

Small Group Guide for Week 1 of Famous Last Words

START IT UP

(Adapted from Small group guide of Fellowship Community Church – Grapevine, Texas)

Ed Young tells the following story - A couple of weeks ago I was at a gas station. While I was filling my car, I saw this guy jogging with a monstrous Doberman Pinscher on a leash. I love dogs, so I was checking this scene out pretty intently. The guy ran past me with the dog and stopped and began to tie the dog's leash to a bench just outside the front door—one that was anchored in concrete. After he tied the Doberman to the bench, he went inside to get something to drink.

All of a sudden, something spooked this dog. You could see the whites of his eyes as he made a mad dash toward the busy freeway. He took off with such force, with such torque, that he ripped the bench out of its cement supports! And as the Doberman took off dragging this bench behind him, sparks were flying everywhere. I remember thinking, "This dog is going to get smashed! He's going to get hit!" Cars all over the road screeched to a stop. And as the dog ran towards a SUV that was turning left, the bench was barreling down. The dog stopped; the bench didn't. Instead, it kept going and slammed right into the side of the SUV. BAM! Parts went flying. Then the dog turned and ran towards a Volkswagen® behind the busted SUV. Once again, the dog stopped short, but the bench did not. SLAM...right into the Volkswagen! The owner of the gas station came running out of the store, chasing the dog while the dog's master came out spilling Gatorade® everywhere trying to catch them both. I couldn't believe it!

Opener: What is the most outrageous event you have witnessed?

TALK IT UP

When it comes to today's subject matter, forgiveness, a lot of us are like that Doberman. We are leashed up to anger, resentment, and unforgiveness. We don't realize it, but we are dragging it all through life and it's causing some serious collateral damage in our relationships. It's damaging the potential God has for us and it's smashing up innocent bystanders who happen to get caught in our wake.

UNLEASHING UNFORGIVENESS IS UNNATURAL

Forgiving someone, or you could say unleashing unforgiveness, is unnatural. The bottom line is I don't like to do it, and you don't either. When someone hurts me, when someone damages me, when someone says something against me; I like to hold a grudge. I want to get back at them. When someone tells me I should forgive them, I don't like it because it flies in the face of every natural instinct I have.

Question - Why do you think it is so unnatural to forgive someone who has hurt you?

Do you realize when we harbor unforgiveness we're saying, "Okay, you control my life. I'm the puppet. You've got the strings. You hurt me. You ruined my life. You keep me from all this potential." That's what we're saying when we remained leashed up to unforgiveness.

Jesus had been talking about forgiveness in Matthew 18. Simon Peter was listening and must have been dealing with unforgiveness in his life. He made some serious assumptions about forgiveness—assumptions that were wrong, but assumptions that we have all made.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Matthew 18:21

Question - Imagine you found out someone in your life had spread some nasty lies about you. If that person came to you and asked for forgiveness, what would you do?

Question - What if that same person kept spreading lies about you? How many times do you think you could offer that person forgiveness?

Simon Peter made the wrong assumption. He thought forgiveness was strictly for the person who did the crime, the person who was the offending party. But forgiveness is more for the one who has been offended than the one who has carried out the offense.

A lot of us think forgiveness is more for the person that hurt us, but that is not true. Forgiveness is more for us. Simon Peter didn't get it so Jesus launched into one of his classic stories.

Matthew 18:23-25 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

If you take the amount of money this servant owed this king and put it into today's money, this servant owed \$10 million. That's a lot of money. So when the king called this guy into his palatial office and said, "It's payday," you know the borrower was in serious trouble. Back then you couldn't file Chapter 11 or Chapter 13 bankruptcy. People that couldn't pay up could be sold into slavery to repay the debt. Read on to find out what happens to the servant.

Matthew 18:26-27 The servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

Now this king could have put the servant and his entire family on the auction block. But he didn't. Instead, this wealthy guy did something that was completely unexpected. He canceled the debt. Can you imagine owing \$10 million and then having your debt forgiven on the spot? That would be a serious party!

Question - How do you think you would feel if you were late on a few mortgage payments and your mortgage company called you up to say, "Don't worry about it. We'll take care of the rest you owe"?

You would think this forgiven servant would be in the forgiving spirit after his massive debt was forgiven. You would think the servant would be in such a great mood over what was done for him

that nothing could bring him down. You would think that...

Matthew 18:28-34 But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

The amount the forgiven servant was trying to collect was around \$11. Just think about that. He was just forgiven a debt of \$10 million and he was ready to fight over \$11. The king delivered this greedy servant from prison, and now, because of \$11, he put himself back in prison.

The same is true in your life and mine. We've been completely delivered as Christ followers. We've been set free. We've been forgiven. The debt's been taken care of. But when we harbor unforgiveness, we're putting ourselves back in prison. We're leashing ourselves back to the condition we had before we understood and appropriated the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

When someone has hurt us, when someone has trashed us, when someone has taken advantage of us, we feel like there is a debt that has been created. We think, "They owe me. They need to pay." And too often, we act like the first servant and try to make those who have offended us pay. We forget how much we have been forgiven and we hold on to the little debt.

Question - Why do you think we so easily ignore how much we have been forgiven when it is our turn to offer forgiveness?

Jesus finishes his story with a scary warning. I wish this verse was not in the Bible. I wish I could take some white out, and erase it. It's so convicting and it messes me up. Here's how Jesus summarized this story:

Matthew 18:35 This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

This guy had received forgiveness, but he hadn't really experienced forgiveness in the depth of his being. Because he hadn't really experienced it, he couldn't share it with others. I think we've all been in the same boat. We've received forgiveness from Jesus, but we've not really embraced it in the depth of our being. And because of this, we can't share it with others. Here's what the Bible is saying. If we harbor unforgiveness toward others, if we are leashed up to the resentment and the animosity and the pain, God will hold us accountable. I wish it was not in there, but that's what the Bible says. If we refuse to forgive, we will live on a treadmill of torture. Can you imagine trying to run on a treadmill while you are leashed up to a bench with four, five, six or seven people on it? That's the picture that Jesus was trying to paint for us.

Question - When you think about how God has forgiven you, how does it make you feel about the unforgiveness you are leashed to?

Let's go back to Simon Peter's question that sparked this entire story. Simon wanted to know if forgiving someone seven times was enough. Read Jesus' response.

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Matthew 18:22

The number seventy-seven is intended to be an illustration of forgiveness over and over again. Jesus told him that he was to offer forgiveness beyond what he could count. Jesus was teaching that forgiveness should be a habit, part of our lifestyle.

Some of you are thinking, "Well, you don't realize what's happened to me. You don't realize what my father did. You don't realize what my mother did. You don't realize what my uncle did or my friend or whoever. You don't realize what that coach said to me. For me to forgive them would be to minimize what they did to me. I'm not going to let them off that easy. I'm going to make them pay. I'm going to make them suffer."

You're right; I don't know what you've gone through. But, forgiving someone doesn't mean you are minimizing their behavior. I don't know what they did to you. And you don't know what people did to me. Only God knows, and he tells us to cancel the debt, to forgive them. We're not minimizing what they did. We're freeing ourselves up. We're giving ourselves a gift that money can't buy.

Think about the word "forgiveness." It has the word "give" in it. When we forgive, we give ourselves the ultimate gift. Also, we're giving the other person who messed us around a gift. We're giving them room to change. So don't play the "I'm-going-to-get-you-back" game. Cancel the debt as Jesus did for you. Say, "You're forgiven."

To think about – To whom do you need to say "you're forgiven" this week?