



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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

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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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"

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.