

Interpersonal Forgiveness as a Gospel Standard

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Abstract

Should a Christian forgive seventy-seven times? Must the sinner first repent before he can be granted forgiveness? Is forgiveness possible if the sinner does not accept the gift of forgiveness? This article focuses on the gift of forgiveness one person offers another from the point of view of forgiveness as a theological, social, and ethical norm. Starting with the reality of people's low expectation of forgiveness, the essay moves on to evaluate the nature, origin, and limits of forgiveness in light of the gospel imperative to forgive, the disposition to forgive, and the sinner's acknowledgment of guilt. The last section of the essay presents the essence of the gospel regarding the social and ethical norm of forgiveness.

Up to seventy-times seven. Or, in the words of Augustine, seventy times eight.¹ But really, must a Christian go to such lengths? Or did the evangelists, in representing these words of Jesus, omit what is self-evident: there has to be a limit to the grace of forgiveness? Must the offender first show repentance before

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¹ Augustine, *Sermo* 83 in Aurelius Augustinus, *Van aangezicht tot aangezicht: Preken over teksten uit het Matteïsevangelie [Sermones de scripturis 51–94]*, ed. Joost van Neer et al. (Amsterdam: Ambo, 2004), 462–69.

he can be granted forgiveness? Is forgiveness even possible if the offender does not accept it as a gift? And does remission of guilt also extend to the harm that has been inflicted on others?

Not all aspects of this interpersonal norm will be considered in this article. The remission of guilt that a group, a people, or a nation extends to another, whether collectively or in relation to individual persons, as presently relevant as that aspect undoubtedly is, will be kept out of the discussion. This article will concentrate on the offer of forgiveness by one person to another, on forgiveness as a social and ethical norm, or (better still) on forgiveness as a theological and ethical norm: this ethical norm—that is to say, this guideline and standard that serves and promotes essential humanity—is examined from a theological perspective. The effect that forgiveness has on the person who grants it will not be considered in this article. That question belongs—from a theological perspective—to the field of practical theology, as does any question concerning the harm done by someone who cannot (or can no longer) be reached.

Following a brief outline about the scarcity of forgiveness in our time, this article will consider the nature, origin, and limits of forgiveness, and the gospel command that applies to this matter. In order to arrive at how actual forgiveness comes about, attention will be given to the disposition of the one who was sinned against, and the acknowledgment of guilt by the offender. The distinctive character of the gospel in relation to the social and ethical norm of forgiveness will be especially highlighted in the final section, where we will consider whether forgiveness can be offered where there is no expression of prior repentance.

I. *Scarcity*

On May 13, 1981, Mehmet Ali Ağca attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II. Ağca was sentenced to life in prison. In 1983 the pope visited him in prison, spoke with him privately, and granted him forgiveness. Afterward, he remained in contact with Ağca's family, and in 2000 he appealed to the authorities to have Ağca released from prison. Today, such willingness to forgive is the exception rather than the rule.² In his own time, Søren Kierkegaard made a similar observation: "But why is forgiveness so rare? Is it not that faith in the power of forgiveness is so little and so rare?"³ It is not

² Cf. Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. David S. Swenson and Lilian Marvin Swenson, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 239.

unlikely that our present-day culture suffers from a similar lack or shortness of faith. At any rate, the unwillingness or inability to forgive fits well in a culture where people value their autonomy so highly: in general, their attitudes and actions are not determined by the relationships in which they exist; rather, they regard these relationships as a form of social contract, the terms of which they wish to control themselves. Where the other party incurs guilt, there is no obligation to act to restore the disturbed relationship, and there is no requirement to forgive.⁴

Similar to forgiveness, acknowledgment of guilt has become quite problematic. Friedrich Nietzsche had a very outspoken opinion about that: whoever admits his own guilt disgraces himself. “True” humans accept what they did wrong, including their misdeeds. And they also accept others’ wrongful acts against them:

To be unable to take his enemies, his misfortunes and even his misdeeds seriously for long—that is the sign of strong, rounded natures with a superabundance of a power which is flexible, formative, healing and can make one forget.... A man like this shakes from him, with one shrug, many worms which would have burrowed into another man.⁵

Nietzsche points to the French revolutionary Mirabeau, “who had no recall of the insults and slights directed at him because he simply—forgot.” Forgiveness is normally seen as a sign of impotence and weakness. Seeking the restoration of violated relationships outside of the “will to power” conflicts with one’s true humanity. It is not possible to make universal valid declarations concerning what has or has not been violated, for all of life is permeated with injustice. Hence, “forgiveness” will not be found in the vocabulary of one who is “truly human.”

Neither in classical antiquity was there such a thing as willingness to forgive. Aristotle does not include such a disposition in his list of the virtues of free citizens of the *polis*. It played no role in the ancient world.⁶ “Justice” was the pre-eminent norm.

⁴ Cf. Frits de Lange, “Room for Forgiveness? A Theological Perspective,” in Didier Pollefeyt, ed., *Incredible Forgiveness: Christian Ethics between Fanaticism and Reconciliation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 162–64. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 211–12.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22.

⁶ Andreas Kinning, *Geografie van goed en kwaad: Filosofische essays* (Houten: Spectrum, 2010), 121.

This same attitude also seems to be prevalent in our present-day culture, in which people wish to shape reality according to their own insights. Should anyone retain an unpleasant memory of a past event, no great harm has been done. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, such qualms are a thing of the past. A special kind of therapy removes any feeling of unpleasantness, of whatever kind.⁷

Still, other voices also make themselves heard. Hannah Arendt identifies forgiveness as one of the necessary means by which society is kept functioning when threatened by the "irreversibility ... of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing."⁸ Hence, life is a hazardous enterprise. Forgiveness, however, is a means to alleviate that:

Trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.⁹

Arendt identifies Jesus as the one who discovered the role of forgiveness within the domain of human affairs. This disposition is a "rudimentary sign of an awareness that forgiveness may be the necessary corrective for the inevitable damages resulting from action."¹⁰ Respect for the humanity of the other is already a sufficient incentive for such willingness to forgive.¹¹ This attribute—together with others common to our humanity—supports a plea for the re-evaluation of the norm of forgiveness. In the twentieth century, the awareness grew that forgiveness might serve to promote human well-being and mental health. There was also a growing awareness that forgiveness can play an essential role in the resolution of conflicts between nations or ethnic groups. One example of this was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, after the abolition

⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World, With an Introduction by John Sutherland*, Everyman's Library 359 (New York: Knopf, 2013), 204.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition, With an Introduction by Margaret Canovan*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 236–37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

of the policy of apartheid.¹² There can be no future without forgiveness, said Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Andreas Kinneging argues that over against the ethical minimalism of present-day society,¹³ forgiveness needs to be reconsidered. He supports a call to restore this norm to its rightful place next to, and even above, the norm of justice, and points to the rediscovery of a highly valuable ancient norm.¹⁴

II. *Nature and Origin*

From the perspective of social ethics, forgiveness is a standard and guideline for situations where people have suffered wrongful harm to their humanity as a consequence of the actions of others.¹⁵ People can always ignore all kinds of relatively minor offenses. However, there may also be injuries that cause serious harm to one's humanity. Examples of such injuries may be disloyalty, betrayal, or violence. Even offenses which may in themselves be "minor" can cause considerable pain if they are intentionally or persistently inflicted.¹⁶ The granting of forgiveness will of itself not yet bring about a full and complete act of forgiveness. Such an act of forgiveness can only attain its goal when those who have inflicted wrongful harm acknowledge their guilt. Within this perspective, forgiveness is an interpersonal, two-sided event. It is more than just an intention. For—in the words of K. J. Popma—such an intention "only attains the fullness of forgiveness when, from the other side, guilt is *confessed*."¹⁷

In themselves, however, human beings do not have the authority to forgive offenses. The Most High God has the highest authority in heaven and on earth. However, at the time of creation, he gave his image a role to play in his rule on earth: "You have made him a little lower than God," the poet sings in Psalm 8 (v. 5 NASB).¹⁸ After the fall, this authority gained a specific, concrete meaning, because interpersonal relationships had been seriously

¹² Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics 29 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29–34.

¹³ Kinneging, *Geografie*, 116; also Andreas Kinneging, "Over rechtvaardigheid en vergeving," in Edith Brugmans et al., eds., *Rechtvaardigheid en verzoening: Over de fundamente van de moraal in een tijd van geweld* (Budel: Damon, 2000), 114–15.

¹⁴ Kinneging, *Geografie*, 126; also Kinneging, "Rechtvaardigheid," 121.

¹⁵ Cf. Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (New York: HarperCollins 1996), 5–13.

¹⁶ See Smedes, *Forgive*, 13–19.

¹⁷ K. J. Popma, *Levensbeschouwing: Opmerkingen naar aanleiding van de Heidelbergse Catechismus VII* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1965), 171.

¹⁸ Cf. Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

and permanently disrupted. Because of the fall, man—to quote Popma again—“had been trapped like a fly in a spider’s web of the tough threads of offenses that he had committed, and that had been committed against him.”¹⁹ In his grace, God continued to allow humans to share in this authority, and granted them a special actualization of this authority, in order to preserve the well-being of society. Just as he continued, after the fall, to appeal to humans in relation to being his image, so God also appealed to them in relation to his power to grant forgiveness. In the same manner as the servant in Christ’s parable (Matt 18:21–35), when he met his colleague at the entrance to his lord’s palace, was empowered to forgive the personal debt that the other owed him, so all people—since they are the image of God—are empowered to forgive their neighbors.

How this empowerment reached its full realization has become visible in Jesus Christ. He is the true man, as God intended from the beginning. This Christ, this Son of Man, came to earth and had the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10–12). All believers who have communion with this Son of Man may and will, in virtue of this fellowship, also grant forgiveness to those who have caused them harm and have expressed repentance. In this way, they will represent and bear witness to Christ. This act of forgiveness is not an expression of high-handed autonomy, but truly a gift of love, one that they pass on to their repentant neighbors. It serves to take away sins. In the words of Kierkegaard, forgiveness is even “the most outstanding way” by which love can remove sin.²⁰ “As one, therefore, through faith *believes the invisible* in the visible, so the lover through forgiveness *believes the visible away*.”²¹ To this authority to forgive a certain power is also attached, namely the capacity to confer actual effect upon this authority. This authority, however, is anything but an occasion for self-aggrandizement. After all, it is a gift from above (cf. John 19:11).

III. *Limits*

The authority that God has conferred upon humans as his image, however, has a limit. First of all, this limit is found within people themselves. No people are empowered to grant forgiveness for wrongful harm that their neighbors have inflicted upon another person.²² In this sense, the reaction of Simon Wiesenthal, his refusal to grant forgiveness to a dying SS soldier

¹⁹ Popma, *Levensbeschouwing*, 196.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 238.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²² Smedes, *Forgive*, 5–7.

for the suffering he had inflicted upon Jews in general, is understandable. Of course, Wiesenthal did have the power to grant forgiveness for the suffering he himself had experienced; he could choose to see in this soldier a human being who accepted responsibility for his actions. However, at that moment, he was unable to bring himself to make that choice. Nevertheless, this event haunted his memory long after the end of World War II; what he wanted was not revenge, but justice.²³

The forgiveness of suffering inflicted upon others, however, must be left in the hands of God. Only he can determine whether such guilt can be forgiven. Human beings only have the power to grant forgiveness for the wrongful suffering they themselves have endured. In Matthew 18:21, the apostle Peter spoke only of someone who had sinned *against him*. And Jesus instructed his disciples about situations in which others had wronged them (Luke 17:4). The general expression “forgive others their trespasses” must be read in the light of “our debtors” (Matt 6:12) and “against me” (Matt 18:21).

Forgiveness has its limits, not only in the one who was wronged but also in the administration of justice in society as a whole. Concerning this, victims have neither authority nor power. They neither can nor may, on their own authority, decide that the offender stands above the rights of society. When people by their actions violate the justice of society, then that justice must take effect, even when the victims have personally forgiven the offenders. Those who harm others have wronged not just those people, but also others around them, and also society as a whole.²⁴

The question may be asked whether the severity of the offense might set a limit to its forgiveness. Ivan Karamazov tells the story of a wealthy landowner who had two thousand persons living on his estate. This man, an army general, saw that his favorite dog was limping. What had happened? A boy—just eight years old—had thrown a stone at the animal. The landlord resolved to teach the boy a lesson and threw him into prison. The next morning, he prepared for the day’s hunt, together with his attendants and game drivers. The inhabitants of the estate were called to present themselves for inspection, with the boy’s mother in the front row. He gave orders to strip the boy stark naked and then set his hunting dogs upon the child until they had torn him to pieces while his mother looked on.²⁵ Ivan is quite

²³ Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, ed. Harry James Cargas and Bonny V. Fetterman (New York: Schocken, 1998).

²⁴ Cf. Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 90.

²⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heinemann, 1974), 248–49. In a preceding passage, Ivan recounts the abuse a five-year-old

sure that the boy's mother would never be able to forgive that butcher. She did not have the right to forgive him. No-one would ever forgive such a brutal act! Yet Ivan believes that the church does teach such forgiveness, and as a result, he hastens to hand his membership card back to God. Still, he says, if the mother is determined to do so, she may be able to forgive "the immeasurable suffering of her mother's heart."²⁶

Judgment concerning the suffering that has been brought upon another must be left to God. In the case of personal suffering, the victim may grant forgiveness, regardless of the enormity of the perpetrator's guilt. After all, where do we draw the line? The right to forgive such harm cannot be limited to "everyday" wrongs, while serious crimes, like those that fall under criminal law, would be excluded. Those who have suffered wrongful harm may grant forgiveness to anyone, even someone who has committed monstrous crimes against them.²⁷ Next to monstrous crimes, an unending succession of lesser, everyday offenses can also inflict great harm upon the other: persistent bullying, continuous intentional annoyances, systematic put-downs, and expressions of contempt. The gospel speaks of the number of times one is to forgive an offender. Augustine summarizes this command as follows: "Whenever someone sins against you, you must forgive him."²⁸ With "seven" or "seventy times seven" (Matt 18:22; Luke 17:4), the gospel means an unlimited number.²⁹ In this sense, forgiveness has no limit.³⁰

IV. Command

Forgiveness of personally inflicted harm is a command of God. Jesus taught his disciples that they must forgive a brother who shows that he repents. Even if he should sin against them seven times, and seven times returns and says, "I repent," they must forgive him (Luke 17:3–4). Paul says the same thing: Forgive one another (Eph 4:32b; Col 3:13). The use of the present tense indicates that this command always remains valid.³¹ Within the

child suffered at the hands of her parents (p. 247). This passage occurs in book 5, chapter IV. It is followed by the narrative of the Grand Inquisitor.

²⁶ Ibid., 251.

²⁷ Cf. Bash, *Forgiveness*, 11–13.

²⁸ Augustine, *Sermo* 83.3.

²⁹ Augustine, *Sermo* 114.1 in Aurelius Augustinus, *Als korrels tussen kaf: Preken over teksten uit het Marcus- en Lucasevangelie [Sermones de scripturis 94A–116+367]*, ed. Joke Gehlen-Springorum et al. (Budel: Damon, 2007), 260.

³⁰ Eduard Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 16th ed., NTD 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 99.

³¹ Joachim Gnilka, *Der Kolosserbrief*, HThKNT 10.1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1980), 195; J. P. Versteeg, *Oog voor elkaar: Het gebruik van het woord "elkaar" in het Nieuwe Testament met*

congregation—that is what the expression “one another” tells us³²—we may expect that each member confers this grace upon all the others. In this connection, Paul uses the word *charizomai* (χαρίζομαι), which highlights the gracious character of forgiveness. Because God has forgiven his own, they will also be able to grant forgiveness to each other (Eph 4:32b; Col 3:13b). His forgiveness has made forgiveness possible within the church. The word *kathōs* (καθώς), however—often translated as “just as” or “likewise”—also conveys a comparative sense.³³ Divine forgiving love is then portrayed as an example for those who are his own: do to others as your Lord has done to you. His love finds a reflection—as incomplete and fragmentary as it may be—in your love for each other. Matthew also points to this necessity (Matt 18:21–25). As the master is kind and gracious, so is his servant. Forgiveness is a part of following God.³⁴

It is striking that the Lord’s Prayer places the same emphasis on what the children of the kingdom should do,³⁵ namely, to forgive their debtors (Matt 6:12).³⁶ Moreover, the prayer is immediately followed by an elucidation of this clause: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (v. 14). This instruction, which Christ probably drew from Jewish tradition,³⁷ does not refer to the remission of a monetary debt. The disciples were not wealthy; how would they have been in the position to lend money to others? In this passage, the word “debts” is a reference to a nonmonetary debt,³⁸ one that was caused by the harm done to the human person. Likewise, it is clear from the use of the word *paraptōmata* (παραπτώματα, debts; Matt 6:14–15) that this is not a reference to mere human weakness; rather, it refers to something morally reprehensible.³⁹

The gracious gift of forgiveness, however, does impose a certain burden on the one who grants it. The king who forgave his servant must bear the consequences of that servant’s failure. Likewise, Christians who forgive

betrekking tot de onderlinge verhoudingen binnen de gemeente, Apeldoornse studies 15 (Kampen: Kok, 1979), 54.

³² Cf. Versteeg, *Oog voor elkaar*, 46–47, 53–54.

³³ Cf. Gnllka, *Kollosserbrief*, 196; Versteeg, *Oog voor elkaar*, 47, 54.

³⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 114.3.

³⁵ Schweizer here speaks of an “interruption” to the prayer (Schweitzer, *Matthäus*, 97–98).

³⁶ Here Luke uses the singular: “for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us” (Luke 11:4).

³⁷ Mark formulates a command here: “Forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25). Here too, the reading is *paraptōmata* (παραπτώματα, trespasses) instead of *opheilēmata* (ὀφειλήματα, debts; Matt 6:12a).

³⁸ See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 250.

³⁹ Walter Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 6th ed., THKNT 1 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1986), 204.

their neighbors assume the burden of the guilt that these neighbors have incurred. They would succumb to this burden, says Bonhoeffer, were it not for the fact that they themselves are carried by the one who took every sin upon himself. In the power of Christ's suffering, believers are able to overcome the sins that are done to them by forgiving them. The bearing of one's brother's burden is then the bearing of the latter's sins, and that would not be possible other than by way of forgiveness. Such forgiveness is one form of the suffering that believers undergo for the sake of Christ.⁴⁰

Those who go by the name of Christian but are unwilling to grant forgiveness to others who have acknowledged their guilt towards them and shown repentance do not live in line with the gospel. Matthew reinforces the emphasis of the Lord's Prayer and the statement that immediately follows it by adding, "But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:15).⁴¹ This admonition is consistent with the juxtaposition of what Augustine calls "a most terrifying parable":⁴² the servant who refuses to show his neighbor the slightest patience or understanding, who will have nothing of any forgiveness, awaits a dreadful fate. While he may have been freed from his own debt by his master's decree, he is anything but free from unrighteousness (Matt 18:21–35). While love covers a multitude of sins, unwillingness to reconcile increases a multitude of sins. Whoever refuses to forgive "increases the sin; he makes it greater," says Kierkegaard, "and next, forgiveness takes the life from sin, but denying forgiveness nourishes the sin."⁴³

However, there is more. The formulation of the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer and the admonitions recorded in Matthew indicate that there is a connection between what happens on earth and what happens in heaven. God takes account of what his own will or will not do, and he responds to that.⁴⁴ In a certain sense, the granting of forgiveness is a condition for receiving forgiveness oneself.⁴⁵ Not in the sense that believers could, by forgiving themselves, somehow earn God's forgiveness. This principle is not some *quid pro quo*, but it does emphasize the necessity of obedience to God's command. Matthew's Gospel emphasizes this necessity. Those who will not forgive their repentant neighbors' personal debts owed to them

⁴⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge: Mit einem Nachwort von Eberhard Busch*, 12th ed. (Munich: Kaiser, 1981), 66.

⁴¹ Mark 11:26 is a later addition.

⁴² Augustine, *Sermo* 83.1.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 240.

⁴⁴ Grundmann, *Matthäus*, 204.

⁴⁵ John Calvin also speaks of a "*conditio*" (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 3.20.45).

have reason to be greatly worried. Their own attitude of faith is not right. For such a faith attitude includes the forgiveness of debtors (Matt 6:12); and where that is missing, will God hear prayer for forgiveness? How could those unwilling to forgive others ever ask God to forgive their own sins?⁴⁶ For they show that in the end, they have not accepted the divine gift of grace.⁴⁷ With the parable of the king and his servant, Jesus wanted to warn us and so prevent that we should be lost, says Augustine.⁴⁸ Similar warnings can be found in other places in Matthew (Matt 25:31–46; 22:14). The misunderstanding that believers can earn God’s forgiveness of sins by forgiving those who have sinned against them is excluded by the parable of the king and his servant.⁴⁹ This word of Christ is meant to exhort us to the obedience of faith.⁵⁰

Even though forgiveness is a command of God, it does not bypass the heart and the feelings of the victim. Forgiveness is a gift that might not always be immediately granted. Sometimes it takes time. Lewis Smedes gives several examples to describe how such an offer might eventuate. Often, insight into the situation of the one who has committed the offense may be helpful. Furthermore, the process of forgiveness may be accompanied by a sense of confusion concerning what exactly took place. There may also be residual feelings of anger. Sometimes forgiveness may be granted little by little.⁵¹ It must be granted freely; it can never be forced.⁵² However, regardless of how the process of forgiveness develops, perhaps with difficulty, perhaps hesitantly, and full of doubt, Christians will always be prepared to forgive. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Christians will be “fully determined wholeheartedly to forgive [their] neighbor” (Heidelberg Catechism [HC] 126).

This disposition will not be limited to the forgiveness of brothers and sisters within the Christian congregation. Christ speaks in a general sense of “our debtors” (Matt 6:12), “others” (v. 14), and “anyone” (Mark 11:25). Still, forgiveness has a particular urgency in the congregation. Paul’s admonitions clearly show this (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). And the parable of the king and

⁴⁶ Cf. J. T. Nielsen, *Het evangelie naar Mattheüs I*, 3rd ed., PNT (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1978), 131; Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.45.

⁴⁷ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 156.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Sermo* 83.2.

⁴⁹ Schweizer, *Matthäus*, 97.

⁵⁰ Calvin says that a believer may be assured that his sins are “as certainly forgiven as we are certainly conscious of having forgiven others, when our mind is completely purged from all envy, hatred, and malice” (Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.45).

⁵¹ Cf. Bash, *Forgiveness*, 166.

⁵² Smedes, *Forgive*, 95–121.

his servant is placed within that chapter of Matthew's Gospel in which life within the congregation of Christ stands at the center (Matt 18:21–35). The use of the word "brother" points to that.

Forgiveness as a social and ethical norm is directed to the neighbor's well-being, in accordance with the divine command of love towards the neighbor. In this way, such a norm serves the restoration of broken relations and the preservation of healthy relationships. It is directed to the future: renewed ability and willingness to live together in peace and harmony. People who by their actions have become estranged from the circle to which they belong can again be received. One example of such a person in the Gospels is Zacchaeus: he was known as a "sinner" (Luke 19:7). He had wronged those around him. Relations had been disrupted. However, after receiving forgiveness, his relationship with the people to which he belonged was restored. Jesus declared him to be a "son of Abraham" (Luke 19:10).⁵³

Forgiveness is directed not only to the well-being of the neighbor but also to that of the victim.⁵⁴ In this sense, the gift has a therapeutic dimension, enabling victims to be released from a painful past event; they experience inner peace and are set free from inner rancor. Forgiveness—said Augustine—sets the heart free from hatred, and that is necessary, for the more firmly we cherish feelings of hatred, the more we ruin our heart.⁵⁵ However, in the gospel it is not this therapeutic effect that is given the most prominence. In the same manner as love towards the neighbor has priority over love towards the self, so forgiveness with a view to the well-being of others has priority over one's own well-being.

V. *Disposition*

The gospel teaches not only that forgiveness is a command, but also that God grants to his own what he asks from them: a disposition, a willingness to forgive. This gift is grounded in the work of Christ, who has reconciled his own with the Father and has paid for their offenses. This gracious gift means that they now have a new relationship, not only with God but also with their neighbor: in Christ the wall of separation has been broken down (Eph 2:14). Believers now share in new interpersonal relations and a commensurate disposition. The reconciliation that began at the cross continues into a disposition to forgive neighbors and in acts of forgiveness.

⁵³ Cf. de Lange, "Room for Forgiveness," 174.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Bash, *Forgiveness*, 36–56.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Sermo* 114A.5; cf. also, for example, Bash, *Forgiveness*, 107.

While this new relationship becomes most apparent in the church, it also extends to other interpersonal relationships in which believers stand. It includes that believers cannot but grant forgiveness to repentant neighbors. That is a fruit of the forgiveness they have received: all who have received forgiveness from God will as a matter of course become forgiving people. All who sincerely pray to the Father for forgiveness will of themselves perform good works of forgiveness. Every forgiveness of others' offenses, in obedience to God's command, arises as a good fruit of their prayer for forgiveness.⁵⁶

This disposition to forgive, grounded in the work of Christ, is directed by his example. Just as Christ is willing to forgive, so likewise are those who have communion with him. It is an "identity marker" for those who are his disciples, a fruit of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit not only causes this fruit to grow and ripen, but he also equips believers to put it into practice. This fruit is granted in the way of prayer. God grants it to "those who constantly and with heartfelt longing, ask him for these gifts and thank him for them" (HC 116). Every act of forgiveness finds its origin in God (cf. Eph 2:10).

This precious gift from the Triune God is, at the same time, capital to invest.⁵⁷ Because believers go to work with it, put it into practice, and make a habit of it, it increasingly becomes a part of them. This disposition will become more and more a distinctive trait. Believers find themselves in a continuous learning process,⁵⁸ one that takes place within their community⁵⁹ and one that has as primary constituents teaching and preaching, the celebration of the sacraments, prayer, and the exercise of mutual fellowship. In this, believers will always keep an eye on their Master, who put this disposition to forgive into practice in an extraordinary manner throughout his ministry on earth, and most notably on the cross at Golgotha, when he prayed for his enemies.

In addition, believers will learn from fellow believers who in their own situation have applied this disposition in an especially striking way. The parents of Miroslav Volf, for example, did not lay any charges against the soldier who had killed their son. They chose to forego their right to compensation. They did this on the grounds of what Paul had taught. True, the forgiveness they extended caused great pain to the boy's mother. She had to deal with many conflicting emotions. But she was able to grant forgiveness

⁵⁶ Cf. Popma, *Levensbeschouwing*, 171.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁸ Alan J. Torrance, "Forgiveness and Christian Character: Reconciliation, Exemplarism and the Shape of Moral Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30.3 (2017): 297–98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 298.

because she was prepared to take this exceedingly difficult decision through her communion with Christ. In the meantime, these parents were plagued by others, who supposed they could explain why their five-year-old son had died.⁶⁰ Notwithstanding, they stuck to their intention to forgive. Believers will take note of such examples as well as those they may encounter within their immediate surroundings.⁶¹ In this way, they will learn to extend the gift of forgiveness themselves.

VI. *Acknowledgment of Guilt*

Those who grant forgiveness affirm by doing so that the other has caused them harm. They describe the injustice that was done and express a judgment about it, just as Joseph did when he saw his brothers as they came to Egypt. By putting them to the test, he confronted them with their own past. Forgiveness does not compete with justice, as if the offer of forgiveness might, in some way, diminish the need for justice. Both of these social and ethical norms—justice and forgiveness—have in common that they are an attempt to bring to an end something that might otherwise continue endlessly.⁶² While forgiveness is essential for the preservation of society, justice is no less essential. Justice is integral to the structure of society. Offenders stand in relation not only to their direct victims but also to society and its system of justice as a whole. This system calls for acts of justice, with a view to both the correction of offenders and the protection of society and its morality.

The reach of such justice, however, is limited.⁶³ An act of justice is unable to release repentant neighbors from their guilt fully and is also unable to restore the disrupted interpersonal relation fully. Disrupted or broken relations can only be restored through forgiveness. It is—as Kinneging puts it—“a necessary addendum to justice.”⁶⁴ Only forgiveness can bring about the restoration that justice cannot attain, which is why it is indispensable. The offer of forgiveness, however, is not yet the same as the acceptance of it. The actual realization of forgiveness does not occur unless the guilty party acknowledges his guilt. Forgiveness has its own “structure,” one that exists by virtue of the cooperation of two parties.⁶⁵ An essential element of

⁶⁰ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 213.

⁶¹ Torrance, “Forgiveness,” 312–13.

⁶² Cf. Arendt, *Vita activa*, 239.

⁶³ Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 122–23.

⁶⁴ Kinneging, *Geografie*, 124.

⁶⁵ Popma, *Levensbeschouwing*, 173, 180.

this cooperation is acknowledgment of guilt: “otherwise there can be no room for the possibility of forgiveness.”⁶⁶ That is why repenting is part of unpacking the gift of forgiveness; it is accompanied by the leaving behind of harmful actions and the readiness to remove, as far as possible, the consequences of this harm. Those, however, who continue in their wrongdoing do not accept the gift of forgiveness; they retain their guilt. Were the church to speak of forgiveness while allowing the sin to continue, it would be proclaiming a cheap grace.⁶⁷ Repentance implies a genuine change of heart. In this connection, Scripture speaks of *metanoia* (μετάνοια): when “a brother” says “I repent” (*metanoō*, μετανοέω), you must forgive him. That is the rule where he truly repents (*metanoēsē*, μετανοήσῃ; Luke 17:3–4), that is, where he expresses genuine repentance, resolves to change his life in relation to the one he has harmed, and does everything possible to make amends for the harm he has caused.

In the same way, as people will usually find it difficult or sometimes even impossible to grant forgiveness, they will also find it difficult to genuinely acknowledge guilt. Who among us likes to admit that we have done something wrong? Most of us are inclined to compare ourselves with others so that we can conclude that the wrongs of others outweigh our own failures. We will often regard the actions of the other as not entirely right or even entirely wrong.⁶⁸ Often it will happen—writes Popma—that the guilty party

continues to evade or complain, and by means of an endless multiplicity of words contrives to confuse or obfuscate the issue as a whole. Gaining time, then, assumes a negative quality. The longer one harps on about it, the smaller the chances will be of a courageous resolution. The matter drags on, and in this way, “old wounds” are nurtured. . . . The long-standing conflict takes on an intractable character. . . . A more or less permanent estrangement develops, one that can no longer be remedied by the simple means of acknowledgment and forgiveness.⁶⁹

If, however, trespassing neighbors truly do acknowledge their guilt, are willing to make amends for the harm that was inflicted, and accept the forgiveness that is offered, then the act of forgiveness has been completed, and the relationship is restored. The offense itself can be left to sink into oblivion, both by those who suffered the harm and by those who inflicted it. In any case, those who were harmed may not, after the expression of repentance and the granting of forgiveness, still declare that they will not

⁶⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁶⁷ Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Nachfolge*, 14.

⁶⁸ Volf, *Exclusion*, 119.

⁶⁹ Popma, *Levensbeschouwing*, 172.

forget the offense. Were they to do that, they would be signaling that they still regard their neighbors as wrongdoers.⁷⁰ That does not befit a Christian. A Christian wants nothing more than to fully restore a broken relationship. Sadly, this does not always happen. Popma even goes so far as to assert that the believer usually does not even receive the chance to restore the wrong; this is destructive to the Christian life and ultimately to Christ's church itself:

One does not consider that mutual forgiveness is the "daily bread" of life for the work that we have to do on earth. Forgiveness of sins is rendered brutally impossible by hard, arrogant people, who immensely overestimate themselves, people who are quite willing to work very hard, but who are never willing to acknowledge guilt at any point. This attitude is deadly for Christian activity in almost every field. Does anyone want to do Christian work? Excellent, but let him always keep in mind that this is only possible where he is prepared, on a daily basis, to admit every offense, right down to the smallest infraction. Not with feeble excuses, but with a full and genuine *admission*. Nothing less will suffice!⁷¹

Believers are willing to forgive their repentant neighbors. In all kinds of everyday annoyances, they are all the more willing to do so when they look at themselves, at all of their faults and shortcomings. Moreover, the line between the offenses of others and their own failings are not always so clear. Often, their failings are interwoven with the wrongs of others, especially in the fabric of everyday life.⁷²

VII. *Forgiveness before Repentance?*

In some circumstances, however, forgiveness may be granted before guilt is confessed. Those who have been harmed realize that those who have harmed them do not see their wrongdoing, have no regret, and do nothing to restore the harm they have caused. That evokes questions and creates disquiet and disappointment. Nevertheless, they are willing to grant their neighbors forgiveness, in part for the sake of their own peace of mind. Such a situation, however, calls for wisdom. Those who grant forgiveness where their neighbors have not acknowledged their wrongdoing must know what they are doing, as their neighbors could all too easily take it as an insult.

Where the offense is obvious, however, such an initiative will not be out of place. Those who have suffered wrong at the hands of their neighbors

⁷⁰ Cf. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 175.

⁷¹ Popma, *Levensbeschouwing*, 181.

⁷² Bash, *Forgiveness*, 10, 64.

might see that these neighbors carry a burden of which they themselves are unaware, one that plagues them in the present and may continue to do so in the future. They may realize that the others are incapable, in their own strength, of expressing regret. If they, in this situation, were to demand immediate apology, they would only make it harder for their neighbors to repent. Their demand for such an apology could in itself form a hindrance to restoration. Those who first demand regret and repentance from their neighbors before considering forgiveness might have good reasons for that. But believers also see that the gospel teaches something different. In the gospel, the indicative of salvation *precedes* the imperative of forgiveness.⁷³ In the same manner as God takes the initiative with humankind, so believers will take the first step with their neighbors. Hence, they may choose to take the initiative to forgive. For who is able, in their own strength, to acknowledge their faults, and to put them behind them? Those who have been wronged may extend a helping hand to them. By forgiving their neighbors, they can put the command of neighborly love into practice. In this way, evil can be overcome by good (Rom 12:21). Unconditional forgiveness, in the sense that the offer to forgive precedes repentance from sin, may be helpful in the process of forgiveness and restoration.

But there is more. An initiative to grant forgiveness before repentance is expressed fits well with the gospel itself. Proceeding from his unfathomable love, God took the initiative to redeem sinners. He granted forgiveness when his own were still enemies (Rom 5:8) and long before they showed any signs of repentance: that is the kind of love he showed to a world that had sinned against him (John 3:16). One example in the Gospels is the forgiveness that Zacchaeus the tax collector received. Jesus wanted to be a guest in his house and accepted him as a brother. It was not until afterward that Zacchaeus made amends.⁷⁴ While this example does not explicitly mention the forgiveness of guilt for any wrong that Zacchaeus had done to Jesus personally, it does demonstrate the application of the social and ethical norm for forgiveness. Here too, it is clear that this forgiveness is not unconditional in the sense that there was no call to repentance. Such an initiative clearly does include a call to repentance. This example also demonstrates that the act of forgiveness is completed by an admission of guilt and a willingness to make amends. Zacchaeus repaid those he had defrauded. Similarly, all believers will want to reflect Jesus in the divine love

⁷³ Torrance speaks of “legalistic” and “evangelical” repentance, and of legalistic and evangelical *metanoia* (Torrance, “Forgiveness,” 308–11).

⁷⁴ Cf. de Lange, “Room for Forgiveness,” 173, 175.

for sinners. How this love is realized in a concrete offer of forgiveness is secondary, as is the specific *moment* when that should take place.

However, in a situation where the confession of guilt does not follow after an offer of forgiveness, the act of forgiveness is not completed. This principle is illustrated in the parable of the king who withdrew his forgiveness of his servant when the latter showed that he had not accepted it. Such acceptance is necessary in the way of confession and repentance.

When people genuinely confess their guilt and are prepared to demonstrate repentance by their actions, then the act of forgiveness is completed. Reconciliation has taken place. The separation has been taken away. What was broken has been healed. Instead of tension, there is now peace. Instead of suspicion, there is now trust, however fragile it may be; there is now a beginning. Where there was silence, people are now speaking to each other again. Here, then, something of the new creation becomes visible; and this new creation is precisely what—in the words of Oliver O’Donovan—the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer asks for: a prayer for discontinuity, for the inauguration of a new righteousness.⁷⁵ This new creation calls for actions that are not determined by the history of the past or the facts of the present. Forgiveness is this kind of action, and as such is a sign of the new creation, one that is not independent of the authority and power that God, in the beginning, has bestowed on humans. “That we should be more than creatures of our past, more than mere continuers of it, that is the gift presupposed in our creation; it is the power which nature’s Creator bestowed on creation’s lord.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Oliver O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology 1: An Induction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 41.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.