

Preaching Forgiveness in a Therapeutic Age

Rodney J. Hunter

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

Forgiveness goes to the heart of Christian faith. Whether referring to God's forgiveness of us, or ours of each other, forgiveness and its themes of sin, repentance, and new life are central to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and arguably central to the whole task of Christian living. This does not mean, however, that either forgiving and being forgiven, or the theology and theory that lie behind them, are easy to do or simple to understand.

The basic *idea* of forgiveness is of course simple enough, or it seems that way. What could be more deeply human, more emotionally moving, and more fundamentally humbling than the experience of forgiving another or of being forgiven? Could anyone possibly fail to understand and appreciate the simple human beauty of Jesus' story of the forgiving father and his returning son, or fail to be touched by the humble and elegantly simple petition that the heavenly Father "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"? There is, clearly, a sense in which every morally sensitive human being knows something about forgiveness.

Forgiveness as Pastoral Theological Problem

But while the idea of forgiveness may seem simple in itself and a matter of common experience, in reality forgiveness has always confronted Christians with a host of questions and existential as well as pastoral difficulties. For starters, it is, simply put, hard to forgive, and perhaps even harder to be forgiven. There is an inevitable threat to self-esteem—shame—if one is seeking or receiving forgiveness, and there is often a difficult emotional hurdle to overcome if one is faced with the prospect of letting an offending party "go free" by granting forgiveness. Giving up one's moral high ground as the victim of another's offense, one's sense of righteousness, does not come easy! But the difficulties do not end there, for questions frequently arise as to *whether*, under certain circumstances, it is even right to forgive, and what preconditions may or may not be required to prevent forgiveness from becoming cheap grace, an inappropriate excusing of failure, or a cowardly way of avoiding the hard edge of truth about what has happened. When is forgiveness authentic, and when is it cheap? When is it appropriate to forgive, and when should forgiveness be withheld, if ever? Is not evidence of contrition ("penance") psychologically or spiritually necessary, but if so, does it not also become a new obligation, a "work of the law" to be satisfied before forgiveness can be (as it were) conferred? What then becomes of the spirit of grace? And who properly has the *authority* to forgive sins? Is not every Christian so empowered—or is it only God who can forgive? If so, what is the role of the church? What institutional arrangements does this sacred power presuppose, and whose political and worldly interests does it possibly also serve? And must we forgive in order to be forgiven? What exactly *did* Jesus mean by "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"? And if we have failed and stand in need of forgiveness, how can we come to *experience* our forgiveness, whether by God or neighbor, as a felt, experienced, genuinely liberating release from the bondage of guilt? We may hear the

words of forgiveness, but how can we come to feel and accept them as liberating truth for *us*, or for those whom we serve as pastors who seek our help in finding forgiveness? And when others have wronged *us*, how can we get past our desire for punishment and revenge, or our sense of righteous anger, to forgive from the heart? Such questions about forgiveness are so vexing that a leading pastoral theologian of our time has titled one of his books, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?*¹

Yet existential and pastoral questions like these are not limited to problems of human forgiveness. There are also profound questions related to the idea of *God* forgiving. From a pastoral perspective, what is true contrition and repentance before God, and how can one know for sure that God has forgiven? Can divine forgiveness be reconciled with divine righteousness, justice, and judgment—and how do justice and mercy go together in the life of believers? Does a forgiving God in some sense not compromise the seriousness of the moral law? Does the death of Jesus somehow enable or even require God to forgive, or is God forgiving from all eternity—by nature, as it were? And what are we to make of Matthew 12:31 and Mark 3:28-29, that clearly teach that the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable? If one believes one has committed such a sin, is one then utterly doomed—a fear that has tortured tender consciences for centuries?

As if these theological and pastoral problems were not vexing enough, in modern times the occurrence of human violence on a scale unknown in biblical antiquity, including the Holocaust and other unspeakable genocides and cruelties, has left many religious souls wondering whether, in some sense, it is not also *God* who must be forgiven for permitting such evil to run rampant in the earth—an anguished sentiment also felt (if not always dared to be spoken) by individuals suffering personal tragedy and victimization from disease and natural disaster.

Forgiveness in a Therapeutic Age

Despite such staggering theological and pastoral mysteries, however, every Christian preacher is inevitably an interpreter of such questions and a source of answers to them, and every congregation has its souls who anxiously seek, or inwardly resist, the forgiveness, divine and human, that the preacher seeks to proclaim. But the problem of how to preach forgiveness is, today, I believe, even more challenging than it was in earlier times. For while the existential, emotional, and theological issues involved in forgiving and being forgiven are enduring and universal human problems, the psychological turn of American culture puts a spin on the way we manage and think about interpersonal relationships that in turn deeply affects what forgiveness means to us and how we go about seeking or resisting it. This psychological culture is both powerful and pervasive in contemporary experience, especially for the educated elites who largely populate our mainline congregations. To preach on forgiveness to a contemporary middle or upper middle class congregation without considering the psychological turn of our culture is to risk misunderstanding or being written off, unnecessarily, as antiquated or irrelevant. But it is also to risk missing some important opportunities for interpreting the gospel effectively. For the psychological cast of our culture is not all bad; it is not simply another hurdle for the preacher to clear in proclaiming the Word. It is, rather, a mixture of new challenges and opportunities—challenges that easily generate confusion and misunderstanding as well as opportunities for insight into the psychological meaning and “process” of forgiveness that can

enhance our understanding of the Bible's spiritual message and help us preach it with greater clarity, insight, truthfulness, and effectiveness.

When I speak of the psychological quality of contemporary American culture I am referring, in part, to the general public's knowledge of practical psychology, like how to lose weight, remember names, make a favorable impression, and negotiate conflict. But I am also referring, more especially, to those millions who have eagerly latched onto psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic ideas, terminology, and methods of treatment. For some reason, Americans have been mesmerized by therapeutic and related psychologies since before the days of Freud. Today, among the educated elite, it is widely assumed, for instance, that personality develops from the earliest days of childhood; that parent and family relations are critical to that development; that everyone, young and old, passes through psychological "stages" of growth; that emotional problems and conflicts are rooted in childhood; that psychological self-understanding and insight are necessary to solve personal problems (often combined with behaviorist ideas about changing behavior through reward and punishment), and that psychological counseling or therapy can help to resolve our problems either by helping us become more insightful about ourselves or teaching us new ways to handle our feelings and manage our relationships.

More germane to the problem of forgiveness, however, are attitudes and beliefs related to improper social conduct and issues of responsibility, guilt, and behavioral change. There is an almost instinctive tendency among many psychologically conscious people today to hunt for the psychological roots of antisocial behaviors that once would have been regarded from a purely moral point of view as sinful and treated as moral failure. Today we are equally inclined to regard such behaviors as psychological difficulties for which "therapy" might be prescribed. Actions that earlier cultures had no hesitancy in branding wrong or "sinful" may now be termed "antisocial" or "inappropriate," thus softening the sense of moral fault and erasing the stigma of the traditional "moralistic" language of sin. Of course, few therapists or laity with therapeutic values would deny that "real guilt" exists in many situations (e.g. in criminal conduct) and must be taken seriously by public authorities, school principals, and religious officials, and few would want moral responsibility eliminated from consideration even when psychological understanding of the causes of antisocial or inappropriate behavior are understood. However, from the most horrid criminal acts to the most venial everyday misdeeds, today's therapeutic culture is keenly aware that personal behavior, including morally problematic action, does not occur in a vacuum.

Family and community histories, cultural contexts, education, psychological development and maturity, and interpersonal skills (or lack thereof), genetic inheritance and bodily health all influence human action and have relevance to the determination of responsibility. Psychology carries explanatory power and enjoys a certain cultural prestige in its accounts of "deviant" or "sinful" behavior and its prescriptions for dealing with it through attempts at personal and behavioral change, re-education, or psychotherapy. Such attitudes and modes of thought are so common today that we take them for granted, scarcely aware that not a hundred years ago most ethically problematic or reprehensible human behavior, whether marital or family transgressions, children's misbehavior, business and professional misconduct, or criminal activity, would have been interpreted straightforwardly as moral failure (if not "sin") and accorded a punitive response.

By contrast, today we have a wider range of interpretation and a correspondingly broader set of responses to irresponsible or transgressive behavior in such contexts as education, the more progressive quarters of the business world, and much professional practice, even if juridical and punitive attitudes and practices continue to reign in courts of law and socially conservative schools, churches, marriages, and families. Many of the recent “culture wars,” in fact, seem to revolve around attitudes toward psychological or “therapeutic” culture. Religious and secular conservatives fear a loss of moral seriousness, authority, and accountability through a psychological weakening of the power relations maintained by traditional moral culture. Their liberal or “progressive” counterparts, on the other hand, seek precisely to reform the “moralistic” and “punitive” attitudes and practices of that traditional culture, which they regard as failing to take account of contemporary knowledge about the psychosocial dynamics of human beings and interpersonal relations.

When Forgiveness Becomes a Message of Abuse

Before turning directly to the question of preaching forgiveness in a therapeutic culture, however, I think it important to recognize from the outset that much preaching on forgiveness over the centuries has, in all likelihood, not escaped the temptation to indulge in an aggressive form of moralizing and works righteousness that easily betrays the Christian meaning of forgiveness itself. The message of forgiveness has frequently come to its hearers with the force of yet another commandment in the form of a demand that we forgive or seek forgiveness. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” gets interpreted simply as a moral and spiritual duty whether or not we are ready or truly able to do so, while a failure to be forgiving adds another layer of sin, guilt, and shame. Such a gospel offers little solace or grace, but only more frustration, condemnation, and shame. Something like this moralistic turn occurs in much evangelistic preaching on the need to *receive* forgiveness as well, when the emphasis falls on condemnation of sin and surrender of self as the price of gaining divine mercy.

What ought to be a liberating experience of freely given grace and gratitude that transform and empower the self can easily end up making a new moralistic demand and threatening judgment and despair, ironically in the name of forgiveness. It is undoubtedly necessary to live in a spirit of authentic forgiveness, of oneself and others, if one is to be a whole and ultimately happy human being. But when our essential need for forgiveness is converted into a moralistic demand it becomes self-defeating. For preaching, therefore, the abiding problem is how to preach the “need” for forgiveness as an invitation to a qualitatively new way of life and a new mode of being human, not as a demand for submissive obedience or the exploitation of shame. In true forgiveness, whether received or given, we are transformed into something more closely resembling our true selves, set free from the tyranny of alienated relationship, and empowered for a new life of loving care and right relations.

What I am saying, in other words, is that forgiveness, in any age, is a profound and subtle form of human transformation reaching into the depths of our souls. It is therefore easily subject to misunderstanding, distortion, and exploitation from the pulpit. The possibility of exploitation, in particular, arises from the fact that forgiveness concerns the inescapable power dimension of all human relations. *To forgive* is to release another from the grip of one’s power, and to renounce one’s power over the other in order to enter into a fellowship of mutuality. Similarly, *to be forgiven*

is to be set free from the power another has over us and to enter into a new state of fellowship or right relations with the neighbor. Either way, forgiveness involves a change in power relations. The decision whether to forgive is a question about how or whether to exercise power over my neighbor (and how or whether God chooses to exercise power over me), and the decision to seek forgiveness is similarly to acknowledge another's power over me and to surrender or transform my power over her or him. Because forgiveness entails this exercise of power, it readily lends itself to exploitation. Withholding forgiveness when it should be extended, for instance, or demanding that others forgive or be forgiven, are essentially power plays that exploit the vulnerable and aggrandize the strong.

There is little question that the psychological turn of contemporary culture has helped us to see the possibility of this sort of dynamic in forgiveness. A sophisticated therapeutic perspective sees the deeper dynamics of guilt and shame in the "process" of forgiveness and recognizes the ways, intentional or unintentional, in which preaching can exploit emotional vulnerabilities. Exploitation may occur equally by making aggressive moral demands that people forgive or seek forgiveness, which may only intensify guilt and shame, or by leading one's hearers to believe they can find forgiveness and become forgiving vicariously, by listening to sermons or reading the Bible, without doing the hard emotional work of engaging alienated relationships directly, in the search for an honest and caring mutuality. There is therefore much that contemporary psychology can teach ministry about forgiveness, especially concerning the critical role of shame, and defenses against shame. I would encourage every minister to take advantage of the excellent literature on this subject.² Much of this pastoral psychological literature, incidentally, regards shame, rather than guilt, as the most fundamental dynamic issue in forgiveness, and suggests that western Christianity's strong emphasis on guilt, and neglect of shame, has limited its understanding not only of forgiveness but of the doctrine of the atonement itself.

Preaching on Forgiveness in a Therapeutic Age

At the same time, however, we need to recognize that the pervasive popularity of psychological ways of thinking further complicates the task of preaching on forgiveness. In particular, psychologically conscious parishioners are likely to prefer psychological language and concepts for dealing with moral concerns, including forgiveness, over traditional moral categories and terminology, for better or for worse—though I think it is some of both. For the psychologically minded, one is likely not to "sin" or "transgress" so much as to "act inappropriately, hurtfully, or antisocially," and when such acts occur, the language of "confrontation," "accountability," and "therapy" is preferred over terms like "blame," "fault," and "punishment." In a psychological climate, the language of moral failure and forgiveness may be employed, but it is often more implicit than explicit and, in any case, set within an attempt to understand the *psychological meaning* of the behavior calling for forgiveness. If forgiveness *is* appropriate (and it may not always be, from a psychological perspective), it is typically conceived as a psychological "process" involving mutual encounter, self-discovery, and a reintegration of the self around new values and new understandings and practices of interpersonal relationship.

It is easy to caricature psychological language and ways of thinking, and to brand them falsely as necessarily attempting to avoid, at all costs, "old fashioned" terms like

sin, contrition, repentance, and forgiveness in order, presumably, not to offend. To write off such language for this reason, however, would be a mistake. As I have indicated, modern psychological understandings of broken relationships and methods of healing them have much to offer, primarily because they probe the deeper levels of the experience of brokenness and forgiveness, and thus help to prevent quick, superficial, and ultimately frustrating “cures.” The very attempt to inquire into the personal meaning of the offense, to offender and victim alike, however, is already a move that invites an examination of the moral quality of this broken relationship in its totality, and perhaps all of one’s relationships, together with a review of the way one is living one’s life as a whole. One’s deeper fears, hungers, resentments, and hostilities come to light, either to be “owned,” thus expanding one’s capacity for exercising moral responsibility, or repudiated. From any Christian theological perspective, such an enhancement of responsibility and selfhood is clearly a moral and spiritual good, whatever language is used to achieve it.

On the other hand, our culture’s penchant for psychological modes of thought and action and its avoidance of traditional moral language in many situations where forgiveness is at issue, carry with them certain dangers—dangers that are perhaps the shadow side of psychology’s extraordinary power, within its own domain, to illumine and heal. By steering clear of the language of sin, repentance, and even, sometimes, forgiveness, we gain the advantage of avoiding terms that, for many and probably most people in our society, carry nasty connotations of the long history of Christian abuse. “Sin” strikes chords of sexual naughtiness and punitive religious authority; “repentance” reminds us all too quickly of the emotional manipulations, fear mongering, and humiliation inflicted by generations of hellfire preachers; and “forgiveness” itself does not escape the stigma associated with the abusive, punitive connotations of these other terms.

At the same time, the classic language of moral failure, forgiveness, and redemption points to a depth of seriousness, even “ultimacy,” in the nature and significance of human brokenness and the liberating power of forgiveness that may not be adequately conveyed by the language of therapeutic psychology. From a therapeutic perspective, the danger is the tendency to reduce the hurtful consequences of moral failure to a “problem” to be “solved” without remainder by insight, acceptance, and emotional growth. At its best, therapeutic language points to profound moral and spiritual truth about ourselves; but like all human language it is also subject to its own kinds of perversion in which the elementary helpfulness and vulnerability of human existence, so powerfully evident in broken relations and the search for forgiveness, can be disguised and evaded by the very language that carries such potential to reveal them. The avoidance of the classic theological language then becomes, not simply an appropriate way of defending against religious abuse, but also, and often at the same time, a way of avoiding encounter with the full truth and ultimate dependency of our existence—before “God”—and the true soul-to-soul meeting with our neighbor. This is not what therapy intends, but it is what therapy can become if the transcending mystery of human moral failure and the event of true forgiveness, and the need for a grace and a power beyond our own, are not acknowledged, at least implicitly.

Similarly, instead of authentic, truthful encounters, the therapeutic perspective can degenerate in community and organizational relations into a convenient and popular means of keeping the corporate wheels turning smoothly. Brokenness, when

it occurs, can be either “worked through” with face-saving (i.e., shame denying) psychological conversations, or outsourced to therapists who are assumed capable of resolving such difficulties without messy public revelations, infringement upon anyone’s self-esteem, or other social and personal costs to the community. When such maneuvers become established, they may facilitate corporate efficiency and an appearance of cooperation, but they exact a price in terms of the creative, unpredictable power that comes from gutsy honesty, willingness to confront failure directly, and courage to forgive and be forgiven. Authentic communities, where brokenness and forgiveness are honestly experienced, may undergo disruption, but such experiences, though more risky, may liberate spiritual energy and creativity. By the same token, when a church, community, or an entire nation misuses psychotherapeutic wisdom to avoid truthful relationships and truthful public discourse in the interest of values like productivity, efficiency, and functional harmony, collective living is reduced to robotics and superficiality, and the spirit of the people withers. One of the dangers facing our entire national culture, as various critics have observed, is precisely the adoption of psychological mindedness as a means of evading important truths about our society’s corporate economic domination, cultural superficiality, and multiple social injustices.³

However, the expression of the gospel through preaching, like its dramatic enactment through sacramental and ritual, offers a depth of meaning that speaks not only of forgiveness with a small “f” but of forgiveness with the large “F”—of forgiveness in relation to the Source and Ground of our being, and forgiveness as a concern of ultimate significance for our own well-being and all the social relations that constitute our lives. Without this proclaimed and experienced reminder of the Mystery in which we live and move and have our being, a reliance on therapy alone to reconcile and heal our broken lives and relationships is prone to degenerate into self-enclosed superficialities and deceptions. We *need* both preached forgiveness and sacramental forgiveness. The classical means of grace are not a religious gloss on the “real” healing work of psychotherapy. From a spiritual perspective, the explicit Word and its sacramental presence provide an essential grounding for, and a critical perspective on all the human healing arts and practical wisdoms of culture, even if these profound religious symbolics are not and cannot be, in themselves, fully adequate to the achieving of forgiveness as a concrete human event. To make them so would be to accord them a magical power that would betray the gospel’s call to meaningful human participation in the work of the Spirit in the world. But Word and Sacrament constitute a continuing reminder that we live not by our own power and wisdom alone, however sophisticated, but ultimately by a Reality beyond ourselves—the ineffable life and grace of God.

Implications for Preaching Forgiveness in a Therapeutic Age

It is certainly easier to diagnose the problem, as I have attempted to do, than to convert such insights into practical principles for preaching, and obviously such an analysis cannot yield simple rules of procedure. However, it seems to me that good preaching on forgiveness today, in the psychologically oriented culture in which many of our church people live, might want to keep the following short list of principles in mind:

1. Identify the cultural problem from the pulpit. Naming the contrasts and

similarities between psychotherapeutic and the traditional moral and religious ways of seeking forgiveness and the power to forgive can be helpful in itself.

2. Interpret psychotherapy as the positive blessing it can be and often is, as an expression of the healing work of God in the world, yet also recognize its limits and the need for the symbols and sacraments of faith to keep us honest and open to the creative power of God's life within and beyond us.

3. Be honest in acknowledging and describing the ways in which the church has misused forgiveness as a form of institutional tyranny and interpersonal power, in contrast to the gospel message of God's faithful love and God's loving, redemptive judgment in the interest of love.

4. Note that the problem of forgiveness, divine and human, remains a fundamental part of what it means to be a human being, and an essential task of every person and every human community, including—especially—the church.

5. Preach that forgiveness is, at bottom, less a matter of submission and surrender—concepts that breathe the spirit of power, control, and domination—than discovering and sharing our common failings in the context of God's supportive and life-giving care.

6. Make grace the first and last word, always.

Notes

1. John Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible? A Pastoral Care Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).
2. See (in addition to Patton, above), David W. Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Jill L. McNish, *Transforming Shame: A Pastoral Response* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004); Stephen Pattison, *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* (Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Neil Pembroke, *The Art of Listening: Dialogue, Shame, and Pastoral Care* (Long and New York: T&T Clark/Handscl Press, and Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).
3. Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology from Adler to Laing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).