

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Forgiveness and Accountability

An inequality exists on such issues between society's haves and have-nots

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), [Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 12.15.2009

At this time of year when we try to uphold the values of peace and brotherhood, it's appropriate to ponder: When is the time for accountability, and when is the time for forgiveness?

The blogosphere buzz-phrase about this issue is “the inequality of accountability.” A blogger implored Wisconsin [Sen. Russ Feingold](#) in 2007 to examine “the inequality of accountability between those regarding themselves as elite and the rest of us who answer to the swift and Draconian laws, excessive punitive fees and fines for the least of our errors.”



It's probably true that when we ourselves are caught in an error, we tend to believe we are being singled out unfairly. We tend to skim over the more numerous times we got away with speeding or failing to stop when a pedestrian waited at an intersection. But what about the larger public sphere?

It takes about a nanosecond to come up with examples of the elite getting away with “stuff.” You remember [Blackwater](#), the private military firm hired by the U.S. government. Recent federal audits suggest it may owe the government tens of millions of dollars for allegedly failing to meet federal contract terms. Five of its employees face murder charges for the massacre of Iraqi civilians, and founder [Erik Prince](#) is accused of running a crusade (or might we say jihad?) against Muslims and Islam. But Blackwater's contracts have been extended indefinitely.

Yadda yadda for [Halliburton](#) subsidiary [KBR](#), pharmaceutical giant [Pfizer](#) and CEOs of government-bailed financial institutions with their jaw-dropping bonuses ([Goldman Sachs](#) may be coming around). For them and many privileged others, it's foot-dragging justice or swift injustice in their favor — all the way to the bank.

Members of society with the least access to safety nets and the least access to justice are held accountable in proportionately larger numbers. Within a few days after hidden

videos showed [Acorn](#), the community organizing nonprofit, giving illegal or illegitimate tax-preparation advice to the poor, members of both houses of [Congress](#) voted to deny federal dollars. This swift action certainly wasn't proportionate to the taxpayer cost of its transgressions, but rather proof of its meager influence.

The man whose birth we commemorate this month, revered by Jews and Muslims and hallowed by Christians, was most interested in this balance between swift justice and compassion. As Jesus of Nazareth warned in the [book of Matthew](#), “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!” (Love the visuals!)

For the powerless, he took a different tack. Addressing an angry crowd preparing to stone a prostitute, he admonished them to let “he who is sinless throw the first stone.” When the crowd dispersed in frustration, he turned to the woman and told her to “go and sin no more.”

During this season — and beyond — when you read about the next belligerent Acorn or supercilious CEO, notice what happens to the offenders. What is the balance between forgiveness and accountability? Is there equality in the way the haves and have-nots are held accountable? What would a sustainable justice call for, and how can we build it?

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*