



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:

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

What do you think?

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

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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

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.