

Toward a Theology of Horizontal Forgiveness
NWC Scholarship Symposium 2010
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INTRODUCTION

Key Terms

Sin: A personal offense that causes moral indebtedness and relational estrangement

Forgive: To cancel the debt of sin and to release the offender from his/her moral liability

Repent: To turn from a sinful life, usually at conversion

Faith: To turn toward God by trusting Jesus for salvation

Confess: To regularly acknowledge sins against God

Reconcile: To remove animosity and restore peace in the relationship

Two Directions of Sin—“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you” (Lk. 15:18)

Vertical sins: These are sins against God, e.g., unbelief, idolatry, ritualism, blasphemy

Horizontal sins: These are sins against each other, e.g., stealing, lying, slander, gossip

Two Directions of Forgiveness—“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mt. 6:12)

Vertical forgiveness: God’s forgiveness of those who have sinned against him.

Horizontal forgiveness: Our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us.

Three Types of Vertical Forgiveness

Salvific forgiveness: When we repent from a sinful life, God forgives all our sins (Col. 2:13; I Jn. 2:12).

Sanctifying forgiveness: When we confess our sins, God spiritually cleanses us (Mt. 6:12; I Jn. 1:9).

Isolated forgiveness: God forgives individual sins of unbelievers (Lk. 23:34; Acts 7:60).

Four Views on Horizontal Forgiveness

Victim: Offended denies the wrong or minimizes the injury

Unconditional Forgiveness: Offended forgives the offender unilaterally.

Conditional Forgiveness: Offended requires repentance as condition of forgiveness.

Vindictive: Offended retaliates in behavior (i.e., words, deeds) or attitude (i.e., anger, bitterness, hate).

EXEGESIS OF RELEVANT N.T. PASSAGES ON HORIZONTAL FORGIVENESS

Colossians 3:13--“Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (cf. Eph. 4:32).

- “Forgive” (*charizomai*) means to give freely or to forgive graciously.
- “As” (*kathos*) introduces a comparative clause.
- Paul developed an analogy between God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others.
- The limits of a comparison are established by the immediate literary context (cf. Mt. 5:48).
- The context of Col. 3:13 and Eph. 4:32 consists of relational vices and virtues.
- Vice list includes bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice.
- Virtue list includes compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and love.
- Believers should forgive others graciously like God forgave them.
- Nothing in the words or context implies that repentance should be a condition of forgiveness.
- Failure to practice the virtue of forgiveness will likely result in anger, bitterness, and malice.

Mark 11:25--“And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father may forgive your sins.”

- In the N.T., horizontal forgiveness is often mentioned in the context of prayer.
- Here Jesus taught that effective prayer requires not only faith in God but forgiveness of others.
- “Hold” (echo) can mean to withhold forgiveness (cf. Mt. 5:23).
- No one or nothing, according to Jesus, are to be excluded from our forgiveness.
- “Forgive” (*apiemi*) is an accounting term that means to cancel the debt and release the debtor.
- It was used as a metaphor to cancel debt of sin and to release offender from his/her moral liability.
- In Mk. 11:25, “Forgive” (*apiemi*) is in the imperative mood meaning that it is a command to obey.
- Thus, pre-emptive forgiveness is a decision of the will and act of obedience.
- The offender’s inability or unwillingness to repent should not hinder our fulfillment of this command.
- “So that” (*hina*) introduces a purpose clause which provides the reason for forgiving others.
- Reason for forgiving others: “your Father in heaven may forgive your sins.”
- Jesus promised believers that those who forgive will experience God’s sanctifying forgiveness.

- Nothing in the words or context implies that repentance should be a condition of forgiveness.
- Neither is there any indication that a forgiving attitude is sufficient to fulfill Jesus' command.
- Jesus commanded the actual and unilateral forgiveness of our offenders.

Matthew 6:12--“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

- This plea for forgiveness occurs as the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13; cf. Lk. 11:2-4).
- The Lord's Prayer is the prayer of those who have already experienced God's salvific forgiveness.
- This is an example of the regular confession of sin that results in God's sanctifying forgiveness.
- “Forgive” (*apiemi*) means to cancel debt of sin and to release offender from his/her moral liability.
- “Debt” (*opheilema*) is an accounting term used metaphorically for sin.
- “As” (*hos*) introduces a casual clause which can be translated “because” (cf. Lk. 11:4).
- We pray for God to forgive us because “we also have forgiven our debtors” (aorist tense).
- Our forgiveness of others precedes and serves as the basis of God's sanctifying forgiveness.
- Nothing in the words or context implies that repentance is a necessary condition of forgiveness.
- Neither is there any indication that a forgiving attitude toward others is sufficient.

Mt. 6:14-15 --“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

- “For” (*gar*) introduces an explanatory clause that clarifies our plea for forgiveness.
- Interestingly, the plea for forgiveness is the only petition in the Lord's Prayer to be explained.
- Given our human tendency to withhold forgiveness, this explanation is understandable.
- “Forgive” (*apiemi*) means to cancel debt of sin and to release offender from his/her moral liability.
- “Sin” (*paraptoma*) means a fall, a lapse, a deviation, a sin.
- Positively, if believers forgive others, they can expect God to forgive them.
- Negatively, if believers don't forgive others, they should not expect God to forgive them.
- Sanctifying forgiveness from God is conditioned on our actual forgiveness of others.
- There is nothing easy or simple about forgiving those who have wronged us.

- Yet, in spite of being wronged, we cancel our offender's moral debt.

Matthew 18:15-17--"If your brother sins [against you], go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

- This passage deals with personal sin ("sins against you") between believers ("brothers").
- If an offender refuses to be reconciled, a progressive process of confrontation is required.
- Significantly, neither repentance nor forgiveness are mentioned in this passage.
- In fact, nowhere in the process is it suggested that forgiveness should be withheld.
- "Listen" (*akouo*) means to respond properly; it is never used for repent.
- The purpose of the process is remedial, namely, reconciliation ("you have won your brother").
- This three-step process culminates in church discipline, specifically, exclusion from fellowship.
- It is significant that the church administers this punishment, not the offended believer.
- What about NT passages that encourage us to overlook personal offenses?
- Love, according to Paul, "keeps no record of wrongs" (I Cor. 13:5).
- Love, according to Peter, "covers a multitude of sins" (I Pt. 4:8; cf. Pr. 10:12; 17:9).
- Thus, this passage must be about serious sin where the offender refuses reconciliation.

Matthew 18:21-35 (Parable of Unmerciful Servant)--"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?'" Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

- Peter inquired, “how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me?”
- Jesus responded, “seventy-seven times,” meaning unlimited forgiveness.
- Jesus introduced the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, “the kingdom of heaven is like...”
- The parable is not about financial debt but about the practice of forgiveness in God’s kingdom.
- In this parable, a king wanted to settle accounts with his servants.
- One servant owed the king 10,000 talents (ca. \$5 billion).
- The servant asked for more time to repay the debt.
- The king could have sold the servant into slavery or put him into debtor’s prison.
- Instead, the king had compassion on the servant and forgave his huge debt.
- This servant then ran into a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii (ca. \$2,100).
- The second servant pled for more time, using the same words as the first servant earlier.
- Nonetheless, the first servant had the second servant thrown into debtor’s prison.
- The first servant had every right to collect this debt; after all, it was owed him.
- But, his refusal to release the debt revealed his lack of gratitude for the cancellation of his debt.
- For his failure to show mercy, the king severely punished the first servant.
- Jesus’ conclusion: “This is how your heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (18:35).
- Thus, out of gratitude for God’s forgiveness of us, we should graciously forgive others.

Luke 6:37-38a--“Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give and it will be given to you.”

- Preceding these verses is Jesus’ instructions on love and mercy (Lk. 6:27-36).
- Jesus provided two negative examples of love and mercy: don’t judge and don’t condemn
- Jesus also provided two positive examples of love and mercy: forgive and give.
- “Forgive” (*aphiemi*) is in the imperative mood meaning that it is a command to obey.
- It is interesting that even though God judges and condemns, he does not allow us to.

- But he does, however, share with us his qualities of giving and forgiving.
- And like God, both our giving and our forgiving should be gracious and generous.
- “And” (*kai*) introduces a result clause and can be translated “so that.”
- Thus, believers forgive others so that they “will be forgiven” (divine passive).
- Since believers already have salvific forgiveness, this must refer to sanctifying forgiveness.

Luke 11:4--“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.”

- This petition is found in Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (cf. Mt. 6:9-13).
- In this petition, believers pray for God’s sanctifying forgiveness.
- “For” (*gar*) introduces a causal clause and can be translated “because.”
- Thus, the basis of our plea for God’s forgiveness is our actual forgiveness of others.
- Nothing in the words or context implies that repentance is a necessary condition of forgiveness.
- Neither is there any indication that a forgiving attitude toward others is sufficient.

Luke 23:34--“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

- Jesus uttered this prayer while hanging from the cross.
- Specifically, he prayed for the forgiveness of the Roman soldiers who crucified him.
- For what does Jesus forgive them? Is it for all their sins against God?
- Jesus was capable of forgiving humans sins against God (cf. Mk. 2:5-10; Lk. 7:47-50).
- But Jesus did not say, “your sins are forgiven,” absolving them of their sins against God.
- Moreover, it is unlikely that all their sins were done in ignorance.
- Instead Jesus pled for their forgiveness for the sin of executing an innocent man.
- Jesus’ plea implies that the offense was against him personally.
- It also indicates that Jesus had already granted his own personal forgiveness.
- Yet, there is no indication that the Roman soldiers repented of their sin.

Acts 7:60--“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

- This is the prayer of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.
- Stephen uttered this prayer while being stoned to death for his faith in Christ.
- “Hold” (*istemi*) can mean to withhold forgiveness (cf. II Tim. 4:16; Rev. 2:4, 14, 20).
- Stephen plead that God would forgive his executioners much like Jesus did.
- Stephen’s plea indicates that he had already granted his personal forgiveness.

Luke 17:3-4 “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.”

- This passage deals with personal sin (“sins against you”) between believers (“brothers”).
- “Rebuke” (*epitimao*), which means to admonish and to reprove, is in the imperative mood.
- “Repent” (*metanoeo*) means to turn from.
- In the next verse, the sin is repeated “seven times a day.”
- If the offender “comes back” (*epistrepho*) and “repents” (*metanoeo*), he must be forgiven.
- These words are used only here in regard to horizontal forgiveness.
- In Acts, they are associated with conversion (e.g., 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20).
- It is significant that the penitent brother simply utters the words, “I repent.”
- There is no requirement of remorse or confession or restitution.
- Thus, believers cannot withhold forgiveness from penitent brothers.
- What about the forgiveness of unbelievers? This issue is not addressed by this passage.
- To use this passage in this way would be an argument from silence.
- What about the forgiveness of unrepentant believers?
- Again, this issue is not addressed by this passage.
- And again, it would be an argument from silence to use this passage in this way.
- But, is the converse of the conditional statement, “if he repents, forgive him,” true?
- According to deontic logic, there are two possibilities for the converse.

- First option: If he does not repent, you must not forgive him.
- Second option: If he does not repent, you may or may not forgive him.
- Since there are two possibilities, the converse must be determined by context.
- Given the broader context of Jesus' teaching, the second option is the better choice.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INTERPRETIVE CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Interpretive Conclusions

- .The best exegetical commentaries support these interpretations.
- Thus, the preponderance of the exegetical evidence supports unconditional forgiveness
- Believers should forgive others graciously like God forgave them (Col. 3:13; Eph. 4:32).
- Jesus commanded believers to forgive others (Mk. 11:25; Lk. 6:38).
- Our prior forgiveness of others is the basis of our plea for God's forgiveness (Mt. 6:12; Lk. 11:4).
- God's forgiveness of us is conditioned on our actual forgiveness of others (Mt. 6:14-15).
- As a result of our forgiveness of others, God forgives us (Mk. 11:25; Lk. 6:38).
- Believers should forgive others out of gratitude for God's forgiveness of them (Mt. 18:21-35).
- If a believer repents, we should forgive him/her (Lk. 17:3-4).
- If a brother refuses reconciliation, we should follow a formal process of confrontation (Mt. 18:15-17).
- Jesus practiced the unconditional forgiveness that he preached (Lk. 23:34; cf. Acts 7:60).

Motivation for Unconditional Forgiveness

Obedience to the Command of Jesus

- On two different occasions, Jesus commanded his disciples to forgive others.
- Nothing in the words or context implies that repentance should be a condition of forgiveness.
- Neither is there any evidence that a forgiving attitude is sufficient to fulfill Jesus' command.

Gratitude for God's Salvific Forgiveness

- God has forgiven believers a great debt for their sins against him.

- Believers should show that same grace and mercy to those who have wronged them.

Humility about Human Condition

- Human are finite and fallen, living in a broken world.
- Because we are finite, our perspective and knowledge are limited.
- Because we are fallen, our perspective is skewed and our knowledge is tainted.
- Given the reality of the human condition, horizontal sins are bound to happen.
- Sometimes we are innocent victims of evil actions done with evil intentions.
- More often we add to relational problems through our actions and inactions.
- In other words, we contribute actively and passively to the escalation of hostility.
- When it comes time to resolve these problems, we are hardly objective in our assessment.
- Given our bias, we will rarely be fair in judging motives or considering circumstances.
- For the sake of Christian community, we should forgive each other pre-emptively.
- This will allow us to diffuse the situation and to move beyond the relational impasse.

Avoid Tendency toward Bitterness

- When wronged, our human tendency is to payback our offender either actively or passively.
- Withholding forgiveness until the offender repents becomes a way to repay the offense.
- Yet, no amount of repentance can ever really undo the harm and merit our forgiveness.
- Extending forgiveness is always an act of mercy and grace.
- Withholding forgiveness requires us to keep a record of wrongs (I Cor. 13:5).
- Such record keeping leads to the nursing of grudges.
- Withholding forgiveness results in anger, bitterness, resentment, hate (Col. 3:13; Eph. 4:32).

Unconditional Forgiveness Does not...

Deny the wrong

- The offender did in fact sin against us.
- The offender incurred a moral debt for their wrongdoing.

Minimize the injury

- The offender's sin caused harm, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.
- Moreover, the offender's sin has created estrangement (alienation).
- Although forgiveness can be instantaneous, it will take time for the wound to heal.

Eliminate the consequences of the wrongdoing

- Sometimes there are natural consequences for actions.
- Other times there is judicial accountability and consequences.
- The pursuit of justice is not contrary to granting forgiveness.
- God may punish someone directly, either in this life or the next.
- God may impose punishment through designated authorities, i.e., church and state.

Unconditional Forgiveness Does...

Release the offender from his/her moral liability

- We graciously choose to cancel the moral debt caused by the offender's sin.
- We pardon the offender from their wrongdoing without any strings attached.
- This unilateral forgiveness is modeled after God's gracious forgiveness of us.
- We pre-emptively forgive others in gratitude to God and obedience to Christ.

Refuse to take vengeance

- We choose not to take matters into our own hands.
- We assure our offender that personal retribution will not be made.
- We will not retaliate through behavior (i.e., words and actions).
- Neither will we retaliate through attitude (i.e., anger, bitterness, hate).
- Instead we will love our offender through sincere care and concern.

Open the way for reconciliation

- We ultimately hope that our pre-emptive forgiveness will result in reconciliation.
- But, we realize that this will take the best efforts of both parties.

What is Reconciliation?

- As important as is the concept of reconciliation, it is not frequently mentioned in the N.T.
- The verb “reconcile” (*katallasso*) means to change, to exchange, and to reconcile.
- Five references to reconciliation with God (cf. Rom. 5:10; II Cor. 5:18, 19, 20).
- One reference to reconciliation between an alienated husband and wife (cf. I Cor. 7:11).
- The noun “reconciliation” (*katallage*) means exchanging, reconciliation, and restoration.
- All five references refer to reconciliation with God (cf. Rom. 5:11; 11:15; II Cor. 5:18, 19).
- A compound verb, *apokatalasso*, occurs in Ephesians 2:15-18.
- “His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Eph. 2:15-16).
- Those who are reconciled to God should have peace not only with God but with each other.
- Only one other verse in the Greek N.T. refers to reconciliation between believers.
- “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Mtl 5:23-25).
- Greek verb “reconciled” (*diallassomai*) means to change or to reconcile.
- Although this verb occurs only here in the Greek N.T., its meaning is clear.
- Believers are to address issues of sin against each other so that relationships can be restored.
- In this passage, Jesus placed the responsibility for pursuing reconciliation on the offender.
- While forgiveness can be unilateral, reconciliation requires the best efforts of both parties.
- “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom. 12:18).

RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON FORGIVENESS

Proponents of Unconditional Forgiveness

Robert Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice*

Robert Jeffress, *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense*

R.T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness*

John MacArthur, Jr., *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*

John Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?*

Proponents of Conditional Forgiveness

Jay Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*

Chris Braun, *Unpacking Forgiveness*

Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*