

Reconciliation Seeking Restored Relationships

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Foreword

In September 1998, delegates at the World Vision Partnership's Triennial Council in Johannesburg unanimously approved the report of our Reconciliation Commission. The approval was enthusiastic and heartfelt. Council delegates affirmed that reconciliation is an integral, vital part of our ministry. It is at the heart of the gospel. If we are to bear witness to the good news of the kingdom of God we must work to bring people together in peace, harmony, and love.

In Bosnia, Ghana, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and elsewhere, World Vision is helping families and community leaders air their grievances, talk with their enemies and learn to cooperate with each other. Communities are willing to engage in reconciliation because they trust us. They have experienced our efforts to help them overcome hunger, sickness, and poverty.

That's why World Vision's pursuit of reconciliation is making a difference. In Ghana, tribal enemies have signed a peace agreement that has led to the creation of a regional association. In Burundi, ethnic Hutus have returned to neighborhoods to live again with their Tutsi adversaries. In Rwanda, a mother has demonstrated the power of forgiveness by adopting the boy who murdered her son. These miracles happened because former enemies learned that without peace there could be no progress.

Our work at reconciliation is not just something for ministry in the field. It is a constituent part of who we are as staff members, volunteers and supporters of World Vision. We must be reconciled with one another at home, in the office and in the community. We cannot love God if we cannot love one another.

The gospel is very clear on the importance of reconciliation: *The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.* (1 John 4:21)

Dean R. Hirsch
World Vision International President

Introduction

As an idea reconciliation is a simple matter. It appeals to the best in us. Who in their right mind would resist restoring relationships and signing peace treaties between people who are alienated from each other?

But in reality reconciliation is difficult. When other people hurt us the pain can lodge deep in our souls. Even when we want to forgive and get on with life the videotapes in our memory keep replaying what went wrong.

When life goes wrong, injustice may often be the cause as well as the result. Exploitation, abuse, gender inequality; racism, tribalism and other expressions of violence may rightfully call for some kind of compensation. Requiring that justice be an inherent part of reconciliation may be complicated and quite likely controversial. If the process of reconciliation is to go forward, participants must take the time to go through the stages that allow forgiveness and justice to coexist. Real reconciliation results only when justice and forgiveness are at peace with each other. Unfortunately, heeding the biblical directive to forgive merely by uttering a well-intentioned prayer does not often resolve what lies deep in the human soul.

God's vision for creation may be viewed through the lens of reconciliation. Right relationship between God and the people God created, between families and friends, between enemies, between nationals, between tribes, between those who hold different beliefs, between people and the environment are all a part of what God intended. Those who have been reconciled with God and claim to follow Jesus Christ are entrusted with the message of reconciliation and commanded to take up the ministry of reconciliation. The Scriptures speak clearly:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God [italics added] (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

How to use the studies

The Bible studies that follow are designed to be a reconciliation resource:

- × to raise issues
- × to ask questions
- × to prompt us to pray and
- × to guide our thinking and behavior

on important matters relating to reconciliation.

We are indebted to Dr. Thomas McAlpine and the Reverend Dr. Michael Pountney, who assisted in producing the overall structure and shared the responsibility for researching and writing the first drafts of the studies.

Tom McAlpine has worked on the frontier between biblical studies and mission within World Vision for 15 years and is currently the Director for Bible and Holistic Ministry. Since 1994 he has been Working with national offices in Latin America and the Caribbean on issues of Christian witness, the role of the Bible in transformational development, and church relations.

Michael Pountney, a former teacher, theological college principal, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship staff worker, is presently Associate Priest for Community Outreach at St Paul's Anglican Church in Toronto, Canada. When not writing Bible studies, lunching with street people or encouraging the business community to think and act in a Christian manner, he likes to sail boats and train for marathons.

The format is designed to make the 22 studies adaptable to different timetables and unique circumstances. Any one of the studies might be done as a single unit within an hour or so, or, depending on the time available, a particular study might be broken into two or three shorter time periods like our 15-minute morning devotionals.

I've already noted that even with the best of intentions, reconciliation can be profoundly complex for us. During the preparation of this series, Rudy Scholaert, a World Vision staff member who is gathering diverse religious leaders in Kosovo to address reconciliation issues, visited the World Vision Canada office. He recounted the following incident. In spite of the of the alienation and brokenness of life in Kosovo, the views and voices of young people give its hope for restored relationships in the future and for a more reconciled world.

A story about two friends

Rudy and a WV Australian staff member decided to take a hike up a huge hill on the north side of an area inhabited by Serbs. When we got up to the top, we could see for miles. And the sight was beautiful, commented Rudy. We were alone for a while before two young Serbs interrupted our conversation. The two young men were young teens and in broken English one said, Can you see that city down there? That's Boustrie. That's where I'm from. Boustrie is now populated by Albanians. You know I have a best friend down there he's Albanian.

Rudy was intrigued and asked, Is he still your best friend?

After a long pause the young teen said, I don't know. But I would like to go back down there and visit my friend.

What struck me, continued Rudy, was that if I had asked the same question of an adult he would have said, Of course not. He's Albanian and I'm Serb. We're enemies.

The conversation continued from Rudy's point of view, The most interesting thing was that as we talked about the conflict, the young people laid the blame for the problems at the feet of the Serb police and the K L .A. In the minds of the teenagers, the conflict was between two military forces rather than two ethnic groups.

Reconciliation is not just about turning away from bitterness and hate and hurt. Reconciliation is also about continuing to believe in people and reaching out to them. It is taking the risk that even in the midst of the pain of war friendships can still exist. And if they don't, the spirit of reconciliation believes that friendships can heal and begin again.

Don Posterski
Director, Church Relations

God the Reconciler

THEME

Our human nature makes us distrust God and alienates us from God in many ways—yet God keeps seeking reconciliation.

The divine vision for reconciliation reveals the patience and persistence of God. God's identity as the ultimate Reconciler can be seen in God's unrelenting pursuit of women and men as friends to be loved and in God's steadfast refusal to be ignored.

While we have been created to enjoy our relationship with God, our human tendency is to become distrustful and to distance ourselves from the God who wants to be in relationship with us. Sometimes God's refusal to force himself on us leaves us wondering whether God is still there. This expression of God's character that keeps God loving us while refusing to overrule our human prerogative to disregard God leaves us vulnerable to the dictates of our own will.

Even though there is ample evidence for God, we still ask, Does God really exist? We engage in the temptation of asking, Did God really say that? How can we really know what God means? We are like Adam and Eve in the garden, predisposed to believe the voice of the serpent that counsels, You will not really die. We can so easily be lured away from friendship with God and become trapped in multiple expressions of alienation. Tragically, the greater our distance from God and God's will and ways, the greater is the danger of our fracturing all other relationships and descending into worlds of darkness and disintegration.

INSIGHT

God's reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to each other.

But while we might flail around in confusion, sometimes blaming others for our plight and believing the serpents of discord and doubt, God cannot but be true to himself and continues to love us. God persists in his unconquerable passion to draw us into friendship with himself. The ultimate Reconciler will not yield in this quest, either to the reckless rebellions of our humanity or to the subtle craftiness of God's enemies.

Context

The Bible's first recorded conversation is about one of God's directives. Like many conversations today, God is offstage. Even though the issue at hand is a matter of life and death,

Adam and Eve see God's expectations as ambiguous and subject to human interpretation.

The drama in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve, the serpent and God raises issues that face us today. Which voices do we listen to? Do we rationalize our own desires, or surrender to God's ways? Do we trust God? Will we write our own charter of rights, or conclude that God can be trusted? Will we hear God's voice and accept God's invitation to be reconciled and restored?

To interact with this text, it is not necessary to resolve the question how this Scripture relates to actual history. We need only acknowledge that this incident is to be interpreted within the context of the entire Bible. The garden truly represents our world—the world in which our relationships with our environment, each other, and God badly need sorting out. The theme of this first study will be repeated in the Bible many more times—in the face of our multiple alienations, God keeps seeking reconciliation.

Biblical Text

GENESIS 3:1-13

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, Did God say, thou shall not eat from any tree in the garden? The woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die. But the serpent said to the woman, You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, Where are you? He said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. He said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate. Then the LORD God said to the woman, What is this that you have done? The woman said, The serpent tricked me, and I ate.

Responses

1. This early creation story in the garden, which ends in deliberate disobedience, reminds us that this could have been the last chapter in human history. God could have concluded, This human experiment is not going to work! What does this tell us about God? If you had been God in this situation, what might you have done?
2. As a result of the disobedience and consequent rupture in the divine-human relationship, what other relationships rupture? What happens between Adam and Eve?
3. What do we learn about the character and practices of evil serpent voices in this incident? What do we learn about God's character and practice?
4. The serpent used the appeal of wisdom as a motivation to disobey God. As you think about your society and workplace, what are the appeals today that tempt and motivate disobedience?
5. Think about some of your own garden stories . . . times when you were willfully disobedient. How did God get your attention? How did God treat you? How did it feel to be reconciled?

God the Covenant Maker

THEME

As a covenant maker, God positions himself to love God's human creation whether or not God is loved in return.

Some relationships are held together with contracts. Companies doing business together, employees working for employers, and vendors offering their services often establish clear written conditions. Another example would be the pre-nuptial agreements that some couples are signing in many parts of the world. Should the marriage not work out, the terms of separation are pre-determined from the beginning. The agreement signed by both parties tends to make the relationship more like a business formula than like two people making a covenant to live together until death do us part.

God's idea of a relationship is not to draft a multi-page contract to protect himself and then hold a signing ceremony. Instead, God leaves himself extremely vulnerable. God positions himself as the lover who commits to love whether or not God is loved in return. God is a covenant maker. Regardless of our human response to God's invitation to friendship and relationship, God is unwavering in his commitment always to be there with extended and welcoming arms.

INSIGHT

Do not tell me, I have besought him many times, I have entreated, I have supplicated, but I have not effected a reconciliation. Never desist till you have reconciled him. Although you may have made many entreaties, yet you must not desist until you have persuaded. God entreats us every day, and we do not hear; and yet He does not cease entreating.
John Chrysostom

God would have every justification in responding to our evil deeds and rebellion with withdrawal and punishment, but a contract approach to relationship is the exact antithesis of the covenant approach that always hopes for reconciliation. Whereas a contract would spell out the terms for us to earn God's rewarding love, covenant speaks of the endless opportunities we have to receive God's unconditional love. Accordingly, God's covenant mathematics simply don't work in the contract world.

Context

The story of Noah is a graphic account of human rebellion in the created order and reveals the chaos that resulted for everyone.

The Scriptures declare that it is God's creation PEOPLE who create the moral disorder of the world by rebelling against the Creator and expressing corruption and violence (Genesis 6:11). What that means exactly is left more to our imagination than given in a descriptive list. However, our imagination is well informed by the daily or weekly news media and by our observation of the way people behave. There is no reason to suppose that yesterday's evil was much different from today's disobedience, so we should be able to identify with the corruption of Noah's world.

The chaos of the flood is quite a different matter, however. In this instance, the Creator himself causes the disorder. Torrential rain falls endlessly and floods rise relentlessly. In the tragedy, all humanity drowns except for Noah and his family.

Could it happen again? we ask in hushed and anxious tones. Will there be another flood? Will God destroy the inhabitants of the earth again in such a way?

The answer is no because covenantal love reigns.

Biblical Text

GENESIS 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

God said, This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.

God said to Noah, This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.

Responses

1. In this universal covenant with Noah, God commits himself to the earth and to its people. Why do you think God made this covenant? How does the covenant make you feel toward God? What thoughts do you have in response to God's covenant?
2. When you see a rainbow in the sky, do you sometimes think about the covenant that God made with Noah? What is the value of reminders and symbols in our lives?
3. God asked Noah to build an ark. In the eyes of people around Noah, it was a foolish act of faith. In God's eyes, it was an act of obedience. Is there any part of God's call to obedience that feels foolish to you? Do you feel out of step with society around you, or do you feel comfortable?
4. Descendants have a prominent place in the covenants of Genesis. How do you see God's covenantal love being handed down from parents to children in your own culture and church? What are your primary hopes for your family, for your friends, for your church?
5. When you think of God's covenant with you, what are your primary hopes for you?

God the People Maker

THEME

Abraham heard the voice of the one true God and, because Abraham was obedient, he was blessed. The voice that spoke to Abraham can also speak to us and we, too, can obey and be blessed.

Stay home, is the cautious advice. Stay within the familiar., stay close to your family and friends. Keep connected to what you know. Play it safe. Stay home! And if you do have to be religious, be religious like the rest of us.

One can imagine that Abraham received this kind of advice. It's not likely that there were travel consultants in Abraham's day, but even the most adventurous could be forgiven if they fell in line with the cautious counsel. What Abraham was planning to do was extraordinary—bordering on the insane! He had heard the voice of a new god, and he was ready to pack his suitcase.

In the city of Ur in Abraham's homeland, there were many gods, so if you wanted to add a new god to the culture go ahead, no problem. However, the voice that Abraham heard was that of the God of all the families of the earth. It was the voice of the God who said, I am the one true God.

At the very foundation of Christian faith stands the towering figure of Abraham, writes Miroslav Volf, but that is only because Abraham was courageous enough to step out of the limits of one particular culture to worship the universal God. This same God would later be known as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—the one, transcendent and universal Savior.

INSIGHT

It is difficult to believe because it is difficult to obey.
-Soren Kierkegaard

Abraham and his wife Sarah stood at a spiritual intersection. They distanced themselves from the specific history of their own particular culture to become partners in bringing to birth the new people of God. God's intervention and their readiness to cooperate had profound implications for what they did, for what they became and for how others were blessed through them. In all their experiences the blessing of God journeyed with them.

Context

Abraham is the example of a traveler . . . a traveler with a purpose. He is the nomad who

follows a voice, a traveler who takes a journey because he is called by God.

Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldeans (geographically he would be a modern-day Iraqi). First his family moved to Haran (near the border with Turkey) and then he moved to Canaan (traveling down through what we know as Syria and perhaps Jordan into Palestine and Israel). His journeys were not motivated by restlessness or discontent, neither were they journeys of ambition. Abraham's travels were motivated by obedience.

It is important to note that Abraham's journey does not result in his losing his culture or his personal Hebrew identity. These features he takes with him as he moves with some risk into the unknown. But it is in his journey into the unknown that he finds a higher identity. He discovers that he is a person created and loved by the one true God of the universe. In a manner beyond his imagination, God's blessing flows from Abraham to others.

What a destiny lies ahead of this wandering Chaldean! He becomes the father of the nation of the Hebrews; God changes his name from Abram to Abraham and he becomes the father of multitudes; he becomes the one in whom all the nations of the world are to be blessed. Our *people-making God* chooses Abraham as the pivotal person in the great sweep of biblical history.

Biblical Text

GENESIS 12:1-4a and 17:1-7

Now the LORD said to Abram, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.

[Twenty-two years later, the covenant is renewed. . .]

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous. Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Responses

1. Go from your country and your kindred, was the directive. Abraham was a real person in a real place. Put yourself in Abraham's position. What do you think would have been most difficult for Abraham in this situation?
2. The covenant with Abraham, though strong and visionary, is also vague and abstract. No destination for the journey is named, no future family tree is presented. How do you think Abraham understood this promise? How do you think he described it to Sarah and his family?
3. Abraham experienced God's personal presence . . . and then a strong directive to obey. Have there been situations when you have sensed that God has spoken directly to you? Share some of those experiences with others. What have been the results?
4. As you think about God's incredible blessing of Abraham, how has God blessed you? God is a people-making God. What do you appreciate most about God's presence and direction in your life? How is your life different because of God's vision for you?

Jesus the Debt Forgiver

THEME

Because we have received mercy and forgiveness from God, we are obliged to extend mercy and forgiveness to others.

Most of us know what it is to go into debt. Whether it's a big balance on a credit card or a loan from a friend or family member, we have experienced debt.

When we use credit as the means to repair our home or buy a computer, we calculate our ability to repay the loan and the interest. Around the world, World Vision lends small funds to the poor, often women, to improve the longer-term situations of their families.

It's a rare part of the world that escapes the lure of credit. We know how the flames of personal debt are fuelled by the incredibly easy manner in which a credit card can be used. On a global scale, international monetary systems enable the rich and powerful to extract loan repayments from poor countries which no longer have the ability to repay, often because of unfair trade conditions. The unequal sharing of individual and corporate wealth in the modern world means that those who already have more than they need end up collecting interest from those who can barely survive.

Leniency regarding the repayment of debt is a rare commodity in the commercial world. Occasionally, one does read a story about the forgiving of debt. On the individual level, there have been instances when someone wins a small fortune in a lottery and graciously forgives an outstanding personal loan. A change of heart resulting from a religious conversion has propelled some individuals to cancel debts. Parents frequently express their love for their children by writing off loans they have extended for education. Jubilee 2000 is a movement of social activists to lobby governments and the World Bank to cancel portions of the overwhelming debt incurred by the world's poorest nations.

INSIGHT

It is ultimately in our best interest that we become forgiving, repentant, reconciling, and reconciled people, because without forgiveness, without reconciliation, we have no future.

*-Archbishop Desmond Tutu,
No Future Without Forgiveness*

Jesus often referred to money in his teachings and, in a parable about the kingdom of heaven, he dealt with the issue of the forgiveness of debts.

Context

What is the kingdom of heaven like? was a favorite theme of Jesus' teaching. One of Jesus' common approaches to teaching about the kingdom was, "Well, it's like. . . let me tell you a story. . ."

In the following parable Jesus asserts, "The kingdom of God is like a king who wished to settle his accounts with his slaves. What follows is a story that demonstrates God's incredible generosity, especially God's nature to forgive. In this story God's lavish generosity is expressed as a gift of grace when the king in the story forgives a large amount of money (ten thousand talents might be approximated to 50 million silver coins).

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we are asking for God's will and ways to come into our present circumstances. In this parable Jesus uses the king as a model for bringing heaven to earth. As God treats us, with unmerited grace, mercy and forgiveness, we are to treat others. The hope is that people who have received mercy and forgiveness will in turn treat others in the same generous way.

Biblical Text

Matthew 18:23-35

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you? And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Responses

1. The servant in the parable who was forgiven an enormous debt refused to forgive the man who owed him a small debt. What was in the character and disposition of the servant who had been forgiven a large debt that kept him from extending the same generosity to the small debtor?
2. Why does it seem easier to extend forgiveness and be reconciled to some people than to others?
3. The parable teaches us that the way we behave brings consequences. Whereas disobedience keeps heaven from coming to earth, obedience brings God's will and ways to earth. Imagine and describe what would have happened between the two slaves if the big debtor had forgiven the small debtor? How would their relationship have been affected?
4. The servant who was forgiven the large debt broke the cycle of forgiveness when he refused to forgive the man with the small debt. Can you recall a situation in your workplace or among your family and friends where the cycle of forgiveness was broken? What were the consequences? Identify a situation that you have observed where forgiveness and reconciliation led to more forgiveness and reconciliation. What were the consequences?
5. In God's plan, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to receive forgiveness for our disobedience and to experience reconciliation with God. How should the way God treats you affect the way you treat others?

Jesus the Reconciler of Enemies

THEME

Jesus continues to bring about reconciliation, even to those who live as his enemies and wants us to love our enemies, too.

The teachings of Jesus sometimes seem so idealistic that in human terms they appear to be impossible to put into practice. The directive to love your enemies is just one example. At the end of the twentieth century, after a hundred years of unparalleled warfare and cruel violence, enemies are entrenched in their national and ethnic hatreds.

In the light of what seem to be current unresolvable enmities, how can we begin to make sense of the idea that we should love our enemies? Considering that for many peoples of the world the drive to survive is fueled by unrelenting hatred of an enemy, is it even feasible to believe that reconciliation can overrule the drive to hate?

The only possibility for followers of Jesus is to live out the vision that God has for all the peoples of the earth. Our first impulse should be to look at how God himself relates to his alienated creation so that we may do the same. God's action is clear: God pursues us relentlessly. Even when we live according to our sin-centered character (which really positions us as enemies of God's will and ways), God still invites us into friendship. The essence of the kingdom of God is the rebuilding of what has been broken. The nature of the love of God is to unite former enemies and to reconcile their differences. Of course, the command to love our enemies is beyond our natural grasp and human capacity. It is only through the love of God, the grace of God's Son and the power of God's Spirit that such a breathtaking and impossible ambition can become a reality.

What is more sobering is to think about the alternative. If we choose to live by the creed of an eye for an eye, we will all end up blind. The endless cycle of revenge digs graves for all of us. Watching the warfare places like Rwanda, or the former Yugoslavia, or Chechnya, makes us wonder whether the love of enemy is actually one of the few alternatives to mutual extermination. The best way to transform enemies is to make them our friends. This is exactly what God does. And we are invited to imitate God.

Context

The passage that follows is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Some scholars believe that the sermon is really a summary of all the teachings of Jesus. Whether the sermon is a summary of, or a diversion from, his main emphasis is not the issue. In this instance, Jesus raises the level of

what it means to follow him. An appropriate sermon topic for this particular section could be, Out with the old and in with the new.

The central message is that the old ethic that made room for practices of personal revenge is replaced with the new ethic of extraordinary love. One conclusion is clear. Without God's personal presence and the energy of God's Spirit, we will not and cannot measure up to the standards of the new way.

It would be wrong, however, to think that Jesus is declaring the Old Testament law null and void. Jesus is not on a collision course with God the Father. Rather, Jesus is revealing the radical nature of God's love that is going to be revealed fully in Jesus' own surrender to death on the cross—a death that is offered so that enemies of God can end their alienation from God's ways and be reconciled in love, instead of living in hate.

INSIGHT

Reconciliation means breaking the spiral of intergenerational vengeance. It means substituting the vicious spiral of violence with the virtuous upward spiral of mutual reinforcing respect.
-Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour*

Biblical Text

MATTHEW 5:38-48

You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Responses

1. Jesus' life was a living example of his teachings. His credibility would have been destroyed if his practices had not demonstrated his teachings. From your general knowledge of Jesus, what stories and events in Jesus' life exemplify his teaching to love your enemies?
2. How do you respond to the notion that God sends his rain on the evil and the good? Do you celebrate that idea, or lament it? What does this tell us about God's character and how God views all people?
3. There are many accounts of people in our own time who have practiced the high standards of faith that Jesus holds up in this passage. Who is on your list of modern saints? Name some people you respect—people you know personally—because of the way they live out their faith.
4. Is there someone in your life you would name as an enemy? Is there anyone from whom you feel alienated? Is there a situation where you need to experience reconciliation? Ask for prayer so that you might be given God's presence and energy to seek reconciliation and to love in extraordinary ways.

Ethnic Equality

THEME

In the kingdom of God and in the church of Jesus Christ, there are no divisions of race or nation: all the peoples of the world are reconciled in the gospel.

Since the final decades of the twentieth century, the world has witnessed a new kind of tribalism. Within historic nation states, ancient animosities among ethnic groups have re-emerged. The Rwandan suffering of 1994 illustrates this tragedy. Hutu extremists in the reigning government and their Tutsi rivals slaughtered each other in a conflict of unprecedented violence.

In another instance, the people groups of the former Yugoslavia, divided along racial and religious lines, rose up in their clans to fight each other for ancient territory. In the years following the 1991 Croatian-Serbian war, newly emerging nations fought viciously to establish territorial gain for the future apportioning of Bosnia Herzegovina. The painful story of Kosovo is along the same theme.

The political pieces of the Balkan jigsaw puzzle, probably more accurately seen as ethnic states rather than as nations, became players in the tragic drama that created the now familiar term ethnic cleansing.

For observers at a distance, the horrors of ethnic conflict are beyond description and beyond words. However, for those

INSIGHT

*This is how ethnic cleansing began to acquire its logic.
If you can't trust your neighbours, drive them out.
If you can't live among them, live only among your own. . . . Never say ethnic cleansing is just racial hatred run wild. For there is a deep logic to it.
-Michael Ignatieff, Blood and Belonging*

caught in the middle of rage and violence, death and abuse have become a personal reality. And for the elders, much of the unbearable heartache is the memory of better times when, in their particular village or town, ethnically different peoples lived as neighbors and friends. At the dawn of a new millennium, our hopes of moving beyond tribalism have foundered.

Context

The Bible is no stranger to ethnic or tribal violence. A fatal result of the wonderful variety of the peoples in God's creation has been their everlasting propensity for racial and national hostility.

A rapid read through the Bible could begin with the fight between two brothers, Cain and Abel. The conflict between Abraham's two sons, Ishmael (Arab nations) and Isaac (Israel), is with us to this day. The family friction broadens to the conflict between Semite (Abraham and his Hebrew descendants) and Amorite (the Canaanites who already lived in the promised land). The lens of biblical history forces us to focus on the inter-tribal jealousies among the sons of Jacob that broaden again to include rivalries and hostilities among Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome. In spite of all the political and ethnic tension, God continues making a people for himself: a people with no name but God's name, no but God's kingdom and no superior identity except that of being in Christ.

By the time Jesus enters human history in first-century Jerusalem, he was faced with a multiethnic and multilingual city. There was also a time of transition while the community of Jesus Christ became a multiethnic and multilingual church. It took time for former distinctions and differences of culture to retreat before the overriding unity of the gospel message that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. As Paul puts it, "You are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). In the passage for study, there is a flare-up of former ethnic rivalries. Christian believers from a strict Jewish background (Hebrews) would have boycotted Greek as an alien language, but others from a more cultured and international background (Hellenists) would have learned Greek and happily used it in commerce and society. In a New Testament church problem concerning the unequal distribution of food to needy women, this dispute comes to a head.

Although there are no guns firing in the background, ethnic favoritism lurks in the shadows of the problem. Look for the role of leadership and the grace-filled way in which the two sides are reconciled the way that conflict de-escalates rather than intensifies.

Biblical Text

ACTS 6:1-7

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Responses

1. It would appear that the Hebrews had control over food distribution, and that they were guilty of ethnic favoritism. The situation could have escalated and become ugly, but it didn't. How did the twelve disciples address the problem? What did they do? How did the community respond?
2. What seems to be the basis on which the disciples solve the problem and move toward reconciliation between the Hellenists and the Hebrews?
3. When there seem to be expressions of racism (ethnic bias), favoritism or the misuse of power in our personal and work worlds, how can we apply what we learned from this incident in the New Testament church? How can we avoid increasing the conflict and take steps toward resolving tensions?
4. One of the results of this New Testament situation was church growth. What do you think is the connection between reconciliation within the congregation and church growth resulting from outsiders entering the congregation?

Gender Equality

THEME

The love of Jesus Christ is meant to reconcile gender inequalities, so that men and women might be partners of equal worth.

Cultures have many different ways for women to view men and men to view women. Although some parts of the world have seen a healthy growth in awareness and appreciation of gender issues, navigating toward gender equality can be a stormy experience.

Nevertheless, we cannot escape some of the fundamental issues. Too often women are victims of domestic violence if not outright assault, then at least abuse and misuse. They often suffer sexual assault and rape, and are objects of commerce in the huge international pornography industry. We know that women, like men, long to be fulfilled in the home, in the family and in the broader community. We also know that success and appreciation for their contribution in the workplace is often difficult to obtain because of male dominance and prejudice in the corridors of power.

INSIGHT

When the Bible talks about justice and injustice, it doesn't start giving us a litany of the perpetrators.

It gives us a litany of the victims, the wounded ones the widows, the orphans, the aliens.

-Nicholas Wolterstorff, The Contours of Justice

Our experience tells us that the issues surrounding gender are not simple either to write about or to live! Cultural complexity is just one challenge. Each particular culture holds gender issues within the context of its own customs, traditions, religions, preferences and stereotypes.

Therefore, it is impossible to create a perfect formula for equality that will work every time, in every place, in every way. Still, whether the setting is the home, work, the church or public life, the desire of many men and women is to reconcile the differences between them without obliterating the distinctions.

Context

How does your culture interpret the roles of men and women? How does your community interpret the partnership of men and women? How does your church interpret the ministries of men and women?

As we navigate the rough seas of gender inequality, many of us on board the ship of the church

have been distressed by strange storms and challenged by new courses. The Bible is our primary chart for this voyage into the reconciliation of male and female relationships, but the task of faithful biblical interpretation is a complex one, and we must be wary of simply finding the parts of the Bible that appear to arm the correctness of our own previously plotted course.

The single most effective biblical aid to navigation is the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Perhaps it does not need repeating, but it is always good to remind ourselves that all issues of worth, identity and role are resolved in the love of Jesus. All of us, regardless of gender, are reconciled in Jesus love.

The woman in the passage that follows is unnamed, but she has gained fame as the woman at the well. She serves as a model for the way Jesus relates to women. In this conversation, Jesus refuses to follow the cultural assessment of women as inferior, unintelligent and unimportant. Choosing neither to ignore the woman nor demean her, he engages her in a conversation of profound spiritual significance. The woman is an excellent conversation partner, and provokes Jesus into a serious pursuit of truth with her.

Biblical Text

John 4:6-29

Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, Give me a drink. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, Give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water. The woman said to him, Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it? Jesus said to her, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. The woman said to him, Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.

Jesus said to her, Go, call your husband, and come back. The woman answered him, I have no husband. Jesus said to her, You are right in saying, I have no husband; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true! The woman said to him, Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem. Jesus said to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this

mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. The woman said to him, I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ). When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us. Jesus said to her, I am he, the one who is speaking to you.

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, What do you want? or, Why are you speaking with her? Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?

Responses

1. It is a tired and thirsty Jesus who opens up this conversation with a culturally second-class woman from a despised province. What does that tell you about Jesus? And what does that suggest for those of us who are followers of Jesus?
2. How would you describe how Jesus treats the woman?
3. The conversation moves from a chat about well water to a conversation about spiritual water. At what point does the woman understand what Jesus is saying? What do you hear Jesus saying?
4. What roles do men and women play in the worship and practices of your own church? Are there any better ways in which a true partnership can be enhanced?
5. Try to envision your workplace and your family from the other gender point of view (men from women's and women from men's). What suggestions would you have for each other's behavior--at home and in the workplace?

Religious Reconciliation

THEME

In a world of many religions, Christians can honor Jesus Christ and reconcile their differences with others by respecting the dignity of all people, regardless of their religious beliefs.

In too many nations of the world, religion contributes to internal strife and violence. Hate pits Protestants against Catholics in Northern Ireland and Christians against Muslims in Indonesia. How can Christians remain true to their own faith without becoming either perpetrators or victims of religious intolerance?

Historically, religious conflict has always existed. Even when religious people have resisted throwing hand grenades at each other, they have resorted to wars of words. Fortunately, globalization and the movement of populations into cities give us more occasions to experience religious diversity without expressing overt hostility. With the worldwide movements of refugees and immigrants, large cities in most continents now know the meaning of religious pluralism in their own populations. While the places of outright inter-religious violence are relatively few, in the twentieth century the degree of religious aggression has been excessive. We have a growing unease about the ability of different religious groups to live together peacefully. The presence of persecution and the absence of harmony give the lie to the injunction of all the world's major faiths to treat others as you would like to be treated.

INSIGHT

Loyalty to one's own tradition and faith community does not exclude a sensitivity towards those of other faiths that is orientated on dialogue . . . The final goal of all our efforts cannot be a unitary religion; it must be an authentic peacemaking between religions.
-Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility*

Christians have strong convictions. They believe that Jesus is the Lord of the universe and they wish to serve him faithfully. They also understand that they are commanded to love their neighbors, whether or not they share their faith in Christ. As Christians they know that they must affirm the dignity of all peoples. Most Christians also want social structures that permit persons of differing religious convictions, no less strong than their own, to live together without discrimination.

One avenue is principled pluralism – remaining true to one’s principles and convictions while also making room for others who hold different views and live in different ways. In principled pluralism, each religion grants to the others the same privileges it wishes for itself. Regardless of people’s religious convictions they have the right to live in unjudged cultural space.

Context

The Bible is adamant that alternative religious practices and beliefs are out of order for faithful Jews and Christians.

The sin of idolatry (the worship of another god) and the sin of syncretism (the merging together of spiritual ideas and practices from other religions) are serious offences in the sight of the one true God. Nonetheless, significant people from other religious faiths figure prominently and favorably in the biblical text. Naaman, a Syrian warrior, receives a miracle of healing from Elisha; Cyrus, the Persian king, was a blessing to the Jews, freeing them from exile; Ruth, from the religion of Moab, climbs into the family tree of King David; wise men from the East offer gifts and celebrate the birth of Jesus; and a Roman centurion named Cornelius presents a great challenge to Peter’s culturally contained and non-pluralistic Jewish version of Christianity.

Biblical Text

ACTS 10: 1-16, 33-35

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort, as it was called. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. One afternoon at about three o’clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, Cornelius. He stared at him in terror and said, What is it, Lord? He answered, Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside. When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, Get up, Peter; kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. The voice said to him again, a second time, What God has made clean, you must not call profane. This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. . .

[Cornelius said] Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say. Then Peter began to speak to them: I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Responses

1. Take the time to read all of Acts 10. Contrast the way Peter saw Cornelius (foreign, faithless) and the way God saw Cornelius (very religious). Make two lists of how Peter and God viewed Cornelius differently.
2. How does your church tradition and culture view people from other denominations and different religions? Are there some ways that you are like Peter? Are you likely to see others who are different from you in the way God saw Cornelius?
3. How would you apply Peter’s great insight in the final sentence above (verse 35) as a tool for reconciliation in the presence of religious conflict?
4. Review the two lists comparing how Peter and God viewed Cornelius. Create your list of how you plan to remain true to your Christian principles while also making room for others who hold different views and live in different ways.

Economic Equality

THEME

In a world of unequal distribution of personal, corporate and national wealth, the gospel of Jesus Christ compels his followers to step in the gap between rich and poor with acts of generosity and justice.

Reconciliation between the world's poor and rich is both a Christian dream and a call to bold Christian action. In the end, it will require structural change in the social order. Any so-called reconciliation of the rich and poor that does not produce a more equitable sharing of wealth and resources is mere rhetoric.

The Christian commitment to compassion and justice is often stated as God's bias toward the poor, or God's partiality for the marginalized. The same meaning reversed translates as God's bias against the rich, or his prejudice against the powerful. Any coming together of the haves and the have-nots that does not create fairer access to power and privilege is a sham.

At the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era, cyberspace is generating enormous wealth for relatively few individuals, who reign as the new technological elite. In what amounts to an immoral contrast, close to 50 percent of the world's population, or 3 billion people, live on less than US\$2 per day. In these cyberspace and technological times, the continent of Africa has only 18 telephone lines per 1,000 people. In the Americas and Europe, there are over 300 lines per 1,000 people. Well-intentioned people in the wealthy part of the world often respond with financial generosity. Although personal generosity is a Christian virtue deserving applause, it is not enough to generate social restructuring and global economic justice.

What must be asserted with uncompromising force is that people who claim to be Christian must help alleviate the afflictions of the poor. Followers of Jesus cannot be passive. In order to have informed minds and tender hearts so as to be advocates for the poor, many more committed Christians need to grasp the implications of macro economics and trade agreements. Compelled by conviction to pursue justice, Christians must take initiatives that redress the tyrannizing imbalance between the world's wealthy and the world's poor.

Context

The Bible asserts that God is against the persistent poverty of the poor and the persistent oppression of them by the rich. The challenge to Christians as global stewards of God's creation is complex, but progress can be made.

Perhaps the eighth century B.C. prophets communicate the clearest biblical teaching on economic disparity. Hosea, Amos and Micah roundly condemned the wealthy of Israel for their opulence and influence, especially if their wealth had been acquired by the shameless exploitation of the poor. Economic exploitation must end, thunders Amos: But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24).

Yet there is hope. The prophet Joel foresees the time when God will pour out his Spirit on all people, and restore justice, when the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk (Joel 3: 18). God will not abandon his people and he will not leave them to fend for themselves: Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Joel 2:32). The hope is that the God who judges all the nations and the earth will also build a kingdom where, in the presence of God's love and power, economic disparities will disappear.

INSIGHT

Human beings are so made that the ones who do the crushing feel nothing; it is the person crushed who feels what is happening. Unless one has placed oneself on the side of the oppressed, to feel with them, one cannot understand.

---Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*

One challenge for the New Testament church was to begin to establish the economic equality characteristic of God's future kingdom. The place to practice this was in the community in Jerusalem immediately following the resurrection. An example for the early church was a man named Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. This means that he was in charge of an organization of less than fully patriotic Jews who picked up the tax levies for their Roman overlords. Zacchaeus ran the local network by syndicating the business of collecting taxes, and methodically skimmed his own percentage off the top as the money made its circuitous route to Rome. He was not a popular man. We do not have all the facts, but he was probably not a nice man. He was more familiar with extortion than compassion, with selfish malpractice than justice. In the fashionable city of Jericho, where Herod the Great had built his winter palace, Zacchaeus was living in wealth and privilege. Then Jesus interrupted his life.

Biblical Text

LUKE 19:1-10

He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of

the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today. So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner. Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much. Then Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.

Responses

1. Zacchaeus takes the initiative to find Jesus. He and Jesus come together in this marvelous meeting. How does Jesus respond? What do Jesus' critics say about him?
2. Think about the supper Jesus had in the home of Zacchaeus. What was most important in the life of Zacchaeus? What do you think they talked about over supper?
3. Jesus announced that, Today salvation has come to this house. What does Zacchaeus commit himself to doing? What are the consequences of his commitment?
4. In this case, what is the impact of spiritual salvation on the social structure in Jericho? How does the response of Zacchaeus help to reconcile the disparity between rich and poor in his immediate community?
5. Imagine that you were living in Jericho, and when you answered the knock at your door Zacchaeus was standing there offering you money. How would you have responded? What would you have thought? After hearing the whole story, what would you have thought about Jesus? How would you explain the results of salvation? What impact might the salvation of Zacchaeus have had on his relationships?

Risk of Retaliation

THEME

Those who desire reconciliation need discretion and wisdom in order to avoid becoming the victims of retaliation.

The process of reconciliation is fraught with risk, including not knowing how the other party will respond to our overtures of peace. When is the right time to seek reconciliation? Should personal safety be risked when attempting the restoration of a relationship? Assessing the risk of retaliation and other adverse reactions is part of the complex reconciliation process.

It is all too easy to snatch the olive branch out of an offender's hand and use it as a weapon to inflict further pain. If that happens at the moment of hope for reconciliation, the damage worsens. The consequences are particularly crushing if a former enemy pretends to desire peace but really plans to retaliate.

When we find ourselves in the position of offering the olive branch without knowing how it will be received, we put ourselves in a very vulnerable position. If there has been a history of violence-physical, sexual, verbal or emotional-then the risk is real.

In risk situations, *naï veté* should be set aside for discretion. The abused wife desiring reconciliation should be wary if violence is a past pattern; the betrayed business partner does well to terminate agreements if the possibility of further embezzlement looms; the exploited friend is unwise to lend more money if further deceit seems probable. When relationships have been damaged, there are obstacles to overcome before shared life can begin again.

INSIGHT

The person who opts for revenge should dig two graves.

Genuine reconciliation can only happen when both parties proceed with integrity in the process of establishing peace. One-way traffic on the road to reconciliation leads to a dead end. Reconciliation can only really move from theory to reality when there are changes in *rue* attitude and behavior of both parties who have offended each other.

Context

one point in Israel's history, King Saul serves the people as the Lord's anointed leader.

However, God's favor is withdrawn from King Saul, and David is anointed by the prophet Samuel to be the new king in Saul's place. This act is later ratified by the people and authenticated by David's prowess as a successful warrior-king and charismatic leader.

In this context, Saul remains as an insecure king. It is no wonder that he is threatened by David's success. In a state of confusion, Saul swings between honoring David as a divinely appointed king-to-be and seeking to kill him. The following passage of Scripture tells one part of the story.

Biblical Text

1 Samuel 26:7-27:1

So David and Abishai went to the army by night; there Saul lay sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the army lay around him. Abishai said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand today; now therefore let me pin him to the ground with one stroke of the spear; I will not strike him twice." But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him; for who can raise his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless?" David said, "As the Lord lives, the Lord will strike him down; or his day will come to die; or he will go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should raise my hand against the Lord's anointed; but now take the spear that is at his head, and the water jar, and let us go." So David took the spear that was at Saul's, and the water jar, and they went away. No one saw it, or knew it, nor did anyone awake; for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord had fallen upon them.

Then David went over to the other side, and stood on top of a hill far away, with a great distance between them. David called to the army . . .

Saul recognized David's voice, and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" David said, "It is my voice, my Lord, O king." And he added, "Why does my Lord pursue his servant? For what have I done? What guilt is on my hands? . . .

Then Saul said, "I have done wrong; come back, my son David, for I will never harm you again, because my life was precious in your sight today; I have been a fool, and have made a great mistake." David replied, "Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and get it. The Lord rewards everyone for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the Lord gave you into my hand today, but I would not raise my hand against the Lord's anointed. As your life was precious today in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the Lord, and may he rescue me from all tribulation.

Then Saul said to David, "Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them." So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place.

David said in his heart, "I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul; there is nothing better for me than to escape to the land of the Philistines; then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand."

Responses

1. David has two views of Saul. He sees Saul as God's anointed leader, but he still does not trust Saul. How does David's view of Saul affect his behavior in the story? What decisions and choices does David make?
2. What risks is David prepared to make for the sake of reconciliation? What risks is he not prepared to make?
3. When David's servant Abishai is ready to end Saul's life, in essence David says, "Let the Lord deal with Saul." We sometimes face conflict situations that seem unsolvable. What guidelines can we develop to help us know: (a) when to keep trying to find our human solutions; or (b) when we should simply pray about the situation and depend on God to take care of the problem?
4. At the end of this part of the story, David discerns that Saul cannot be trusted, that Saul is capable of retaliation. In complicated situations in our life where relationships break down, what can we do to be as discerning as possible? How can we protect ourselves from becoming victims of retaliation?

Seeking Revenge

THEME

Because God is unalterably committed to reconciliation, we eventually have to choose between God's ways and our human desire for revenge.

Few impulses in the human heart are stronger than the impulse to seek revenge to get even. If we yield, then the terrible consequence of revenge rules lives and societies. We will return hurt for hurt and atrocity for atrocity.

The circumstances inciting revenge may be more complicated than we understand. In his book, *Violence Unveiled*, Gil Bailie contends that violence in history can be understood as sacred vengeance, where people believe that they have a sacred obligation to pay in kind for past offences. After all, how can one abandon a sacred obligation?

Sacred violence or sacred vengeance erases the moral problem of the killing, and even bestows honor on the one who does the killing. The sacred avenger has done a good deed. He has performed a noble act of justice. The spirit of sacred vengeance makes it possible for killing to be honorable, and if one should die in the process, then one dies as a hero. Even if one does wake up with a moral hangover, yesterday's act of violence is clearly justified.

Bailie also believes that the gospel destroys the old system of sacred violence. Jesus teaches us to abandon the pursuit of vengeance. In Christ's way there is no need for reciprocal violence, because we can trust God to bring about justice.

Still, the lust for revenge in our world too often turns our yesterdays into tomorrow's violence. Our history becomes our fate. Without the resolute will to break the inevitability of reprisal, conflicts will never cease and warfare will never end.

INSIGHT

How many mothers in Bosnia have sworn to teach their children hate and revenge! How many little Muslims, Serbs, and Croats will grow up listening to such stories and learning such lessons.
- Zeljko Vukovic, Serbian journalist.
The Killing of Sarajevo

Where there are signs of hope for increasing peacebuilding in places like Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Pakistan and India, we will find here the courageous actions of people in their

communities. When the sword of revenge is laid down upon the altar of a higher devotion it generates a desire for peace, a belief in forgiveness and a vision for reconciliation.

Whether our wounds are emotional or physical, whether we have been terrorized or have experienced the death of someone we love, eventually we will have to choose between the perverted pleasure of revenge and the pursuit of God's plan for peace.

Context

The book of Jonah tells the well-known story of the Israelite prophets being sent to pronounce judgment on the people living in Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire and nemesis of the Israelites.

Although Nineveh lies to the east of where Jonah lives, he deliberately takes a ship that is headed west. Contrary to his wishes, and after enduring a huge storm and an encounter with an enormous fish, Jonah eventually arrives in Nineveh. He does what God tells him to do and begins to preach. The results are remarkable and, to Jonah, an unsettling success. As the conclusion of chapter 3 tells us, "When God saw what they [the Ninevites] did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it."

God's response of compassion upsets Jonah terribly! Clearly Jonah had been preaching his warnings, but in his inner spirit he had been seeking revenge. After, all the Ninevites were the ancient enemy of his people, and he was ready to find delight in their destruction. The irony that permeates the book of Jonah not only reveals how complex human motivation can be, but also illustrates how we have the capacity to do the right thing for the wrong reasons.

Biblical Text

JONAH 4: 1-11

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the

sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, It is better for me to die than to live.

But God said to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the bush? And he said, Yes, angry enough to die. Then the Lord said, You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

Responses

1. This story reveals to us the nature of God. God successfully seeks reconciliation with Nineveh. The Ninevites repent of their sin and acknowledge God. How does God deal with Jonah's anger and despair?
2. The modern Ninevehs in our world include nations that are economically and militarily powerful, transnational corporations and organized crime. What nation or group plays the role of Nineveh from the vantage point of your country? Who is the enemy? God had a vision for Nineveh. If God gave you a vision for the modern Nineveh in your world, what might it look like?
3. In the story, God extended mercy and compassion to Jonah just as he did to the people of Nineveh. He provided a bush for shade and showed patience with Jonah while Jonah was feeling sorry for himself. Why do we sometimes have difficulty rejoicing when good things happen to other people? Why is it often so hard for us to express compassion?
4. Have you ever wanted to get even with someone by seeking revenge? Are there people you know by name who you hope will fail? How does God's actions inform our own actions in these situations?

Claiming Innocence

THEME

The human instinct to claim, I m innocent! is a stubborn obstacle on the pathway to achieving reconciliation.

I didn't do it! It's not my fault! The problem has nothing to do with me! How quickly we protest our innocence! There are many reasons why we are unable to take responsibility for what's gone wrong.

Unfortunately, claiming innocence not only precludes the possibility of reconciliation, it also closes the door to the opportunity of receiving forgiveness. What we are often unable to see is that lurking behind our claim of innocence is the pretence of self-righteousness.

There are many examples of claiming innocence. The politician implicated in a scandal involving misappropriation of government funds claims to have known nothing about it. The corporate head caught in a case of insider trading claims to have acted within the bounds of the law. The military leader named in an expose of incompetence denies all responsibility. And closer to home for many of us is the innocent party claim when a marriage falters or ends in divorce. So quickly and so easily we present ourselves as being without blame. In protesting our innocence we become an obstacle to the process of reconciliation. If we maintain such a position and continue to argue our perfection, we lift ourselves above and beyond the need for any kind of peacebuilding.

INSIGHT

It is to the prodigals that the memory of their Father's house comes back.

If the son had lived economically he would never have thought of returning.

-Simone Weil, quoted in Amazing Grace

The logic is flawless. We are not alienated because we have done nothing wrong. We are innocent of any behavior that could possibly divide or rupture a relationship. Therefore, the fault belongs to someone else.

This claim to innocence, resting as it does on self-deception and denial, could well be called the elder brother syndrome. It stands as a huge barrier to reconciliation. And claiming innocence also blocks the entry of God's grace.

Context

Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the most famous stories in the literary history of the Western world. Beyond its fame as a biblical story, its theme is repeated time after time in film and theater. A remarkable painting by Rembrandt of the prodigal's return hangs in the Hermitage art gallery in St. Petersburg.

In the sequence of the story and prior to the opening sentence in the text printed here, the younger son has persuaded his father to give him his inheritance. This is really a mortgage on the future. Had the younger son used his inheritance wisely, it is likely that he could have created his own independent wealth. But nothing like that happens. Fuelled by the desires of youth and by the gratification of pleasure, the son's adventure leads him into a life of wickedness and waste. A victim of his own ways, he is soon abandoned by his short-term friends, and left alone as a poverty-stricken social outcast.

For centuries, the understanding of this parable has been dominated by the exploits of the younger brother, to the point of being called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Because the elder brother plays a significant role both in the story and in the teaching that Jesus is sending our way, there is good cause to rename it the Parable of the Two Sons.

Biblical Text

Luke 15:20-32

So the younger son set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his slaves, Quickly, bring out a robe (the best one) and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound. Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him! Then the father said to him, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.

Responses

1. Think about what might have happened in the prodigal's family before the younger son left home. Based on what we know about both brothers, how do you think they might have treated each other?
2. When the prodigal returns home, he is quick to own his wrongdoing: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. How did the elder son react when he first heard that his brother had returned? Compare the elder son's response with the father's response.
3. The elder son is totally absorbed with himself—his own virtues and his own interests. He is preoccupied with naming his brother's faults and voicing his own strengths. In what situations (where and when) do we find it tempting to adopt the elder son's practices?
4. What are some ways that claiming innocence can be a part of our work settings? What can we do to keep the elder brother syndrome out of our work environment?
5. The elder son missed the opportunity to celebrate and enjoy the party. What are some positive patterns and practices of behavior that will help us create and be a part of life's celebrations?

Blaming and Complaining

THEME

Blaming others may be the easiest way out of confrontation and conflict, but such dishonesty fractures human relationships and makes true reconciliation with God impossible.

Church pastors, family therapists and employment counselors are very familiar with the human ploy of blaming and the art of complaining. Indeed, all those concerned with caring for people in the stress of their relationships readily recognize the impulse to point the accusing finger at others.

In the third chapter of Genesis, we have an example of guilty people caught in the act of blaming. Pinned down by God's probing questions, Adam and Eve try to escape responsibility by shifting the blame to the crafty serpent or to each other.

Comedians have used this famous story from Genesis in blame-game He/she made me do it! comedy routines. The Garden of Eden incident also lends itself to the he said/she said approach to comedy that plays off one excuse against another. Several years ago in some parts of the world it was trendy to say, The devil made me do it!

For some, this event is the original script for the theatre of gender wars. The exchange typifies the way in which some men tend to blame women for all the problems of life.

Charlotte Whitton, former mayor of Ottawa (Canada's capital city), has a good-humored response for those occasions when women are asked to carry the blame: Whatever she does, a woman must do twice as well as any man in order to be thought of as just being half as good. Luckily, that's not difficult!

INSIGHT

*Moral indignation drives us to condemn others;
conscience prompts us to question ourselves.
-Patrick Glynn, Brookings Review, Spring 1999*

Whether we respond lightheartedly or seriously, the Genesis text focuses on the problem of the guilty attempting to shift the blame to someone else. Regrettably, the blame game is a coward's reaction. Blaming and complaining about others without, assuming responsibility for one's own actions severs personal relationships. The refusal to be truthful also puts us in a

position of having to lie to God. Even God's grace has a hard time penetrating people who cannot answer honestly because they pass the blame on to others.

Context

Sin entered the Garden of Perfection. Disobedience joined the human parade. Paradise has been lost. The forbidden fruit has been eaten. Who did it? Who is to blame?

The Lord God is about to find out. As if playing detective, he prepares to interrogate the suspects. The man and the woman are frightened, because, after all, there are only two possible suspects. The serpent is in the garden, but who in his right mind is going to blame a snake?

The garden is now occupied by more than just two people, a snake and sin; fear has also taken up residence. For Adam and Eve the sense of guilt they feel in their conscience is enough for them to know that something is wrong. They know that they are in trouble with their Maker. Hearing the sound of God's voice, they try to hide. But, as we all know, you cannot hide from God!

God's first question is non-threatening: Adam, where are you? The second question, still addressed to Adam, is more probing: Who told you . . .? The last question, aimed directly at Eve, is more confrontational: What is this that you have done?

The only encouragement here comes from God's approach to the problem. Can we see his patience and gentleness as he gives his disobedient children the chance to explain themselves in honest confession? At the very beginning of creation we see God expecting obedience, but being ready to deal compassionately with disobedience. Clearly God is endeavoring to draw Adam and Eve out of hiding, rather than to drive them out of the garden.

Biblical Text

Genesis 3:8-13

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, Where are you? He said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. He said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate. Then the LORD God said to the woman, What is this that you have done? The woman said, The serpent tricked me, and I ate.

Responses

1. After God begins his conversation with Adam he asks the question: Have you eaten from the tree? Without even answering the question, Adam blames Eve and, with human consistency, Eve blames the serpent. What is there inside us that keeps us from taking responsibility for our actions? Why are we so often compelled to blame others?
2. What other motivations are there besides fear to compel us to blame other people?
3. Adam and Eve move from literal and physical hiding to verbal hiding. In what ways do people tend to hide behind their words? What word games do you see people playing? Which ones do you play?
4. Adam had a choice about how he answered God's question about eating from the tree. How might Adam have answered the Lord God if he had chosen to honor Eve and to give priority to their relationship?
5. If you were Eve in that situation, after God had left both you and Adam alone, what approach would you take with Adam to address his blaming you? What approach would stop the blaming game and, instead, move toward reconciliation?

Power and Patronage

THEME

To move from conflict to reconciliation, the stronger party may need voluntarily to surrender some power and grant the weaker party freedom to negotiate the terms for reconciliation.

Relationships of unequal power saturate all levels of society. From the round tables of heads of state to dinner tables in family homes, there is an unequal distribution of power. Typically, the stronger take more and more power into their hands, leaving the weaker to feel less and less influential. What is the role of reconciliation when power is the instrument of control?

There is an old adage that one should be gracious in defeat and magnanimous in victory. This cliché from the past has been applied as a standard of good conduct to a wide range of combatants, from Roman conquerors to heavyweight boxers, from sports teams to one colleague's getting a promotion over another. Being magnanimous and gracious can avert conflict, can create a civil environment and can lead competitors in the direction of long-term reconciliation.

One of the beatitudes in Jesus' teaching is "blessed are the meek." This means neither to be weak-minded nor to live without appreciating strength, but to be strong in bringing one's strength under the control of responsible discipline. Power—personal or positional— that is brought under the control of truth and love is a much-needed virtue in these times.

God's treatment of his creation serves as an example of how to use power. The almighty God of the universe has ultimate strength and power to use as he chooses. Yet God decides to surrender himself to work in partnership with people in God's creation. Instead of flaunting power God sent God's Son, who surrendered his power to die on a cross. Rather than extolling the virtue of structures and hierarchies, God affirms people who use their position and power to serve the needs of others.

Context

Abraham and Lot are not social or economic equals. Abraham is Lot's uncle (in that culture, a significant hierarchy existed between an uncle and a nephew), and Abraham's wealth far exceeded Lot's possessions.

In the setting of the biblical passage that follows, Lot has been on the move for some time as part of Abraham's extended family. He has been following his uncle Abraham from Ur to Haran and from Haran down into Egypt, to seek food during a time of famine. Presently the clan is back from Egypt and in Palestine. They are in Bethel enjoying the well-watered valley of the Jordan. During all these travels, Lot has been dependent on Abraham for sustenance and protection. But now the time has come to separate. They face a practical problem of too many people in too small a space. Lot also decides to assert his independence, but it is up to Abraham to determine the economic terms of the separation.

INSIGHT

*When a foul egotism rises up within
me bidding me to assert myself,
serve my own interest and look
out for number one, then O God,
as I listen down the corridor of
the years for the voice of
the Almighty, may I hear the
gentle splashing of water in a
basin, and see the
Son of God washing his disciples' feet.
-Leslie Weatherhead*

Abraham is faced with the task of exercising his power and patronage. Abraham's prerogative is clear. He has every right as the senior and stronger member in the relationship to exercise his privilege of power. After all, he is the head of the clan and everyone else expects him to have the advantage over his younger and less-deserving nephew.

Abraham must have surprised everyone. He chooses to surrender his power to the younger and weaker nephew by giving Lot first choice of the land. In so doing, Abraham creates an amicable separation built upon his desire for a reconciled relationship, rather than his right to power.

Biblical Text

Genesis 13:1-12

So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.

Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together, and there was strife between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.

Then Abram said to Lot, Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left. Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward; thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

Responses

1. What problems do Abraham and Lot face? What is the reason for their conflict? Think about your workplace, community, family and friends. What are the reasons for conflict that you observe around you?
2. How do you view Lot's behavior in this situation? Do you think Lot should have declined Abraham's invitation to choose first? Should he have responded, "No, you go first"? What do you think you would have done?
3. Because Abraham refuses to exercise his right to choose first, he opens himself up to risk. What are those risks? What do you think Abraham's family and herdsman said behind his back? In what way is Abraham now vulnerable?
4. This text teaches us something about the character of Abraham. People with wealth and power face unique temptations. What does it take for wealthy and powerful people to live by the same principles Abraham lived by?
5. Think again about your world-work, church, family and friends. Does the conflict that sometimes emerges have anything to do with the use of power? Or with the way in which people sometimes receive special treatment?
6. It's a rare person who doesn't have some power-either influence in relationships as part of a family, or a position held at work. Describe a situation that illustrates how you use your power. What can you learn from Abraham's example?

Beyond Justice to Forgiveness

THEME

For reconciliation to go deep, demands for justice must be met with a spirit of forgiveness.

I remember those shoes, said an onlooker, as the body of a man was being dug out of a makeshift grave in South Africa, I bought them for him. He's my brother.

This is just one of the stories Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells in his presentations. Like so many other stories out of the horrors of South Africa and other killing fields in modern history, injustice generates a desire for retaliation. Don't the Scriptures support the law of an eye for an eye or a life for a life? When fathers disappear in the night, when women are raped, when children are maimed for life, isn't revenge justified? In the name of justice, don't those who act in evil ways have to pay a price for their evil?

Jesus' answer is stunning and revolutionary: The law of forgiveness must rule.

It is this law of forgiveness, this unrelenting commitment to reconciliation, which has permeated the work of Archbishop Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Created in 1995 at the request of President Nelson Mandela, this great experiment in the triumph of forgiveness began its public hearings. The Commission charted a course between the same two extremes that marked public attitude after World War II: the fierce pursuit of justice in the Nuremberg trials, and the casual dismissal of all crimes resulting from a combination of denial and national amnesia. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission dared to seek the miracle of negotiated settlement (*No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 21). While many felt that the whole process encouraged impunity and jeopardized justice, the Commission kept unswervingly to its aims. The strong leadership established solid and demanding criteria for each hearing, and in many cases witnessed the grace of restorative justice, so characteristic of traditional African jurisprudence (p. 54).

INSIGHT

Only forgiveness can set free both the victim of oppression and the perpetrator of oppression.
-Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Context

The Old Testament does contain laws of retributive justice (an eye for an eye justice). Such rules for measured retaliation are found in passages like Exodus 21. These laws may reinforce the human desire for private and public vengeance.

Jesus and the New Testament stand against that human desire for vengeance and retaliation. Instead, Jesus offers us the law of forgiveness. Rather than allowing us to take the law into our own hands, Jesus asks that we give the law into *his* hands. For the sake of our sanity and our of his desire to offer us freedom of mind and spirit, Jesus asks us to surrender our enemies and their evil deeds into his nail-scarred and healing hands.

This world knows too much of vigilante justice and the violence of personal revenge. We also know what it is to feel that immediate surge of anger and desire for revenge when we are wounded. In our humanness, we experience the powerful lust to get even. The radical ethic of Jesus Christ doesn't ask us to deny our feelings, but it does not allow us to act on those feelings. Instead, Jesus invites us to call for the power to forgive. He wants us to experience the healing release triggered by mercy—he wants us to be reconciled.

This is not to say that deep wounds respond to quick fixes. A sincere Prayer before God and an offer to forgive rarely deals with all the psychological damage and pain of our memories. Forgiveness most often involves a process of healing that happens over time. Still, forgiveness of the offenders is God's way for God's people to start again.

Jesus' invitation to go beyond justice to forgiveness is extraordinary. It is beyond human logic, beyond human reason and beyond our human ability. Only those followers of Jesus who fully understand that they are incapable *by themselves* of moving beyond justice to forgiveness will find that they are able *by God's grace* to live the law of love.

Biblical Text

Matthew 5:38-48

You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Responses

1. Jesus' call to love and forgive one's enemy does not make the courts in our countries unnecessary or illegitimate. A civil society depends on just law—on consequences for crimes, on compensation, on retribution. How do you think this teaching of Jesus relates to the realm of *public* law? To international law for war crimes?
2. Do you think Jesus' expectations are too high? Is it conceivable we can actually follow this teaching in the realm of our *private* spirituality?
3. Make a list of the feelings and behaviors that hate produces. Make a list of the feelings and behaviors forgiveness produces. Reflect on the lists and ask: Why is it that forgiveness is so central to the Christian faith?
4. Is there anyone in your life you would name as an enemy? Is there someone in your life who has wounded you whom you have been unable to forgive? Are there people or situations that are lodged deep in your memory where you harbor a spirit of revenge? Privately reflect . . . If the answer is yes, what action will you take? Ask someone you trust to pray that you will be able to forgive and be reconciled.

Beyond Forgiveness to justice

THEME

For reconciliation to go deep, forgiveness will sometimes need to surrender to the demand for justice.

Forgiveness alone as a response to injustice is both too simple and too easy (for both the victim and the offender). Some people will literally get away with murder. Forgiveness without consequences leaves little or no place for taking sin seriously. Forgiveness that does not meet justice can actually bless injustice. Cheap forgiveness is like cheap grace—a grave misunderstanding of God's nature and our human responsibility.

We must not be naive about the inclination of unrepentant people to take advantage of forgiveness offered too quickly. It is true that forgiveness can sometimes be effective in producing behavioral change, but human nature is also adept at pretending to be remorseful and promising rehabilitation without any real commitment to change. We have the capacity to tell successful lies, appear contrite and still avoid any necessity for stopping the behavior that needed to be forgiven in the first place. Accordingly, we are right to be cautious about looking upon forgiveness as a cure-all.

Just as there are natural laws in God's universe, there are also moral laws. The physical law of gravity means that if we jump from a six-story building we will fall through the air and, at the very least, be physically injured. If we disregard God's moral laws, we suffer the consequences as well. If we reject God's moral law of love and choose selfishness instead, we will suffer personal damage as well as have a negative impact on people around us. God's moral law is etched into creation. Sin entails consequences and, according to the biblical record, in the end we will all be judged.

INSIGHT

*Sister Mary Rose, president of Covenant House, laments:
I loathe drug dealers and pushers. I loathe and despise what they do to kids.
I hate their cruelty and viciousness. I know maybe I should find
a place in my heart to forgive them, but I can't, I just can't. . . .
Could it be that drug dealers deserve justice, not forgiveness?*

Forgiveness receives a lot of attention from Christians, but the moral law of justice is also a guide for us when we find ourselves in circumstances where we have been wronged. The law of justice requires that offences be punished by measures that are fair and just. Evil acts deserve appropriate punishment so that they will be stopped. Offensive and immoral behavior damages relationships. Think about the way immorality in a marriage relationship causes hurt, breaks trust and jeopardizes circles of friendships. The pieces of a broken life are not easily glued back together again. Justice requires that there be a price paid. In order for reconciliation to go deep, the spirit of forgiveness needs to surrender to the moral law of justice.

Context

We may be successful in telling lies to the people around us, but we cannot lie to God and get away with it. In the Psalms, for example, lying to God is regarded as one of the basic sins of the rebellious Israelites (78:36), and liars are explicitly excluded from the palace of King David (101:7). Jeremiah and Isaiah denounce false prophets as those who tell lies. God is clearly

opposed to those who lie to him.

In the following Bible passage, a married couple try to trick God and the church by lying, by being deceptive. Presuming on God's mercy and forgiveness, they run headlong into God's swift justice. This is a hard reading. God's judgment upon Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, is immediate and merciless.

This event in the early history of the New Testament church is clearly the exception, rather than the rule. If God were to pronounce a death sentence for every act of deception we would all be dead. The major point of the story is that in the name of justice sin must be punished, rather than forgiven automatically.

Biblical Text

Acts 4:36-5:11

There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means son of encouragement). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. Ananias, Peter asked, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God! Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price. And she said, Yes, that was the price. How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out. Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Responses

1. This early church event is an object lesson. God is setting some standards of right and wrong in the community called the church. Clearly deception is not to be tolerated. What do you think it was that motivated Ananias and Sapphira to sell their property? What reward do you think they hoped to get out of it?
2. Imagine the conversation Ananias and Sapphira had had on the night before they brought in their gift. What do you think they might have said to each other?
3. The passage indicates that Sapphira stuck to her agreement with Ananias. She persisted with the original deceptive story and suffered the consequences. God is telling us that disobedience brings about severe results; sin is destructive—even deadly. What situations come to your mind that show that disobedience is destructive and damaging to life and relationships?
4. This interplay between justice and forgiveness is like life—it's complicated. Can you think of a situation, either personal or from within your circle of friends, where punishment and justice had to precede the gift of forgiveness in order that life could get back on track?

Beyond Personal Rights to Civil Society

THEME

In contributing their gifts and energies to create a civil society, Christians can reconcile their responsibilities to God and their duties to the state.

Christians live in two different worlds simultaneously the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. The duty and calling to both worlds is a serious challenge to all committed followers of Jesus. It requires people of faith to extend themselves beyond the personal realm to the concerns of collective society.

Civil society is one of the greatest achievements of the secular state. It is often difficult to support and connect the virtues of civil society with the common grace of God at work in the world, but whether the society is formally religious or avowedly secular, God is undeniably present in the ordered structures of good government and just law. Still, thoughtful Christians face numerous issues: To what extent should the state be supported or criticized? Should Christians enter politics, join the military or serve in the justice system?

A healthy civil society is usually a good friend to religious liberty and the life of the church. Stable governance, a dependable justice system and freedom of the press are predictors for public safety and civic order. Christians can go about their business as members of God's kingdom. Social, political and economic well-being serve the interests of all members of society, but when governments sink into corruption or are taken over by military regimes or self-interested dictators, Christians and everyone else may find themselves in a situation of civil uncertainty or threatened by persecution.

In God's design for life, Christians are meant to be contributors to civil society. Christians can usually reconcile their responsibilities to God with their duties to government and society without compromising their convictions. Among other things, God's people can participate in politics, volunteer in community organizations, stand against tyranny and oppression, intervene in the courts, lobby for biblical social policy, be a collective voice to defend the interests of the poor and express moral perspective in the public forum.

Context

Ever since the foundation of the Christian church, the problems connected with living the Christian life in the context of the political life of the state have been urgent and pressing.

Christians' primary and overwhelming allegiance is to the one true God, revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus instructed his disciples to strive first for the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). In the final disclosures of the book of Revelation, we are informed that all the other kingdoms of this world, the nation-states and political powers, will be forced to bow before the one true God. In the meantime, many Christians struggle with coming to terms with their immediate political authority-and all too often, with the lack of law and order.

When a society is ordered, the problems are relatively easy for Christians to resolve. If the national government is fair and just, if law and order are maintained with equity, if there is welfare for the poor and health and education for all, then the difficult issues are few. But in a

society where anarchy reigns unchecked, or where dictators and oppressors rule with violence, the problems for Christians may be acute.

INSIGHT

All citizens have a duty to play an active part, in a spirit of solidarity, in the building of society. It is right for everyone, Christians and Muslims, while respecting different religious views, to place their skills at the service of the nation, at every level.

-Pope John Paul II at the Cairo Mass, Feb. 26, 2000

In the biblical text that follows, the apostle Paul wrote advice to a church congregation that knew about imperial power and autocratic authority. The church in Rome, and indeed Paul himself, were going to experience persecution, imprisonment, torture and death in the following thirty years. What then? Should Roman Christians still pray for the state and submit to it?

Government, writes Paul, is ordained by God. At the same time, it is limited by God and accountable to God. Whether it be good or bad, government is God's institution. Government is one of God's means of providing justice and social order in God's creation. Accordingly, Christians are not by nature anti-government people. They are expected to pray for good government, call governments to serve the interests of all citizens in their societies and contribute their gifts and skills toward making civil society work.

The context in which many of you are reading this Bible passage makes this a difficult text. The message offends; it makes no sense; it doesn't understand your situation; it can't possibly be applied to your government. Faced with corrupt and tyrannical government authority that has brutalized its people and persecuted its churches, devout Christian readers in such places cannot be expected to come to this text without dissent.

Biblical Text

Romans 13:1-10

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.

Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.

For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, Love your

neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Responses

1. How do you see the biblical teaching of Paul being worked out in your country, your church, your part of the world?
2. One principle the passage proposes is that everyone needs to be subject to authority. What happens to individuals who refuse to be subject to authority? What happens to countries when authority breaks down and lawlessness rules?
3. It is clear that good government is what God intends, government that serves people and creates order in our societies. Is it possible that no government is worse for a society than bad government?
4. The passage does not tell us exactly how Christians should respond to evil and corrupt governments. How do you think Christians should behave under such regimes?
5. Take time to pray for people-Christians and others who live in countries where freedoms are restricted, persecution is experienced and civil disorder is the norm.

Beyond Excluding Others to Embracing Others

THEME

Because God reaches out to welcome hostile humanity into divine communion, Christians must move from excluding other people to embracing them, whether they deserve it or not.

When people are at war, they develop hate for their enemies. For Miroslav Volf, a Christian Croatian academic, the ultimate enemies-the ultimate others-were the Serbian fighters called cetniks. Expounding good Christian theory, Volf had just finished a speech in which he argued that followers of Jesus ought to embrace their enemies as God has embraced us all in Christ. Dr. Volf's speech prompted a penetrating question from German theologian Jurgen Moltmann: But can you embrace a cetnik?

The challenge to Miroslav Volf was deeply personal and took his mind from the halls of the academy to the hills of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia. The question cut through the intellectual theory and evoked memories of burned bodies and raped women. Slowly, Dr. Volf responded. No, he said, I cannot-but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.

In his profound book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Dr. Volf analyzes some of the most challenging and perplexing questions facing people today. How can we move beyond the natural tendencies that cause us to exclude others? How can we embrace the differences in other people's religion, race, ethnicity and nationality that have driven us apart? To press the point even further, how can we embrace others in ways that still allow us to celebrate our own individuality as people with our own language and culture? And as Christians, how can we embrace others and at the same time remain faithful to Jesus' command to discern truth while still loving neighbors of all kinds?

These are hard questions that need a response of fearless honesty. Recognizing and affirming the very differences that have been the offence and cause of warfare, violence, hatred and betrayal is a daunting challenge, particularly when you have suffered through such events. But God, who is relentless in his pursuit of peace and reconciliation for all the peoples of the world, will not let us off the hook. As God is, so must we be. We must move beyond exclusion to embrace.

Context

Extending open arms is the beginning of every embrace. We are happy to hug our family and friends. When we love someone, we freely and easily open our arms to embrace him or her, but even to extend an open attitude to those who are different is a challenge. And to embrace an enemy-that is another matter altogether.

The image of open arms is a recurring one in the New Testament. Think of Simeon reaching out to the baby Jesus, or the father running to embrace his prodigal son. Jesus lived in open fellowship with people who drank too much or who sold themselves for sex. How interesting it is to think that Jesus died with his arms open! Of course, the cross image is a forced posture, but the symbolism still shines through. Who would disagree? Jesus on the cross is a picture of God going beyond exclusion to embrace. Jesus' open arms express his open heart.

INSIGHT

*The will to give ourselves to others and welcome them,
to readjust our identities to make space for them,
is prior to any judgment about others, except that of
identifying them in their humanity.
Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace*

Saul, before he became Paul, was a persecutor of the early church who tumbled into the embrace of a forgiving God on the road to Damascus. Paul makes an insightful reflection on the power of the cross: For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life (Romans 5:10). In the passage that follows, witness the sheer power of the cross and God's open arms of embrace that are extended to the criminal during Jesus' crucifixion.

Biblical Text

Luke 23:32-43

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one! The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself! There was also an inscription over him, This is the King of the Jews.

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us! But the other rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong. Then he said, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. He replied, Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Responses

1. Identify all the characters in this crucifixion event. Who is excluding whom? Who is including whom?
2. In his book, Miroslav Volf contends that forgiveness is the boundary between exclusion and embrace. Do you think there is any way we can avoid or set aside forgiveness as we strive to move beyond excluding others to embracing them? Can we embrace without first forgiving?
3. During the crucifixion, Jesus was mocked and ridiculed. In the reality of today's war-torn, violent and selfish world, are forgiving and genuinely embracing people who are different from ourselves really possible? Should the very idea be held in derision?
4. What is it that allows Jesus, in the hour of his agony, to reach out to embrace a dying criminal and seek forgiveness for his enemies? What will it take for people to do the same?
5. What are the consequences of moving beyond exclusion to embrace? Is there someone (or a number of people) in your life whom you are excluding? What will have to change in order for you to embrace that person?

19

Reconciling God's Grace and our Works

THEME

In the gospel, divine grace and human responsibility are held in tension. We receive God's gift of mercy and forgiveness as we continue to work out our own salvation.

It is impossible for us to understand or describe fully what happens when we are reconciled with God. Mystery is part of the life of faith. When the divine spirit touches our human spirit, it is an act of God's mercy and grace. Still, we keep trying to get it under our own control. Is it our prayer and confession that results in our salvation? Do we keep connected to God by obeying rules and regulations and going to church all the time? Do our actions for social justice somehow make God respond to us?

We do have a deep desire to be friends with God, but we also know we don't deserve God's friendship. Is God so different from us, and God's love so automatic, that it just doesn't matter what we do? Is it possible that, regardless of how we behave, God will just continue to love us and be patient to the end? Can that be true?

Caught between the anguish of trying to be good enough to merit God's love and the knowledge that we will always need God's mercy, we find ourselves wondering where human responsibility and divine grace actually meet. We are told that the only full resolution of our dilemma is found outside ourselves, in the good news of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God has reconciled us to himself so that we may soar above what we deserve and experience the freedom of forgiveness. Cradled in the mystery of how God works and in the reality of our experience in Christ, we find our rest.

Context

The question of how divine grace and human works relate to each other is not a new one. The dilemma troubled the members of the church in Ephesus nearly two thousand years ago. Perhaps it is not surprising that new believers in such a multiethnic, bustling, commercial center as Ephesus (the fourth largest city in the Roman empire at that time) should be debating the complexities of how divine grace relates to human works.

The passage in Ephesians chapter 2 uses direct yet simple words as it wrestles with the question of reconciling grace and works. These are frank words about our faults and glorious words about God's solution. As you read the passage, look for the following key words (in bold type):

The first message is a little jolting. As men and women fully responsible for the sinful actions that separate us from God, we are described as being **dead** in **trespasses** and **sins**. But God refuses to leave us in that place. By the power of God's love and the richness of God's mercy God makes us **alive**. We are **saved**. This is the **grace** of God in action! And there's nothing about human **works** that could ever produce this kind of miracle.

INSIGHT

No amount of falls will really undo us if we keep on picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home. But the bathrooms are all ready and the towels are put out, and the clean clothes in the airing cupboard. The only fatal thing is to lose one's temper and give it up. It is when we notice the dirt that God is most present in us; it is the very sign of his presence.
-C.S. Lewis, *The Business of Heaven*

Biblical Text

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Responses

1. Under the two key words dead and alive, make a list of all the ways in which Paul talks of being dead and then all the ways in which Paul talks of being alive.
2. This short passage articulates two sides of the gospel equation. First, our relationship with Christ is a gift of grace: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Second, the new relationship with Christ generates works-faith in action: For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Think about the church you attend. Which side of the gospel equation gets most of the emphasis—grace or works? Do they receive equal attention?

3. In your personal walk with God, do you tend to emphasize the grace side of faith or the works side of faith? Do you feel you are quite balanced? Give examples to support your perceptions.

Reconciling Personal Faith and Social Action

THEME

When personal faith and social action are disconnected, the gospel is left fractured, unbalanced and incomplete.

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? (James 2:15-16) Jesus' brothers didn't always get it right, but in this instance his younger brother James was correct.

Indeed, what is the good of words without deeds? What is personal faith without social action?

Words are cheap, so the saying goes, and in every area of human interaction the statement is true. It is useless to say to a hungry beggar on the street in the cold, Be fed, be warm without doing anything to help him. It is futile and even damaging in a marriage relationship to say to an offended spouse, I am sorry, without making the effort to change the behavior that offended him or her in the first place. It is useless to mouth words of repentance without the changes in behavior that are both the fruit and the proof of repentance. It is of no avail to mumble words that appear to extend friendship to strangers or enemies without the social actions that make those words believable.

INSIGHT

An individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body, and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other is a corpse.
E. Stanley Jones

God's actions set the pattern for us. If God had remained aloof, believing that he loved the world but not doing anything to help it, we would still be waiting for God to show up. But in a perfect partnership of belief and action, God loved the world so much that God sent his son to earth—to live, die and be resurrected for our salvation. Jesus' life, death and resurrection is the greatest reconciliation of word and faith in action this world has ever seen.

Context

The Scripture that follows is like a doctor's check-up, an X-ray of the soul. It is frank, direct, challenging and, in its own way, demanding. The Bible ought to have a caution label on it!

John, author of this short pastoral letter, which was quite likely passed around to believers in several of the end-of-first-century congregations of the eastern Mediterranean, is not going to let his readers get away with a faith of mere words and personal belief. He is adamant that anyone professing belief in Jesus Christ must express that faith in social action. If you say you love the Lord you must love your human sisters and brothers, too. The kind of love John is looking for is concrete: feeding the poor, housing the homeless, receiving and touching the untouchables.

Read this short but potent passage with an open heart and let God speak to you. Read with a readiness to translate God's words into actions in your own life. Read from your head to your heart and to your hands.

Biblical Text

1 John 3:16-20

We know love by this, that he [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything

Responses

1. The first statement is that Jesus laid down his life for us. Jesus' death and resurrection is God's way of enabling us to experience forgiveness and have a relationship with Christ. How do you observe other people experiencing forgiveness? In what ways can you talk about your relationship with Christ?
2. The second statement is that we ought to lay down our lives for others. There are several proofs and tests of love in this passage. Find them. What are the tests of love?
3. Complete one or more of the following sentences:
Love is the most important thing in the world because . . .
 - a) I have experienced God's love when . . .
 - b) My most vivid example of receiving the love of God is . . .
 - c) My most memorable example of receiving the love of another person is . . .
 - d) I was privileged to offer the love of God to someone when I . . .
4. The basic challenge of this Scripture is love into action. Think about your own walk with God. How have you been challenged by the reading? What actions do you think God could be calling you to take? Where is God inviting you to take? Where is God inviting you to use action to express your faith?
5. The challenge to prove our personal belief by the actions of life is a vocational challenge. Identify a situation where you observed a work colleague translate his or her faith in action. . . . Pray for God's energy to help you be more consistent in this important area of the Christian life.

21

Reconciling Words and Deeds

THEME

Verbal commitments alone are fraudulent; words of faith only become valid when they are reconciled with active obedience to God and others.

You have my word on it.

With a handshake, a nod and that single simple speech, bargains are made every day.

However, the deals are only really valid if the words hold true.

The stability of everyday life depends upon the integrity of our social interaction. We can only build a civil society when citizens speak truth to each other and mean what they say. In our dealings with government and bureaucracy, in business and our churches, with neighbors and family, society depends upon the reconciliation of words and deeds. We never get it totally right all the time, but our life together disintegrates when words are divorced from actions.

The same is true of our relationship with God. God is not impressed with devotion consisting only of words, nor is God persuaded by our speech. God looks for the translation of our words into corresponding action. We do have to be sincere about what we say, but the proof of our sincerity is when we actually do what we say we will do.

Context

Jesus presents the model of this correspondence of word and deed in his own life. His teaching is candid and his living is consistent.

Chapters 5 through 7 of the Gospel of Matthew summarize much of Jesus' teaching that is about behavior and ethics. An underlying message of these chapters is that deeds must follow words. From the opening beatitudes (5:1-11) to the closing words, which urge us not to live lives fraught with anxiety (7: 34), Jesus puts forward the challenge to prove what we say by what we do. We learn that God is not fooled, even if we can do remarkable feats in God's name. Neither is God deceived by verbal devotion. Unless we obey God's will, unless we act on what we hear from God, our lives will be as unstable and as vulnerable as houses built on sand.

INSIGHT

Any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of people and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that can scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.
-Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Dream of a Common Language*

The passage we are studying starts in a bold manner. There is no question here about what Jesus means. He is very straightforward: words alone are not enough; we have to act on our words. God's grace and mercy continue to flow our way when we fall short of the ideal, but to be real disciples of Jesus we must *do* the will of the Father.

Biblical Text

Matthew 7:21-27

Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? Then I will declare to them. I never knew you; away from me, you evildoers.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!

Response

1. The parable tells us that all people build their life upon something—some upon rock and some upon sand. Think about people who build their lives without God. Upon what do they build their lives? What building materials do they use to construct their lives? How do their beliefs affect their behavior?
2. In the story of the two houses, it is probable that the houses would have looked the same—only the foundations were different. How would you describe the foundations of your own life? What building materials have you used to construct your beliefs and practices?
3. The parable also teaches that all people face storms in their life, but those who build their lives on Christ and his teachings survive the storms. How has God helped you cope with some of life's storms—the heavy rains and howling winds?
4. How does God help you to translate the words of your faith into active obedience?
5. Who have been some influential people in your life? In what ways are you like the people who have influenced you?

Reconciling Conviction and Compassion

THEME

Jesus reconciles conviction with compassion and compassion with conviction. He expresses both truth and love and invites us to do the same.

Why is it that people who are high on conviction are often the ones who are low on compassion? And so often the reverse is also true: people who are highly compassionate seem reluctant to hold strong convictions.

Many of us find ourselves swinging from one extreme to another in dealing with the people in our lives. In some situations we can be as hard as tempered steel. Our convictions generate strong opinions and stern judgments. In other situations, we are as flexible as a rubber band. Our compassion takes over and we exude gentleness and mercy. We are empathetic, accepting and forgiving. The swing from legalism to sentimentality can be confusing, even bewildering. Our attempt to embody conviction and compassion at the same time leaves us feeling fragmented.

Fortunately, Jesus showed us how we can hold deep convictions about what is true, right and good and, without compromise, also extend empathy and tenderness toward others. We need discernment and a special measure of God's grace to be able to respond to people with compassion and conviction, with love and truth.

Context

The Scribes and the Pharisees set up a clever trap for Jesus. Either he upheld the Law of Moses by condemning to death the woman caught in adultery, or he disobeyed the Law of Moses by showing mercy to the woman.

On the one hand, if Jesus affirmed the ancient law of punishment for adultery, his hearers would at least recognize his religious orthodoxy. Jesus would be safe with them, but the woman would be dead.

On the other hand, if Jesus ignored these laws and set the woman free, he would be performing a radical act of mercy, but in doing so he would be making a whole new set of enemies. The woman would be free, but Jesus would be judged. This incident is both a compelling drama and an example of the tensions involved in integrating conviction and compassion.

Biblical Text

John 8:2-11

Early in the morning he [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

INSIGHT

Religion without conviction is spineless and weak, powerless and indecisive . . . Religion without compassion is harsh and judgmental, arrogant and rude.
-Don Posterski, *True to You*

Responses

1. This incident is a good script for a scene in a movie or an act in a stage play . . . The accusers were really using the woman to get at Jesus. Jesus was teaching and the accusers' interruption was intended to test his orthodoxy. How did Jesus respond after being challenged, 'Now what do you say?'
2. Jesus is under pressure in this situation. The mob, stirred up, is out to destroy the woman. After taking time to ponder by writing on the ground, what did Jesus do to de-escalate the situation? How does Jesus protect the vulnerable woman?
3. In what specific ways does Jesus express his compassion? At what point does Jesus express his conviction?
4. Think about you . . . your relationships with family and friends, and with others in your place of work. How do you react to situations? Are you more inclined to lean toward compassion, or toward condemnation?
5. Should your compassion index be raised in some situations? Should you be less compassionate? Should your condemnation index rise in other situations? Should it be lowered?

Appendix A

Mission Statement

World Vision is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice, and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God.

We pursue this mission through integrated, holistic commitment to:

Transformational Development that is community-based and sustainable, focused especially on the needs of children.

Emergency Relief that assists people afflicted by conflict or disaster.

Promotion of Justice that seeks to change unjust structures affecting the poor among whom we work.

Strategic Initiatives that serve the church in the fulfillment of its mission.

Awareness that leads to informed understanding, giving, involvement, and prayer.

Witness to Jesus Christ by life, deed, word, and sign that encourages people to respond to the Gospel.

Appendix B

Core Values

We are Christian.

We acknowledge one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ the love, mercy, and grace of God are made known to us and all people. From this overflowing abundance of God's love, we find our call to ministry.

We proclaim together, Jesus lived, died, and rose again. Jesus is Lord. We desire him to be central in our individual and corporate lives.

We seek to follow him in his identification with the poor, the powerless, the afflicted, the oppressed, the marginalised; in his special concern for children; in his respect for the dignity bestowed by God on women equally with men; in his challenge to unjust attitudes and systems; in his call to share resources with each other; in his love for all people without discrimination or conditions; in his offer of new life through faith in him. From him we derive our holistic understanding of the gospel of the Kingdom of God, which forms the basis of our response to human need.

We hear his call to servanthood and see the example of his life. We commit ourselves to a servant spirit permeating the organisation. We know this means facing honestly our own pride, sin, and failure.

We bear witness to the redemption offered only through faith in Jesus Christ. The staff we engage are equipped by belief and practice to bear this witness. We will maintain our identity as Christian, while being sensitive to the diverse contexts in which we express that identity.

We are committed to the poor.

We are called to serve the neediest people of the earth; to relieve their suffering; and to promote the transformation of their condition of life.

We stand solidarity in a common search for justice. We seek to understand the situation of the poor and work alongside them towards fullness of life. We share our discovery of eternal hope in Jesus Christ.

We seek to facilitate an engagement between the poor and the affluent that opens both to transformation. We respect the poor as active participants, not passive recipients, in this relationship. They are people from whom others may learn and receive, as well as give. The need for transformation is common to all. Together we share a quest for justice, peace, reconciliation, and healing in a broken world.

We value people.

We regard all people as created and loved by God. We give priority to people before money, structure, systems, and other institutional machinery. We act in ways that respect the dignity, uniqueness, and intrinsic worth of every person – the poor, the donors, our staff and their families, boards, and volunteers. We celebrate the richness of diversity in human personality, culture, and contribution.

We practice a participative, open, enabling style in working relationships. We encourage the professional, personal, and spiritual development of our staff.

We are stewards.

The resources at our disposal are not our own. They are a sacred trust from God through donors on behalf of the poor. We are faithful to the purpose for which those resources are given and manage them in a manner that brings maximum benefit to the poor.

We speak and act honestly. We are open and factual in our dealings with donor constituencies, project communities, governments, the public at large, and with each other. We endeavour to convey a public image conforming to reality. We strive for consistency between what we say and what we do.

We demand of ourselves high standards of professional competence and accept the need to be accountable through appropriate structures for achieving these standards. We share our experience and knowledge with others where it can assist them.

We are stewards of God's creation. We care for the earth and act in ways that will restore and protect the environment. We ensure that our development activities are ecologically sound.

We are partners.

We are members of an international World Vision Partnership that transcends legal, structural, and cultural boundaries. We accept the obligations of joint participation, shared goals, and mutual accountability that true partnership requires. We affirm our interdependence and our willingness to yield autonomy as necessary for the common good. We commit ourselves to know, understand, and love each other.

We are partners with the poor and with donors in a shared ministry. We affirm and promote unity in the Body of Christ. We pursue relationship with all churches and desire mutual participation in ministry. We seek to contribute to the holistic mission of the church.

We maintain a cooperative stance and a spirit of openness towards other humanitarian organisations. We are willing to receive and consider honest opinions from others about our work.

We are responsive.

We are responsive to life-threatening emergencies where our involvement is needed and appropriate. We are willing to take intelligent risks and act quickly. We do this from a foundation of experience and sensitivity to what the situation requires. We also recognize that even in the midst of crisis, the destitute have a contribution to make from their experience.

We are responsive in a different sense where deep-seated and often complex economic and social deprivation calls for sustainable, long term development. We maintain the commitments necessary for this to occur.

We are responsive to new and unusual opportunities. We encourage innovation, creativity, and flexibility. We maintain an attitude of learning, reflection, and discovery in order to grow in understanding and skill.

Our commitment.

We recognise that values cannot be legislated; they must be lived. No document can substitute for the attitudes, decisions, and actions that make up the fabric of our life and work.

Therefore, we covenant with each other, before God, to do our utmost individually and as corporate entities within the World Vision Partnership to uphold these Core Values, to honour them in our decisions, to express them in our relationships, and to act consistently with them wherever World Vision is at work.