A Discussion Guide
For Individuals and Groups

FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVABLE

Would you? Could you? Should you... forgive?

Prepared By:
Vision Video
Discussion Guide for the DVD *The Big Question*

**Forgiving the Unforgivable**

**Discussion Guide**

**Introduction:** *Forgiving the Unforgivable* is a 25-minute DVD program presenting three powerful true stories of forgiveness. These stories represent unique human experiences that generated revulsion in the human mind and soul, but at the same time presented saving opportunities for men and women. In each story, one or more persons find themselves in the midst of unthinkable tragedy. Each faces pain that cuts to the very marrow of life, threatening to destroy them. Eventually, each finds their freedom through the healing gift of forgiveness.

These stories were originally presented through *The Big Question*, an hour-long production that includes two additional stories, along with commentary by spiritual leaders from diverse faith backgrounds. *Forgiving the Unforgivable* is an abridgement, intentionally prepared for use in Christian settings, including Sunday schools and small study groups. This discussion guide is designed to assist groups in discussing the power of forgiveness in real life settings.

**How to use this program and discussion guide:** This material fits nicely into a three session format, one per story. Three unique study sessions have been prepared for this purpose. The stories presented show forgiveness in the midst of horrible crimes, that most people may never face. As such, it is important to help group members do two things: First, help viewers to imagine themselves in the situation being presented. As they do, they will better appreciate the forgiveness extended by the victims. Second, help the group to apply the concepts into their own real life situations, realizing that forgiveness in every day grievances can be very hard to grant, yet is important for growth and health.

For those who prefer, the material can be presented in one session. As such, it would be good to simply use a few general questions: *If you were faced with this situation, how would you react? What, if anything, would have helped you to forgive? How did forgiveness impact those who received this gift? How did it impact those who extended the gift of forgiveness?* Questions such as these can be used in any session or as a basis for a single session.

**Dr. Everett Worthington Jr.’s Five Steps to Forgiveness:** Dr. Everett Worthington, Jr. is widely recognized as a leading expert in the area of forgiveness. His story is presented as the second one on this DVD. As an added feature, the DVD includes a video presentation of Dr. Worthington’s *Five Steps to Forgiveness*. This 25-minute bonus feature can be used as an additional session or simply as background information for the group leader. For those who want to dig even deeper into Dr. Worthington’s work, we recommend his book *Forgiving and Reconciling*. A study of this book, along with the DVD segments on the five steps would be a wonderful follow-up class for those who wish to dig deep into their own need to forgive.
Session 1: Nickel Mines Pennsylvania

A community in crisis baffles the world with their capacity to forgive.

Synopsis: Nestled in the heart of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania is the small old-order Amish town known as Nickel Mines. Like other Amish communities, Nickel Mines presents a stark contrast with much of the modern world. While the majority of mankind eagerly embraces each new advance and convenience for “easier living,” the old order Amish choose the “simpler living” of another era. Living apart from, yet largely at peace with, the modern world, they are known for their work ethic, commitment to community, and strong faith. It is perhaps their peaceful ways that make this story all the more poignant.

On October 2, 2006 Charles Carl Roberts entered a one-room schoolhouse in the rural Amish community of Nickel Mines. After ordering the boys and a pregnant woman to leave the building, Roberts barricaded himself in the classroom with eleven girl students ranging in age from six to fifteen. He shot ten girls in the back of the head, execution style. Five girls died. The murderer then committed suicide. The death of these children shocked not only the Amish community, but the nation as well.

The crime was pre-mediated, although unknown to the killer’s wife and family. Roberts suffered from the memory of a youthful crime against two young girls, along with grief from the loss of his own infant daughter. While probably never being able to fully understand what happened, the Amish parents of the slain children were able to set aside anger and visit the family of the slayer, offering comfort and compassion to his widow and children; later, they quietly attended the man’s funeral.

Through it all, the media, the first responders and the police, marveled at the spirit of calm, resignation, prayer, and forgiveness that pervaded the Amish community.

Although the schoolhouse has been torn down and rebuilt in another location, the public memory of the crime remains. However, in the hearts of the Amish people, compassion and forgiveness reigns.

Scripture to Ponder:

II Cor. 2:7 Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”
Session 1 Discussion Questions

Through this tragedy, the Amish were thrust headlong into an intense media spotlight. This was an especially difficult burden to a people who have chosen to live their lives in a self-contained community, separate from the secular world.

- How do you think the Amish were able to face their pain and sorrow, while the world watched?
- Think of circumstances in your life that required you to forgive. This could be anything from a major unexpected tragedy to an ongoing conflict with a family member. What is your usual first response when you’ve been wronged?
- Do you prefer to handle your feelings of anger or grief in private or in community?

It would have been extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, for this Christian community to understand Charles Roberts. Nevertheless, with God’s help they conquered their revulsion and ministered to his family.

- How did they manage to reach beyond this first step to attain sympathy and compassion for his family?
- Have you ever tried to empathize with those who’ve wronged you?

Forgiveness is a gift. The Amish people do not typically express their feelings in public, although in this case, many people wept openly. The kindness of the murdered children’s parents to Roberts’ family, and their presence at his funeral was the outward expression of their gift of forgiveness.

- What effect do you think these expressions of forgiveness had on the Roberts’ family?
- Could you do the same in similar circumstances?
- What effect do you think these expressions had on the community as a whole?
- What role did their Christian faith play in the Amish victims’ commitment to forgive?

Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, will forever hold the painful title of the site of the “Amish massacre.”

- How might this constant reminder affect the Amish choice to forgive?
- What specific techniques can you employ to hold onto forgiveness while still living with the pain or consequences of an infraction?
Session 2: Dr. Worthington's story

When his mother is murdered, this teacher, author, and counselor needed to follow the advice he had so often given to others about forgiveness.

Synopsis: Dr. Everett Worthington, Jr., whose specialty is forgiveness counseling, faced a moment of truth on New Year’s Eve, 1995 when he was called to the scene of his mother’s murder.

Entering the home where he lived until he was about twenty-two, Dr. Worthington found the place wrecked by a young man. He saw blood on the floor where his mother had lain. Curiously, every mirror in the house was broken, as if the intruder did not want to see his own guilty face. As Dr. Worthington surveyed the damage, and thought of his dead mother, rage welled up inside this normally gentle man. He thought of the killer and said in his heart:

“I’d like to have him alone for 30 minutes with a baseball bat.”

The rage continued for a long time, until he was able, at last, to come to grips with it. Perhaps the situation was made even more difficult by the fact that the young man who was captured was later released due to what may have been “contaminated evidence.”

Dr. Worthington’s life was devoted to helping others to forgive. Now that he was faced with a personal tragedy, he admitted that he did not even think of the word “forgive.”

Dr. Worthington has observed, "We each have a strong justice motive…we can reduce the 'justice gap' by seeing justice done, or we can turn it over to God." He refers to his forgiveness method as a "Christian framework" for "God to forgive through us... God is doing the work."

Scripture to Ponder:

Mark 11:25 And when you stand praying; if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.
Session 2 Discussion Questions (based on Dr. Worthington’s Five Steps)

Recall. Dr. Worthington shares his struggle with this step. For weeks he was tortured by the images of his mother’s blood on the floor of the vandalized home. Though his life was devoted to forgiveness therapy, he struggled to come to grips with the unthinkable. He tells us that the mind works on several levels and must be de-programmed.

- Why do you think someone with Dr. Worthington’s qualifications would have had such a struggle to employ his own methods?
- What is the difference between healthy and necessary recall and unhealthy obsession over a painful memory? Are there memories from your past that have become an unhealthy obsession?

Empathize. Dr. Worthington struggled with thoughts of killing his mother’s murderer. He was shocked by his desire for revenge.

- How did he overcome his hatred and move on through the steps of Empathy, Sympathy, Compassion and unselfish love?
- Describe a time in your life when you wanted revenge for a wrong done to you.
- How are justice and forgiveness related?

Altruistic Gift. Dr. Worthington was finally able to make the altruistic gift of forgiveness, but not without a struggle.

- The perfect altruistic gift “has no strings attached.” Could you make this gift?
- At some point in our lives, we all need forgiveness, perhaps from a friend, a co-worker, or a family member. Describe a time when you were forgiven and how that gift of forgiveness impacted you.

Commit. This involves making a choice to not go back on the resolve to forgive.

- Can you think of any time in your life when you forgave someone, only to have old feelings of anger and hurt resurface?
- Your first commitment to forgive is unemotional. How would you move on to the emotional stage—forgiving not only from your mind, but from your heart?
- Is it possible to “forgive and forget?” Why or Why not?

Hold. Dr. Worthington teaches that we must “hold on to our forgiveness,” even though we will recall the occasion from time to time.

- How would faith help you achieve this final step?
Session 3: The Martin Luther King Story

“We need to learn to live together as brothers or we’ll perish together as fools.”

Synopsis: The assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968 is a major event in the history of the United States. Dr. King was standing on the balcony of his room at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN when James Earl Ray opened fire. Dr. King died an hour later at St. Joseph’s Hospital; he was only thirty-nine years old. Racial tensions flared as the memory of years of discrimination and human rights violations surfaced. There were riots in 60 cities. The situation eased when President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a national day of mourning for the lost civil rights leader.

The repercussions of Dr. King’s death still resound, but the indignation and sorrow of that time were not expressions of the Black community alone. Individuals and organizations working toward racial equality and opportunity, political and religious leaders of every creed, joined to recognize Dr. King’s contribution and to mourn him.

Today, this great tragedy can be looked upon as a unifying event, a rallying point for those who share similar ideals. In the decades following King’s death, much progress has been made. Each January all fifty states celebrate Martin Luther King Day through a day of service and remembrance, during which we recall the pain of the past and work towards a better future. Though it would have been unthinkable in King’s day, America has elected its first African American president, showing a far-reaching change in attitudes. This illustrates one of Dr. King’s well-known teachings:

“There is no path to fulfillment for black people that doesn’t intersect the path to fulfillment for white people. We were all tied together inextricably, and we need to learn, to live together as brothers or we’ll perish together as fools.”

Scripture to Ponder:

Jeremiah 31:34 For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

Psalms 25:18 Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.

Matthew 18:21-22 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?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”
Session 3 Discussion Questions

The murder of Martin Luther King will never be forgotten. It is stamped on our national consciousness like the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy and the more recent tragedy of 9/11.

- Given the public nature of Dr. King’s assassination, how has the remembrance of this event been transformed over the years? How do you personally observe the Martin Luther King Holiday each year?
- How might Dr. King wish the United States to honor his life and death?
- How does the ongoing re-telling and reflection upon this event and others like it affect the public’s ability to forgive?

Crimes based on race are among the most difficult to understand.

- Enmity between blacks and whites in America is only the tip of the iceberg regarding racial and religious tensions in the world. Have you been personally impacted by any sort of discrimination based on race or religion? Describe your feelings or those you imagine would be present in such a setting.
- Now consider the discrimination and prejudice present in your life. Be as honest with yourself as possible. Are there people that you have trouble viewing as equals? What is at the heart of your struggle?

Sometimes the gift of forgiveness can be contaminated by a sense of “your own nobility.”

- How did the Christian black clergy encourage forgiveness and peace among all races? How did their gift of forgiveness help to defuse the anger of Dr. King’s followers and others who supported him?
- Forgiveness as a Christian act is always inspiring. How can forgiveness—even in little things—change our lives?

Dr. King’s legacy of peaceful movement continues today, as does the remembrance of the spirit of forgiveness.

- How does Dr. King’s legacy reflect the power of Christian forgiveness?
- Share your own personal experiences with the power of forgiveness to bring freedom. Who benefits more when forgiveness is genuine, the giver or the receiver?
Discussion Guide for the DVD *The Big Question*

**DVDs on forgiveness, available from Vision Video:**

**Journey Toward Forgiveness** — Here are seven emotional stories of people who have dealt with anger and forgiveness in the face of racial injustice, violent death and terminal illness. These compelling accounts show how bitterness can be overcome and healing found by forgiveness. Downloadable PDF guide. 58 minutes.

**Uganda: Ready to Forgive** — Through twenty years of war, the Acholi people of Northern Uganda endured rape, torture and child abduction. Thousands are missing or dead. Despite all of this, the Acholi are united in a belief that the only solution is reconciliation and forgiveness. Hosted by Rwandan genocide survivor, Immaculée Ilibagiza. Downloadable PDF guide. 60 minutes.

**The Power of Forgiveness: The Story of Karla Faye Tucker** — Karla Faye Tucker was imprisoned for taking part in a horrendous murder. In prison, her life was completely changed by God, and she devoted herself to loving and serving her fellow inmates. An unforgettable story of the power of forgiveness. 30 minutes.

**Killing Time** — Noel Fellowes was cast into a British prison for a murder he did not commit. Noel was an ex-policeman so he was despised by both the prison guards and fellow prisoners and was repeatedly beaten mercilessly by the other inmates. Here is a true heart-wrenching story of a man wrongly imprisoned and how he learned to forgive in spite of the horrible injustice done to him. 30 minutes.

**Into His Arms** — A family is shattered when seven-year-old Jennifer disappears while shopping with her mother, Sharla. Sharla struggles over how a loving God could allow evil to happen to a child. This film raises questions of faith and forgiveness without offering simplistic answers. One truth prevails: in the midst of chaos, God is still present. 77 minutes.

**Test of Time** — Host Robert Beckford takes us around the world for what has to be one of history's toughest tests. Four areas which affect all of us at some level are explored. These are areas where the teachings of Jesus are clear and where they can be put to the test. They are Commitment, Money, Inner Peace, and Forgiveness. 112 minutes.

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