

Forgiveness implies that wrong has been done, that there is something broken that needs repair. Whether we did something wrong, or we are the one who has been wronged, forgiveness begins with acknowledging what happened.

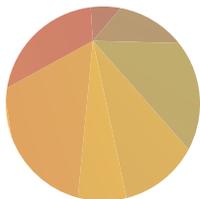
Sometimes this is easy. The brokenness and sin are apparent, easily named, and clearly identifiable. Other times, we have difficulty putting grievances and brokenness into words. The wounds are too deep. Shame may keep us silent. We get used to glossing over the sins of others or ourselves. Or we think there is some value in just moving on. How many times have you heard the (non-biblical) advice to “forgive and forget”?

Let’s get something clear from the start. Forgiveness in Christian practice does not mean forgetting. The New Testament word translated as “forgiveness” is *aphiemi*, which essentially means “to let go.” When we forgive—whether it is another person, or ourselves—we are letting go of the wrong that has been done to us (or that we have done), letting go of anger or a desire for revenge. When we allow ourselves to receive God’s forgiveness, we are letting go of the burden of guilt and shame.

Many who write about forgiveness, from theologians to psychologists, suggest that when we hang on tightly to wrongs done, whether by others or ourselves, we are living in the past. As we will see by the end of the final session, forgiveness turns out to be the way to move forward into the future. To forgive is to let go of the past, to release its hold and our grip on it, so that we can move into the future. Step one in the process of letting go and moving toward God’s new future is recognizing and naming the sin that occurred.

Sin is one of those church words that carries a lot of weight and needs a little definition, as it can be understood in different ways by different faith traditions. Following are a few affirmations about sin. Do you agree with all of them?

- All have sinned.
- Sin is anything that separates us from God.
- Sin leads to separation from others, other children of God, and even a separation from a healthy understanding of ourselves as a beloved child of God.
- Sin can be thought of as specific acts of wrongdoing.



- Sin is a general state of being, where we live separated from God's intention for us.
- Sin is part of being human, but that doesn't mean we throw up our hands and quit trying to live more in harmony with God and one another.
- Jesus shows us the depths of God's love, and the lengths to which God will go to forgive sin and bring us back into wholeness in our relationship with God.
- No sin is too great for God to forgive. God is in the business of forgiving sin. Thanks be to God!



What are some wrongs or sins in your past that need to be forgiven or released so that you can move into the future? These can be simple acts or deeper brokenness.

➤ Wrongs I've done:

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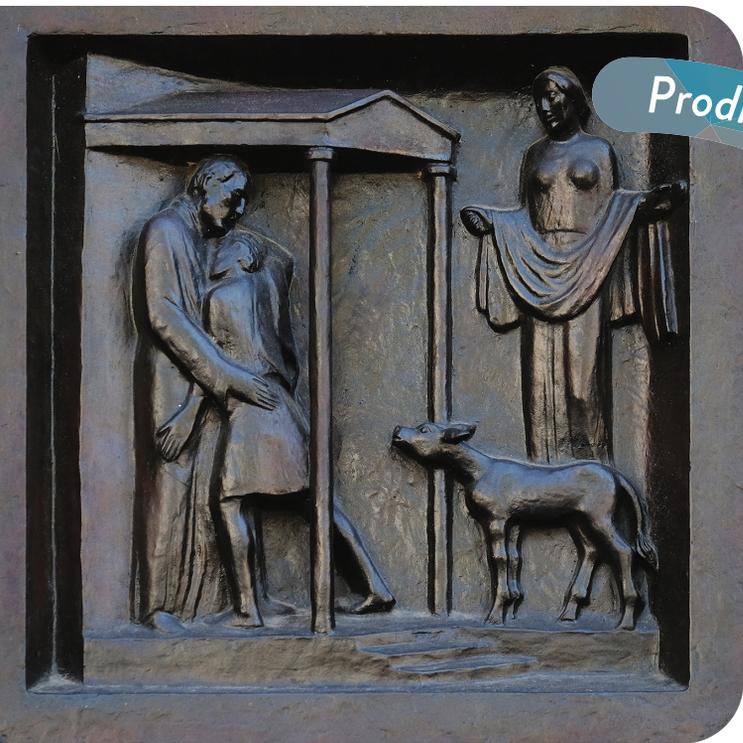
➤ Wrongs done to me:

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Gracious God, I believe you forgive all sin.
Forgive my sins as I forgive those who sin against me.
 Forgive the many times I hurt others and your creation.
Forgive others who also make mistakes.
 Help me be as forgiving to others as you are to me.
I believe in the forgiveness of sin.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Prodigal = wasteful, extravagant



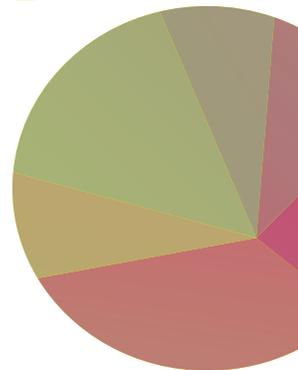
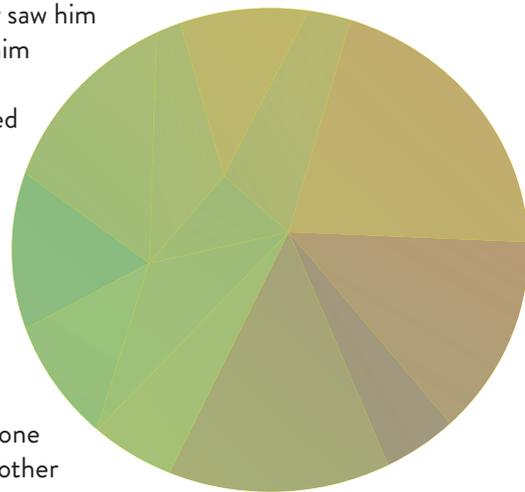
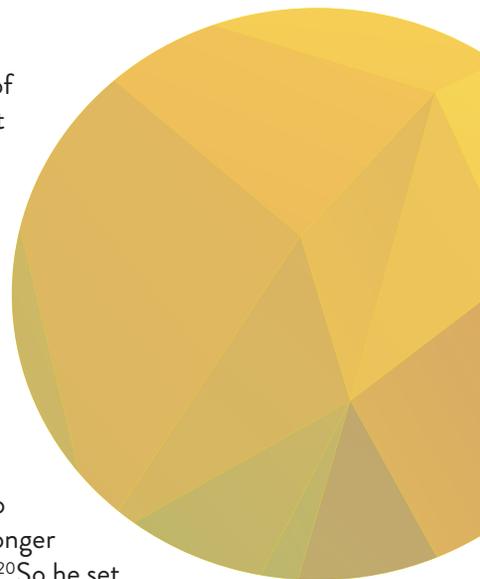
The guiding biblical story for this practice of forgiveness comes from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus told simple stories, or parables, to teach some profound concepts. The story of the prodigal son offers many clues and lessons about forgiving and being forgiven. As mentioned previously, this story could be titled in a variety of ways: “the parable of the prodigal son,” “the parable of the loving (or forgiving) father,” or the “story of a family in need of forgiveness.”

- ✦ When have you made requests or demands of God that you thought were your right to receive?

The parable is Luke 15:11–32. We will include the entire parable here, and focus on smaller sections during the study. We will refer to this page or you may use your Bible. As you read, notice wrongdoing that needs to be forgiven, and consider what you would title the parable, if it were up to you.

¹¹Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”





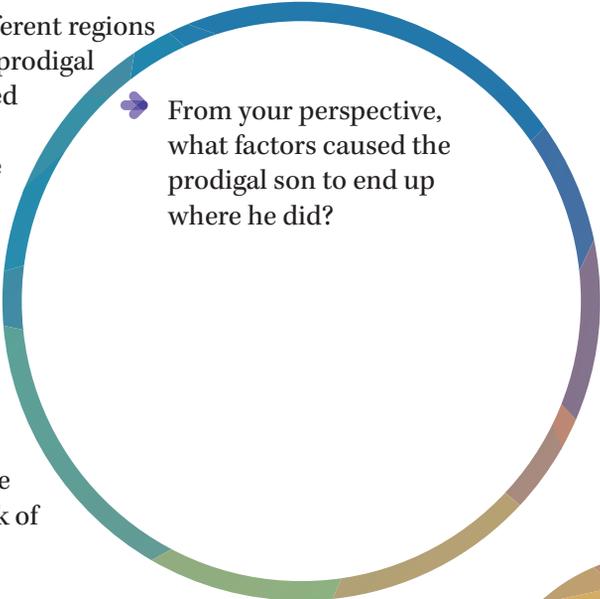
✿ Can you recognize and name wrongdoing on a variety of levels, considering the parable from the perspective of each of the characters or groups named?

	Wrong done by	Wrong done to
Father		
Younger son		
Older son		
Pig owner		
Community in distant land		
Slaves		

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Recognizing what needs forgiving, as the first step in the process of forgiving, often takes a second or third look and the ability to consider a situation from someone else's perspective. At the same time, what might seem like clear and obvious sin at first glance often has other layers of complexity within it. We see this even in how the parable is read and understood in different parts of the world.

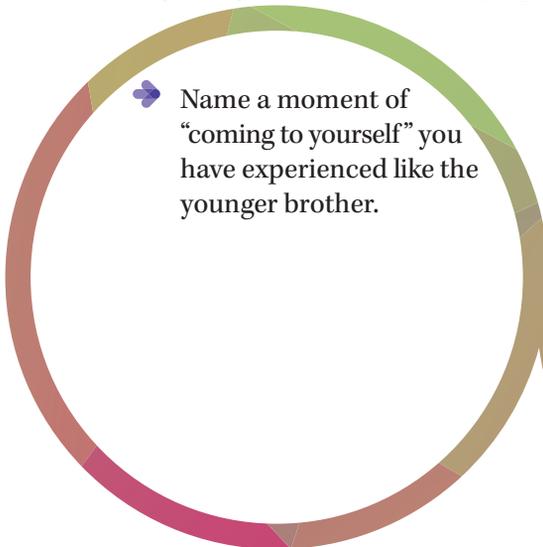
Mark Allan Powell tells about studies he did in different regions of the world, asking people to retell the parable of the prodigal son. When asked to explain how the prodigal son ended up in his situation, a community in Russia (which had experienced a recent period of famine) highlighted the famine mentioned in verse 14. People in Tanzania, in East Africa (with a strong sense of community hospitality) emphasized the fact that “no one gave him anything” when the prodigal was in need, in verse 16. People in North America (with a strong sense of individual responsibility) highlighted how he “squandered his property in dissolute living” in verse 13. Most participants in North America, quick to recognize the prodigal's wrongdoing, didn't register the parts in verses 14–16 that mention famine and the lack of help from his community.¹



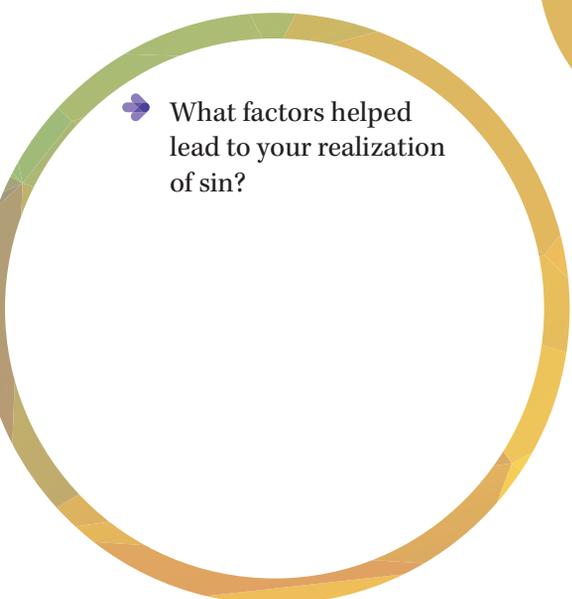
From your perspective, what factors caused the prodigal son to end up where he did?

HE CAME TO HIMSELF

Luke 15:17 says the younger brother “came to himself.” That is, he recognizes the enormity of what he has done. And so, he resolves to return home and prepares what he will say, naming his sin out loud. His journey to forgiveness begins with this clarifying moment of recognizing his sin, and his simple prayer of confession in response.



Name a moment of “coming to yourself” you have experienced like the younger brother.



What factors helped lead to your realization of sin?

1. Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 11–28.

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW



The practice of naming sin or wrongdoing is found in worship rituals and in wider society as it deals with historical repercussions of wrongs, such as human rights violations around the world.

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

The necessity of acknowledging wrongdoing is a key component in truth and reconciliation processes around the globe. While critics of these processes point out where they might not go far enough in terms of justice or repair, the public action of acknowledging harm and wrongdoing is powerful.

You may wish to explore some of these websites and related film clips about truth and reconciliation processes in South Africa, in Rwanda, and in Canada. Keep in mind that some of the images and stories are difficult to see and hear.

- In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (bit.ly/FMTARC) brought together victims and perpetrators of human rights violations related to the period of apartheid, and created space to hear public testimony from victims and those seeking amnesty.

Bill Moyers filmed a 1999 special about it called “Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers.” Two brief summary clips from the special may be found at “Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers” (bit.ly/FMFacingTruth, 6:30) and “Desmond Tutu on Truth and Reconciliation” (bit.ly/FMTARC2, 2:44).
 - In Rwanda, in the aftermath of genocide, the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission and many other governmental and religious reconciliation projects included truth-telling as a step toward forgiveness and healing. Two powerful videos may be found at:
 - The YouTube video “Healing Wounds of Rwanda’s Genocide through Reconciliation” (bit.ly/FMHealingRwanda, 8:54), and
 - The YouTube video “The Power of Forgiveness” (bit.ly/FMPowerForgiveness, 11:58), which tells a personal story of Carine Kanimba. If you saw the movie *Hotel Rwanda*, you will appreciate hearing her story.
 - In Canada, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation incorporated the gathering of stories related to injustices against indigenous peoples through residential schools, forced assimilation, and other abuses. Watch the YouTube video “The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation” (bit.ly/FMCanadaTruth, 6:05).
- ➔ Where do you see a need for this kind of truth and reconciliation work in your community today?

CALLS TO CONFESSION

One practice of naming sin is seen in calls to confession in worship. Before praying, the leader says words about what we believe about confession and God's role in it. Some Scripture verses often used include:

- "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)
- "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:8–9)
- "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by [God's] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:23–24)

Notice that each of these calls to confession has the promise of forgiveness and love embedded in it. Before we even open our mouths to name our sin, we are assured of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. God's forgiveness comes before our naming and confession of sin.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

As you read this common prayer, can you name specific sins happening in your life right now? For example, what have you done or left undone? Write these or hold them in your thoughts.

Merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you
with our whole heart and mind and strength.
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
In your mercy forgive what we have been,
help us amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be,
so that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your holy name.²

2. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 53.

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Christians believe that we are known and loved, flaws and all. Every one of our mistakes can be confessed and forgiven. Like the younger brother in Luke's parable, we can always go home again. Indeed, this is what it means to follow Jesus, trusting in the grace of God to help us live transformed lives through Christ.

With that in mind, there is power in naming our sin as we seek forgiveness. Most of us get used to carrying around a whole lot of feelings of guilt and unworthiness. When we can articulate where we have gone wrong, we can let go of the general unease and receive God's grace, which is both particular and expansive. God's grace certainly covers sin we don't remember and cannot name. But there is real healing and power in knowing that forgiveness is possible for the wrongs we can name.

IN YOUR WORDS

Look back at the brief list of wrongdoing you generated on page 7, both wrongs you have done and wrongs done to you. After further study, is there something else you want to add to the list? Think about the memories of your own wrongdoing that make you uncomfortable, and those that feel too big to write about. Are there words you can put to those feelings? Can you articulate more about what went wrong? If you would rather not have it remain in print, write it down, and then—with thanks to God for grace and mercy—erase it, mark over it, or even burn it.



WRITE A PRAYER OF CONFESSION

If you were to lead a prayer of confession for worship this week, what would you say? You might connect it with the Scripture reading for Sunday worship or another favorite verse or story. You might use the prayer and your notes on page 13 as a guide. You might keep it very personal (though it is to be prayed by a group), or make it more community-focused, remembering that sin is both personal and corporate.

Practice writing what you might say. You might use the guidelines below to help structure your prayer.

1. Address God.
2. Honestly confess wrongdoing. Perhaps include some of these:
 - How we treat our family and friends
 - How we treat our neighbors
 - How we treat ourselves
 - How we treat those different from us
 - How we treat creation
3. Say how we hope to live following Jesus going forward.
4. Offer a statement confirming God's love and grace.

A FORGIVENESS NOTE—PART 1

- How did the practice of confession work in the family setting in which you grew up?
- Did you see adults modeling the practice of naming wrongdoing (their own or someone else's)?
- What were you taught about naming your own wrongdoing?
- What values learned about forgiveness do you want to hold onto from childhood?
- What do you want to release?

Write a note to someone in your childhood—an adult, a peer, or even yourself—naming a wrongdoing it is time to let go of. Don't send it, just hang onto it. As we walk through the rest of these sessions, we will revisit this exercise.



FOLLOWING JESUS

We all sin. Our actions and thoughts separate us from God and from one another. Our wrongs cause pain for us and for those around us. The first step in moving toward forgiveness is naming the sin.

As the prodigal child who “came to himself” far from home and vowed to make his way back, naming himself as a sinner in front of his father, we all must name our own sinfulness and wrongdoing as well.

In the next session, we will reflect on the second step on the journey of forgiveness, which is to recall the way each of us has been forgiven by the grace of our loving God. If you need some assurance that forgiveness is possible—no matter what sins you named in this session—know this: You are forgiven by God. And by God’s grace, you can forgive others too. Alleluia! Amen!



An ancient Greek prayer, *Kyrie Eleison*, is sometimes sung after a confession of sin during worship. It is sung in Greek or English or other languages, and goes like this:

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

Listen to a calming version of the song while meditating by playing the YouTube video “Kyrie Eleison (Audrey Snyder)” (bit.ly/FMKyrieEleison, 2:10).