



**God  
Forgives  
Can I?**

**The Word Among Us Partners**

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The Word Among Us Partners is the prison ministry of The Word Among Us, Inc. It was established in 1989 in response to our growing awareness of the need to support Catholic prisoners in their faith. The Partners' ministry raises funds to donate spiritual materials to prisoners, including *The Word Among Us* magazine. By reflecting on the daily Mass readings, the magazine helps prisoners to grow in their personal relationship with God, love for prayer, the Eucharist, and Scripture. For more information, log onto our website at [www.waupartners.org](http://www.waupartners.org)

## Dear Friend,

- ◆ Do you ever feel a need to be forgiven?
- ◆ Do you ever struggle with deep hurts or anger?
- ◆ Do you find it hard to say, “I forgive you” or “Please forgive me”?
- ◆ Do you want to experience more joy and freedom?

If you’ve answered “yes” to any of these questions, you should take a look at what God says about forgiveness.

We all find it hard sometimes to give and receive forgiveness. But when you’re behind bars, you’re especially vulnerable to guilt and anger. Shame and vengeance can rise up in you so quickly that it may seem impossible to offer mercy and forgiveness, let alone receive it. Unless you confront the negative forces in your heart, though, unforgiveness can destroy you.

The good news is that you don’t have to fight this battle on your own! Jesus is at your side, ready to help you experience God’s forgiveness for yourself. As his love and mercy soften your heart, you’ll be empowered to forgive even those who have hurt you the most.

This pamphlet will help you to understand and receive the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In it you’ll find fourteen short reflections. Each one is followed by an action step—a suggestion for putting the thought into practice—and a prayer to get you talking with God. You can focus on one reflection a day for two weeks, or move at your own pace.

Each reflection makes just a few simple points. But don’t speed read! You’ll get the most out of this pamphlet if you take time to listen for God’s special message to *you*.

God has so many good things in store for you! Ask him to help you receive them as you read and reflect on these scriptural truths. We’ll be praying for you.

**Angela M. Burrin**

**Director, The Word Among Us Partners**



## **“I Forgive You”**

Just three little words, but how powerful they are! They express generosity toward those who have hurt us, and a desire to see wounded relationships healed. Forgiveness and repentance open our hearts and allow God’s love to flow freely in us.

Forgiveness is a great gift, as a death row prisoner named Michael has come to see:

I have been forced to face my own mortality. I have been blessed with time to try to set things right and make my peace with God. I have been given time to ask and seek forgiveness from those whom I have hurt. I have been given time for my own hurts to be healed and to forgive those who have hurt me.

Don’t count on tomorrow. Cherish and live each day as if it were your last. Live the life that God has given to you to its fullest potential. And live each day that God has given you for his glory. Don’t forget Jesus’ teaching about the two greatest commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). Your next encounter with your neighbor may be your last. Seek forgiveness and forgive those who have hurt you. Not tomorrow—today! Repent to God for your past transgressions and live each day to further his glory.

### **Take Action!**

When you hear the word “forgiveness,” what thoughts come to mind? Do you consider it a blessing? Does it seem out of reach? Has anyone ever forgiven you—or refused to forgive you—for something you did? What was your reaction? Start a journal to record your thoughts about forgiveness.

## **Pray!**

God, I ask you to be with me as I read the Scriptures and think and pray about forgiveness. Help me to be open to your will for my life. ■



## **Two Who Forgave**

Maybe you're familiar with the Old Testament story of Joseph. (You'll find it in Genesis 37-45.) His brothers were so jealous of him that they dropped him into a pit and left him to die. God had other plans.

Joseph was rescued and became the right-hand man to the pharaoh of Egypt. When a great famine struck, he was the one in charge of the country's abundant food supply. What did he do when his brothers came pleading for help? Joseph offered them not only food but also the gift of forgiveness! He held no resentment in his heart.

Of course, Jesus is the best teacher and model of forgiveness. Although he preached in just a few towns and cities, his call to repentance and the message of his Father's love changed the world!

Jesus told us to forgive fully—seventy times seven times, if necessary (Matthew 6:14-15; 18:21-35; John 8:3-11). He taught us not to retaliate against those who hurt or persecute us, but to love them (Matthew 5:44). He said not to condemn or hold anger against anyone, but to replace our resentment with love. In short, Jesus called us to love others as much as he has loved us (John 15:12).

Jesus was so filled with his Father's love that he offered forgiveness and salvation to everyone he met. One woman was so moved by his mercy that she crashed a dinner party to express her gratitude by kissing Jesus' feet and anointing him with costly perfume (Luke 7:36-50). A tax collector named Zacchaeus returned all the money he had stolen—and more besides—because he experienced Jesus' compassion (Luke 19:1-10).

At Calvary, Jesus offered the priceless gift of forgiveness. One of the two thieves crucified with him acknowledged Jesus' innocence and his own guilt and said, "Jesus, remember me when you

come into your kingdom.” Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42-43). What a powerful reminder that all we have to do is acknowledge our sins and ask Jesus for forgiveness!

## **Take Action!**

Open your Bible and read the following Scripture passages about people who sought and were granted forgiveness: Genesis 37-45, John 8:3-11, Luke 7:36-50, Luke 19:1-10 and Luke 23:42-43. In your journal write down your answers to the questions listed below. If you have the chance, share your thoughts and answers with someone else.

- ◆ Pick one person from these Bible readings who knew their need for forgiveness. What do you think motivated them to change their life?
- ◆ Who do you most easily identify with, and why?
- ◆ Why do you think Joseph was able to forgive his brothers and not hold resentment?
- ◆ Why do you think Jesus opened heaven to the repentant thief? Put yourself in the place of the thief. What would Jesus say to you?

## **Pray!**

Jesus, you are so loving. I want to love as you loved, but I know my heart is often hard and unforgiving. Please soften my heart with your love. ■



## **Forgiveness and the “Logic of Love”**

Logic is a wonderful gift from God that helps us to reason soundly and make right choices. But for some things—like forgiving others from the heart—reason alone is not enough. For this we need the “logic of love.”

Mother Teresa understood this logic and how it works. “Once you know you have hurt someone, be the first to say ‘sorry,’” she said. And then she explained what makes this reaction possible: “We cannot forgive unless we know that we need forgiveness, and forgiveness is the beginning of love.”

To live by the “logic of love,” we must know God who is love. This is crucial, because the ability to love and forgive is first and foremost something that God does in us. God is love (1 John 4:16), and as we open up and say “yes” to him, we receive his love and find ourselves able to share it with others. God is so great that he makes possible even those things we think are *impossible* (Luke 1:37)! If we live in God, we can forgive others as freely as God has forgiven us.

Our relationship with God develops by the power of the Holy Spirit. It takes us beyond human capabilities and gives us a share in God’s divine nature. Baptism is our first step in this transforming process. Then, with every passing day of following Jesus, we grow in knowledge and understanding of the saving power of God’s love. Gradually, as Pope John Paul II pointed out, “God’s forgiveness becomes in our hearts an inexhaustible source of forgiveness in our relationships with one another.”

What are your thoughts about God? Do you think of him as a “cop in the sky,” or do you know him as a God of love, who cares about you and is absolutely committed to renewing your life with his love (Jeremiah 31:3; John 10:10)?

Do you know that God has a wonderful plan in mind for you and loves you too much to leave you the way you are (Jeremiah 29:14)?

### **Take Action!**

Now slowly read the Scripture passages mentioned above. As you read, some of the words may “jump out” at you. This is the work of the Holy Spirit bringing these words to your attention. Write these verses in your journal. Talk to God about them. Then sit quietly, and wait to hear God’s still, small voice speaking to your heart about how he wants you to walk with him today.

Here is one more action step. If there is anyone to whom you need to say “I’m sorry,” consider making a phone call or writing a letter.

## **Pray!**

Father, I thank you for creating me to know you and love you. Although I don't always feel as though you love me, I know that you never stop loving me. Nothing can separate me from your love—nothing I have done or will ever do. ■



### **“Father, Forgive Them”**

Jesus gave up his life because he “loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (Revelation 1:5-6).

The amazing thing is that this love comes not just from a good man but from God the Son! When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan, the Holy Spirit came upon him, and the voice of God was heard saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22). After receiving this affirmation by his Father and being filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus began preaching about the kingdom of God and healing all who came to him.

What thanks did Jesus receive for his good works and good news? After three years, he was falsely accused, scourged, crowned with thorns, and forced to carry his cross through the streets of Jerusalem to the hill of Calvary. As he hung there, with nails piercing his hands and feet, he heard the crowds mocking him and the religious leaders taunting him to display his power.

Jesus didn't deserve any of this, yet he prayed: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). He knew that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). He knew we needed a Savior.

By his death on the cross, Jesus made it possible for us to be forgiven and brought back into a life-giving relationship with God. Because this could not happen without some atoning payment for our sins, Jesus took the pain upon himself. He

who was innocent paid the debt for us who are guilty. “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Our sin made Jesus’ death necessary. We are responsible for the death of God’s Son. What worst possible crime could there be? But amazingly, Jesus now offers us eternal salvation—heaven—as a free gift. Of course, salvation isn’t ours until we accept it. To do so, we must receive Jesus into our lives by faith and then lead a good life (Ephesians 2:8-10; James 2:17).

As many men and women have discovered, being behind bars is no obstacle to living a holy life. Actually, incarceration can be an opportunity to get closer to God, says one prisoner, whose name is William:

My friendship with Jesus has grown a lot over the past two years. Here in prison, I’ve had time to talk with God and ask his forgiveness for all I’ve done wrong against him, my family, friends, and coworkers. I now feel more at ease with myself. God seems to take care of my every need just in time.

### **Take Action!**

Open your Bible and read the account of Jesus’ suffering and death in the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 22:47–23:56). Remember, you were in Jesus’ thoughts as he hung on the cross; he died to restore you to a right relationship with your Father. Jesus wants to be an intimate part of your life. If you are ready to invite him in, pray the following prayer:

### **Pray!**

Father, I am **sorry** for all the wrong things I have done. I turn from them now. (Tell God your sins.) Jesus, **thank you** for dying on the cross and washing away all my sins so that I can have eternal life. **Please** come into my heart. Be my Savior and Lord. Fill me with your Holy Spirit and make me the person you want me to be. Amen. ■



## God Is Eager to Forgive

Jesus' love is so great that we can barely begin to understand it: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). God is so merciful that when we go to him, no bitterness, grudge, or resentment stops him from pouring out his love.

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) shows how much God loves and wants to forgive. It is a story of an ungrateful son who leaves home and squanders his inheritance. Every day, though, his father watches anxiously for his return. When the son finally reappears, the father runs to embrace him and showers him with kisses. "He doesn't even let the son apologize," said Pope John Paul II. "Everything is forgiven. The intense joy of forgiveness, offered and received, heals seemingly incurable wounds, restores relationships, and firmly roots them in God's inexhaustible love" (World Day of Peace).

Like that welcoming father, God our Father is waiting for us to return to him. When we do, he runs to meet us with arms wide open and his heart full of merciful love. What could be greater than knowing that God is always ready to forgive! But as a woman named Patricia writes, this good news can be hard to believe:

I was raised a Catholic, but I never really believed in my heart that God would allow his Son to be crucified so that my sins could be forgiven. Then one day while I sat in my cell, praying once again for God's help, I started to think about this "Jesus" person and to really try to understand. Somehow my "awakening" happened. I started believing in Jesus Christ and God like never before.

Do you wonder about God's forgiveness, too? Do you find it hard to believe that God has forgiven all your sins—even those you consider unforgivable? Do you ever find yourself thinking, "My sins are too many, too horrible"?

Knowing God's love for you will help you to know God's forgiveness. This is true for all of us. Only by experiencing God's personal love can we come to forgive ourselves for all the evil and harm we have caused ourselves and others. God's merciful love can transform us so that we can even say, "I love myself."

### **Take Action!**

Open your Bible and read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. Then close your eyes, and imagine your heavenly Father putting his arms around you and saying, "Welcome home! I forgive you for all your sins—including the ones you think I can't and won't forgive." Say aloud, "Father, I accept your forgiveness."

Take advantage of the sacraments that God has given us to strengthen our faith and support our Christian life. Meet with a priest to confess all your sins, and receive the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

### **Pray!**

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you, whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help, to do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin. Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy. Amen. (An Act of Contrition) ■



## **The Burden of Guilt and Shame**

The sins of our past can place a tremendous burden of guilt on us. We are weighed down by memories of the evil we have done, the people we have hurt by our actions, the ruined lives and severed relationships. A prisoner writes:

I am incarcerated for crimes that "decent people" find incomprehensible. I was a child molester. In the eyes of many, especially other inmates with violent crimes, I am

viewed as the vilest of all, and this has caused me to believe myself “beyond redemption.” I struggle to accept God’s forgiveness. Flannery O’Connor, the Catholic novelist, wrote, “The central mystery of Christianity is that God would find humanity worth dying for.” Only the truth of this statement keeps me going. Even when no one will forgive me, God does. Even when I fail in my own efforts to love my worst enemies as much as I love God, Jesus still intercedes for me and cleanses me by his sacrifice.

Only one remedy can overcome the plague of guilt: knowing that God, who is love, loves us unconditionally!

Jesus said, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” (John 15:9). No matter what we have done in our past, God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). Through the Holy Spirit, God has poured his love into our hearts (Romans 5:5). There, in the depths of our being, we can experience a divine forgiveness that melts away guilt and shame. At any moment, we can turn to God and know his love and forgiveness. He wants to pour out his mercy, and the only thing he looks for is a repentant heart.

Anyone who feels crippled by guilt for sin needs to deal with that guilt. Left to fester, it causes confusion and isolation. It will leave you bitter, defensive, and sapped of self-esteem.

If you experience guilt, try to determine its source. Does it come from unconfessed sins? Is it from Satan? If you have already repented of your sins, chances are that Satan is seeking to rob you of the joy and freedom that are your rightful heritage as a child of God.

When the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins, he does not leave us feeling condemned. The Spirit is always positive. Satan is always negative. God’s intent is to give life. Satan is the “accuser” and “thief” who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). He always tries to bring guilt, fear, and hopelessness.

### **Take Action!**

Close your eyes and imagine Jesus dying on the cross for you. Now look into your heart to see if there are any sins for which you

still need to ask God's forgiveness. Do it now! Accept God's forgiveness and remember, when you bring your sins to him, Satan's back is broken.

If you haven't ever been able to forgive yourself before, ask Jesus to help you do this now. If you can't love yourself, ask Jesus to pour his peace and transforming love into your heart. Over time, you'll see a change in how you think about yourself. Remember: God is faithful. When his children ask for bread, he never hands them a stone (Matthew 7:9)!

## **Pray!**

Holy Spirit, I am full of guilt and shame for the sins of my past. Please help me to know that in Christ I am forgiven. Thank you, Father, that you are pouring your transforming love into my heart so that I am able to forgive myself. ■



## **Justice or Mercy?**

What do you want to receive—justice or mercy? Surely, we all want mercy!

The question is, what do we want for others? Are we ready to give them mercy, or do we insist on strict justice? Before you answer, consider these strong and challenging words of Jesus: “With the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get” (Matthew 7:2).

The way we treat people is the way we will be treated by God. If we want mercy, we have to offer mercy to others. If we demand that they receive an “eye for an eye”—justice and repayment for their sins and wrongs against us—then God will pronounce judgment on our own sins by that same standard. We will receive exactly what we deserve. Is that what we really want?

Let's look at Jesus again. More than anyone else, he had a right to seek retribution. Jesus should have been honored and respected by all, not executed! But by his willing sacrifice on the cross, he revealed God's desire to forgive even the worst sinners.

St. Stephen, the first martyr, followed Jesus' example. As he was being stoned to death, he prayed: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Stephen could have responded with anger and hatred, but he fixed his eyes on Jesus. He held onto his faith in a living God who commanded him to love in the face of persecution, slander, physical abuse, and even a violent death.

### **Take Action!**

Take a look at your life, past and present. Make a list of the people you need to forgive—parents, spouse, siblings, teachers, former friends, judges, prosecutors, or anyone who may have lied about you or hurt or abused you. Now pray the following prayer:

### **Pray!**

Father, I bring to you all the people who have hurt me. To my mind, they are guilty and deserve punishment. But I want your heart, Father, and so I choose to freely give the gift of my forgiveness even to those I don't think deserve it. [Name each person individually.] Lord, I'm tearing up all the "IOUs" I've been carrying around in my mind. I place them at the foot of your cross. ■



## **Freely Give What You Have Freely Received**

Jesus taught us to forgive not just big offenses but even the smallest of sins—over and over, if necessary (Matthew 18:21-22). We are to forgive freely, because we have been forgiven to a far greater degree.

Jesus illustrated this point by telling a parable about a king's mercy toward a servant who owed him an enormous sum of money (Matthew 18:23-35). Faced with debtor's prison, the servant pleaded for time. The king was touched. He could have sold the servant's family into slavery, but instead he wrote off the debt completely. He chose mercy over what would have been a legal course of action.

But what did this servant do? When he ran into another servant who owed him a very small amount, he grabbed him by the throat, demanded immediate repayment, and had him thrown into prison. He forgot the mercy he himself had received. The king wasn't pleased! Hearing the news, he rebuked the unforgiving servant and threw him into prison (Matthew 18:32-33).

Like that king, God has written off the immense debt of sin that each of us owes him. In justice, he could have condemned us. Instead, God so wanted to forgive us that he sent his beloved Son to the cross to bear the punishment we deserved.

God expects us to pass on this abundant mercy to others. Jesus said: "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 evil-doer. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 5:38-39; see Leviticus 24:19-20).

Will we treat other people with mercy or not? The choice is ours.

### **Take Action!**

Read the following sentence carefully: *Is there still one person I find it impossible to forgive?* Don't be afraid to admit the truth. God can give you the grace—right now—to forgive. Ask Jesus for the grace to help you forgive that person from the heart. Express your desire by cupping your hands in front of you and imagining this person in them. Release your hands with an opening and away motion—and as you do, "release" this person to the Lord.

### **Pray!**

Jesus, I no longer hold anything against those who "owe" me. I release them completely to you. I choose mercy. Guard my heart so that I don't take back what I have given you. ■



## Obstacles to Forgiveness

Mercy is simple to understand, yet difficult to practice day to day. In part, this is because society places a high value on individual rights and desires—often to the detriment of personal relationships. But there are many other reasons why we find it difficult to forgive. Here are two of the most common.

*I'm waiting for an apology.* “He hurt me and he’s not sorry!” “I’ll forgive her—but only after she apologizes.” Have you ever felt this way? Someone has said or done something hurtful or cruel—perhaps on purpose—and shows no regret. It may seem impossible or even unwise to forgive such an act. But this wasn’t Jesus’ approach. When confronted with the strongest hatred, opposition, and cruelty, he chose to extend love and mercy.

*I'm not capable of forgiving.* Especially when we’ve been deeply hurt, we often have neither the power nor the desire to forgive. But in every situation, we have a choice. Will we trust in God’s power to change our hearts and make us able to obey Jesus’ command to love? Or will we give in to feelings of anger, frustration, and bitterness?

It’s not easy to forgive. In fact, it would be impossible without God’s help. But as we call on God and put our faith in him, he brings about a gradual change. He empowers us to offer forgiveness freely and without conditions—to become as merciful as he is (Luke 6:36).

Don’t be discouraged if you don’t experience an immediate release of forgiveness. Don’t stop praying for a forgiving heart. And remember: “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles” (Isaiah 40:31).

### **Take Action!**

Which of the two obstacles to forgiveness do you struggle with? Note your thoughts in your journal. Consider talking to someone—perhaps your chaplain—so that you can begin to make decisions that will help you overcome these obstacles.

## **Pray!**

Jesus, I don't want to speak words of forgiveness while my heart is holding on to resentment. And so I come before your cross, Lord. I acknowledge that "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Please help me to forgive. ■



## **Forgiveness: God's Gift of Healing**

There's a story about an elephant trainer who was showing a visitor around the zoo. The visitor noticed a large elephant with a short chain around one ankle. The chain was staked to the ground, and its links were thin. "I'm curious," said the visitor. "How can such a weak chain hold such a large animal?" The trainer replied, "Well, it doesn't." He went on to explain: "When an elephant is born, we place a chain like this one around his ankle. Now, no matter how much the baby elephant pulls, he can't break the chain or pull out the stake. At some point, he stops trying. By the time he's full grown, he's still being held by that same chain. It's not the chain that holds him, though. It's the memory of the chain."

Isn't that elephant chain a good image for the painful memories that so many of us carry with us? Abuse, abandonment, broken relationships, ruined lives, and bad decisions—all these hurts get worse if we hold onto unforgiveness. Sometimes, even if we have forgiven, the hurt remains because we are chained to the memory.

The sad and terrible truth is that people hurt people. But as we freely accept God's forgiveness and freely forgive those who have hurt us, we open ourselves to his healing power. The ability to forgive comes from sharing in the very life of God. When we forgive, it's because God's grace—his life in us—helps us to become like him. His forgiveness and mercy are total and perfect, flooding us like a mighty river.

Forgiveness touches every part of life. Throughout his ministry, Jesus linked it with physical healing (for example, see Matthew 9:5-6). Jesus even made forgiveness and reconciliation a prerequisite to worship: “First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:24).

All of us harbor unforgiveness at times, even when we’re praying to be forgiven or healed. God knows that. But he still offers us his mercy, if only we accept the grace to forgive others as he has forgiven us. Because he respects the precious gift of our free will, he waits for us to choose this freedom. Don’t think that God isn’t eager to totally free and heal us, however. He really longs to see us without those elephant chains!

### **Take Action!**

Jesus longs to heal your painful memories. The time is now! Tell him you want to be healed. Then close your eyes and in your mind recall these hurtful events and situations. As you “see” these memories, ask: “Jesus, where were you when this happened?” Wait and expect to “see” Jesus there in the midst of your memory. What is Jesus doing? What is he saying?

### **Pray!**

Jesus, you have set me free! I love you, and thank you for your great love. I now realize that you were always with me, even in the most painful moments of my life. Your healing power has broken the chains of my painful memories. ■



## **Sowing and Reaping**

In the “Our Father,” Jesus taught that we must forgive if we want to receive forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15). One reason is that “you reap whatever you sow” (Galatians 6:7). Bitterness, anger, and resentment toward others reap the same harvest in our own lives.

Before wishing bad things on other people, we should ask whether we would want them for ourselves. If we remember that

our thoughts and actions can boomerang, we just might be sobered into not wishing evil on others! On the other hand, if we sow a crop of forgiveness and mercy, we clear the way for the Spirit to wash us in the healing blood of Jesus.

Scripture teaches that “The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Corinthians 9:6). This bountiful sowing of forgiveness isn’t a one-time thing. We have to sow forgiveness every day, even if it feels like we’re overseeding! We must never stop asking the Spirit to reveal deeper areas of unforgiveness in us so that we can receive every kind of healing God offers.

Today, why not decide—or decide again—to take down whatever barriers you’ve created that prevent God’s healing power from flowing freely? God loves you! How much he wants you to understand and experience his love and power! Become good soil then, and receive everything God wants to sow in you. With his grace, you will reap a wonderful harvest and share it with others.

### **Take Action!**

Set aside five minutes each day—morning, afternoon, or evening—to examine your conscience. It will bear fruit in your life! The following questions will help get you started:

- ◆ Did I ask forgiveness from God for ways I didn’t love him or others today?
- ◆ Did I willingly offer forgiveness to those who hurt me today?
- ◆ Am I holding onto anger or resentment toward anyone or withholding any blessings from them?
- ◆ Is there anyone of whom I should ask forgiveness?

### **Pray!**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen. ■



## “Jesus, Bless Them”

What’s your reaction to this Scripture verse: “Forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:35)? It’s a challenge, isn’t it? But it’s a direct quote from Jesus. That’s how he wants us to relate to the people who have hurt us.

Whenever angry thoughts rise up in us, we have a wonderful opportunity to become more like Jesus. We can ask God to pour out his love on our “enemies.” Such a prayer is powerful enough to unlock the chains of bitterness in our own hearts and bring blessings to those who have hurt us.

How beautiful it is to be able to tell someone, “I forgive you and I love you.” Nothing has more potential for freeing up and restoring a relationship! But some relationships may be too damaged to allow for outward expressions of reconciliation. Even in these cases—even if we’ve been deeply wronged—God asks us to forgive from the heart. We can do this by coming before God and honestly acknowledging how deeply we have been hurt. Then we can tell God that we choose to forgive. We can ask him to bless those who hurt us. In this way, even without the opportunity to verbalize our forgiveness and blessing in front of other people, we can reject bitterness and seek their good.

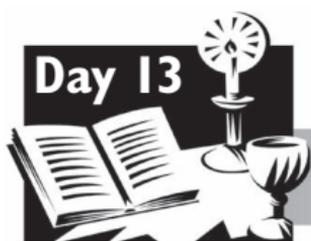
When you forgive others from the heart, you may or may not experience peace and reconciliation. Tension may remain. You may still feel uncomfortable around certain people. But don’t get discouraged. We don’t forgive in order to reduce tension! We forgive because Jesus has called us to be like him.

### **Take Action!**

Right now, ask God to bless five people you interact with every day. When memories of people who have hurt you come to mind, bless them. If family and friends visit you, offer them a “God bless you.”

## **Pray!**

Father, thank you for all the blessings in my life, and especially for forgiveness. I want to walk in your love and forgiveness and freely give it away to everyone I meet. ■



## **Forgiveness Every Day**

Every day, Jesus calls you to love and forgive everyone around you—other prisoners, officers, instructors, chaplains, and volunteers. When you express this love, even in small, everyday ways, you please God immensely because you are reflecting Jesus' mercy.

Compared to some of the issues you may already have worked through, this personal decision to express love in everyday situations may seem small. It's not insignificant, however! And as this prisoner John says, it's not always easy.

I had been running a prayer circle gathering for about eight to fifteen prisoners when it happened. I came back from chow one day, and someone had broken into my locker and stolen about forty dollars' worth of food and hygiene products. I was angry. I was hurt that these people I had "trusted" would do this. Well, as long as I didn't know who did it, I could be angry but not have to do anything. By evening, I had pretty much gotten over it.

The next day, three people came to me, at different times, to tell me who had broken into my locker. I wanted to beat him up. I wanted to smash his face in. I wanted to kick his ribs in and break his arms. But I'd been preaching from the Bible to these men for nine months. What to do? I prayed about it. Fight to protect my "stuff?" Forgive? I went to the different gang leaders and explained that I was going to forgive the thief; that I believed in the Bible and what Jesus said. Then I confronted the thief publicly. "I know you stole my stuff. But

I forgive you.” Later, the gang leaders came to me and said I no longer needed a lock on my locker. From now on, my “stuff” was safe. Nobody would take anything from me again.

If you want to walk the path of love everyday, you have to make a decision and renew it often. Will you choose to forgive, or will you harden your heart and harbor anger and resentment? Allow God’s love and forgiveness to find a place in your heart and your relationships. Over time, you’ll see the power of the gospel change not only your life, but the lives of everyone around you.

Jesus’ grace of forgiveness is pouring down from heaven like a great waterfall. If you stand far away from a waterfall, you see only the mist produced by the cascading waters. If you stand near or under it, you can get drenched! Come and be drenched in the overflowing, merciful, and forgiving love of Jesus—today and every day!

### **Take Action!**

Protect the great gift of forgiveness that you received as you read and prayed through this pamphlet. Set aside a time each day to pray. Read the Scriptures regularly. Stay on course by asking yourself some “review” questions like those in the action section for Day 11. Get involved in the Catholic community at your institution. Attend Mass or Eucharistic services, pray the Rosary, and receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly. Pray also for those who are struggling with forgiveness.

### **Pray!**

Jesus, I praise and thank you for being my Lord and Savior. You have reconciled me to my heavenly Father, and I rejoice that I am a beloved child of God! Holy Spirit, please empower me to be a person who freely offers the gift of forgiveness to everyone. ■



## **Let's Review!**

Listed below are some of the Scripture passages used in this pamphlet. Starting today, open up your Bible and reflect on one or more of them as part of your daily prayer time. Memorize the verses that speak to you most, or write them in your journal. And as you pray, remember: Talk to God! Examine your heart! Ask forgiveness of God and others! Forgive yourself! Forgive and bless others!

### **God's love**

Exodus 34:6

1 John 4:16

John 3:16

Luke 15:11-32 (The Parable of the Prodigal Son)

### **God's Love Revealed in Jesus**

Isaiah 53:4-6

Matthew 9:2-7

John 8:3-11

John 15:9

Matthew 26:36-27:50; Mark 14:32-15:37; Luke 23;

John 18-19 (Jesus' Passion and Death)

### **The Call to Love**

Matthew 22:37-39

John 15:12

Matthew 5:38-48

Romans 5:5

### **Forgiveness and Mercy**

Genesis 37-45 (The Story of Joseph)

Matthew 5:23-24; 38-39

Matthew 6:12-15

Matthew 7:1-5

Matthew 18:21-35 (The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant)

Luke 6:36-38

Luke 7:36-50

Luke 19:1-10

Acts 7:54-60 (Stephen's Martyrdom)

