

Reflecting

On Sunday's Readings

September 2026

The following series is free, downloadable small-group materials based on each week's Mass readings and 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 minutes 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.** (The booklet *A Facilitator's Guide* is available from Emmaus Journey to provide additional practical training for leading lively and informative small-group discussions.)
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 that this passage ties 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, Second Reading and the Gospel 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 Scripture 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,

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Reflecting

On Sunday's Readings

THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 6, 2026

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 1b*)

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.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult with your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Ezekiel 33:7-9

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

Second Reading — Romans 13:8-10

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

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?

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THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 13, 2026

Introduction: Mercy means not giving people who have behaved unseemly 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 times 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 others have 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 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*)

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult with your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Sirach 27:30—28:7

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

Second Reading — Romans 14:7-9

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

Gospel Reading — Matthew 18:21-35

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?

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THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 20, 2026

Introduction: The tension we feel between justice and grace is something we struggle with throughout 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 effect 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.

For the texts corresponding to this Sunday's Readings please either consult with your New American Bible, or the USCCB (United States Council of Catholic Bishops) website.

First Reading — Isaiah 55:6-9

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

Second Reading — Philippians 1:20-24, 27

3. How do you see Christ living in you?
4. What is meant by "striving side by side for the faith of the gospel"?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 20:1-16

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?

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THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—September 27, 2026

Introduction: “Whenever I take the opportunity to actively love God in personal obedience, I end up sensing a new tenderness in my heart toward Him and a stronger resolve to obey again next time. Obedience is not an end, but a means—a means to express our love to God, and a means to increase our love for God. It is a catalyst in the process of loving God and becoming more like Jesus.” (Martha Thatcher in *The Freedom of Obedience*)

Obedience, or the lack thereof, always reveals where our heart is in relationship to God.

Obedience, or the lack thereof, always reveals the direction our heart is moving, either toward God or away from God. Obedience is never neutral, for to not obey God is to disobey his will. Inaction to God’s known will is simply a passive form of rebellion, but rebellion none the less. Fortunately, God looks at the entire process of obedience and not simply at our first response, so we have hope and an opportunity to make right a wrong initial response to disobey.

For many of us our initial response to God’s will is negative, either because we are so needy or in some cases because we have developed habits of disobedience. But, fortunately, as we linger over the implications of obeying or not obeying, our heart is softened by the warmth of his love and we say, “Yes!” as we allow ourselves to be molded to his will. Others of us are always ready with a resounding, “Yes!” only later to find our resolve weakening, and our will cooling into an icy, “No!” And all the while God is watching the process and looking at our heart. As the first reading points out, not only is our initial response important to God, but also our resolve to follow through on our commitment to obey.

Obedience is dependent on our knowing what God wants and expects from us, and it pre-supposes a desire and willingness to do his will once we know it. Consequently, God has promised to reveal his will to us, both in general terms and in more specific personal ways, through sacred Scripture, the Church’s teaching, prayer, godly counsel, etc. Interestingly, obedience too becomes a means of knowing his will, for many times God only reveals the first steps and then unfolds more of his will as we respond in obedience. Once we know his will, further illumination comes into play as we choose to either obey or not obey the aspects of his will that we already know. One of the benefits of obedience, and there are many, is that God’s grace and help become a reality to us as we respond to his enablement to do his will. The promise of John 14:21 is that when we love him by obeying his revealed will that he will abide with, or dwell, with us and show us even more of his love. Why would any of us, knowing this to be true, decide to live disobedient lives and deny ourselves this promise?

We see in the second reading both an evidence of this principle and an example. Jesus who came as Immanuel, God with us in the flesh, was faced with the humility of becoming human when he was divine, with taking on our sins when he was sinless, and with dying when he was eternal and immortal, yet he did not shy away from obediently doing the Father’s will. The Father in turn exalted Jesus, giving him a name and honor that are above all creation. He, the perfect example of obedience to his Father’s will, shows us the joy that comes from obedience. In the parable the man had two sons who each obeyed quite differently. The analogy is clear, we too are children who are faced with a decision regarding whether we will obey our heavenly Father in word only, or in the spirit of obedience. What will you choose to do?

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First Reading — Ezekiel 18:25-28

1. What assumptions are necessary for a person to accuse, “The Lord is not just”?
2. Verse 28 provides a good definition of repentance, “he considered and turned away.” From what in your life is God calling you to consider and turn away?

Responsorial Reading — Psalms 25:4-9

Second Reading — Philippians 2:1-11

3. What has been your experience of “encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy”?

Gospel Reading — Matthew 21:28-32

4. With what areas of the Father’s will are you currently struggling?
5. What feelings are influencing your thinking about doing his will?
6. What is the opposite of repentance?

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