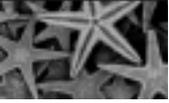




3

# forgiveness

forgiveness in the new testament  
janet unsworth



### introducing the series

This paper is the third in a series of 15 papers to be produced over a two year period as part of the *Embodying Forgiveness* project run by the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (CCCI). Drawing on a broad range of contributors, from a broad range of backgrounds, the papers aim to explore the meaning of forgiveness in the Bible and in different Christian traditions, and to ask about the implications of the practice of forgiveness for our society. It is worth saying at the outset that we have not insisted on a particular definition or understanding of forgiveness among those who will be contributing to the series. Rather, our hope is that through this series of papers we will come to a fuller and more authentic understanding of forgiveness and its implications for church and society.

CCCI: 2001

## introduction

In recent years there has been a developing debate around the subject of forgiveness across a wide range of academic disciplines. As part of this, there has been an increased interest in the theology of forgiveness. However, reflection on biblical material relevant to the subject has been largely absent. This paper aims to explore perspectives on forgiveness from the New Testament, with a particular focus on Jesus' teaching in the gospels.

## new testament words

It is important to note that the verb usually used in the New Testament for the act of forgiving is the same verb used to describe the remittance of a debt (aphiel<sup>a</sup>mi).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in Greek linguistics and culture often the same noun is used for debt and sin (opheil<sup>a</sup>ma). Thus, the concepts of debt and sin appear to be interchangeable, as are the concepts of forgiving sin and remitting debt. This implies that the relationship between God and humanity is analogous to that between a creditor and a debtor. However, while this forgiveness involves release or remission it does not signify dissolution of the relationship with God. Rather, forgiveness restores the relationship between God and His people.

## forgiveness from john to revelation

Most of the references to forgiveness in the New Testament are found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. However, there are a number of other references scattered throughout the rest of the New Testament.

In the writings of John there are three references. In 1 John the believers are told that their sins have been forgiven on account of Jesus' name (2:12) and that, if they confess their sins, they will be forgiven (1:9). In both instances it is God's forgiveness of human beings that is in view. The other reference in John's writings is found in his gospel (20:23). While the traditional Protestant interpretation of this passage stresses the church's proclamation of God's forgiveness and the traditional Catholic interpretation stresses the church's authority to administer that forgiveness, both interpretations understand the passage to refer to divine forgiveness of human sin.

The book of Acts contains six references to forgiveness. All of these occur in the context of proclamation and witness, and referring to God's forgiveness of sinners (2:38; 5:31; 8:22; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). In these passages forgiveness is variously linked with repentance, baptism, believing, justification and enlightenment. However, there is no common pattern and not all these elements are present on every occasion. One of the core elements, repentance, is presented as both a command that makes forgiveness possible (2:38) and a gift that is given with forgiveness (5:31).

While the writings of Paul contain no extended treatment of forgiveness, there are a number of important references. Romans has one reference contained in a quotation (4:7). 2 Corinthians has three references: two refer to forgiveness among Christians (2:7, 10), while the third is purely rhetorical (12:13). Particularly significant are the references in Ephesians and Colossians where Paul focuses on the relationship between Christ, divine forgiveness and forgiveness in the Christian community (Ephesians 1:7; 4:32; Colossians 1:14; 2:13; 3:13).

In the first chapter of Ephesians the reference to forgiveness (v7) occurs in the context of a hymn celebrating God's grace in Christ, which reaches

back before time and forward into the eschatological future. As Paul elaborates the benefits that believers have in Christ he makes mention of "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins." Their redemption is their liberation, which is made possible through the death of Christ and experienced through forgiveness.

In Ephesians 4 the reference to forgiveness (v32) occurs in the context of a passage concerning the nature of the believers' life together as church and looks back to the message of chapter 1, in that it holds up the forgiveness that the believers have received in Christ as the model for the forgiveness they are to exercise in relation to one another. In their exercise of forgiveness in the church they are to be imitators of God (5:1).

Colossians conveys a very similar message. The first chapter recounts the glory of Christ, the wonders of grace and the comprehensiveness of salvation - including "redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:14). In the second chapter forgiveness is mentioned again in the context of an extended passage describing the scope of Christ's accomplishments on the cross where "he forgave us all our sins" (2:13). As in Ephesians, Paul then holds up the forgiveness of Christ as a paradigm for the practice of forgiveness among believers as they work out the implications of the gospel for their life together. In chapter 3 he identifies both vices to be avoided and virtues to be pursued. Among the latter, Paul encourages the Colossian believers to "bear with each other, and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (3:13).

For Paul, then, the Christian virtue of forgiveness should be a normative aspect of relationships among believers. This forgiveness is rooted in the forgiveness that believers have experienced in Christ; forgiveness that is, for its part, only one aspect of the more comprehensive mystery of God's grace.

The book of Hebrews has three references: the first is a quotation from the Old Testament (8:12), the other two refer to divine forgiveness in the context of the writer's discussion of the relationship between Christ and the sacrificial system (9:22; 10:18). Finally, James has one reference to forgiveness by God in the context of sickness and healing (5:15).

Taken together, a number of points are relevant. First, almost all the references to forgiveness are references to God's forgiveness of sinners. The rest are largely concerned with the practice of mutual forgiveness among believers. There are no clear references to forgiveness of those outside the community of believers by believers, nor to the practice of forgiveness outside the church.

Second, there is little discussion of the need for certain events to take place in a certain order for forgiveness to be possible: specifically, the New Testament writers do not attempt to explain the relationship between repentance and forgiveness. As we have seen, this relationship is only addressed directly in the book of Acts and even then it is not presented in any systematic way. In Ephesians and Colossians it is not addressed at all. Instead the emphasis is placed on the need for believers to keep on being forgiving of one another. Paul's aim is to stress the need for forgiveness to be part of the church's practice, not to provide an outline of how and when forgiveness may or may not happen.

Third, forgiveness is always intimately connected with Christ. It is his death and resurrection that is preached in Acts. It is his sacrifice that is compared with the sacrifices of the Old Covenant in Hebrews. In Ephesians and Colossians it is the grace of God made manifest in the

self-giving of Christ that brings forgiveness - and so much more - to human beings. Christ, then, stands as the exemplar, the paradigm for Christian forgiveness as for so much else (see also 1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 2:5; 1 Peter 2:21). Consequently, if we are fully to understand the New Testament's teaching on forgiveness we need to turn to the example of Christ in his teaching and practice of forgiveness as it is presented to us by Matthew, Mark and Luke.

### **forgiveness in the gospels**

*matthew 6:12, 14-15 - god's action, humanity's response*

Forgiveness is a central theme of the Lord's Prayer. While there is a clear connection between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others, it is a given that God's forgiveness comes first.<sup>2</sup> Yet these verses do raise the issue of the conditions under which we can experience God's forgiveness. It is often argued that repentance must be a condition of receiving forgiveness. However, there is no indication of such a requirement here. The implication is that God's forgiveness cannot be merited; it can only be responded to. Nonetheless, there is a clear linkage in the petition between our experience of God's forgiveness and our attitude towards others. As Davies and Allison suggest: "God's forgiveness, although it cannot be merited, must be received, and it cannot be received by those without the will to forgive others."<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, verses 14 and 15 convey both a warning of judgement on an unforgiving person and a demand for sincerity. France suggests that, "The point is not so much that forgiving is a prior condition of being forgiven, but that forgiveness cannot be a one-way process. Like all God's gifts it brings responsibility; it must be passed on. To ask for forgiveness on any other basis is hypocrisy."<sup>4</sup> Human forgiveness can also be seen as a reflection of the divine forgiveness that is an intrinsic aspect of God's character.<sup>5</sup> As we are called into relationship with God, we are obliged to act in His way, and thus to exercise His forgiveness.

While there is undoubtedly a corporate sense in the petition, it is important that this emphasis should not result in the matter of individual responsibility being neglected. After all, it is each individual who experiences the forgiveness of God and who has the responsibility to extend that forgiveness to others.

*luke 7:36-50 forgiveness: an experience of acceptance*

In this story, Jesus is not afforded the customary hospitality by the host. A woman of dubious background breaks in on the scene. Her actions indicate a devotion that hints at some prior experience of forgiveness. The expensive perfume used to anoint the feet of Jesus emphasises the costliness of the action. When her tears wet Jesus' feet she forgets social proprieties, and wipes his feet dry. She may have been "a social deviant, an outcast and probably a prostitute." However, for Jesus she was a "model disciple," a "forgiven sinner," someone who showed him love and hospitality that went beyond that of his host.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus comments on the woman's actions with a parable about money-lenders and debtors. It would have been unthinkable for a moneylender to cancel debt. The dual background of debt and sin is critical to the understanding of the parable and the episode as a whole. As Bailey puts it, "The woman is a sinner; the parable is about debtors and creditors; and the concluding discussion turns on sin and love."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus then speaks of the woman's forgiveness. The key question that



arises is this: is she forgiven in response to her act of love or is her act of love a response to having been forgiven? The Greek text suggests that the latter. Moule points out that "the message of the whole section is not that love has earned forgiveness but that the woman's trusting response has enabled her to receive what was offered as a free gift with no relation to her deserts. It was not her love that has saved her, but her faith - her trustful response."<sup>8</sup>

In verse 49 the questioning of the wider audience of other guests challenges Jesus' authority and identity as the agent of God's forgiveness. While their question is a general one, it relates directly to the issue of honour. In this context the question implied is: "Who is this who has the right to grant honour to one whom we consider shameful?" By forgiving her sins, Jesus has granted her honour. Jesus also provides final confirmation that it is faith not love, repentance not emotion, which has saved the woman.

The theological message is clearly visible for all: In the Kingdom, there is a reversal of expectations regarding attribution of honour and shame. Moreover, faith releases the potential to experience forgiveness, a forgiveness that is attested by a love that knows no boundaries.

*mark 2:1-12 forgiveness: the power to bring wholeness*

This familiar story, which focuses on two key elements of Jesus ministry - forgiveness and healing - contains some surprises. The unusual order of events makes this episode distinctive. The pronouncement of forgiveness occurs at exactly the point where words of healing would be expected. We need to ask if these are simply words of assurance before healing takes place or if they are a declaration of forgiveness.

The phrase can be seen as Jesus' own personal declaration of forgiveness - taking upon himself God's exclusive prerogative to forgive sins. What is important is that the words have the force of an authoritative declaration and are perceived to be so. When the words are read as an authoritative declaration rather than as a statement of assurance the element of surprise is considerably heightened.

There is a stark contrast between the sceptical attitude of the scribes and the faith that Jesus discerns in the friends of the paralytic. Those expected to have faith have none, whereas the friends exhibit much. Indeed, not only do the scribes fail to recognise who Jesus is, they also fail to see the signs of the Kingdom.

Jesus' counter question in verse 9 brings the forgiveness and the healing aspects of the story together under the theme of authority. The silence of the scribes enhances the impression that his authority is superior to theirs. The silence also contributes to the general ambiguity concerning the relationship between forgiveness and healing.

The association of illness with sin was widespread. Whatever the cause of the paralysis it would be a mistake to suggest that Jesus went along with the view that sin resulted in suffering. Nonetheless, illness and sin, healing and forgiveness appear as interrelated concepts in this episode. Cranfield suggests that there is some kind of "organic connection" between sin and disease and Jesus' ministry is against both, since illness and sin both entail separation from God.<sup>9</sup> It could be argued, then, that healing and forgiveness have a similar "organic connection" in the overarching intention to bring the individual to wholeness. This emphasis on wholeness helps to resolve any tension there might be between healing and forgiveness, since it can be clearly understood as the focus of Jesus'

ministry. So the healing of illness and the forgiveness of sins are seen as signs of the Kingdom breaking in.

*mark 3:28-29 forgiveness: for all who believe?*

Verse 28 displays Jesus' authoritative promise of forgiveness for all sins and for blasphemies of whatever kind. However, verse 29 explains something that cannot be forgiven. The contrast between what can be forgiven and the time when forgiveness cannot be experienced needs to be explored.

The immediate context is one of conflict between Jesus and the scribes and between Jesus and his own birth family. What Jesus says in these verses is in direct answer to the charges made against him by the respective groups.

The Greek word used here for sins was originally used to mean folly or blindness. However, it came to mean an offence committed with evil intent. The second term appears in Greek literature as "profane speech" or "defamation." Thus it was used to describe the slandering of human beings as well as irreverence towards the gods.

The power of this saying about forgiveness cannot be underestimated. The pronouncement is that forgiveness is available for all sins against others and against God. The importance of this declaration must not be neglected in favour of examination of the difficult lesson that follows.

Verse 29 provides the exception to the general rule of forgiveness. The message is clear. Those who commit the unforgivable sin are those who know who Jesus is, yet deny his power and attribute it to Satan. The problem is not a failure to recognise who Christ is, nor even to have honest doubts and questions. It is the charge that Jesus' power to drive out demons is a result of his own possession by a demon which is considered unforgivable. Thus Mark is interpreting the unforgivable sin as "the deliberate refusal to see the activity of God's spirit in Jesus' ministry."<sup>10</sup>

So verse 29 is not a qualification of verse 28. Rather, it explains the circumstances in which someone might place themselves beyond the potential of experiencing forgiveness. Thus, the unforgivable sin appears to be a fixed attitude of mind which refuses to acknowledge the power of God and which slanders His authority. Such an attitude makes someone liable for eternal damnation because they remove from themselves the potential of a relationship with God. It is only through relationship with God that the power of His forgiveness can be experienced.

*matthew 18:21-35 the constraints and conditions of forgiveness*

In this passage Jesus is addressing the limits of forgiveness in the context of community life. Peter's suggestion that the limit of times of forgiveness might be seven was generous by contemporary standards. The traditional rabbinical answer was three for the forgiveness of the same sin and there were harsher views. Peter's offer indicates that he realises the need for taking the initiative in forgiveness and reconciliation but it is clear that he still thinks of a limit to that forgiveness.

To demonstrate that forgiveness should be without limit Jesus uses two perfect numbers 7 and 10, and multiplies them together. Whatever the exact meaning, Jesus' intention is clear: there should be no counting or calculation - forgiveness is to be unlimited, without boundary, a state of heart rather than a matter of calculation.

The parable that follows offers three cameos that represent different facets of Jesus' teaching and summarise the whole of Matthew's section on community relationships.

The first cameo demonstrates how it is possible to forgive. A servant comes before the King owing a debt that cannot be paid. His plea for mercy and promise to repay would have been unrealistic. Yet the King applies mercy, not justice, granting total remission. The King presents a remarkable example of someone who is able to show mercy by offering forgiveness, rather than extracting justice.

Although the parable is dealing with an economic situation, the word used for debt is the same word used for sin in other contexts. Likewise the word used for the cancelling of the debt is that used elsewhere to mean the act of forgiving (see above). Thus "there is an echo of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins in this verse."<sup>11</sup>

The second scene takes place under very different conditions and demonstrates how someone forgiven does not show forgiveness. The "forgiven" servant resorts immediately to physical violence towards his fellow servant before there is any explanation of the problem or any opportunity for a plea. There are clear echoes of the first servant's own plea for mercy in the words of his fellow servant. Yet there are sharp contrasts between the actions of the first servant and the mercy of the King.

While the lack of forgiveness and the injustice of the situation evoke a response from the onlookers in the story, the disciples would surely have been outraged at the situation. Yet the question must be asked if this scene did not follow on from the first one, would it provoke such a reaction?

In the third cameo the onlookers take action. On the basis of what they have witnessed they have already judged the actions of the "forgiven" servant to be unworthy of one who had been treated with mercy himself. Cancellation of the merciful judgement and the reinstatement of the original debt is the only possible course of action open to the King. The closing statement of the parable results in a sense of the servant's imprisonment being perpetual, since it appears unlikely that the debt could ever be paid. As Davies and Allison comment, this makes the situation into "a transparent symbol of eschatological judgement."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the application of the parable provided in verse 35 also warns of the future eschatological judgement. Only those who forgive with sincerity can expect to be forgiven.

The idea of a forgiveness that has no limits was clearly surprising to Peter. Yet it is in keeping with Jesus' teaching (that attitude rather than legality is important) for those who follow his way. Traditionally, justice without mercy was applied at the point of judgement. However, Jesus speaks of justice *and* mercy. It is significant that the new form of relationship that the King creates between himself and his servant immediately forms the pattern for the type of relationship to be shown between equals. However, the King's subsequent reversal of his actions demonstrates that it is impossible to have both new and old patterns of relationship existing alongside each other. If the servant himself reverts to the previous pattern of relationship, the King has to revert to it also. Thus the mercy previously granted is withdrawn, as a consequence of the "forgiven" person withholding forgiveness to another.

Central to the teaching of Jesus is the idea that an individual should act towards another individual in the way that God has acted towards them.

This is an essential message for disciples living in community with each other.

### reflections

*what do we learn about the forgiveness that god offers humanity in christ?*

Firstly, forgiveness is not earned by humanity, it is offered by God. While it cannot be merited, forgiveness does have to be received - by faith. That faith is based on a relationship of trust and a recognition of Jesus' power and authority to forgive. It is faith that opens up the possibility of experiencing God's forgiveness. It is clear that the woman in Luke chapter 7 had undergone an experience that led her to repentance and faith from which her forgiveness arises. Faith is also an element in the story in Mark chapter 2. The fact that the friends have faith that Jesus can do miracles opens up the possibility of wholeness for the paralysed man. They recognised that Jesus had power. Yet Jesus' demonstration of power and his claim to have the authority to forgive sins lead to conflict. Evidence of this is found in Mark chapter 3, as well as in Luke chapter 7 and Mark chapter 2. However, we must not allow the conflict to distract from the central issue of what that authority has to teach us about forgiveness.

Jesus' authority indicates the origin of the capacity to forgive. It is God who is the source of that authority. Therefore, God is the source of forgiveness. The parable in Matthew chapter 18 depicts this clearly. However, Mark chapter 3 teaches us that there are implications for those who refuse to recognise this authority and attribute it instead to Satan. By ignoring and even distorting the message that God is the source of forgiveness, they render themselves "unforgivable."

Secondly, the forgiveness offered to humanity by God in Christ is without limits. This is demonstrated in two ways:

- (1) Who can receive forgiveness;
- (2) How much forgiveness is available.

It is apparent that this forgiveness is available to all. Mark chapter 3 makes it clear that forgiveness is available for all, even those who reject Jesus (in this instance his family and the scribes). The scope of what can be forgiven is also without limit. According to Mark chapter 3 it covers "all sins and all blasphemies." Jesus' answer to Peter in Matthew chapter 18 tells of forgiveness that never ends. The parable in the same chapter demonstrates that debt, sin, can be completely cancelled.

*what do we learn about the forgiveness that we are to show to one another?*

The capacity or ability of humanity to forgive is a reflection of the divine nature. The forgiveness that God offers establishes a new form of relationship with him, but the person who receives it must in turn offer that forgiveness to others. The expansion of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew chapter 6 issues an imperative for us to act in God's way. That imperative extends to a community context. Although there is ambiguity over the identity of the "debtors," it is clear that forgiveness must be exercised within the community of believers and shown to those who are outside that immediate group.

It is clear that there are consequences for us if we do not forgive. These are graphically demonstrated in the hyperbole of Matthew chapter 18. The King withdraws his mercy when forgiveness is not shown. God's unlimited

forgiveness of us must be reflected in the forgiveness we offer to others. New and old patterns of relationship cannot co-exist. A similar picture emerges from Mark chapter 3 and Matthew chapter 6. It is in these three texts that constraints and conditions are applied to the model of unlimited and freely available forgiveness. Our failure to forgive results in us not being forgiven.

The picture of forgiveness withdrawn poses some difficulty. Perhaps the texts are suggesting that people who withhold forgiveness towards others cannot hope to experience forgiveness for themselves. Alternatively, they may not have taken hold of the forgiveness granted to them and thus they are not able to forgive others. What is clear is that where these problems emerge they derive from the experience of humanity, rather than from God. Mark chapter 3 bears this out. The warning of verse 29 comes in the middle of conflict and is preceded by an amazing promise of unlimited forgiveness in verse 28. It seems that when we are separated from God it is impossible to experience his forgiveness.

God's forgiveness offered to humanity in Christ is without limit. It is indiscriminating, loving and vulnerable to criticism and conflict. It establishes a new form of relationship: a relationship characterised by love and mercy. This pattern of relationship is a distinguishing characteristic of the Kingdom of God and those who seek to be part of the Kingdom will strive to make it the model for all their relationships. The petition in the Lord's Prayer indicates both a realised and future eschatological dimension to forgiveness. Forgiveness is a sign of the Kingdom breaking in, part of the inauguration of the new age of right relationships. When the forgiveness God offers is received through faith and is shared among his children, then his Kingdom begins to be realised on earth (see Luke 6:37; Matthew 7:1-2; Matthew 22:37-40).

**notes**

1. In some cases in the letters attributed to St. Paul the verb used is *charizomai* which has a similar meaning.
2. Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Word Biblical Commentary) (Word: Dallas, 1993) p152.
3. WD Davies and DH Allison, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew, Vol.I* (International Critical Commentary) ( T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1988) p 610.
4. RT France, *Matthew* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary) (IVP: Leicester, 1985) p137.
5. Ernst Lohmeyer, *The Lord's Prayer* (Collins: London, 1965) p182.
6. Darrell Bock, *Luke* (IVP NT Commentaries) (IVP: Leicester, 1994) p141.
7. Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, and *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (combined edition) (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1983) p13.
8. CFD Moule, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation - Biblical and Theological Essays* (SPCK: London, 1978) p74.
9. CEB Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* (revised edition) (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1959) p98.
10. Morna Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark* (A&C Black: London, 1991) p117.
11. Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Word Biblical Commentary) (Word: Dallas, 1995) p538.
12. WD Davies and DH Allison, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew, Vol.II* (International Critical Commentary) (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1991) p803.



**recommended reading***introductory article*

Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor" pp 38-45 *Christianity Today*  
January 10, 2000

*theological perspectives*

L Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*  
(Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 1995)

*websites*

[www.forgiving.org](http://www.forgiving.org)  
[www.forgivenessday.org](http://www.forgivenessday.org)  
[www.forgivenessweb.org](http://www.forgivenessweb.org)  
[www.forgiveness-institute.org](http://www.forgiveness-institute.org)  
[website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html](http://website.lineone.net/~andrewhdknock/index.html)

*forgiveness papers already available*

Forgiveness and Psychology  
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Forgiveness in Literature and Popular Culture  
Concluding Reflections

*about the author*

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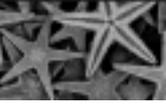
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