Lavishly Forgive Sins in order to Be Forgiven: Jesus' Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Ardel B. Caneday

KEY WORDS

| Confess | Forgive | Forgiveness | Guilt | Reconciliation | Remission | Repent | Repentance | Sin | Therapy | Therapeutic |

ABSTRACT

Christians universally confess "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." Yet, with psychotherapy's ascendancy and its blending with Christian theology, Christians have come to disagree whether in interpersonal relationships repentance properly conditions forgiveness of sins. Many use Jesus' Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) to endorse the popularly accepted notion of "unconditional forgiveness." After all, to Peter's question—"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"—Jesus replies, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." On the contrary, Matthew's placement of Jesus' parable immediately following 18:15-20 shows that Jesus's response to Peter and the parable that follows reinforces that repentance is necessary to receive forgiveness of sins in relationships with both fellow humans and God.

INTRODUCTION

To teach that forgiveness is conditioned upon repentance is to contest a widely embraced, unchallenged, sacred assumption that many Evangelicals hold in common with non-Christians, received from psychotherapy.[1] It is because pluralism's dogma of "tolerance" which infects even Christians, that to teach Scripture requires repentance in order to receive forgiveness of sins often ignites accusations of intolerance, strife, and resentment, which is the antithesis of true forgiveness which brings reconciliation and unity.[2] Thus, forgiveness has become a privatized transaction of the heart for the therapeutic wellbeing of wronged individuals; now, whether wrongdoers repent is irrelevant. Even many who generally resist the psychologizing of the Christian gospel reflexively accept "unconditional forgiveness." For support, they appeal to the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:21-35).[3] Do the

1 See, e.g., Johann Christoph Arnold, *Seventy Times Seven: The Power of Forgiveness* (Farmington, Penn: Robertsbridge, East Sussex, UK: The Plough Publishing House, 1997). This book features numerous accounts, not only Christian, of forgiveness therapeutically focused.

2 On such irony, see D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

3 Cf. Brian Zahnd, *Unconditional? The Call of Jesus to Radical Forgiveness* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2011), 23-26. Cf. John MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998), 97-112. Both Zahnd and MacArthur deduce "unconditional forgiveness" from the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant," but they part

Scriptures teach "unconditional forgiveness"? Does Jesus' parable instruct us to forgive the sins of one another without requisite repentance? What about the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel—"If your brother sins, reprove him, and if he repents, grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' grant forgiveness to him" (17:3-4)? Do Matthew and Luke contradict one another?

In Matthew 18:15-20 Jesus initially instructs his disciples concerning how we are to respond if someone sins against us, and he adds more steps if repentance is not forthcoming. This section is sandwiched between the parables of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14) and of the Unforgiving Servant (18:21-35). It outlines the process to follow concerning sin, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. True, the words "repent," "forgive," and "reconcile" do not occur in Jesus' three-step procedure (18:15-20).[4] Yet, Christian laity, clergy, and scholars alike recognize that the concepts of repentance, of forgiveness, and of reconciliation are present in the passage. Hence, Christians historically have received this passage as essential instruction concerning church discipline that calls for repentance and forgiveness with the hope of reconciliation.

The antithetical concepts of *repenting* and *refusing to repent* are clear, for in Jesus' repetition—"if he *listens* to you," "if he does *not listen*," "if he *refuses to hear*," and "if he *refuses to hear* the church"—he portrays respectively *repenting* and *not repenting* under the imageries of *hearing* and *refusing to hear*, which signify *heeding* and *refusing to heed*.[5] Likewise, "you have gained your brother" is imagery that signifies reconciliation.[6] Jesus does not belabor his instruction by detailing each of the three steps, for where enmity occurs, apart from repentance and forgiveness of sin, reconciliation will not obtain. "If he listens to you" sufficiently signifies repentance, and if repentance is forthcoming, the victim (i.e. the one sinned against) is obligated by grace to grant forgiveness. Likewise, is it not evident that to remit the sins of the wrongdoer who refuses to heed when reproved is to disobey Jesus' instruction? Otherwise invoking the second and third steps would be pointless. If at any of the three steps the sin is remitted upon repentance, the disciplinary process terminates. Then, love confines both knowledge of and consequences of sin. Excommunication is averted.[7] Is it not

ways on Matt 18:15-17, for here MacArthur claims that it is obvious that "forgiveness must be conditional" (p. 119). It is worthy of note that MacArthur finds "conditional forgiveness" in Matt 18:15-17 but "unconditional forgiveness" in 18:22-35.

4 The verbs and nouns respectively are "repent – repentance" (μετανοέω; μετάνοια); "forgive" (ἀφίημι; ἄφεσις); and "reconcile" (διαλλάσσομαι, συναλλάσσω, καταλλάσσω, ἀποκαταλλάσσω; καταλλαγή). The notion that a concept is present within a context *only if certain words are also present* is called the *word-concept fallacy*. It is the mistake of equating concepts with particular words. When we read or listen, we need to understand that the words used may signal that a concept is under discussion without actually using the words one might have expected to signify that concept. See, e.g., Darrell L. Bock "New Testament Word Analysis," in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Scot McKnight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 111. Cf. J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, third ed. 2012 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 166.

5 The Greek expressions are these, respectively: ἐάν σου ***ἀκούσῃ***, ἐὰν ***μὴ ἀκούσῃ***, ἐὰν ***παρακούσῃ***, ἐὰν καὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ***παρακούσῃ*** (Matt 18:15-17). Cf. A. B. Caneday, *Must Christians Always Forgive? A Biblical Primer and Grammar on Forgiveness of Sins* (Mount Hermon, CA: Center for Cultural Leadership, 2011), 13.

6 The Greek expression is ἐκέρδησας τὸν ἀδελφόν σου (Matt 18:15). Κερδαίνω occurs as either market or athletic imagery for various aspects of salvation in the NT in addition to Matt 18:15. Cf. 1 Cor 9:19, 20, 21; Phil 3:8; 1 Pet 3:1. Matthew's expression is a variation on ὕπαγε πρῶτον διαλλάγηθι τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου ("Go. First be reconciled to your brother").

7 Jesus' three-step procedure confines and curtails sin with its effects by restricting knowledge of the sin. "A clear principle that emerges from Matthew 18:15-20 is that Jesus means for the process of correcting sin to involve as few people as necessary for producing repentance" (Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2012], 68. For he teaches, "If your brother sins against you, go expose his

evident that refusal to repent after receiving three distinct opportunities, each augmenting in solemnity, is the reason Jesus requires the church to excommunicate a member?[8] Finally, Jesus' use of *binding* and *loosing* imagery respectively signifies *not remitting sin* and *remitting sin*. "Repentance leads to loosing, or forgiveness, and continued fellowship. The lack of repentance leads to binding, or retention of sin, and exclusion from the community."[9]

Against this backdrop Matthew introduces (1) Peter's question, (2) Jesus' initial hyperbolic reply, and (3) his parabolic portrayal of the Unforgiving Servant. Jesus' three-step procedure averts hasty reactions to sin and requires believers to forbear with one another in a prescribed and orderly pattern when one sins against another. It seems apparent that the initial procedural step (18:15) prompts Peter's query, "Lord, how many times shall I grant forgiveness to my fellow disciple who sins against me? Up to seven times?" (18:21).[10] If Jesus insists that a fellow disciple is to receive three orderly and solemn opportunities to acknowledge wrongdoing, it seems Peter thinks seven times may be even more generous.[11] The frequency of admonishing and forgiving the sin of one who heeds his rebuke is Peter's concern (18:15).

Jesus responds, "I do not say to you that you should grant forgiveness 'up to seven times' to your fellow disciple who sins against you and acknowledges the sin. No, instead, I say to you that you should remit the sin of such a one 'up to seventy-seven times'" (18:22).

But this understanding of Matthew 18:15-22, leading into the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, raises the very questions this essay endeavors to answer. This essay demonstrates agreement between Jesus' three-phased procedure for securing repentance and reconciliation and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Jesus neither renders repentance optional nor forgiveness unconditional but consistently affirms that repentance is antecedent to remission of sin. Peter's query receives Jesus' dual reply, (1) his hyperbolic response—"not seven times, but seventy-seven times"—and (2) his parabolic illustration features remission of sin, granted graciously and lavishly, never begrudgingly or stingily, yet correlated with antecedent repentance.[12] Contrary to a popular notion, the fact that remission of sin correlates with repentance as a condition (1) does not reduce the wrongdoer to groveling, (2) does not

fault between the two of you alone" (Matt 18:15). Cf. the proverb, "love covers a multitude of sins" (Prov 10:12; cf. 1 Pet 4:8), when James says, "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone turns him back from sin, let him understand that whoever turns back a sinner from the error of his way saves his soul from death and covers a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20).

8 Refusal to repent is the singular sin that warrants excommunication according to the NT (cf. 1 Cor 5:1-5; 2 Cor 2:5-11; see Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 28-29).

9 David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 446. "If the Word of God has been followed, then we may be assured that God registers with approval in heaven that which we do upon earth. In a word, the will of God as revealed in his Word is the same as the will of God in heaven. The decisions of the church on earth, when consonant with the Word of God, bear the authority and seal of God and we dare not plead as our comfort that such decisions are merely those of men. If they follow the prescriptions of Scripture then they are the judgments of God in heave" (John Murray, "A Lesson in Forgiveness," *Collected Writings of John Murray* [Edinburgh, UK; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982], 3.192-193).

10 Turner observes, "The recidivist sin about which Peter is concerned probably relates to the process outlined in 18:15-17, and Peter is asking how many times 18:15 must be repeated" (*Matthew*, 449).

11 Daniel J. Harrington thinks "Peter's question about the limits of forgiveness . . . is given a response that renders the question absurd" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina 1 [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991], 271).

12 "It is true that when a brother sins against us he ought with speed to come to us in confession and sorrow. But if he does not do this we ought to go to him to reprove him—'go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone' (v. 15). We must do our utmost to bring him to the right state of mind, and that means to repentance, so that we shall be in the position to forgive him and enter again upon relations of peace and harmony" (John Murray, "A Lesson in Forgiveness," 3.191).

render the forgiver unforgiving and unmerciful, and (3) does not turn the gift of forgiveness into a commodity to be earned.

However, before pondering the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, consideration ought to be given to the origins of the widespread teaching of therapeutic "unconditional forgiveness" because now few hear teaching on interpersonal forgiveness without suffusion of Scripture's terminology with psychotherapeutic concepts and jargon. The tendentious nature of this pervasive teaching hinders this essay's task in at least two ways. First, the teaching's duration, pervasiveness, effective repackaging of Christian nomenclature, and general acceptance gives the impression that to challenge it is to protest orthodoxy, if not to distort the gospel. Second, this teaching is so widely received that the careful exegesis required to identify and to correct ingrained confusion and errors runs the risk of appearing pedantic, quarrelsome, and niggling.

FORGIVENESS OF SINS: REORIENTED, REPURPOSED, REDEFINED, AND REARRANGED

From the earliest days of the church, Christians have confessed: "I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins."[13] For many this confession has become confused, unclear, even conflicting with the gospel they confess. Throughout psychotherapy's ascendancy it has rivaled Christianity by infiltration, hijacking its vocabulary and concepts to imbue them with its own substitutes that tend to privatize religion, including Christian faith.[14] Against warnings and critiques offered by some Christian psychologists, ministers, and theologians, psychotherapy infiltrated Christianity's pews and pulpits.[15] Universally acknowledged virtues surrendered to individually derived values.[16] Evangelicals became preoccupied with "psychological wholeness as a substitute for holiness."[17] Within Christian teachings, perhaps rivaled only by *love*, *forgiveness* became susceptible to psychotherapy's reconfiguration.[18] Consequently, what many Christians confess when they say, "I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins," has become muddled, impaired, even

13 David F. Wells states, "It is my contention that theology should mean the same thing regardless of whether it is used in the Church or in the academy. There was a time when there was this sort of uniformity of meaning. In the past, the doing of theology encompassed three essential aspects in both the Church and the academy: (1) a confessional element, (2) reflections on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded in the first two elements" (*No Place for Truth: or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 98).

14 Wells observes, "As the nostrums of the therapeutic age supplant confession, and as preaching is psychologized, the meaning of Christian faith becomes privatized" (p. 101).

15 Two notable psychologist who published warnings are William Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction: The Failure of Modern Psychology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), esp. 74-89, and Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 95-110.

16 Due largely to the "values clarification technique" morality became subjected to individual preferences and feelings. Cf. Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction*, 102-121. "Hence, whereas the church (and even the general society) formerly recognized and condemned obvious misconduct as *sinful* (wrong) and *shameful*, now, if the behavior is too offensive to fall under the umbrella category of 'alternative life style,' both church and society barely muster the moral courage to label the behavior *inappropriate* or perhaps *unhealthy*, but surely without the slightest whisper of sin or of shame" (A. B. Caneday, "How Can I Live the Biblical Worldview in a Culture That Does Not Share It?" in *Christian Contours*, ed. Douglas S. Huffman [Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011], 117. The "shift from virtues to values represents the true moral revolution of our time" ("Learning from Victorian Virtues—Interview: Gertrude Himmelfarb," *Religion & Liberty* 5.5 [July/August 1995]: 4).

17 See David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 134.

18 Wells claims, "The church has succumbed to the seductions of our therapeutic culture, and in that context it seems quite natural to favor the relational dimensions over the moral dimension, mysticism over cognitive conviction, self-fulfillment over personal surrender, self-image over character, pluralistic religious equality over the uniqueness of the Christian faith" (*God in the Wasteland*, 136).

egregiously wrong, especially with regard to forgiveness within interpersonal relationships. Though many evangelical teachers and authors have contributed to this confusion with misappropriation of Scripture, the influence of one looms above all others.

A generation ago, when he repackaged "forgiveness as therapy," Lewis Smedes altered the course of Christian teaching concerning forgiveness with regard to wrongs done interpersonally.[19] While ostensibly articulating a Christian perspective upon forgiveness, he married popular psychology and pastoral counseling. His book, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, leads a parade of volumes on forgiveness that mingles psychological research, appropriation of Scripture, and anecdotal stories.[20] In his review, Robert C. Roberts states,

> I shall argue that the kind of forgiveness Smedes expounds both overlaps with Christian forgiveness and is significantly different from it, and that the similarities and differences are revealed by comparing the grammars of the two virtues. I shall call Smedes' concept of forgiveness the "therapeutic" concept, and the other the "Christian" concept.[21]

He claims that Smedes found "a special sort of forgiving" which is "different from and at odds with that of classical Christianity."[22] This teaching on forgiveness now permeates Evangelicalism because others, such as Randall O'Brien, dutifully proclaim and publish the same doctrine. *Set Free by Forgiveness: The Way to Peace and Healing*, the title of O'Brien's book (2005), reprises Smedes' teaching, aiding and abetting its widespread acceptance.[23]

Forgiveness Reoriented

Psychotherapeutics *reorients* forgiveness so that the guilt of the person, who according to classical Christian teaching needs to be remitted, is not at issue.[24] Instead, presumption that a person who is wronged is at risk of becoming consumed with hatred, bitterness, resentment, and revenge displaces classical Christianity's distress over the gravity of the wrongdoer's sin, guilt, and need for repentance in order to receive remission of sin. Thus, forgiveness is *reoriented* to focus not on the culprit's guilt but

19 Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984). "Smedes' book is rich in psychological insight, vividly and even at times poetically rendered; it is uncommonly good as a popular exposition of a therapeutic virtue. But as regards the corrosion of classical virtue concepts in the acidic atmosphere of this therapeutic age, *Forgive and Forget* only instantiates this tendency and contributes to it" (Robert C. Roberts, "Forgiveness as Therapy: A Review Article," of Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, *Reformed Journal* 36.7 [July 1986], 22).

20 For a critical engagement of Smedes and "therapeutic forgiveness," see L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 35-69, especially 47-53; and Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 63-73.

21 Robert C. Roberts, "Forgiveness as Therapy: A Review Article," of Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 21, 20. In Smedes' reply to Roberts's review, he objects that "it makes no sense at all to characterize *Forgive and Forget* as a book about 'therapeutic forgiveness' and, therefore, about something somewhat different from Christian forgiveness" ("Lewis Smedes Replies," *Reformed Journal* 36.7 [July 1986], 23).

22 Ibid., 19.

23 Randall O'Brien, *Set Free by Forgiveness: The Way to Peace and Healing* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2005). In the preface to his book O'Brien states, "I still recall the title of Professor Smede's lecture: 'Forgiveness: What, Why, and How?' If imitation is the highest form of flattery, I have flattered Dr. Smedes since first hearing him in 1983. For over twenty years, I have taught in churches, at conferences, and on college campuses, focusing on the subject of forgiveness. Suffice it to say, I owe a great debt to Lewis Smedes. His book *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* remains one of the best books available on the subject" (11-12).

24 Cf. Rob Bell who states, "Hell is full of forgiven people God loves, whom Jesus died for" (Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], 146); and O'Brien, who insists, "Contrary to popular view, forgiveness *precedes* repentance! Repentance is the result of God's forgiveness, not the cause of it" (*Set Free by Forgiveness*, 73).

on the innocent's *presumed risk of resentment*.[25] So forgiveness fixates upon the *presumed hatred* allegedly concealed in the heart of the one sinned against, not upon the overt sin *actually committed*.[26]

Forgiveness Repurposed

A wrongdoer's culpability is not an essential issue if forgiveness is therapeutic. So Smedes asks, "Would it bother God too much if we found our peace by forgiving him for the wrongs we suffer? What if we found a way to forgive him without blaming him?"[27] O'Brien reasons, "Sometimes we have a difficult time forgiving God for allowing our adversaries to prosper. Do we not? We watch in bitter resentment as they fare well. Jonah was unable to forgive God for his *goodness* to the people of Nineveh. . . . Truth be known, God is terribly hard to forgive when bad things happen to us, *and* when *good* things happen to our enemies. . . . Sometimes God has to be forgiven for his goodness."[28]

Accordingly, if God who does not sin is nonetheless the object of human forgiveness, it is evident that the purpose of forgiveness is not to remit another person's guilt, for God is not in need of remission of sin. So, forgiveness is *repurposed* to entail an inward, private, and invisible transaction of the heart, not to absolve the wrongdoer's guilt but to banish the resentment presumably being nursed in the heart of the one sinned against.[29] Smedes claims, "Forgiving is an *honest* release even though it is done invisibly, within the forgiver's heart."[30] Thus, forgiveness is *repurposed* for the "inner healing" of the person who is wronged, whether by fellow humans or by God's permission of evil.[31] So, forgiveness is *our releasing ourselves* from alleged *hatred* or *resentment* induced by hurt inflicted upon us rather than our remitting the guilt of a repentant person who has sinned against us.[32] Because forgiveness as therapy

25 Even Miroslav Volf fastens upon this presumption, "Instead of wanting to forgive, we instinctively seek revenge An evil deed will not be owed for long; it demands instant repayment in kind" (*Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996], 120).

26 Smedes claims, "I never had it in my head to write what Roberts calls a therapeutic book" ("Replies," 23). Even so, that he developed and published his ideas on forgiveness, featuring presumed *resentment* or *hatred* in the person wronged, in the midst of the burgeoning therapeutic culture is hardly coincidental. Smedes' appeal to internal resentment or hatred in the person wronged is in keeping with the spirit of the age in which *ressentiment* is incited, cultivated, and exploited to advance the cause of the therapeutic culture which Charles Sykes chronicles well in *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), esp. 33-52. Herbert Schlossberg provides an instructive discussion of *ressentiment* in *Idols for Destruction: Christian Faith and its Confrontation with American Society* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 51-61. Though more complex than this, *ressentiment* consists in the nursing of entrenched feelings of resentment and hostility against another, accompanied by a sense of powerlessness to give direct expression to these feelings. Embers of *ressentiment* are what grievance activists stoke into burning coals in order to promote their "social justice" causes with their "expertise" as the solution.

27 Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 83.

28 O'Brien, *Set Free by Forgiveness*, 136-137.

29 Smedes' approach to forgiveness presumes that hatred in the heart of the forgiver will always be present wherever forgiveness is needed: "you cannot shake the memory of how much you were hurt, and you cannot wish your enemy well. You sometimes want the person who hurt you to suffer as you are suffering" (*Forgive and Forget*, 2).

30 Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 29. Later, he elaborates, "The only way to heal the pain that will not heal itself is to forgive the person who hurt you. Forgiving stops the reruns of pain. Forgiving heals your memory as you change your memory's vision.... When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life.... You set a prisoner free, but you discover that the real prisoner was yourself" (p. 133).

31 Smedes, "Replies," 23.

32 Given this view of forgiveness, it is understandable why a notion formerly regarded as absurd—"forgiving ourselves"—is now commonplace jargon in evangelical self-help literature and conference talks (see O'Brien, Set *Free by Forgiveness*, 161). Smedes asks, "Do you dare release the person you are today from the shadow of the wrong you did yesterday? Do you dare forgive yourself? To forgive yourself takes high courage. Who are you, after all, to shake yourself free from the undeniable sins of your private history—as if what you once did has no bearing on who you are now?" (71). He continues, "*Finally, the climax of self-forgiving; it comes when we feel at one with ourselves again*. The split is healed. The self inside of you,

suppresses the real sin and busies itself with an imagined "sin"—presumed resentment in the heart of the victim—this is one application of psychotherapy where it is permissible to "blame the victim."[33] So, it is not uncommon for Evangelicals to indict a person who has been sinned against for resentment for not granting unconditional forgiveness to the wrongdoer who refuses to seek absolution of guilt. At work is a twisted use of Matthew 7:1—to judge sin is deemed worse than to commit sin. Thus, Roberts is warranted to contrast Smedes' "therapeutic" concept of forgiveness with the "Christian" concept.

Forgiveness Redefined

This fixation upon our presumed resentment toward the person who wronged us and upon our need for "inner healing" from that hurt calls for redefining *forgiveness*.[34] Among Evangelicals awash in psychotherapy, the pervasive functional definition of forgiveness now refers to being "healed of our pain" internally and privately "even when the other person will not or cannot be reconciled to us."[35] Given this *reorientation*, *repurposing*, and *redefining* of Christian and biblical categories, presumption that the person wronged by another is infected with hatred (1) renders the wronged person in need of forgiveness (i.e., "release"), and (2) suppresses the gospel's call for wrongdoers to seek remission of sins from those they have wronged, including both God and fellow humans.

Forgiveness Rearranged

If forgiveness (1) concerns healing the hurt and hatred of the one sinned against, not absolving the guilt of the wrongdoer, (2) is releasing ourselves from the resentment induced by that hurt, and (3) is an act done "invisibly, within the forgiver's heart" for one's own sake, not to remit the guilt of the wrongdoer, what follows comes as no surprise. This widely embraced concept of forgiveness *rearranges* the Christian gospel's stated order of sin, guilt, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restitution, even marshaling Scripture for authorization. If remission of a wrongdoer's guilt is not of the essence of forgiveness, then it is reasonable to insist that forgiveness is "unconditional," which is to say that repentance is unnecessary.[36]

who condemned you so fiercely, embraces you now. You are whole, single; you have come together" (p. 74). Once more, consider Smedes: "To forgive yourself is to act out the mystery of one person who is both forgiver and forgiven. You judge yourself: this is the division within you. You forgive yourself: this is the healing of the split" (p. 77). Cf. O'Brien, *Set Free by Forgiveness*, 161-182.

33 William Ryan coined the phrase, "blaming the victim," in *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971).

34 O'Brien states, "*Forgiveness is the removal of personal barriers within a relationship caused by wrongdoing, real or imagined*" (Set *Free by Forgiveness*, 50). He argues that the principal barrier is the forgiver's hurt and resentment.

35 Smedes, "Replies," 23. That Smedes was awash in psychotherapeutics is evident in his exchange with Roberts, for Smedes states, "In any case, I never had it in my head to write what Roberts calls a therapeutic book. I wanted only to describe and commend a healing action that Christ expects of us and that is widely misunderstood. If a lot of people find it therapeutic as well, I am the more thankful" (p. 23). Smedes' default imagery of "healing" signals how thoroughly he had already displaced biblical imagery with psychotherapy's categories.

On how prevalently within American culture psychotherapeutic categories had replaced biblical ones by the time Smedes published *Forgive and Forget*, see William Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction: The Failure of Modern Psychology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), esp. 74-89, and Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 95-110.

36 Classical Christian teaching on forgiveness of sin recognizes an order—sin, guilt, repentance, forgiveness, restitution, and reconciliation—with forgiveness as one distinguishable step or stage in the progression, not as containing multiple stages. Rather than follow this scriptural order, Smedes fixates upon forgiveness, repackages it as consisting of four therapeutic stages, renames sin as "hurt," suppresses the wrongdoer's guilt, and need for repentance and restitution, and treats reconciliation (coming together) as part of forgiveness, even if not always attainable. So, Smedes claims that forgiveness takes four stages: *hurt*, *hate*, *healing*, *coming together* (p. 4). O'Brien's reprisal of

Though hardly original with him, Smedes canonized the doctrine of "unconditional forgiveness," even as he acknowledges that repentance is necessary to receive God's forgiveness. Yet, even here psychotherapy dominates, for Smedes queries,

> But supposing we are the ones who have *been* hurt. Must we *demand* repentance *before* we forgive the person who hurt us? Should we hold back on forgiving when the other one holds back on repentance?
>
> God takes the tough line, it seems, from what we read in the Bible. When Jesus sent his disciples to tell the world that God forgives, he also told them to ask people to *repent*. Following this lead, St. Peter put the cards on the table: "Repent so that your sins can be forgiven."[37]

Why does God grant forgiveness conditioned upon repentance but does not require the same in inter-human relations? Smedes explains,

> My guess is that God asks us to repent, not as a condition he needs, but as a condition we need. What God wants is not only that we *be* forgiven in *his* heart and mind, but that we should also *feel* forgiven in *our* heart and mind. He wants an *honest* coming together [reconciliation] with his children. Asking for repentance was only a way of asking for *truthfulness*.[38]

Why does it not follow that God requires repentance for forgiveness in inter-human relationships, if *honesty* and *truthfulness* matter? Smedes simply asserts: "Realism, it seems to me, nudges us toward forgiving people who hurt us whether or not they repent for doing it. . . . So we need to forgive the unrepentant for our own sake. We need to forgive people who do not care if only so that we do not drown in our own misery. Let the other guy take care of himself."[39] Accordingly, forgiveness is an invisible act in the heart of the forgiver but also can remain a secret from the one forgiven. "Forgiving is real even if it stops at the healing of the forgiver."[40]

CORRELATION OF DIVINE AND HUMAN FORGIVENESS

Scripture portrays forgiveness as the unequivocal act of remitting a repentant person's guilt due to sins committed against others. Forgiveness is not overlooking an offense (cf. Prov 19:11; 10:12), nor being eager to forgive nor having a forgiving spirit, though these all are character traits of God's children whose sins he has remitted (Col 3:13). Forgiveness is the *active remission of sins* in response to repentance and true in our relationships with both God and fellow believers.[41]

When Peter asks if remitting sin up to seven times is sufficient, initially Jesus offers a hyperbolic reply—"I do not say to you 'up to

Smedes' book reiterates the same four stages of forgiveness with slight renaming: *hurt*, *alienation*, *release*, *reunion* (Set *Free by Forgiveness*, 52-62). O'Brien seems to sense some discrepancy in his scheme, for though he says the "final leg of the journey to forgiveness is *reunion*" (i.e., reconciliation) he finds it necessary to qualify: "Forgiveness happens to the person doing it. It may or may not affect the person being forgiven. Forgiveness is a one-way street. Reconciliation is a two-way street. Reconciliation results only when forgiveness is given *and* received" (p. 60).

37 Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, 69.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 70. "Forgiving is a process. One stage is the healing of the forgiver's memory. If the people you forgive want to stay where they are, let them. You can make a solo flight to freedom."

41 John Murray summarizes: "Forgiveness is not overlooking a transgression, it is not simply to be of a forgiving spirit; it is not even the readiness to forgive. Forgiveness is a definite act performed by us on the fulfilment of certain conditions: 'If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him' (Luke 17:3). Forgiveness is something actively administered on the repentance of the person who is to be forgiven" ("A Lesson in Forgiveness," 3.191).

seven times' but up to seventy-seven times" (18:22). Then Jesus responds parabolically concerning the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35).

Jesus' Hyperbolic Reply To Peter's Query

Matthew's use of "then" (τότε) signals that Jesus' teaching concerning three solemn and discrete opportunities for a disciple to repent (18:15-20) prompts Peter's question (18:21-22).[42] His query focuses on the first step of the procedure.[43] His concern is how often he should admonish and forgive the sin of a fellow disciple (18:15).[44] The short answer, according to a parallel passage would be, grant forgiveness as often as the person who sins says, "I repent" (Luke 17:3-4). Matthew's account, however, is not as explicit.[45]

We must be wary lest we reason that because Matthew's narrative does not use *repent-repentance*, *forgive-forgiveness*, or *reconcile-reconciliation*[46] that these concepts are not present, for they are all indicated either with different words or by implication.[47] To equate concepts with particular words is to commit the *word-concept fallacy*.[48] Matthew's account requires us to infer, just as Peter does, that *repentance* obligates *forgiveness* which leads to *reconciliation*, though Jesus does not explicitly say, "If he *repents, forgive his sin*; you have reconciled" (18:15).[49] The order is

42 D. A. Carson "Matthew," in *EBC* 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 405.

43 Turner observes, "The recidivist sin about which Peter is concerned probably relates to the process outlined in 18:15-17, and Peter is asking how many times 18:15 must be repeated" (*Matthew*, 449).

44 Nelson claims that Peter's 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 limit, even when you find it necessary to confront serious sins that have caused alienation" ("Exegeting Forgiveness," 46).

45 "As the presence of Jesus' instruction concerning disciplinary procedures in the church explains why Matthew has no need to provide explicit mention of repentance in his account of Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, so the placement and compression of Jesus' saying in Luke's Gospel explain the explicit mention of repentance when he reports Jesus' saying, 'If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and turns back to you seven times, saying, "I repent," you must grant forgiveness to him'" (Caneday, *Must Christians Always Forgive?*, 13-14).

46 Various verbs in the Greek New Testament bear the sense, "I reconcile" (διαλλάσσομαι; συναλλάσσω; καταλλάσσω; ἀποκαταλλάσσω); one noun means, "reconciliation" (καταλλαγή).

47 Here is an instructive illustration of what the word-concept fallacy looks like concerning Matt 18:15-20. "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" (Randy Nelson, "Exegeting Forgiveness," *American Theological Inquiry* 5.2 [July 2012], 46). Despite committing the word-concept fallacy by failing to see the concepts of "repentance" and "forgiveness" within the context without those actual words present, Nelson does recognize "reconciliation" as represented in the words "you have won your brother," despite the absence of the noun "reconciliation" (καταλλαγή) or verbs signifying "to reconcile" (καταλλάσσω, ἀποκαταλλάσσω). It is obvious, then, that this illustrates another fallacy, "selective and prejudicial use of evidence," "the kind of appeal to selective evidence that enables the interpreter to say what he or she wants to say, without really listening to what the Word of God says" (D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, second ed. 1996 [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1984], 54). A moment's reflection renders it obvious that to move from "enmity" or "alienation" (ἔχθρα, another missing word, though the concept is present) to "reconciliation," two intermediate actions are required, for we "tell him his fault" in order to induce *repentance* that we might *grant* forgiveness.

48 See note 4 above for details and documentation.

49 Scripture distinguishes forgiveness from reconciliation. On this, Vincent Taylor observes, "In the passages which have been under review the condition of forgiveness is repentance, by which is to be understood not only a change of mind, but a turning of mind and heart to God, or to those who are wronged, and a desire for amendment. In several of these passages μετανοέω or μετάνοια is used in close connection with the reference to forgiveness. . . . The same idea is expressed by ἐπιστρέφω in Acts xxvi.18 (cf. Mk. iv.12), and by ὁμολογέω with reference to confessing sins in I Jn. i.9" (*Forgiveness and Reconciliation: A Study in New Testament Theology*, reprinted 1952 [London: Macmillan and Co., 1941], 7).

evident—sin, rebuke, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation—though Jesus (1) explicitly mentions only sin and rebuke, (2) represents repentance under the imagery of hearing, (3) implies forgiveness, and (4) conceptualizes reconciliation by saying, "you have won your brother."[50] Jesus' teaching is clear even though he does not use stylized evangelical jargon. Sin provokes enmity. Repentance and remission invoke amity. Thus, because remission of guilt is the removal of barriers impeding reconciliation acknowledged through repentance, remission of sins must not be granted to those who refuse to heed reproof, for to do so renders the second and third steps of Jesus' outlined procedure superfluous and purposeless, exonerating the unrepentant.

Because Peter's query introduces the verb "forgive" (ἀφίημι), only implied in Jesus' saying, brief commentary is necessary. Suppressed, if not missing, from therapy's widely received teaching on forgiveness is Scripture's presentation of forgiveness as remission of sin. Remission is the removal of guilt, enmity's obstacle between God and humans or between two humans.[51] Remission's omission from forgiveness may be due in part to incaution concerning the English idiom. Usual translations of Peter's question illustrate our English idiom's lack of clarity—"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" (NIV; cf. ESV). Clarity requires a more cumbersome translation: "Lord, how many times shall I grant forgiveness to my brother or sister who sins against me?" or "Lord, how many times shall my brother sin against me and I grant remission to him?"

In the Greek New Testament, two main verbs bear the sense "forgive" or "remit" (ἀφίημι, χαρίζομαι). With both, if the thing forgiven is stated, it is always the *direct object* (accusative case), and if the person who receives remission of sins is indicated, the person is always the *indirect object* (dative case).[52] This is why when the Greek noun (ἄφεσις) is translated as "forgiveness" or "remission" it is regularly followed by the word "sins" (ἁμαρτιῶν).[53] So, within the New Testament, whenever these words are properly translated "forgive" or "forgiveness," they invariably refer to *remission of sin* (as guilt), even when sin or transgression is not explicitly mentioned. We remit *sin's*

50 Nelson cites BAGD, 31-32 to warrant dismissing the conceptual presence of "repent" *under the imagery of hearing* by asserting, "The Greek verb 'hearing' (*akouō*) is never used for 'repent' in the NT" ("Exegeting Forgiveness," 44). Two errors are apparent: (1) entry 4α lists absolute use of ἀκούω in Matt 18:16 as *obey*, *listen*, which bears the sense of *heed*. In fact, entry 4 in BDAG shows ἀκούω as bearing the sense "to give careful attention to, *listen to*, *heed*" (BDAG 38); and (2) to say that "repentance is present in the context under the imagery of hearing" does not mean that ἀκούω should be translated "repent." Nelson cites Craig Blomberg who takes ἀκούω "to mean 'responds properly.'" But what does "respond properly" mean, if not "to repent," as Blomberg actually takes it? If Nelson had consulted lexical entries of παρακούω, he could have avoided his misstep, for entry 3 indicates the verb's use in Matt 18:17 signifies *refuse to listen to*, *disobey* (BAGD, 619). Cf. entry 2 b "to pay no attention to something that has been heard" with the intensified sense of "refuse to listen to, disobey" (BDAG 767).

51 In his survey of NT passages that entail forgiveness (including ἀφίημι, ἄφεσις), Vincent Taylor makes this crucial observation: "Everywhere it is implied that, if this object [sin] is removed, covered, or in some way adequately dealt with, the forgiveness is accomplished. Forgiveness, therefore, in these passages cannot be identified with reconciliation; it is a stage antecedent to reconciliation; it is that which makes reconciliation possible" (*Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 3).

52 This is true of ἀφίημι, (e.g., ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, Matt 18:21; ἀφῆκεν αὐτῷ, 18:27) and χαρίζομαι (e.g., χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτώματα, Col 2:13). In the NT there are no examples where ἀπολύω means remit where it is followed by the thing remitted in the accusative and the person to whom remission is granted in the dative. The only use of ἀπολύω meaning remit occurs in Luke 6:37 where the verb is used in the absolute twice: ἀπολύετε, καὶ ἀπολυθήσεσθε, "forgive and you will be forgiven" or "be forgiving and you shall be forgiven."

53 See Matt 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 1:77; 3:3 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; Heb 9:22; 10:18. Once ἄφεσις occurs as absolute (Mark 3:29, οὐκ ἔχει ἄφεσιν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα). Twice ἄφεσις occurs in Luke 4:18, a citation from Isa 61:1-2, where the noun signifies "the process of liberating."

consequence, which is guilt. We do not remit *fellow humans*.[54] Failure to acknowledge this and to account for this in how we give expression to Scripture's instruction has been and will be detrimental to our teaching and practice of forgiveness, both God's and ours.

Another important clarification is that New Testament words for forgiving feature the wrongdoer's guilt, not the wrongdoing itself.[55] Remission does not undo the sin itself.[56] Rather, to forgive means to absolve or to pardon the guilt brought about by sin. Therefore, the apt imagery of indebtedness portrays the need of remission. So Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, "And grant to us *forgiveness of our debts* as we also grant forgiveness to our debtors" (Matt 6:12). This petition features our debts of guilt that need to be remitted: "Grant to us *forgiveness of our debts*."

This would be an apt segue to Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which features the imagery of debts remitted. However, Jesus' hyperbolic reply to Peter's query requires additional comment. To Peter's query whether to forgive a fellow disciple's sins seven times is generous, Jesus offers a hyperbolic response, "I do not say up to seven times, but up to seventy-seven times."[57] Though Peter may seem magnanimous compared to a stingier standard of forgiveness the rabbis taught, his big-heartedness falls short of the lavishness Jesus requires.[58] It is likely that Peter derives his number from Scripture's frequent use of "seven times" for avenging evildoers, first with reference to the Lord's protecting the life of Cain by threatening sevenfold avenging of anyone who would slay him (Gen 4:15; Lev 26:21, 28; Deut 28:25; Ps 79:12; Prov 6:31; cf. Luke 17:4). If this is correct, then Jesus' reply may allude to Genesis 4:24, to Lamech's use of seventy-seven times (ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά, lxx). Lamech appeals to *lex talionis* to reason that if Cain, who murdered his brother out of malice, could be avenged sevenfold, then his own avengement ought to be seventy-sevenfold, an exaggerated number, because he killed in self-defense.[59] Likewise, Jesus exaggerates Peter's number, to emphasize that remission is boundless.

Remitting a fellow disciple's sin done against us must be boundless and free with regard to frequency or quantity.[60] "Boundless and free" does not mean unconditionally, for Jesus' parable includes a proviso, namely, acknowledgment of indebtedness. Just as

54 The word "sins" in "forgiveness of sins," entails a figure of speech, metonymy, which substitutes the cause (sins) for the consequence (guilt). See also note 52.

55 The NT expression, "remission of sins" (ἄφεσις ἁμαρτιῶν, e.g., Matt 26:28; Acts 5:31; 10:43; Col 1:14), employs bookkeeping imagery of debt cancellation (ἄφεσις) and metonymy, a figure of speech in which the wrongdoing itself (sins, ἁμαρτία), substitutes for the consequences of wrongdoing, "guilt" (αἴτιος, adj. used as a noun, e.g., Luke 23:4, 22; Jn 18:38; 19:4, 6; Acts 13:28. Cf. the adjective, "guilty," ἔνοχος, as in Mark 3:29).

56 This is why restitution, if warranted, is distinct from remission. The OT law is rich with instruction on restitution (e.g., Ex 22 & Num 5). The primary NT passage is the Zacchaeus episode (Luke 19:1-9).

57 The expression ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά should likely be translated "up to seventy-seven times" rather than "up to seventy times seven times." It is so translated by NIV, NRSV; BDAG 269. See Turner, *Matthew*, 449 Cf. Carson, "Matthew," 405.

58 "In rabbinic discussion the consensus was that a brother might be forgiven a repeated sin three times; on the fourth, there is no forgiveness" (Carson, "Matthew," 405). Cf. Turner who cites *m. Yoma* 8.9; *t. Yoma* 5.13; *b. Yoma* 86b-87a (*Matthew*, 449).

59 In contrast to Carson who reasons, "Lamech's revenge is transformed into a principle of forgiveness" ("Matthew," *EBC*, 8.405), I accept John Sailhamer's interpretation of Gen 4:24. "When read in the context of the Mosaic Law and of the teaching regarding the cities of refuge . . . Lamech's words appear to be an appeal to the system of legal justice. . . . If Cain, who killed his brother with malice, could be avenged, then Lamech would surely be avenged for a killing in self-defense. The point of the narrative is not to show that Lamech's sense of justice was correct or even exemplary. Rather it is to show that Cain's city and descendants had a system of law and justice representative of an ordered society" (*The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 115; cf. Sailhamer, "Genesis," EBC, 2.68).

60 Carson, "Matthew," 405.

with Jesus' response to Peter's query, so his parable implies that boundless remission of a fellow disciple's sins correlates with rebuke and repentance, which are not absent from the parable, though not featured. A parallel passage makes this explicit: "If your brother sins, reprove him, and if he repents, grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' grant forgiveness to him" (Luke 17:3-4).

Jesus' Parabolic Portrayal of Lavish Forgiveness

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant expands upon boundless remission of sins. Jesus employs debtor imagery to present repentance and remission of sin: "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is similar to a human king who wanted to settle an account with his servants." The story consists of three settings with introduction (18:23) and conclusion (18:35): (1) the king cancels a servant's enormous debt (18:24-27); (2) that servant imprisons a fellow servant who owes him a small debt (18:28-30); and (3) the king calls in the ungrateful servant's debt (18:31-34).[61]

To settle accounts the king requires his servants to pay their debts. One owes ten thousand talents, an exorbitant amount in contrast to the negligible debt another servant owes this deeply indebted servant.[62] English vernacular might use "zillions."[63] Because the servant cannot pay, the king threatens to sell him and his family with all their possessions to recover some of the debt. The servant begs, "Be longsuffering with me, and I will repay everything to you" (18:26). The king's generosity is as lavish as his wealth. He releases him from custody and remits his colossal debt.[64] The poor servant becomes financially debt-free but indebted to the king's beneficence.

Next, this debt-free servant goes to a fellow servant to collect a paltry debt of a hundred denarii. He demands, "Pay what you owe me!" (18:28). Without a hundred days' worth of income on hand, he begs, "Be longsuffering with me, and I will repay everything to you" (18:30). The servant, whose vast debt was cancelled, casts his debtor into prison until he fully pays his debt.

Grief-stricken fellow servants inform the king of the unforgiving servant.[65] The king summons him again, rebukes him, and demands payment in full: "You evil servant! All that debt I remitted for you because you implored me. Should you not also have mercy upon your fellow servant, as I had mercy upon you?" (18:32-33). "And in anger his master delivered him to the torturers until he should pay back everything he owed."[66]

Finally, Jesus draws the kingdom's analogical corollary as a warning of eternal punishment lest his disciples refuse to remit the sins of fellow disciples who petition them, for every disciple has incurred eternal indebtedness to the lavish

61 See Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1990), 240-243.

62 Turner calculates a debt of ten thousand talents. "A talent was probably worth around six thousand drachmas ... or denarii ... and a laborer was paid a denarius a day. ... Thus a laborer would have to work sixty million days, or roughly 193,000 years ... to earn this much money" (*Matthew*, 450).

63 BDAG 661.

64 Take note that when ἀπέλυσεν (ἀπολύω) does not signify "forgive/remit," the person released is indicated in the accusative case (αὐτόν). As indicated above, when ἀφῆκεν (ἀφίημι) signifies "forgive/remit," the thing remitted, here τὸ δάνειον (the debt), is in the accusative case and the person whose debt is remitted is in the dative case (αὐτῷ).

65 Their response should also be the reader's (Donald Senior, "Matthew 18:21-35," *Interpretation*, 41 [1987]: 405).

66 The usual translation of ὁ βασανιστής is "jailer." However, R. T. France argues that "torturer" is better (*The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 708).

beneficence of their righteous heavenly Father who cancels their eternal debt of guilt.[67] "In the same manner also my heavenly Father will do to you, if each of you does not grant forgiveness to your brother from your heart." The analogy is that just as the evil servant will never deplete his debt to the king but remain confined in the debtor's prison forever, so also will it be in God's kingdom.[68]

As Jesus' saying on binding and loosing correlates human and divine remission of sin (18:18), so also his parable teaches that God remits the sins of people who imitate his lavish remission of sins.[69] The parable expands upon Jesus' saying, "For if you grant remission of trespasses to humans, your heavenly Father will also grant remission to you. But if you do not grant remission to humans, neither will your Father remit your trespasses" (Matt 6:14-15). This, in turn, expands upon the petition Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: "Grant remission of our debts *as we also grant remission to our debtors*" (6:12).[70]

Jesus' parable features the heavenly Father's lavish remission of guilt as obligating his disciples to remit lavishly one another's sins, but this does not mean that forgiveness is unconditional, for at least two reasons. First, those within the parable who receive cancellation of debts *acknowledge* their debts and *petition* for their cancellation in accord with the presence of repentance in Jesus' three-step procedure (Matt 18:15-18), its implication in Peter's query concerning remission of sin (18:21), and its explicit inclusion in the parallel passage—"If your brother sins, reprove him, and if he repents, grant forgiveness to him, and if he sins against you seven times in a day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' grant forgiveness to him" (Luke 17:3-4). Second, Jesus configures his parable to emphasize the correlation between receipt of God's remitting our sins and our remitting the sins of one another. *Acknowledgement of guilt* (repentance), whether to God or to one another, receives cancellation of indebtedness. For God's lavish remission of our sins cancels our debt of guilt due his justice and renders us indebted to his mercy, an indebtedness that both obligates and authorizes us lavishly to grant remission of sins to fellow disciples *who acknowledge their debts of guilt* to us.[71] Though the parable features

67 Overly occupied with whether the parable suggests possible perishing of one whose sins have been truly forgiven, MacArthur contends that (1) the servant represents an unregenerate person; (2) divine rescinding of forgiveness is not portrayed; and (3) the notion that the unforgiving servant represents a spurious believer is not present. Instead, "The lesson of the parable is this: Christians who refuse to forgive others will be subject to the severest kind of discipline until they learn to forgive as they have been forgiven" (*Forgiveness*, 109-111). MacArthur does not sufficiently consider that the parable, simply stated, *functions as a warning lest we incur God's eternal punishment*. On Scripture's warnings, see Thomas R. Schreiner & Ardel B Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

68 Cf. Turner, *Matthew*, 452. Carson observes, "Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly Father who forgives so bountifully and punishes so ruthlessly, and neither should we. Indeed, it is precisely because he is a God of such compassion and mercy that he cannot possibly accept as his those devoid of compassion and mercy. This is not to say that the king's compassion can be earned: far from it, the servant is granted freedom only by virtue of the king's forgiveness" ("Matthew," 407).

69 "Whatever you bind upon earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (ὅσα ἐὰν δήσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένα ἐν οὐρανῷ, καὶ ὅσα ἐὰν λύσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένα ἐν οὐρανῷ, Matt 18:18); "and whatever you bind upon the earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose upon the earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (καὶ ὃ ἐὰν δήσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ ὃ ἐὰν λύσῃς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, Matt 16:19); "If you remit the sins of some, remission is granted to them; if you withhold remission from some, remission is withheld" (ἄν τινων ἀφῆτε τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἀφέωνται αὐτοῖς, ἄν τινων κρατῆτε κεκράτηνται.(Jn 20:23).

70 Cf. Caneday, *Must Christians Always Forgive?*, 8-9.

71 Here I have a point of departure with John Piper who disparages what he calls the "debtor's ethic," for his argument is flawed with hyperbole and reductionism. See *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, revised ed. 2012 (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 1995), 29-37.

remittance of debt, repentance as an antecedent condition of remission is present under the imagery of petitioning cancellation of debts.

Nevertheless, some suppose that our remitting the sins of others cannot be lavish and free if forgiveness is correlated with antecedent repentance.[72] John MacArthur so reasons when he objects to Jay Adams's contention that forgiveness, whether God's or ours, is conditioned upon repentance.[73]

> 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. The attitude of the forgiver is where the focus of Scripture lies, not the terms of forgiveness.[74]

Though some may abuse requisite repentance to justify their stingy, exacting, and unforgiving spirit, this hardly nullifies the order of God's kingdom.[75] That remission of sins is to be granted to those who repent does not mitigate our obligation to grant remission of sins to one another readily, lavishly, freely, and graciously.[76] Jesus' Parable of the Unforgiving Servant features God's pleasure to bestow lavish remission of our sins, which renders us both debtors to and imitators of his forgiveness. God's debtors are not miserly. From the heart they eagerly forward the lavish gift of forgiveness to others. As children we imitate our heavenly Father by delighting to grant remission of sins done against us to everyone who petitions our

72 See, e.g., Nelson, "Exegeting Forgiveness," 35).

73 Cf. Jay E. Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God's Way* (Amityville, NY: Calvary, 1994), 34. Cf. Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008). Ken Sande states, "Ideally, repentance should precede forgiveness . . . minor offenses may be overlooked . . . even if the offender has not expressly repented" (*The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. 2004 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 210).

74 MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 118. MacArthur betrays an exaggerated reaction to Jay Adams who does not "make conditionality the gist of Christlike forgiving." by shortly afterward mitigating his own view asserting: "There are times when forgiveness must be conditional" (p. 118) and later, "It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional" (p. 119). He offers Luke 17:3 and Matt 18:15-17 for this claim (pp. 119-120).

75 It becomes apparent that MacArthur actually shares Adams's view despite his mischaracterization of Adams's fuller argument saying, "It is a mistake to assume that verses like Luke 17:3 . . . and Matthew 18:15 . . . are absolute prescriptions for every kind of transgression. If we were obligated to confront one another for every paltry misdeed, we would be doing little else" (p. 120). Adams accounts for those "paltry misdeeds," for "God has provided a means for handling the multitude of offenses that we commit against one another. But it is not by forgiveness. In 1 Peter 4:8, quoting Proverbs 17:9, Peter points out that those who love one another 'cover a multitude of sins' in love. It is only those sins which throw the covers off that must be dealt with by the Luke 17 and Matthew 18 processes: those offenses that break fellowship and lead to an unreconciled condition require forgiveness. Otherwise, we simply learn to overlook a multitude of offenses against ourselves, recognizing that we are all sinners and that we must gratefully thank others for covering our sins as well" (*From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 34). On overlooking offenses (Prov 10:12; 19:11) as not the same as forgiveness, remission of guilt, Adams agrees with John Murray ("A Lesson in Forgiveness," 3.190-193). So, despite MacArthur's exaggerated response to Adams, upon careful reading, they are in much greater agreement than upon first appearances, but Adams regards "forgiveness" more tightly defined than MacArthur does.

76 Jones rightly observes that "emphasizing the centrality of repentance" for the sake of assuring that people "take questions of culpability and accountability seriously" becomes "unfortunately all too often a way to guarantee that we will either (at best) oversimplify issues of forgiveness and repentance or (at worst, and more likely) distort a Christian understanding of forgiveness by making repentance a prerequisite for forgiveness" (*Embodying Forgiveness*, 150). Thus, Jones rightly challenges Richard Swinburne who "argues that reparation, repentance, apology, and penance to the victim(s) are all necessary prerequisites for a person to remove his or her guilt and to make atonement for the past. He indicates that, following these other four actions, 'The final act belongs to the victim—to forgive'" (p. 151). Jones fills nine more pages with a critique of Swinburne's pedantic argument (pp. 152-160). His principal point is that "those who have been forgiven by God in Jesus Christ ought to be people whose repentance is never in question, who understand that holiness of heart and life can only be achieved through the unique conjunction of forgiveness, repentance, and hope found in turning and re-turning to God and to those against whom we have sinned" (p. 155).

forgiveness. Refusal to grant remission of sins to all who seek forgiveness is to sin by being unforgiving and stingy, thus incurring God's wrath.

By good and reasonable inference, Jesus' parable also obligates us to avoid imputing an "unforgiving spirit" to fellow disciples who, eager to forgive from the heart, do not grant remission of sins to those who refuse to repentant.[77] Otherwise Jesus portrays the heavenly Father as unforgiving while demanding his children to remit sins freely and lavishly.[78] Thus, Jesus reinforces tight correlation between receiving and granting forgiveness, an emphasis he makes following his model prayer: "For if you grant to men forgiveness of their transgressions, your heavenly Father will grant to you forgiveness. But if you do not grant to men forgiveness, neither will your Father grant to you forgiveness of your transgressions" (Matt 6:14-15).

CONCLUSION

"Who can forgive sins except God alone?" (Mark 2:7). Our absolution of guilt before God, which is justification in the divine court, is his prerogative alone. Because divine remission of guilt is extravagantly disproportionate to the debts our sins incur, we are eternally indebted to God, who is merciful at his Son's expense. For Jesus Christ's "blood of the covenant" is "poured out on behalf of many for the remission of sins" (Matt 26:28). Divine remission of incalculable debts obligates us not to pay back God but to replicate his forgiveness by lavishly granting remission of guilt to others who commit sins against us. This is what Jesus teaches by way of his Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which features lavish forgiveness of sins as a grace necessary for dwelling in God's kingdom.

Less explicit but no less essential for inhabiting God's kingdom is the grace of repentance, for Jesus' parable binds inextricably together *appealing* for and *receiving* remission of our debts. Forgiveness of sins is reserved for all who acknowledge their guilt and plead for remission. Jesus emphasizes this point when he concludes the parable, "In the same manner also my heavenly Father will do to you, if each of you does not grant forgiveness to your brother from your heart." The rule of God's kingdom on earth obligates God's children to behave analogously to their Father in heaven who lavishly remits the guilt of all who plead his forgiveness (Matt 18:19). Every sin we commit against others increases our indebtedness to God and to fellow believers from whom we are obliged to plead remission with the gospel's assurance that we will receive sincere remission of guilt from our Father and also from his forgiving children whose sins are remitted. For, as we all incur greater indebtedness daily, the "blood of the covenant poured out for the remission of sins" assures us that our debts are remitted that we also might lavishly grant remission to our debtors. If we refuse to forgive the sins of those who repent, we need to repent lest we incur God's eternal punishment. Reasonable inference from the parable also compels us to acknowledge that to grant forgiveness of sins

77 Cf. Caneday, *Must We Always Forgive?*, 17. Lamentably, so prevalent is therapeutic forgiveness that it is not rare for Christians rashly to judge mature and godly believers as unforgiving and vengeful even as they seek wholeheartedly to obey the Lord Christ by granting forgiveness to the repentant and not to the unrepentant (cf. Luke 17:3-4; John 20:23).

78 Anthony Bash reasons that *unconditional forgiveness* "in effect insists that our forgiveness is to be more lavish and more gracious than God's, and that is clearly absurd. Since God forgives only the repentant, how can we be expected additionally to forgive the unrepentant? How can we show more grace than the one who is the source of grace itself? . . . Our forgiveness of one another can hardly be required to be more gracious than God's" ("Forgiveness: A Re-appraisal," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 24 [2011]: 140).

to those who refuse to repent is to distort the gospel of God's kingdom by granting to the unrepentant what belongs only to those who heed the gospel's rebuke of sin and who properly receive the promise of forgiveness.

Ardel B. Caneday
Ardel B. Caneday is Professor of New Testament and Greek at the University of Northwestern—Saint Paul, Minnesota. He received the Ph.D. in New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois). He authored ***Must Christians Always Forgive?*** *(Center for Christian Leadership, 2011), co-edited* ***Four Views on the Historical Adam*** *(Zondervan, 2013), and coauthored* ***The Race Set Before Us*** *(Inter-Varsity, 2001). He regularly publishes book reviews and articles on biblical-theological themes as well as cultural-political issues.*