

Forgiveness: Grace, not Work

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On the popular web site “WikiHow” (an online cousin of Wikipedia that publishes brief “how-to’s” on virtually everything from washing a dog to running for political office), an article recently appeared entitled “How to Forgive.” It begins,

One of the hardest, thorniest and most difficult things we humans are ever called upon to do is to respond to evil with kindness, and to forgive the unforgivable. We love to read stories about people who’ve responded to hatred with love, but when that very thing is demanded of us personally, our default seems to be anger, angst, depression, righteousness, hatred, etc. Yet study after study shows that one of the keys to longevity and good health is to develop a habit of gratitude and let go of past hurts. Want to live a long, happy life? Forgive the unforgivable. It really is the kindest thing you can do for yourself.¹

The tone of this essay is one of self-help, even self-improvement, like a Nike sneaker commercial: “Just do it!” (And you’ll feel better when you do.)

And yet, there is good reason to believe that this popular emotional view of forgiveness is not only unhelpful, but also it is poor psychology, and from a Christian point of view, poor theology as well. This assertion may seem quite surprising, since forgiveness is a central theme in Christian scripture and tradition, and there is a strong strand of Christian thought that seems to advocate forgiveness as a hallmark of Christian piety. From the Lord’s Prayer, which (in various English translations) includes “forgive us our debts/trespases/sins as we forgive our debtors/those who trespass/sin against us,” to the story of Jesus insisting that the disciple forgive “not seven times, but seventy times seven,” (Matt. 18:18-19) emotional forgiveness is often understood even as a command of Jesus himself.

The runaway Christian bestseller, *The Shack*, offers a good example of how forgiveness is viewed as central to spiritual life and even personal healing. The protagonist, Mack, is mysteriously summoned to a secluded shack where years before his youngest daughter Missy was murdered. The Trinity, in the form of a “large beaming African-American woman,” a “Middle Eastern” man “dressed like a laborer,” and a strangely translucent, “small, distinctively Asian woman” who collects tears in a crystal bottle, meet Mack at the site.² They spend time with him, giving him lessons and helping him to grieve. In a culminating lesson, Papa takes Mack to a clearing and teaches him about forgiveness:

[Papa says,] “You already know what I want, don’t you?”

“I’m afraid I do,” Mack mumbled, feeling emotions rising as they seeped out of a locked room in his heart.

“Son, you need to speak it, to name it.”

Now there was no holding back as hot tears poured down his face and

between sobs Mack began to confess. "Papa," he cried, "how can I ever forgive that son of a bitch who killed my Missy. If he were here today, I don't know what I would do. I know it isn't right, but I want him to hurt like he hurt me...if I can't get justice, I still want revenge."

Papa simply let the torrent rush out of Mack, waiting for the wave to pass.

"Mack, for you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him."

"Redeem him?" Again Mack felt the fire of anger and hurt, "I don't want you to redeem him! I want you to hurt him, to punish him, to put him in hell..." His voice trailed off.

Papa waited patiently for the emotions to ease.

"I'm stuck, Papa. I just can't forget what he did, can I?" Mack implored.

"Forgiveness is not about forgetting, Mack. It is about letting go of another person's throat." (224)

The dialogue continues, as Papa clarifies that Mack's forgiveness does not mean that "everything is okay," nor does he have to have a relationship with his daughter's killer, nor does he have to forget what he did (225-6). Forgiveness does not excuse the man's crime (226). But Papa makes it clear that it is Mack's spiritual task, for his own wellbeing, to forgive the man:

"I don't think I can do this," Mack answered softly.

"I want you to. Forgiveness is first for you, the forgiver," answered Papa, "to release you from something that will eat you alive, that will destroy your joy and your ability to love fully and openly. Do you think this man cares about the pain and torment you have gone through? Don't you want to cut that off? And in doing so, you'll release him from a burden that he carries whether he knows it or not—acknowledges it or not. When you choose to forgive another, you love him well."

"I do not love him."

"Not today, you don't. But I do, Mack, not for what he's become, but for the broken child that has been twisted by his pain. I want to help you take on that nature that finds more power in love and forgiveness than hate." (225)

After further dialogue, Mack is finally convinced and asks how to go about this task of forgiveness. Papa replies, "Just say it out loud. There is power in what my children declare." And Mack does so, at first in a whisper, and then "with increasing conviction" (227). He tells him he is a joy, that he may have to declare this forgiveness "a hundred times the first day and the second day," but that eventually his forgiveness will be complete, and God's love "will burn from [the murderer's] life every vestige of corruption." Mack groans, but "in his heart he knew that it was the truth" (227).

What is wrong with this picture, from a pastoral and theological perspective? Many faithful Christians, including many theologians, would say that it is both psychologically and theologically sound.³ The theme of forgiveness as a cardinal virtue (however seemingly unattainable) is rampant in popular culture. Images of Amish girls, walking to the schoolhouse where their classmates were gunned down in Nickel

Mines, Pennsylvania, and accounts of their community's prayers for forgiveness of the gunman, held a strong fascination for weeks in the public media. People were riveted by media portrayals of the Amish as "Christ-like."⁴ However, such portrayals even of the Amish, for whom forgiveness is a central spiritual discipline, neglected the more subtle and complex emotional nuances of Amish practice.⁵

Forgiveness Is not a Work

The portrayal of forgiveness in *The Shack* is less flat-footed than the "Wiki-How" article cited above. Author William Young incorporates the understandings that forgiveness does not erase or excuse wrongdoing and that forgiveness is a process, not a one-time action. The primary problem with all such emotional depictions of forgiveness, however, is that they define forgiveness as a human activity—in theological terms, as a *work*. Forgiveness becomes something we do, like exercise or healthy eating, in order to live a better life. In numerous popular accounts, forgiveness is increasingly being touted as a form of corrosion-prevention: "Unforgiveness is NOT normal or acceptable. It is a dysfunction, a sin. Like corrosive acid, it eats away at the soul and body of the possessor."⁶

In this way, the public interest in forgiveness in North America begins to be one more tool in the distinctively self-absorbed U.S. culture of self-actualization and the pursuit of happiness. Such depictions of forgiveness are perhaps not coincidental, coming at a time when self-improvement is a trademark of the good life, and advertisements for the good life have become all the more shrill in the aftermath of September 11, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the current economic crisis. Notably, the primary motivation expressed in these calls for forgiveness is to release inner bitterness, pain, and anger in order to heal from one's wounds and feel better. From another popular website, About.com's page on depression, we read:

Forgiveness. It's such a hard thing to do, but it can be so liberating to the soul. What makes it difficult for most of us to do is the way we define it. We think of forgiveness as meaning that we should say all is forgotten and things will go back to what they were. This Biblical definition of forgiveness is very hard for most of us to swallow. How can you forget the unforgettable? How can you forgive the unforgivable? To enjoy the benefits of forgiveness, however, we needn't go that far. All that's really required is that we make the decision to move forward, to let go of the old hurts. We don't have to condone what's been done. What's wrong is still wrong. We don't have to invite the person back into our lives or even be friendly with them. What we do have to do is allow ourselves to release all the negative emotions associated with that person. As long as we hold onto the pain, we are choosing to allow that person's past actions to continue to hurt us. We can also choose to stop letting them hurt us. That's a definition of forgiveness that's more doable for those of us who are less than saintly.⁷

The article continues with "an exercise you can do right now to let go of pain and regain your life"—in other words, salvation.

How are such calls for forgiving one's way to healing and salvation likely to be heard by actual victims of violence, betrayal, and injustice? Any demand to forgive

may be understood by the wounded individual as an impossible burden that adds insult—or guilt—to injury. Such advice all too often tends to heap new feelings of guilt and inadequacy on a person who makes an effort to forgive, using such guidelines, and feels that he or she has failed. The most healing word we can offer a survivor of abuse or injury—from a Christian perspective—is this: that *forgiveness is not a human work*. The author of the About.com quotation has in fact misread and too quickly dismissed the Bible. A closer examination of biblical writings about forgiveness can help us to come to a better understanding of forgiveness—one that does not force forgiveness on the survivors of injury and violence.⁸

What the Bible Really Says

The word most often used in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' teachings on forgiveness is the verb *aphimi*, which means "I send away, or let off," in the sense of forgiving a loan. This is the word for forgiveness used, for example, in Matt. 18:21-35 and in the Lord's Prayer (in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels). In Matt. 6:12, the verse literally means "release us from our debts (*opheilmata*) as we also have released those who are indebted to us (our debtors—*opheiltai*). We no longer hold them in obligation to us. This is also the sense of the most commandment-like passage about forgiveness in the Gospels, Mark 11:25: "Release whatever you may have down on someone, in order that your father in heaven may release your trespasses." There is nothing inherently emotional or psychological about this sense of the word. It is simply a cancelling of a balance due. Furthermore, in Mark 11:25, Jesus is more likely arguing against taking revenge than he is arguing for feeling forgiving. The Gospels and the Epistles both advocate turning away from active vengeance (e.g., Matt. 5:38; Rom. 12:17-21). However, refraining from personal retribution does not equate to feeling emotionally warm toward someone who has done us harm.

An examination of the parallel text of the Lord's Prayer in Luke further suggests that the emphasis in this passage is on the quality of *God's* forgiveness, and not on *our* effort to forgive. In Luke's version, the forgiveness of sins rather than debts is made explicit: "forgive us our sins" (*hamartia*)—literally, when we have missed the mark. But in Luke 11:4, God and human beings do not do exactly the same thing! The parallelism in the verse is not "as we forgive the *sins* of others," but again, as in Matthew, as we forgive our *debtors* (those who owe us—*opheilonti*). The Lucan version is not, in fact, a parallelism as in most English translations, but an analogy. In other words, we pray for God to release us from our wrongdoings *in the manner in which* we humans release our debtors. This is not the same thing as saying that we should forgive sinners as God forgives, and it is certainly not a legal contract by which God will only forgive us if we first forgive others. It is God in these texts who forgives sins, not human beings.

In this sense, *The Shack* almost gets it right—Papa tells Mack that Missy had already forgiven her murderer. Mack asks, "How could she?" Papa replies, "Because of my presence in her. That's the only way true forgiveness is ever possible."⁹ The problem, of course, is that it is still framed as something the person him- or herself finally does, although s/he does it by God's help.

This sense of the Greek carries forward the understanding of forgiveness found in the Hebrew Bible. The word *kaphar*, to cover, is used by the ancient Hebrew writers to describe how God "blots out" sins. This word is never used in relation to human

beings. It is only God who forgives in such a way. Note also that the English translation, “blots,” implies an erasure, whereas a “covering” literally suggests a healing-over, but does not preclude a scar of remembrance.¹⁰

Forgiveness as a Gift of Grace

The word for forgiveness found more often in the Epistles, *charizomai*, (e.g., 2 Cor. 2:7, 10; 12:13; Eph. 4:31-32; Col. 2:13; 3:13) literally means to be gracious. Paul often exhorts the members of his churches to show forbearance, compassion, and kindness toward one another, and to “forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven you” (Col. 3:13; also echoed in Eph. 4:31-32). But this verb *charizomai* is too often misunderstood, again, as an effort on the part of the person. To be gracious is to be graced. It is a charisma, a gift of the Holy Spirit. It enables a person to let go of the person who wounded him/her, and perhaps, in time, to be less preoccupied with both the perpetrator and the wound. Moreover, as New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl pointed out, the modern church’s emphasis on sin and forgiveness is not a correct interpretation of Paul.¹¹ From a post-Freudian perspective, we tend to psychologize biblical texts in ways that were unknown in the ancient world. Therefore, to assign a modern emotional understanding to the texts about forgiveness is anachronistic and probably says more about our preoccupation with guilt and anxiety than the Bible actually says about God, Christ, or the early Christian community.

As I have written previously,¹² at certain times, for some people, when pain has been worked through and justice has in some sense been achieved, this gift simply descends. There may be a sense of anger, inner conflict, doubt, fear, or hatred being lifted away. The experience of violation is not erased or forgotten, and anger and fear may still be present in very appropriate ways. But the experience no longer has power over the person in the same way as it did before. If *aphimi* is the word for release, then in this charism of forgiveness from God, it is we who are released—not by our own doing, but by God’s action in us and for us. At times, this may come as a sense of realization or discovery after the fact.¹³ There is a new lightness, a new ability to move on emotionally, a “peace that passes all understanding.”

In another popular novel, *The Kite Runner*, the protagonist Amir discovers that without any conscious effort or intention on his part, he had finally experienced forgiveness toward his father Baba for secretly preferring his illegitimate half-brother:

Your father was a man torn between two halves, Rahim Khan had said in his letter. I had been the entitled half, the society-approved, legitimate half, the unwitting embodiment of Baba’s guilt. I looked at Hassan, showing those two missing front teeth, sunlight slanting on his face. Baba’s other half. The unentitled, unprivileged half. The half who had inherited what had been pure and noble in Baba. The half that, maybe in the most secret recesses of his heart, Baba had thought of as his true son.

I slipped the picture back where I found it. Then I realized something: That last thought had brought no sting with it....I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded, not with the fanfare of epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night.¹⁴

There is no English word that adequately expresses this sense of forgiveness as

something we receive rather than something we do. Rather than the transitive verb “to forgive him/her,” which implies active effort, we need a word like “to be forgiven of him/her,” which would convey the sense of *having been* released from pain and bitterness. This grace does not (and perhaps need not) come to everyone. It is not a matter of magic that we can invoke or a prize we can earn. There are no “should’s” in any of this, nor should we hold this in front of survivors of violence as a goal at the end of an emotional or therapeutic process. Perhaps the best pastoral counsel we can give to someone who may be feeling pressure (either internal or external) to forgive an offender is this: Sometimes people may have a feeling of having forgiven another person as a letting go and moving on, but do not blame yourself if you are not “there” in your own emotional life. Forgiveness is a gift of grace, and it may be given to you in God’s own good time. In the meantime, don’t worry, and don’t be preoccupied with something that is God’s job to do, not yours.

Reconciliation as Communal

A related set of words in the New Testament, translated as “reconciliation” (*apokatalasso*, *katallasso*, and *diallattomai*), literally means “thoroughgoing change” or “transformation.” I have argued in my writings on the church’s response to victims and survivors of violence that this term represents a turn from insistence upon individual survivors forgiving their perpetrators toward an emphasis on communal reconciliation. The root words for “reconciliation” are revealing—*katallasso* comes from *allasso*, to exchange, which in turn comes from the root word *allos*, meaning other.¹⁵ Violence is, at its heart, always a result of an objectification, an “othering”—turning a “Thou” into an “It.”¹⁶ And such objectification can always be found operating not only at the level of individual relationships, but in the wider context of social injustice and unequal power, which serves in turn to undergird, goad, and/or reinforce individual acts of harm and violation.

Reconciliation is therefore a corporate transformation—a turning toward those who have been “othered,” a restoring of the *concilium*, the whole society.¹⁷ Again, as in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 5:18-19), reconciliation is *God’s* work through Christ, and we are the ambassadors or messengers of that reconciliation. This reconciliation, or transformation, is not about individuals “making nice,” or even about individuals’ coming back into personal relationships at all. Rather, it is the promised unity and peace between whole groups of people, represented in Paul as Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28; cf., the “reconciliation” between circumcised and uncircumcised peoples brought about in Christ, Eph. 2:14-16), and between humanity and God (Rom. 5:10, Col. 1:19-23). Its sign would not be the oppressed forgiving their oppressors, but rather the hearts of the oppressors recognizing the full dignity and humanity of those who had objectified, and entering into true repentance, true *metanoia*.

Conclusion

All theology, but especially *pastoral* theology which is concerned with care for suffering, *must begin with human beings*, and in particular, the pain and brokenness of the human condition. Pastoral theology takes human suffering as its starting place—in Jürgen Moltmann’s words, “the open wound of life in this world.”¹⁸ From the perspective of those who have been victimized, whether the injury has been

emotional, physical, or sexual, classic and popular definitions of forgiveness as a spiritual work do not facilitate the healing that well-meaning Christians intend. Furthermore, when we urge someone else to forgive, we may be unconsciously wishing simply to avoid staying with them in their suffering and anger. As the Rev. Marie Fortune, longtime advocate for survivors of sexual and domestic violence, has put it, “We ask others to forgive and forget, and what we really mean is that we want them to forgive so we can forget.”¹⁹ When we shift our perspective in doing theology from one of power and privilege to the perspective of the “sinned-against,”²⁰ we are challenged to re-think simplistic notions of forgiveness as a work.

If forgiveness is God’s job to do, and a gift of grace that we may receive but not forcefully achieve by our own effort, we no longer need to push forgiveness onto others or ourselves! We may or may not ever feel as though we have forgiven those who have harmed us, but we can stop punishing ourselves and others for legitimate negative feelings of hurt, anger, humiliation, and grief. As we allow our feelings to flow through us, without self-recrimination or judgment, we may find that we have new freedom, because we are no longer using our energy to suppress emotions that we thought were un-Christian. In fact, the so-called “negative” emotions of hurt and anger can be channeled into acts of compassion for others who have been wounded and collaborative actions with other Christians for constructive social change. Finally, as we re-shift our attention away from forgiveness as the central theme of our theology, we can be freed to engage in prophetic witness to the already-not yet reconciliation that God is calling forth from all creation and an end to violence in all its forms.

Notes

1 <http://www.wikihow.com/Forgive>.

2 William P. Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007). The romanticization of racial stereotypes in this image is also highly problematic. See my review of *The Shack* in *The Journal of Pastoral Theology*, forthcoming.

3 For example, see Eugene Peterson’s book endorsement: “This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did for his. It’s that good!” *The Shack*, front cover.

4 E.g., “Amish Forgiveness Is Christ-like,” MSNBC, available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJt3wKXdRc>. Reporter Ann Curry stated on Oct. 4, 2006, that “the Amish here are quick to forgive, burying their anger even before they bury their children. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15134030/>

5 Dr. Steven Holt, a scholar of Amish life, states, “The Amish are quite aware that forgiveness is — the emotional side of forgiveness is a process. It’s a difficult process. It’s something that certainly wasn’t over in five or 10 days after the shooting. PBS Religion and Ethics Newsweekly, “Perspectives: Amish Forgiveness,” Sept. 21, 2007, available online at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1103/perspectives.html>.

6 Junior DeSouza, “Forgiveness,” available online at http://www.openheaven.com/forums/forum_posts.asp?PN=1&TID=9616

7 Nancy Schimelpfening, “The Healing Power of Forgiveness,” July 25, 2008, available online at <http://depression.about.com/od/copingskills/a/forgiveness.htm>.

8 The following section summarizes a more detailed exegesis of forgiveness in the Bible in Pamela Cooper-White, “Conclusion: The Call to Reconciliation,” *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 253-62.

9 Young, *The Shack*, 226.

10 *contra* Miroslav Volf, who has proposed an eschatological vision of a restoration of the world in which even the memory of evil is erased and forgotten, in *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 136; see also Volf, *The*

End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), and *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). My view is more like pastoral theologian James Emerson's on this point, *The Dynamics of Forgiveness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).

11 Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 85, 95, also cited in John Patton, *Is Human Forgiveness Possible? A Pastoral Care Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 89, 127-30; and lectures at Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, 1982.

12 Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, pp. 260-61.

13 Cf., Patton, "The Discovery of Human Forgiveness," in *Is Human Forgiveness Possible?* pp. 117-45. This is the corollary to the discovery that one has been forgiven, described in Emerson as "realized forgiveness" in *Dynamics of Forgiveness*, 131-32.

14 Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (New York: Riverhead Books/Penguin, 2003), p. 359.

15 John W. de Gruchy uses this etymology in *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). While de Gruchy draws different conclusions, based on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he also emphasizes communal reconciliation.

16 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Free Press, 1971).

17 Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar*, p. 262. This has resonance with Emerson's emphasis on the community context of forgiveness in *Dynamics of Forgiveness*, p. 180. For further discussion of relationality and power, particularly power-in-community, see also pp. 28-42.

18 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 49.

19 Video "Broken Vows: Religious Perspectives on Domestic Violence," Seattle: Faith Trust Institute, available through http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/index.php?p=Broken_Vows&s=112.

20 Andrew Sung Park and Susan Nelson, eds., *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); see also Park, *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).