

**January 20. Read Colossians 3:12-14; 1 John 1:8-9.** Jesus, the King who reigned from a cross, strikingly prayed for those who crucified him, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing” (Luke 23:34). His followers live forgiven and forgiving because Jesus is the lord of their lives. As scholar N. T. Wright put it: “Have you ever tried to let Christ’s peace, Christ’s word, Christ’s name be the reality around which you order your life? If you have, you’ll know it’s not easy. It takes serious prayer and real moral effort....King Jesus is to be the decider in all your deliberations....whatever you do or say must be able to stand having these words written above it: ‘In the name of the Lord Jesus’.” John knew we often like to fool ourselves: “If we claim, ‘We don’t have any sin,’ we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Are you ignoring any God-given inner convictions that you need to face some issue honestly? If so, talk seriously with God about it. When have you been honest about a flaw or struggle, and found that it opened you to the freedom John described: “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we’ve done wrong”? “As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other.” Sound simple? C. S. Lewis learned that it isn’t: “I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me....I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me....Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances....that [real forgiveness] we can always have from God if we ask for it.” How have you learned to recognize the difference between saying, “It was no big deal” and truly forgiving the part of any action that had no good excuse?

**January 21. Read Psalm 103:9-13; Isaiah 55:6-9.** People sometimes wrongly think the idea of “forgiveness” only arose in the New Testament. Today’s readings are not the only passages that show the Hebrew Scriptures also focusing on God’s forgiveness (cf. also, for example, Jeremiah 31:33-34). Isaiah 55 told readers that God’s superbly merciful acts are very different from our usual human patterns. As we choose to respond to God’s mercy, we join in a cosmic celebration full of peace, joy and beauty. So just how far is the east from the west anyway? And how much higher are the heavens than the earth (an image both the psalmist and Isaiah used)? The psalmist, like most people in his day, most likely thought of earth as a flat disk, the center of the cosmos, with the heavens as a dome above the earth. On a disk, from “east” to “west” is the greatest possible distance, as is the heavens’ height. As a child, did you learn that God is forgiving, that he’s harsh and angry, or nothing much at all about God? How do you understand God’s forgiving nature now? How does Isaiah’s description of the gap between God’s mercy and our usual human ways of relating speak to your heart? Sometimes when we read Isaiah’s words, or Jesus’ teaching about forgiving others, we might think, “Sounds nice—but it would never work.” Do you believe God’s ways are indeed higher than ours? Do you believe God’s way is only utterly naïve idealism, or the only real path to peace and good?

**January 22. Read Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Luke 11:4.** In addition to hamartia (which meant “missing the mark”), Greek used other words for “sin.” Luke 11:4 used hamartia about our sins, but it used a form of opheleima, which meant “a debt owed to someone,” about what we forgive in others. Matthew 6:12 also used opheleima, while Matthew 6:14-15 used a form of paraptoma, which meant a lapse or slip-up. As in English, sometimes writers used synonyms simply to give variety and life to their writing—but it’s also possible that the different words used give insight into nuances of Jesus’ meaning. For Jesus, forgiveness was a fundamental Kingdom reality. If God did not forgive, no fallible human could have hope. But Jesus also knew that it’s simply not credible to claim God’s forgiveness for ourselves if we aren’t willing to forgive others. Do your background and temperament make it easier or harder for you to believe that God truly forgives you, and for you to extend that forgiveness to others? Scholar William Barclay wrote: “Of all petitions of the Lord’s Prayer this is the most frightening. ‘Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors’ . . . It is . . . quite clear that . . . if we say, ‘I will never forgive so-and-so for what he or she has done to me’ . . . and then take this petition on our lips, we are quite deliberately asking God not to forgive us . . . To be forgiven we must forgive, and that is a condition of forgiveness which only the power of Christ can enable us to fulfill.” Who do you need to forgive?

**January 23. Read Psalm 32:1-7; Luke 18:9-14.** Asking God or others for forgiveness, and accepting it, starts with being honest. Often our first challenge is to be honest with ourselves. Most of us are expert at rationalizing even our biggest failings. But we repeatedly see in the lives of public figures that even if we know we’ve missed the mark, we think we can hide that from others, even from God. The psalmist wrote that keeping silent, trying to hide the truth, drained him of energy and life. “The choice is yours. You can continue to carry the burden of your sins, or you can allow the Lord to take it from you and set you free, as he wants to do . . . The process begins with acknowledgment and sorrow.” Do you find it hard to acknowledge to yourself, others or God that certain things you did were wrong? How can you open your heart to allow God to give you the courage to be honest? How do you see yourself at your deepest level in relation to most others—as “less than” or “more than”? How can Jesus’ image of God’s forgiveness and love for the outcast tax collector help you see more clearly how God values you? How can God’s love and grace help you maintain a healthy sense of spiritual need without sinking into a sense of contempt, either for others or for yourself?

**January 24. Read Matthew 18:21-35, Ephesians 4:31-32.** Most of Jesus' themes in his teaching grew out of the Hebrew Scriptures. That was certainly true of this parable about a king who showed almost undreamed of mercy (earlier this week we read Psalm 103:9-13 and Isaiah 55:6-9). When we serve a king as merciful as God, then our gratitude toward the king and our mercy toward others will be signs that we truly value and wish to live by the kingdom's values. Jesus' story made the debt owed to the king absurdly large—as if he said the man owed “a gazillion dollars.” Was Jesus right in his picture of the debt we owe God, to show us how badly we need a Savior? Scholar Craig Keener noted, “Seventy times seven...does not really mean exactly 490 here; it is a typically graphic Jewish way of saying ‘Never hold grudges.’” How can taking in God's vast forgiveness transform you over time to be able to forgive others as God forgives you? Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “People who are enslaved to anger and malice may think they are ‘free’ to ‘be themselves,’ but they are in bondage. If we are marked out by the Spirit's personal presence living in us, think how sad it makes that Spirit if we behave in ways which don't reflect the life and love of God.” Before you scold that server, post that acid Facebook response or yell at your spouse or kids, ask, “Am I being ‘kind, compassionate, and forgiving’? Can I picture Jesus acting this way?”

**January 25. Read Luke 15:17-24; Romans 5:6-1.** In Jesus' day, patriarchs did NOT run—it was unseemly. But as the long-absent son in Jesus' story took the road home, his father ran to greet him. Jesus said God is thrilled when you turn toward home. Scholar N. T. Wright said it was vital that Jesus was God: “When we look at Jesus, the Messiah, we are looking at the one who embodies God's own love, God's love-in-action. Look at [Romans 5,] verse 8. What Paul says here makes no sense unless Jesus, in his life and death, was the very incarnation, the ‘enfleshment’ (that's what ‘incarnation’ means) of the living, loving God. After all, it doesn't make sense if I say to you, ‘I see you're in a real mess! Now, I love you so much that I'm going to...send someone else to help you out of it.’ If the death of the Messiah shows how much God loves us, that can only be because the Messiah is the fully human being (how much more human can you get than being crucified?) in whom the living God is fully present.” In Jesus' story, the once cocky son had hit bottom. He had no demands—he just hoped for a square meal in the servants' quarters. What does it say to your heart to picture God racing down the road to embrace you, even if you are dragging yourself home to God? The son sadly said, “I no longer deserve to be called your son.” The father wasn't worried about “deserving,” just as the God who gave himself on the cross was not concerned about whether you “deserved” that sacrifice. If being part of God's family is not mainly about deserving, then what is it about? If it is not about deserving, then what moves you to change your life in positive ways when you are welcomed into the family?

*Adapted from [www.cor.org](http://www.cor.org)*