

# OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

## Study Eight

### FORGIVE US AS WE FORGIVE

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#### WHICH COMES FIRST?

When Jesus gave his disciples what we now call 'the Lord's Prayer' he included this petition:

And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matt. 6:12).

In the version recorded by Luke it reads:

And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us (Luke 11:4).

Jesus chose these words to comment on particularly:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matt. 6:14–15).

As he said on another occasion:

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses (Mark 11:25).

Other ancient authorities add verse 26: 'But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses'.<sup>1</sup> It seems that our receiving of forgiveness from God has much to do with our own forgiving of others.

At first sight, to our sinful minds, these texts would appear to make God's forgiveness of us conditional upon our forgiving of others—God will forgive us if we forgive others, but if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us. The picture we may have is of God waiting

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<sup>1</sup> NRSV note.

to see whether or not we are going to forgive others before he decides to forgive us. That way, our forgiveness of others would come first, and God's forgiveness of us would then follow, as a consequence dependent on our forgiving of others. Is that the way it is?

We have been saying all along that forgiveness is a sovereign, free and willing action on the part of God that is in keeping with His own very nature, and which is made possible solely by the action of God at great cost to Himself. We have also said that God's forgiveness of us is not dependent upon us doing the right thing, or any action on our part. The very fact that we need forgiveness is because we have not done the right thing. The grievous nature of our sin means we are unaware, unwilling, and so far gone that we are in no position to do anything to help ourselves or anyone else. We have seen that the miracle of new birth comes by no human action but from God, and that our repentance and faith by which we receive forgiveness are themselves gifts from God. Before God's forgiveness comes to us, forgiving others would be the furthest thing from our minds. So how could God's forgiveness of us ever be consequent upon our forgiveness of others? So which really comes first? We in our prideful arrogance may like to think that we out of the largeness of our hearts have done something like forgiving others in such a way as to deserve the forgiveness of God. But is that the way it really is?

The teaching of Jesus tells us that it is in fact the other way round. A woman of the city, who was a sinner, came to Jesus while he was dining with a Pharisee, and poured out on him precious ointment, tears and kisses in a profuse display of devotion (see Luke 7:36–38). Jesus ends up saying to her, 'Your sins are forgiven' (Luke 7:48). Again, we might conclude that she was forgiven because she showed such love. But in the middle of the incident, Jesus told a story with a question for his host:

'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly' (Luke 7:41–43).

We can ask the question: which came first—the love or the forgiveness? The story makes clear: the forgiveness came first, and the love followed as a consequence. So Jesus says of the woman: 'her sins, which were many, *have been* forgiven; *hence* she has shown great love' (Luke 7:47, NRSV).

Jesus' apostle Paul follows suit:

be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ *has forgiven* you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 4:32–5:2).

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord *has forgiven* you, so you also must forgive (Col. 3:13).

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *When have we thought that God's forgiving of us is dependent on our forgiving others?*
- *What is problematic with that?*
- *How do we see it now?*

## THE EXTENT AND COST TO GOD OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS

How then is our forgiving of others related to God's forgiving of us, and how can our withholding of forgiveness from others prevent us from receiving forgiveness from God? Jesus told another story to make this clear:

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart (Matt. 18:23–35).

How much is 'ten thousand talents'? 'A talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer'.<sup>2</sup> At that rate ten thousand talents amounts to 150,000 years of hard labour. In forgiving the slave that debt, the master bore the entire cost of that himself, for the sake of the slave. The slave had no appreciation whatsoever of the enormity of debt he had been forgiven and released from. He thought that given a little time, he could pay it all off: 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything'! Perhaps because he had such little appreciation of what had been done for him, he demanded restitution from his fellow slave of an amount that was worth only one hundred days of work,<sup>3</sup> and refused to allow any leeway, even though the fellow slave made the same plea to him as he had made to the master. His refusal to forgive was a direct result of his lack of appreciation of how much he had been forgiven. As a result, by the master's determination, he was rendered incapable of ever enjoying the release that had been granted. We are in the same situation regarding our forgiveness of sin from God, and our forgiveness of others: 'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart'.

This is what Jesus meant when he said, 'For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matt. 6:14–15). God, at total cost to Himself, has done everything necessary to 'forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness' by giving His Son as 'the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 1:9; 2:2). This is the only true and full forgiveness that there is for us and for everyone else. If we do not receive it fully, we will not have it to impart to others. If we are not imparting it to others, even though has been given, then it is not yet fully ours, and we may be rendered incapable of ever receiving it.

One mechanical illustration of this can be of a water tank that collects rain-water from the roof gutters. Once the tank is full, if the outlet tap is shut off, no more water can come into the tank, no matter how much it rains. If the tap is turned on, so the water flows out, any amount of rainwater can keep flowing into the tank and through it out to the house or garden.

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<sup>2</sup> NRSV note.

<sup>3</sup> 'The denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer' NRSV note.

A mechanical illustration, however, has its limitations. God and human beings are not mechanical, but personal. We are not dealing here simply with an outlet tap, but with the will of a human person, which can be as dogged and complex as all hell, or as simple, strong, straightforward, sweet and clear as heaven itself (see Jer. 17:9–10; Titus 1:15). God's action here also is not automatic but personal, with a sovereign freedom to give or withhold in wisdom, according to His boundless mercy and compassion (see Rom. 9:14–18). The simple personal truth remains, however, that the more we give, the more we get, to go on giving with:

Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back (Luke 6:37–38).

Any unwillingness to receive forgiveness from God, then, is deadly for any forgiving relationships with each other. Jesus made this point to his host when the forgiven sinner woman poured out her love over him:

Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little' (Luke 7:44–47).

Why did Simon the Pharisee 'love little'? Because he was 'one to whom little is forgiven'. In his self-righteousness he probably thought he had little that needed forgiveness. Hence his love was consequently small.

Joseph's brothers were in a similarly parlous and perilous position when, after their father Jacob had died, they came to Joseph with a concocted request to forgive them for what they had done to him many years earlier in the hope that he would not take it out on them:<sup>4</sup>

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father' (Gen. 50:15–17).

Joseph can hardly believe his ears, so grieved is he that his brothers still do not recognise and accept all that God in His mercy has done for them and their family in spite of and even through their evil intent:

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves' (Gen. 50:17–18).

The brothers have misinterpreted Joseph's tears—they think perhaps he is still angry with them. They consider that they might gain his favour if they play along with his grief, and humiliate themselves, perhaps as some form of penance by which they could pay off their guilt. Joseph is on a very different page. After all these years of knowing God's favour and goodness, in the midst of reversals, to him and to his dodgy family, the question of whether or not he forgives them does not even arise—they have together all long been in the good

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<sup>4</sup> See also Study 3, pp. 5–6.

books of God's mercy and loving-kindness. How could he withhold the forgiveness which is not his to give anyway but which has been testified to already by God's covenant faithfulness to them all these years? So Joseph follows suit:

But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Gen. 50:19–21).

We are not told whether Joseph's brothers then abandoned the guilt that they had been labouring under all these years, as they constantly misinterpreted God's goodness to them as threatening judgements (see Gen. 42:21–22, 28, 35; 43:16–23; 45:3). Jonah was faced with a similar question regarding his own attitude of unforgiveness towards the Ninevites:

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the LORD said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the LORD said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?' (Jonah 3:10–4:11).

The question to Jonah remains similarly unanswered. We need to make sure that it does not remain so with us.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *When have we been high-handed in considering whether or not we are going to 'forgive' someone else?*
- *What difference does it make to this when we know the full extent and cost to God of God's forgiveness and loving-kindness towards us?*
- *How does our refusal to forgive others prevent us from receiving forgiveness from God?*

## **ABUNDANT AND FREE**

If our forgiveness of others is in truth our participation in God's forgiveness of us all, then our forgiveness of each other needs to be of the same order as God's forgiveness of us all. It will be unstinting and without calculation:

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times’ (Matt. 18:21–22).

The number ‘seventy-seven’ here may be a deliberate contrast on Jesus’ part to the grim revenge exacted by a sinner belonging to the offspring of the murderer Cain:

I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for striking me.  
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold (Gen. 4:23–24).

An alternative translation is ‘seventy times seven’. Given that ‘seven’ signifies completeness, this could mean an infinite or incalculable number of times.

Forgiveness is to be given even where it is unasked-for, unwelcome, resisted or rejected:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven (Luke 6:32–37).

It has been said that love of enemies, which is certainly largely counter-cultural, is a distinctive hallmark of Christian loving. Why should this be? It is simply taking after our Father God as His children, made in His image:

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Rom. 5:8, 10).

This is the love that now ‘has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom. 5:5). So now we love sinners, even those who are our enemies, just as we have been loved by God.

This has particular ramifications for when we are tempted to retaliate towards others or to justify ourselves. Paul rebuked believers in Corinth for taking each other to court:

When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels—to say nothing of ordinary matters? If you have ordinary cases, then, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another, but a believer goes to court against a believer—and before unbelievers at that? In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that (1 Cor. 6:1–8).

‘Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?’ This is a stance that does not come naturally to us, but rather one that requires the special grace and strengthening of the Holy Spirit to conform us to the image of Christ:

‘He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth.’

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:22–23).

Paul himself and his ministry had been subjected to the unwarranted censure of others. His recourse, for himself and his accusers, was to the Lord Jesus as the merciful coming judge of all:

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God (1 Cor. 4:1–5).

Such a stance can be acquired and maintained in humility only by the loving and prayerful discipline of the Holy Spirit, as he brings to bear in our lives Christ's magnificent justifying of the ungodly. Nothing but this is proof against the accusations—whether true or false—of human or demonic agents.

Not that we can ever force our forgiveness on anyone. To do so might be another ploy on our part to place ourselves at an advantage over others who are thereby characterised as sinners, or who may be at this stage less willing to 'forgive' than we are. Paul gives some good advice about coming to a realistic assessment of where we are, and not to expect necessarily that friendly overtures from us will always be accepted by others:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Rom. 12:3, 17–18).

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *Where have we stumbled against cut-out points in our readiness to love and forgive?*
- *How have we been helped over these by the unstinting grace of God?*
- *When have we still tried to exercise 'forgiveness' as a mark of our superiority over others?*

## **NO WHITEWASHING**

The prophet Ezekiel had stern words for those who sought to conceal the sins of Israel and make out that all is well:

Because, in truth, because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace,' when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it. Say to those who smear whitewash on it that it shall fall. There will be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will fall, and a stormy wind will break out. When the wall falls, will it not be said to you, 'Where is the whitewash you smeared on it?' Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: In my wrath I will make a stormy wind break out, and in my anger there shall be a deluge of rain, and hailstones in wrath to destroy it. I will break down the wall that you have smeared with whitewash, and bring it to the ground, so that its foundation will be laid bare; when it falls, you shall perish within it; and you shall know that I am the LORD. Thus I will spend my wrath upon the wall, and upon those who have smeared it with whitewash; and I will say to you, The wall is no more, nor those who smeared it—the prophets of Israel who prophesied concerning Jerusalem

and saw visions of peace for it, when there was no peace, says the Lord GOD (Ezek. 13:10–16; compare Jer. 6:14; 8:11).

Forgiveness is not the same as covering up or papering over. God's forgiveness exposes sin in the process of removing it, and judges sinners in the process of cleansing them. It is into 'the judgment of this world' that Christ drew us when he was 'lifted up' on the cross (John 12:31–33). There we were 'crucified with Christ' (Gal. 2:19). By faith in Christ we come to and partake in the shining light of his holiness:

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

'Sleeper, awake!  
Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you' (Eph. 5:8–14).

Nor is this all over once our initial repentance is past. It is after we have been cleansed and given a new heart and a new spirit that we are made more acutely aware of the sins that before we were inert towards:

Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds (Ezek. 36:31).

God is the one 'to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden'. So when we come together we are 'to acknowledge our many sins, and not to conceal them in the presence of God our heavenly Father, but to confess them with a penitent and obedient heart, so that we may be forgiven through his boundless goodness and mercy'.<sup>5</sup> Knowing God's forgiveness as we do, the church is a place where sin is to be acknowledged and not hidden.

To do this realistically, for ourselves and each other, without falling into despairing self-accusation or legalistic scrupulosity, will make great demands on our capacity for self-assessment, humility and compassion, in constant dependence on the mercy of God that has come to us. There is something about the presence of Christ and his word that draws this out of us:

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again' (John 8:7–11).

If we are realistic in our own self-assessment and correction, we may help to save ourselves and others from some further pain—salutary as that might be. Paul says:

Examine yourselves . . . if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:28, 31–32).

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<sup>5</sup> *An Australian Prayer Book*, Anglican Information Office, Sydney, 1978, pp. 135, 19; compare Jer. 17:10; Heb. 4:13; James 5:16.



Jesus used vivid imagery to make the point that discipline exercised on ourselves here and now can spare us serious judgement later on:

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire (Matt. 18:8–9).

It is a case of regarding ‘everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’ (Phil. 3:8).

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *How have we confused ‘forgiveness’ with the covering up or making light of sin?*
- *How does our knowledge of God’s forgiveness enable us to face and deal with sin in our lives and in the life of the church?*

## **FORGIVENESS IN THE CHURCH**

While proclaiming ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’ to others (Luke 24:47; compare John 20:22–23), the Church of the living God must exercise forgiveness among its own members: ‘be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you’ (Eph. 4:32). Any instance of sin in our midst must be addressed by the gospel of forgiveness with a view to reconciliation. This was the thrust of what Jesus said in Matthew 18. He spoke of not despising ‘one of these little ones’ who belong to him. He then told the story of a shepherd who has a hundred sheep but left the ninety-nine and went ‘in search of the one that went astray’. In this context he went on:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt. 18:15–17).

‘Other ancient authorities lack *against you*’ in the opening sentence.<sup>6</sup> So this is not just about dispute resolution. It is primarily about helping to bring back a lost one that has gone astray. It is the same situation addressed by Paul when he said:

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness (Gal. 6:1).

The person or persons go to this one not to accuse but to bring and apply the life-giving gospel. The procedure outlined by Jesus is straightforward, and is to be followed. It is directly contrary to the way we often approach such situations: where we first of all talk with all and sundry about it—anyone but the person involved—then we might get one or two others to back us up in our accusations, and the last thing we do—if we ever get round to it—is speak with the person on our own—by which time it is probably too late anyway, and the damage is done. No—speak first with the person alone, without speaking about it with anyone else. If that is not received, go with one or two others—you might be on the wrong

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<sup>6</sup> NRSV note.

track, and they might be able to help. Only as a last resort is it brought to the larger group (including the leadership) for their prayers and counsel and support.

Even the final stage of exclusion for a time is with a view that the person ‘may be saved in the day of the Lord’ (1 Cor. 5:5), and the time comes when the church ‘should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow’, and ‘so that we may not be outwitted by Satan’ (2 Cor. 2:7, 11)—for the gospel of forgiveness confounds Satan every time. To treat someone ‘as a Gentile and a tax collector’ is to regard them as an outcast. But we know what Jesus did with Gentiles and tax collectors—he ministered to them, and they came to him.

John the apostle wrote: ‘If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal’ (1 John 5:16). How can that be so? Surely all sin is mortal—‘the person who sins . . . shall die’ (Ezek. 18:4). A sin that is not mortal then must be a sin which is forgivable—so pray for that! The only unforgivable sin—the sin against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29)—is the refusal to receive what the Holy Spirit brings—the forgiveness of sins—by which you then remain unforgiven.

There needs to be a recognition also that some sins are addictive, and may take some time and support to get over. Perhaps it was with this in mind that Jesus said:

If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive (Luke 17:3–4).

All of this requires great wisdom, love, and humble self-awareness. None of us is immune. ‘Take care that you yourselves are not tempted’, says Paul (Gal. 6:1). It is no doubt best done with a lightness of touch, rather than in a high-handed way that makes heavy weather of it. All of it is not to be done off our own bat, but ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’, ‘with the power of our Lord Jesus’, and ‘in the presence of Christ’ (1 Cor. 5:4; 2 Cor. 2:11)—it is Jesus at work, seeking the one that has gone astray. And Peter says, ‘Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins’ (1 Pet. 4:8).

Paul says that restoration should be done ‘in a spirit of gentleness’ (Gal. 6:1). Sometimes our attempts at restoration have a bit of a sharp edge to them. We want people to do what we want them to do, for the world to be the way we think it should be. This is understandable, since we have been made to rule the creation (see Gen. 1:26) and by God’s grace we will (see Rom. 4:13). But ever since we sinned as a human race, our propensity to rule has become distorted—from ruling in relationship with God and by His blessing, to seeking to control things according to our own agenda. So when people do not do what we want them to do for the world to be the way we think it should be, we get cross. This can give a troubled sharp edge to our attempts at restoring people—even when we are seeking to do that according to the clear law of God. We need to repent of this, and receive forgiveness for it, and renounce it. Is not God faced every day with people who do not do what He wants them to do, for the world to be the way He made it to be? And what does He do? He comes to them.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *Where have we seen the issue of forgiveness in the church ignored or evaded?*
- *Where have we seen it handled in a ham-fisted way?*
- *Where have we seen it done well? What can we learn from that?*

## LOOK FORWARD TO THE MERCY

What of intractable situations in which gross and harmful sin has been committed, and the potential for harm persists, as in abusive situations? We need to be careful not to serve our own needs for a quick or easy resolution by pressing on people in the first instance their need to forgive the offender. That is something that will come only by the revelation and gift of God, and that might take time. Miroslav Volf tells of a woman fearfully abused in time of war who vowed undying hatred against her enemies. He describes how she might come to forgive once Christ has made his dwelling in her:

Eventually, the time to forgive may come. She may forgive with one part of her soul while desiring vengeance with another. She may forgive one moment and then take it back the next. She may forgive some lighter offenses but not the worst ones. Such ambivalent, tentative, and hesitant attempts are not yet full-fledged forgiveness, but they are a start. If she doesn't trample underfoot the tender plant of forgiveness that seeks to break through the crust of vengeance with which she has protected herself, if she waters the plant with the living water of God's goodness, one day it may grow sturdy enough to bear fruit.<sup>7</sup>

We may recognise something of our own experience here, in the time it takes us to come round. It can and it does happen more quickly than this, but we need to make allowances. If God is long-suffering in His care for us, should we be any less so in our care for others?

What about situations where relational resolution continues to evade us? Due care must be taken, while never selling out on the gospel hope, to remain with the Lord who brings this hope to us. While God's forgiveness of us is immediate and full as soon as we repent and believe, there is a sense in which forgiveness will come into its own at the completion of all things. Peter told us to set all our hope on 'the grace that Jesus Christ *will bring you* when he is revealed' (1 Pet. 1:13), and Jude said, '*look forward* to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life' (Jude 21). With that sure and certain hope before us, we will be able to bear patiently with others who are in a bad way: 'have mercy on some who are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies', because the one 'who is able to keep you from falling' can also 'make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing' (Jude 22–24).

We need to face the reality that much of our forgiveness of one another may well be incomplete in this life.

only God can forgive *rightly*. God alone knows the nature and extent of any offense. And without that knowledge, forgiveness is bound to be at least partly wrong . . . we forgive by echoing God's forgiveness to the best of our ability . . . The consequence for us should be humility—willingness to admit that we may have gotten the wrongdoing wrong, willingness to revise our judgment, willingness to retract it. We should always forgive humbly and provisionally.<sup>8</sup>

This is with a confident view to that great day that is surely coming:

On that day, God will condemn all sins and yet forgive them. The light of God will shine into all dark corners of our lives and our hearts, and we will know ourselves as we are known by God. The love of God will finally and definitively release us from all guilt and fear of punishment, and we will love ourselves and others as we are loved by God. Then and there, we'll make God's forgiveness of our sins fully our own. Then and there, we'll make God's forgiveness of the sins of those who have offended us fully our own. Our forgiveness, now tarnished, will then sparkle in its full splendor.

We forgive now in hope for that day.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, , 2005, p. 207.

<sup>8</sup> Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 220.