# Opening Prayer

## Gather

One of the greatest gifts God gives us is second chances. God’s unlimited forgiveness reminds us that we are always welcome back after turning away from God in sin. Scripture is filled with stories of God forgiving us when we don’t deserve it. In the most incredible act of forgiveness, we hear Jesus—still suffering on the cross—forgiving those who crucified him. As we contemplate the God’s awesome mercy, let us celebrate God’s desire for us to change our hearts and turn back to him in love. And so we pray.

God of love and forgiveness, we come together in awe of your great love for us. Nothing we do—whether it is done out of weakness or greed, anger or hate—can stop your love for us. As we celebrate the gift of reconciliation which you extend to us, help us to be truly sorry for the times we’ve turned away from you. Give us the courage to face our sins and confess them honestly and sincerely. Help us to seek reparation for what we’ve done to make this world a little less loving. Change our hearts so that we can turn away from sin and allow your Spirit to turn our stony hearts into hearts of love. We ask this in the name of your Son, our loving Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Listen

Ezekiel 36:25-30

## Respond

Because we are sinners, we need the forgiveness of God and the courage of the Spirit to confront the sin in our hearts. Each of you has a heart on your table. Take your heart and do something to it—write a word or phrase on the heart, use the scissors on the table or your own hands, whatever is appropriate—to symbolize what sin does to *your* heart every time you turn away from God. As we move through this session and look at the steps which our Church offers us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we will return to our hearts to also symbolize what *love* and *forgiveness* do to heal our hearts wounded by sin.

## Go Forth

I invite you to lift up your hearts, wounded by sin, to our loving God as we pray:

God of hope and second chances, we are all in need of your healing. We ask you to make us open to a change of heart, to a conversion, so that we can return to you. Take these stony hearts of ours and transform them by your love and forgiveness into hearts overflowing with love for you and for your people. We ask this humbly in the name of your Son Jesus. Amen.

# Handout #1.

# Dialogue Among Gospel Personalities

**Peter:**

Judas, what were you thinking? Why in God’s name did you despair?

**Judas:**

Look, man, I betrayed a friend, a good man who gave me nothing but love. He even trusted me with our money. And I set him up. I worked with those who hated him—not because he was bad, but because they were threatened by his goodness. I sold him out for thirty miserable pieces of silver.

**Peter:**

OK, I admit that’s a terrible sin. But look at me. Is betrayal any worse than denying you know someone who loves you? I don’t think so. And to make matters worse, I didn’t deny him once. I did it three times—after bragging to him that I would NEVER do anything to lose his trust. And I did it because I was scared. I was afraid they’d arrest me like they did him. Can you imagine how I felt when the cock crowed and I remembered Jesus’ words that I would deny him? I felt so guilty, so sinful, so worthless.

**Judas:**

But that just proves my point. I felt the same way—guilty and evil, which is why I killed myself. I didn’t deserve his forgiveness. He would never have been able to forget what I’d done. Look at the suffering he went through—all because I betrayed him.

**Peter:**

You just don’t get it, do you? Let me tell you what happened when I was with Jesus after he rose from the dead. There we were on the beach. I’d already made an idiot of myself by jumping into the water when the guys told me Jesus was there. When he got me alone after we ate, I thought, “This is it. He’s going to ream me for denying him.” So when he asked me if I loved him, it was like an arrow through my heart. After all, I deserved the question. I hadn’t acted in love when I told the crowd I’d never seen him before. But I answered in truth. I told Jesus that he knew I loved him. And you know what he said to me? He didn’t yell or lay blame or tell me how rotten I was. He said, “Feed my lambs.” And he did it THREE TIMES. I think he did it once for each time I denied him. And he made it all go away—all the anger and the self-hatred that I’d nursed since that Thursday night and dark Friday. Jesus loved me through it all. And he forgave me—no strings attached. He even asked me to take care of his sheep! So don’t you see, Judas? Don’t you know? You were forgiven the moment you betrayed him. You just needed to let his forgiveness touch your heart and change it.

**Judas:**

I couldn’t believe in that big a love, that He would have that big a heart. So I gave up, hardened my heart.

**Peter:**

And I embraced his love and his forgiveness, let my heart soak up his love and grow bigger—and went on to lead his disciples into the future!

(Judas walks off-stage, and Peter turns to the assembly.)

**Peter:**

And now let me introduce you to two other people who want to tell you how Jesus’ forgiveness changed *their* hearts—not to mention their entire lives! This is Bud. You probably don’t recognize him from the Gospel because when you read about him, he was lying on a mat most of the time. Bud, tell us your story!

**Bud:**

It was the strangest thing. You see, I was paralyzed before I met Jesus. And if you think it’s hard to live in a wheelchair, try living without one when your legs don’t work for you. Wheelchairs weren’t invented yet 2000 years ago. My life was so limited. But my friends had heard rumors about some guy who was curing people—doing miracles all over the place with blind people and lepers and crippled people like me. When they heard he was going to be in our neighborhood, they loaded me on a mat and off we went to meet this Jesus. But the problem was there were too many people. It’s not easy to sneak to the front of a crowd when you are carrying a man on a mat. Jesus was in this house, but the door was blocked and people were standing three deep outside the door. Now my friends are nothing if not enterprising. So they decided—if we can’t get him in through the door, let’s try the roof. So they got me up there—no easy task, let me tell you—and lowered me down through the tiles. There I was, swinging from the ropes smack dab in the middle of the room, with all eyes on me. Embarrassing, you know? And this stranger, this beautiful, gentle, strong man, stopped talking and just looked at me. And he looked like he cared! His eyes were so loving. But here’s the weird part. Before I could even ask him for the miracle, he said something strange. He said, “My friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

Now let me tell you, that wasn’t what I expected. And it certainly wasn’t what the crowd expected, either. In fact, some of them were downright mad that this person would take it upon himself to forgive sins. After all, we Jews know—don’t we?—that only God can forgive sins. But that’s what this Jesus said, “…your sins are forgiven.” And when he sensed the hostility, he turned to the critics and asked them, “Why do you harbor these thoughts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? In any case, to make it clear to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then turned to me and said, “I say to you, get up! Take your mat with you and return to your house.” And I did. Oh, I did! And it was because I realized that he’d cured what really ailed me. I had thought it was my legs, but it really was *my heart*. I had never forgiven God—as if he were to blame—for my crippled legs. And over the years, I stopped praying and stopped caring and was a bitter, mean, self-centered man. When Jesus said, “My friend, your sins are forgiven you,” he changed my heart. And I think the healing of my heart penetrated my whole being and I was able to walk because of it. And I’ve never looked back. My heart is whole now, and I LOVE people…because that’s what he did, that Jesus, he loved people. Even me.

**Peter:**

Thanks, Bud, for sharing your heart with us. Now, so I won’t get accused of being sexist, I thought it was important that we hear a feminine perspective on this whole issue of redemption. But seriously, Nora has a powerful story to share with us today. Nora, would you please tell us what Jesus did in your life?

**Nora:**

There was a time when I would have been too ashamed, too humiliated, to tell my story. I was almost at the point of despair, not that different from Judas. I had hit rock bottom. Sinner? That was me. Loved? Only for what I could give people, never for who I was. Because no one really knew me. I was shunned by the “good” women because I was so bad. I had no friends, no hope. Then I heard that Jesus was going to be at my neighbor Simon’s house for dinner one night. I knew about Jesus, how he didn’t just help people physically—although he did do that—but how he healed their hearts, too. And my heart was so wounded by sin and loneliness. I hadn’t felt loved in so very long. I thought, “Why not? What have I got to lose?” So I went to Simon’s house, where people either ignored me or tried to kick me out. But I persisted. And when I saw Jesus, I approached him on my knees, knelt at his feet, and just started to cry. Something in me was so sad and so sorry for the way I’d wasted my life. All the sorrow and regret just gushed out. So I wept, right there on his feet. And my tears washed away the dirt of the road. So I dried his feet with my hair.

Simon, of course, wasn’t too happy about this. He challenged Jesus. But Jesus turned Simon’s criticism upside down. He proposed this question to Simon: “Two men owed money to a certain money-lender; one owed a total of five hundred coins, the other fifty. Since neither was able to repay, he wrote off both debts. Which of them was more grateful to him?” Simon’s answer was, “He, I presume, to whom he remitted the larger sum.” And Jesus said to him, “You are right.”

Then Jesus turned to me and said to Simon: “You see this woman? I came to your home and you provided me with no water for my feet. She has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. I tell you, that is why her many sins are forgiven—because of her great love. Little is forgiven those whose love is small.” I could only cry more. How did he know that my heart, abused as it was, had such a great capacity for love?

Then Jesus said to me, “Your sins are forgiven…Your faith has been your salvation. Now go in peace.” And I did!

### Discussion

Discuss your answers to the following questions:

* What did Peter, the paralytic man and the woman who washed Jesus’ feet have in common? What do you think happened to their hearts when they experienced Jesus’ forgiveness? Why was Judas’ heart so different?
* What was the greatest gift the paralyzed man was given by Jesus?
* What does the question Jesus posed to Simon tell you about your own life?
* What other persons in Scripture can you name who were transformed by forgiveness? In history (someone like St. Augustine, St. Francis, or Dorothy Day)? In fiction (perhaps a character in the Harry Potter series)?
* How do you feel when God forgives you? When someone in your life forgives you?

# Handout #2.

# Lyrics from *Les Miserables*

Valjean Arrested/Valjean Forgiven

Constables: Tell the Reverence your story.

Let us see if he’s impressed.

You were lodging here last night.

You were the honest Bishop’s guest.

And then, out of Christian goodness,

When he learned about your plight,

You maintain he made a present of this silver.

Bishop: That is right.

But my friend, you left so early

Surely something slipped your mind.

You forgot I gave these also\*

Would you leave the best behind?

So, Messieurs, you may release him

For this man has spoken true.

I commend you for your duty

And God’s blessing go with you.

But remember this, my brother.

See in this some higher plan.

You must use this precious silver

To become an honest man.

By the witness of the martyrs

By the Passion and the Blood

God has raised you out of darkness.

I have bought your soul for God!

What Have I Done?

 Valjean: What have I done?

Sweet Jesus, what have I done?

Become a thief in the night!

Become a dog on the run!

And have I fallen so far

And is the hour so late

That nothing remains but the cry of my hate,

The cries in the dark that nobody hears

Here where I stand at the turning of the years?

If there’s another way to go

I missed it twenty long years ago.

My life was a war that could never be won.

They gave me a number and murdered Valjean

When they chained me and left me for dead

Just for stealing a mouthful of bread.

Yet why did I allow this man

To touch my soul and teach me love?

He treated me like any other.

He gave me his trust.

He called me Brother.

My life he claims for God above.

Can such things be?

For I had come to hate the world,

This world that always hated me!

Take an eye for an eye.

Turn your heart into stone.

This is all I have lived for.

This is all I have known.

One word from him and I’d be back

Beneath the lash, upon the rack.

Instead, he offers me my freedom.

I feel my shame inside me like a knife.

He told me that I have a soul.

How does he know?

What spirit comes to move my life?

Is there another way to go?

I am reaching, but I fall,

And the night is closing in,

And I stare into the void—

To the whirlpool of my sin.

I’ll escape now from the world,

From the world of Jean Valjean.
Jean Valjean is nothing now.

Another story must begin!

\*The bishop gives Jean Valjean a pair of expensive candlesticks.

### Reflection and Discussion

* What word would you use to describe Jean Valjean’s heart when he was caught by the constables?
* What do you think happened to his heart when the bishop told the constables that he gave the silver to Jean, even though Jean had taken advantage of the bishop’s kindness and stolen them?

* What word would you use to describe the bishop’s heart? Why do you think the bishop did what he did? Why did he add the candlesticks to the silver?

# Handout #3.

# Forgiveness Transforms the Heart

Read the following passages from Scripture and then discuss the answers to the questions at your table:

## Luke 5:17-26

One day Jesus was teaching, and the power of the Lord made him heal. Sitting close by were the Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. Some men came along carrying a paralytic on a mat. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but they found no way of getting him through because of the crowd, so they went up on the roof. There they let him down with his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd before Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said, “My friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

The scribes and Pharisees began a discussion, saying: “Who is this man who utters blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Jesus, however, knew their reasoning and answered them by saying: “Why do you harbor these thoughts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? In any case, to make it clear to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then addressed the paralyzed man: “I say to you, get up! Take your mat with you, and return to your house.”

At once the man stood erect before them. He picked up the mat he had been lying on and went home praising God. At this they were all seized with astonishment. Full of awe, they gave praise to God, saying, “We have seen incredible things today!”

Reflection and Discussion

* What happened to the heart of the man whose sins Jesus forgave?
* Was the ability to walk the greatest gift he was given?
* What happened to those who saw this story unfold? What does that tell you about the power of forgiveness in your own life?

## Luke 7:36-50

There was a certain Pharisee who invited Jesus to dine with him. Jesus went to the Pharisee’s home and reclined to eat. A woman known in the town to be a sinner learned that he was dining in the Pharisee’s home. She brought in a vase of perfumed oil and stood behind him at his feet, weeping so that her tears fell upon his feet. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissing them and perfuming them with the oil. When his host, the Pharisee, saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is that touches him—that she is a sinner.” In answer to his thoughts, Jesus said to him, “Simon, I have something to propose to you.” “Teacher,” he said, “speak.”

“Two men owed money to a certain money-lender; one owed a total of five hundred coins, the other fifty. Since neither was able to repay, he wrote off both debts. Which of them was more grateful to him?” Simon answered, “He, I presume, to whom he remitted the larger sum.” Jesus said to him, “You are right.”

Turning then to the woman, he said to Simon: “You see this woman? I came to your home and you provided me with no water for my feet. She has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since I entered. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. I tell you, that is why her many sins are forgiven—because of her great love. Little is forgiven those whose love is small.”

He said to her then, “Your sins are forgiven;” at which his fellow guests began to ask among themselves, “Who is this that he even forgives sins?” Meanwhile he said to the woman, “Your faith has been your salvation. Now go in peace.”

### Reflection and Discussion

* What do you think happened to the heart of the woman to whom Jesus said, “Your faith has been your salvation”?
* What does the question Jesus posed to Simon tell you about your own life?
* Why is there a sense of joy in each of these two stories?
* What other persons in Scripture can you name who were transformed by forgiveness? In history (someone like St. Augustine, St. Francis, or Dorothy Day)? In fiction (perhaps a character in the Harry Potter series)?

# Handout #4.

# “I’m Sorry”

God always invites us to turn away from sin and come home to God. As we just saw from the stories of Jesus in the Gospel, God is always ready to welcome *us*. The question is, are we ready to return to God? Do we want things to be different? Are we truly *sorry* for the things we’ve done which move us away from God and each other? In order to be ready to fully celebrate God’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we must first have a genuine change of heart.

### Design

Try design a “game board’ within a heart outline? The START space is right below the center of the heart, which is a little heart with the word “God” in it. The succeeding spaces move down to the bottom tip of the heart, and each succeeding space moves around the perimeter of the heart, spiraling back towards the center, which is the God space. See diagram below.

### Game Instructions

Place all markers on the Start space. Begin with the youngest person, who draws a card, reads it, and follows the instructions on the space. Children draw from the Children Cards and parents from the Parent Cards. Take turns until all have made it to the center of the heart.



## Children Cards

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| I feel bad that I hurt my Mom’s feelings when I yelled at her. *You showed contrition. Advance two spaces.* | I talked about my sister behind her back—and she deserved it, even though it made her cry when she found out. She’s just a big baby.*You don’t regret what you did, and you moved away from God when you hurt your sister. Go back to Start and look at your heart.* |
| I haven’t prayed ever since I stole that money. I can’t face God with what I did.*You need to realize that nothing you do will ever destroy God’s love for you. Stay on this space and think about it.* | I cheated on the test, but I knew that was wrong. So I told the teacher about it and she said she and God would give me a second chance.*Your honesty reveals a good heart. Advance three spaces.* |
| I said God’s name with a bad word because I was so mad, but it kind of made me sick to my stomach.*Your heart knew it was bad to use God’s name in that way. Advance two spaces.* | When I hit my classmate, he hit another guy, and then we all had to stay after school. Even though I didn’t hit the other guy, I know what I did led to it and I am really sorry I hurt two people that way.*You realized that our sins can have an effect on lots of people. Advance four spaces.* |
| I told Daddy that my little sister broke the vase, but it was really me. And she got in trouble. That worked out great.*Look into your heart and ask how your little sister feels and what you think God would want you to do now. Go back two spaces.* | We made fun of a girl at school and called her a fat cow. Her parents took her out of our school and she’s going somewhere else. I wish I could go back and change things. I’d ask her to play with us at recess.*God is glad you changed your heart. Advance three spaces.* |
| I told Grandma I hate her because she wouldn’t let me eat the candy bar before dinner. She’s a big old meany, and I’m glad I said it.*How do you think Grandma feels right now? And why did she say no to the candy? Think about it. Go back a space.* | My brother and I wrote our dad an apology note when we scratched his car with our trucks.*That made Dad feel better. Advance two spaces.* |
| My classmate says we shouldn’t talk to the new kid because he looks different from all of us. But that new kid always looks sad and alone, so I am going to talk to him tomorrow.*God is so happy with you. Advance four spaces.* | They took up a collection at school for the people who lost their homes in the flood, but I kept my money because I really, really want those cool sunglasses all the popular kids are wearing.*Hmmmm, look at your priorities—and ask your parents what priorities are if you don’t know. Stay on this space and think about it.* |
| I pretended I was sick so I wouldn’t have to go to mass Sunday. I just felt like lying in bed for a while.*God does everything for you, and you couldn’t give him one hour? Go back three spaces.* | Two big guys in my class told me they were going to steal our neighbor girl’s bike, and I didn’t do anything to stop them. I’m really scared of those bullies, but I am going to tell my teacher who did it because I wouldn’t want anyone to steal my bike.*Awesome. It takes courage to tell the truth, but Jesus did that and he’ll be with you when you talk to your teacher. Advance two spaces.* |
| I hit my little brother. He’s four and very annoying. *He’s just a little kid. Do you remember what you were like when you were four? Go back one space.* | Dad asked me to take out the trash and I said I would but then didn’t because I was too busy playing a game.*It’s important for everyone in a family to pitch in and help, especially when they say they will. Go back two spaces.* |
| My sister told me I was bossy. I was going to say something mean back to her, but then Ithought—oh, oh, she’s right! I’m going to try not to boss her around as much.*It’s painful to admit our faults, but that’s the only when we can become better people. Good for you! Advance three spaces.* | I wanted to go to the mall but Mom says we should go visit our aunt in the nursing home. So I went, but I wouldn’t talk to Auntie and I gave my mom some really mean looks the whole time we were there. Auntie looked sad when we left. I’m sorry I acted that way. I’m going to tell Mom I want to go back to the nursing home and bring Auntie a picture I drew for her.*You really had a change of heart, and that will bring you so close to God. Advance two spaces.* |

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| Sometimes I think God doesn’t like me because I do bad things A LOT.*God will always love you—no matter what. God is always there, just waiting for you to open your heart and feel his love. Advance one space.* |  |

## Parent Cards

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| I pray every day that I can be a better parent—the parent my children need me to be.*God’s spirit is always with you to help you be a good mom or dad. Advance two spaces.* | I lost my temper with my child who kept pestering me to buy him junk food, and I yelled at him in the store. He knows better than to ask for things I don’t want to buy him.*Embarrassing him in front of strangers must have been really tough on him. Go back two spaces.* |
| I argued with my spouse and made the children very worried. I am going to try to keep my voice calmer, count to ten, and listen to what my spouse has to say before sharing my opinion on things we disagree on.*That sounds like a great strategy. God is happy with this idea. Advance three spaces.* | I told my children to sneak into our hotel room so I wouldn’t have to pay the extra money for them. When I heard them talking about ways they could save money dishonestly, I realized I’d been a bad role model. I am never going to do that again.*God is pleased with your resolution to set a better example to your children. Advance one space.* |
| I gossip about the neighbors and their activities all the time. It keeps life interesting.*You are not being a very good role model for your children, and the gossip is hurting your neighborhood community. Think about that and go back two spaces.* | I skip out early from work on days when I want to golf or just enjoy the weather. I don’t get paid what I should anyway, so this is one way of getting back what I deserve.*Giving less time than you are paid for isn’t the answer. If you really get paid unjustly, talk to your supervisor. But put in a fair day’s work! Go back three spaces.* |
| I watch videos which aren’t good for the kids, but it’s my way of relaxing after a hard day’s work. Besides, they should get exposed to real life sooner or later.*Children are so impressionable. God wants you to share the good things in life with your children, not the bad. Don’t be so selfish! Go back three spaces.* | I always put pressure on my kids to get perfect grades and punished them when they didn’t get straight A’s. That’s what my dad did to me, but I am beginning to wonder if it’s causing more harm than good.*Too much pressure is hard on children. God is glad you are thinking about the consequences of your behavior. Stay on this space and continue to think it through.* |
| I sometimes worry that I will never be the person God wants me to be because I still sin and make mistakes.*God wants you to be faithful and loves you with all your imperfections. Advance three spaces, and don’t be too hard on yourself.* | I am here because I want to share my faith in God with my children—and sometimes that is hard to do.*Talk to God about your kids—and talk to your kids about God! Advance one space.* |
| I used to use swear words and smoke cigarettes, but ever since I’ve become a parent, I’ve tried to use better language and quit smoking because I want to be a good example to my kids.*God is so happy that you are using his name with reverence—and that you are taking care of your health. Advance three spaces.* | I have a really short temper, but that’s just who I am and I can’t do anything about it.*That’s a cop-out. God didn’t create you this way, and God expects you to work on your temper. Go back one space.* |
| I was offered a promotion if I moved the family across the country. When my spouse and children told me they really wanted to stay where we are, I agreed. But now I resent all of them—and let them know it in subtle ways.*Holding a grudge isn’t fair or loving. Go back two spaces and go ahead with your life.* | I slept in on Sunday because I had too much to drink Saturday night. When the rest of the family got back from church, I felt terrible. I owed God and the family my participation in the Eucharist.*God missed you at mass! But God knows you regret what you did and is happy to welcome you back next Sunday. Advance one space.* |
| I lied on my resume to get the job I have—and I think the end justifies the means. No one got hurt, and I work hard.*God doesn’t condone lying. You should have trusted your true merits to get you the job. Go back two spaces.* | I don’t tithe or even drop much money in the Sunday collection at church. I have bills to pay at home, and besides, that new car I want costs a lot of money!*Stewardship is important to being part of a faith community. You have more than you need to live well, and the Church needs your support. Go back two spaces.* |

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| I sometimes get jealous of the neighbors because they don’t have any kids and can buy anything they want for themselves. But then I think about how much I love my kids, and I wouldn’t trade them for all the cars and clothes and designer furniture in the world.*Jealousy is a human emotion. God is so proud of you for having the right values. Advance four spaces.* | I sometimes value success over anything—even my relationship with God or my family. I want to be the best at my work, in sports, in everything I do. What’s so bad about that?*God should always be first in your heart. Your family is more important than any praise or award or fame. Go back three spaces and ponder your priorities.* |
| I am so tired of my aging mother calling me for this favor or that errand. I will, of course, say yes, but why can’t my brother and sister take care of her once in a while?*God understands your frustration, and he is pleased that you take care of your mother even when you don’t feel like it. But God also wants you to remember all the wonderful things your mother has done for you all your life. Advance one space.* | I said no to playing with the kids last night because I just wanted to relax and watch television. But I know I should have played with them—so I am planning a family game night tonight.*What a great idea—and God likes it, too. Advance three spaces.* |

# Handout #5.

# Clues to Contrition

Explore the Scripture passages listed below in which sinners are faced with the need to change their hearts. Work in pairs to find clues that indicate whether or not the people in each story were genuinely sorry. Look for the state of the individuals’ hearts, the “why” behind the sorrow, and any actions the Biblical figures took to reveal a change of heart.

### Scripture Passages

* Read Luke 16: 19-31. Focus on both Lazarus and the rich man
* Read Luke 18: 9-14. Focus on both the Pharisee and the tax collector
* Read Luke 19: 1-10. Focus on Zacchaeus
* Read John 15: 11-32. Focus on both the younger son and the older son
* Read John 8: 3-11. Focus on the Pharisees and the woman caught in adultery

For the Scripture passage that you and you partner are assigned consider these questions:

**1. Did the person or persons in your story recognize their sin? (circle one)**

Yes No Not Enough Information to Know

CLUES: Did they see the connection between their sin and their relationship with God?

**2. Did the person or persons regret their sin? (circle one)**

Yes No Not Enough Information to Know

CLUES: What are the clues that prove it?

**3. Did the person or persons trust and accept God’s forgiveness? (circle one)**

Yes No Not Enough Information to Know

CLUES: What are the clues that prove it?

**4. Did the person or persons make amends for their sin? (circle one)**

Yes No Not Enough Information to Know

CLUES: What did they do? What effect do you think it had on their heart?

Once you have completed the reading of Scripture and the clues, share your insights with the others at your table.

If time permits, discuss the following questions. Base your responses on both Scripture and your own life experiences.

* Have you ever experienced a change of heart similar to those of the Gospel characters?
* In your experience, why is contrition necessary to seeking forgiveness?
* How does sin impact our relationship with God?

Just as John the Baptist called the Jewish people to repent and turn away from sin as a preparation for encountering the messiah, so too must we regret our sins. When we realize that our sins have moved us further away from the God who loves us unconditionally, and further away from God’s family, we are ready to confess and be reconciled.

Now take your hearts and draw a symbol or a word for feeling sorry, for contrition, on them. If time permits, share your symbols with each other.

# Handout #6.

# Have I Grown in Love? Examination of Conscience

* Is God the most important person in my life? Do I let things like money, or what others think of me, or my possessions, get in the way of my love for God?
* Do I talk to the Father, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit on a daily basis? Do I listen to God’s word in the Bible?
* Do I celebrate the Eucharist, especially on Sunday, to thank God for all the blessings in my life? Do I celebrate God’s forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation?
* Am I loving in my relationships with others? With my family? My colleagues or classmates? The most hurting people in my life?
* Do I live my life guided by the values of the Catholic Church? Do I respect the life and dignity of all people? Do I forgive others as God has forgiven me? Do I work for peace in my family, my community, and my world?
* Do I give of my time to serve those most in need? Do I share my God-given talents with others? Do I share what I have with those who have less than me?
* Do I make my decisions based on the moral principles which Jesus taught? Am I honest, generous, compassionate, and fair?
* Have my actions of the past weeks drawn me closer to God? Did I say Amen to love, or have I failed to love?

### Act of Contrition

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.

# Handout #7.

# Celebration of Forgiveness

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a gift from God, who knew we needed to express our regret for failing to love and to needed to hear his words of forgiveness. We can trace the sacrament back to Jesus telling Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 16:19). At Pentecost, Peter lived out Jesus’ words when he declared, “‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38).

This sacrament is our opportunity to say Amen to God’s love and forgiveness by a true change of heart. In the sacrament, the priest represents God in absolving us from our sins; he also represents the community in extending forgiveness. To understand what we say Amen to whenever we celebrate this sacrament, we are going to pray the rite—the words and the gestures which celebrate the healing of our sinful hearts. We will use a penitential celebration modeled after the Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents to reveal the connection our sins and our need for forgiveness have to our relationship with God *and* our relationship with each other.

### Gather

**Presider:** Grace, mercy, and peace be with you from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

**Assembly:** And also with you.

**Presider:** The introduction reminds us of the central action of reconciliation—God’s mercy to us as sinners. We say Amen to the belief that God alone gives us peace and mercy.

Mark your heart with a symbol or word which represents God’s mercy.

Brothers and sisters, God calls us to conversion; let us therefore ask him for the grace of sincere repentance.

### Pause for a moment of silence

**Presider:** Lord, hear the prayers of those who call on you, forgive the sins of those who confess to you, and in your merciful love give us your pardon and your peace. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

**Assembly:** Amen.

**Presider:** The gathering prayer is a plea for forgiveness of sin from God the Father. We say Amen to knowing our own sinfulness and knowing God can heal the most sinful heart. We also say yes to being in solidarity with each other as sinners in need of God’s grace.

Write a second symbol or word or phrase on your heart to capture the reality that our sins have a social dimension—they affect our relationship with God and our relationship with others.

### Listen

**Presider:** Now let us listen to the Word of God calling us back to love and to God’s own heart. God’s Word draws us deeper into the meaning of sin and forgiveness in our lives.

**Reader:** Luke 15:11-31.

**Presider:** Jesus shared the story of the Forgiving Father to teach us that God forgives us no matter what. The father is the central figure in the story. But we stand in the place of one of the two sons.

We may be the younger son who turned away from home, hurt his father, and hardened his heart with sin and selfishness. This son recognized his sin and experienced genuine sorrow. He confessed his sins to his father and was willing to take the consequences for his mistakes.

Some of us may identify more with the older son—living obedient lives but resenting the blessings received by others whom we may judge to be unworthy.

Both sons needed a change of heart. But the common theme in both sons’ stories was a father who continued to love without reservation, a father who celebrates the return of the sinful son with absolute joy!

### Examination of Conscience

The next step in the Rite is the Examination of Conscience, which we have already experienced. We have said Amen to our need for redemption and we acknowledged the effect our sin has on our relationship with God and our relationship with others. We looked for patterns of selfishness as we asked ourselves where we have failed to love in our day-to-day lives.

Choose one key question which helps you examine your life on a daily basis for patterns of love or failure to love (e.g., Did my existence today bring a little more love into the world or take a little away? Did the way I lived today bring the kingdom of God closer to realization, or did my actions postpone the kingdom?). As a family or individual, come up with a question. Write that question on your hearts.

Kneel.

**Presider:** Brothers and sisters, let us call to mind the goodness of God our Father, and acknowledge our sins, so that we may receive his merciful forgiveness.

**Assembly:** I confess to Almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault (strike your breast) in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do; and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God.

**Presider:** Christ our Savior is our advocate with the Father: with humble hearts let us ask him to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from every stain. You were sent with good news for the poor and healing for the contrite.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** You came to call sinners, not the just.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** You forgave the many sins of the woman who showed you great love.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** You did not shun the company of outcasts and sinners.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** You carried back to the fold the sheep that had strayed.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** You did not condemn the woman taken in adultery, but sent her away in peace.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** You called Zacchaeus to repentance and a new life.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** You promised Paradise to the repentant thief.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** You are always interceding for us at the right hand of the Father.

**Assembly:** Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.

**Presider:** Now, in obedience to Christ himself, let us join in prayer to the Father, asking him to forgive us as we forgive others.

### Pray together the Our Father

**Presider:** Father, our source of life, you know our weakness. May we reach out with joy to grasp your hand and walk more readily in your ways. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

**Assembly:** Amen.

### Confession and Absolution

**Presider:** This is the time in the Rite when we would experience the sacrament. Each of us would individually confess our sins, receive counsel from the priest confessor, be absolved, then go out to offer an appropriate act of reparation which the priest gives us.

I invite each of you to hold your hands open in front of you, palms up, receiving the message of forgiveness in the words of the rite as I share them:

 God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son

has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**Assembly:** Amen.

On your heart, write a word or symbol which captures the feeling of forgiveness and healing which you experience when you hear the words of absolution in the sacrament.

**Presider:** After individual confession, the whole community hears a proclamation of praise for God’s mercy. We will celebrate God’s forgiveness by singing together the Canticle of Mary.

### Song of Celebration

Sing together “Holy is His Name” by John Michael Talbot.

**Presider:** The Rite concludes with prayer, so let us pray. Let us be mindful of what it is that we are saying Amen to.

All-holy Father, you have shown us your mercy and made us a new creation in the likeness of your Son. Make us living signs of your love for the whole world to see. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

**Assembly:** Amen.

**Presider:** May the Lord guide your hearts in the way of his love and fill you with Christ-like patience.

**Assembly:** Amen.

**Presider:** May he give you strength to walk in newness of life and to please him in all things.

**Assembly:** Amen.

**Presider:** May almighty God bless us, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

**Assembly:** Amen.

**Presider:** The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.

**Assembly:** Thanks be to God.

# Handout #8.

# FAQs about Reconciliation

**1. What is the name for this sacrament?**

**Answer**: Sacrament of Reconciliation

**2. Do I have to receive the sacrament if I don’t commit mortal sin?**

**Answer**: “According to the Church’s command, ‘after having attained the age of discretion, each of the faithful is bound by an obligation faithfully to confess serious sins at least once a year’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 1457). “Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed, the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful” (*Catechism*, 1458). This sacrament is a celebration of a change of heart and the outward sign of being reconciled with God and with the community. Frequent confession gives us peace.

**3. Why do I need to tell my sins to a priest? Why can’t I just confess them directly to God?**

**Answer**: We need the human elements of voice and gesture to reassure us we are forgiven. And we need forgiveness from both God, whom we always let down when we sin, and the community. Our sins have communal effects, no matter how private they may seem. Any time we fail to be the persons God created us to be, we are letting down the community which needs us to be good. So we need a means of asking forgiveness of both God and community when we sin. The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers us just this means.

**4. What do I say when I go to confession today? I heard we weren’t supposed to say the old formula.**

**Answer**: The rite for individual confession is not rigid, but the following norms apply:

* The priest welcomes the penitent, who then makes the sign of the cross, and the priest invites him/her to trust in God’s mercy.
* Reading of the Word of God (optional): The priest reads or recites a text of Scripture which talks about God’s mercy and our need for conversion. If the priest does not do this as part of the rite, it is highly recommended that the penitent read Scripture as part of his/her preparation for the sacrament.
* Confession of Sins and Acceptance of Satisfaction: There is not one prescribed formula for how the penitent confesses sin. The *Rites of the Catholic Church – Volume One* states: “Where it is the custom, the penitent says a general formula for confession (for example, **I confess to almighty God**) before he confesses his sins” (p. 545). Then the priest may counsel the penitent, particularly if the penitent requests it. He connects the penitent’s experience of reconciliation to the paschal mystery of Jesus and proposes an act of penance for the penitent to make satisfaction for his/her sin and to amend his/her life.
* Prayer of the Penitent and Absolution: The priest asks the penitent to express his/her sorrow for the confessed sins in prayer. The prayer could be an Act of Contrition learned as a child or a simple prayer of sorrow, such as: “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Then the priest extends his hands and says the words of absolution, to which the penitent responds, “Amen.”
* Proclamation of Praise of God and Dismissal: The priest proclaims, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” And the penitent responds, “His mercy endures forever.” Then the priest concludes, “The Lord has freed you from your sins. Go in peace.” The final word in the sacrament is *peace*.

**5. How often should I take part in this sacrament?**

**Answer**: There is no one answer to this question. Of course, in the case of mortal sin, Penance and Reconciliation are necessary. In the case of lesser sins, regular confession gives abundant grace and peace to the recipient. Participation in the communal celebrations of Reconciliation during Advent and Lent are recommended. The sacrament is a powerful source of grace in any form, and Catholics who take advantage of the opportunity find it a genuine source of joy and faith in their lives.

# Handout #9

# Experiencing Reconciliation

### Prepare

As you prepare for the celebration of the sacrament, meditate on your own or discuss as a household the following questions:

1. **How am I preparing for the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Have I regularly examined my conscience? How have I failed to love?**
2. **What is the focus of my preparation? Am I truly sorry for having chosen self over others, moving away from God rather than toward him?**
3. **How do I keep God’s love and forgiveness in mind as I prepare to confess my sins?**

### Reflect

After the celebration, reflect on the following questions:

1. **What did celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation do to my heart? To my relationship with God? To my relationship with others?**
2. **How have I lived out reparation for my sins? Did I do whatever the confessor told me to do as my penance? What else did I do to repair any damage which my sins caused?**
3. **How am I responding to God’s unconditional and limitless forgiveness in my life today?**