

The Case for Unconditional Forgiveness

Randy Nelson, Professor of N.T. Studies, Northwestern College
Evangelical Theological Society Regional Conference (3/19/10)

INTRODUCTION

Two Important Distinctions

Before looking at the case for unconditional forgiveness, it will be helpful to make two important distinctions and to describe the different views. The first distinction is between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of each other. The N.T. itself implies this distinction in such verses as Mt. 6:12, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." While praying for God to forgive our sins against him, we acknowledge that we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. For our purposes, we will call the former vertical forgiveness and the latter horizontal forgiveness. Another helpful distinction is between God's initial forgiveness that occurs at conversion and God's ongoing forgiveness that occurs throughout the Christian life. The initial forgiveness usually requires repentance and results in the forgiveness of all our sins (cf. Col. 2:13; I Jn. 2:12). Since this forgiveness results in salvation, we will call it salvific forgiveness. There is another kind of forgiveness that a believer seeks through the regular confession of sins (cf. Mt. 6:12; Acts 19:18; James 5:15; I Jn. 1:9). Since this forgiveness results in ongoing spiritual cleansing, we will call it sanctifying forgiveness.

Four Views on Horizontal Forgiveness

When it comes to horizontal forgiveness, four views can be plotted on a continuum between passive and aggressive. Two of these views are extreme. On the extreme passive side of the continuum, the offended chooses to do nothing when wronged. Instead, he/she plays the victim by denying the wrong or minimizing the injury. On the extreme aggressive side of the continuum, the offended attempts to retaliate against the offender either by behavior (i.e., abusive words and actions) or by attitude (i.e., anger, bitterness, hate). While Christians sometimes practice these extremes, neither are biblical.

On the literature about horizontal forgiveness, Christians are divided between conditional and unconditional forgiveness. Before distinguishing these views, it will be helpful to understand what they have in common. First, both views agree that the offense was wrong and that the injury was real. They further agree that a personal offense incurs a moral debt. In forgiveness, the offended releases the offender from his/her moral liability. Second, both views believe that a personal offense damages the relationship resulting in estrangement between the two parties. Third, both agree that it is wrong either to play the victim or to seek vengeance. Fourth, both views believe that there are consequences, natural and judicial, that follow wrongdoing even when forgiveness is granted. Fifth, both views agree that our forgiveness of others should be modeled after God's forgiveness of us, even if they disagree on what it means to forgive

like God. Sixth, both views have as the end goal reconciliation, the restoration of a trusting relationship. Although these two Christian views have much in common, they differ on the means of accomplishing reconciliation. In particular, what role, if any, does repentance play in horizontal forgiveness?

For advocates of conditional forgiveness, forgiveness is bilateral. The offender must first repent before the offended can forgive him/her. Repentance, according to this view, should include remorse, confession, and restitution. Until the offender repents in this manner, the offended is obligated to withhold forgiveness. Ardel Caneday comments, "let us withhold forgiveness of sin from those who refuse to repent, but let us hold a forgiving posture."¹ For conditional forgiveness, reconciliation automatically follows forgiveness. Chris Braun states, "The Bible never speaks of God's forgiveness apart from reconciliation."² Two passages are commonly used to support conditional forgiveness. The first passage is Col. 3:13, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (cf. Eph. 4:32). Jay Adams concludes, "forgiveness is modeled after God's forgiveness which is unmistakably conditioned on repentance and faith."³ The second passage seems to confirm this conclusion: "if he repents, forgive him" (Lk. 17:3). Ken Sande says, "Ideally, repentance should precede forgiveness (Luke 17:3)...however, minor offenses may be overlooked and put away even if the offender has not expressly repented. Your spontaneous forgiveness in these cases can put the matter behind you and save you and the other person from needless controversy."⁴ Although not all advocates of conditional forgiveness would agree, Sande allows for unconditional forgiveness in the case of minor offenses.

For advocates of unconditional forgiveness, forgiveness is unilateral. The offended graciously forgives the offender to begin the process of reconciliation. Robert Jeffress says, "Remember that forgiveness is not synonymous with reconciliation, restoration, or even releasing a person of consequences that might arise from their wrong."⁵ Support for unconditional forgiveness is found in the teachings and example of Jesus. In Mk. 11:25, Jesus commanded his disciples, "if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins." In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to forgive unconditionally: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt. 6:12; cf. Lk. 11:4). In Lk. 6:37, Jesus commanded his disciples, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Jesus not only preached unconditional forgiveness, according to this view, he practiced it. While hanging from the cross, Jesus prayed for his executioners: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk.23:34; cf. Acts 7:60). John MacArthur summarizes well the position of unconditional forgiveness: "This kind of forgiveness involves a deliberate decision to cover the other person's offense...It is a choice made by the offended party to set aside the other person's transgression and not permit the offense to cause a breach in the

¹ Ardel Caneday, "On Forgiving and Forgiveness: The Sin of 'Unconditional Forgiveness,'" n.p. [cited 22 February 2010]. Online: <http://trsbu.blogspot.com/2009/02/sin-of-unconditional-forgiveness.html>.

² Chris Braun, *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008), 58.

³ Jay Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving* (Amityville, New York: Calvary Press, 1994), 34

⁴ Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 210.

⁵ Robert Jeffress, *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense* (Colorado Springs, Waterbrook Press, 2000), 77.

relationship or fester in bitterness.”⁶ Although not all advocates of unconditional forgiveness would agree, MacArthur allows for conditional forgiveness for serious sins through a formal process of confrontation culminating in church discipline.

RELEVANT NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES

Forgive Others as God Forgave You

Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13. In two of his letters, the Apostle Paul developed an analogy comparing our forgiveness of others to God’s forgiveness of us: “Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col. 3:13; cf. Eph. 4:32). But what does this mean? Commenting on this verse, Ardel Caneday states, “How does God grant forgiveness to us? We who confess our sins and repent of our sinful deeds find that God faithfully and righteously absolves us of the debt we incur by our sin.”⁷ For proponents of conditional forgiveness, since God requires repentance as a condition of forgiveness, so should we. But, how do advocates of unconditional forgiveness interpret this verse? John MacArthur, Jr. says, “To make conditionality the gist of Christlike forgiving seems to miss the whole point of what Scripture is saying. When Scripture instructs us to forgive in the manner we have been forgiven, what is in view is not the idea of withholding forgiveness until the offender expresses repentance...The emphasis is on forgiving freely, generously, willingly, eagerly, speedily—and from the heart.”⁸ For advocates of unconditional forgiveness, since God forgives graciously, so should we.

In Eph. 4:32 and Col. 3:13, Paul does not use the common N.T. word for “forgive” (*aphiemi*).⁹ Instead he uses the Greek verb *charizomai*, the semantic range of which includes: give freely and forgive graciously.¹⁰ Regarding *charizomai*, Douglas Moo states that it “conveys the idea that forgiving others is an act of grace, freely offered, often ‘not deserved.’”¹¹ In Eph. 4:32 and Col. 3:13, *charizomai* is in the present tense emphasizing the ongoing nature of our gracious forgiveness of others.

Also in both passages, Paul uses the Greek conjunction *kathos* which can introduce either a causal clause or a comparative clause.¹² Most commentaries argue that Paul intends to communicate both cause and comparison. Peter O’Brien states, “The introductory ‘just as also’ has both comparative and causal force (cf. 5:2, 25, 29): what God has done ‘in Christ’ for believers...provides both the paradigm of and the grounds

⁶ John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1998), 122.

⁷ Caneday, “On Forgiving,” n.p.

⁸ MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, 118-119.

⁹ In his writings, Paul used the verb, “forgive” (*aphiemi*), only once (Rom. 4:7). He used the noun, “forgiveness” (*aphesis*), twice (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14).

¹⁰ The Greek verb *charizomai* occurs in its verbal form 23 times, 10 of which refer to the forgiveness of sins. Of these 10 references to forgiveness of sins, half refer to vertical forgiveness (cf. Lk. 7:42, 43; Eph. 4:32b; Col. 2:13; 3:13b) and half to horizontal forgiveness (cf. II Cor. 2:7, 10; 12:13; Eph. 4:32a; Col. 3:13a).

¹¹ Douglas Moo, *Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 279.

¹² Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 674-75.

for their behavior.”¹³ While God’s forgiveness of us surely provides the basis for our forgiveness of others (cf. Mt. 18:23-35), in this passage Paul is more likely emphasizing the comparative nature of God’s forgiveness. Andrew Lincoln rightly observes, “Such statements introduced by *kathos kai* have been called ‘the conformity pattern’ and function within exhortations to show Christ’s or God’s saving activity as prototypical for believers’ conduct.”¹⁴ For introducing a comparative clause, *kathos* can be translated: as, even as, just as, like, in the same way, in the same manner. Thus, in Eph. 4:32 and Col. 3:13, Paul is making a comparison between the way God forgave us and the way we should forgive others. In other words, vertical forgiveness provides a model for horizontal forgiveness.

In Eph. 4:32 and Col. 3:13 was Paul exhorting believers to forgive others in exactly the same way that God forgave them? Comparisons, by their very nature, are limited. Or, as the saying goes, “Every analogy breaks down.” This is especially true with divine/human comparisons. But, how should the limits of a comparison be determined? A good hermeneutic would require that the limits be established by the theology of the author as well as the immediate context of the comparison. It would be unreasonable to treat Paul’s comparison as an ink blot into which we read our own personal theologies. Neither should we read into Paul’s comparison the entirety of Old and New Testament theologies of vertical forgiveness. It is unlikely that Paul intended by this comparison that the offender should sacrifice of an unblemished animal to atone for the personal sin? Or that the offended has the right to judge and condemn those who fail to repent? At minimum, the meaning of Paul’s comparison should be limited by his theology.

So what is Paul’s theology of vertical forgiveness? Paul says little about God’s forgiveness of human sins and the need for repentance. Within the Pauline corpus, Paul refers six times to vertical forgiveness (cf. Rom. 4:7; Eph. 1:7; 4:32; Col. 1:14; 2:14; 3:13). He uses the verb “repent” (*metanoeo*) only once (II Cor. 12:21) and the noun “repentance” (*metanoia*) four times (cf. Rom. 2:4; II Cor. 7:9, 10; II Tim. 2:24). Donald Guthrie rightly concludes, “If we assess Paul’s approach by the number of times he uses the verb ‘repent’ or the noun ‘repentance,’ we shall have to conclude that he had little interest in the subject.”¹⁵ Given the rarity of Paul’s reference to repentance, it is unlikely that it played a role in his comparison, “forgive as God forgave you.”

Paul’s understanding of vertical forgiveness is subsumed in his doctrine of justification by faith. Regarding Paul’s view of justification, Donald Guthrie comments, “His doctrine of justification has to do with God’s provision for the sinner, but he never suggests that man himself has no part in it. God’s gift of righteousness needs only one response, i.e., to be received.”¹⁶ The role of forgiveness in Paul’s doctrine of justification can be seen when Paul appealed to Ps. 32:1-2: “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the

¹³ Peter O’Brien, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 352.

¹⁴ Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 309.

¹⁵ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1981), 589.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 590.

man whose sin the Lord will never count against him” (Rom. 4:6-8). In these verses, Paul equated God’s credit of righteousness to believers with God’s forgiveness of their sins. If this was Paul’s understanding of God’s forgiveness of believers, should believers imitate God by declaring righteous those whom they forgive? This hardly seems reasonable. But, then, what does Paul mean by the comparison, “forgive as God forgave you?”

The second way to establish the limits of a comparison is to consider the immediate context in which it occurs. An instructive example of this can be seen in Mt. 5:48, where Jesus commanded, “Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Did Jesus command perfection in all areas, such as knowledge, power, and righteousness? The context of Mt. 5:48 is about love not only for neighbors but for enemies. Just as God provides sun and rain for the righteous and the wicked, so should believers show mercy to their enemies. This mercy is more than a sympathetic attitude; it involves acts of benevolence, kindness, and generosity. So then, believers are to be perfect like their heavenly Father in the practice of mercy. This is confirmed by the parallel passage in Luke 6:36, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

What is the immediate context of Eph. 4:32 and Col. 3:13? Preceding these two verses, Paul compared two lists: a vice list that characterized our pagan life and a virtue list that should characterize our Christian life. The vice lists in Ephesians and Colossians include: bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice. According to Paul, believers should remove these vices from their lives and put into practice a variety of virtues, such as compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love. It is significant that the vices and virtues listed by Paul are relational in nature. Andrew Lincoln correctly observes, “In contrast to the vices so destructive to harmonious relationships, the qualities now enjoined are those conducive to communal living.”¹⁷ Among the virtues that should characterize Christians, Paul lists forgiveness. In the context of Ephesians and Colossians, the virtue of forgiveness stands in stark contrast to the hostility and bitterness that disrupted our previous relationships. The forgiveness that now characterizes us as believers stands in continuity with the virtues of kindness and compassion. Walter Liefeld states: “It is the attitudes of grace, mercy, kindness and compassion that make forgiveness possible in our relationships.”¹⁸ So then, our forgiveness of others should be like God’s forgiveness in kindness and compassion.

Nothing in the words or the context of Eph. 4:32 or Col. 3:13 suggest that believers should require repentance as a condition for forgiving others. Moreover, none of the commentaries considered for this study argued that Paul’s comparison included the requirement of repentance. They all agreed that a believer’s practice of forgiveness should be like God’s in grace, mercy, kindness, and compassion. They also agreed that certain vices, such as anger and bitterness, characterize those who withhold forgiveness. Klyne Snodgrass states well the conclusion of these commentaries: “What forgiveness does accomplish is the rejection of bitterness, malice, and revenge.

¹⁷ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 309.

¹⁸ Walter Liefeld, *Ephesians* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1997), 122.

We do not control the actions of others, but in choosing to forgive we establish control over our own responses. We choose to value the other person despite his or her offense and to desire what is good for that person before God. Forgiveness also restores relations, or at least provides a foundation on which they can be restored.¹⁹ As the offended, we take the first step toward restoration by extending forgiveness to the offender.

Aside from imitating God's mercy in forgiveness, what else does the N.T. teach about horizontal forgiveness? Jesus actually had much to say about how his followers should forgive others. After a careful study of one passage in Mark and three in Matthew, we will examine five passages in Luke-Acts.

Jesus Commanded Believers to Forgive Others Unconditionally

Mark 11:25. One of Jesus' clearest teachings on horizontal forgiveness is found in Mk. 11:25, where he said, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your sins." This verse occurs on the heels of Jesus' cleansing of the temple and cursing of the fig tree (11:12-19). Jesus used this opportunity to teach on the power of prayer that results from faith and forgiveness (11:20-26). For Jesus, both faith in God and forgiveness of others are prerequisites of effective prayer. James Edwards comments, "The final instruction in v. 25 is about forgiveness of sins, which is the feature of faith that most perfectly epitomizes God's nature."²⁰ It is often the case in the N.T. that horizontal forgiveness is mentioned in the context of prayer. This is true not only in this verse but in the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:12; Lk. 11:4), Jesus' prayer from the cross (Lk. 23:34), and Stephen's prayer for his killers (Acts 7:60).

How is Mk. 11:25 interpreted by advocates of conditional forgiveness? Commenting on this verse, Jay Adams states, "His prayer is to God, and since he is not granting God forgiveness, in the verse the word 'forgive' must be used by extension to express the willingness to forgive another."²¹ Ardel Caneday calls this willingness to forgive a "forgiving posture."²² For advocates of conditional forgiveness, the offended should maintain a forgiving attitude toward the offender. Actual forgiveness, however, should not be granted until the offender repents. How do proponents of unconditional forgiveness interpret Mk. 11:25? Regarding this verse, John MacArthur comments, "That describes an immediate forgiveness granted to the offender with no formal meeting or transaction required. It necessarily refers to a pardon that is wholly unilateral, because this forgiveness takes place while the forgiver stands praying."²³ For proponents of unconditional forgiveness, the offended is called upon by Mk. 11:25 to grant actual forgiveness even if the offender does not repent.

¹⁹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 264-65.

²⁰ James Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 348.

²¹ Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 31.

²² Caneday, "On Forgiving," n.p.

²³ MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, 121.

In Mk. 11:25, the conjunction “if” (*eī*) introduces a first class conditional sentence in which the protasis (if-clause) is assumed to be true for the sake of argument.²⁴ What is assumed true is that “you hold anything against anyone.” The Greek verb for “hold” is *echo*, which is used in the N.T. for withholding forgiveness (cf. Acts 7:60; Rev. 2:4). So, for the sake of argument, it is assumed that believers may come to prayer while withholding forgiveness from others. Given the human tendency to withhold forgiveness, this is probably a safe assumption even for believers who have experienced God’s salvific forgiveness. The words “anything” (*ti*) and “anyone” (*tis*) are indefinite pronouns, making this verse inclusive. This means that no offense or offender is to be excluded from our forgiveness.

The apodasis (then-clause) in this verse is simply, “forgive [him].”²⁵ The Greek verb for forgive is *aphiemi*, which is the most commonly used word for forgive in the Greek N.T.²⁶ The semantic range of this verb includes: let go, release, cancel, pardon, and forgive. Although originally an accounting term, this word was used as a metaphor for the forgiveness of sins. But, what is emphasized by this metaphor, the cancellation of the debt or the release of the debtor? Some scholars argue that the debtor is emphasized: “it is debtors that are forgiven, not ‘debts.’”²⁷ Other scholars argue that it is the debt that is emphasized: “The Greek idiom makes it clear that the direct object that is to be forgiven is our ‘debts,’ not us.”²⁸ In Lk. 6:37, it is clearly the debtor who is forgiven: “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” In Mt. 6:12, Jesus probably intended to communicate that both the debt and the debtor were forgiven. Thus, “forgive” (*aphiemi*) means to cancel the debt of sin and to release the offender from his/her moral liability. In Mk. 11:25, “forgive” is in the present tense and imperative mood, meaning that forgiving others is commanded as an ongoing action.²⁹ There is no indication in this command that a forgiving attitude is sufficient. Jesus here is commanding the ongoing practice of actual forgiveness. Thinking about forgiveness or feeling forgiving fall short. Also, nothing in the context of Mk. 11:25 suggests that repentance is an implied condition of horizontal forgiveness. It is significant that none of the commentaries consulted for this study identified such an implication.

Behind the NIV phrase, “so that,” is the Greek conjunction *hina*; it usually introduces a purpose clause and is better translated as “in order that.”³⁰ Thus, the purpose for our ongoing, inclusive forgiveness of others is God’s sanctifying forgiveness of us: “your Father in heaven may forgive your sins.”³¹ Regarding Mk. 11:25, Craig Evans

²⁴ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 690-694.

²⁵ The personal pronoun “him” is not in the Greek text. It has been added in the NIV for clarity.

²⁶ This Greek verb occurs 142 times, only 45 of which refer to the forgiveness of sins. The semantic range of noun form of this verb, *aphesis*, includes: release from obligation, liberation, and forgiveness. This Greek noun occurs 17 times, 15 of which refer to forgiveness of sins.

²⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 147. See also R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 250.

²⁸ Caneday, “On Forgiving,” np.

²⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 485.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 677.

³¹ The Greek word for sin in Mk. 11:25 is *paraptoma*. Its semantic range includes: false step, fall, lapse, deviation, offense, and sin. This noun occurs 28 times in the Greek N.T., always with reference to sin.

comments, “one’s own forgiveness of others must grow out of one’s being forgiven. Therefore, to be forgiven and not forgiving, to have obtained mercy and not be merciful, is in reality to have failed to experience God’s gracious acceptance and makes a mockery out of prayer as understood in vv 22-24 as an expression of one’s relationship to God.”³²

What can we conclude about horizontal forgiveness from Mk. 11:25? First, our forgiveness of others, like our faith in God, impacts our prayers. Our prayers to our heavenly Father will be hindered if we come with either unbelief or the lack of actual forgiveness. Second, our forgiveness of others is to be inclusive, meaning that no one or no offense is to be excluded from our ongoing forgiveness of others. Nothing in the words or the context implies that our forgiveness of others should be conditioned on their repentance. Third, the reason we are forgiving toward others is that we continue to expect our heavenly Father to be forgiving toward us. Robert Stein summarizes well the scholarly interpretation of Mark 11:25, “This saying gives an additional condition for having one’s prayers answered, especially the prayer for personal forgiveness. Those who want to be forgiven of their ‘trespasses’...must forgive those who have offended them.”³³ There is nothing easy or simple about forgiving those who have wronged us. Yet, in spite of being wronged, believers are called to cancel the debt of sin and to release the offender from his/her moral liability. This pre-emptive forgiveness is a decision of the will and an act of obedience.

Matthew 6:12-15. Another passage on horizontal forgiveness is found in the Lord’s Prayer, Matthew 6:9-13. Verse 12 constitutes the fifth petition of this corporate prayer. Jesus taught his disciple to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Of the seven petitions in the Lord’s Prayer, this is the only one with an explanation and condition: “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” (6:14-15). It appears that the requests for physical sustenance and spiritual deliverance are self-explanatory. Forgiveness, on the other hand, will require some clarification from Jesus. Given the human tendency to withhold forgiveness, this need is understandable. So important is horizontal forgiveness that Jesus makes it a condition of vertical forgiveness. Commenting on Mt. 6:14-15, Donald Hagner rightly concludes, “These verses are a forceful way of making the significant point that it is unthinkable—impossible—that we can enjoy God’s forgiveness without in turn extending our forgiveness toward others.”³⁴

How is Mt. 6:12-15 interpreted by proponents of conditional forgiveness? Although repentance is not stated as a condition of forgiveness, they argue, it is implied. Commenting on these verses, Chris Braun states, “It is true in these verses that Jesus does not explicitly utter a condition of repentance. However, the requirement is

24 times it refers to sins against God while 4 times it refers to human sins against each other (cf. Mt. 6:14, 15; 18:35; Mk. 11:25). The Greek word *paraptoma* is largely synonymous with *hamartia*.

³² Craig Evans, *Mark, 8:27-16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 193.

³³ Robert Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 520-21.

³⁴ Donald Hagner, *Matthew* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 152.

implicit.”³⁵ Ardel Caneday agrees with this interpretation: “Jesus’ unstated assumption, of course, is that the person has repented.”³⁶ What about advocates of unconditional forgiveness? R.T. Kendall says, “This petition is both a plea for forgiveness and a claim that we have already forgiven those who have hurt us.”³⁷ Nothing in the words or context of these verses suggests that repentance is implied or that a forgiving attitude is sufficient until the condition of repentance is met.

It is important to keep in mind that the Lord’s Prayer is the prayer of Christians, those who have already experienced God’s salvific forgiveness of all their sins at their conversion (cf. Col. 2:13; I Jn. 2:12). David Turner puts it this way: “Prayer for ongoing forgiveness (6:12) implies that the disciple has made the decisive turn from sin to God demanded by the message of the kingdom (3:2; 4:17)...When disciples pray for pardon, they recognize that they are not yet perfect—their attitudes and actions often fall short of kingdom standards (cf. 5:3, 6).”³⁸ The fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, then, represents the regular confession of sin and ongoing plea for sanctifying forgiveness that should characterize believer’s prayers (cf. Acts 19:18; James 5:15-16; I Jn. 1:9).

In Mt. 6:12, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Forgive us our debts.” The verb “forgive” (*aphiemi*) means to cancel the debt of sin and to release the offender from his/her moral liability. In this verse, “forgive” (*aphiemi*) is in the aorist tense and imperative mood. While the imperative mood is the mood of command, it can also be used as an entreaty.³⁹ Also, nothing in the word “forgive” (*aphiemi*) implies or requires repentance. Someone can readily cancel a debt and pardon a debtor without a prior request. Just as a debtor can unilaterally be released from his/her debt, so an offender can pre-emptively be forgiven for his/her sin. The Greek word for “debt” is *opheilema*.⁴⁰ The semantic range of this accounting term includes: what is legally owed, debt.⁴¹ Robert Mounce notes, “Behind the Greek *opheleima* (‘debt, one’s due’) is the Aramaic *haba*, which was used figuratively of sin as moral debt.”⁴² When we sin against God and others, we incur a moral debt. This moral liability must be paid by the offender through restitution or cancelled by the offended through forgiveness.

In the second half of the fifth petition, Jesus’ taught his disciples to pray, “as we also have forgiven our debtors.” The same Greek verb “forgive” (*aphiemi*) is used here as in the beginning of the petition. This time, however, the verb is in the aorist tense and the indicative mood. With this mood, the aorist tense points to past action. In other words, our petition to God for his forgiveness follows our previous forgiveness of others. This verse says nothing about having a forgiving attitude while withholding forgiveness until

³⁵ Braun, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 146.

³⁶ Caneday, “On Forgiving,” n.p. See also Braun, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 146.

³⁷ R.T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness* (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2007), 81

³⁸ David Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 188.

³⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 486.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ The word *opheilema* occurs only twice in the Greek N.T. (cf. Mt. 6:12; Rom. 4:4). In Mt. 6:12, “debt” is being used as a metaphor for sin or offense. Matthew’s use of “sin” (*paraptoma*) in vss. 14-15 and Luke’s use of “sin” (*hamartia*) in the Lukan parallel (Lk. 11:4) confirms this.

⁴² Robert Mounce, *Matthew* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1990), 57.

our offender repents. This verse is about the actual forgiveness of sins, whether repentance from our offender is forthcoming or not. Craig Blomberg observes, “Our pleas for continued forgiveness as believers, requesting the restoration of fellowship with God following the alienation that sin produces, is predicated on our having forgiven those who have sinned against us.”⁴³ The failure of offenders to acknowledge their sins should not hinder the offended from fulfilling his/her duty to forgive those sins. Why should the offended be held hostage by the offender’s inability or unwillingness to repent?

The second use of the verb “forgive” (*aphiemi*) in the fifth petition is preceded by the Greek conjunction “as” (*hos*): “Forgive us our debts **as** we have forgiven our debtors.” This conjunction can introduce a variety of subordinate clauses: comparative (“as”), causal (“because”), temporal (“while”), and result (“so that”). The specific meaning is determined by context. In this context, two possibilities stand out: comparative and causal. If “as” (*hos*) introduces a comparative clause, then a proper translation would be: as, like, in the same way, in the same manner. Thus, a comparison is being made between the way we have forgiven others and how we want God to forgive us.⁴⁴ But, since humans are finite and fallen, it seems unlikely that horizontal forgiveness would provide a model for vertical forgiveness.

The other possibility is that “as” (*hos*) introduces a causal clause and can be translated as: because or since. So, we are able to request vertical forgiveness because we have already granted horizontal forgiveness. This interpretation is consistent with Luke’s parallel account of the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our sins, **for** we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (Lk. 11:4). The conjunction “for” (*gar*) follows the main clause and introduces a causal clause; it could rightly be translated as “because.”⁴⁵ Since “as” (*hos*) can also introduce a causal clause, Matthew’s rendition of the Lord’s Prayer could rightly be translated: “Forgive us our debts **because** we have forgiven our debtors.” But, our vertical forgiveness is not automatically the result of our horizontal forgiveness. Nor is our horizontal forgiveness meritorious. Michael Wilkins rightly comments, “Those who have received forgiveness are so possessed with gratitude to God that they in turn will eagerly forgive those who are ‘debtors’ to them.”⁴⁶ Thus, our forgiveness of others is an expression of gratitude for the salvific forgiveness we have already received through faith in the atoning work of Christ. In the Lord’s Prayer, our forgiveness of others precedes and serves as the basis of our plea for forgiveness from God. We dare not withhold forgiveness from others while pleading for God’s sanctifying forgiveness. Leon Morris concludes, “we have no right to seek forgiveness for our own sins if we are withholding forgiveness from others.”⁴⁷ Moreover, it seems precarious to make our obedience to Christ’s command to forgive others dependent on the actions or inactions of those who have offended us.

⁴³ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Louisville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 120.

⁴⁴ Strangely, Braun reverses the comparison in Mt. 6:12, “In Matthew 6, Jesus told the disciples to forgive as God forgives,” in *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 146.

⁴⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 674.

⁴⁶ Michael Wilkins, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 279.

⁴⁷ Morris, *Matthew*, 147.

The conjunction “for” (*gar*) at the beginning of vs. 14 introduces an explanatory clause. The request for forgiveness in vs. 12 is now explained in verses 14-15, even though these verses are not a formal part of the Lord’s Prayer. Interestingly, the word for wrongdoing has changed from “debt” (*opheilema*) to “sin.” The word for sin here is *paraptoma*, which can be translated as: a fall, a lapse, a deviation, and a sin.⁴⁸ In this passage, the two words for sin, *opheilema* and *paraptoma*, are used synonymously.

The conjunction “if” (*ean*) occurs twice in vss. 14-15. In both cases, it introduces a third class conditional sentence where the protasis (if-clause) may or may not be true. But, if the protasis is true, then it follows that the apodasis (then-clause) is also true.⁴⁹ The first condition found in vs. 14 is stated positively: “if you forgive men when they sin against you.” If this condition is true, then we can be assured that God will forgive our sins: “your heavenly Father will forgive you.” The second condition found in vs. 15 is stated negatively: “if you do not forgive men their sins.” If this condition is true, then we can be assured that God will not forgive our sins. John Nolland states, “Matthew thinks of forgiveness of others as a necessary condition for seeking God’s forgiveness.”⁵⁰ It is significant that Jesus stated this conditional clause both positively and negatively. This seems to suggest that the negative conditional statement cannot simply be inferred from the positive conditional statement. What is clear from these verses is that our forgiveness of others precedes and serves as the condition of God’s forgiveness of us.

What can we conclude about horizontal forgiveness from Mt. 6:12-15? First, we can conclude that our requests for ongoing forgiveness from our Heavenly Father should be preceded by our actual forgiveness of those who have sinned against us. Second, we can conclude that our actual forgiveness of others is the basis of our request to be forgiven by God. Third, the ongoing forgiveness of our sins against God is conditioned on our actual forgiveness of others. Those who refuse to forgive others should not expect the sanctifying forgiveness of their heavenly Father.

Matthew 18:15-17. A second passage to consider in the Gospel of Matthew is 18:15-17: “If your brother sins [against you],⁵¹ 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.” Mt. 18:15-17 is preceded by Jesus’ instructions on “little children,” which was Jesus’ way of referring to his followers (cf. Mt. 11:25; 18:3). Jesus encouraged his disciples to receive the Kingdom of God like a child (18:2-4) and warned them against those who might cause them to sin (18:6). In the episode immediately before Mt. 18:15-17, Jesus

⁴⁸ This noun occurs 23 times in the Greek N.T., 5 times of which address human sins against each other (cf. Mt. 6:14, 15; 18:35; Mk. 11:25, 26).

⁴⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 696-99.

⁵⁰ John Nolland, *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 291.

⁵¹ In the UBS Greek N.T., the phrase “against you” is placed in brackets and given a ‘C’ rating which indicates “considerable degree of doubt.” Craig Keener observes, “Some of the earliest manuscripts omit the words ‘against you’ in 18:15, but the early geographical distribution favors their inclusion,” in *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 453n.

told the Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14; cf. Lk. 15:3-7), which illustrated God's pursuit of a wandering Christian. It is significant that this Parable is preceded by a brief warning: "See that you do not look down on one of these little one" (18:10). The Greek word for "look down on" is *kataphroneo*, which means to despise or to look down on with scorn or contempt. D.A. Carson comments, "Jesus is telling the community as a whole how to handle the situation when a brother sins; and in the immediate context, this sin is that of despising another brother."⁵² For Carson, then, the sin addressed in Mt. 18:15-17 is specifically the sin of contempt. This interpretation may be too narrow. Jesus was, however, probably describing a formal process of confrontation for only serious sins. More will be said on this below.

How is Mt. 18:15-17 interpreted by advocates of conditional forgiveness? Ardel Caneday comments, "Any reasonable reading of Matthew 18:15-20 must conclude that Jesus is teaching the necessity of repentance for forgiveness of sins under the imagery of 'hearing.'"⁵³ Jay Adams agrees with this interpretation: "If forgiveness were unconditional, then this entire process of discipline would be impossible. It is my contention that the very existence of such a program as this requires us to believe that forgiveness is conditional."⁵⁴ How are these verses interpreted by proponents of unconditional forgiveness? John MacArthur states, "in certain cases the offender is to be confronted and ultimately even excommunicated from the church if he or she refuses to repent (Luke 17:3; Matt. 18:15-17)."⁵⁵ As we will see, however, Mt. 18:15-17 is not really about repentance as a condition of forgiveness.

In Mt. 18:15-17, Jesus developed a procedure for addressing personal sin. The reference to "brother" in Mt. 18:15 indicates that the sin is committed by a Christian against a fellow Christian. The phrase "against you" points to a personal sin rather than a general concern about a fellow believer's spiritual welfare. The reference to the church indicates that this issue was to be addressed within the church, the community of believers.⁵⁶ A formal process for resolving conflicts is not unique to Christianity. Exclusion from the community can be seen in the O.T. Craig Blomberg observes that Mt. 18:15-17 "resembles the Old Testament practice of 'cutting' someone 'off' from the assembly of Israel (e.g., Gen. 17:14; Exod. 12:15, 19; 30:33, 38)."⁵⁷ The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls had a similar three step procedure for addressing personal grievances: "They shall rebuke one another in truth, humility, and charity. Let no man address his companion with anger, or ill-temper, or obduracy, or with envy prompted by the spirit of wickedness. Let him not hate him [because of his uncircumcised] heart, but let him rebuke him on the very same day lest he incur guilt because of him. And

⁵² D.A. Carson, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 402.

⁵³ Caneday, "On Forgiving," n.p.

⁵⁴ Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving*, 33.

⁵⁵ MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, 119.

⁵⁶ A good hermeneutic requires that biblical passages be applied in comparable settings. For example, I Tim. 2:11-15 was originally applied in an ecclesiastical setting. It would be inappropriate to apply these verses to a corporate or academic setting. In Mt. 18:15-17, Jesus described a three step process of confrontation for believers in an ecclesiastical setting. This formal procedure, which culminates in church discipline, is inappropriate for corporate or academic settings.

⁵⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 279.

furthermore, let not man accuse his companion before the Congregation without having admonished him in the presence of witnesses” (*The Community Rule* 5:25-6:1).

How are believers to address personal sin in the church? In Mt. 18:15-17, Jesus delineated a three step process of progressive confrontation that culminated in the application of church discipline. In the first step, the offended takes the initiative to confront the offender, albeit in a private manner: “Go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” The verb “go” (*hupago*) is in the imperative mood. It is a command directed at the one offended.⁵⁸ Leon Morris comments, “Go’ means taking the initiative; the person in the clear is not to wait for the sinner to come to him.”⁵⁹ The phrase, “show him his fault,” translates the Greek verb *elegcho*. The semantic range of *elegcho* includes: bring to light, expose, set forth, convict, convince, reprove, and correct.⁶⁰ Regarding this word, R.T. France states, “It includes the related ideas of reprimand, of bringing the wrong to light, of trying to bring the person to recognize that they are in the wrong, and of correcting them.”⁶¹ If the offender “listens” to the offended, then you have won over your brother and the process is over. The Greek word for listen is *akouo*; its semantic range includes: hear, listen to, learn, be informed, and understand.⁶² Craig Blomberg interprets *akouo* to mean “responds properly.”⁶³ The Greek verb “hearing” (*akouo*) is never used for “repent” in the N.T. The phrase, “won over,” translates the Greek verb *kerdaino* which means to gain.⁶⁴ It seems to imply reconciliation from the alienation caused by the personal sin. It is significant that the purpose for this private confrontation is redemptive. The goal is not to punish the offender but to reconcile with him/her.

In the second step, if the offender will not be reconciled, then 1-2 witnesses must be brought to establish the facts (cf. Dt. 17:6-7; 19:15-17). John Nolland comments, “The presence of the supporting parties ensures that the initiative is not a confused one, based on a misunderstanding, but is also concerned to enhance in the eyes of the one being approached the seriousness of what is at stake.”⁶⁵ The goal for this second step is the same as the first: To get the offender to respond properly, that is, to be reconciled. If step two fails, then the offended must proceed to the third and final step. In the third step, the conflict is brought to the attention of the church, the community of believers. Leon Morris observes, “Jesus envisages the brother who initiated the process as telling the local church as a whole what had happened...The implication is that the church will try to bring him [the offender] to his senses.”⁶⁶ If the offender refuses to respond appropriately and be reconciled, he is to be treated as a “pagan or tax collector.” Some scholars deny that church discipline is advocated by these verses.

⁵⁸ In Mt. 5:23-24, Jesus exhorted the offender to go and be reconciled with the offended. Whether the offended or the offender, Christians have a responsibility to pursue reconciliation.

⁵⁹ Morris, *Matthew*, 467.

⁶⁰ Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 249.

⁶¹ France, *Matthew*, 689.

⁶² Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 31-32.

⁶³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 278.

⁶⁴ Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 429.

⁶⁵ Nolland, *Matthew*, 747.

⁶⁶ Morris, *Matthew*, 468.

They point out that the personal pronoun throughout the procedure is singular. R.T. France, for example, states, "It is addressed entirely to the individual disciple; even the 'you' of v. 17 is still singular, so that that verse prescribes not communal ostracism but the attitude of the individual disciple who first noticed the problem. The disciple is envisaged as acting within the context of the whole community, but the focus is on the individual's attitudes and actions."⁶⁷ Given the involvement of the church at this final step, however, it is unlikely that discipline would be administered only by the offended in the form of personal ostracism. D.A. Carson correctly concludes, "The argument and the NT parallels (Rom. 16:17; 2 Thess. 3:14) show that Jesus has excommunication in mind...in the Greek expression, 'let him be to you as,' the 'you' is singular. This suggests that each member of the church is to abide by the corporate judgment."⁶⁸ Thus, the entire church administers discipline in the form of removal from fellowship. This interpretation is more consistent with the practice of the O.T. and Dead Sea Scroll community (see above).

An important issue to address at this point is what sins need to be confronted by this formal process that culminates in church discipline. Should every personal infraction, large or small, result in confrontation? What about passages that encourage believers to overlook personal offenses? Love, according to the Apostle Paul, "keeps no record of wrongs" (I Cor. 13:5). Regarding this kind of record-keeping, D.A. Carson observes, "But suppose genuine injury has been done? What then? Paul's answer is that love 'keeps no record of wrongs,' a private file of personal grievances that can be consulted and nursed whenever there is possibility of some new slight. Its stance in the presence of genuine evil precludes such accounting; for at a very deep level, love cannot bear to be censorious or hypocritical."⁶⁹ The Apostle Peter had a similar view to Paul: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins" (I Pt. 4:8). The Greek word "sin" is *hamartia* and it can be translated as: missing the mark, wandering, erring, and sinning. The word "cover" (*kalupto*) means to hide or to cover up. The present tense of the verb emphasizes the ongoing nature of the covering of sin. I. Howard Marshall states, "What Peter says here is closer to what Paul says in I Corinthians 13:5: 'Love...keeps no record of wrongs.' It does not treasure up the memory of wrongs committed or offenses, but releases them and does not hold them against the person."⁷⁰ The idea of overlooking the infractions of others can be traced back to the O.T. wisdom tradition. We read in Pr. 10:12, "Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs." Likewise, in Pr. 17:9, it states, "He who covers over an offense promotes love but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends." Wayne Grudem offers this insight: "Where love abounds in a fellowship of Christians, many small offences, and even some large ones, are readily overlooked and forgotten. But where love is lacking, every word is viewed with suspicion, every action is liable to misunderstanding, and conflicts abound."⁷¹ Since believers are called to overlook

⁶⁷ France, *Matthew*, 600.

⁶⁸ Carson, *Matthew*, 403.

⁶⁹ D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 62-63.

⁷⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *I Peter* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1991), 144.

⁷¹ Wayne Grudem, *I Peter* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1988), 173-74.

personal offenses, it is likely that Jesus is commanding a formal process of confrontation only for serious sins.

What is the purpose of this formal process? Is the purpose to extend forgiveness when the condition of repentance is met? This does not seem to be the case. Neither the word “forgiveness” (*aphiemi*) nor “repentance” (*metanoia*) occurs in these verses. Also missing are instructions on when to withhold or extend forgiveness. Mt. 18:15-17 is not about forgiveness but reconciliation: “you have won your brother.” The three step process described by Jesus is to reconcile believers who have been alienated by serious sin. This process of confrontation culminates in the application of church discipline. Interestingly, the discipline administered is not the withholding of forgiveness but the exclusion of the offender from the fellowship of believers. Moreover, it is the church that administers this punishment, rather than the offended believer. That Mt. 18:15-17 is not about repentance as a prerequisite for forgiveness is confirmed by Peter’s question about the frequency of forgiveness. Shortly after Jesus’ instructions on confronting serious sins, Peter inquired, “how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” (18:21). This question does not make much sense if forgiveness was withheld during the three step process of confrontation. Peter seemed to assume that forgiveness was granted even when the brother refused to be reconciled. If forgiveness was withheld during each of the three steps due to lack of repentance, Jesus should have answered Peter’s question, “Zero, unless he repents.” Instead, Jesus responded, “seventy-seven times” (18:22). In other words, your forgiveness of others should be without limits, even when you find it necessary to confront serious sins that have caused alienation.

It is important to note that exclusion from fellowship is the result of a church decision, and then only after a progressive procedure of confrontation. Like the state (cf. Rom. 13:1-7), the church (cf. I Cor. 6:1-6) has been ordained by God to administer justice. Although the process of church discipline may begin as a private correction, public rebuke and exclusion from fellowship are to be administered by the church. Church leaders, in fact, should play a central role in this process (cf. II Thess. 3:14-15; I Tim. 5:20; Titus 3:10-11). Individual Christians should indeed practice mutual accountability (cf. Gal. 6:1), but they do not have the right to impose punishment on each other.

Matthew 18:21-35. Following Jesus’ instructions on church discipline, Peter inquired, “how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” The fact that Peter asked this question implies that even when church discipline is applied, forgiveness should be extended. But, perhaps there is a limit to how many times it should be extended. Jesus’ initial response to Peter is “seventy-seven times.” This number, of course, does not establish a limit but instead highlights that a believer’s practice of brotherly forgiveness should be limitless. It is significant that Jesus does not require the condition of repentance for the extension of horizontal forgiveness. After his initial response to Peter, Jesus told the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Like many of his other parables, Jesus prefaced this one with the words, “the kingdom of heaven is like.” Thus, parables were not about the physical realities mentioned, e.g., farming, vineyards, weddings, finances. Rather, through his parables, Jesus provided

illustrations of God's kingdom. The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, then, was not about financial debt but about the practice of forgiveness by those who belong to God's kingdom.

How is this parable interpreted by proponents of conditional forgiveness? Ardel Caneday states, "as Matthew narrates Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant he does not need to reiterate what is already obvious within the preceding context from Jesus' instruction concerning the order of addressing sins within the church body."⁷² For Chris Braun, the parable addresses Christians who refuse to forgive even when the offender repents: "Those unwilling or unable to forgive should fear for their salvation."⁷³ How do advocates of unconditional forgiveness interpret this parable? Robert Jeffress comments, "But Jesus' point was that the first slave had an obligation to release his friend from his debt, considering the debt from which he had just been freed. Forgiveness is the obligation of the forgiven."⁷⁴ John MacArthur agrees with this idea of obligation: "Scripture everywhere teaches that those who have been forgiven much are obligated to forgive others (Matt. 18:23-35; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13)."⁷⁵

In this particular parable, Jesus told the story of a king who cancelled the incredible debt of one of his servants. This servant owed a debt of 10,000 talents, which is comparable to about \$5 billion dollars by today's standards. Since the servant was unable to pay the debt, the king decided to sell the man and his family into slavery. Such a sale, however, would hardly have made a dent in the servant's debt. The action of the king appears to be punitive. But, the servant begged for the king's patience until he could payback everything. Instead of granting forbearance, the king "took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go" (18:27). The word "pity" (*splagchnizomai*) means to move with compassion; it occurs also in the Parables of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:33) and the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:20). The semantic range of the verb "let go" (*apoluo*) includes: release, forgive. The verb "cancelled" (*aphiemi*) means to cancel the debt of sin and to release the offender from his/her moral obligation. The king, of course, incurred the debt himself.

Later, that same servant approached a fellow servant and demanded payment for a debt. The amount of the debt was 100 denarii, equivalent to about \$2,100. This amount paled in comparison to the amount of the debt from which the first servant was released. Nonetheless, this first servant had every right to collect this debt. After all, it was owed to him. The second servant begged for patience, using almost the exact same words as the first servant. Yet, the first servant had him thrown into debtor's prison "until he could pay the debt." John Nolland observes, "People sense their need for mercy, but they are not so ready to see the need to extend mercy."⁷⁶

⁷² Caneday, "On Forgiving," n.p.

⁷³ Braun, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 123.

⁷⁴ Jeffress, *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense*, 57.

⁷⁵ MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, 75.

⁷⁶ Nolland, *Matthew*, 759.

When the king learned about the first servant's failure to show mercy, he confronted him: "You wicked servant...I cancelled 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?" (18:32-33). In his anger, the king had the first servant thrown into jail to be tortured severely. While the king's mercy earlier led to forgiveness, the king's anger now leads to judgment. Unlike most of his parable, Jesus offered an interpretation: "This is how your heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (18:35). D.A. Carson comments, "Those in the kingdom serve a great king who has invariably forgiven far more than they can ever forgive one another. Therefore failure to forgive excludes one from the kingdom, whose pattern is to forgive."⁷⁷ The point of the parable is that since God mercifully forgives believers a great debt, they should gratefully show mercy in their forgiveness of others. Nothing in this parable suggests that forgiveness should be withheld until the condition of repentance is met. Neither is there any suggestion that a forgiving attitude is sufficient.

Horizontal Forgiveness in Luke-Acts

Joel Green has rightly observed, "Forgiveness of sins...is a pervasive motif in the Lukan narrative."⁷⁸ The two writings of Luke, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, contain several references to horizontal forgiveness. Before examining Lk. 17:3-4, let's consider three passages in Luke's gospel and one passage in Acts.

Luke 6:37-38a. The first verse to consider is 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." Although not translated by the NIV, these verses are introduced with the conjunction "and" (*kai*) indicating that they are connected with the preceding verses on love and mercy. Jesus taught, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Lk. 6:27-28). This love for enemies, according to Jesus, imitates our heavenly Father who "is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Lk. 6:35). Jesus concluded with this command, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk. 6:36). Luke 6:37-38a is followed by Jesus' promise of divine blessing to those who are generous in giving: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Lk. 6:38). Thus, it is within the context of mercy and generosity that Jesus taught about horizontal forgiveness.

In Luke 6:37-38, Jesus provided his disciples with four examples of love and mercy. The first two examples are negative: don't judge and don't condemn. I. Howard Marshall states, "In their own day-to-day conduct the disciples are forbidden to usurp the place of God in judging and condemning other people. The context would suggest that it is the attitude which fails to show mercy to the guilty which is here being attacked."⁷⁹ The next two examples of love and mercy are positive: forgive and give.

⁷⁷ Carson, *Matthew*, 406.

⁷⁸ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 443.

⁷⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 265.

In contrast to judging and condemning, believers are to exemplify forgiving and giving. Darrell Bock observes, “Jesus develops his description of mercy by highlighting its relationship to forgiveness and judgment...Negatively, Jesus says we should not judge or condemn. Positively, we are to forgive and give generously.”⁸⁰ It is significant that God practices all four qualities: judgment, condemnation, forgiveness, and giving. Yet, God has chosen to share only the last two qualities with his children.

All four examples of love and mercy are followed by divine promises: you will not be judged, you will not be condemned, you will be forgiven, and you will be given to. Each of these verbs is in the passive voice. The use of the passive voice here is known as the divine passive in which “God is the obvious agent.”⁸¹ Therefore, God makes a promise to believers: he will not judge us if we do not judge others, that he will not condemn us if we do not condemn others, that he will forgive us if we forgive others, and that he will give to us if we give to others. With the passive verb, “you will be forgiven,” you is the subject of the verb but it receives the action of the verb. Thus, in this verse, the emphasis is on the forgiveness of the person rather than the forgiveness of his/her sins.

The semantic range of the verb “forgive” (*apoluo*) includes: release, pardon, and forgive. In this verse, the verb is in the present tense and imperative mood, meaning that the forgiveness of others is commanded as an ongoing action. Robert Stein notes, “The command does not require that the believer ignore the guilt of those who have sinned against them or to proclaim the guilty as innocent. It means instead to forgive the guilty.”⁸² But how are we to forgive? In the context of this passage, it is clear that we should forgive freely and generously.

The conjunction “and” (*kaì*) which follows the command to forgive usually introduces a coordinate clause. In this context, “and” (*kaì*) appears to be introducing a result clause which could be translated as “so that” (cf. Mk. 11:25).⁸³ Thus, the result of our ongoing forgiveness of others is God’s forgiveness of us: “you will be forgiven.” As mentioned before, this is an example of a divine passive in which God is the agent. God promises to forgive us as the result of our forgiveness of others. There is nothing in the context about our willingness to forgive without actually forgiving. In other words, the promise of God’s forgiveness is the result of actually forgiving those who have wronged us.

Luke 11:4. The next verse to consider is Luke 11:4, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” This verse occurs within Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (11:2-4; cf. Mt. 6:9-13). As mentioned previously, the Lord’s Prayer is the prayer of believers, those who have already experienced God’s forgiveness at conversion. Robert Stein comments, “The prayer assumes the regular need for confession of sin, even as I John 1:9 does. The issue is not one of entrance into God’s

⁸⁰ Darrell Bock, *Luke* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1994), 126.

⁸¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 437-38.

⁸² Robert Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 212.

⁸³ Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 392.

people, i.e., salvation, but the regular cleansing from sin that each believer needs.”⁸⁴ Since believers have already experienced God’s salvific forgiveness, the forgiveness requested here is God’s sanctifying forgiveness.

The verb “forgive” (*aphiemi*) means to cancel the debt of sin and to release the offender from his/her moral liability. I. Howard Marshall observes, “To sin is to come under obligation to God and hence to owe him restitution. Often debtors become slaves to their creditors. But Jesus speaks of the forgiveness of sinners and debtors without any restitution being offered by them to God.”⁸⁵ In fact, our plea for forgiveness is one of complete helplessness for we cannot even begin to repay the debt of our sin to God. Since we cannot make restitution, we are utterly dependent on God’s mercy to forgive our debt to him. Like the tax collector in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we approach God with the plea, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13).

In the first usage of “forgive” (11:4a), the mood of the verb is imperative which, as we’ve seen, commonly functions as an entreaty in N.T. prayers. In the second usage of “forgive” (11:4b), the present tense is used indicating continuous action. This is different than Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer where the verb “forgive” (*aphiemi*) is aorist tense (6:12). So while Matthew’s version emphasizes the pastness of our horizontal forgiveness, Luke’s version emphasizes the ongoing nature of that forgiveness. Darrell Bock states this well: “a forgiven person is to be a forgiving person.”⁸⁶

As noted before, the conjunction “for” (*gar*) follows the main clause and functions to introduce a causal clause; it can rightly be translated as because or since. So, the basis for our request for vertical forgiveness is that we continually practice horizontal forgiveness. Thus, our plea in this petition is that God would forgive us because we are continually forgiving those who sin against us. Joel Green rightly concludes, “Jesus grounds the disciples’ request for divine forgiveness in their practice of extending forgiveness.”⁸⁷

The participial phrase “everyone who sins against us” is built on the verb “sins” (*opheilo*) which means to owe. In Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, the noun “debt” (*opheilema*) is used. When we sin against God and others, we become indebted to them. The participle is in the present tense which emphasizes the continuous action of those who are indebted to us. And our response to them should be one of continuous forgiveness, if indeed we expect ongoing forgiveness from our heavenly Father. Robert Stein observes, “The hand that reaches out to God for forgiveness cannot withhold forgiveness to others.”⁸⁸ It is significant that the participle, “who sins,” is modified by the adjective, “all” (*pas*). The word is inclusive, and the participial phrase could rightly be

⁸⁴ Stein, *Luke*, 326.

⁸⁵ Marshall, *Luke*, 461.

⁸⁶ Darrell Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1055.

⁸⁷ Green, *Luke*, 444.

⁸⁸ Stein, *Luke*, 326.

translated as “all who sin against us.” In other words, no one is to be excluded from our forgiveness, at least not if we hope to be forgiven by God.

Luke 23:34. The third verse to consider in the Gospel of Luke is 23:34, where Jesus prayed while hanging on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”⁸⁹ The verb “forgive” (*aphiemi*) means to cancel the debt of sin and to release the offender from his/her moral obligation. There is no explicit statement about what sin was to be forgiven, other than that it was a sin of ignorance. “Forgive” (*aphiemi*) is in the imperative mood which, as mentioned previously, commonly functions as an entreaty in N.T. prayers.⁹⁰

How is this verse interpreted by proponents of conditional forgiveness? Chris Braun interprets Jesus’ words from the cross prophetically: “Jesus prayed that those who crucified him would be forgiven in the future—he did not thank God that they were already forgiven. If they had already been forgiven, such a prayer would have been superfluous.”⁹¹ Ardel Caneday agrees with this interpretation: “Jesus’ prayer from the cross was becoming effectual through the proclamation of the gospel that requires repentance in order to receive forgiveness of sins.”⁹² How do advocates of unconditional forgiveness interpret Jesus’ words from the cross? John MacArthur observes, “Forgiveness was the predominant theme of His thoughts throughout the whole ordeal of His crucifixion.”⁹³ Like proponents of conditional forgiveness, MacArthur believes, “it was a plea on behalf of those who would repent and trust Him as their Lord and Savior.”⁹⁴ As we will see below, this is probably not the case.

In Lk. 23:34, the personal pronoun “them” (*autos*) is the object of Jesus’ plea for forgiveness. But who is the “them?” Scholars are unanimous on this question. Joel Green believes that the pronoun refers to Jews and Romans who conspired to have Jesus crucified.⁹⁵ Thus, Green concludes, “In death, Jesus continues his redemptive ministry, even putting into practice his own instruction regarding love for one’s enemies: ‘Pray for those who abuse you’ (6:27-28).”⁹⁶ Craig Evans confirms this interpretation: “it presents Jesus as willing to forgive those who have committed an inexcusable crime against him. Jesus asks that they be forgiven on the grounds that they did not know what they were doing.”⁹⁷ Darrell Bock agrees with the interpretation of Green and

⁸⁹ In the UBS Greek N.T., this verse is placed in double brackets and given a ‘C’ rating which indicates “considerable degree of doubt.” Nonetheless, most commentaries believe that the verse is authentic, even if not originally a part of Luke’s gospel. I. Howard Marshall states, “The balance of the evidence thus favours acceptance of the saying as Lucan, although the weight of the textual evidence against the saying precludes any assurance in opting for this verdict” (p. 868).

⁹⁰ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 488.

⁹¹ Braun, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 145.

⁹² Caneday, “On Forgiving,” n.p.

⁹³ MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, 38.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

⁹⁵ Green, *Luke*, 819-20.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 820.

⁹⁷ Craig Evans, *Luke* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1990), 340.

Evans.⁹⁸ None of the commentaries consulted for this study interpreted Jesus' words from the cross prophetically.

A close examination of the immediate context, however, reveals that the antecedent of "them" is clearly the Roman soldiers. Consider the preceding clauses: "they led him way," "they seized Simon from Cyrene," and "they crucified him." Immediately after Jesus pleads for their forgiveness, we are told that "they divided up his clothes." The mocking of the Jewish mob does not occur until after these events (Lk. 23:35-38), making it clear that they are not the antecedent of the personal pronoun, "them." In antiquity, a detail of Roman soldiers was responsible for carrying out the crucifixion. This crucifixion detail usually consisted of one officer, perhaps a centurion, and four soldiers. So then, Jesus is pleading for the forgiveness of this crucifixion detail. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus taught his disciples to "pray for those who abuse you" (Lk. 6:27-28). Hanging from the cross, Jesus now practiced what he preached. Robert Stein states, "Jesus modeled his own teachings on love for enemies, forgiveness, and nonviolence. For Luke's readers it should be easier to love their enemies possessing this example of how the Christ, the King of the Jews, forgave his enemies. Who had ever been more wronged than God's Chosen One? Yet he forgave his enemies."⁹⁹ The first Christian martyr, Stephen, would likewise forgive those who wrongly killed him (Acts 7:60).

An important question still needs to be addressed: Is Jesus pleading for the forgiveness of all their sins or for the specific sin of killing an innocent man? On other occasions, Jesus exercised his divine prerogative and forgave humans sins against God: "Your sins are forgiven" (cf. Mk. 2:5-10; Lk. 7:47-50). In this episode, Jesus pled with his heavenly Father: "Father, forgive them." It appears that Jesus had already granted horizontal forgiveness for this personal sin against him; he is now pleading for their vertical forgiveness. But, is this plea for God to forgive all their sins? The context makes it clear that Jesus is pleading for God to forgive their sin of killing an innocent man, "they do not know what they are doing." Surely, not all the sins of these soldiers were committed in ignorance. In the broader context of the passion narrative, these soldiers had earlier brutalized Jesus, beating and flogging him. Now they were in the process of crucifying him. Since Jesus had been found guilty by Pilate, they had no reason to question his guilt. Darrell Bock observes, "Even in this desperate situation, Jesus prays for those who kill him. He asks his executioners be forgiven, since they acted in ignorance."¹⁰⁰ Thus, Jesus is not praying for the absolution of all their sins but only for their sin against him, specifically murder. Yet, there is no evidence in this passage that the Roman soldiers had repented of this sin. Thus, Jesus practiced the very unconditional forgiveness that he preached to his disciples.

Acts 7:60. The last verse to consider in the Luke-Acts corpus is Acts 7:60, which records the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. In the literary context, Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, offering a lengthy speech about Jewish history

⁹⁸ Darrell Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1849.

⁹⁹ Stein, *Luke*, 591.

¹⁰⁰ Darrell Bock, *Luke* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1994), 373. See also Marshall, *Luke*, 867.

that culminates in the coming of Jesus, the promised Messiah, whom the Jews killed. In a fit of rage, those present dragged Stephen outside the city walls and stoned him. In the midst of his martyrdom, Stephen plead for the forgiveness of his executioners. Stephen prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Jesus’ prayer for the forgiveness of his executioners (Lk. 23:34) clearly provided a model for this first Christian martyr.

Who is the “Lord” (*kurios*) to whom Stephen prayed? In his message to the Sanhedrin, Stephen used the word “Lord” (*kurios*) to refer to Yahweh (cf. Acts 7:31, 33). When Stephen began his prayer, he addressed, “Lord Jesus” (7:59). The addressee “Lord” in vs. 60 must also refer to Jesus. Although Jesus addressed his plea for the forgiveness of his executioners to his heavenly Father, Stephen pled his case to the now resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus.

The verb “hold” (*istemi*) means to lay, to establish. It was used metaphorically for the withholding of forgiveness (cf. II Tim. 4:16; Rev. 2:4, 14, 20). Stephen here is pleading that “this sin” (*hamartia*) may not be held “against them.” This plea indicates that Stephen was not withholding forgiveness for this sin. In the context, “this sin” clearly refers to the killing of an innocent man. F.F. Bruce states, “But there was yet another of our Lord’s utterances upon the cross that Stephen echoed. For, on his knees amid the flying stones, he made his last appeal to the heavenly court—not this time for his own vindication but for mercy towards his executioners. Before he was finally battered into silence and death, they heard him call aloud, ‘Lord, do not put this sin into their account.’”¹⁰¹

After surveying the four passages from the Lukan corpus, what can we conclude? From the first two passages (Lk. 6:37-38a; 11:4), we can conclude that Jesus linked our ongoing forgiveness from God with our actual forgiveness of those who have wronged us. There is no evidence in these passages that our forgiveness of others should be conditioned on their repentance. In fact, our forgiveness of others is to be generous and inclusive; no one is to be excluded. From the second two passages in the Lukan corpus (Lk. 23:34; Acts 7:60), we can conclude that unconditional forgiveness is not merely an idealistic theory. Not only did Jesus practice what he preached but so did Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

Exposition of Luke 17:3-4, “if he repents, forgive him”

There is one more passage on horizontal forgiveness in the Lukan writings that needs to be considered. The passage is 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.” The preceding passage is about causing believers to stumble (17:1-2). Just as believers are not to cause each other to sin, neither are they to withhold forgiveness especially from those who repent. In both passages, Jesus is concerned about horizontal relationships. In the verses that immediately follow Lk. 17:3-4, the disciples asked Jesus, “Increase our faith” (17:5-6).

¹⁰¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 171.

Given the subject matter of causing to sin and offering forgiveness, this plea for increased faith is understandable. John Nolland puts it this way: “Reeling under the impact of these demands, the apostles petition for an increased allocation of faith.”¹⁰²

How are these verses interpreted by advocates of conditional forgiveness? Regarding these verses, Chris Braun comments, “Jesus said that Christians should forgive if the other party repents.”¹⁰³ Ardel Caneday agrees with this interpretation: “Far from being a singular passage that poses a problem for those who advocate ‘unconditional forgiveness,’ Luke 17:3-4 is in full harmony with the whole of the New Testament’s instruction concerning the indispensable condition for receiving forgiveness of sins, namely, repentance of sin.”¹⁰⁴ How do proponents of unconditional forgiveness interpret these verses? Robert Jeffress says, “Nowhere in this verse does Jesus advise withholding forgiveness from a person who refuses to repent. Repentance is our offender’s responsibility; forgiveness is our responsibility.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, the offended should fulfill his/her responsibility of granting forgiveness, whether or not the offender fulfills his/her responsibility of repenting.

In 17:3a, the conjunction “if” (*ean*) introduces a third class conditional sentence. The protasis (if-clause) may or may not be true. But, if the protasis is true, then it follows that the apodasis (then-clause) is also true. So then, “if your brother sins, rebuke him.” The reference to “brother” here indicates that Jesus is limiting his teaching on horizontal forgiveness to believers who are brothers and sisters in God’s spiritual family. The verb “sins” (*hamartano*) can be translated as: missing the mark, wandering, erring, and sinning. Although verse 3 is ambiguous about who is sinned against, verse 4 makes it clear, “he sins against you.” So then, if a Christian is sinned against by a fellow believer, according to Jesus, they are to rebuke the wrongdoer. The semantic range of the verb “rebuke” (*epitimao*) includes: admonish, reprove, rebuke, or warn sternly. The verb is in the imperative mood, which means that it is a command to obey. The offended must take the initiative to confront the offender. Regarding this rebuke, Joel Green observes, “Jesus’ followers are not to stand at a distance from the sinner, but to seek actively for his or her restoration.”¹⁰⁶ While Lk 17:3-4 makes it clear that the offended should seek reconciliation, Mt. 5:23-24 made it equally clear that the offender should seek reconciliation. So then, as Christians, whether we are the offended or the offender, we should take the initiative to pursue reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Although believers should be committed to this kind of mutual accountability, as we saw in the previous section, it is the responsibility of the church to impose discipline.

In 17:3b, the conjunction “if” (*ean*) introduces another third class conditional sentence. The protasis (if-clause) may or may not be true. But, if the protasis is true, then it follows that the apodasis (then-clause) is also true. Thus, “if he repents, forgive [him].”

¹⁰² John Nolland, *Luke* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 839.

¹⁰³ Braun, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, 57.

¹⁰⁴ Caneday, “On Forgiving,” n.p.

¹⁰⁵ Jeffress, *When Forgiveness Doesn’t Make Sense*, 80.

¹⁰⁶ Green, *Luke*, 613.

The semantic range of the verb “repent” (*metanoeo*) includes: turn from, turn around, change one’s mind, and repent.¹⁰⁷ In all cases, whether verb or noun, this word is typically used in regard to the initial turning from a sinful life that occurs at conversion. It is significant that the call for repentance is typically directed toward unbelievers. The Apostle Paul summarized well this call: “I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance (*metanoia*) and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21). When unbelievers obey the call to repentance and place their faith in Christ, they enjoy the forgiveness of all their sins and experience reconciliation with God (cf. Rom. 5:10-11; Col. 2:13; I Jn. 2:12). This is salvific forgiveness.

The verb *metanoeo* is found in the imperative mood on the lips of John the Baptist (cf. Mt. 3:1), Jesus (cf. Mt. 4:17), and Peter (cf. Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22). All three men commanded: Repent! So important was the need for repentance that Jesus told the crowd: “unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Lk. 13:3). In the Greek N.T., *metanoeo* is often combined with the Greek verb *epistrepho*, the semantic range of which includes: turn toward, turn back, and return. For example, Peter said, “Repent (*metanoeo*), then, and turn (*epistrepho*) to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19; cf. Acts 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20; I Thess. 1:9). So then, divine forgiveness requires both a turning from sin and a turning toward God. As the gospels make clear, this turning to God is only possible through faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Mk. 1:15; Acts 20:21).

The use of “repent” (*metanoeo*) in Lk. 17:3b is unusual because, as we’ve seen, repentance is most commonly associated with conversion. In the N.T., repentance is connected with horizontal forgiveness only here. Also, it is rare for believers to be called to repentance for vertical forgiveness.¹⁰⁸ Repentance from sin, along with faith in Christ, typically takes place at conversion and results in the forgiveness of all sins (cf. Col. 2:13; I Jn. 2:12). Robert Stein states, “Although ‘repentance’ for Luke usually referred to the conversion experience, here it involves a subsequent experience of sincere sorrow over having offended a fellow believer.”¹⁰⁹

The verb “forgive” (*aphiemi*) means to cancel the debt of sin and to release the offender from his/her moral liability. In this verse, *aphiemi* is aorist tense and imperative mood. Forgiveness, according to Jesus, is not optional. Interestingly, Jesus’ command is directed at the offended rather than the offender. John Nolland comments, “Clearly the responsibility has been laid by Jesus on the one offended to show wholehearted readiness to forgive, and not upon the offender to demonstrate the reality of his or her

¹⁰⁷ The verb “repent” (*metanoeo*) occurs 34 times in the Greek N.T. The noun form, *metanoia*, occurs an additional 24 times.

¹⁰⁸ There are two exceptions in Paul’s letters. In one instance, Paul was disappointed that some believers at Corinth had not repented of “sexual sin and debauchery” (II Cor. 12:21). In the other instance, Paul encouraged church leaders to gently instruct those who oppose them “in the hope that God will grant them repentance (*metanoia*)” (II Tim. 2:25). The only other time that Christians are called to repentance is in the Book of Revelation. On five occasions, the risen Jesus called churches to repent because they were in danger of apostasy (cf. 2:5, 15, 20-22; 3:3, 19).

¹⁰⁹ Stein, *Luke*, 431.

repentance.”¹¹⁰ It is significant that the verb ‘repent’ (*aphiemi*) is complimented here by the verb “comes back” (*epistrepho*). As we saw previously, the call to repentance from sin is often supplemented by the call to return to God (cf. Acts 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20). Luke uses the same Greek word, *epistrepho*, to describe our return to our brother in Christ. Therefore, in Lk. 17:3-4, Jesus is saying that we cannot withhold forgiveness from those who turn from their sin and come to us for a restored relationship. This points to the seriousness of the sin and the necessity of extending forgiveness even in extreme cases.

Are there limits to the extension of forgiveness? Jesus says, “If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” Seven, of course, is not a limit. Leon Morris states, “If the offender repents, the believer must forgive him. And his forgiveness must be without limits.”¹¹¹ It is significant that the wrongdoer offers only a minimal acknowledgement, “I repent.” There is no demand here for sufficient remorse, a detailed confession, or the offer of restitution. Moreover, any expectation of restitution would render the need for forgiveness superfluous. After all, there is no need to forgive a debt once it has been repaid through restitution. All that is required of the offender, according to Jesus, are the words, “I repent.” No other requirement should be attached. John Nolland offers this insight: “In traditional Jewish approaches to forgiveness, the burden lies with the one seeking forgiveness to demonstrate the genuineness of his or her repentance. With Jesus, the emphasis is on the readiness of the heart to forgive...The benefit of the doubt lies entirely with the one being forgiven.”¹¹² Unfortunately, with some Christians, repentance is a moving target. No matter what is said or done by the offender, it is never sufficient to merit the forgiveness of the offended.

Luke 17:3b makes it clear that Christians are to forgive fellow believers who wrong them and then repent. In fact, Jesus commanded us to forgive repentant brothers so that withholding forgiveness is not an option. But what if the offender is an unbeliever? This verse does not address that issue. To use it to do so is an argument from silence. What if the offender is a believer but he does not repent? Surely we should be able to withhold forgiveness from unrepentant brothers. Again, this verse does not address that issue. And again it would be an argument from silence to use it in this way. Robert Stein rightly concludes, “The saying does not deal with the question of what a believer should do if his brother does not repent.”¹¹³ Interestingly, none of the commentaries consulted for this study argued for the conditional statement: If he does not repent, you must not forgive him. All agreed that when repentance is present, forgiveness must be granted. None, however, argued that forgiveness should be withheld in the absence of repentance.

Yet, it seems reasonable to infer the converse of Lk. 17:3, “If he repents, (you must) forgive him.” But, what is the converse? According to deontic logic (i.e., the logic of

¹¹⁰ Nolland, *Luke*, 839.

¹¹¹ Leon Morris, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 256.

¹¹² Nolland, *Luke*, 838.

¹¹³ Stein, *Luke*, 431.

duty or obligation), there are two possibilities. One, the converse could be: If he does not repent, you must not forgive him. Two, the converse could be: If he does not repent, you may or may not forgive him. The case must be decided by context, whether the immediate context of Lk. 17:3 or the broader context of Jesus' teachings. Since nothing in the immediate context decides the case, what about the context of Jesus' teaching on horizontal forgiveness elsewhere? As we've seen, Jesus commanded horizontal forgiveness on two occasions (cf. Mk. 11:25 and Lk. 6:37). Jesus also made the believer's practice of forgiveness the basis of God's forgiveness of them (cf. Mt. 6:12; Lk. 11:4). Jesus even made the believer's forgiveness of others the condition of God's forgiveness of them (cf. Mt. 6:14-15). Nothing in these verses suggests that repentance was the implied condition of horizontal forgiveness.¹¹⁴ Neither is there any evidence that a forgiving attitude is sufficient. Instead, the basis and condition of a believer's forgiveness from God is their actual forgiveness of those who have sinned against them. It seems clear from these verses that Jesus taught unconditional forgiveness. Moreover, Jesus' unconditional forgiveness of the Roman soldiers who crucified him demonstrates that Jesus practiced what he preached (cf. Lk. 23:34). Given the broader context of Jesus' teaching on horizontal forgiveness, the appropriate converse of the conditional sentence, "If he repents, forgive him," is clear: If he does not repent, you may or may not forgive him.

Jesus emphasized mercy in forgiveness: "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 your heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Mt. 18:33-35). The prioritizing of mercy can also be seen in James: "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (2:12-13). Given this emphasis on mercy, it seems more prudent to extend forgiveness to the unrepentant than to withhold it.

CONCLUSION

Vertical Forgiveness is not Formulaic

Part of the problem with conditional forgiveness is that it attempts to turn forgiveness into a formula. Once the right ingredients are added in the proper order, then you have forgiveness. Since God requires repentance as a condition of forgiveness, it is reasoned, so should believers. But is this always true? On two occasions Jesus exercised his divine prerogative to forgive human sins against God. Upon seeing the faith of the paralytic's friends, Jesus said to the paralytic, "your sins are forgiven" (Mk. 2:5). Upon seeing the devotion of the sinful woman, Jesus said to her, "your sins are forgiven" (Lk. 7:48). In neither case is there any evidence of repentance. Moreover, every believer will die with unconfessed sins. Yet, we have full assurance that all our

¹¹⁴ Paul's exhortation to "forgive as God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13) was not about requiring repentance as a condition of forgiveness. As the context made clear, believers are to forgive like God with grace, mercy, kindness, and compassion.

sins are forgiven (cf. Col. 2:13; I Jn. 2:12), even those that are unconfessed. Thus, it is clear that God does not always require repentance as a condition for the forgiveness of each and every sin. Moreover, just because someone repents does not mean that God is obligated to forgive him/her. Judas, for example, repented: "When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. 'I have sinned,' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood'" (Mt. 27:3-4). In spite of his repentance, there is no evidence in Scripture that Judas was forgiven for the sin of betraying Jesus (cf. Jn. 17:12). Some might argue that Judas was not forgiven because God judged his heart. Exactly! God is able to do what we cannot when it comes to forgiveness, namely, judge the human heart. From the example of Jesus' practice of unconditional forgiveness and Judas's lack of forgiveness in spite of repentance, it should be clear that vertical forgiveness is not formulaic. God reserves the absolute right of divine clemency: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Rom. 9:14; cf. Ex. 33:19).

Human Relationships are Complicated

The main reason that Christians should practice unconditional forgiveness is because Jesus commanded it, making it the basis and the condition of our petition from vertical (sanctifying) forgiveness. Are there other reasons? There are at least two other reasons why believers should practice unconditional forgiveness. First, humans are finite and fallen. Because we are finite, our perspective and knowledge is limited. Because we are fallen, our perspective is skewed and our knowledge is tainted. Given the reality of the human condition, personal 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 or inactions. In other words, we contribute to the escalation of hostility by what we do and do not do or say. 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. This forgiveness, however, should not be confused with reconciliation. Reconciliation is the rebuilding of a trusting relationship. While forgiveness can be unilateral, reconciliation takes the best efforts of both people. Paul said, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18).

A second reason to practice unconditional forgiveness is to avoid the vices of anger, bitterness, resentment, hate. How can love keep no record of wrong (I Cor. 13:5), and at the same time withhold forgiveness from those who wronged us? How can we not become bitter when our offender has not met the minimum standards of repentance: sufficient remorse, detailed confession of wrong, and restitution for injury? In the two passages where believers are exhorted to forgive as God forgave you (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13), the virtue of forgiveness is contrasted with the vices of bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice. These are the vices that characterized our old life. The virtue of forgiveness should characterize our new life, along with compassion, kindness,

humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and love. Given the stark contrast in these verses, it seems humanly impossible to withhold forgiveness without nursing a grudge against those who have wronged us.

Unconditional Forgiveness is Counter-cultural

When wronged, our human inclination is to get even. This inclination has not gone unnoticed by Hollywood. Many of the recent box office hits are about vengeance, e.g., “Unforgiven” (Clint Eastwood), “Out for Justice” (Steven Segal), “Payback” (Mel Gibson). These movies play to our desire to pay back our offender, even if we need to take the law into our own hands. For those who are unwilling to act out this vengeful desire, the alternative is to withhold forgiveness until the other person takes responsibility for the wrong and acknowledges the injury it caused. Even then, some might continue to withhold forgiveness because no amount of repentance can undo the harm that was done. Much of what Jesus taught was counter-culture, even counter-intuitive. For example, Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek, and to go the extra mile (Mt. 5:38-44). Conditional forgiveness is consistent with my natural inclination and cultural climate. In many ways, I want to believe that I have the right, even the obligation, to withhold forgiveness from those who have sinned against me. Yet, this approach seems so foreign to Jesus’ teachings about forgiveness. In fact, withholding forgiveness seems to border on vengeance. Ironically, Jay Adams comes to the same conclusion: “Refusal to forgive is a decision for vengeance. It is taking vengeance into your own hands...Because the Lord has said, ‘Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,’ to take vengeance of any kind—even the withholding of forgiveness—is an attempt to arrogate God’s work to oneself.”¹¹⁵

While conditional forgiveness is consistent with my natural instinct and cultural mores, unconditional forgiveness is more consistent with Jesus’ counter-cultural message. With unconditional forgiveness, there is no attempt to deny the wrong or minimize the injury. The offense was wrong and the injury was real. This wrongdoing resulted in the offender’s moral debt to the offended and in estrangement between the two parties. Nonetheless, the offended pre-emptively forgives the offender in the hopes of moving the relationship toward reconciliation. This unilateral forgiveness cancels the debt of sin and releases the offender from his/her moral liability. Believers do this in obedience to Christ and out of gratitude for God’s gracious forgiveness of them. While there are no conditions to this forgiveness, there still may well be consequences, both natural and judicial. Also, forgiveness should not be confused with reconciliation. Forgiveness can indeed be unilateral, but reconciliation is bilateral requiring the best efforts of both parties. If the offender is a Christian who refuses to be reconciled, then the offended may need to use a formal process of confrontation that culminates in church discipline. The purpose of this process, of course, is remedial rather than punitive. The goal is the reconciliation of alienated believers within the body of Christ.

¹¹⁵ Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 25.