The following series is free, downloadable small-group materials based on each week’s Mass readings and taking into account the seasons of the liturgical year. Each study provides an introductory reflection on some aspect of the readings or on personal spirituality. Each of the readings is provided along with a few questions designed to engage the heart and stimulate the group’s discussion. These small-group materials will be provided on a continuing basis in monthly segments.

We would suggest the following 60-to-90 minute format for the small group:

1. Open with a moment of quiet reflection and prayer.

2. Discuss the introductory reflection with a question or comment like, “What do you feel is important for us to grasp in this introduction?” or “What stood out to you from these opening paragraphs?” As the facilitator of the discussion be ready to share one or two things which were important to you from the introduction.

3. Have someone read the First Reading and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions. **Effective group-dynamic techniques should be used to further stimulate the discussion and affirm the participation.**

4. The Responsorial Psalm provides a reflective transition from the First Reading to the Gospel Reading, so have the Psalm read aloud. You may do this without additional comment, or you may want to draw their attention to something you feel is pertinent.

5. You can either read this week’s Second Reading next and ask several people to share their answers to the reflection questions, or cover the Second Reading after you cover the Gospel Reading. The Second Reading does not always have a clear connection to the other Sunday Mass readings, so do not feel like you need to force a connection. However, you can provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw a connection by asking, “How do you see this passage tying into the theme of the readings?”

6. Move on to the Gospel Reading, repeating the process by asking several people to share their answers to the reflection questions.

7. Approximately equal time for discussion should be given to each of the sections: Introduction, First Reading, Gospel Reading, and the Second Reading. Obviously, if one section is especially stimulating, you should give some additional time to discussing it.

8. Close the discussion with group prayer, using various prayer formats.

We trust that God will use these materials to make His Word more meaningful to you, both within the small group environment and during Mass as you hear the Scripture is read and taught. **We would appreciate knowing if you are using the Reflecting on Sunday’s Readings, and would welcome your feedback, either through the Emmaus Journey web page form, or by direct e-mail.**

Sincerely in Christ,

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Introduction: When, like Peter in this week’s Gospel reading, we volunteer spiritual advice to another person, is it simply our own opinion we offer, or does the advice we give reflect God’s view and opinion?

This week’s Gospel reading is a continuation of last week’s Gospel reading, and together they pose quite a contrast. Previously, Peter was commended by Jesus for answering correctly, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” a truth revealed to Peter by God, and differing from those responses of the other disciples. Now, in this week’s reading, Peter once again boldly offers his opinion to Jesus, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” Immediately, Jesus strongly rebukes Peter and tells him that he is taking the side of men and like Satan is presenting a hindrance to Jesus doing God’s will. Surely Peter must have experienced some confusion and loss of confidence. Which one of us, out of our love for Jesus, would not have replied the same?

These two incidences put in sharp perspective the wisdom of James 1:19, “Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak…” How often are we presented with opportunities to provide counsel and advise, wherein we quickly expound on what we believe is right, or what we believe is God’s opinion. Granted we have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which Peter did not have at this point in his life, however we must also remember that we have a healthy portion of our fallen nature as well. We would also do well to remember God’s admonition to Israel, “For my [God’s] thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” We need to realize that our first, automatic understanding of God’s words may well not be anything more than a superficial understanding of truth. It is often not much deeper or more insightful than would be that of an enlightened unbeliever. God’s thoughts and ways become ours when our mind, over time, remains open to the Holy Spirit to receive the wisdom of God, and when we allow him to shape our will to embrace his ways.

In some sense our mind is like a sponge. Whatever it is saturated with is what will come out when probed. If our mind mainly takes in the world’s messages and opinions through the things we read, listen to, watch and think on, we should not be surprised when it responds with spiritual insight which is in keeping with mankind’s view of things. On the other hand, the more we saturate our minds with sacred Scripture, with prayer, and with the wise thoughts of the Holy Spirit, the more we will stand in amazement as we hear our lips express thoughts consistent with God’s view of things.

We should avoid thinking that we will develop and experience this transformation in thinking in isolation. The wisdom of the Church, both past and present can provide valuable insight and be used by the Holy Spirit to make the complex things of the Spirit, clearer. Thomas à Kempis is an example of what we mean. He said “Blessed are the ears that listen to the Truth teaching inwardly, and not to the voices of the world. Blessed are the eyes that are closed to outward things, but are open to inward things.”

We have had 2000 years’ experience of the Holy Spirit leading the Church into Truth. How foolish it would be of us to insist on re-discovering his lessons on our own. It is not only foolish but impossible. A counselor becomes wise by walking with, listening to, and thinking with those who are wise. Let’s ask God to give us the wisdom and understanding to seek his wisdom and understanding.

First Reading — Jeremiah 20:7-9
7 O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; thou art stronger than I, and thou hast prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; every one mocks me. 8 For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, “Violence and destruction!” For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. 9 If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

1. What do you think Jeremiah was really struggling with?
**Responsorial Reading — Psalms 63:1-5, 7-8 (63:2-6, 8-9 NAB)**

1 O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is. 2 So I have looked upon thee in the sanctuary, beholding thy power and glory.

3 Because thy steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise thee. 4 So I will bless thee as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on thy name. 5 My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat, and my mouth praises thee with joyful lips, … 7 for thou hast been my help, and in the shadow of thy wings I sing for joy. 8 My soul clings to thee; thy right hand upholds me.

**Second Reading — Romans 12:1-2**

1 I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

2. Explain the various motivations this passage provides for living a sacrificial life.

3. What would a life “conformed to this world” look like?

**Gospel Reading — Matthew 16:21-27**

21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” 23 But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.” 24 Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? 27 For the Son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done.

4. Practically speaking, what does it mean to “deny” one’s self?

5. What does the symbolism of a cross mean and why would someone choose to take it up?

6. Identify the values revealed in this passage, both those that are godly and those that are worldly.

7. For the average person in the pew, what does it mean to lose one’s life for Jesus’ sake?

Introduction: For sixteen years they had not spoken to each other, nor attended family occasions where the other was present. For sixteen years a cloud had hung over family and friends knowing that no event, no matter how special, would be complete because one or the other, or usually both, would choose to absent themselves. That’s what unforgiveness, bitterness and rancor does. It poisons the atmosphere of all it touches. Now with the sudden and tragic death of their beloved parents they were once again together, weeping in their grief. Amazingly, neither could remember what it was that divided them. Their grief was doubly bitter not only for the tragic loss of both parents, but also for the tragic sixteen years of heartbreak they brought on their parents, others, and themselves through their practice of unforgiveness.

We all know of or have participated in similar instances of harboring unforgiveness, bitterness and rancor, perhaps not lasting for as long or being as pronounced, but nevertheless equally damaging. Sometimes we have observed it within our human families and sometimes we have observed it within our spiritual families. In either case, it should not be so, for it is our Father’s will that we dwell together in unity. “How important a place the unanimity and harmony of brothers hold with God! We can know from this very fact that the Lord has clearly said that when two or three pray in unanimity, the Father grants everything from heaven. For with God nothing is more pleasing than brotherly peace, nothing better than unanimity and harmony, according to what is written: ‘Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.’” (Chromatius, from Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol Ib)

This Sunday’s reading in Ezekiel reminds us of the responsibility and power a community of faith has to its individual members and the responsibility and power individual members have to their faith community. We are to watch for one another’s souls, love requires it as the second reading points out. Not only does love require it, love specifies the manner in which our watch care for one another should be conducted.

In the Gospel reading Jesus provides advice for bringing about repentance, reconciliation and restoration between brothers. He offers the only antidote for unforgiveness, bitterness and rancor; unconditional love. It is important to recognize that at the heart of Jesus’ concern is the spiritual welfare of the sinner. There is no hint of proving the sinner wrong nor of shaming or punishing the wrongdoer. Rather Jesus’ motive is to correct the individual and bring about restoration in as gracious and inconspicuous a manner as possible.

It is out of a heart of love and concern for the wrongdoer’s spiritual wellbeing that we engage in the process which Jesus enumerated, and not for some kind of personal satisfaction. If it is a case of simply being personally wronged we would not need to go through such an elaborate process, we would need to simply practice forgiveness as we have been instructed. But out of a love for the Father and his desire for unity, and out of a love for our brother or sister, and a concern for their spiritual welfare Christ counsels us to go through this process of repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. Consequently, whether we are the offender, or the one offended, we should open our hearts to participate fully in the process of maintaining peace between brothers and sisters.

First Reading — Ezekiel 33:7-9

7 “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8 If I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 9 But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

1. Describe your responsibility to warn others about the consequences of sinful behavior.

2. What place does your opinion have in this process?
Responsorial Reading — Psalms 95:1-2, 6-9

1 O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! 2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! …

6 O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! 7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would hearken to his voice!

8 Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, 9 when your fathers tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

Second Reading — Romans 13:8-10

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

3. How does a life of individualism, isolation, and unconcern for others make us debtors to our faith community?

4. How do you feel about this characteristic of love, that “does no wrong to a neighbor”?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 18:15-20

15 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

5. Explain what you think “sins against you” means and what it doesn’t mean.

6. What is the motivation for using this process of reconciliation?

7. Where does authority reside in this situation?

8. When and why should others be involved in the resolution of personal conflicts?

Introduction: Mercy means not giving people what they deserve. The degree to which we show mercy to others is usually in direct proportion to the gratitude we feel for the mercy shown to us by God. Consequently, when we walk around with unforgiveness in our heart toward others, we are a walking billboard stating that we either have never known, or have lately forgotten and no longer appreciate the mercy God has shown us.

The question in today's Gospel reading, “How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?” is a question whose roots lie in legal obligation—the minimum requirements imposed on us. It could also be stated, “What are the boundaries beyond which I will be justified in holding a grudge? What are the boundaries beyond which I will be free to live and demonstrate an unforgiving spirit?” It seems that unforgiveness must always be propped up by the concept that we are somehow justified in our resentment.

The pharisaical concept was that if a brother asks forgiveness three time you should grant it, but if he asks a fourth time you are not obliged to do so. So when Peter asks this question, his suggestion of forgiving someone seven times exceeded that of the religious expectations of his time. But Jesus totally knocks the props out from under this legal argument by indicating that forgiveness should be offered without limit.

In an attempt to have the disciples move from viewing forgiveness primarily in legal terms to thinking about it spiritually, Jesus introduces the parable of the “unforgiving servant.” Jesus contrasts the debt that was owed by the king’s servant, ten thousand talents, with that of the fellow servant, a hundred denarii. Proportionally what the king’s servant owed far outweighed what he was owed. We would offer unlimited forgiveness to those who offend us, if we understood proportionally how very much more we have offended God than have others offended us. In spite of the magnitude of our sin we have received God’s unconditional forgiveness which has been freely offered to us through Jesus and his propitiatory sacrifice. Forgiveness of others will truly come “from the heart” when it comes from a heart personally grateful for God’s forgiveness.

This week’s first reading refers to anger and wrath as an abomination, and to unforgiveness as endangering our eternal future more than that of the one who has done the wrong about which we are bitter. The implication of living an unforgiving life toward others is a fearful thing when we hear Jesus’ words, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from the heart.” When next we pray “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” we should, out of gratitude to God for erasing our sins, truly wipe clean the slate of another’s sins against us.

“There is immense joy in being able to forgive and a wonderful liberation in being forgiven. Out of such experiences emerge new possibilities for growth and relationship, so that even the previous hurts and wounds open up new perspectives of the healing love of God. … To refuse to forgive is to allow resentment to smolder in the breast. Even if it does not result in overt revenge or violence it will take root and spread bitterness in all other areas of a person’s life. Sometimes you hear the words: ‘I’ll forgive but I’ll never forget!’ Such an attitude falls short of true forgiveness, which springs, from mercy, humility and compassion.” (Brother Ramon SSF in Forty Days and Forty Nights)

First Reading — Sirach 27:30-28:9

1. What are the inherent dangers of remaining angry and unforgiving?
2. What does God’s forgiveness mean to you personally?

**Responsorial Reading — Psalms 103:1-4, 9-12**
1. Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name! 2. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, 3. who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, 4. who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, …

5. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever. 10. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. 11. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; 12. as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

**Second Reading — Romans 14:7-9**
7. None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. 9. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

3. How should claiming that Jesus is our “Lord” affect both our forgiveness and our ability to forgive?

**Gospel Reading — Matthew 18:21-35**
21. Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” 22. Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. 23. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; 25. and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27. And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

28. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29. He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. 30. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

31. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; 32. and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ 33. And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. 34. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

4. In your mind what is the most difficult aspect of forgiving those who have offended you?

5. How does someone’s unforgiving spirit affect each individual involved and the community to which they belong?

6. Verse 35 is a very powerful statement. Why do you think God put such a high premium on being a forgiving person?
Introduction: The tension we feel between justice and grace is something we struggle with through out our lives. On the one hand we believe that people ought to get what they deserve. People who do evil should receive their recompense. On the other hand we want those we love to receive mercy and not what their wrong behavior warrants. For instance, my dad spent a life-time struggling with alcoholism. It wrecked his marriage, damaged his family, and made shambles of his life. There is little evidence that he ever took responsibility for what he did, or for the harm he caused by the abuse which stemmed from his alcoholism. But every one of us in the family, though victims of his bad choices, hopes that somehow in the final days of his sickness that he called out to Christ for salvation. We don’t want him to receive what he deserves.

The mercy of salvation in Jesus doesn’t make sense to the unconverted mind. The Scriptures report that the world will see the simplicity of the Gospel as foolishness. Even for the converted the mystery of salvation can only be understood in part, and so we praise and thank God for the wonders of mercy and grace. It is with this sense of wonder and mystery that we approach this week’s Gospel reading. It is only natural on a first superficial reading of this passage to find ourselves agreeing with the complainers that the owner of the vineyard was treating them unfairly. But a closer reading and reflection enables us to see that it really isn’t so. This is especially true when we realize that the parable is an illustration of the way things are different in the Kingdom of Heaven then they are in the kingdom of humans. When we realize what this parable teaches indirectly about our eternal rewards, then our response becomes “Hallelujah!”

In the first reading we learned that God’s ways are not our ways, and that his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. We can be thankful for that, for when it comes to eternity who of us wants to receive only that which we deserve? Who of us does not desire to be treated with a more merciful form of justice than that which we see displayed here on earth. Only those persons who are blind observers of their own spiritual shortcomings would want it otherwise. Rather, we long for mercy (God not giving us what we deserve) and grace (God giving us what we do not deserve). This parable points out that merciful and gracious treatment is exactly what we can count on from our loving Father.

Understanding and experiencing the mercy of God should have a direct bearing on the way we serve God, his people, and his mission to the world. Knowing that mercy is extended to all equally do we wait to commit ourselves to laboring in the harvest? Do we wait not wanting our lives of comfort disturbed by the demands of service, hoping and knowing our reward will be the same as those who made a longer commitment? I don’t think so. If that is our response it indicates that we really know little or nothing about the love of God.

The Scriptures teach that knowledge of God’s love will have a different affect on us altogether: Saint Paul teaches, “For the love of Christ impels us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” Understanding God’s gracious love will motivate us to live for him, and not for ourselves. When we respond by living only for ourselves it is apparent that we have not yet grasped God’s love for us.

First Reading — Isaiah 55:6-9

6 “Seek the L ORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 7 let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the L ORD, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the L ORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

1. Summarize the main point of verses 8 and 9.

2. In what ways are God’s thoughts higher than ours?
**Responsorial Reading — Psalms 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18**

2 Every day I will bless thee, and praise thy name for ever and ever. 3 Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. …

8 The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. …

17 The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. 18 The LORD is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth.

**Second Reading — Philippians 1:20-24, 27**

… 20 as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. …

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

3. How do you see Christ is living in you?

4. What is meant by “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel”?

**Gospel Reading — Matthew 20:1-16**

1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ So they went. 5 Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing; and he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ 8 And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ 9 And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 12 Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. 13 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ 14 So the last will be first, and the first last.”

5. How would you respond if you were in the first group hired?

6. What attitudes create this sense of injustice?

7. What insights does this parable provide regarding salvation?