

Study Guide Questions for Small Groups

Desperate Forgiveness

Based on the book by
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CHAPTER 1: DESPERATE FOR FORGIVENESS

1. Both Al and Lisa disclosed childhood experiences that negatively affected choices they made as they entered into adulthood. Take inventory of your own childhood and list below any events that adversely affected you as an adult.
2. Al and Lisa also disclosed how they brought “baggage” into their marriage and other relationships. What baggage from your life followed you into your relationships? Journal specifically about any negative experiences you brought into your relationships and how they could sabotage your marriage.
3. How would you describe your “forgiveness meter?” How easy is it for you to forgive? How often do you find yourself holding grudges?
4. How desperate are you for forgiveness right now? How desperate have you been in the past? In what specific ways could your relationship with your family or spouse use a forgiveness overhaul? Discuss in detail.

CHAPTER 2: A FAMILY FORGED BY FORGIVENESS

1. Phil and Ms. Kay have been together for more than fifty years. They have been candid about their rocky relationship in the first twelve years. How can a relationship survive during those “down” years?
2. What do you think prompted Ms. Kay to “stick it out” during those difficult years? Why were her actions worth the effort? What would she have gained and lost by leaving the relationship?
3. Even though he had a front row seat to the pain that Phil’s rebellion against God had brought into his family, Al experienced his own “Prodigal Son” days. Why would he choose to live a life of sin knowing that he was bringing more pain and suffering into the life of his family? Why would he do this knowing that sin always leads to personal loss and pain?
4. When people come to Christ, their sins are forgiven, but consequences often follow for years (or even for a lifetime). How have the consequences of your rebellion against God affected you later in life?

CHAPTER 3: THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

1. Lisa explained how her fear that she would not be forgiven by Al or God led her to use a variety of strategies to cover up her sin. How has your fear of discovery prevented you from opening up about any secret rebellion in your life?
2. Why do you think fear of discovery leads us to run from the only Being in the universe who can heal us (God)? What are the lies that Satan has told you about your secrets that prevent you from opening up to God? What lies has he told you about God? Lisa said that the biggest lie she embraced was that her purpose on earth was to please men. What is the biggest lie you have ever believed about yourself?
3. Why is it illogical to run and hide from God? What difference would it make to you if you truly understood that God knows every secret thought you've ever had, yet He still loves you enough to send His Son to die for you? Why is this thought so liberating? How could knowing this actually free you from the chains restraining you from running to God?
4. Lisa talks about how she began to doubt God after He had given her the courage to be completely honest with Al. What doubts and fears about the presence of God have you experienced, even though He had already done great things in your life? (Matthew 14:22-33). Why do you think it is so easy for us to gravitate to the negative?

CHAPTER 4: HOW DESPERATE ARE YOU?

1. Describe a time when you were truly desperate? Maybe your head was held under water by some obnoxious friends and you were afraid that you weren't going to be able to take another breath of fresh air. What does desperation feel like? How can it give you a sense of single-mindedness? Think about a time when you have been emotionally or spiritually desperate. Describe what that looked like. How did it change your behavior? Your personality?
2. Al said that the paralytic's desperation touched the heart of Jesus. How would your desperation affect Jesus? Why does your desperation for forgiveness and grace also touch the heart of God? How could that change how you relate to Him?
3. Al talked about how a lifetime's worth of guilt and shame could convince us that our problems are insurmountable. When have you ever felt that way? What has made you think that you are just too far gone for God to do anything about it?
4. When you experienced this kind of desperation, what part did the hardness of your own heart play in preventing you from running to Jesus? Was it because you didn't really believe you were all that guilty, or was it because you didn't think God could actually heal your broken heart?

CHAPTER 5: BIG SINS, BIG FORGIVENESS

1. In the beginning of this chapter, Lisa talks about how the abortion clinic nurse made a promise to her that she would never have to think about her baby again. Discuss how Satan has convinced you to believe the lie that you would be better off rejecting God's purpose for your life and doing what He suggests you do.
2. Why do we find it so easy to embrace "The Lie" rather than the truth? What could be in us that wants to believe untruth? What do you think about Lisa's assertion that she subconsciously thought that she deserved the abuse and punishment?
3. What does this say about Lisa's view of God the Father and the Son? Where did she go wrong?
4. When Lisa asked the question, "How did I get here?", she also talked about her reluctance to confess her sins to her fellow churchgoers. What could church leaders do to encourage their members to be more transparent about the struggles they face—to confess their sins openly?

CHAPTER 6: FORGIVENESS FOR THE DOUBLE-MINDED

1. After reading this chapter, how would you define double-mindedness?
2. If double-mindedness means that you have one foot planted in the Bible and the other in pride, describe how that is potentially a deadly position to be in.
3. 1 Peter 5:6-8 lists at least four commands, one promise, and one warning. Discuss each of these and think about how these insulate us from falling into the trap of being double-minded.
4. Some “theologians” reject the idea that the devil is a real being. Peter warns us to watch out for him because he never has our best interests at heart. He plots our destruction. Why is it critical for us to embrace the reality of Satan? What would be the danger in thinking that he doesn’t really exist?

CHAPTER 7: PUT DOWN YOUR STONES

1. Lisa and Al began this chapter telling the story of Anna and Trey. Why is it important to listen to both sides of a story before giving advice? Explain.
2. What approach do you think would have been most healing in helping the woman in John 8 who was caught in the act of committing adultery: the judgment of the men who caught her in the act or the mercy that Jesus offered her? Discuss why you chose the answer you did.
3. Why do you think Trey so readily chose to throw stones at Anna (since he had led her into sexual sin in the first place)? Think about your own response to sin. Why is it easier to cast stones at others than to openly admit our own guilt before God and others?
4. What do you think Jesus was writing in the dirt? Let's imagine that He was listing the sexual sins and even the private thoughts of the crowd of men who had brought the helpless woman before Jesus. What affect would it have on your desire to pass judgment on others if all of your secret sins and thoughts were played out on a video screen for all to see?

CHAPTER 8: TALES OF THE FORGIVEN

1. What did you think of Al's questions: whether he could forgive Lisa or even if he should forgive her? You might want to discuss whether it's possible for the sacred trust of marriage to be restored once it's been broken.
2. What are some common problems in marriages? How can it help your own marriage to know that many other people have struggled with similar issues?
3. In thinking about moving past guilt, what did you think of Joe Beam's story about the son who continued to feel guilty because he once forgot to feed the dogs? How does this analogy help you to understand God's mercy and grace?
4. Lisa talked about seeing her sin from the time it took root in her heart until it bore its ugly fruit. Why do you think it's important to understand "why" we did what we did before we can truly move on to healing?

5. Reread Matthew 19:16-26. What do you think Al and Lisa meant when they said that “forgiveness only comes to us when we give up whatever it is that holds us back from Christ?” Why do you think the “trade-off” is worth it?

CHAPTER 9: CHOOSE FORGIVENESS, NOT DESPAIR

1. Al and Lisa talked about how desperation can lead us to one of two places. First, it can lead us to more desperation. Think about times in your life when sin made you desperate, but rather than embrace God's love, you reverted to old strategies to mask the pain of despair.
2. Assuming that you did not find the relief you were looking for, why do you think you persisted in covering up your sin instead of coming clean about it before God and other believers?
3. Share a time when despair was taking over your life, but you finally surrendered to God.
4. What factors led you to give up your despair and embrace your Father in heaven?
5. Al and Lisa make the case that perpetual despair often comes from a skewed view of the nature of God. When we are in despair, what is it about God's nature that we aren't understanding?

6. Continuing with that thought, how do you explain the 30 percent increase in suicides since 1999? How would you explain the 33 percent increase in the number of diagnosed cases of mental illness since 1999? What part does a feeling of meaninglessness play in these statistics?

7. What is it about the character of God that could keep us from falling into despair and feeling as if our lives have no purpose?

8. Read the list of suicide “causes” on page 157. Check any that apply to you. What do you think should be your next step?

9. Now check any that apply to someone you know and love. What do you think you should do to make sure that they have the opportunity to come to God’s table and receive healing and grace?

10. Why is meaningful relationship with God and other believers so important in establishing and maintaining good mental health?

CHAPTER 10: GENERATIONAL CURSES AND FORGIVENESS

1. Lisa talked about how her silence concerning her sexual abuser kept “a generational sin . . . from being exposed and dealt with.” Why would keeping family “secrets” about the harm that one person does to another be a bad idea?
2. Lisa also discussed how burying feelings about generational sin can actually manifest as destructive behaviors and feelings. How would silence about generational sin lead to the sins she mentioned—anger, shame, verbal abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse?
3. Hebrews 12:15 says that bitterness causes trouble. How can you trace the trouble in your life to a root of bitterness? Be specific.
4. While it seems reasonable to hold grudges against someone in our family who’s really hurt us, explain how grudge-holding actually winds up hurting us instead. Lisa said that forgiving is also “godly.” How is forgiving others being like God?

5. What would be missing from a person's life if she or he could not forgive as Christ forgave?

6. If you experience depression, negativity, and low self-esteem, what traumatic childhood experience (abuse, conditional love, etc.) could be at the root of your feelings? What do you think you should do with the negativity that arises from that experience?

7. Lisa said that it was only when she was totally broken that she was able to receive the forgiveness of Christ. What do you think it means to be totally broken?

8. Why do you think Lisa said that only in a state of total brokenness was she ready to receive healing and grace from God?

CHAPTER 11: FORGIVING THE PRODIGALS

1. When Al told the story of Jep's return to the family after a period of drugs, alcohol, and sexual promiscuity, he described his reluctance to forgive Jep at first. Why do you think a person (who is also guilty) would find it difficult to forgive another guilty person?
2. When we refuse to forgive repentant people, what does it say about our understanding of God's nature?
3. What does it say about our awareness of our own guilt? (Luke 15:11-32)
4. Why do you think we (as Al did) find ourselves thinking, "I may have been guilty, but I wasn't as guilty as _____ is?"

5. In the story of the prodigal son, the older son seemed to think that his relationship with his father should be more secure because he'd kept all of the rules. He had worked hard and had done what he was told to do. This was the source of his bitterness. What did he miss about the nature and character of his father? In other words, what was the father really looking for from his sons?

6. Like Al, the older brother thought that the prodigal son was getting a better deal than he got. If you've ever felt resentment because someone else's repentance was celebrated more than your legalistic faithfulness, what were the circumstances?

7. When you read the story of the prodigal son (and Al's story of Jep's final repentance), how important do you think it is for us to fully embrace our own unworthiness before God ("I am unworthy to be called your son.")?

8. Why is this kind of repentance necessary before we can enjoy what Al calls "the extravagance of Christ?"

CHAPTER 12: LIVING A LIFE OF FORGIVENESS

1. Now that we are at the end of the book, it's time to make a decision. But first, we want you to pray that God will reveal to you your own need for desperate forgiveness as well as your need to dispense forgiveness to others who may not even be aware that they are in need of forgiveness from you. We suggest that you write your prayer below or in your journal.
2. Has anyone ever been a barrier to you receiving forgiveness because of legalistic and judgmental attitudes? When that happens, how important do you think it is to look to Christ instead of "Pharisees" in order to get over the obstacle of unforgiveness?
3. Describe a time when you were an obstacle to someone else seeking mercy from God. Pray, asking God to give you a new heart concerning that situation as well as increased sensitivity to forgiveness in the future.
4. Consider the people Jesus forgave (adulterers, murderers, criminals, oppressive tax collectors, the people who were murdering him, etc.). With that in mind, what are you guilty of that God can't forgive? What is anyone else guilty of that can't be forgiven?

