



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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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; *Psalms* 85:1-3; *Psalms* 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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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.