



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Frodo's Forgiveness
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 30-37)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Triumph of Spectacle
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 83-87)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Frodo's Forgiveness

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* captures the transcendent quality of love, utterly unknown either to warrior cultures of the ancient world or to our equally merciless culture of consumption. "The pity of Bilbo" is not only for Middle-earth; it's the key to our transformation as well.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:43-48

Responsive Reading[†]

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Reflection

The middle-aged, unadventurous hobbits Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee are mysteriously elected to destroy the Ring of Mordor – which, because it grants its bearer unassailable power, is the treasure sought by the Dark Lord Sauron bent on dominating Middle-earth. What draws us into their tale?

"The hobbits' struggles are our own. Like the other nobodies of this world, we remain at one with the hobbits in being summoned to resist – if not to defeat – the enormous forces of evil," Ralph Wood notes. "Against the craft and power of the demonic, our one hope lies in refusing the policies of the wicked – in repudiating their terroristic tactics by surrendering all coercive force, so that our weakness might become our strength."

The moral center of the epic is "the pity of Bilbo," the mercy shown by Frodo's uncle to Gollum, a wretched creature lost in self-absorption by his indulging use of the Ring. Bilbo's earlier pity for his enemy – he refused to destroy Gollum – echoes through subsequent events. In this leitmotiv we see forgiveness:

- ▶ *is a radical demand.* Within the Fellowship called out to destroy the Ring, Frodo and Sam experience friendship that kindles mutual support and forgiveness for one another. Yet Bilbo's pity had a deeper source, the wizard Gandalf reminds them, which he calls "pity" and Scripture names "agape." It is "the love of those who are not only radically 'other' to us, but who deserve our scorn and cannot reciprocate our pardon," writes Wood. "We can make friends only with those whose convictions we share, but we are called to have pity for those whom we do not trust, even our enemies."



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► *enables repentance*. "Repentance does not produce forgiveness, but the other way around: mercy enables contrition." Pity frees those who accept it for a life of service and virtue.

► *requires a sustaining story*. Hobbits, who are consummate storytellers, find life's meaning in the stories we inhabit. Forgiving enemies makes no sense in "mere adventures." Only when we are summoned into an infinitely "great tale," Sam concludes, does pity find its proper role: "Things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different. Why, even Gollum might be good in a tale."

"Sam has plumbed the depths of real hope," Wood explains. "The 'great tales' stand apart from mere adventures because they belong to the One Great Story. It is a story not only of those who fight heroically against evil, but also of those who are unwilling to exterminate such an enemy as Gollum. As Sam discerns, this tale finds a surprising place even for evil. For it is not only the story of the destruction of the ruling ring, but also a narrative of redemption."

Study Questions

1. Which characters are shown mercy in *The Lord of the Rings*?
2. Peter Jackson changes the climactic scene of the epic (p. 87). Why does Ralph Wood think Tolkien's version is more true?
3. As for mercy, what is the "huge distance between Tolkien's book and the heroic world that is its inspiration" (p. 34)?
4. How does Matthew 5:43-48 allude to the "great story" of redemption in which it makes sense to forgive enemies?
5. How can we practice pity toward our enemies in the thick of a war on terrorism?

Departing Hymn: "Heaviness of Heart and Conscience"

Heaviness of heart and conscience;
shadow, haunting still, at noon;
what can lift this bending burden?
Does this night have star or moon?

Echoes fill the heart and conscience,
words, once spoken, will not fade.
What can cease this pressing murmur?
Silence! What price must be paid?

Friendships lost reveal their treasure.
Guilt and pain reveal their might.
Then a Word with sudden freshness
resurrects the Way and Life.

Hear the word by God's Word spoken;
hear "forgiven" sung as gift.
Fresh and brisk the hope and healing;
feel the breeze as burdens lift.

Terry W. York

Suggested Tune: WEBSTER

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†1 John 1:5-10

Frodo's Forgiveness

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 3 or 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To recognize that “the pity of Bilbo” is the central theme of Tolkien’s epic, *The Lord of the Rings*.
2. To explore the role of forgiveness in human relationships.
3. To consider how Jesus’ command to practice repentance-enabling forgiveness is grounded in the biblical narrative of God’s redemption of the world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. The hymn “Heaviness of Heart and Conscience” was written for *Forgiveness (Christian Reflection)*. Download the tune WEBSTER from the Ethics Library at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

Begin with a Story

Samwise Gamgee, Frodo’s steadfast hobbit friend who is caught up with him in the Quest to destroy the Ring, realizes there are “many competing stories that vie for our loyalty, and Sam tries to distinguish them, to locate the one hope-giving story:

‘...The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren’t always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?’ (2.320-321) (quoted in *Inklings of Glory*, p. 32).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members will receive God’s forgiveness and reflect that costly forgiveness as they forgive others.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 5:43-48 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This is an opportunity for group members who are familiar with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (or Peter Jackson's film adaptations) to explore its leitmotiv of pity and mercy. They may investigate how Tolkien's epic shapes the moral imagination – by nurturing in us the sentiments (the complex of emotions and thoughts) that are characteristic of a forgiving attitude.

If group members are not familiar with Tolkien's epic, focus the discussion on these features of forgiveness: its centrality in human relationships, the radical nature of Jesus' command to forgive enemies, and the "great story" of redemption in which that command is at home.

Study Questions

1. Enemies are forgiven – e.g., Bilbo Baggins's pity of Gollum, which is remembered by Gandalf as an example for all to follow (p. 33); and Gandalf and Frodo offer mercy to the evil wizard Saruman after the battle of Helms Deep (p. 35) – as well as friends and comrades – e.g., Aragorn pities his terrified troops before the assault on the Black Gate of Mordor (p. 36); and Aragorn pardons Boromir's treacherous betrayal of Frodo (p. 37).
2. In the novel, Frodo is overwhelmed by evil on Mount Doom; he is saved as Gollum bites off Frodo's finger with the Ring, and in a giddy dance topples into the volcano. Jackson changes the scene, having Frodo wrestle Gollum over the volcanic brink, but grasp the edge to save himself at the last moment. Tolkien realistically displays the terrible power of evil and our creaturely weakness of will. Evil finally destroys itself; we do not heroically overcome its thrall. "Tolkien's world is Christian in the precise Pauline sense: in all things, even in the most sinister wickedness, a providential power is at work to bring about the good" (p. 87).
3. In ancient Greece, pity was not a virtue. One should never show mercy to one's equal, but only "to the pathetic, the helpless, those who are able to do little or nothing for themselves." Likewise one should never show mercy to the unjust or undeserving. If one spares a defeated enemy, it should be for self-display of one's power rather than love for the other. That *The Lord of the Rings* subverts this pagan view, even though its events are set in a mythical ancient warrior culture, is a key to grasping the epic's moral and religious center.
4. Jesus alludes to the grand story of the creation, our rebellion, and God's acts of redemption through Israel to bring us into loving union with one another and with God. The Creator, who "makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous," calls us to be his children (Matthew 5:45). God's invitation is not limited to people who have returned his love (5:46), but encompasses the evil and the unrighteous who do not love him. God's love is reflected within Israel (perhaps the meaning of "brothers and sisters" as opposed to Gentiles), but should extend to those outside the community (5:47). The purpose is to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).
The Father's love extends to his enemies. Indeed, all his children were enemies who have received forgiveness. When Jesus commands us to love our enemies, he is calling us to see ourselves and the world as they really are and to become like the Father. "Love as a theological virtue is not a natural human capacity, not a product of human willing and striving even at their highest," Wood reminds us. "Because charity constitutes the triune God's own essence, it is always a gift and thus also a command. About this matter as about so much else, Christians and Jews are fundamentally agreed" (p. 33).
5. The Free Peoples of Middle-earth unite to resist evil; yet they use restraint, fearing how they will be deformed if they're seduced by the power they possess. To the vanquished they offer generous terms. They seek the redemption, rather than destruction of their enemies. "Tolkien demonstrates that, against the craft and power of the demonic, our one hope lies in refusing the policies of the wicked – in repudiating their terroristic tactics by surrendering all coercive force, so that our weakness might become our strength" (p. 86).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.