

Dear Class Member,

The conviction of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the death of George Floyd has been much in the news lately. Many observers say that the verdict is more a matter of accountability than justice. Both of those things are significant themes in scripture, and this news gives us an opportunity to consider the differences between them. So that will be the topic of our next class.

The in-person and Zoom *Wired Word* classes are cancelled. You can continue to use *The Wired Word* discussion sheets in your homes, with your friends/family/co-workers or fellow Abide Group members.

The Present Word adult class resumes in-person following our Sunday school COVID-19 Safety Guidelines (http://www.sprucc.org/docs/Worship/ReOpenPlan_SundaySchool_201013.pdf) on Sundays at 9:00am on May 2, 9, 16, & 23.

We continue to have 9:00am Tuesday morning Zoom Bible studies with Zion UCC:
<http://www.sprucc.org/classes/adultstudy-groups.htm#ZionUCCBibleStudy>.

Sunday evenings there is a six week series book discussion with Zion UCC of *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges & Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* by Zoom from 6:30-7:30pm from April 18 - May 23. Info at: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/recent-aupcomingevents.htm#PostQuarantine>.



Chauvin Conviction About Accountability, Commentators Say

The Wired Word for the Week of May 2, 2021

In the News

After the April 20 conviction of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, several commentators and others have said the trial and the verdict were about accountability, preferring that word to "justice."

For example, in an opinion piece in *University Press*, a publication of Florida Atlantic University, staff writer Michael Gennaro wrote "'Justice' was a word used a lot in the wake of the verdict. I think 'accountability' fits better here. Justice would be George Floyd still being alive."

On May 25, 2020, Chauvin, along with three other police officers, responded to a complaint that Floyd had passed a \$20 counterfeit bill. They took Floyd, who was apparently under the influence of a chemical substance (later found to be fentanyl and methamphetamine) into custody. Floyd initially resisted but eventually ceased to do so. Nonetheless, he was restrained in a neck hold under Chauvin's knees for about nine minutes. And all this while Floyd was handcuffed, lying face down on the street and calling out "I can't breathe."

Eventually, Floyd suffered an anoxic seizure. Chauvin, however, persisted in the back-and-neck restraint he'd been applying to Floyd for an additional four minutes, even after Floyd had no pulse and was not breathing.

In the trial, Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter. His sentencing won't be until June, but some legal experts say it's likely he will receive a 30-year prison sentence.

Chauvin is white and Floyd was black. The prosecution in the trial did not say or intimate that Chauvin was a racist; nor did they suggest that racism played any role in his crimes. They did, however, say that he was a bad cop. Some Americans, speaking from their own experiences, say that racism was a factor.

Hoppy Kercheval, a well-known broadcaster for West Virginia Radio Corporation, also commented in *MetroNews* about accountability in Chauvin's case.

"Accountability is an important concept, especially for individuals in positions of responsibility, and few professions in our society bear a greater responsibility than police officers. They maintain 'the thin blue line' that separates order from chaos," Kercheval said.

But, said Kercheval, police officers have "an obligation to stay within the boundaries of the law themselves." While he maintained that police officers "must have the benefit of the doubt, especially when making split-second life or death decisions," they must also show restraint.

"When a police officer crosses that line, as Chauvin did, there must be accountability, and that strengthens trust, which is vitally important in policing," Kercheval said, and he added that "one reasonable conclusion from the Chauvin trial is not that 'all cops are bad,' but rather when a cop fails in his responsibility, they will be held accountable."

To find out how this focus on police accountability might translate into specifics, *CBS News* spoke with activists and legal experts to learn how Chauvin's conviction could change policing in America. Among the responses CBS received are these:

- The verdict could drive both state and federal policy. CBS noted that the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which passed in the House last month, "uses Floyd's legacy as a case to make specific changes to key police policies, including banning chokeholds and no-knock warrants, ending qualified immunity for officers and making it easier for police to be held accountable for abuses." The Senate is expected to take up the bill soon.
- The verdict may give prosecutors a sense of confidence when bringing future cases against police.
- Chauvin's trial could pave the way for police to testify against fellow officers in future cases, as happened in the Chauvin trial.

Whatever happens in the future, many people hope that the Chauvin verdict will be a crucial juncture in the national conversation about race, policing, public safety, the use of force and accountability by all.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Opinion: Chauvin's Guilty Verdict Was Accountability, Not Justice. *University Press*

Derek Chauvin Verdict Equals Accountability. *MetroNews* |

What the Media Didn't Tell You About the Chauvin Case. *National Review*

What Derek Chauvin's Guilty Verdict Means for the Future of Policing. *CBS News*

For George Floyd, a Complicated Life and Consequential Death. *APNews*

Applying the News Story

The word "accountable" -- in its meaning as "Liable to be called ... to answer for responsibilities and conduct" -- has been in use in the English language since at least 1583, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Before that, accountable has roots in the Middle English (A.D. 1150-1450) word *acount*, and before that, roots in the Old French (possibly as early as the A.D. 700s) *aconter*, according to *Origins: The Encyclopedia of Words*. And all that time, from one language to another, with essentially the same meaning: taking responsibility for one's actions.

The first use of the idea of accountability in the Bible is in Genesis 3, where God confronts Adam and Eve for eating forbidden fruit. The word "accountable" isn't there, but there's no question that our first parents had done what God had told them they must not do, and now were being called to answer for their conduct. And with their failure to be accountable, came a huge penalty: expulsion from the garden.

Our point with this etymological excavation is to note that almost from the beginning of creation, humankind has recognized that no one is a law unto him- or herself. Accountability to our Creator and to others is part of what it means to live as God wants us to. Thus accountability is our topic in this discussion.

To help our discussion, here two definitions from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*:

justice: the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments ... the administration of law

accountability: the quality or state of being accountable, especially: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions

The Big Questions

1. What do you see as the primary similarities between justice and accountability? What are the primary differences?
2. To what persons do you regard yourself as legitimately accountable? Why? To what entities do you regard yourself as legitimately accountable? Why?
3. In what ways do you help others to be accountable? How is it possible to do so without judging others, and what does that suggest about the difference between justice and accountability?
4. Is it fair and right that higher standards of integrity and behavior are expected from some professions than from others? Explain your answer. What are the compensations for being held to a higher standard? What, if any, standards should be expected of every profession or job?
5. Is it possible to hold someone accountable while also extending forgiveness? How can we do that? How does God hold us accountable for our misdeeds while also extending mercy to us? Are some sins unforgivable?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Genesis 43:9

I myself will be surety for him; you can hold me accountable for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. (For context, read 43:1-15.)

In Genesis 43, during the time of a widespread, multi-year famine, Jacob's sons, led by son Judah, prepared to go back to Egypt to get more food for their family, but knew that the Egyptian food czar (who, unbeknownst to Judah and his brothers was their other brother Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery years before), wanted them to bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, with them. Jacob, fearful that something bad would happen to Benjamin, didn't want to let him go, but Judah spoke the words above to his father,

His words are quoted here from the NRSV rendering of the original Hebrew underlying the verse, which in that version contains the word "accountable." The NIV doesn't use "accountable" but conveys the same idea when it has Judah saying to his father "you can hold me personally responsible for [Benjamin]."

Questions: When have you intentionally made yourself responsible for someone's well-being? In what ways did you hold yourself accountable in that regard? What did that mean for you?

2 Samuel 12:9-10, 12-14

[Nathan said to David,] "Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me ... For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David, "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, ... by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD ..." (For context, read 12:1-14.)

As the king of Israel chosen by God and anointed to that office by Samuel, David had a lot of responsibilities, some of which he fulfilled quite well, but in the matter of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah, David sinned against both of them as well as against the Lord. And now, God sent the prophet Nathan to hold David to account, and David's penalty was severe.

Questions: In this case, David was accountable, but how was that different, if at all, from justice. What would have been justice for Bathsheba, who had no choice when the king wanted her? What would have been justice for Uriah, who was betrayed by David and murdered at David's instructions? What is one application of this biblical story to your own life?

James 3:1

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. (For context, read 3:1-5.)

James made this comment about those who teach in the church, but we suspect he would say at least this much about those who are in professions where the lives of others are in their hands. Notice however that James doesn't say "No one should become a teacher," for teaching is a needed profession (or volunteer position). Rather he seems to be saying that no one should enter that work without committing to working in it according to best standards of leadership, integrity, responsibility for those under one's tutelage or care.

We would not be surprised that if asked about someone wanting to become a police officer, James might make a similar statement.

Questions: What impact, if any, do you think the Chauvin conviction is having on currently serving police officers? Why? What impact might it have on people considering going into policing as a career? On those who are responsible for deciding which applicants to enter policing should be accepted?

Luke 17:3

Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. (For context, read 17:1-4.)

Galatians 6:1

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. (For context, read 6:1-10.)

James 5:16

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. (For context, read 5:13-18.)

Each of these verses is about accountability within the church community. The Luke and Galatians texts instruct those who have not transgressed to hold to account those who have, thus restoring the spiritual health of the congregation. But note that the Galatians verse reminds those who have not sinned that they too are susceptible.

The James text addresses both those who have slipped and those who have not, thus creating a community of mutual accountability.

Questions: In what ways do your fellow congregants help you live up to your spiritual commitments? In what ways do you do the same for them? What role does forgiveness play in all of this?

For Further Discussion

1. Read and respond to [this piece from NBC News](#) about how misdemeanor offenses are handled in the United States and the effect they have on overall society.

2. In addition to the verses included in the "Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope" section above, the Bible contains many more verses that illustrate or call for accountability, either directly or indirectly. Here are few of them. In each case, talk about how they relate to the topic of being accountable.

- "Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?'" --Genesis 4:9
- "The LORD of heavenly forces proclaims: Cut down her trees, and build siege ramps against Jerusalem. This city must be held accountable, for there's nothing but oppression in her midst." --Jeremiah 6:6 (CEB)
- "Then they cried to the LORD, 'O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased.' Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him." --Jonah 1:14-16 (NIV)
- "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." --Matthew 18:15-17
- "When they kept on questioning [Jesus], he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'" --John 8:7
- "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." --Hebrews 10:24-25

3. From the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). In the context of the verse, Jesus was praying, at minimum, for the soldiers who actually nailed him up. However, throughout his Passion narrative, Luke emphasized the role of the Jewish leaders in engineering the crucifixion (22:1-6, 52, 66; 23:4, 10, 13), and in the end, some of the common people were swayed into calling for Jesus' death (23:18). Later, in the book of Acts, which Luke also wrote, he quotes speeches in which the speakers maintain that the Jewish leaders acted out of ignorance (e.g., Acts 3:17; 13:27). So it seems that Jesus' prayer may have been for all who were involved in bringing about his death.

So should Jesus' prayer here mean he was calling for forgiveness for people not because they had acknowledged and understood their guilt, but because they misunderstood what they were doing? And if one doesn't know what one is doing, who is accountable? Where does justice go in such cases? What then is the connection between the harm one has done and the one who did the harm? Was Jesus seeing something we cannot see?

Responding to the News

This is a good time to pray for safety, wisdom and a sense of accountability for those in law enforcement, as well as for those who are on the receiving end of police actions where bias, misunderstandings or disregard for the humanity of all result in unneeded harm or fatalities.

Prayer

We pray, O Lord, for those who loved and were loved by George Floyd, that they might draw from the conviction of his slayer some measure of peace and find a way forward that is blessed by your presence. We pray for Derek Chauvin, that paying the penalty for his wrongdoing will drive him to grow in his sense of humanity and your will for him, even in confinement. In Jesus' name. Amen.