

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE BIBLE STUDY



Steps to Reconciliation

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Psalm 34:14

Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

Romans 12:18

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

(New International Version)

Overview of the Theme for the 2002 Bible Study

While most generally do not desire or seek it, conflict occurs between people. Some conflicts may arise more or less unintentionally, yet many stem from willful wrongdoing. Crime is one particular kind of wrongdoing. Though it involves breaking a law, crime fundamentally consists of conflict between people, resulting in material or non-material harm. Crime disrupts and damages people and relationships.

Can the conflict which is crime be resolved? Can the harm experienced by individuals and in relationships be redressed? What does it mean to resolve conflict between people in cases of wrongdoing and crime?

Reconciliation is key to resolving the conflict. This is because crime, as we have seen, is primarily relational or personal in nature. Upholding law is important in responding to crime. Yet the pursuit of reconciliation between people is utterly vital if the true nature and effects of crime are genuinely to be addressed.

Resolving conflict through reconciliation does not mean scrubbing clean the area of conflict with no traces at all remaining of the conflict and its aftermath. Depending on the severity of the wrongdoing or crime, as well as other factors, the effects on both the perpetrator and the victim can persist, to a greater or lesser extent, for some time. Long-term traces and effects may be physical, emotional, and spiritual.

Yet real progress and redress can be made in addressing conflict and harm between people in the aftermath of crime. In this regard, reconciliation means choosing and working to move beyond staying stuck in the area of conflict. When people desire to deal with the problems within and between them, they can take steps to journey in a new direction toward a new emotional and relational place.

How do people desire and work to resolve the conflict which is crime? How do people choose and act to embark on a new direction and seek a new place to live emotionally and relationally? How do they pursue reconciliation in response to crime and its damaging effects?

Suggestions for Using this Study Guide

Each lesson in this guide begins with a Scripture passage to read and consider. Along with Scripture, we will find a brief meditation on the particular study topic to read, ponder, and apply. We will also find related questions to assist in reflecting on and applying the topic.

The lessons in the study guide (Scripture passages, meditation, and questions) can be used either as an individual or as part of a group. Here are a few ways to use the study guide:

- Daily devotional
- Training with staff, volunteers, or board members
- Bible study in prison
- Study or information session with local churches, student groups, or Christian professionals
- Study or information sessions for Christian prison personnel and justice officials



Notes:

Several key actions or steps toward conflict resolution and reconciliation can be identified. Through the use of texts from the Bible, reflections on the texts and particular topics, and questions for personal consideration or group discussion, this study focuses on the following steps:

- Lesson 1: Taking Responsibility
- Lesson 2: Confession and Repentance
- Lesson 3: Forgiveness
- Lesson 4: Making Amends
- Lesson 5: Reconciliation

From all of this we can see that reconciliation usually occurs through a process over time. Both the perpetrator and the victim need to deal with a number of issues related to the wrongdoing. Some issues are material, and some are non-material. Some of what the involved parties must do is individual and internal. Some is relational and external. Generally, it takes time for people to work through the individual and relational components of desiring and pursuing reconciliation. It can be hard work both personally and relationally.

In view of the time and hard work required, reconciliation costs the parties involved. Each may have to give up certain things, especially emotionally, and each may have to undertake specific actions. Yet, more than it costs, reconciliation will certainly benefit them when genuinely and successfully pursued. Reconciliation is a key and vital goal of justice that restores.

LESSON 1: Taking Responsibility

Luke 19:1-9

¹Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ²A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" ⁸But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

Note: Zacchaeus was the leader of corrupt tax collectors. With support from Rome, they collected taxes from the people and usually took more than they were supposed to. The people of Jericho were his victims in this crime. When Zacchaeus promised to pay back anyone he had harmed fourfold, he admitted his guilt and offered to take the punishment that Jewish law demanded – paying back the victim.

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There are many ways we may harm people and relationships through our behavior; crime is only one example of this. In each case, the first step toward reconciliation is to take responsibility for our actions. Acting so as to harm people and relationships is bad enough. Refusing to take responsibility only adds to the damage. See, for example, Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve compounded their disobedience of God by trying at first to avoid responsibility for it. Hence, taking responsibility for our actions is vital to begin a process of recovery or restoration from the harm caused.

For criminal offenders and other wrongdoers this means accepting responsibility for what we have done in the *past* and for the harm that resulted. And whether we are the victim or the offender, we face choices about how we will act *now* and in the *future*. We must take responsibility for those choices if we are going to move past the offense and resulting harm.

Offenders may avoid taking responsibility by blaming others for what happened, making excuses, or justifying their actions. Victims can assume unwarranted responsibility by blaming themselves or denying or minimizing the harm done. Also, victims may avoid responsibility for themselves and others by refusing to consider and work on

Reflection Questions:



1. What alternatives are there for victims and offenders besides taking responsibility for how they respond to what happened?

2. Think of times when you hurt someone. Was it better to accept or deny the responsibility? If you accepted responsibility, how did you do that, and what did it mean to you and to the person you hurt? If you denied responsibility, what did it do to you and to the other person?

emotional and relational recovery for themselves, with friends and family, or even with the offender who seeks to make things right.

The story of Zacchaeus speaks to us whether we are offenders or victims. Offenders need to take responsibility for their actions and do something to repair the harm caused. Although victims are not responsible for what others have done to them, they can choose how they will respond to that harm. The story of Zacchaeus reminds us that God can help us respond in ways that will bring healing. He can bring good things – salvation – out of the situation.

Notes:



Reflection Questions:

3. **Think of times when someone hurt you. What would it mean to take responsibility for how you respond? Do you have an obligation to take responsibility for how you respond? What are better ways to respond, and what are worse ways to respond?**

LESSON 2: Confession and Repentance

2 Samuel 12:1-7a, 13

¹The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴“Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

⁵David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! ⁶He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

⁷Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

¹³Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Note: David had an affair with another man’s wife and then attempted to cover up his actions. When this attempt failed, David arranged to have the man killed. The prophet Nathan confronted David with his crimes by using a story to stir up David’s sense of justice. When Nathan accused David of his crimes, he accepted responsibility for his actions and repented. Yet, David still had to face the consequences of his actions.

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As we have seen in the previous lesson, taking responsibility for our actions is the good and right thing to do. Avoidance or denial of responsibility only adds to the problem and its harmful effects on ourselves and on the injured party. The act of confession and repentance constitutes the first and necessary step in taking responsibility.

Confession means to admit something, to tell the truth about something. Confession of crimes or other harms means to admit guilt, to be grieved or to be remorseful, and to speak the truth about what was done. Truth is an essential part of justice.

Repentance involves confession, but goes beyond it. Repentance consists of turning around and going in the opposite direction. It requires the offender not only to admit his or her wrongful actions. It also requires the offender to turn away from that behavior and seek to repair or rebuild the harm to people and relationships.

When victims of crimes are asked what kind of amends they would like their offenders to make, the answer often includes telling the truth about what happened, apologizing for that, and taking steps to show that it will not happen again. In very practical and relevant

Reflection Questions:



1. Imagine what it was like in King David’s court, where the people around him knew he had committed crimes, but no one was willing to talk about it. What are some of the ways that a person who refuses to tell the truth about what they did can harm the people around them?

2. What did it take for David to confess and repent? What might it take for an offender today to reach the decision to confess and repent? How can those involved in a criminal case, whether personally or officially, help an offender reach this point? How do our justice systems discourage or encourage an offender’s confession and repentance?

ways, these actions constitute confession and repentance, and they can significantly advance the process of building the bridge toward reconciliation between offender and victim.

David asked God to forgive him, to clean him, and to give him back joy. God is willing to do that for anyone who confesses before God and others. Genuine confession and repentance begin to place both the offender and the victim in the dynamic of God's restoring grace.

Notes:



Reflection Questions:

3. David prayed that if God forgave him, he would teach other sinners God's ways. How does this demonstrate repentance? In specific, concrete ways, how might an offender today demonstrate genuine repentance?

4. How might a victim respond to an offender's act of confession and repentance? What role, if any, should a victim play in an offender's confession and repentance? Does a victim have a responsibility to accept an offender's confession and repentance?

LESSON 3: Forgiveness

Luke 15: 11-24

¹¹Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Note: In Biblical times, a son who asked for his inheritance was saying that he wished his father were dead. This was a severe insult to the father. Nevertheless, when the prodigal son decided to return to his father’s house, his father welcomed him back into the family with a joyous celebration. This did not mean there were no consequences for the son: his share of the inheritance was gone.

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What is forgiveness? While definitions of forgiveness can be quite complex and nuanced, in basic terms we can say that forgiveness involves the act of pardoning a person for the perpetration of a wrong or an offense. That is, among other things, forgiveness consists of a decision or an act to forego holding a wrong or an offense against the person who committed it.

How does a person seek forgiveness? A person seeking forgiveness must come in humility, with authentic confession and repentance. This person cannot expect the injured person to forgive. The offender can only offer his or her confession and repentance in humility and truth, and hope the injured person will accept the offer.

How does a person forgive? Forgiveness can only be given; it cannot be forced from someone. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, nor does

Reflection Questions:



1. Would you like to be forgiven of things you have done in the past? What are they?

2. Are there wrongs to you or those that you care about that you would like to forgive?

3. How does forgiveness cost the victim and the offender? How does forgiveness benefit the victim and the offender?

it ignore the harm done or remove the offender’s responsibility to try to make things right. The act of forgiveness names the wrong that was done; otherwise there would be no need to forgive. Nevertheless, in the very acknowledgment of the offense or injury, the wronged party gives up the option to clutch the wrong as a permanent or irresolvable complaint against the offender.

Forgiveness is not the same as feeling forgiving. Rather, it is a decision not to hold a wrong and its consequences against the wrongdoer anymore. Forgiveness frees the wrongdoer from the strict demands of justice, although it does not ignore justice nor does it remove all consequences from the offender.

Forgiveness usually occurs through a process over time. As indicated in the introduction with respect to the steps toward reconciliation as a whole, forgiveness itself often takes considerable personal and relational work to deal with emotional and spiritual challenges and issues, especially for the victim. Even when it seems to occur or resolve in a crucial moment, this is likely the fruition of individual and interpersonal efforts over a period of time.

Notes:



Reflection Questions:

4. Why might it be hard to ask forgiveness of another? Why might it be hard to grant forgiveness to another?

5. How might forgiveness function in the justice system? How could the justice system encourage offenders and victims to explore the possibility of forgiveness and perhaps engage in a process seeking forgiveness?

LESSON 4: Making Amends

Luke 19:1-9

¹Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ²A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” ⁶So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’” ⁸But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” ⁹Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.”

Note: Jewish law required a wrongdoer to pay restitution to the victim (e.g., Ex. 22). When Zacchaeus said he would pay back four times what he had taken, he was applying Old Testament law to his situation. Then Zacchaeus went beyond the law’s requirements by promising to give half his possessions to the poor. This was something additional he chose to do to repair the harm he had caused.

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What does it mean to make amends? The act of making amends consists of an attempt to pay back or remedy in some form for loss or harm resulting from wrongdoing. When an offender tries to make amends, he or she shows a willingness to take responsibility for the offense, and manifests the sincerity of his or her confession of and repentance for it.

Restitution is one way of making amends. Other ways can include personal services to the victim or community service. In whatever way, an offender seeks to give something back in order to make up, to the extent possible, for the victim’s loss or harm.

For some victims, an offender’s deep, sincere, and humble confession and apology are important ways to make amends. Amends does not make the harm disappear. Yet it does acknowledge that the offender owes a debt to the victim and community and seeks to pay that debt. In this way, the offender’s efforts to make amends can play a vital role in repairing harm, restoring material or non-material loss, and contributing to possible reconciliation with the victim.



Reflection Questions:

1. Thinking of a time when you have been harmed by someone’s actions, what form of amends would have been meaningful to you?

2. Thinking of a time when you hurt someone, what kind of amends did you make or might you have made?

3. Why are confession, apology, and symbolic restitution acceptable to many victims, in your opinion?

4. How could a justice system encourage and make possible the use of making amends as a form of accountability for offenders and a means of working toward reconciliation between offenders and victims?

LESSON 5: Reconciliation

Philemon 1, 10-22

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker,

¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹²I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

²²And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers.

Note: Philemon was and rich and righteous man, and a good friend of Paul's. Onesimus had been Philemon's slave and it appears from the letter that he had stolen from Philemon and then run away. Paul met Onesimus in prison in Rome. Onesimus became a Christian and a close associate of Paul. Paul decided to try to bring about reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus by writing this letter. In it he acknowledges the harm Onesimus caused, writes of Onesimus' changed life, offers to pay restitution to Philemon, and invites Philemon to receive Onesimus as a free brother in the Church.

(New International Version)

When an offender and victim genuinely make the effort to begin and work through the steps or processes we have already examined – taking responsibility, confession and repentance, forgiveness, and making amends – reconciliation between them becomes a real possibility. Reconciliation is the culmination of the interpersonal aspects of these steps. It has to do with the relationship between an offender and the victim who has suffered loss and harm from the offense. Reconciliation involves the restoration of harmony, trust, and peace between people in conflict.



Reflection Questions:

1. Is true and deep reconciliation possible only after the four steps of responsibility, confession and repentance, forgiveness, and amends?

2. Think about conflicts in your own life. Have you hurt someone? Has someone hurt you? What steps could you take to begin reconciliation?

3. Is true and deep reconciliation possible between criminal offenders and their victims? Why or why not?

Seeking and achieving reconciliation can be intensive. It can take time for reconciliation to become complete, and sometimes it helps to have other people assist with this process. Often reconciliation begins when the offender confesses and repents (as in the case of Onesimus), but it may begin with the victim's offer of forgiveness. However, for reconciliation to be complete, both parties will need to do their parts.

The work of God in the world is the story of a long reconciliation. God's reconciliation begins with the restoration of people to a good and right relationship with himself, and then extends to restoration of people with each other. God has gone to great lengths, and continues to do so through his Spirit, to draw men and women into close relationship with him. God longs to see people reconcile with each other, and he promises to act in our lives to bring about reconciliation as we ask and receive his grace for the task.

Reflection Questions:



4. Does the justice system foster or inhibit reconciliation between offenders and victims? Explain your answer with specifics about the nature and operation of the justice system.

5. How could a justice system encourage and make possible the pursuit of reconciliation between offenders and victims?

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE NETWORK

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