



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for Forgiveness

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to enrich our understanding of God's forgiveness and of God's call to congregations to become forgiving communities. The guides can be used in a series or individually. You may download and reproduce them for personal or group use.

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Forgiveness is central to God's activity in the human realm. But what is forgiveness? And who is the God who offers this to us and seeks reconciliation with a stubborn and sinful humanity?

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Focus Article:

- 📖 The Purpose of God and the Politics of Salvation
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 22-28)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Forgiveness: Taking the Word to Heart
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 15-21)

What do you think?

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Forgiveness is God's Purpose

The Triune God loves us, offers us forgiveness, and seeks our reconciliation. This is the bedrock truth. But what is forgiveness? And who is the God who offers this to us and seeks reconciliation with a stubborn and sinful humanity?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 4:14-30

Reflection

Jesus began his teaching ministry in the synagogues in towns near to where he had been raised. What were his opening comments? And how did his first listeners respond? Luke tells us what happened in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth (4:16-30). Jesus started by reading Isaiah 61:1-2, in which the Greek word *aphesis* (forgiveness) occurs twice. (Read 4:18 again, but substitute "forgiveness" and "into forgiveness" for the words "release" and "free" in the NRSV.) Then Jesus told them, in effect: "That's who I am: God's Anointed One. Forgiveness is my work."

It is God's *purpose* to forgive. The Pharisees and lawyers who refused John's baptism, a "baptism of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*", have in fact "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (Luke 7:30).

Luke highlights these facets of forgiveness:

- ▶ *Forgiveness is God's initiative.* In Luke/Acts, God does the forgiving in 24 of 28 instances; these are typical: Luke 1:76-77; 5:17-26; 24:45-48; Acts 10:43; and 26:17-18. The remaining four times Jesus instructs his followers to forgive, as God has forgiven them.
- ▶ *Forgiveness is God's action through Jesus of Nazareth.* This is a *scandal* in Luke's gospel. When Jesus forgives a paralyzed man, Jesus' detractors accuse him of blasphemy for daring to assume the prerogative of God (Luke 5:21). His banquet companions are dismayed by his evident presumption: "Who is this who even forgives sins?" (Luke 7:49).
- ▶ *Forgiveness is God's gift to all humankind.* God offers forgiveness without restriction to the entire human family. Luke's story of God's forgiveness begins in Jerusalem (see Luke 1 and Acts 2) with Jewish people. Even here, however, the picture is a universal one, since the Jews gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost come "from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). It is back to these nations, the Gentiles, that the word of God's forgiveness is ultimately destined in Luke/Acts.

In Nazareth that Sabbath morning (Luke 4:16-30), all three facets were evident. The Spirit of the Lord had anointed Jesus, so that his ministry of forgiveness came about at God's initiative and was God's action through him (4:18). Jesus pronounced that God's gracious activity is for all humankind. He reminded the scandalized congregation that God forgives foreigners and enemies, crystallized for them in the stories of the widow in



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Sidon whom Elijah fed (1 Kings 17:1, 8-16) and Naaman, the Syrian army commander whom Elisha healed (2 Kings 5:1-19).

But what exactly is forgiveness? As a rich experience that is central to Christian life, forgiveness may be difficult to explain with other words. Randall O'Brien defines it as "the removal of barriers between persons caused by wrongdoing, real or imagined, ... as sins are sent away and persons are drawn together in relationships". He sends us back to the metaphorical language in Scripture from which the concept of forgiveness grows. *Nasa'* (lift up, bear, dismiss, send away) is the Hebrew term for forgiveness used most frequently in the Old Testament. Three Greek words are translated "forgiveness" in the New Testament: *aphiemi* (let go, send away, pardon, forgive) is the most repeated term, but occasionally *apoluo* (let go, loose) or *charizomai* (be gracious) are used.

Study Questions

1. When we think about forgiveness, we tend to focus upon our human efforts to forgive. What can we learn from Luke's starting point: that forgiveness is God's initiative?
2. Why was it scandalous to say that God's forgiveness was being enacted in Jesus of Nazareth? Do people still find this to be scandalous today?
3. Are there some people or groups of people that you really do not want to forgive today? Why do we resist forgiving certain people or groups?
4. Study the metaphors associated with forgiveness in these passages: Nehemiah 9:16-20; *Psalms 32:1-2; Psalm 85:1-3; Psalm 103:8-14; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Micah 7:18-20*. (The italicized passages contain *nasa'*.) How do the metaphors shape your understanding of the concept of forgiveness?
5. Examine Nicolas Poussin's *Sacrament of Penance* on the cover of *Forgiveness*. In this powerful representation of Luke 7:49, "Who is this who forgives sins?", the artist positions Simon the Pharisee and his slave in mirror opposition to Jesus as he forgives the sinful woman. How do you interpret Simon's reaction? Does it deepen your understanding of the scandal of forgiveness in Luke's gospel?

Departing Hymn: "Heaviness of Heart and Conscience"



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Focus Article:

📖 **Forgiveness: Taking the Word to Heart**
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 15-21)

Suggested Articles:

📖 **To Err is Human; to Forgive...?**
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 29-35)

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Why Should We Forgive?

The whole emphasis of the New Testament is on forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, and holy living manifested and made possible by the love of God through the Cross of Jesus Christ. But as Clarence Jordan remarked, "We'll worship the hind legs off Jesus, then not lift a finger to do a single thing he says." Is such the case for Christians in the hard area of forgiveness? Why should Christians forgive?

Prayer

O God, slow to chide and swift to bless, we worship you today as God of justice and of mercy. Help us, your children, to model that vital tension in our own lives. Forgive us our failings, we pray, both those things we have failed to do and those things we have failed to refrain from doing. And forgive us, O Most Gracious Lord, when we have failed to forgive those who have failed us, as your son, our savior, Jesus taught us to pray, we boldly say:

Our father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed by thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth,
As it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
Forever. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:13-14; 2:6-14; and 3:12-13

Reflection

Why should we forgive? Why be a doormat? The complaint is that forgiveness is an invention of weakness. Besides, it is unfair. Is it not true that when we ask people to forgive we ask them to suffer twice: the initial hurt, and then again as they wish the one hurting them well at their own expense?

Christians should forgive others for three reasons:

- ▶ *We should forgive for the sake of Christ.* For Christians the cross becomes the paradigm for living. Jesus preached, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Paul wrote, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). God is re-creating the world through Jesus Christ in the church. As Richard Hays puts it in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, "The church community is God's eschatological beachhead, the place where the power of God has invaded the world.... The church community is a sneak preview of God's ultimate redemption of the world."



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So Christians forgive, first and foremost, for the sake of Christ.

- ▶ *We should forgive for the sake of others.* God does not love us and forgive us because we repent; rather we repent because God loves us and forgives us. Paul noted, “God proves his love for us in that while we *still* were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). The cross teaches us that reconciliation is the task of the victim. Of course, we are uncomfortable with the ethical implications of the theology of the cross. We who are wronged prefer that the villain make amends. Instead, the model of the cross portrays the injured party taking the initiative to restore the relationship. Wrongful injury becomes an opportunity to display the life-changing grace of God. Two additional words are necessary at this point. First, while forgiveness from the cross precedes repentance, redemption and reconciliation do *not* result until we accept God’s forgiveness and return his love. In other words, forgiveness is a necessary, but insufficient condition for reconciliation. Reconciliation is always conditioned upon the response of the forgiven. The same is true between persons. Second, no Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one *or* wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation.
- ▶ *We should forgive for our sake also.* When Jesus, in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-35), vows that any one who refuses to forgive a debtor will meet with unspeakable torture, he drives home the point: among other reasons, we should forgive for our sake. Also, forgiving is the only way to be fair to ourselves. For only forgiveness liberates us from a painful past to a brand-new future.

Study Questions:

1. In the scripture reading from Colossians what reason to forgive does Paul provide?
2. Do you agree that “no Christian is ever in the position of privilege, wronged one *or* wrongdoer, where he or she is excused from the responsibility of working for reconciliation”? How would this affect the way a Christian responds to wrongdoing?
3. Is the *order* of these three reasons important? Which should be most fundamental? L. Gregory Jones warns of what he calls “therapeutic forgiveness” because it locates the motivation to forgive in the benefits of forgiveness for the one who forgives. (See p. 86 of *Forgiveness*.) Does the view in this guide avoid reduction to “therapeutic forgiveness”?
4. Read the paragraph on p. 33 of *Forgiveness* that begins: “But there is another and more significant reason why forgiveness is rare in our experience. Forgiveness is uncommon in human experience not just because it is hard to do, but also because it is *impossible* to do.” If it is impossible for us to do, then how does the writer, Thomas Long, think anyone can be forgiven?

Departing Hymn: “Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive”



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Focus Article:

- 📖 The Purpose of God and the Politics of Salvation
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 22-28)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 God's Repentance-Enabling Forgiveness
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 64-70)

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The Politics of Salvation

In Luke's gospel, salvation is the first and the final word. Luke begins with John the Baptist's mission to "go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:76b-77). In the final scene in his story, Paul declares, "this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (Acts 28:28). Forgiveness is God's single and all-crucial strategy or "politics" for saving God's people, but it is not for the faint of heart. It is a call to radical and costly life changes.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:1-10

Reflection

Welcoming God's forgiveness is more than enjoying freedom from guilt and shame, as Zacchaeus knew when he climbed down from the tree and welcomed Jesus. The chief-tax-collector-turned-disciple would agree with Rowan Williams:

So to live a "forgiven" life is not simply to live in a happy consciousness of having been absolved. Forgiveness is precisely the deep and abiding sense of what relation—with God or with other human beings—can and should be; and so it is itself a stimulus, an irritant, necessarily provoking protest at impoverished versions of social and personal relations.

Luke describes the radical and costly life changes of a forgiven life in these ways:

- ▶ *Forgiveness is solidarity with sinners.* Jesus knew that he was gaining a bad reputation among his detractors as "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). He would plead *guilty* to the second charge. He accepted sinners' banquet invitations (Luke 5:27-29) and even invited himself to Zacchaeus' house. His stories are equally outrageous: like the one about a father who throws a party to welcome back the son who shamed and abused him (Luke 15:11-32), or the story of a tax collector and self-acknowledged sinner whose prayers for forgiveness have greater weight with God than the prayers of a law-abiding and right-living Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). There is seemingly no length to which Jesus, *or the God whom Jesus represents*, will not go to "welcome sinners" (Luke 15:2) and show solidarity with them. If Jesus flouted social convention and offended religious sensibilities at every turn, he did so neither by chance nor by malice, *but because this is what it takes to engage in God's politics of salvation.*
- ▶ *Forgiveness is call to costly repentance.* Solidarity is God's side of the forgiveness interaction. Repentance is the human side, and it has clear social and economic implications. It is no less than the call to do justice in our relations with others. It means sharing our coat and food with folks who have none, giving our possessions to the poor, doing honest business with our clients, refusing to extort money from the powerless,



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and repaying with ample interest those whom we have cheated (Luke 3:11-14 and 19:8). Repentance calls us to a profound reordering of human perspectives and priorities.

- *Forgiveness is God's invitation to the banquet.* Forgiveness is nothing less than God's exuberant and unrestrained joy over finding what has been lost (Luke 15:6, 9, 32). And God will not celebrate alone. The extravagant party which God throws is a celebration intended for all of God's "friends and neighbors" in the human community, and the entire house must be filled (Luke 14:23). This is the ultimate good news of Luke's story: an extravagant and cosmic celebration over God's reconciliation with humankind. The politics of salvation ends at the banquet table, with "music and dancing" (Luke 15:25) and the "fatted calf" (Luke 15:23, 27).

Study Questions

1. Examine the collision of personalities in Antonio Montauti's sculpture, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, on p. 36 of *Forgiveness*. The father, his two sons, and a servant react to the father's unconditional forgiveness (Luke 15:11-32). How do you interpret each figure's gestures? Do they increase your appreciation of costly repentance, God's solidarity with sinners, and the celebration that is God's intention?
2. Translate the Zacchaeus episode into your own experience: who would be a "tax collector" or "sinner" in your community? How might your relationships to these folks be changed, if you evaluated them in light of your own forgiveness by God?
3. Martin Luther and John Calvin, the great theologians of the 16th century, taught that God's gracious offer of forgiveness comes first and provokes our repentance. In the meeting of Zacchaeus and Jesus, and in Jesus' story of the prodigal son, what is the relation of repentance and forgiveness?

Departing Hymn: "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" (verses 1, 2, 5, and 11)

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

Frederick W. Faber, Oratory Hymns, 1854

Suggested tunes: WELLESLEY or BEACH SPRING



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Focus Article:

📖 Forgiveness As a
Character Trait
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 56-63)

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Becoming Forgiving People

God's forgiveness can transform the way we 'see' people who wrong us. This kind of seeing is done with the heart—the "eyes of the heart" as Paul says, "that you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (Ephesians 1.18). Just as eyes for beauty vary in their power to detect it accurately, so Paul prays that our hearts may be "enlightened", so that we will see the great and wonderful things of God, which not everyone can see.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: John 8:2-12 and 1 John 1:5-2:6

Responsive Reading

Come everyone who is fallen and fractured. Come everyone who is wandering and wondering. Come everyone who is lost and lonely.

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." We are the fallen and wandering and lonely ones. We have nowhere to turn but to God.

Then hear the good news! God is a forgiving God. God's mighty throne is a mercy seat. In God's hands are justice and love, and those are the very hands that made you.

"If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." God lifts up the fallen, God leads the wanderers home, God loves the lonely.

Then come all of you bind your broken hearts together, bind your spirits with those fellow spirits around you, and come now to God.

Reflection

It was a strange moment in the Temple. Competing teachers, scribes and Pharisees, interrupted Jesus' lesson to show everyone "exhibit A" of why you cannot go around forgiving everyone. Here was a woman "caught in the very act of committing adultery" (8:4). Shouldn't they stone her? What did Jesus write with his finger on the ground: her accusers' failings, or a reminder of God's forgiveness of them? The gospel connects this story with Jesus' statement: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (8:12). The first epistle of John underscores the point: when we walk properly, in God's light, we see our own sins clearly. Yet we walk as forgiven folks, because we follow the One who is "faithful to forgive our sins".

When we walk in God's light and look with "eyes of the heart", how will we see people who have offended us?

- ▶ *We will be sensitive to the offender's repentance.* When we are angry with an offender, we see them as an enemy, in opposition to us and our interests. But repentance invites a reversal of that. The offender says, "I'm on your side. I'm my own enemy insofar as I responsibly did what I did. I, like you, hate the *me* who did that deed. Will you please accept



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my self-rejection, and thus accept me as *I now am*?" What would make us *sensitive* to this repentance? Perhaps that will become clearer by considering some other sensitivities of the forgiving person.

- ▶ *We will be eager to know if there are excuses for the offender.* To be relevant to forgiveness, of course, these must be only *partial* excuses. (If the offense were totally excusable, then the person would not have done anything wrong that requires forgiveness.) When we see with "eyes of the heart", we will care a great deal about being in a relationship of harmony and beneficent interaction with that person—whether the person is a friend, a family member, a colleague, or a stranger—and will welcome the offender's repentance and any excuses that may plausibly reduce the severity of the offense, because such repentance and excuses pave the way for reconciliation.
- ▶ *We will care about our relationships with the offender.* Even if we are quite angry with people, we can still care deeply about our relationships to them. A deeply forgiving person is slow to abandon a relationship—to start talking about divorce, to start thinking the offender is not worth having as a friend, to take seriously disowning a son or daughter. So relationships are cited as reasons for forgiving: "I forgave her because she is my daughter (sister, wife, mother, friend, colleague)." If we think of a relationship simply in terms of our own comfort or advantage, then even though we overcome our anger we are not really forgiving the offender. But if we seek reconciliation because we value our personal relationship with them, then our damping of our anger is a kind of forgiveness.
- ▶ *The offender's suffering will move us.* If we see that an offender is suffering greatly, we may look upon them benevolently in the suffering and weakness of their humanity. In some cases compassion may move us to reconciliation even without the aid of the other considerations mentioned above: repentance, excusing circumstances, or a prior relationship.
- ▶ *We will be keenly aware of our own moral failings.* A sinner is in no position to judge another sinner. It is incongruous for one criminal to sit in judgment of another. To remain angry, we must be looking down on the offender. When we see ourselves as on the same level, our anger will evaporate.

Study Questions

1. Are any of the aspects of the "eyes of the heart" described above most basic or important? Do we develop all five aspects at the same time, or under differing circumstances?
2. Which facet of a forgiving spirit requires some strengthening in your life? What resources in your church would support your growth in that respect?
3. Discuss Margaret G. Alter's observations, in "Other Voices" on pp. 54-55 of *Forgiveness*, that sometimes we respond to God's forgiveness with a darkened and defensive self-righteousness.

Departing Hymn: "Heaviness of Heart and Conscience"



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Focus Article:

📖 See How They Love One Another
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 9-14)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Heart of Reconciliation
(*Forgiveness*, pp. 78-84)

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See How They Love One Another

The church, especially through congregational worship, can provide us with practice and conditioning to become forgiving people.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

Reflection

Paul was not a Pollyanna; he knew that it would be extraordinary for the Corinthian church, or for that matter, any congregation, to be a mutually forgiving community. The forgiveness would flow from one member to the next, and it could not stop at the community's perimeter. Metaphors come tumbling out as he tried to describe it. It is as though we would begin to see other folks with fresh and Christ-like eyes: "we regard no one from a human point of view." The entire world would become brand new again: "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" It would be like God making us "ambassadors for the Messiah" to go to every person, empowered to continue God's work, through Jesus, of "reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them". Behind all of the Apostle's metaphors lies this truth: forgiveness will be incredibly difficult, both to offer to others and to receive to ourselves when needed. A "ministry of reconciliation" will never be natural to us, so it will require that we get new eyes and a divine appointment; it will be a work that we neither initiate nor can sustain. The forgiving community will form, the reconciling begin, and the forgiveness continue to flow from one person to the next only because "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (5:18).

Through worship God can shape us into communities of forgiveness:

- ▶ "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," writes Paul; "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" (Colossians 3:16). Each Christian worship service re-presents God's forgiveness to us. We rehearse, week after week, the words and gestures that offer release from bondage to the past. We confess that we are sinners in a prayer spoken in unison with some of the very folks whom we have betrayed—folks who also have betrayed us. We receive assurance that in Christ we, and they, are forgiven. We hear the Bible read and the Word proclaimed, and we are convicted of our sin and shown the possibility of new life.
- ▶ At the Lord's Table when we share the one body and blood of Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:16-17), we become "one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:5). We are reminded of how, through Jesus' death, God forgives our sins against one another (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).



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► Each time that we witness a new baptismal robe it should jog our memories that we were given new selves in baptism. As we overcome barriers that divide races, genders, and social classes, and as we learn to forgive one another, we are growing into those new selves (Colossians 3:9-14 and Galatians 3:27-28).

The forgiveness that worship engenders will spill over into the rest of our lives as we begin to see one another with new and Christ-like eyes. "We no longer regard each other as we once did, or from a worldly point of view," write Dorothy Bass and Fred Niedner. "No matter what happens among us, we see in each other not only a fellow sinner, but also one of the redeemed for whom Christ died. Within the fellowship of the church, we see each other in baptismal garments, the working clothes of the new creation, each and every day. In our sanctuaries as well as around our tables at home, we break bread that comes not only from our own labors, but also from Christ who is our true host."

Study Questions

1. Read Matthew 26:20-30 and notice the failures, betrayal, and abuse that are present when Jesus institutes the Lord's Table. Does Jesus know all that mess is going on? What does this suggest to you that we should be remembering about Jesus when we eat the bread and drink the cup of communion?
2. Study an order of service that your congregation uses. Which elements of worship will shape members into a forgiving community? Are there elements that you would like to add?
3. Read Colossians 3:12-13. How important to our moral formation is worshiping with other people? Would a Christian develop as easily without a church community all of the traits that Paul mentions?
4. Comment on this passage in Martin Luther's *Large Catechism*: "Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. Thus, although we have sins, the grace of the Holy Ghost does not allow them to injure us, because we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sin, both in that God forgives us, and in that we forgive, bear with, and help each other."

Departing Hymn: "Forgive us, Lord"

Forgive us, Lord, and set us free
To love each other joyfully,
To worship you abundantly
To be what we are called to be. Amen.

David G. Miller

suggested tunes: OLD 100TH or TRINITY COLLEGE

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Focus Article:

📖 **Failing Leaders**
(Fall 2001, pp. 71-77)

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Failing Leaders

Why do some Christian leaders betray or abuse us? Nothing tests our resolve to forgive like these spiritual disasters. Do we, in turn, fail those leaders by not standing ready to forgive, heal, and restore them?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1-35

Reflection

Headline-grabbing moral breakdowns by Christian public figures and celebrated ministers we can handle. The real disasters are local: our pastor sexually exploiting a member, a minister stealing church funds, deacons constantly tearing members down, a teacher flashing habitual bursts of temper, or a worship leader disguising substance abuse. Our pain is more personal; our shame, grief, and anger are deep and smoldering. Our feelings often go unshared. We blame and distrust fellow church members, and fissures hidden just below the surface of congregational life split wide open into cliques and divisions.

Fallen leaders may be *unhealed wounders* who abuse their power. One counseling team discovered that 80% of sexually exploitive leaders had been abused or abandoned as children or adolescents. Now in positions of social power, these unhealed wounders fail to recognize the significance of personal boundaries; a few become cruel abusers who intentionally cross over them. This fact about their woundedness does not excuse their betrayal or abuse, but it gives us hope that we may participate in their healing. Fallen leaders need to ask for and accept the forgiveness of God and others, and know the deep self-worth that comes from experiencing that God accepts us. Our instruction and reconciliation efforts that hold failing leaders accountable may be instruments in their forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

Some of Jesus' disciples enjoyed having power and wanted more of it. So, he warned them to protect the weak members, the "children", whom they might easily abuse in church (Matthew 18:1-7). However, when a fellow member, even an abusive leader, harms us, we must not begrudge them forgiveness (18:21-22). Does this mean we are obligated to restore a fallen leader to church leadership? Marlin Jeschke wisely says, "it may be necessary to exercise discretion in appointing restored persons to office, just as in the appointment of new converts to office.... However, it is inconsistent with forgiveness to make them 'pay' with continued humiliation or to put them on any other 'probation' than that under which all believers live all the time." Forgiveness requires that we treat restorees with the same grace extended to new converts.

Restoration practices usually fit these models:

- ▶ **Spiritual care team.** A small group, assembled by the fallen leader from among the congregation or other Christian friends, guides and holds him accountable, and cares for him and his family.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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- ▶ *Denominational*. The leader surrenders credentials to the denomination for a prescribed period of study and counseling, monitored by quarterly progress reports. The denomination keeps rehabilitation records and, at the proper time, restores the leader's credentials.
- ▶ *Congregational*. A local congregation follows the "threefold admonition" in Matthew 18:15. Usually this is formalized in some way, but it remains supple to apply to individual cases.

Each approach has its limitations. The *congregational approach* is the best framework to heal an injured congregation and to nurture its Christian responsibilities for community discernment and offering restoration to the fallen leader. Yet a congregation may not have the spiritual or professional resources required; the restoree may move across town or across the country from the congregation; and this approach may not provide continuing spiritual care to the restoree and his family—too often, the process stops at judgment and does not carry through to restoration. The *denominational approach* provides the needed resources (usually for failing *clergy*), but by professionalizing spiritual care it fails to address the local congregation's injuries or encourage the congregation's responsibility. The *spiritual care team approach* provides the best care to the restoree and his family, but can it address the congregation's injuries?

A more adequate practice, a *friendship-church team approach*, would combine the strengths of the congregational and spiritual care team models. Congregationally endorsed teams, flexible enough in composition to care for fallen clergy or lay leaders, would enrich the congregational approach. Team members would come from the congregation or "friendship churches"—other congregations of the same or another faith tradition, nearby or in distant places, with which the injured congregation's members have built networks of trust. The friendship-church teams would have more inclusive goals: not only would they care for the restoree, they would care for the injured local congregation by convening it, when possible and at an appropriate time, to give its approval to the process and its results through a restoration worship service for the restoree.

Study Questions

1. How are church members injured when a leader fails them? Are they all injured, or just those directly involved?
2. Do the six types of unhealed wounders outlined on pp. 72-73 of *Forgiveness* describe the abusive leaders you have known?
3. How should we respond when a fallen leader does not apologize and repent? Matthew 18:17 seems to be a harsh instruction. Yet, how did Jesus treat tax collectors and Gentiles? Read Matthew 9:9-13 and Matthew 12:15-21.
4. How does your church forgive, heal, and restore leaders who fail? How would the congregational model be applied within your church's administrative structure? Are there friendship-churches on which your congregation might depend?

Departing Hymn: "Remember Christ Our Savior"

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30 to 45 minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Forgiveness is God's Purpose

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 7:36-50
Discuss Luke 4:14-30	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Luke 4:14-30	Discuss three "facets"
Question 2, 3, or 4	Questions (selected)	Question 2 or 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

(Note: The study guide outlines the main ideas in only the *first half* of Dorothy Jean Weaver's article, "The Purposes of God and the Politics of Salvation". If group members have read her article in advance, tell them that you will be discussing the rest of Weaver's article in the third study in this series, "The Politics of Salvation".)

Teaching goals

1. To define God's forgiveness.
2. To better understand the role of Jesus Christ in God's purpose.
3. To realize the universal scope of God's forgiveness.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Forgiveness* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. You may need to print some extra copies of the hymn "Heaviness of Heart and Conscience" (on pp. 42-43 of *Forgiveness*) for the musicians and guests.

Begin with a Story

Share Thomas Long's account of the pop quiz on theological words that he gave to his seminary students. It makes the point that many of us have little experience with forgiveness; so, defining this key Christian concept can be difficult for us. Long's story begins on p. 31 of *Forgiveness*: "I teach homiletics, the art of preaching, and one day I walked into my beginning preaching class and told them to prepare to take a test...."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. End the prayer with a time for silent confession of sins, and then voice a request that members experience God's forgiveness of their sins through Jesus Christ.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for someone to read aloud Luke 4:14-30 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Highlight the key events in the story of Jesus teaching in his Nazareth synagogue. Ask a member to read Luke 4:18 with the substitutions for *aphesis* as recommended in the study guide.

1. *Forgiveness is God's initiative.* Assign several members to read aloud the Bible passages. If time is limited, read only Zechariah's commission for his son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:76-77), and Paul's commission on the Damascus Road (Acts 26:17-18). These "bookends" in Luke/Acts define the ministries of the first and last of Luke's major characters in terms of God's forgiveness of sins.

2. *Forgiveness is God's action through Jesus of Nazareth.* Briefly remind members of the stories of Jesus healing of the paralytic man (Luke 5:17-26) and Jesus forgiving the sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50). Highlight the point that in each story Jesus forgives sins and this action offends many who observe it.
3. *Forgiveness is God's gift to all humankind.* Summarize, if necessary, the events in Luke 1 and Acts 2. Point out that these are the first 'episodes' of parts 1 and 2 of Luke's two-part story.

Return to the story of Jesus teaching in Nazareth. Remind members of the two embedded stories of the widow of Sidon and of Naaman. Enrich the word studies in the final paragraph of the study guide by reading aloud some of the italicized passages in study question #4. (The italicized passages contain *nasa'*.)

Study Questions

1. Members may offer such insights as the following. Forgiveness is primarily about sinful actions and about loss of relationship, not about minor offenses. The goal of forgiveness is not to make the forgiver (God) feel better, but to restore a relationship (that the forgiver, at least, values). Forgiveness is always a gracious gift, and is never earned or deserved.
2. How would we react if a person *forgave sins*? Would we not consider the person to be either blasphemous or seriously confused? Many people today, influenced by new age or syncretistic religions, object to the claim that Jesus thought that his ministry was uniquely divine. They might say that Jesus was a wise person like those found in many religious traditions.
3. We all have some individuals whom we find it very difficult to forgive. Perhaps members should think of these folks silently, or only describe rather than name them, or openly discuss only categories of people that group members find it difficult to forgive.
4. These metaphors stand out: sinners being *not forsaken* by God, but cared for with a *spirit of instruction* and physical food, water, and clothing (Nehemiah 9:16-20); our sins being *covered* or being *hidden from God's gaze* (Psalm 32:1-2); God's *anger being withdrawn*, or God turning away from anger (Psalm 85:1-3); our sins being *removed by God as far as possible from us* and God's anger abated (Psalm 103:8-14); our sins being *forgotten by God* (Jeremiah 31:31-34); our sins being *trod under God's foot* and *cast into the sea* (Micah 7:18-20).
5. Members may want to look at the story in Luke 7:36-50. They might describe Simon as curious, cautious, shocked, and so on. Though he appears to be interested, he is hardly supportive or encouraging. Other guests seem to be frozen in reaction too. Two slaves, standing on the right, discuss Jesus' action. Notice Simon's social position in relation to the slave whom he ignores, and that no other women are at the table. The image suggests the twin scandals of *Jesus* forgiving sins and of the *universality* of forgiveness (reaching to a sinful woman).

Departing Hymn

Distribute to guests the extra copies of the hymn "Heaviness of Heart and Conscience". (Group members will find it on pp. 42-43 of *Forgiveness*.) If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

Why Should We Forgive?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (brief lecture)	Reflection (discuss all)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (all)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To clarify three Christian motivations to forgive others.
2. To understand the Christian obligation to forgive others.
3. To consider that while deep forgiveness may be *impossible* for us, we are invited to participate in God's forgiving activity.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Forgiveness* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate the hymn "Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive" in your church's hymnal.

Begin with a Story

Share the story of Pope John Paul II forgiving his would-be assassin. This story, as told by Randall O'Brien on pp. 15-16 of *Forgiveness*, raises in a dramatic way the issue of why Christians should forgive.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently for someone whom the person needs to forgive, and then ask the group to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide that begins "O God, slow to chide and swift to bless, ...".

Scripture Reading

Arrange for three members to read aloud Colossians 1:13-14, 2:6-14, and 3:12-13 from a modern translation. Or, print out these three passages so that one person can read them through without interruption.

Reflection

Ask for members' initial response to the Colossians passages. Detailed discussion of these passages should wait for Study Question 1.

- ▶ *We should forgive for the sake of Christ.* Ask members to read this paragraph silently and focus their response on Hays' comment. They might connect being "given a ministry of reconciliation" and "taking up their cross daily" with Hays' idea that "the *community* is a sneak preview of God's ultimate redemption." Notice that the "sneak preview" is the *community*, not individual Christians. The community is only a *preview*, and not itself the cause of ultimate redemption.
- ▶ *We should forgive for the sake of others.* Our motive to forgive for the sake of others grows out of our own repentance, and our commitment to forgive as God has forgiven us. We model our stance toward wrongdoers upon the stance God took toward us "while we were yet sinners".
- ▶ *We should forgive for our sake also.* This paragraph mentions two appeals to self-interest: avoiding God's righteous anger if we mistreat others by refusing to forgive, and avoiding the continuing

pain caused by our angry attitude. In regard to the former, remind members of the parable in Matthew 18:23-35: a slave who has been forgiven a debt of 10,000 talents (about \$150,000 in wages) turns around and imprisons a fellow slave for owing him only 100 denarii (about \$40).

Study Questions

1. Paul says that we are to forgive others, just as Christ has forgiven us (3:13). Christ's forgiveness was a gracious rescue operation, motivated by love (1:13-14).
2. Members may find it difficult to accept that we have an *obligation* to offer forgiveness to those who wrong us. We have this obligation, not because of our self-interest, but as committed followers of Jesus Christ.
3. The *list* is very important. If we forgive others only for self-interested reasons, we are doing it for therapeutic reasons. When we add the first two reasons (for the sake of Christ and others), we begin to depart from the therapeutic model. What would we do if there were a conflict among the reasons: our self-interest leading us to withhold forgiveness, but the first reasons moving us toward forgiveness? In such cases, the *order* is also important. The first reasons must have priority over self-interest, or we will be therapeutic forgivers, forgiving others only when it is to our advantage.
4. In the next few paragraphs Thomas Long says that we are called to *participate* in God's forgiveness as a gift. As we move to respond to offense with forgiveness, God gives us power to continue. Members may have stories of difficult forgiveness to share, either confirming Long's reading of scripture or questioning it.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

The Politics of Salvation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 15:11-32
Discuss Luke 19:1-10	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Luke 19:1-10	Discuss Luke 15:11-32
Question 2	Questions (selected)	Question 2	Questions 1 and 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

(Note: This study guide outlines the main ideas in the *second half* of Dorothy Jean Weaver's article, "The Purposes of God and the Politics of Salvation". It is a companion to the first study in this series, "Forgiveness is God's Purpose", which deals with the first half of Weaver's article.)

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate the social and economic costs of repentance.
2. To understand the relationship between repentance and God's forgiveness.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Forgiveness* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Your church hymnbook will use a different tune for "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy". If you want to use BEACH SPRING as suggested, ask your musician to locate this tune in your hymnbook or online at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a story

Share the story that Ralph Wood retells on p. 67 of *Forgiveness* about Swiss theologian Karl Barth meeting with Adolph Hitler. Though this event probably never happened, it highlights the issue of the relation between repentance and forgiveness.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then voice a request that members will support one another to make costly changes in their lives and relationships, as necessary, in response to God's forgiveness of their sins through Jesus Christ.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for someone to read aloud Luke 19:1-10 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The story of Zacchaeus will be familiar to many members, perhaps as a children's story. Ask them to look for parallels between the story and Rowan William's statement. Zacchaeus saw that forgiveness required that he make change in many of his relationships.

- *Forgiveness is solidarity with sinners.* Briefly remind members of Jesus' parables of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and the tax collector and Pharisee at prayer (Luke 18:9-14). Point out that in each story the supposed virtues of one character, either the older son or the Pharisee, get in the way of his receiving or offering forgiveness.
- *Forgiveness is call to costly repentance.* Assign a member to read aloud Luke 3:11-14. In that passage Jesus is responding to 'categories' of persons who ask him what repentance requires.

- *Forgiveness is God's invitation to the banquet.* If time permits, members might read the entire parable of the great dinner in Luke 14:15-24. Note the similarity of themes (seeking the lost, celebrating their acceptance of an invitation that others ignore) with the more familiar parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son in chapter 15.

Study Questions

1. We notice immediately the father's solidarity with his returning son; a servant offers the fine cloak, which signals the father's intended celebration. The returning son's kneeling posture suggests his remorse and may reflect his proposal to return as a slave (14:21). The father refuses this costly offer, and welcomes him home as a son (14:22). Does this imply that the returning son's repentance was not costly? The older son is just arriving, perhaps; but is he also stopping short, hanging back from embracing his returning brother?
2. Zacchaeus was despised as a traitor for helping the occupying Roman army to collect taxes and as a cheat for over-collecting those taxes. Members might name lifestyles they despise (drug addiction, freeloading on government programs, lavish living with no concern for the poor, and so on) or occupations that they look upon with scorn (owning an adult book store, operating a gambling casino, or working for an abortion clinic, and so on). More exact parallels to Zacchaeus might be people who profit from substandard apartments, disguise accounts to help the wealthy escape taxes, or hide their own business activities from taxation.
3. Remind members of Ralph Wood's discussion of Luther and Calvin on p. 66 of *Forgiveness*. In these Lucan stories, the attitude and words of forgiveness precede the repentance. This order is also found in Luke's account of Jesus' forgiveness from the cross (Luke 23:34) and Stephen's forgiveness of his attackers as he is stoned (Acts 7:60).

Departing Hymn

Many hymnbooks use the tune WELLESLEY for "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." As an alternative we suggest that you sing two verses of the hymn to each playing of the beautiful melody BEACH SPRING. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

Becoming Forgiving People

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 or 2	Questions 1, 2, and 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the five sensitivities of forgiving people as ways that they are prepared to perceive those who wrong them.
2. To begin to think about how congregational life can help us to acquire these sensitivities.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Forgiveness* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. You may need to print some extra copies of the hymn “Heaviness of Heart and Conscience” (on pp. 42-43 of *Forgiveness*) for the musicians and guests.

Begin with a story

Share the story about Abba Moses on p. 62 of *Forgiveness*. Christians have used the stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers since the fourth century to teach Christian truths. This one reminds us that when we see ourselves as on the same level as an offender, our anger can evaporate.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then voice a request that members will honestly confess their sins to God, who promises to be faithful to forgive them and cleanse them from sin.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for two members to read aloud John 8:2-12 and 1 John 1:5–2:6 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Members will be familiar with this dramatic story of the woman who was caught in adultery. What additional features of the story did they only just notice when they heard it read again? Perhaps they will mention that the event occurs in the temple and after Jesus has gathered people for a teaching session; that the gospel connects this story with the “I am the light of the world” proclamation; that we are not told what Jesus wrote (or drew) upon the ground.

- ▶ *We will be sensitive to the offender’s repentance.* Make the point that when an offender repents, the person is inviting us to see ourselves as “on the same side”, at least in so far as we view the offense as wrong and the offender as blameworthy.
- ▶ *We will be eager to know if there are excuses for the offender.* Emphasize the difference between a total or blanket excuse, and a partial excuse. Use Bob Robert’s examples on pp. 59-60 of *Forgiveness* or brainstorm some partial excuses that a person—for example, the woman caught in adultery—might have for betraying a trust.

- ▶ *We will care about our relationships with the offender.* The distinction might seem subtle, but it is important. If a relationship was valued *just* for personal gain, then we are not forgiving the person who violated the relationship, but strategically positioning ourselves with regard to them. The goal of forgiveness is to renew and restore relationship, not to use the other person for our gain.
- ▶ *The offender's suffering will move us.* To illustrate this point, you might tell the story from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* which is on p. 61 of *Forgiveness*. Ask members if they agree that it is proper to be so moved by the offender's suffering, that we forgive regardless of whether the person repents, has excuses, or was in a prior valued relationship with us.
- ▶ *We will be keenly aware of our own moral failings.* Remind members of the Abba Moses story mentioned at the beginning of this lesson plan.

Study Questions

1. Members might describe particular experiences in which they learned the importance of partial excuses, or to value a certain relationship more than maintaining their justified anger, or to identify with others' suffering, and so on. It seems that these might be independent sensitivities. On the other hand, several of these involve awareness of common bonds with others, including offenders; this suggests that some experiences or training might enhance several of these sensitivities.
2. Some churches have local reconciliation ministries or special efforts to help members overcome anger based in ethnic conflicts, racism, or community injustice. Members might mention ministers, church counselors, or Christian friends who have helped them to deal with anger in their families, work situations, and friendships. They might mention worship experiences, Bible studies, and other congregational gatherings that provide experiences of community with people with whom they are angry.
3. Lead the group to apply Alter's insights to the story in John 8:2-12. The relation of self-denial and self-righteousness to forgiveness is also central to the story of the Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden. See "Our Dangerous Innocence" on p. 39 of *Forgiveness*.

Departing Hymn

Distribute to guests the extra copies of the hymn "Heaviness of Heart and Conscience". (Group members will find it on pp. 42-43 of *Forgiveness*.) If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

See How They Love One Another

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Matthew 26:20-30
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss Matt. 26:20-30
Question 2	Questions (selected)	Question 2	Questions 1, 3, and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To reflect on how worship—singing, teaching, the Lord’s Table, and baptism—shapes those sensitivities of forgiving people that were discussed in the previous study.
2. To appreciate the centrality of reconciliation to the church’s ministry.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Forgiveness* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate music for the departing hymn; the tunes suggested are the ones that many congregations use for “The Doxology”.

Begin with a story

Share the scene from the film “Places in the Heart” as retold by Dorothy Bass and Fred Niedner, Jr. on pp. 9-10 of *Forgiveness*. It is a powerful commentary upon the meaning of the Lord’s Table. An alternative is to tell Tom Long’s story, on pp. 34-35 of *Forgiveness*, about the minister who must offer a dying stranger forgiveness. The minister recognizes that this has always been the church’s ministry.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then voice a request that your group will be a forgiving community for its members.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read aloud 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Encourage members reflect upon the startling metaphors Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. In my Baptist tradition this passage is reduced to a motto for “Royal Ambassadors”, a mission group for boys; as adults we may miss the richness of its vision.

Ask members to read all of the Bible passages in this section. For Paul, both the Lord’s Table and baptism have implications about how we should see one another as “members”. Point out that Colossians 3:9-14 and Galatians 3:27-28 draw powerful lessons about overcoming distinctions that are significant in the world.

Ask for reactions to Bass and Niedner’s comment in the last paragraph of the Reflection material.

Study Questions

1. Matthew says that Jesus knew more about the failures and betrayal than any of the disciples at the table, including the ones who would fail Jesus. The Lord’s Table *addresses* problems that the disciples don’t fully appreciate, rather than avoiding or disguising them. Jesus was offering and creating a fellowship, rather than celebrating one that already existed.

2. Encourage members to brainstorm. They may mention also worship practices that other churches use.
3. Allow honest responses. Some members may discuss churches that have been dysfunctional and have deformed their members with bitterness, envy, self-conceit, or impatience at changing the world. If they have been blessed by a church fellowship, encourage them to reflect upon the importance of community encouragement, teaching, and correction.
4. The passage comes from the great 16th century reformer's instructions for people who would become confirmed Christians. "Word and signs" means Bible reading and preaching, and communion and baptism—the very elements discussed in the lesson. Notice the close connection that Luther draws between God's forgiveness and the forgiveness that flows among church members.

Departing Hymn

Your group may use their favorite tune for "The Doxology" here. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.

Failing Leaders

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Galatians 6:1-2
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Review Matthew 18
Question 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand that some church leaders who betray and abuse members are “unhealed wounders”.
2. To appreciate how members are injured by these failures.
3. To understand the Christian community’s obligation to forgive and restore failing leaders.
4. To examine the restoration practices which are used in churches.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Forgiveness (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. You will need to print copies of the hymn “Remember Christ Our Savior” for everyone from the website www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a story

Share the story about Mr. Covey on p. 71 of *Forgiveness*. Or read the opening paragraphs about spiritual cairns on our Christian journey and ask members to reflect upon their own painful experience with a failing leader.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then voice a request that your group will be accountable to one another, and that members will be prepared to forgive, heal, and restore church leaders who betray their trust.

Scripture Reading

Ask six people to take turns, or two people to alternate, reading aloud the six segments of Matthew 18 (vv. 1-5; 6-9; 10-14; 15-20; 21-22; and 23-35) from a modern translation. Too often we separate these segments in Matthew 18 and do not hear how the gospel relates these passages.

Reflection

Discuss these issues with great care. Some members have been deeply wounded by failing leaders, or your group may be divided over recent betrayals or abuse. Allow members to share their own experiences without disclosing hurtful or privileged information.

Remind members of the six types of “unhealed wounders” described on pp. 72-73 of *Forgiveness*. An abusive leader can display characteristics of more than one type. Emphasize that a failing leader’s woundedness is not a blanket or complete excuse, but it helps us understand our calling and opportunity to heal and restore them.

Discuss Jeschke’s suggestion that we have an obligation to approach the restoration of a person to leadership office with the same grace stance with which we extend the gospel to new converts.

Supplement these brief outlines of the spiritual care team, denominational, and congregational approaches with the information on p. 76 of *Forgiveness*. Ask members to discuss the limitations of each approach, and to reflect on the friendship-church team approach as an alternative.

Study Questions

1. Members may have personal stories that they want to share at this point. Many people are injured and in various ways. Some are directly injured as objects of abuse, the leader's family members are shamed and injured in a different way, and all members are indirectly affected. Read the passage on p. 75 of *Forgiveness* about how our being "*members* one of another" (Romans 12:5) will shape our understanding of how all members are injured.
2. Allow members to question the categories, to explore additional categories, and to use the categories to understand an abusive leader in their experience. Do those in some categories bear more responsibility for their behavior? For which categories of failing leader is restoration most difficult? In which categories would professional help be recommended or required?
3. Ask members to read Matthew 9:9-13 and Matthew 12:15-21. Tradition says the gospel writer was the Apostle Matthew, a former tax collector. Members might reflect that the gospels record many parables and events about restoration (rather than bringing in someone who was never part of the forgiving community): the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son (Luke 15); the ten lepers (Luke 17:10-19); Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); the restoration of Peter (John 21:15-19); Barnabas restoring both Paul and John Mark (Acts 9:27 and 15:36-39), and so on.
4. If the congregation does not have a formalized process, members might discuss how they would care for a failing leader, the leaders' family, and members injuries. How would members identify friendship-churches in the community or in more distant locations?

Departing Hymn.

Distribute copies of the hymn "Remember Christ Our Savior" from the website www.cyberhymnal.org. Its suggested tune AURELIA is in many hymnals, often with the hymn "The Church's One Foundation". If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.