



How to Forgive *As We Have Been Forgiven*

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The Cultural Ache for Forgiveness

In the mid-90s, the world witnessed a war of ethnic cleansing and genocide between Bosnians, Serbians, and Croats in what is now remembered as the Bosnian War (1992-1995). While not a war of religion in the strict sense, the various sides of the war represented Muslims (Bosnians), Orthodox Christians (Serbians), and Catholics (Croats). War of any kind is terrible and atrocious, full of death and violence committed by humans against other humans. War is humanity in its worst form.

A Muslim woman who survived the war reported several unspeakable things that happened to her. Perhaps the most moving part of her story is the sense of vengeance that her experiences produced. A teacher, the woman had formerly been moved to foster a sense of love among her pupils. Using literature, she had “taught them how to love.” Yet, during the war she found herself a victim both of her former pupils and fellow colleagues who shouted derogatory remarks over her while they beat her and did many other worse things. She even named her child to represent her hatred of those who perpetrated crimes against her. In naming him such, she nursed him with milk that flowed full of hatred.

The journalist who captured the woman’s story goes on to wonder just how widespread are the consequences, not only of what happened to this particular woman, but to all those whose living memory would be characterized by similar forms of victimhood. “How many mothers in Bosnia have sworn to teach their children hate and revenge! How many little Muslims, Serbs, and Croats will grow up listening to such stories and learning such lessons!”¹

In the heart and mind of this woman, we can see an example of how easy it is for victimhood to manipulate our character. We begin to think of certain acts as unforgivable. From there, we begin to think of certain kinds of people—those who commit such acts—as unredeemable. As such, it’s easy to think of them as something secondary, as somehow less than human, even justifying violence against them.

In our fractured and polarized age, we don’t have to look to situations so shocking to find people with attitudes similar to the woman in our story. Simply harboring differences of opinion, taste, or preference in our society is enough for people to be accused of harming others. It’s not uncommon for such differences to produce attitudes of disgust or considerations of others as despicable, their actions inexcusable.

And what of our response to this cultural moment? We don’t need to look to highly publicized or controversial circumstances for reasons to abandon or ignore a move toward reconciliation. We are all aware that we live in a time when it’s common for people to cut off their relationship with others simply because of some kind of disagreement. Often, those disagreements are over important things that we each hold sacred. Our views on social, political, or ethical issues, differences of religion, and more, are common divides amongst us. Sometimes those differences seem enough to consider a person unpardonable for whatever position or belief they adhere to. So we exile them from our lives by cutting off the relationship (or we may even find ourselves the ones who have been exiled).

Do we not ache for a kind of grace that runs counter to the unkindness, discord, and brokenness all around us?

At other times however, choosing not to associate with another person can be for entirely trivial reasons. Sports fandom can be as contentious as politics and religion (which we've long been advised not to discuss in polite company because of the deep disagreement such discussions might cause).

All this is to say, it's not difficult for any of us to recognize ourselves in the role of the woman in our story. Having been hurt by disagreement or broken relationships, we find that we are either the ones cutting others off or the victims of having been cut off from others we love.

It's in moments like these that we and many others—all victims of the kind of hatred that runs through every human heart—begin to wonder about the possibility of forgiveness. Can relationships be restored? Can what has been broken be mended? Can we experience healing, and if not forgetfulness at least the dulling of past pains?

Do we not ache for a kind of grace that runs counter to the unkindness, discord, and brokenness all around us? Aren't we frustrated and exhausted by it all? Do we not long for grace that can heal, restore, renew, and that offers hope that we are not confined to a future of victimhood where the victims themselves become vengeful perpetrators of hate like the woman in our story?

To become people who can forgive others and respond rightly to the aches and desperation for grace in the world around us, we first must truly receive, experience, and know deeply God's forgiveness for ourselves. Then we must be enjoined to a forgiving community, the church, whose teachings and practices form us to be the kinds of people who can forgive. These things working together (personal experience and life in a forgiving community) can shape and empower us to be the kind of people who can forgive as we have been forgiven.

That's the invitation in this booklet.

What Do I Want When I Want to Be Forgiven?

If you've ever experienced rejection, you know it hurts. Failing in a task at work, not being invited to the party everyone is going to, being cut from the team—these are all painful. But when we look in the mirror (the physical one, or with our mind's eye) and we don't like what we see, rejection of this sort is the worst. The very worst kind of rejection any of us must deal with comes from ourselves.

When we've experienced rejection, what we want is another chance. Wanting another chance is perhaps the best answer we can give to the question: "What do I want when I want to be forgiven?" What we want is another chance, a chance to start over, to do things differently, a chance to leave the pain of the past behind and move on with today, this very moment, renewed and empowered this time to do and be better.

As we've said, if indeed, we long for the possibility of forgiveness, we long for the chance to start again.

Longing for Forgiveness

Even still, we may doubt forgiveness is possible for us—for you or for me. We may struggle with simply saying we long for the possibility of forgiveness without believing that we can actually experience it personally. Perhaps this is because our experience of forgiveness has not been anything like that longing to start over again. Rather, forgiveness, like the idea of sin, has been reduced to something more suited to the tastes of the modern age, and thus lacks the truly redemptive and renewing features that comes with a chance to start over again.

In one sense, forgiveness is often considered quaint, old-fashioned, and weak. In another sense, forgiveness is often encouraged as an emotional coping mechanism for those who have been wronged. People are told to forgive in order to heal *themselves* rather than the relationship, to forgive in order to move on from their trauma and pain.

To think of forgiveness in these ways is to misunderstand it. It is to reduce it to something that it is not. To be sure, forgiveness can bring about experiences of personal healing. Forgiveness is also a kind of surrender—a willingness

not to harbor animosity or cling to a victimhood identity. Far from being weak, forgiveness requires a kind of strength and discipline. Still, such strength and discipline are not personal virtues we simply summon from within. Rather, they are God's gracious gifts given from outside, formed in us through participation in the community of God's people and empowered by the very grace of the God we seek.

To become the kind of people who can forgive others and thus respond rightly to the aches and desperation for grace that characterize the world around us, we first must truly experience God's forgiveness for us, and then, knowing it deeply, be enjoined to a community that shapes us to be the kind of people who can forgive as we have been forgiven.

All of this is to say, forgiveness is personal; we each need to know God's forgiveness not just intellectually or academically, but deeply and personally, convinced in heart, mind, and soul.

Why Do I Need Forgiveness?

There is still a major challenge that we face deep within ourselves. Wanting, or longing for, forgiveness is just the beginning. But here's the rub: We don't always want it. That's because we don't always realize that we're wrong, that we are sinful, that we are in need of forgiveness. Deep within our human nature is a tendency that often prevents us from recognizing these truths.

Sin then, is a way to describe our broken human nature. We are sinful. And that means that we think, act—and neglect to act—in ways that consequently hurt others and violate our Creator's good purposes for us.

Concluding a story in which she describes herself as unreasonably angry at her husband, which produced the collateral damage of taking out her frustrations on her child, the writer Elizabeth Oldfield proceeds to define sin as "the human propensity to f— things up." (Perhaps this is not the prettiest language, but the sharpness is the point.)² Who cannot relate to Oldfield's everyday example? How many times have we found ourselves in terribly difficult situations that are entirely of our own making?

The Scriptures speak to this point. The prophet Jeremiah pointedly tells us, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

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The Path to Forgiveness: Recognizing Sin As Upward Rebellion

One of the basic tenets of the Christian story is that, from almost the beginning of time, humans have lived with the consequences of sin—their upward rebellion against God. It was an "upward" rebellion in that, they wanted to do things their way, effectively seeking to be the God of themselves. That rebellion is found in the story of Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 2-3). The consequence of their eating is that now, all of reality is shot through with sin. Their actions changed everything. As a result, the whole of creation suffers and groans, Scripture says (see Romans 8:22). And indeed, we humans struggle, suffer, and muddle through life, sometimes with great difficulty, all of which is a consequence of the first sin.

It wasn't just Adam and Eve who participated in this upward rebellion, however. Every human is just like them. All of us are bent away from God and toward ourselves. Like Adam and Eve who were convinced they could be like God and know as He knows, we too want to be in a similar position. Their upward rebellion exhibited a lack of submission, an unwillingness to follow and worship their Creator. We are bent just the same. The fifth-century North African bishop, St. Augustine, described humans as "curved in on themselves." The Protestant reformer Martin Luther extended this idea to talk about the human heart as the part of us that is "curved inward." Our concern is for our own selves, having things our way, and submitting to no one else's rules except our own.

To truly experience and embrace the gift of forgiveness, one must first recognize oneself as in need of it in the deepest sort of way. That is, forgiveness is what is required for all humans who stand before the living God. Scripture testifies that our status before Him is as fallen, sinful creatures. The prophet Isaiah describes us as sheep

who have all gone astray, doing only what we want for ourselves (see Isaiah 53:6). In another place, we learn that all people have sinned and therefore fall far short from the glory and holiness of God (see Romans 3:23).

How can we understand these claims? Two millennia ago, the writer of most of the New Testament, St. Paul of Tarsus, described human beings as people who are a problem to themselves—a problem they could not solve on their own.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the Law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the Law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15-24)

What Paul meant only requires basic reflection: how often have you found yourself thinking or wanting or doing something you knew was wrong for the umpteenth time, yet were no stronger in that moment to stop yourself than you were when it happened the first time? This is the kind of frustrating rejection of ourselves that we discussed earlier. It's just this predicament that produces many of the aggravating situations in which we find ourselves. Wanting forgiveness is the desire to start over again.

The good news is this: God promises that His mercies are new every day—every moment (see Lamentations 3:23). So we rediscover, over and over again how much of a gift it is to receive His forgiveness, another chance.

The Path to Forgiveness: Embracing the Consequences of My Rebellion

While it might sound rather strange, experiencing and embracing forgiveness begins with a kind of hatred of self (what Christians have at times called the *odium sui*), a disgust at what one sees in the mirror of the human heart. This is not a recommendation toward some sort of unhealthy self-loathing, but a recognition that there are things inside of us that we do not like but cannot fix, not without God's help. This *odium sui* arises in us because the human heart has been imprinted by the Law of God. Even more, God has explicitly given us His Law in the Ten Commandments and throughout the rest of the Scriptures. Known to us then, but often ignored, is a sense of how God has ordered human life, both in terms of human relationships between one another, and with God Himself. We often know how we ought to live, but choose otherwise, for example, when putting our own interests above those of others. Knowing that we've violated God's requirements of us, we become a problem to ourselves, one that we cannot do anything about on our own. We need help from elsewhere, from outside of ourselves, from God alone.

The Scriptures also teach us how to recognize and own our blameworthiness. St. Paul, in another place, describes himself as the “foremost” of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15b). In saying this, he was most certainly not trying to brag. Rather, he was seeking to admit that he, too, is as much a problem to himself as anyone. His being a Christian made no difference—he was no holier than anyone else. From this perspective, St. Paul is right to declare what forgiveness means in the starkest of terms. He describes us as “enemies” of God (see Romans 5:1-11).

Forgiving His Enemies: God's Redemptive Act

Yet, Paul goes on from there to say that it was precisely *as* enemies of God that God nevertheless chose to redeem us, offering us forgiveness through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus, who willingly gave His life on our behalf. That is, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was a righteous Man, sinless and pure, who did the unthinkable. Rather than sacrifice Himself in a manner that makes human sense—to die for another righteous person, or even perhaps for a fairly good person—Jesus chose to die for the unrighteous, for every human being that stands guilty before God of violating His Law as a sinner. Jesus Christ died for His enemies—that is, you and me! The extravagance, even seeming recklessness of that sacrifice, is quite unfathomable. And yet it really is a gift for us. What an amazing piece of good news that is indeed, new for us every day! (See Lamentations 3:22-23.)

By redeeming us, His enemies, Jesus also empowers us to be the kind of people who forgive others just as generously. The late pastor and theologian Timothy Keller tells a story that offers a great example of what's possible for followers of Jesus who have learned to forgive just as they've been forgiven.

In October of 2006 a gunman took hostages in a one-room Amish schoolhouse at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He shot ten children ages seven to thirteen, five of whom died, and then he committed suicide. Within hours members of the Amish community visited both the killer's immediate family and his parents, each time expressing sympathy for their loss. The Amish uniformly expressed forgiveness of the murderer and his family. The forgiveness and love shown toward the shooter and his family amazed many. Numerous voices called Americans to emulate the Amish and become more forgiving.³

How could anyone do such a thing? Only with the help of God. Only as receivers of the very gift of forgiveness they have already experienced as followers of Jesus. Only then is anyone empowered to forgive others in a way that seems extravagant, even reckless.

Knowing God's Forgiveness

How can we know God's forgiveness? The Scriptures tell us a beautiful story about how God deals with humanity's sinfulness, bringing about the possibility of our forgiveness.

God sent His One and only Son, Jesus Christ, to live a holy life and die as a sacrifice for our sins. In one of the most well-known quotations from all the Scriptures, this is stated plainly by Jesus Christ Himself: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3:16-17).

This is the Gospel, the Good News of God's grace for us, in a nutshell. Were we to be left in our sin without forgiveness, redemption and eternal life would not be possible. But from the very beginning, God was committed not to leave us in our sin. He loved us too much! So He sent His Son to earn forgiveness for us by doing what we could not do—live the holy life that St. Paul noted feels impossible for us (see Romans 7:15-24). Jesus Christ took on our sin so that we could take on His righteousness. "For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

St. Paul goes on to describe the humility of Jesus Christ, motivated by His love for all humanity to give His life for us, earning our forgiveness as well as our redemption and eternal life. St. Paul even encourages us to live similarly when he says,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the Name that is above every name. (Philippians 2:5-9)

Yet, Jesus Christ did not simply die. His death paid for our sins, for as Scripture says, the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). While we tend to think of death as the end, death was not the end for Jesus. In fact, He put to death the very consequences of sin—death itself—for all who believe in Him. He rose from the dead, proving His claim to be the Son of God. And in His rising from the dead, He was the first of all who would come after Him—those who believe in Him (see John 3:16; 20:30-31). That is, we too will rise from the dead when Christ returns at the end of all things (see 1 Corinthians 15:20).

If it were not for Jesus Christ, we all would be condemned. Death would be our end. But now there is no condemnation for those who believe in Him (see Romans 8:1). Christ gave everything, setting aside the privileges of His Godhood to become a human like us. This He did to die a death to which we were condemned, in order that we may not live in the hopelessness and condemnation of our sin. Instead, now we can enjoy the hopefulness of the promises of God's grace—His forgiveness—and our redemption because of the blood of Jesus shed for us. He put death to death so that we no longer may die. We live with the hope of eternal life when we trust Jesus.

Jesus Christ's gift to us is the promised forgiveness of God when we come to Him and acknowledge our sin, confess it to Him, and seek His forgiveness. Our sins include the things we did but should not have, as well as the things we should have done but did not. Christians call this "confession." Confession is an intentional admission of our wrongs, whether we are confessing things we have done, thoughts and desires that are unholy, or confessing that which God has called us to do, but we have left undone.

Admitting that we're wrong is never easy. It's like getting a bad grade, but worse. We didn't just perform poorly or make a mistake. The regular practice of confession means admitting that we've sinned, and even more, it means admitting that at our core, we're not wholly good. Rather, at our core, we are people who oppose the ways of God and His design for our lives and relationships. We want to run the show ourselves and be its star. Because we are enemies of God's ways at our core, we are constantly prone to violating His Commandments and damaging the relationships we're a part of.

But as we've seen, there is hope for this predicament! And that hope is Jesus Christ Himself. His redemptive work on our behalf not only undoes God's judgment of us as enemies and sinners, but it has the power to help us live differently, in a manner that fits our lives and actions into the groove of His created order. Because of Jesus, we are empowered to live according to God's design for His desired relationship with us and for our relationships with others.

Forgiveness As a (True) Gift

Perhaps the best way to describe forgiveness is to call it a gift. But it's a gift of an unfamiliar sort. In American culture, gift giving is often better understood as gift *exchange*. Whether it's the kind of exchange that happens over major holidays like Christmas, or even just casually, like picking up the check at a meal, we are culturally accustomed to a "this for that" practice when it comes to gifts. In other words, we find it strange and unfamiliar to think about a truly *free* gift. We're prone to use the cliché, "There's no such thing as a free lunch" to signal our wariness about such gifts. We've learned to imagine that either there are "strings attached," as it were, and we're expected to "owe" something on account of the gift, or that a kind of reciprocal gift-giving is expected of us.

To say all this another way, we are used to gifts with "conditions." Bank loans are helpful for thinking about conditions as they relate to how we practice forgiveness in a way that treats it as something other than a gift. The Catholic philosopher John Caputo puts it like this: "Forgiveness," as we tend to practice it, Caputo says, "requires an expression of sorrow, the intention to make amends, a promise not to repeat the offense, and a willingness to do penance. If someone meets all four conditions, they have earned forgiveness. We owe it to them the way the bank owes us the deed once the mortgage is paid off."⁴

Banks don't give us the deed on our mortgage until the debt is paid. At that point, they owe us the deed because we've met the conditions by paying our bills. The deed is never simply given as a gift. When it comes to our mortgage, we're the debtor and we must pay off the debt.

But imagine that a bank just forgives your loan and releases you from the debt without having met the conditions. In other words, imagine receiving a free house. In our wildest dreams we might be able to imagine such things, but in reality, we find the idea silly. Banks that forgive loans like that wouldn't be in business for long.

Yet forgiveness, in the sense we are considering here, is just such a gift of this purest sort. It is, for all intents and purposes, mad. It's given freely, recklessly, abundantly, because of the sheer love of God for us! There is no sense of a "this for that." There are no strings attached. There are no accounts to be kept and balanced. God's forgiveness is *uneconomic*. It's an impossible possibility. There is nothing like it in human experience. And there is an infinite amount of it available to all of us who trust Jesus. We're not just talking about an idea, something that's true only in our wildest dreams. Rather, forgiveness is real and true for all of us here and now.

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Of course, there is more to forgiveness than God's radically generous gift to us. Because of Jesus, God offers to all people the grace of His forgiveness. Knowing we need that forgiveness by confessing our sins to God opens the space for us to receive the gift that God so desperately wants to shower upon all of us. But there's another aspect of forgiveness—the one with which we began.

Forgiving As We Have Been Forgiven

We've mentioned several times that forgiveness is often necessary in human relationships. Not only do we at times require forgiveness when we've hurt or offended people we care about, but in the same way, we are called upon to forgive them. But offering forgiveness to others is not easy, especially when we've been hurt deeply. Still, followers of Jesus are called upon to forgive others.

Why Forgive?

Why must we forgive other people, then? Two reasons:

First, because God made us for community with one another, and sin breaks community through pain, betrayal, neglect, and more. When we hurt others or they hurt us—whether intentional or unintentional—sin becomes a divider. But forgiveness can be a restorer. Forgiving others restores relationships, not by forgetting wrongs, but by offering another chance, allowing another to try again. We all need forgiveness of this sort from one another. How else will the community of God grow and mature into Christ's body? Answer: It can't.

Second, we must forgive other people because God calls us to do so in the Scriptures. In the great prayer that Jesus taught us (see Matthew 6:9-13), we pray that God would forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. That is, God is holding us accountable to whether or not we forgive others (more on this below). As we've noted above with the example of the Amish who forgave a murderer, it is only those who have truly received God's gift of forgiveness and embraced it for what it is who can also give the same gift to others. People who have received God's forgiveness, even if it's every day (or multiple times per day) for the same sins committed over and over—they know God is not just letting them off the hook. That would not be real forgiveness. Rather, it would make a mockery of God's Law, treating it as if it didn't matter. No, God's forgiveness, given by God lavishly and as often as it is asked for, is a true gift that empowers the receiver to give it to others. And God expects that we would do so, just as we pray in the Lord's Prayer.

Jesus teaches a specific parable that both helps us understand the above portion of the Lord's Prayer and amplifies just how much God's gift of forgiveness is truly a gift that can empower us to forgive others. The parable helps us picture the limitless forgiveness God offers to us and then, as receivers of such, helps us to become the kind of people who can offer it, too. In reading or hearing this parable, it is as if we undergo the story itself, learning what to do and how to do it, while also encountering the warning of what not to do. Let's take a closer look.

Limitless Forgiveness to Us and Through Us

In the Gospel of Matthew, there is a moment when Jesus' disciples pose two significant questions and Jesus responds by teaching them. First, they ask, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1b). Jesus brings a child into their midst before He answers. Referring to the child for the point He intends to make, Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in My Name receives Me" (Matthew 18:3-5).

This scene is critically important for understanding everything Jesus teaches His disciples in chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel. Reading the Bible sometimes requires understanding the cultural context in which it was written to fully grasp what it says. Here, Jesus focuses attention on a child. For us today, children often represent innocence, playfulness, or cuteness. We even harbor a kind of airy, angelic sentimentality when it comes to thinking about children. We're protective of them and even imagine sacrificing ourselves to save their lives if necessary.

In contrast to this, when Jesus tells the disciples they must become like a child similar to the one He set before them, they are offended. This is because the idea of a child represents something very different in the culture of Jesus' day than it does in our own. Children were seen as burdensome because the burden of caring for them stood in the way of adult activity, particularly work and earning one's livelihood. Children were utterly needy and helpless, thus demanding much from adults around them.⁵ While in a sense, a child's needs are no different for us today, we nevertheless do not interpret that reality as negatively as Jesus' disciples would have. For since they had achieved the stature of adulthood, to be told they need to become like a child again, well, this was everything they had sought to leave behind. To be called back to that was deeply offensive.

Now, having offended them, Jesus proceeded to teach, continuing to use the child as an exemplar for making a handful of points. The disciples, however, offended as they were, likely misunderstood and remained confused about what Jesus taught (as was often the case). Nevertheless, for modern readers like us to rightly understand what Jesus is teaching we must be clear about the meaning of the figure of the child, lest we too, like the disciples, misunderstand because of our own sense of what a child represents to us. It's the burdensomeness, the neediness of the child that shapes how we should interpret what we're about to explore. The beginning of the chapter sets up how we should read the last portion, where we hear the disciples' second question.

Skipping ahead a bit in chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, we come to the other question the disciples ask Jesus. Peter voiced the question, saying, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18:21b) Peter's question shows that he doesn't "get it" when it comes to Jesus and His teachings. This question also offers another opportunity to learn something about the cultural context that helps us fully understand what Jesus is teaching: numbers are often used symbolically rather than literally.⁶ The number seven is symbolic in Jesus' culture, representing a kind of completeness. Peter uses it as a standard to signal that forgiving someone seven times is a good thing. It's as if he's suggesting that offering forgiveness seven times is a kind of limit, after which he is no longer required to forgive. If seven represents completeness, Peter's question suggests he might think that by forgiving seven times he has met some kind of requirement. But Jesus upends his assumption by responding, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22b; Note: some English translations render this "seventy times seven").

Jesus' response combines two symbolic numbers, seven and ten. We've already noted that seven signifies completeness. Ten signifies both completion *and* perfection. Jesus then, is doubling down on the symbolic meaning here, rather than literally counting how many times one forgives another. That is, Jesus calls Peter to forgive without limit.

This becomes clear as He teaches them a parable about a king who forgave an insurmountable debt owed by one of his servants, a sum that in our time might amount to an entire career's worth of wages (see Matthew 18:23-27). Jesus means to signal that the debt forgiven is so large as to seem unforgivable.

And here we return to the image of a child. Before God, every human stands as like a child, completely needy and dependent, especially in terms of the fact that our own sinfulness is not something we can overcome on our own. There is no tipping the balance in our favor, no impressing God with our goodness in such a way that we do not require God's mercy and grace for redemption. In this way, we are nothing other than the one who owes an unpayable debt, like the king's servant in Jesus' parable. Our debt of sin is so significant that only God can forgive it, for not even a lifetime of good thoughts and deeds can reconcile our account with God. There is no such thing as balancing the cosmic sin scale in our favor. Because of sin, we are always in debt.

Jesus goes on to offer a contrasting situation to the king who forgave his servant. The servant departs and encounters someone who owes him a debt, and like the servant when he stood before the king, payment was not possible. But the incredible generosity offered by the king did not effectively change the servant's posture toward the one who owed him money. Instead, he ordered the person to be thrown in prison until the debt could be paid (see Matthew 18:28-30). The king learns of this and severely scolds the servant, and in turn, reneges on his generosity, throwing the servant himself into prison to be tortured until his debt could be paid (see Matthew 18:31-34).

Jesus concludes His teaching with these words: "So also My Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35). Here is both a gloriously good and terribly difficult teaching. It is gloriously good in the sense that we learn the great lengths God has gone to grant us forgiveness. That is, He sent His own Son Jesus Christ to die on our behalf to heal the brokenness between humanity and Himself because of sin. Jesus paid our unaccountable debt with His very own life. Yet this teaching is also terribly difficult because Jesus burdens us with treating every other person in the same manner as God has treated you and me—as utterly needy and dependent children, requiring a limitless amount of forgiveness.

So, there is no limit to the amount of forgiveness we are called to offer fellow sinners. Just as God's willingness to forgive us is limitless, we too are called to put no limit on our willingness to forgive others. Like the Amish above, it's only as receivers of the kind of limitless forgiveness that God pours out on us that we are transformed into the kind of people who can and will forgive others in the same way. The gift of forgiveness becomes the power of forgiveness in us, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Still, limitless forgiveness? One might object that such forgiveness is flagrant, that continuing to forgive others who repeat the same sins over and over again—especially when they are personally hurtful—is just to enable the repeated sin. That is, by continuing to forgive, we enable the bad behavior to continue. We’ve been taught not to enable bad behavior. Hence the forcefulness of this objection.

Yes, enabling bad behavior by not placing a limit on our willingness to forgive is indeed a real risk. Yet we must not forget that what we are ultimately talking about is God’s own posture toward us. How often do we repeat, willingly and knowingly—not just accidentally or unwittingly—the same sins against God and neighbor? How often do we find ourselves becoming a problem to ourselves because there are things we don’t like about ourselves—often our sinful and other bad habits—but which we cannot seem to fix on our own? Our only way out is encountering and receiving the gift of God’s forgiveness, which can be a kind of propulsion toward a different kind of life, a power to live otherwise. This is one way that God can renew and transform our hearts, empowering us to live with and according to His divine grace, whereas by our own strength we are able to do nothing.

Human Forgiveness As God’s Forgiveness

Not only this, but our forgiveness of others is a form of God’s forgiveness for them, too. In other words, when we forgive others, they encounter Jesus and the grace of God in us. This is by design, for God made us to be creatures who live in community, in relationships of love for one another. Forgiveness is ultimately God’s means of restoring our relationship both with Him and with one another when the brokenness of sin has brought pain and fracture. Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes it this way:

Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin ... The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him to find true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ.⁷

The church reformer Martin Luther also discussed how God’s forgiveness is given by us to others when he says,

Thus by divine ordinance Christ Himself has placed absolution in the mouths of His Christian community and commanded us to absolve one another from sins. So if there is a heart that feels its sin and desires comfort, it has here a sure refuge where it finds and hears God’s Word because through a human being God looses and absolves of sin.⁸

Again, in the most famous of prayers, we are taught to pray, “forgive us our trespasses [sins] as we forgive those who trespass [sin] against us” (see Matthew 6:9-15).⁹ Since, as we have seen, God forgives us limitlessly—which is exactly what we’re asking for as often as we pray the Lord’s Prayer—we too ought to forgive others as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do: without limit.

The Act of Forgiving Others

Reckoning with the fact that we are called to forgive others, it’s important that we spend time thinking about how best to do that. After all, we are transformed into people who can and will forgive others, just as we have been forgiven. But what do you say to another person when they apologize, admit that they caused offense or hurt you, and ask for forgiveness?

It’s important to begin by recognizing that in our day and age, people are not always going to ask for forgiveness explicitly. Instead, as Christians, rather than expecting them to use language that’s important to us (like asking for forgiveness or confessing their sins), we need to hear it implied in the words of their apology. When someone says to us, “I’m sorry,” especially when they are aware that they have violated our relationship in some way, they are expressing remorse and seeking resolution for that situation. In seeking resolution, we should also hear the expression of their apology as an implicit request for forgiveness. They want the opportunity to try again.

We should also note that there are a lot of times when we use the words, “I’m sorry,” or “Sorry about that,” or some other phrase in ways that aren’t really about mending a relationship. Very often we say such things in commonplace moments. You walked around a corner and just about bumped into a colleague because you didn’t

see her coming. “Whoops! I’m sorry.” You’re a teacher reading names on the first day of class and inadvertently mispronounce someone’s name. “Sorry about that. How do you say it?” You’re sitting and chatting with a friend you’ve not seen in a very long time and happen to ask about her mother, whom you remember fondly, only to find out her mom died recently. Feeling like you might have poured salt on a fresh wound, you profusely apologize. Sometimes “I’m sorry” or “Sorry about that” are offered for simple, accidental mistakes we make. We use such phrases to address situations that are mostly inconsequential. These moments aren’t confessions of sin. They’re more just instances of how our lives intersect with others in basic and unpredictable ways that sometimes cause inconvenience or error.

Nevertheless, in either case, for weightier apologies as much as for those that seem more trivial, the best response when someone says, “I’m sorry,” is to say to them, “I forgive you.” But it’s often more common to hear someone say, “That’s okay,” or “No worries,” or something similar. These responses may unintentionally ignore and undercut the apology just expressed. It works like a form of second-guessing, responding to the person apologizing as if nothing worth apologizing for had happened. Of course, no one is intentionally trying to ignore the wrong committed. These responses have simply become a watered-down way of dealing with the awkwardness of an apology in our time, especially when concepts like “sin” and “forgiveness” have lost their proper place in our moral vocabulary.

Despite all of this, we should offer forgiveness when someone apologizes. One reason is because offering forgiveness acknowledges the wrong committed, thus validating the person’s apology. But another reason is simply because apologies are offered as a subtle way of asking for forgiveness, asking for another chance in the relationship. Remember, as Luther noted above, God has put His words of forgiveness in your mouth, and we are called upon to forgive those who have sinned against us just as God forgives us for sinning against Him. Let us be like Jesus in giving this extravagant gift away. Practice saying “I forgive you” more and more, and it will become a ready part of your Christian moral vocabulary.

We can begin practicing in the church. Becoming a part of the Christian church puts you in touch with those who are practicing the same thing. Weekly we read, hear, and sing together the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Confessing our sins together is a central part of each weekly gathering of God’s people, the church. And then receiving His forgiveness from the mouth of a pastor is like receiving it from God Himself—indeed, God sends pastors to give you that very good news. Joining together with other Christians in confessing sins and receiving forgiveness is a great place to start if you want to become someone who can forgive others as you’ve been forgiven.

If you’ve never been a part of the church, imagine the church as a gathering of sinners just like you. No one is better than anyone else in the church. There is no hierarchy before the eyes of God. We all come as beggars with the same need—we’re problems to ourselves and others, and we can do nothing about it without His help. Every time we gather, we practice our own story when we engage in confession and receive forgiveness. It’s admitting who we are and what we need. Such practices help us see and know ourselves rightly. It does the same for the people around us, most immediately our fellow Christians. It likewise blesses the people in the world who don’t know Jesus since we’re all people who are needy for God’s grace. Here then is a third reason why we should forgive others—that through us, everyone might come to know the love of God for them.

Conclusion: Fulfilling the Longing

We began this booklet with these questions:

- Do we not ache for a kind of grace that runs counter to the cruelty, discord, and brokenness all around us?
- Aren’t we frustrated and exhausted by it all?
- Do we not long for a kind of grace that can heal, restore, and renew?
- Don’t we desire a hope that we aren’t confined to a future of further victimhood where the victims themselves become vengeful perpetrators of hate?
- Do we not long to be set free from what has seemingly become an accepted (expected?) cycle of hate answered by yet more hate?

Yes! The answer to all the above questions is an emphatic, yes!

That longing, we learned, is a holy longing, drawing us toward God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Then came the challenge: to become the kind of people who can forgive others and respond rightly to the aches and desperation for grace in the world around us.

Two more questions to think about: Do you want to become this kind of person? Do you want to participate in this kind of community?

Accept the challenge: through the power of the Holy Spirit, and the grace of Jesus to ...

become the kind of person who can forgive others and thus respond rightly to the aches and desperation for grace in the world around us, to truly receive, experience, and know deeply God's forgiveness for yourself, and to participate in a forgiving community that shapes us and responds to the world's ache for the liberating power of God's forgiveness.

Endnotes:

¹ See Zeljko Vukovic, *The Killing of Sarajevo* (Belgrade, Kron: 1993), 134. Cited in Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace, Revised and Updated: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019) 110.

² Elizabeth Oldfield, *Fully Alive: Tending to the Soul in Turbulent Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2024), chapter 2.

³ Timothy Keller, "The Fading of Forgiveness," in *Comment Magazine*, vol 39.2 (Spring 2021): 34–44.

⁴ John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 73–74. Emphasis in original.

⁵ See Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2 – 20:34, Concordia Commentary Series*, St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2010), 887–904.

⁶ Sometimes numbers are both literal and symbolic (i.e., the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament; the 12 apostles in the New Testament). Many times however, numbers are just literal—a count of this or that, such as the various times when the author writes in Acts about how many conversions occurred (e.g., "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" Acts 2:41).

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 117–18. Bonhoeffer's original audience for this book was a small group of men training for the pastoral ministry; thus he predominantly uses male language. But his intent, as seen throughout his other works, is inclusive of all God's people, for these men would go on to lead congregations that included men and women, young and old. *Life Together* has become a Christian classic because readers have long understood him to be speaking to everyone who desires to follow Jesus more closely.

⁸ Martin Luther, "A Brief Exhortation to Confession," in the *Large Catechism*. See Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 477–78.

⁹ The use of the word "trespasses" is a holdover from the King James Version of the Bible (1611). Synonymous words like "debts" or "sins" are more common in modern English translations.

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