

Retreat based on Forgiveness

Welcome & Introductions:

Arrange in small groups:

Logistics of day: We'll give you ample opportunities for breaks, so please wait for the time that is planned into the schedule to go to the bathroom.

Leader's opening remarks:

It is obvious that one cannot be both Christian and unforgiving.

The lack of forgiveness not only poisons and sours our lives, smashing relationships, and it is specifically prohibited by Christ.

We are unforgiving whenever we judge others for their faults and then feel resentment, bitterness, or anger in our hearts towards those persons.

We are unforgiving when we want to hold others to account for their failings and want to see to it that they pay for them.

These are attitudes that Jesus forbids.

If you have any doubt about the matter, simply read Matthew 18: 21 and 22. Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive. He suggested a seemingly extravagant number of times - seven. He must have been utterly amazed when Jesus replied seventy times seven! That was his way of saying *there is no limit to the number of times you forgive*.

No, there is no question whatsoever that being a Christian involves forgiveness. It is mentioned so frequently throughout the New Testament that we all know it in our hearts.

On a more practical side, there are negative consequences of unforgiveness which are very valid reasons to desire to offer forgiveness. Anger can take over your whole life and not leave room for anything else - no room for love, no peace, no pleasure, no joy.

The desire to get even can set up a vicious circle: Because someone hurt me, I will hurt them a little worse, then they want to hurt me a little worse yet.

To keep from showing my hurt I may crawl behind a wall and dry up and die inside.

I lose and/or destroy many possible friendships and create enemies - not just of the person I'm angry with but often his friends as well will become my enemies.

All that is well and good, but have you ever tried to practice forgiveness towards all who have offended you? If you have, you know how extremely difficult, how nearly impossible it is. You find that you don't have control of the feelings of resentment and anger, of spite and revenge. It is horrible. You see what you ought to do and you can't. With Paul you groan; "I don't do the good I want to do; instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do" (Romans. 7:19).

We seem to be caught in a terrible tension. On the one hand we know in our hearts that it is our unforgiveness which separates us from a true relationship with God, and on the other, we seem powerless to do anything about it.

So it doesn't help for us to know that we should be forgiving unless we learn how to forgive. That is the purpose of this Kairos retreat.

THE TASK

Talk #1, 10 – 15 minutes

Let's look at the definition of forgiveness, as found in the Webster Dictionary: *to give up resentment against or the desire to punish.*

to stop being angry with

to pardon

to cancel a debt

If we look at this definition, what forgiveness really is, is giving up our natural responses to being wounded.

(Speaker should give an example of what it feels like to be deeply wounded.)

What are some natural responses to being wounded?

Anger

Desire to get even, i.e. to wound back.

Denial - I'm too tough to let that hurt me.

Avoidance - I'll never talk to him again; I'll just pretend he doesn't exist.

The first thing we must realize is that achieving forgiveness is a very difficult job. It is not easy and cannot be done without work. We are brought up in a world that sees forgiveness as peculiar and weak.

It is easier to get others to agree with you when you tell people you have been wronged. It is easier to point the finger than to be accepting.

Let's face it, standing up for one's rights, repaying grudges, vindicating one's honor - these are the things honored by the world. Blood feuds and duels, fights and quarrels are the logical and quite painful results of this point of view. When we set out to be forgiving, we go against the grain of the world.

Our only way to forgive is in God with lots of prayer and support from others.

Discussion questions:

1. Have you been wounded and if so, what were the feelings that came over you as a result?

OUR ATTITUDE

Talk #2, 10-15 minutes

It is scary to look at our own attitudes and to look honestly at ourselves. We know who we are. We know ourselves well... or do we?

The most important thing for us to remember as we begin looking honestly at ourselves is that GOD LOVES US. We must be very sure of that. God loves us, or we would not even be here. And, we must know that in our hearts. Without that knowledge, we will never be brave enough to take that honest look at ourselves. We have let the world tell us too often that we are not worthy, we are no good, and that we are a failure.

Turn to the people in your group and tell them "You are loved by God! God Loves You! I love you!" (*Give them a minute.*)

Knowing that God loves us, let's look to see how many of the world's attitudes lie within us.

We usually are brought face to face with forgiveness because of one particularly tough conflict in our lives, towards a relative, a parent, a child, a neighbor, a spouse, a boss or a competitor. We usually give up and opt for unforgiveness, which keeps us tuned to the world, and we think we are happy living in the world.

(Speaker should give an example of what it felt like to examine those personal attitudes in his/her personal life.)

When we are able to identify our own attitudes as coming from the world, we are able to admit our unforgiveness. As we become aware of this unforgiveness, if we look more closely and deeper into ourselves, we find a whole web of lesser resentments and unforgiving attitudes.

The world's attitude encourages resentment and anger. "Sue him" is an often heard example. Blaming others becomes a way of life. "It was his fault." "I was disrespected."

This can be a very distressing thing to look at closely. We find our lives are full of unforgiveness. It colors every relationship we have. We begin to sense the enormous task before us if we want to be Christ's followers. If we ever need patience and perseverance, it is now.

Discussion questions:

1. Identify some of the world's attitudes about forgiveness.
2. What ones have you taken as your own?
3. Do you have ideas how to change those attitudes in you?

DO I WANT TO CHANGE?

Talk #3, 10-15 minutes

Do I Want to Change? This is the major decision and it's a tough one. This is where the rubber meets the road. We have seen ourselves clearly. We can envision the goal that Christ has set before us. The big question is: Do we really want to change our attitude? Do we really want to be forgiving in spite of all the obstacles or do we really enjoy being mad, the power of negative emotion or the safety of not changing?

It is easy to answer "yes, I want to change" but is entirely another matter to summon up the courage to back up that yes. It will take courage to plant that seed of desire so firmly in our will that we will pursue the goal indefinitely and against all odds.

Forgiveness may involve us in many embarrassing and sacrificial situations. It makes great demands upon us. The world is against it. Remember the man by the pool who had been sick for 38 years? Read John 5:2-9. The first thing Jesus did was ask him, "Do you want to be healed?"

Do we really want to be healed of our unforgiveness? I have known incarcerated in Kairos who have told me they are afraid to forgive because the only thing that they have to live for is to get out and get even. Without that, they could not see any reason to live.

Do we take our Lord seriously even though he doesn't seem practical from the world's point of view?

(Speaker should share a time when he/she decided to forgive and talk about how hard it was to make that decision.)

Discussion questions:

1. What would the price of making a decision to change an attitude be so you can forgive someone?
2. Is it worth it to you?

FACING BURIED SECRETS

Talk #4, 10-15 minutes

The last talk about "Do I Want To Change" was the hardest step.

DO YOU HAVE BURIED SECRETS That you want to keep buried? Imaginethat you are going down a stairs into the cellar of your life. Walk over to those cellar doors, open them, and look in. Do we have anything alive down there in our cellar which we haven't forgiven in the lives of others? Is there anything down there inside which we hang on to, but which we will not tolerate in others? Have we hidden some of our deeds so carefully that we have forgotten they ever happened?

Sometimes we can identify those things in our lives by examining what we hate in others. Look around in the cellar. Do you see racial intolerance, or distrust of anyone not like you? What about the homosexuals? Resentment of authority? Look around. Is there a jar of envy on the shelf? Is that a big barrel of insecurity in the corner?

If anything aids forgiveness towards others, it is this kind of assessment of ourselves. It is, in fact, a well-accepted principle in psychology that the things for which we are most critical in others are often the very things we have buried in the cellars of our own lives, and have forgotten. We often indulge in unforgiving attitudes merely to shift the heat and take attention away from our own faults.

As kids we used to make fun of those few who would excel in school or help the teacher. We used to say they were sucking up to the teacher and ridicule them when we were with our friends. I know that I did that knowing that I wanted to do what they were able to do but I could not, so I ridiculed them.

(Speaker should share a personal experience of finding fault with another, realizing later that the thing we found most objectionable in the other represented something that had been hidden in his/her cellar.)

Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. As we begin to see in what fragile houses of glass we live, the temptation to throw stones of unforgiveness at others decreases in a dramatic way. We come to the conclusion that there is so much in ourselves to be forgiven by God and our fellows that we are just like the unforgiving slave in Jesus' story in Matthew 18:23-35. (read it)

Discussion questions:

1. What have you found in your own cellars? Did you recognize anything about yourself?
2. Have you ever heard the quote from Walt Kelly? “We have met the enemy and he is us”
3. Do you want to clean your cellar?

LINGERING ANIMOSITIES

Talk #5, 10-15 minutes

How do we identify and get rid of **THOSE LINGERING ANIMOSITIES**? Even after the first four steps of Identifying the task, Looking at our attitudes, deciding to change and facing our buried secrets, we find there are persistent things or people hard for us to forgive.

The first rule to remember is to never let our lack of forgiveness to harm that person. Cease doing anything unkind to that individual. Never do anything spiteful or mean.

The next rule is to stop saying anything ugly, snide or hurtful to them or about them. The harm that unforgiving words can do is unbelievable. Holding our tongue requires more than ordinary self-control. The temptation runs high, particularly when someone else has started in talking about someone we dislike and we know some juicy tidbit we could add.

As we begin to follow these rules, we must also begin to pray for the persons towards whom we feel no forgiveness. It is hard to continue our resentment when at the same time we are asking God to bless them. Week after week, month after month, year after year, lift them up into God's presence. It will change them, and it will change you.

The next suggestion is to begin to find something positive to say about people towards whom we bear resentment. To do this, we have to look at them sympathetically and try to understand why they are as they are. Perhaps they were strongly conditioned by tragic or dysfunctional family experiences. Were they rejected or abused by their parents? Are there other factors in their past that might explain why they act the way they do?

As we understand what went into the making of these people, we begin to feel compassion for them. We begin to identify with them. Then, it is easier to say the kind word when others are criticizing. Then it is easier to do a little kindness and to put on a new attitude towards them.

If we wish to get over our lack of forgiveness, we must do more than merely wipe out the negative feelings. We must also fill our relations with positiveness. We can't be completely neutral in human relations.

Insert a personal story of how mean words impacted you and what it took to overcome their impact.

Discussion questions:

1. Do I have the strength to put on another person's shoes and try to feel how they feel, how they walk, why they acted as they did toward me?
2. Can I try to forgive?

WAITING FOR GRACE

Talk #6, 10 minutes

Even after we have gone through all the steps that we have addressed, we must **WAIT FOR GRACE!**

After we have done all this and tried as hard as we can to get over our feelings of unforgiveness, we still feel a taste of anger which we don't want. The reason for this is that God alone can cleanse us perfectly clean of unforgiveness. We must do our best, but all we can do is open the door and remove the main obstacles. It is only as the stream of God's purity and grace floods through us that suddenly we awake and see that there is nothing left of our old hurt feelings, that our attitudes are now those which God had given.

(Speaker should witness to a time when, try as he or she might, he/she had to wait patiently for grace to bring him/her complete forgiveness)

You see, absolute forgiveness is not in our power. It is given as we strive towards it. Perhaps God doesn't remove our unforgiving attitude sooner because a more complete giving of ourselves to God is necessary. Forgiveness is not something that can be given while the rest of our life goes its old worldly way. It is the product of a real friendship with God. It is one of the last, and one of the richest gifts the God gives those who patiently seek Him.

We must bear the burden of those resistant negative attitudes as pleasantly and smilingly as possible until at last God gives us freedom from them. Then we will know the peace which complete forgiveness brings to the struggling and weary soul. When total forgiveness finally flows from us, it is a sign that we are cut free from the wheel of ego and have been given a taste of the freedom of eternity.

Discussion questions:

1. Share with one another times when you have made every effort to forgive someone, but have not been able to ever really experience good feelings about that person.
2. Allow people to pray for each other

OPTIONAL IF THE COMMUNITY WOULD BENEFIT FROM A FORGIVENESS CEREMONY.... It is more abbreviated than on the Kairos weekend.

OFFERING OF FORGIVENESS LISTS

The person who is going to pray for forgiveness for all comes forward and orchestrates the forgiveness windup.

Hopefully, there is time to make this as meaningful as it deserves to be. This is a significant moment for the residents. Residents will know intuitively that forgiveness of others is a life-or-death situation for them.

Pass out Dissovable paper and give time to add names to the list.

Instruct the community on how to come forward: Residents and team should come forward and offer their lists up to God. They should be given time to kneel and pray if that will let them feel the significance of the moment more deeply.

You might use 4 altars, each having a basin of water. Allow each person will go to the nearest altar and put his/her list under the water in the bowl. The team member at that altar will spend a few moments honoring the journey each person is making. This has been done on a Kairos weekend, so it should not need a huge description or instructions.

The entire community should end up in a circle.

When all have finished, the leader speaks briefly about God's forgiveness and prays. At the close of this prayer sing "Surely the Presence.

Talk #1 Discussion Questions

1. Have you been wounded and if so, what were the feelings that came over you as a result?

Talk #2 Discussion Questions

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Talk #3 Discussion Questions

1. What would the price of making a decision to change an attitude be so you can forgive someone?
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Talk #4 Discussion Questions

1. What have you found in your own cellars? Did you recognize anything about yourself?
2. Have you ever heard the quote from Walt Kelly? "We have met the enemy and he is us"
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Talk #5 Discussion Questions

1. Do I have the strength to put on another person's shoes and try to feel how they feel, how they walk, why they acted as they did toward me?
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Talk #6 Discussion Questions

1. Share with one another times when you have made every effort to forgive someone, but have not been able to ever really experience good feelings about that person.
2. Allow people to pray for each other