The Audience of One

MATTHEW 6:14-18 (BSB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

You've been forgiven a debt you could never pay back, so the mercy you keep for yourself and the fasting you keep just between you and God are both aimed at the same Father who's watching when nobody else is.

Opening Lines

Two things in this passage happen where no one can see: forgiving someone who never apologized, and fasting with a clean, ordinary face. Both are done for an audience of one.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Move the room from admiring forgiveness as a doctrine to naming the person they're still holding a debt against, and from knowing about fasting to trying one hidden act this week. The reward comes from the Father who sees in secret, not the people who see the effort.
- If you're short on time, cut: If time runs short, cut the fasting history detail and keep the forgiveness knot in verses 14-15. The clenched fist is where this room will feel the pinch.
- Where the moment lives: Not in the definition of forgiveness but in the silence after you ask, 'Who did you not forgive this week?' Transformation lives when the textbook answers stop and a specific name surfaces.
- Your prep: Come having already named your own unforgiven person to God before you walk in. You cannot lead a room somewhere you haven't gone yourself this week.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Classroom opening, the concrete 'who did you not forgive' question (4 min). Read Matthew 6:14-18 aloud (2 min). Teach 'aphiēmi' with the fist image (8 min). Brief fasting history so they see both acts share a hidden audience (6 min). Questions 1, 3, and 4 with real silence after each (18 min). Handout take-home actions and out-loud commitments (5 min). Close in prayer over named grudges (2 min). Transformation lives in the silence after question 4. Cut the fasting history first if you're behind.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Small-group paradox opening — what do forgiveness and hidden fasting share (5 min). Read the passage (3 min). Teach 'aphiēmi' with the fist (8 min). Work all five discussion

questions slowly, lingering hardest on 4 and 5 (30 min). Handout writing time in silence (4 min). Out-loud commitments around the circle (6 min). Spontaneous closing prayer over the actual names spoken (4 min). Transformation lives when a real name surfaces at question 4. Cut question 2 first if time is tight.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Coffee opening — 'is there anyone you'd have a hard time being generous toward?' (5 min). Read verses 14-18 off a phone (2 min). Say the 'aphiēmi' fist image simply, in your own words (5 min). Talk through questions 4 and 5 only, honestly and personally (13 min). Name your own step first, then invite theirs (3 min). Close by praying briefly over what was said (2 min). Transformation lives in one honest admission of a real cost. Cut nothing — just protect questions 4 and 5.

One Thing Deeply

This is a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately. Remember weeks 3 and 8, where you learned to take one word or line and go all the way down instead of racing across the whole passage. Level three asks a harder rep: pick your one thing BEFORE you prepare anything else, then build the entire lesson to serve it. For this passage, the one thing is the tie between our forgiving and God's forgiving in verses 14-15. Everything — the fasting, the secret face, the reward — hangs off that knot. Do not let the interesting fasting history become a second topic that competes for airtime. Every minute you spend should bend the room back toward one clenched fist that needs to open.

Why This Passage Matters

Most rooms already know they're supposed to forgive. That's exactly the danger. Ask a group of church people what forgiveness means and every hand goes up with a correct answer, and nothing moves. They know the word so well it costs them nothing, and a truth that costs nothing changes nothing. This passage refuses to let that happen. Jesus doesn't offer a definition; he ties a knot: the mercy you refuse to hand out is the mercy you haven't understood you were handed. That's not a rule to earn pardon. It's a mirror. A rescued drowning man who won't throw the rope hasn't grasped what the rope did for him. And then Jesus does something startling — he sets forgiveness right beside fasting, two acts done where no one applauds, both aimed at a Father who sees in secret. The reward is his, not the room's. You get to lead people past the comfortable vocabulary into the one relationship they've been managing with a grudge, and to hand them the freedom of an audience of one. There are not many hours where you get to loosen a fist that a person has been carrying for years. This is one of them.

Catch the Fire First

Before you teach a word of this, do the exercise yourself. Sit down this week, name to God the one person you have not forgiven — the one whose face came up the moment you

read verse 15. Say out loud that you release the debt. Then draft the ordinary, warm text you'd send them, even if you never hit send. Feel how much your hand resists. That resistance is what your room will feel, and you cannot coach them through a flinch you skipped. Do the same with the hidden act: skip one meal before you teach, tell no one, and pray in the gap. Walk in having already paid the cost you're about to ask of them.

Bring Your Own Story

- PROMPT: a time you finally released a debt against someone who never said sorry, and what changed in you (not them).
- PROMPT: a time you did something spiritual for the crowd's approval and felt the emptiness of the applause afterward.
- PROMPT: a small hidden thing you once did with no audience, and how it quietly reshaped you.
- SAMPLE (polished vs real): Polished — 'I learned that forgiveness sets you free.' Real — 'I carried that grudge for eleven years, and the day I said his name to God and let it go, I slept for the first time in weeks. He never knew. He still doesn't.'
- GUARDRAIL: keep it unfinished and true, not raw and bleeding — full storytelling coaching is back in week 1's drill.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Don't ask what forgiveness means. Ask: 'Who is one person you know you have not forgiven, and did you think of them instantly or did you have to search?' Let the discomfort sit before you read a word of the text."

Kill the abstraction — start with a concrete second-person question, not a definition.

SMALL GROUP: "Jesus puts two strange things side by side here: forgiving people who never apologized, and fasting with a washed face so nobody can tell. What could those two possibly have in common? Let them guess, then read verses 14-18 and watch the connection land."

Open with the paradox that makes people lean toward the text.

COFFEE: "Can I ask you something honest before we look at this? Is there anyone right now you'd have a hard time being generous toward? Not naming names — just, is there someone? That's the person this passage is about."

Personal and low-stakes — one true admission opens the table.

Teaching the Word

The word to go deep on is the Greek 'aphiēmi' — the verb behind 'forgive' in verses 14-15. It doesn't mean to feel warm toward someone. It literally means to send away, to let go, to release. It's the word for cancelling a debt or letting a prisoner walk. Picture your hand right now, closed tight around something — a coin, a stone, a grievance. Make a fist.

That's the natural state of the wounded heart, gripping the debt someone owes you. 'Aphiēmi' is the deliberate act of opening that hand and letting the thing drop to the floor. You don't have to feel it fully first. You open the fist as a decision, and the feeling often follows later. Jesus says the Father who sees that private, costly opening of the hand is the same Father who opened his own hand toward you at the cross. 'You have been forgiven a debt you could never repay; that mercy is now yours to give away.' [Let that sit in silence.]

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus ties our forgiving directly to God's forgiving of us. Does that verse comfort you or scare you when you read it slowly?

Coaching note: Both answers are honest and useful. The ones who say 'scare' have read it correctly. Don't rush to soften it — the warning is fastened to the promise on purpose.

If it stalls: Simpler: when you read verse 15, does anyone come to mind you'd rather not think about? You don't have to say who.

2. Why do you think Jesus set forgiveness and hidden fasting side by side in the same breath? What do they share?

Coaching note: Guide them to 'the Father who sees in secret.' Both acts have no earthly audience and no earthly reward — the whole point is that God alone sees.

If it stalls: Yes/no way in: is forgiving someone usually something a crowd sees, or something that happens quietly inside you? Same with real fasting?

3. The passage describes people who 'disfigure their faces' so others can see they're fasting. Where do you catch yourself doing the spiritual version of that?

Coaching note: This one exposes the performer in all of us. If the answers stay theoretical, push into second person: 'When did you last make sure someone noticed how much you were sacrificing?'

If it stalls: Concrete: think of the last thing you did that was hard and good — did part of you hope someone would notice?

4. Think of the friend who wronged you and never said sorry. What has holding that debt actually cost you?

Coaching note: Slow way down. Let the flinch happen. This is where the correct answers stop and the real person shows up. Do not fill the silence with your own words.

If it stalls: Easier: has an old grudge ever cost you a night's sleep, a friendship, or a good mood? Just nod if yes.

5. If forgiveness starts as a decision and not a feeling, what would it look like for you to open your hand toward that person this week — even one small step?

Coaching note: Move them toward action, not resolution. A text, a released debt named to God, a prayer. Keep it small and real; do not let anyone commit to a grand reconciliation scene they can't sustain.

If it stalls: Concrete: could you name that person to God tonight and say the words 'I let it go'? That alone counts.

Questions You May Hear

"Is Jesus saying I earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others?"

No. He's saying a heart truly gripped by grace can't keep its fists clenched against a brother. Where we can't forgive, it's a sign we haven't yet grasped how much we ourselves were forgiven — the forgiving is the proof, not the payment.

"The Pharisees fasted twice a week — was that commanded?"

No. The Law required only one fast, the Day of Atonement. Everything else grew up around grief, repentance, and crisis, and by Jesus' day the strict Pharisee fasted Mondays and Thursdays — which happened to be the busy market days with the biggest audience.

"Are Christians supposed to fast? It sounds optional here."

Notice Jesus says 'when you fast,' not 'if.' He assumes it. He's not banning fasting — he's banning the performance of it, telling us to anoint the head and wash the face so it's offered to the Father who sees in secret.

"What if I forgive and the person keeps hurting me?"

Forgiveness means releasing the debt, not pretending nothing happened or removing all boundaries. Colossians calls it the daily clothing of the Christian — worn again and again toward the people closest to us, which assumes ongoing offense.

For Experienced Leaders

- When every answer is textbook-correct and the room feels flat, you've hit the most dangerous room there is — it looks like success. Break it by trading 'what does forgiveness mean' for 'who did you not forgive this week.'
- Don't let the fasting history become a second sermon. It's fascinating, and it will steal the airtime the forgiveness knot needs. Serve the one thing.
- After you say the keepable line, actually stop talking. Count to seven in your head. The silence does the work; your extra words undo it.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Go around and have each person say out loud one sentence: the name of the person they're going to release. Out loud, not just in their head — saying it makes it a decision. If someone is planning a hidden fast, they keep it to themselves: Jesus says that one stays between them and the Father.

Close by praying out loud over the actual names and grudges people just spoke — the specific person someone said they'd text, the debt someone said they'd release. Don't reach for a written prayer; saying their own words back to God is the whole point of a passage about the Father who sees in secret.

If you run out of time: If the room only gets to question 4 and someone finally names a real cost, stay there. Do not push to question 5 for the sake of finishing. A named grudge is more than a completed worksheet.

Midweek follow-up: Next week, before you start, ask quietly: 'Did anyone send the text, or say the words to God?' No pressure, no report card — just letting them know the decision was real and someone remembered.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/matthew/6-14-18/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- One person I have not forgiven (just initials, or a symbol only you understand):
- What holding that debt has actually cost me:
- 'Aphiēmi' means to open the hand and let go. Write the one small step of opening your hand this week:
- The spiritual thing I catch myself doing for an audience:
- One meal I'll skip this week to pray, telling no one:

Take-home actions:

- Before you sleep tonight, name that friend to God and tell him you release the debt. Tomorrow morning send one ordinary, warm text that treats them as someone you still want in your life — you don't have to feel it fully first.
- Skip one meal this week and tell no one (check with your doctor first if you have a health condition, are pregnant, or take medication). Use the gap to pray; let the hunger be a small alarm clock pointing you toward God.
- Take twenty minutes today that produce nothing anyone will praise — no post, no update. Sit with God in the unimpressive quiet. Your Father, who sees what is done in secret, counts it.

The audience of one is the only audience worth having.