

# God's Forgiveness Is Free



## BACKGROUND NOTES

Salvation and repentance are difficult concepts for children as well as adults. We get bogged down by our sins and consider the task of repentance too difficult if it means that we must change our lives before we can "win" the gift of salvation. But this thinking is backwards. We already have the gift of salvation; Jesus has earned it for us and God gives it to us unconditionally. Repentance is our response to God's free gift. We repent, or in other words "turn our lives around," because we want to respond to God's love, not because we are trying to win God's love. Our task is simply to respond to what is already offered. This service assures children that Jesus is always with them to teach them how to respond to God's unconditional love and forgiveness. Have available paper, pencils, and a container for the optional activity.

## GATHERING PRAYER

**Leader** Jesus, we believe that you are here with us and we thank you for the gift of your presence. Bless us now as we pray and think together about your gift of forgiveness. You give it to us freely. Show us how to respond to it. We ask this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**All** Amen.

**Leader** Birthday parties are lots of fun, and often relatives and friends give us special gifts. They give us gifts just because we are us, and just because we were born on this special day.

A few days after our birthday, it's the polite thing to do to send thank-you notes to those who have given us gifts. Kids often forget to do this. Has your mother or father ever had to remind you? Why do you think they want you to send these notes?  
*(Allow time for responses.)*

**Reader One** Wouldn't it be a silly thing to send thank-you notes before your birthday, before anyone has even given you anything?

People would think you were crazy, or maybe they would think you were hinting that you want a present. Anyway, no one sends thank-you notes before a gift is given.

**Reader Two** In a way, though, this is what we do to God. God gives us the gift of forgiveness, but before we receive it we think we have to send God a message. We think we have to be able to tell God that we will never sin again, that we are now as perfect as possible.

**Reader Three** What must God think of this? God is saying, "Here, receive my gift," and we are saying, "Oh no, I can't take it until I do certain things to change my ways."

**Reader Four** We have it backwards. We must first reach out and receive God's forgiveness and then respond to this great gift by turning our lives around toward God. The more God forgives us, the more we will want to get closer to God. What a great thing this is!

**Reader Five** The sacrament of reconciliation is celebrated in the church to give people the opportunity to receive the gift of forgiveness that God so freely offers. It reminds us that God loves and cares for us and gives us forgiveness, whether we "deserve" it or not. The sacrament also teaches us how to turn ourselves around to God.

**Reader Six** When we go to this sacrament we speak to the priest or celebrant who stands in for Jesus. This person speaks the words of forgiveness in Jesus' name and offers us suggestions about how we can respond even more to God's presence in our lives. Another name for these suggestions is "penance." After we confess our sins, the priest gives us a penance to say or perform.

**Leader** When we think of this sacrament as a meeting with Jesus, and when we think of our penance as a chance to respond to God more fully, it becomes something we can look forward to. It's something like a birthday party where we receive gifts just because we are who we are.

As you prepare now for the sacrament, close your eyes and picture Jesus. He is surrounded by people who have come to listen to him. All at once a child runs up and tries to climb on Jesus' lap. The adults are annoyed and try to get the child away. But Jesus says, "Let the children come to me." He explains to the adults that children know how much God loves them and they don't worry about anything except receiving God's love. That's how everyone should be, Jesus tells the people. Talk to Jesus about this now in your heart. Ask him to help you to learn to receive God's forgiveness and to respond by turning your life around to God. Ask Jesus to show you how you might do this.

## **OPTIONAL ACTIVITY**

Invite each child to write a thank-you note to God for the gift of forgiveness that God offers so freely in the sacrament of reconciliation and in countless other ways. Allow sufficient time for writing these notes.

## CLOSING PRAYER

### Leader

We have talked to Jesus and we have learned that God offers us forgiveness, even before we ask for it. God freely forgives us in the sacrament of reconciliation, at Mass, and in many other ways in our daily lives. I invite you now to come forward with your thank-you notes.

As each comes forward, ask: "\_\_\_\_\_do you accept God's gift of forgiveness?" (*Suggest that participants respond "yes" if they want, but don't coerce them.*) Then have each place his or her thank-you note in a container.

When all the notes are in the container, lift it high and say: Let us now praise God for the gift of forgiveness and for all that we have received:

### All

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

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