

Have mercy • Breaking open the word

Like any good parent, God has great expectations for us, his children. And, like any normal children, we fall short of those expectations. God, who is perfect and loves us unconditionally, treats us with mercy in all circumstances and expects us to do the same.

In the first reading, the Hebrews had been left alone for a short time, and when Moses came back, they were worshiping an idol that they had made. God could have given up on them and punished them greatly for not following his instructions. The Hebrews were only beginning to learn about God, so God, instead, treated them with mercy and understanding.

Paul tells us of his personal experience with God's mercy in the second reading. He was aware of his sinfulness and really felt God's forgiveness and love for him in his life. His response to that mercy and forgiveness was gratitude, which is the response that everyone should have when they are forgiven. As a result of his being forgiven, Paul understood that God wanted him to treat everyone with the same mercy with which he had been treated. Having an experience of forgiveness makes us more compassionate toward others when we remember how it feels to be forgiven.

The Gospel introduces us to one of humanity's most amazing flaws—the double standard. The Jewish leaders are annoyed that Jesus treats sinners with compassion and tries to love them into changing their lives. So, Jesus tells them a few stories to try and love them into being less judgmental; and to drop *their* double standard (they are sinners, too!). He tells us two people who lost things that were important to them and how carefully they looked for their lost items. The joy that they had is only an inkling of the joy that God has when we turn

our hearts back to God. The story of the Prodigal Son that followed is talking directly to those leaders—they are the unforgiving big brother in the story. The Father is God, who allows his children to make their own choices—even ones that will cause them pain—and welcomes them back with a massive party when they come to their senses and are willing to accept God’s forgiveness. The Father’s mercy toward the son (who essentially said, “You’re dead to me” to his father) is the same mercy with which God treats us when we reject him. This story is meant to be a clear illustration that there is nothing you can do that God won’t forgive if you want to be forgiven.

You can read this Sunday’s readings here:

[Scriptures for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C](#)

Break open the word with your family

Kids

Did it ever happen that you were left alone for a short time and, in that time, got into trouble? Why did you do what you did? How did the adult in charge of you handle it? Did you learn anything from that experience?

Teens

In order for Paul to feel God’s forgiveness, he had to first understand that he needed it. Sometimes it’s hard to admit that we have sinned because it causes us to feel guilty or ashamed. Those feelings are meant to be an indicator—like the “idiot lights” in a car—but not where we are meant to stay. When we ask for forgiveness, God wants us to really leave behind the things that we have done wrong; not to keep them with us, weighing us down. Is there anything you need to be

forgiven for? If there is, take it to the Sacrament of Confession. If it's something you should discuss with your parents, do that, too.

Adults

How do you respond when people essentially say “you're dead to me” and disregard your authority? Have you ever done that to anyone else? Have you ever made choices that say that to God? What lessons can you find in the story of the Prodigal Son for dealing with people who don't conform to your standards of behavior?

A little lectio

The ancient practice of prayerfully reflecting on bits of Scripture is known as *lectio divina*. Want to try it out with your family? Head over to [Lectio Divina for Kids](#) to find out how to adapt this prayer practice for your kids.

A little Bible study

Want to do a little Bible study with your kids? Here are some tips:

- During Ordinary Time, the Church pairs the Old Testament and New Testament readings in a way that each sheds light on the other. Ask your kids to look for the common theme connecting the two readings. (Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes it is subtle.) How does the “dialogue” between the readings help you understand them better?
- Get a New American Bible, Revised Edition, and take a look at the footnotes for these readings. How do they change your understanding of what is going on?
- Take a look at the context for the readings—what happens

before, or after?

- Read the NABRE's introduction to the book of the Bible that the readings are taken from. How does that help you understand the readings?
- If you don't have a copy of the NABRE at home, you can view it online at the USCCB website at the [Daily Readings](#) web page.

For even more resources for breaking open this Sunday's readings, head over to [The Sunday Website](#).