

## **FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING – Study Questions**

L. William Countryman is an Episcopal priest and Professor of New Testament at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California. Keen and provocative in his teaching, he nurtures growth in his classroom by sowing seeds of thought and wonder. This book joins his others on scripture, sexuality and ordination in addressing thorny issues vital to Christian life and thinking.

“Get over yourself. You are forgiven.” With straightforward style and direct, plain language, Bill Countryman unfurls a quietly surprising, outrageously affirming understanding of forgiveness. ***FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING*** explores this tool for peace so dearly needed in our modern world. Naming and exploring common misunderstandings, the book invites its readers to imagine an organic, growing, flawed perfection in which the abundant love of God is so acutely known that the only natural response is to forgive others. But Countryman does not paint a merely pleasant pastel picture; in the book he describes the difficulty of choices, the pain of love, and the joy of meeting the enormous challenge to forgive. Practical problems are addressed with concrete suggestions even as a glorious image is developed of life oriented in hope and strength towards the future.

### **Why Forgiveness?**

1. Why “Forgiveness?” What leads you to read a book about this particular topic? What hopes and expectations do you have of this study?
2. Countryman writes of approaching problems with a new orientation, a focus on the present and the future. Where do you find your focus? In the past: analyzing, learning, critiquing? In the present: observing, participating, effecting change? In the future: dreaming, dreading, hoping?
3. Look up “transformation” in a dictionary. Countryman writes of being transformed as “letting go our control for a while” (p. 3), as something only God can give. How is it for you to imagine being the object of this transitive verb?
4. Reread the William Temple quote on page 4. Who in the Bible was able to adopt God’s viewpoint as her or his own? What effect did it have on that individual? On the life of the community?
5. Before you continue reading, jot down your definition of “forgiveness” as you understand it today.
6. Towards what in yourself or towards whom do you hope to have your viewpoint changed?

### **Forgiveness—Not Quite What You Thought**

1. Review the four common misconceptions of forgiveness which Countryman addresses. Which, if any, play most often in your life? What antidotes does Countryman suggest?

2. Countryman names "the intolerance which self-assurance breeds" as "the principal social and political problem of our time" (p. 18). Where is the healthy balance between celebrating our individual gifts and successes and claiming our common humanity? What stories in our faith tradition give us examples?
3. Countryman suggests that our mistakes are a part of us, shaping our response to this "messy adventurous, educational existence" (p. 21). How is it for you to embrace your flounderings and wonderings as tools for the future? Can you? Is it difficult to name our errors to ourselves? To one another?
4. Read Genesis 2 and 3. How have your abilities to know changed?
5. Countryman introduces the story of the accountants with the advice, "Get over yourself. You are forgiven." (p. 24) Which of the two accountants are you most like? Which had more integrity? Which understood forgiveness?
6. Where in your life do you long for the breathing room which is forgiveness?

### **Forgiving Oneself**

1. Countryman's statement, "Love is all powerful," provides the foundation for his ideas on forgiveness. What qualities must this omnipotent love have? How is it for you to be in a world where such a love exists? What doubts gnaw at your belief in this love?
2. Countryman asks, "What is your idea of perfection – the kind of perfection that Jesus might be summoning us to?" (p. 29) Name some of the organic, growing, flawed perfection which you see in and around you. How does Countryman's idea of natural perfection focused on love and generosity strike you? How does it compare with a dictionary definition of "perfection?"
3. In what ways is it possible "to apply this lavish forgiveness to yourself" (p. 31)? What scares you about doing so? What about it gives you life? Try slathering some forgiveness on yourself right now. (No, really, try it!)
4. Countryman articulates the concept of "spiritual recycling," a claiming of our failures as "raw materials for future growth" (p. 34). It is a form of accepting God's amazing gift of forgiveness. How do you respond to the idea that "all this is particularly hard for the good church folk who are most likely to read a book like this" (p. 35)? Where do you struggle?
5. Countryman writes, "Forgiving oneself means trusting God's forgiveness enough to risk joining in it, to risk forgiving ourselves in partnership with God." (p. 41) How is this a challenge to you? How is it a comfort?
6. In what ways do you want to grow in partnership with God?

## **Forgiving One Another—Opportunity or Demand?**

1. Countryman suggests that forgiveness may be the only really effective way of overcoming evil, the way of making it safe to change and grow. What forms of sin and evil have been a part of your life? How might a transformed perspective work toward redemption?
2. Say the Lord's Prayer together now. Say it slowly, consciously, in society How is it familiar in this context of studying forgiveness? What strikes you anew?
3. Countryman emphasizes that "no reader can avoid having to make decisions about what the gospel is" (p. 51). How does this idea strike you? What would you say is central to Jesus' good news?
4. Countryman insists that we must be honest about our situations, that "our God is never served by lies" (p. 57). He cites the example of anger. How do you express your anger within yourself? To others? What does it mean to you to read the psalmists raw words?
5. Revisit Countryman's four ways to cultivate forgiveness (pp. 60-63). With which does your life resonate? With which do you struggle?
6. In what ways do you hunger to obey God's invitation

## **Forgiveness Builds the Future**

1. Countryman tells us that "the goal of this process (of forgiveness) is nothing less than a new creation of humanity." (p. 66) Can you share that goal? Do you? What might it mean in your life?
2. Forgiveness involves investing ourselves in God's abundant future. This future, which is "uncontrolled, unpredictable, threatening, and surprising" (p. 69), is also a promise. What is your own past experience with surprise? Unpredictability? What resources might you need to embrace such a future?
3. What two things does Countryman say we're doing when we forgive? What costs must be paid to do so? What rewards are offered if we grow and respond to love?
4. Countryman cites the Risen Jesus as "the best vision we have of human perfection" (p. 73). We see Jesus sharing, offering, calling, welcoming, and holding. Explore the connections between these actions. What is perfect love?
5. Reread the story of Joseph (Genesis 37, 39-45). If a movie were made of this story today, would it be a hit? What facets of the story reflect true life? What seems far-fetched? With whom do you identify?
6. In which situations might "the good church folk who are most likely to read this book" (p. 35) find opportunity to try "standing up, holding up your head, telling what really happened, making a fuss, leaving an abusive situation, calling for justice" (p. 79)? How might it look in your community?

7. With whom do you long to stand in common humanity and look towards the future?

### **Some Practical Problems**

1. What common threads weave through the particular problems of forgiveness which Countryman explores? What is the bottom line? Which difficulties are not addressed here?
2. Countryman suggests, "an apology should usually be a plain and simple admission of fault without a catalogue of extenuating circumstances or self-defenses" (p. 82). What spiritual value does such an apology have? What obstacles exist to offering such an apology? What obstacles exist to accepting one?
3. Try writing your own definitions of "forgiveness" and "reconciliation." How do they compare with Countryman's definitions? With a dictionary's? Is there a time frame in which we are working here?
4. Countryman writes, "the process of forgiveness begins only when we recognize (a problem), confront it, wherever and whenever possible, and insist that something better is possible in our future" (p. 94). Forgiveness begins with honesty and claims the common humanity of both the offended and the offender. What in our society affirms such a stance? What in our faith affirms such a stance? What hinders such forgiveness??
5. Reread William Temple's comments on repentance (p. 4). What might repentance look like in the particular situations addressed in this chapter? What truth do you yearn to see?

### **The Forgiving Spirit**

1. What has been your experience of the new and unknown? What in your past would lead you to risk change? What in your past would lead you to avoid change?
2. Countryman asserts that we must respond to the gifts of God, must get to know them, use them, practice with and make use of them (p. 107). Is it a gift if we do not respond? Do we lose the opportunity to respond? Does God withdraw gifts once offered?
3. "The gifts of the Spirit are given not so much to the person who receives them as through the person to the community at large." (p. 107) What gifts does your community have?
4. Countryman contrasts Stoicism with the descriptions of life with God in the Bible. What advantages are there in a life free of passion? What disadvantages? Where do you deeply know the love, joy, and forgiveness of God?

5. In writing about the surprise of the cross, Countryman asks, "Can God fail?" How do *you* respond? What is failure? Is it important that God failed in order to win us through Christ? What failures are told of in the Gospels?
6. How is it for you to be wooed, to be courted by the overwhelming love which cannot finally be defeated? Imagine yourself as *completely desirable* to God, right here, right now.

### **Forgiveness and the Life of Faith**

1. Countryman writes, "the true saint has a strong sense of shared human weakness" (p. 129). What stands in the way of your recovering a sense of your own weakness and God's unbounded goodness? Does God's "rather indiscriminate and extravagant forgiveness" (p. 129) offend your sensibilities? Why?
2. Review the two conceptions of justice which Countryman describes. Compare these to a dictionary definition. Which of these further a profound and loving respect for others? What examples of justice are offered in the Bible?
3. What specifically does Countryman mean by the "habit of kindness?" What might it look like in your own life? Can you do this? What support do you need?
4. With whom do you long to share the news that God loves us, gifts us, holds us, and forgives us?

### **Conclusion**

1. Jot down your own definition of "forgiveness." How has it evolved over the course of this discussion? Is it complete, finished?
2. Countryman suggests that this forgiveness business entails a lot of change and freedom. Where in your life is such growth possible? In what ways are you released from your past?
3. In what ways can you continue to claim God's forgiveness in your life? How can you share it with others?

*This study guide was prepared by Helen C. L. McPeak, an Episcopal priest and former student of Bill Countryman's.*