

FORGIVING OTHERS: SOME PUZZLES EXPLORED

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We ask God in the Lord's Prayer to forgive us our "trespasses" - or in current versions our "sins" - as we forgive those who trespass or sin against us.

Some writers on forgiveness ignore some of the obvious questions that the thoughtful Christian would like answered about the second part of that petition, and there are perplexing disagreements among writers who do elect to deal with them. I propose to contrast what I elect to call "complete Christian forgiveness" with other attitudes and actions which have real importance in our spiritual lives but are not to be confused with it.

Christians must of course be forgiving people. The New Testament is unequivocal on that. An editorial by Peter Jensen in *Global Anglican* stresses the centrality of forgiving others in the Apostles' gospel preaching.¹ It can be a matter of great joy both to forgive another and to receive another's genuine forgiveness. Jensen reminds us: "If we are able to forgive others, it is only because of the transforming grace and mercy of the God who gave his Son for us as a propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2)."

Forgiving others can be a very difficult thing to do in practice.² Even apart from that difficulty, puzzles abound with the meaning of "forgiveness", the understanding and practice of forgiveness, the Bible's teaching and our experience of forgiveness. We explore several of these puzzles in what follows.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'FORGIVE'?

The words "forgive" and "forgiving" are used in a variety of contexts and are used to refer to several distinguishable actions. The precise meaning depends on the particular social and verbal context, including the author's purpose and the audience being addressed. Wittgenstein memorably declared that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language." And that, "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language."³ If a word appears in several different contexts there are several meanings, all to be taken seriously. It is a mistake to search for one "proper" meaning of a word like "good", though many have embarked on such an endeavour. So I contend it is unhelpful to peer at the word "forgive" and dissect it ever more closely in order to say that this action constitutes forgiveness, and that action does not, whatever its use in the particular context.

In the case of the word “forgive” we can nevertheless point to what my Oxford teacher Professor Herbert Hart called a “core of settled meaning with a penumbra of uncertainty”⁴.

There are undoubtedly “family resemblances”⁵ between different usages of the word “forgive” in ordinary language. God’s forgiveness of our sins and our forgiveness of others have similarities which we need to understand but they are not exactly the same thing. One of these points of difference is obvious: when we forgive another person we do so imperfectly while the Father’s forgiveness of us is undeniably perfect and complete. There are nevertheless illuminating affinities, family resemblances, between the two kinds of forgiving, harnessed as they are in the Lord’s Prayer.

The core of settled meaning in the word “forgive” is, I think, this: The idea of taking revenge for the wrong is abandoned. The wrong is wiped from the accounts. The forgiver no longer asserts a claim for compensation and no longer is obsessed with resentment because the wrong has been suffered. The issues I am going on to address below lie in the penumbra of uncertainty beyond this core meaning.

Christians have no monopoly on the word “forgive”. Wooliness often surrounds the use of the word “forgive” in secular contexts such as the response of a crime victim towards the perpetrator.

SECULAR UNDERSTANDINGS

Stephanie Dowrick in *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*⁶ elaborates her view that forgiveness “deeply offends the rational mind.” For her, forgiveness is “simply a movement to release and ease your heart of the hatred and pain that binds it.” She doubts whether we can rightly speak of our “power to forgive”. She denies that we can “directly forgive”:

“Even where one wants to forgive, one finds one simply can’t, because forgiveness doesn’t come from the ego. I cannot directly forgive. I can only ask, or pray, that these sins be forgiven.”⁷

She rightly emphasizes that forgiving someone for a wrong that person has committed is utterly different from excusing that wrong. But there is no emphasis, as there must be in discussion of forgiveness by biblical Christians, on forgiveness as an expression of love and the benefits accruing to the forgiven person.

Colin Tipping develops a theory of what he calls “radical forgiveness” in his book of the same name.⁸ He defines forgiveness as “the exercise of compassion”. He sees forgiveness as essentially a method of self-release in which we are recommended to “forgive” not other people, but powerful “energies” like hate. No

words or actions are essential. Forgiveness is said to be a soul-to-soul interaction and “requires only that we become connected at the soul level”, whatever that means.

IS FORGIVENESS MORE FOR ME?

This is the first and main puzzle. Is it essential to communicate one’s forgiveness? And whom does forgiveness seek to benefit?

Those Christian writers who proffer an analysis of forgiveness fall into three camps - those who assert that forgiveness is of benefit to the forgiver’s spiritual health and emotional well-being only, those who envisage benefit to both parties, and those who for some reason ignore the issue or fudge it.

A goodly number inhabit the first camp. Among them, notably, is RT Kendall in *Total Forgiveness*.⁹ For him:

“Most of the time the people who have hurt you shouldn’t even have a clue that you have forgiven them because it happens in the heart.”

“Totally forgiving someone...does mean that we release the bitterness in our hearts concerning what they have done.” He goes so far as to say that you should “never go to a person you have had to forgive” and say ‘I forgive you.’ This will allegedly be counterproductive.¹⁰ Also: if we develop the “lifestyle of total forgiveness” we “not only avoid bitterness, but we also eventually experience total forgiveness as a feeling - and it is a good feeling.” Kendall, and without seeming to notice the incongruity of doing so, refers to “total forgiveness” variously as an act, a feeling and a lifestyle.

An influential book by Lewis Smedes embraces the subjective benefit theory. It is entitled *Forgive and Forget*.¹¹ He exalts the “healing of incomplete giving.” Forgiveness for him is correctly understood as a “solo flight to freedom.” Dealing with the freedom to forgive, he illustrates its importance by referring to Corrie Ten Boom who “arrived at the place where she forgave even the Nazis who had dehumanized her life in the camps.” But, having already forgiven, she encountered a bestial camp guard, came to feel “forgiven for not forgiving” and “released” him. “Release” is commonly encountered in discussions of forgiveness. It accurately reflects the most common Greek word for forgiveness in the New Testament but is ambiguous. It might refer to a radical change of mind either with or without overt action expressing it. To be fair, in several of Smedes’ illustrative stories it seems to go without saying that an act of real forgiveness demands communication.

In South Africa Archbishop Desmond and Mpho Tutu in *The Book of Forgiving*¹² set out the fourfold path to forgiveness - telling the story, naming the hurt, “granting forgiveness” and renewing or releasing the

relationship (the last step being “separate from forgiving”). But for whose benefit? They write, “We forgive for ourselves. Forgiveness, in other words, is the best form of self-interest.” But because they do not grapple with the issue I am addressing head on, it may be wrong to treat them as excluding the motive of blessing others. After all, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in their country was about reconciliation through truth telling as opposed to multiple psychological releases.

According to Monbourquette, Catholic priest and psychotherapist, in *How to Forgive*,¹³ a person who wants to forgive someone who has wronged him or her should engage in meditation. Then: “When you feel ready, allow that person into your heart. Whisper ‘I forgive you’. Give that person time to receive your forgiveness and be moved by it.” This seems to be telepathic forgiveness. Communication is not mentioned. And he commends journeying to “emotional forgiveness”. At some points in his book Monbourquette recommends “sharing with the offender”, and discusses the problem that arises when such sharing is impossible. But his emphasis is emphatically on the benefit to the forgiver. For him the whole purpose of forgiveness is therapeutic: it is to benefit the forgiver, it enables you “to discover your real creative self.”¹⁴

C.S. Lewis also seems to have emphasized forgiver experience and benefit. Thus:

“... while at prayer, I suddenly discovered - or felt as if I did - that I had really forgiven someone I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years.”

Keller, who quotes this comment in *The Reason for God*,¹⁵ is unclear on the question: who benefits? All the same, he has some valuable insights, especially in connection with the suffering involved in Christian forgiving, quoting Bonhoeffer, “Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian’s duty to bear.” And as Keller says, “Bonhoeffer uses divine forgiveness to help him understand human forgiveness.”

David Pytches once wrote:

“We need deliberately to release forgiveness to those who have hurt us and ask God to forgive them also.”¹⁶

In charismatic meetings of some forty years ago there was often no exhortation to communicate with the offender if this was still possible. The often difficult task of forgiving someone who has seriously hurt you was in this way simultaneously spiritualised and made easier.

In the second camp, where I belong, are those who integrate communication into their discussion of Christian forgiveness. They emphasise the enormous benefit of forgiveness to both the forgivers and the

forgiven. There is considerable support in the Scriptures for this understanding. “Watch out”, says the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, “that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many” (Heb 12:15). Zacchaeus promised to more than compensate people who had been “cheated on their taxes” and experienced the joy of learning from Jesus that salvation had come to his home that very day (Luke 19:6-9).

In *Free of Charge*, Miroslav Volf rightly notes that “in much popular culture, to forgive means to overcome feelings of anger and resentment” but that, just as in the case of giving, “we should also forgive primarily for others’ sake, not our own.”¹⁷ True, some only implicitly reject the idea that forgiveness is a matter of one’s feelings and spiritual benefit. An example is Meg Guillebaud’s *After the Locusts*,¹⁸ an account of reconciliation activity in post-Genocide Rwanda. It contains many accounts of reconciliation ministry bringing (mostly) Tutsi victims together with the Hutu murderers of their family members or with those “standing in the gap” for them. She has some excellent discussion of what constitutes “true forgiveness”. Amongst other things it involves a deliberate choice of the will: it is “not a feeling”.

Chris Brauns’ *Unpacking Forgiveness*¹⁹ offers us biblical answers for complex questions and deep wounds. For Brauns, forgiveness should be defined as “a commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated.” He regards Smedes’ *Forgive and Forget* as “both representative of, and responsible on some level for, a great deal of wrong Christian thinking about forgiveness.” He usefully contrasts “therapeutic forgiveness” with “Biblical forgiveness”. The former is primarily “an activity that goes on within individual persons’ hearts and minds.” The latter views forgiveness as “something that happens between two parties.” It cannot on this view simply be ceasing to feel bitterness or resentment. Therapeutic forgiveness is motivated primarily (note that I am not saying exclusively) by self-interest. For Brauns, by contrast, Biblical forgiveness is motivated by love for neighbour and love for God.

It would be tedious to attempt to list the numerous writers in the third camp who are either non-committal on the present puzzle, or who fudge the issue, or simply don’t think it important. The list would include those who may have a profound theological insight but for some reason do not descend to the practical nitty gritty. Chris Marshall’s very valuable *Beyond Redemption*²⁰ does not. Cameron Surrey, for example, maintains that “all forgiveness is Christological.”²¹ Tom Wright usefully expounds the eschatological meaning of “forgiveness of sins”.²² Maurice Andrew contends that forgiveness should be connected with “our identity, with the kind of people we are.”²³

COMPLETE CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS

It is true, as Attwood says in his *Changing Values*,²⁴ that “there is a limit to how much one can generalize about forgiving across the range of human experience.” This reflects the myriad of practical situations which may arise. It would be foolish to assert that every time anyone forgives he or she should employ a particular technique or set words, or that the wrongdoer must invariably first ask for forgiveness before there is a need to forgive, or that the communication of forgiveness must be face to face, or oral rather than by letter or email. In particular using the word “forgive” is not essential. Nevertheless, an understanding of what forgiveness involves and what it is not, can be striven for.

What, then is the best exegesis of Matthew 6:12? The two parts must be construed with help from each other. Our starting point, with Bonhoeffer, is that God’s forgiveness of us helps us understand human forgiveness. The first essential point is that God’s forgiveness of us is communicated to us, accepted by us with joyful assurance and has the potential to transform us. It is not to be thought of as a mere attribute or inclination of God. So too is our forgiveness of others - whom Jesus did not confine to other Christian believers. Next, God’s forgiveness of us is motivated by his love for us. So should our forgiveness of others be. And when God forgives us, exercising his grace, he does not exhaust his forgiving love. He forgives limitlessly. And so should we be prepared to do. “But whether privately or publicly, to forgive as we have been forgiven will always be a matter of limping painfully after.”²⁵

This reading chimes with everything else in the New Testament. We must communicate our forgiveness, not just subjectively bask in feelings of release. We should do whatever is necessary to bring assurance to the wrongdoer that his or her forgiveness is total, not partial, and that we will not continue to smoulder with resentment. God forgives with his whole heart and we should have no insincerity or hidden reservations. Finally, God’s forgiveness of us is a transaction, not to be equated with a process, or a mere willingness to forgive. This rules out watering down propositions such as those that say that *all* we must do is ‘cultivate a forgiving spirit’. Complete Christian forgiveness is always a two party transaction.

This indeed is the second essential point that we must, I contend, learn from the family resemblance between the juxtaposed forgiveness we receive from God, and our forgiveness of others. When God forgives us, he *communicates* that forgiveness to us, we have to receive it and we are entitled to the joy of knowing that we have got it. The Holy Spirit brings the conviction that we have been forgiven to our hearts and minds. God’s written word is the vital instrument which the Spirit so often uses to do that. No such knowledge, no assurance of forgiveness, no blessing. In this key aspect of God’s forgiveness of us, we are given the key which unlocks the nature of our forgiveness of others. If forgiveness is not communicated to the one who has wronged us, he or she can have no certainty that there is real and full forgiveness, and

may be left to guess. No communication, no possibility of acceptance (or possibly, rejection), none of the blessing of the wrongdoer that Jesus had in mind.

When Jesus healed the paralysed man (Luke 5:17-25) he issued his two directions to the man directly, and the man “went home praising God.” There can be little doubt that he was blessed both by God’s forgiveness of his sins and by his healing. Paul addressed the church at Colossae as God’s “holy people.” Amongst other things that involved making allowance for each other’s’ faults, they were to “forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others” (Col 3:13, NLT). In both cases the sequence is clear: remission of sins offered, accepted, blessing received.

But none of that implies that other actions we may be inclined to describe as “forgiving acts” are valueless. Other actions, though less than the full blown concept that the Bible is referring to, can be of real spiritual value. An uncommunicated release of someone who has hurt you very badly will probably be far from valueless. But we should be emphasising what is not typically even mentioned, that it is only a pale cousin of the action which Jesus commanded. Similarly, if communication is impossible, because the wrongdoer is untraceable, or has died, as in many of the Rwandan situations which Guillebaud tells us about, or is locatable but spurns all one’s effort to communicate, a willingness to release the wrongdoer subjectively is to be encouraged.

If the perplexed Christian mother of a soldier son slain in Afghanistan asks whether it is “my duty to forgive the Taliban for my son’s death” a Christian counsellor should in my view say something along the following lines: “Complete Christian forgiveness is impossible in this situation. You should not feel guilty for not having attempted what is impossible. But on the other hand forgiveness in a different sense is possible. It is still desirable, though perhaps shockingly difficult, for you, as a mother, to seek God’s help to get rid of any obsessional resentment which if not eliminated may blight your life and possibly your relationship with God.”

WHAT IF I WITHHOLD IT?

Does God forgive Christian believers because we have forgiven others, or in proportion to the extent to which we have genuinely forgiven them? This is really the same as the question whether God’s forgiveness of us is conditional on our forgiving others. Jesus’ only addendum to the Lord’s Prayer must be considered: “But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt 6:14). Several writers nevertheless want to interpret the relationship between the two kinds of forgiveness differently.

Smedes tells us that "...we need to forgive the repentant for our own sake."²⁶ He appears not to be bothered by Jesus' addendum. Monbourquette ignores it completely. He asserts, "God's forgiveness is not conditioned by any human acts of forgiveness."

Does the 'as' mean 'because', or 'in proportion to', and with the same intensity as? I believe it clearly means the second of these. A third understanding, offered by Athol Gill, is that:

"Our forgiveness of others is the outstretched hand by which we are able to grasp the forgiveness of God."²⁷

This, however, suffers from ambiguity: does 'grasp' means 'intellectually grasp' or 'experience' or 'obtain benefit from'?

R.T. Kendall essentially treats the 'as' as a 'because'.²⁸ So does Attwood, without discussion.²⁹ On Kendall's view we utter a big lie when we say it, because we so often fail to forgive others. On this view, the belief that God's forgiveness of us is a work of grace alone is undermined: we have to earn it. And it poses an insoluble conundrum: what suppose we often manage to forgive others but fail sometimes? Would that mean that we are never entitled to say the Lord's Prayer sincerely, since all of us fail to forgive sometimes, even if we own a strong "forgiving spirit"?

The exact translation of Matthew 6:12 can easily encourage a 'because' understanding. In *Matthew for Everyone*, for example, Tom Wright translates this verse, "And forgive us... as we too have forgiven what was owed to us."³⁰ The most natural reading of that is "because we too have been forgiving." Barclay treats the 'as' as 'in proportion as' but goes on to contend that "...if we pray this petition with an unhealed breach, an unsettled quarrel in our lives, we are asking God not to forgive us", and argues that "No one is fit to pray the Lord's Prayer so long as the unforgiving spirit holds sway in his heart."³¹

To reject the conditionality of God's forgiveness of us is to perform an impossible gymnastic with the text. But what exactly is the content of the condition? We have probably all been guilty of not forgiving - sometimes, not forgiving someone for a long period and then finally having a change of mind and getting round to it. This cannot mean, I contend, that we will not be forgiven by God for our failure to forgive. Unforgiveness can be forgiven. We do not "tell a lie" when we say this portion of the Lord's Prayer. My argument is that God's forgiveness of us is conditional on our not living as a slave to unforgiveness. This is different from failure to forgive just as sinning is different from being a slave to sin. By "slavery to unforgiveness" I mean the settled prideful belief that to forgive others is unmanly or unwomanly, that it is just a sign of weakness: "I never have any moral duty to forgive anybody." As part of the new life in Christ,

we are freed from such slavery. Yet we continue to sin, probably every day, and we can probably all recall times when we should have forgiven a particular person but failed to do so. These were times when we forgot the warm and gracious invitation of our Lord to come back to him and find our rest in him.

To speak of “having a forgiving spirit”, as do some of the commentators like William Barclay, is insufficient. Our willingness to forgive those who have wronged us will quite likely go up and down with our mood. The supplement needed is a belief that it is good and our duty to forgive, a belief that forgiving is a primary part of moral conduct, and remorse when we realise that we have failed to forgive. But we can in penitence still seek and expect to receive God’s forgiveness. We have not jettisoned all possibility of forgiving others.

To return to the important ‘as’, I believe that it is also to be understood as exemplary. There are several exemplary uses of ‘as’ elsewhere in scripture. “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12); “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it” (Eph 5:25).

True, in the Lord’s Prayer what we are to do is stated in words following our request to God to forgive us, but what we are to do is enjoined as a consequence (once we abandon a ‘because’ reading).

Our failure to forgive others in the full sense of complete Christian forgiveness, being itself forgivable after penitence, cannot therefore imperil our salvation. Brauns warns, “Those unwilling or unable to forgive should fear for their salvation.”³² This is unacceptable if it means that not forgiving someone when you should is an unforgivable sin. But it is important to ask whether my unforgiveness of X is symptomatic of a much more deadly problem, a slavery to unforgiveness generally?

Jesus illuminated not forgiving in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-35). The key to understanding it is the colossal difference between the zillions that the first servant owed the king and the trifling amount that the second servant owed him. The failure to forgive the second servant his debt occurred, it would seem, shortly after the first one had received the forgiveness of his debt, release from the prospect of lifetime imprisonment and torture for not repaying it, and a demonstration of amazing grace. Despite all that, he refused to forgive the second servant.

The king’s withdrawal of forgiveness was due to something vastly more serious than the first servant’s failure to forgive, namely the repudiation by that servant of a personal forgiveness obligation *under any circumstances*. If he refused to cancel a small debt when the king had been so overwhelmingly merciful, he was evidencing a rejection of forgiveness as a moral obligation, and thumbing his nose at the king’s example: he had disqualified himself. Mere failure to forgive someone, even if often repeated, is therefore

sinful but forgivable; but “I will never forgive anyone under any circumstances” evidences a slavery to unforgiveness and is not.

IS RECONCILIATION PART OF IT?

Is reconciliation between the wrongdoer and the wronged party a part of forgiveness or not? The word “forgiveness” has sometimes been used in a sense which includes an accomplished reconciliation. That is a possible usage, and certainly not an improper one to be decried. Smedes, for example, states that the 4 “stages” of forgiveness are hurt, hate, healing and coming together.³³ For the Tutus, on the other hand, forgiveness involves a fourfold path: telling the story; naming the hurt; granting forgiveness; and “renewing or releasing the relationship.” They are clear that the fourth step is “separate from forgiving”, and make the obvious point that “renewing” a relationship is not possible in many situations in real life, for example when you do not know the identity of the person who harmed you.³⁴ Similarly, the offender may refuse to accept a forgiving overture, and perhaps refuse all contact. Alan Richardson has it right: “in the New Testament forgiveness means the removal of the barriers to reconciliation, rather than reconciliation itself.”³⁵

Forgiveness can often be said to have “definitely occurred” whereas reconciliation will typically be a slow and gradual process before it can be labelled as complete. In South Africa in the 1990s, after Nelson Mandela’s return, forgiveness was often expressed, and probably was mostly genuine, but reconciliation between the opposing Bantu and Zulu people remained rooted in racial distrust, hatred and fear of political domination. It required much more than personal forgiveness at leadership level – as Michael Cassidy has recently acknowledged.³⁶

REPENTANCE NECESSARY?

Must the offender repent of his or her wrong before forgiveness can take place? And, must it be requested? It is highly desirable that forgiveness be requested for a clearly identified and named wrong, and that the offender should repent and say he or she is sorry. John Stott stresses:

“It is our God-given duty to go to a brother who has sinned against us, and to tell him his fault, not out of pride, but out of love (Gal 6:1). We are to desire to gain him, to ‘save’ him.”

He proceeds:

“Although God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of one another are quite different...yet both are conditional upon repentance. If a brother who has sinned against us refuses to repent, we should not forgive him. Does this startle you? It is what Jesus taught.”

The reference here is to Luke 17:3: “Correct any followers of mine who sin, and forgive the ones who say they are sorry.”

John Stott then says: “A forgiveness that bypasses the need for repentance issues not from love but from sentimentality.”³⁷

On the analysis offered in this article, complete Christian forgiveness will involve, as Stott says, both a request for forgiveness and repentance.

Many ‘less than’ paradigm situations often arise. A lesser form of forgiveness, one still worthy of the name even if it is not the full article, may take place when the wrongdoer merely croaks, “I need your forgiveness”, or even when such words are not spoken but the wronged party wants to remove the block to a deeper conversation, and to confer a partial blessing. The words “I forgive you” may on occasion be sufficient to remove a logjam. The perfect should not become the enemy of the good. To bless others mightily as we have been blessed is excellent; to show love towards our neighbour as myself may entail less ambitious action. Jesus certainly did not actually prohibit the expression of forgiveness to those who fail to say sorry, and how does one know that an un-sorrowful wrongdoer will not come around in the end?

WHAT IS A TRESPASS AGAINST ME?

Some writers seem to imply that everything that upsets us in any way is a “trespass” or wrong committed against us, attracting a duty to forgive. They are inclined to speak of “wrongs” without elaboration. This implies that we all know what these wrongs or trespasses or sins are that we must forgive. The Tutus would enjoy forgiveness for everything that offends us: there is a need, they say, to exercise our forgiveness muscle in “the small daily acts of forgiveness that make family life more than merely tolerable.” Since they also emphasise, rightly, that forgiveness “may need to be followed by more forgiveness of the same hurtful act,”³⁸ this opens up the possibility of countless acts of forgiveness in the home, and of guilt feelings when we don’t forgive. Smedes, by contrast, says:

“If we lump all our hurts together and prescribe forgiveness for all of them, we turn the art of forgiving into something cheap and commonplace.”

He contends that “slights are really for shrugging off, not for forgiving.”³⁹

Once again this is not a huge problem once we analyse our language with some sophistication. The Tutus are electing to invoke the usage of the word employed in a basically loving household. So used, we do need “forgiveness” for forgetting to put the cat’s milk out, communication occurs quickly, typically no one calls for repentance, and the error will, and certainly should, be promptly forgotten. This does not constitute complete Christian forgiveness but it is still to be applauded.

We cannot be expected to go through the difficult task of forgiving for all such things. Attempting to do so will often mean opening up the gulf still further. The offender, so far from apologising, may justify what was said or done and effectively widen the gulf. Best to shrug it off as far as the decision whether to interact with the “slichter” is concerned. Failure to respond is not a sin for which we should feel guilt. On the other hand we should be provoked into self-reflection. Perhaps the slight opens up a valuable opportunity to do that. Am I aggrieved just because I have not gotten my own way on a matter?

If we are asked what it is for people to “sin against us” we are naturally slow to include missing-the-mark acts like not extending hospitality to us. The word ‘forgive’ has a sliding connotation: it slides up and down depending on what needs to be responded to.

There is no clear Scriptural guide for characterising what has badly upset us but falls within the twilight area either as a “wrong against us” or as something short of that. It will be an occasion for seeking to apply the supreme principle of Christian ethics, and asking what love requires, praying about it and remembering to be slow to anger.

We also need to heed Tom Wright’s important point that:

“...we have developed a corollary that is neither love nor forgiveness -namely tolerance... I can ‘tolerate’ you without it costing me anything very much.”⁴⁰

FORGIVING AND FORGETTING

Christian writers agree that forgiving does not mean excusing or condoning the wrongdoer’s fault. Therefore, in the case of a wrong which also amounts to a criminal offence, Christians can without qualms both elect to forgive and appear as witnesses in a criminal trial.

But when we turn to the question whether forgiveness involves *forgetting* the wrong done, disagreement resurfaces. At its root lies the stance we take towards therapeutic forgiveness. If one adopts that viewpoint, it makes sense to urge complete forgetting of what occurred. Get rid of the past, the advocates of therapeutic forgiveness urge, do not brood on it, you will be far more richly blessed if you never think

about the wrong or hurt again. Become your natural self again. Obtain a full release. You will then, so they say, be qualified to forgive.

Barclay, for example, asserts:

“We must learn to forget. So long as we brood upon a slight or an injury, there is no hope that we will ever forgive.”⁴¹

Smedes’ very title, it will be recollected, is *Forgive and Forget*. While for him forgiving is not the same thing as forgetting, we “can forget because we have been healed.”⁴²

On the other side of the argument, Richard Foster, I believe correctly says that requiring the forgiver to forget “would do violence to our rational faculties.” He quotes Thielicke: “One should never mention the words ‘forgive’ and ‘forget’ in the same breath.”⁴³ For the Tutus, forgiveness is not weakness and it is not forgetting.⁴⁴ It is indeed entirely unrealistic to tell Christian believers that they should forget the wrong; in many cases it will be engraved in their memories.

It must usually be pastorally helpful, however, to steer people away from obsessive brooding upon the past. A victim can remember the past without recalling it at every waking moment. It is one thing to remember that your parent abused you when you were a child. It is another to brood on it every day, reliving every last detail.

I consider that Christian people should be instructed that forgiving does not mean forgetting, but also that with God’s help the past, never wholly forgotten, can become mainly historical, and that no crime is beyond the reach of complete Christian forgiveness.

FORGIVING GOD AND MYSELF

Brauns quotes theologian and writer Scot McKnight who observed that:

“The debate over the meaning of forgiveness is bedevilled by clumsy definitions, confusing categories, and contextual dislocations.”⁴⁵

Obviously I agree. The word ‘forgive’ has a variety of meanings. To transpose one meaning into an entirely different context will cause confusion. Most of the puzzles I have tried to address inhabit the world of our relations with other people. When we alter the object of the verb we are entering a new area. The connotation of the word is almost certain to change. But do we notice that? Possibly not. We can use ‘forgive’ in a sentence where the action is directed to a government, a club or one’s deceased parents.

Examples: “I cannot forgive the government for going back on its environmental promises”; “The Club made the unforgivable error of not appointing Jack as captain of the First XV”; “I forgive my deceased mum and dad every day for the inadequate way they brought me up.”

In the first of those examples, there may be no thought of identifying the government’s mistake with any precision, the government will not have asked for my forgiveness, or repented. I am probably communicating with the public rather than with any representative of the government. Despite those differences we know what the critic is saying. But to search for the proper meaning of the word ‘forgive’ and assume that it must have that meaning once located when either an individual person or an abstract collegial body like the government is the object of the action would be a mistake.

Can we sensibly speak of “forgiving God”? Smedes speaks of our “need to forgive God after all. Now and then, but not often. Not for his sake. For ours!” He asks, “Would it bother God too much if we found our peace by forgiving him for the wrongs we suffer?”⁴⁶ This is another natural outworking of therapeutic forgiveness; the emphasis is placed on what will make me feel better. Smedes shows no awareness of using ‘forgive’ in a substantially different sense from what it has when I talk of my duty to forgive ‘Jim’ for wrongly accusing me of fraud. If we use it in the same sense, the answer must be, as Brauns says, that God *would* mind if we purported to forgive him. As he is perfect and holy it is nonsense to speak of his wrongdoing,⁴⁷ and thus it is a logical impossibility for him to be pardoned. Job blamed God for his suffering. Later he repented of that attitude. He did not in any sense “forgive God”.⁴⁸ God has never done anything that requires our forgiveness like the hypothetical Jim did. Other language is usually readily available with which to tell God that we don’t understand why he has allowed something to happen to us.

What about the notion of forgiving *myself*? Church leaders and liturgies often promote this, not only as a personal spiritual practice but sometimes even as what you first have to do before you will be successful in forgiving others. Bishop J.V. Taylor, for example, writes:

“To accept forgiveness one must forgive oneself; and to offer forgiveness one must forgive oneself. And this is true of the church also.”

For Kendall “total forgiveness” means, inter alia, forgiving ourselves. Joseph, he explains, wanted to help his brothers to “forgive themselves” - meaning to not “be distressed” or “angry with themselves” (the phrases appearing in most renderings of Gen 45:5).⁴⁹ For Kendall, “Forgiveness is worthless to us emotionally if we can’t forgive ourselves.”⁵⁰ But since when have our gratified feelings been all important?

In one of the Anglican Communion liturgies, after a petition asking God to forgive us, the presiding priest is directed to say: “God forgives you. Forgive others; forgive yourself.”⁵¹

This suggests that the same benefit is sought for each of the three classes of recipient. But that is not correct. Once we accept that forgiveness is to be understood by Christians as a two party transaction it follows, as Brauns insists, that “it makes no more sense to talk about forgiving yourself than it does to talk about shaking your own hand.”⁵² Joseph did not want his brothers to “beat themselves up” or to condemn themselves. That is far removed from the idea of remitting their own sins or repenting unto themselves. Yet there is, once again, real spiritual value in soberly assessing what your own sins have consisted of before asking God to forgive them, and it is important not to ask people to see value in exaggerating their wrongdoing, or to beat themselves up.

I can find no Scriptural warrant for saying that our forgiveness of others is possible only if we first “forgive ourselves”. Nor is God constrained in any way by our failure to forgive ourselves in the remission of sins sense, but only by our forgiveness of others. So let us make a better effort to understand what that means.

FORGIVENESS THROUGH US?

Alexander Pope memorably wrote: “To err is human; to forgive divine.” This is correct *if* it means that when we forgive others we do not perform an action identical with that of God when he forgives us. As Miroslav Volf says: “We forgive tenuously and tentatively: God forgives unhesitatingly and definitively.”⁵³ It is misleading if it means that forgiving others is not a human function, so that when we think we are forgiving another person this is a delusion because what is really happening is that God is forgiving that person *through* us. Volf maintains that it’s ultimately Christ who forgives through us, although “we still have to do the forgiving.”⁵⁴

I respectfully contest that understanding. First, there is no clear Scriptural authority for it: surely Jesus, when underlining disciples’ duty to forgive, would have spelt out our mere agency role if such was the case. Secondly, the Lord’s forgiveness of our sins is perfect but my forgiveness of sins against me is necessarily imperfect—as Volf himself emphasises. But a specific act of forgiveness cannot logically be simultaneously ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ - whatever precisely counts as perfection. Thirdly, it conflates “I need the Lord’s strength and the Spirit’s guidance when I forgive” with “Actually it’s the Lord, not me, doing the job.” Finally, a wrongdoer is likely to be confused if we claim that the Lord is the principal or ‘real’ actor when I forgive. Assume, for example, that a wrongdoer has forcibly abducted my wife. This is a sin against both God and me, so forgiveness is required from us both. In my case the abductor may crave

forgiveness from me as the human being hurt - someone who can be talked to and communicate in heard sounds, rather than a spiritual functionary.

CONCLUSION

The ability to forgive, as Solzhenitsyn, quoted by Philip Yancey,⁵⁵ once said, is what makes human beings different from all animals. My answers to the recurring puzzles surrounding our duty to forgive others as an indispensable component of our new life in Christ have sufficiently appeared above. Underlying those answers are the following general themes:

1. 'Forgive' and 'forgiveness' have no proper meaning. Their meaning is dependent on their particular use. That use will depend on the situation, including the speaker's intention, the intended audience, who, if indeed it is a person, is to be forgiven, and the function and purpose of the utterance.
2. Even although it may seem "too philosophical", preachers, writers and liturgy compilers should attempt to elucidate "forgiveness" and not just keep using the word thinking that of course all Christians know what it involves.
3. "Complete Christian forgiveness" is the ideal but in many situations loving action will not fully measure up to its demands. We should be encouraging one another to recognize situations where the full action is impossible or impracticable, and to praise loving action which necessarily falls short. But a church whose members regularly practised, and were seen to practise, complete Christian forgiveness would do much not merely to live out the forgiving others part of the Lord's prayer but also to advance the kingdom of God in its secular community.

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- ¹“True Forgiveness” in Global Anglican (2020), 291.
- ² For the importance of personal forgiveness in the South African crisis of 1994 see Michael Cassidy, *Footprints in the African Sand* (SPCK: 2019), ch 30.
- ³ Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ground-breaking view of language, found in his *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: 1953) is discussed by, for example, Mary Warnock, *English Philosophy since 1900* (Oxford: 1959) ch 8
- ⁴ See H L A Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: 1961), 122-3
- ⁵ See Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, Oxford: 1953) 1 paras. 66-76.
- ⁶ Dowrick, *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love* (Viking: 1997).
- ⁷ Dowrick at 299, quoting James Hillman.
- ⁸ *Radical Forgiveness* (Sounds True: 1959)
- ⁹ *Total Forgiveness* (Charisma House: 2007)
- ¹⁰ At 76.
- ¹¹ *Forgive and Forget* (San Francisco: 1994)
- ¹² *The Book of Forgiving* (Collins: 2014)
- ¹³ *How to Forgive* (St Anthony Messenger Press: 2000)
- ¹⁴ At 130
- ¹⁵ *The Reason for God* (Hodder and Stoughton: 2017) at 189.
- ¹⁶ *Come Holy Spirit* (Hodder and Stoughton: 1985) at 184.
- ¹⁷ *Free of Charge* (Zondervan: 2005)
- ¹⁸ *After the Locusts* (Monarch Books: 2005)
- ¹⁹ *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Crossway: 2008)
- ²⁰ *Beyond Retribution, A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime and Punishment* (Eerdmans and Lime Grove: 2001)
- ²¹ Cameron Surrey, “Cyclic Times and the Glorious Wounds”, *Stimulus*, 2013, 27 at 30.
- ²² N T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK: 1996) at 271 and 273, n 121.
- ²³ M Andrew, “Forgiveness, Identity and Witness”, *Stimulus*, 2007, 3.
- ²⁴ David Attwood, *Changing Values: How to Find Moral Truth in Changing Times* (Paternoster: 1998) at 145.
- ²⁵ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Eerdmans: 2005), 93.
- ²⁶ *Forgive and Forget*, 69.
- ²⁷ Athol Gill, *Life on the Road: The Gospel Basis for a Messianic Lifestyle*, at 232-3, approvingly quoted by Chris Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, at 77.
- ²⁸ *Total Forgiveness*, 81.
- ²⁹ *Changing Values*, 145ff.
- ³⁰ At 60.
- ³¹ Daily Study Bible, *Matthew* (22-3). Without really analysing “forgive”, J Duncan Derrett, in *Law in the New Testament* (Dartman Longman and Todd, 1970) endorses “Forgive first and then you can be forgiven.”
- ³² Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness* at 120.
- ³³ *Forgive and Forget*, introduction to ch 1.
- ³⁴ *The Book of Forgiveness*, 153.
- ³⁵ *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (SCM Press, 1958, 350, n 1.
- ³⁶ See the later chapters of Michael Cassidy, *Footprints in the African Sand*.
- ³⁷ *Confess Your Sins* (Hodder: 1964) at 34-5. Contrast Chris Marshall in *Beyond Retribution* at 73: When repentance is not forthcoming, he says, the disciple is “still obligated to nurture forgiveness”, pointing to Luke 23:34 where Jesus forgave his murderers in the absence of any trace of contrition. Lysa Terkel, *Forgiving What You Can’t Forget* (2020).
- ³⁸ *The Book of Forgiveness*, 54.
- ³⁹ Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 14.
- ⁴⁰ N T Wright, *Virtue Reborn* (SPCK: 2010), 220.
- ⁴¹ *The Gospel of Matthew*, DSB, vol 1, (Saint Andrew: 1977), 223.
- ⁴² *Forgive and Forget*, 39.
- ⁴³ *Prayer* (Hodder and Stoughton: 1992), 198
- ⁴⁴ *The Book of Forgiveness*, 33-7.
- ⁴⁵ *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 43.
- ⁴⁶ *Forgive and Forget*, 112 and 119.
- ⁴⁷ *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 67.
- ⁴⁸ *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 68.
- ⁴⁹ *Total Forgiveness*, 65.
- ⁵⁰ *Idem*.
- ⁵¹ *A New Zealand Prayerbook* (Collins: 1989), 458.
- ⁵² *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 199.
- ⁵³ *Free of Charge*, 220.
- ⁵⁴ *Free of Charge*, 218-9.
- ⁵⁵ *What’s So Amazing about Grace?* (Zondervan: 1997), 98.