

Re-Thinking Forgiveness

Study Guide

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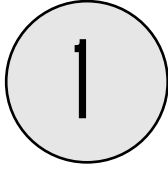
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Understanding God's Love

Share a recent experience when you felt anxious or fearful? What was the root of the fear?

Most people who believe in God affirm that God is loving. Yet, despite this affirmation, we all struggle in some way with the confidence that God loves us. No matter how strong one's relationship with God, there is always an underlying fear that God does not love us fully.

1 John 4:18 (NLT)

Such love has no fear because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.

1 Peter 5:7 (NLT)

Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.

Why does the Apostle John make a correlation between fear and a distrust of God's love?

2 Peter 1:3 (NLT)

By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life.

How would fully trusting God's love have changed how you viewed your past fearful or anxious situations?

Why do you think we so deeply distrust God's love?

1 John 4:8 (NLT)

But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

The Apostle John doesn't say God loves; he says God "is love." What do you think he means by this?

If God's love is a constant, unchanging attribute rooted in his character, how does that affect how he loves us?

Do you sometimes feel that God loves others more than you? When do you tend to feel this the most?

In what way is God's love different from our own?

Are you comfortable declaring, "Right now, as I am, at this moment, I am fully loved by God!" Share your reaction to this declaration.

Romans 5:8 (NLT)

But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.

If God loves us so profoundly that he was willing to die for us, why do we continue to resist him in so many areas of our lives?

If you fully trusted and embraced God's perfect unconditional, unrelenting love for you, how might that change your approach to life?

Are there some areas in your life that you know you are not trusting God's love for you? Can you share one area with the group?

Zephaniah 3:17 (NLT)

For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs."

At night time, when I put my kids to bed, I would always say, **"I love you, and I like you too."** I wanted my kids to know that as a parent, I loved them but that I also enjoyed them.

In Zephaniah, God foretold the judgment that was about to come on the nations, including Judah. But he also declared that there would be a day when God's wrath would be removed, and he would restore his people to himself and rejoice over them with gladness and loud singing.

This prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ when he died to remove your sins and restore you to a relationship with the Father. He always loved you, but your sin had to be removed for there to be full reconciliation.

Luke 15:10 (NLT)

In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

How do you react to the idea that God not only loves you but actually rejoices over you when you turn to him?

Do you believe God currently likes you? Do you think that he is still rejoicing over you? Why or why not?

How can we remind ourselves in the coming week that God loves and delights in us?

ACTION STEP:

As you reflect on this incredible truth over the next week, next session, we'll encourage you to share if that made any practical difference in your life.

2

God – The Righteous Judge

Were you able to remember and reflect on the fact that God loves you fully and that you need to be anxious about nothing? Share your experiences of how it helped or what happened when you forgot this incredible truth.

One of the biggest challenges to the existence of God is the question of how a good God could allow so much evil and suffering to exist. Ultimately, they are questioning the justice of God.

Psalm 9:7-8 (ESV)

⁷ But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, ⁸ and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness.

What does it mean to say that God is just?

Obviously, God does not judge everyone immediately. This apparent delay in justice is what creates tension for us. Even people in scripture struggled with this reality. They started to question why they were even following God if wicked people prospered and the righteous struggled.

Psalm 73:1-17 (NLT)

¹ Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure.

² But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone. ³ For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness. ⁴ They seem to live such painless lives; their bodies are so healthy and strong. ⁵ They don't have troubles like other people; they're not plagued with problems like everyone else. ⁶ They wear pride like a jeweled necklace and clothe themselves with cruelty. ⁷ These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for! ⁸ They scoff and speak only evil; in their pride they seek to crush others. ⁹ They boast against the very heavens, and their words strut throughout the earth. ¹⁰ And so the people are dismayed and confused, drinking in all their words.

¹¹ "What does God know?" they ask. "Does the Most High even know what's happening?"

¹² Look at these wicked people— enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply.

¹³ Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason? ¹⁴ I get nothing but trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain. ¹⁵ If I had really spoken this way to others, I would have been a traitor to your people.

¹⁶ So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult task it is! ¹⁷ Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked.

Can you share a time when you resonated with this psalmist and questioned God's justice?

What was it that changed the psalmist's perspective?

David wrote a beautiful psalm relating how awesome God is in his omnipotence, omnipresence, and creativity. He was in awe of God's creation, especially how he had been at work in his own life from the moment he was conceived. But then, as he reflected on those opposed to God and his purposes, it evoked deep anger within him.

Psalm 139:17-24 (NLT)

¹⁷ How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! ¹⁸ I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand! And when I wake up, you are still with me!

¹⁹ O God, if only you would destroy the wicked! Get out of my life, you murderers! ²⁰ They blaspheme you; your enemies misuse your name. ²¹ O LORD, shouldn't I hate those who hate you? Shouldn't I despise those who oppose you? ²² Yes, I hate them with total hatred, for your enemies are my enemies.

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

Have you ever been so angry at people that you wanted God to give them the justice they deserved right away?

Why did David suddenly change his tone in verses 23-24?

What can we learn from David's turn-about?

If God were to judge all evil right now, what would be the consequence for all people?

There is an appointed **Day of Judgment** coming.

Revelation 20:11-15 (NLT)

¹¹ And I saw a great white throne and the one sitting on it. The earth and sky fled from his presence, but they found no place to hide. ¹² I saw the dead, both great and small, standing before God's throne. And the books were opened, including the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to what they had done, as recorded in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up its dead, and death and the grave gave up their dead. And all were judged according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire. This lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ And anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire.

2 Peter 3:7 (NLT)

And by the same word, the present heavens and earth have been stored up for fire. They are being kept for the day of judgment, when ungodly people will be destroyed.

In light of this reality, do you want God to judge yourself or even others right now? What are your thoughts?

**Every day that God withholds righteous judgment
is a pure act of grace.**

2 Peter 3:9 (NLT)

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.

What was Peter's explanation as to why God is withholding judgment?

If God is withholding judgment so that people are given more time to repent, what does that suggest should be the focus of our remaining time in the world?

ACTION STEP:

As you reflect on the justice of God, what are the various ways it might influence how you approach this coming week?

3

The Problem with Our Judgment

We all judge people. We do it without even thinking about it or realizing that it is happening. We evaluate people's actions and then treat them according to what we believe they deserve. Consider how you typically react to people when they fail to meet your expectations.

Some examples of the consequences people give:

Aggressive Behavior:

- Speaking harshly to the person
- Quick temper
- Swearing
- Verbal confrontation
- Threatening the person
- Pointing fingers
- Insults
- Emotional abuse
- Stalking/ Obsessing
- Physical violence
- Murder

Passive-Aggressive Behavior:

- Not talking to the person - the silent treatment
- Talking negatively about the person to others (social media included)
- Undermining the person, their work, or reputation
- Using sarcasm
- Being argumentative
- Moodiness around the person
- Refusing to support the person even when they're right
- Resentful attitude
- Withholding sex from a partner
- Not encouraging them

When you believe someone has wronged you, what sort of consequence do you typically give? Do you tend to express your anger or take a passive-aggressive approach?

Judgment can be extremely subtle. We may not even be aware that we are judging another person. **Discuss the following statement.**

Every time you withhold the "full extent of your love" from a person because they have not lived up to your expectations – you have judged them.

What do you think about the above quote?

In light of this, how judgmental are we?

None of us like to be judged, so what motivates us to judge others so frequently?

What's the problem with judging others?

Below are three significant problems with judging others.

1) _____

Matthew 7:1-5 (ESV)

¹ "Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Why do we make terrible judges?

Romans 2:1 (NLT)

You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things.

We might argue that we don't do the "same" evil things. We have never done anything as harmful to others as that person did to us. What do you think Paul means?

2) _____

James 4:12 (NLT)

God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?

Romans 14:10 (NLT)

So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Why do we have such a hard time trusting judgment to God?

How do you think your act of judging affects your personal relationship with God?

In what way is rejecting God as Judge a worse offense than what the worst offender has done to you?

Have you ever noticed that it is difficult to worship God when you have tensions with another person? Share your thoughts.

3) _____

How is it that offenses from the past can still affect us decades later?

LETTING GO OF JUDGMENT

The only way to be free from the wounds of your past is to let go of judgment. Have you discovered any ways to help you let go of judgment?

STEPS TO FREEDOM

1) Be aware of who you are judging

Make a list of all the people you are not showing your full love to because they have failed to love you in some way.

Psalm 139:23-24 (NLT)

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

- 2) **Confess your sin** of playing judge and trust God to be the Righteous Judge over every offense against you.

Isaiah 33:22 (ESV)

For JEHOVAH is our judge; JEHOVAH is our lawgiver; JEHOVAH is our king; he will save us.

Go through your list of offenders:

- Confess your sin of judgment and distrust of God as judge
- Invite God to be the judge over every offense against you

- 3) **Trust God to righteously judge every offense** so that you don't need to think about it.

Psalm 75:2 (NLT)

God says, "At the time I have planned, I will bring justice against the wicked.

- 4) **Walk in freedom** as one who is no longer a "victim" but has new life in Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:17 (NLT)

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

- 5) **Ask for forgiveness from those you have been judging.** If the other person is aware of your judgment and condemnation against them, you may need to ask for their forgiveness. They may not own what they did wrong, but you can acknowledge what you did and make it right.

- 6) **Offer and grant forgiveness** when the other person acknowledges their sin against you

Luke 17:3-4 (ESV)

³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,
⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

ACTION STEP:

Work through the process described above and come prepared to share your experience.



Loving Your Enemies

Review: Trusting God to be the Righteous Judge and refusing to judge others creates a deeper intimacy with God and sets you free from your past.

How well did you do at identifying and repenting of judgment against others in the past week? How did it affect your view of life?

If we are not to judge and condemn others for their offenses against us, how should we relate to them?

Luke 6:27-28 (NLT)

²⁷ "But to you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. ²⁸ Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you.

Why is loving our enemies impossible in our own strength?

What does it practically mean to love our enemies?

How does understanding the final justice and wrath of God motivate us to love our enemies?

How can the offender be set free from the guilt of their actions?

Luke 17:3-4 (ESV)

³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

What is the process of reconciliation according to Jesus in Luke 17?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What is the condition for granting forgiveness? Why is this the case?

1 John 1:9 (NLT)

But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.

What happens if there is no repentance?

Do you still forgive if there is no repentance?

What are the implications if you find yourself emotionally unable to offer forgiveness?

Matthew 6:14-15 (ESV)

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Why does Jesus say the Father will not forgive us if we do not forgive others?

What is the problem of "forgiving" someone without first letting go of judgment?

Can you recall when you "forgave" someone but as a "benevolent" judge? How did that play out for you in the long run?

RELEASING JUDGMENT to the RIGHTEOUS JUDGE sets US FREE

FORGIVENESS is about setting the OFFENDER FREE

Does not judging the person mean we let them continue in their destructive behavior?

What's the difference between boundaries that we set up out of judgment vs. love?

What types of "loving boundaries" have you set in place to protect your relationships?

Are there some boundaries you realize you need to start enforcing to truly love another person?

ACTION STEP:

Consider this week steps that you can take to "love your enemies." Come prepared to share with the group your experiences.

5

Ambassadors of Reconciliation

**Review: How effectively were you able to love your enemies in the past week?
Did you have to enforce some boundaries in your relationships?**

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (ESV)

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us **the ministry of reconciliation**; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

What is a ministry of reconciliation?

In Jesus' last prayer for the church, he specifically focused on relational unity within the church.

John 17:20-21 (NLT)

²⁰ "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. ²¹ I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.

Why is relational unity so important within the kingdom of God?

Do you tend to run toward relational chaos or away from it? Why?

When there is relational conflict, do you tend to be the first to address it or wait for others to take the first step? Why?

How does understanding our new calling as "ambassadors of reconciliation" change how we relate to people who have previously hurt or are currently hurting us?

Why do you think the world tends to view the church as being judgmental as opposed to forgiving?

How can we remain firm in our convictions but be viewed as incredibly loving and forgiving?

Matthew 5:9 (ESV)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Romans 12:18 (ESV)

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

We can't control how other people respond, but we can ensure we do the right thing. What steps can you take to be an agent of peace within your church?

When others start to spread negativity about others, how can you promote unity?

How might you be a messenger of reconciliation with God in your various spheres of influence?

ACTION STEP:

What is one thing you could do this week that would help bridge the gap between either:

- others and God?
- between you and another person?
- between two others?