in your life who you find very difficult to get along with, like you've already forgiven them 490 times? Find a way to show kindness to them this month. The only rule is to avoid words and try to open the way for reconciliation through actions.
- Reconciliation is about building relationships, respect and trust between people who have a painful history. If you're an Australian, spend some time this month learning about the culture, history and traditions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and consider what first step you can take to move closer to reconciliation. Go to the [Reconciliation Australia](#) website for further information. If you know of another group or community with whom you need to pursue reconciliation, then spend the time learning about them and working out what it is you need to do.