

# Forgive and Forget? A Biblical Exposition of What It Means to Forgive



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## INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness; such a small word, yet it is packed with a plethora of meanings and implications. For some people, the word may bring memories of freedom and healing from a difficult time in their life while, for others, the word may stick in their throat and remind them of bitterness and anger they refuse to release.

Take, for example, the story of Sarah whose father molested her as a child. She never had the chance to confront her father about the abuse before he died of cancer, and her deep-seated pain gnaws at her every day. Or, consider Julie, who experiences verbal and physical abuse by her estranged husband. Her Christian friends tell her she needs to forgive and take him back, but she fears the possible consequences for her and her children. Or, take for instance, the case of Charlie, who is tortured by the fact that his wife had an affair with a coworker throughout their twenty-year marriage and left him to marry someone else. For people who have faced painful relational issues, the reaction to the idea of forgiveness may be dramatically based on their own personal experience and ongoing pain. Nevertheless, forgiveness serves as a cornerstone of Christian theology and a benchmark for everyday Christian interaction.

Due to the crucial and integral aspect of forgiveness for followers of Christ, believers must have a clear understanding so as to apply forgiveness in their personal circumstances. Many Christians couple the word “forgiveness” with reconciliation and trust—seeing forgiveness and reconciliation as two sides of the same coin. But, how can Sarah reconcile with her deceased father? Should Julie enter into a potentially dangerous reconciliation with an abusive husband? How can Charlie get back with a wife when she has remarried? Does their inability to bring

full reconciliation deny them the ability of experiencing full forgiveness? Many pastors tell congregants to “forgive and forget” the offences of others and reconcile just as God forgives and forgets sin. However, is this really what the Bible requires? The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the biblical understanding of forgiveness and examine whether or not reconciliation must occur in order for a person to experience true forgiveness.

In order to fully understand the meaning of the word “forgiveness” and its relationship to reconciliation, one must compare biblical texts and investigate the biblical authors’ original intent. This study will examine the following biblical texts: Matthew 18:21, Colossians 3:13, Matthew 6:13-14, and Ephesians 4:32. The research will examine word studies relevant to the passages, discuss the traditional theological interpretation of forgiveness, and consider how the popular view of forgiveness has influenced the Church’s perspective on this critical topic. Since professional counseling, Christian or otherwise, can also play a large part in an individual’s understanding of forgiveness, this study will review the typical view of forgiveness and reconciliation from the perspective of the behavioral science community. Upon completion of these assessments, each discipline’s concept of the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation will be compared. The resulting principles and their applications will be discussed as they relate to the individual and to an overall Church understanding of the topic.

While this study focuses on several pieces of the overall forgiveness puzzle, certain limitations apply to the study. Although the Bible frequently deals with God forgiving the sins of humanity, this study will focus primarily on forgiveness between humans (although divine and human forgiveness are intertwined at points). Also, while the topics of corporate forgiveness and self-forgiveness are certainly valid areas of consideration, this study will concern itself primarily with forgiveness between individuals.

The exegesis of biblical texts will mainly be restricted to verses within the New Testament in hopes of gaining insight into the kind of forgiveness Jesus talked about and what the Early Church understood by His words. Although the aspects of reconciliation and trust are present in this analysis, this study does not intend to be a full biblical explanation of those concepts; they instead serve as comparisons to the qualities of forgiveness. Last, the term “reconciliation,” as used in this paper, denotes the complete recovery of a relationship to the state experienced prior to the offence in question.

## BIBLICAL EXEGESIS OF FORGIVENESS PASSAGES

Before looking at the traditional theological outlook on the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, one must consider several of the main biblical texts that deal with forgiveness between individuals and establish a foundation for the nature of forgiveness. Upon achieving exegetical insight into the primary passages, the research will focus on the larger picture of forgiveness and reconciliation within the traditional theological view.

The New Testament presents four major passages that deal with forgiveness between individuals (listed in order of significance for this study): Matthew 18:21-22; Colossians 3:13; Matthew 6:14-15; and Ephesians 4:32.<sup>1</sup> Exegesis of each

text is necessary to both inform a biblical theology of forgiveness and to determine whether reconciliation is a prerequisite for forgiveness. However, before beginning an investigation into each text, the passages' primary Greek words for "forgiveness" will be discussed.

### **Word Studies of *Aphiēmi* and *Charizomai***

*Aphiēmi*, the first word used for "forgiveness," means "to send off" and is richly attested in classical Greek literature from an early period. It is used both literally and figuratively with a range of meanings from "to hurl," "to release," "to let go," or "to let be."<sup>2</sup> Classical Greek uses *aphiēmi* to indicate the voluntary liberation of a person or thing over which one has legal or actual control. It can mean to "send forth," "send away," "to leave or dispatch," and can also refer to the release from a legal bond.<sup>3</sup> The noun *aphesis* can refer to release from office, marriage or obligation, and also from debt or punishment; however, none of these meanings are found in a religious sense.<sup>4</sup> The Septuagint uses *aphiēmi* in a similar sense as the classical Greek use. The word can mean "let go," "leave," "give up," "leave behind," "allow," "leave over," and "release,"<sup>5</sup> but *aphiēmi* is seldom used in the sense of forgiveness.<sup>6</sup>

The New Testament records the appearance of *aphiēmi* 142 times. Most the occurrences appear in the writings of the Gospel authors; it appears forty-seven times in Matthew, thirty-four in Mark, thirty-four in Luke's writings, and fourteen times in John. This leaves only thirteen examples appearing in the rest of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> *Aphiēmi* occurs forty-five times in the sense of forgiveness, with seventeen examples in Matthew, eight times in Mark, fourteen times in Luke-Acts, twice in John, and only once in Paul's writings.<sup>8</sup> When used in the New Testament to denote forgiveness, the word means to "release from legal or moral obligation or consequence, cancel, remit, pardon."<sup>9</sup>

The second word meaning "forgiveness" is *charizomai*. Words that stem from the Greek root *char-* imply things that produce well-being. In Greek literature, the noun *charis* indicates grace, favor, beauty, thankfulness, gratitude, delight, kindness, and benefit. The Septuagint uses *charis* about 190 times, and usually denotes favor or inclination.<sup>10</sup>

While *aphiēmi* means to "cancel," "remit," or "pardon" in the New Testament, *charizomai* carries with it a richer context emphasizing the gracious nature of the pardon.<sup>11</sup> The New Testament uses the term *charis* 155 times, and over 100 of those uses appear in Paul's letters. The word only appears in the Gospels twelve times and those references are limited to Luke and John. *Charis* has a New Testament meaning of "grace," but the secular use of *charis* also has a sense of beauty, favor or love, benefit, and gratitude that would have made sense to first century converts.<sup>12</sup> The verb form, *charizomai*, is used primarily in connection with the decisive, gracious gift of God,<sup>13</sup> but it can also indicate forgiveness, remittance, or pardon.<sup>14</sup>

### **Matthew 18:21-22**

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my

brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."<sup>15</sup>

One of the most frequently used passages that relates to interpersonal forgiveness is Matthew 18:21-22. Donald A. Hagner notes that this particular passage in Matthew is a continuation of a theme regarding relationships between members of the community. Matthew then turns to the important topic of forgiveness. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew uses Peter as his spokesperson or to prompt a reply from Jesus. Regarding practical matters of life within the community, Peter wants to know the limit for the number of times one should offer forgiveness to another person.<sup>16</sup>

Hagner notes that Peter probably related the "seven times" of forgiveness to the traditional number for fullness and felt quite generous with his proposal. The rabbis of the period considered three times adequate for the forgiveness of the same sin. The word "forgive" in this passage is *aphiēmi*, and the verb for "sin" is *harmartia*, a general word for sin, thereby encompassing as wide a variety of offences as possible.<sup>17</sup>

Whether one should take Jesus' answer as "seventy-seven" or "seventy times seven," the phrase points neither to a literal seventy-seven nor to 490 times, but rather indicates an unlimited number of times.<sup>18</sup> R. T. France also agrees that Peter's willingness to forgive as many as seven times, when three was the standard, would be well above and beyond expectations, thus making Jesus' reply in verse 22 all the more shocking.<sup>19</sup> In his sixteenth-century writings, John Calvin observes that Peter's offer initially seems generous, yet his limited view of forgiveness stems from his fleshly thought and understanding; it is innate for humans to have a desire to be forgiven themselves and to complain if they are not forgiven immediately, but they are far from showing themselves easy toward others.<sup>20</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, in the fourth century AD, said of this passage that since God pardons believers from their sins by His gift, rather than by human merit, believers should not be excused from the requirement of giving pardon to others the same way that God does—without measure.<sup>21</sup>

Hagner points out that the unlimited scope of forgiveness parallels the unlimited scope of what is to be forgiven. Jesus emphasizes the extravagant nature of forgiveness by pointing out that, whenever human beings exist together as disciples, forgiveness is necessary without limit.<sup>22</sup> Based on Jesus' words, Leonhard Goppelt states that, in addition to forgiveness becoming unlimited, love also becomes unlimited. The correlation between God's forgiveness and forgiving one's neighbor was not a relationship of reciprocity, but instead a circular system. The circular flow of forgiveness collapses when people fail to forgive; consequently, individuals cannot receive God's forgiveness.<sup>23</sup>

Luke 17:3-4 presents a partial parallel of Matthew 18:21-22: "Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." France adds that when comparing Matthew 18:21-22 with Luke 17:3-4, the two passages differ dramatically in wording and structure making it plausible to suggest separate traditions both developing from Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:14-15).<sup>24</sup> Donald E. Gowen comments

that in both parallel verses one cannot explicitly determine whether the text refers to the same sin, repeated many times, or instead to various sins. The point of the text does not emphasize when and how to forgive, but rather focuses on the need for Jesus' followers to imitate God's unlimited graciousness.<sup>25</sup>

According to France, Matthew 18:15-17 deals with a fellow Christian's sin in the church, while verses 21-22 deal with a personal grievance and personal forgiveness. Furthermore, he adds that a main cause of disharmony within a group of disciples comes when one member perceives that another member opposes him or her. Clearly, personal forgiveness serves as a key to good relationships. France also points out an apparent tension between verses 15-17, where the end result may be a breaking off of relationship, and verses 21-22 that demand unlimited forgiveness. However, verses 15-17 do not address personal injustices against another individual, but rather illustrate pastoral concern over a disciple's sin. Verses 21-22, on the other hand, address a willingness to forgive offenses against oneself.<sup>26</sup>

The parable of the Unforgiving Servant, which immediately follows Matthew 18:21-22, clearly illustrates that the person who receives forgiveness must, in turn, forgive others. Gowen agrees that the parable builds upon verses 21-22 and emphasizes that the one who needs to forgive has already been forgiven.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Hagner states that the parable portrays God's forgiveness of community members as a model for forgiving one another. In essence, the disciples are the "forgiven who forgive."<sup>28</sup> As exemplified by God's inexhaustible forgiveness, His disciples must cultivate forgiveness again and again.<sup>29</sup> Although Matthew 18:21-22 sheds valuable insight into the inexhaustible and altruistic nature of forgiveness, one must note that the passage does not make a clear connection to reconciliation.

### **Colossians 3:13**

Another frequently used passage concerning forgiveness between humans is Colossians 3:13: "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Although Paul devotes most of the letter to Colossae to combating gnosticism,<sup>30</sup> Curtis Vaughan notes that the passages leading up to verse 13 focus primarily on patience, while two Greek particles, *anechomai*, "bear with," and *charizomai*, "forgive," (v. 13) expand the idea of patience.<sup>31</sup>

While the meaning of *anechomai* can be difficult to determine, in this instance, the word's proximity to the five listed virtues and the present participle qualifies the final virtue on the list—patience.<sup>32</sup> Peter O'Brien notes that Paul uses the word *charizomai* as opposed to the more common word for forgiveness, *aphiēmi*, and highlights that the present tense of the verb clearly indicates that forgiveness is to be unceasing and untiring.<sup>32</sup>

Paul certainly recognizes that within a congregation people will experience grievances and offences, but whenever these grievances arise, they are instructed to forgive one another. The reason for the conciliatory attitude towards forgiving others, according to O'Brien, is that "the Lord forgave you."<sup>33</sup> Vaughan adds that

Paul uses *anechomai* and *charizomai* to demonstrate that truly patient Christians will manifest their patience: (1) bearing with those who have faults or unpleasant and irritable traits, and (2) forgiving those whom they have grievances against.<sup>34</sup> Forbearance and forgiveness are two essential Christian traits. Calvin offers a similar observation when he says that bearing with each other means that believers embrace each other "indulgently, and forgive also where any offence has been given."<sup>35</sup>

F. F. Bruce notes that Colossians 3:12-17 addresses believers who have put on the "new nature." As such, they are instructed to cultivate and manifest the qualities seen preeminently displayed in the life of Jesus, who taught the lesson of unlimited forgiveness by example, not simply by precept. Therefore, mutual forbearance, tolerance, and forgiveness should mark believers' relationships with one another.<sup>36</sup> This passage adds to the general understanding of the concept of forgiveness, but does not suggest the necessity of reconciliation.

### **Matthew 6:14-15**

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matt. 6:14-15)

Gowen points out that human forgiveness must be an important subject since it is the only human activity mentioned in the Lord's Prayer.<sup>37</sup> In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) Jesus moves from talking about himself as the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets (Matt. 5) to emphasizing the goodness of God (Matt. 6).<sup>38</sup>

In Matthew 6:14-15, the author uses the Greek word *aphiēmi* for the English term forgiveness, in the same way he uses it in Matthew 18:21-22.<sup>39</sup> Mark 11:25 also uses *aphiēmi* and the statement in Mark is under strong suspicion of being a gloss of Matthew 6:14.<sup>40</sup> At first glance, Jesus appears to be saying that unless the believer is willing to forgive others, he or she jeopardizes his or her own salvific forgiveness. Donald A. Hagner points out that verse 15 simply repeats verse 14 in negative form, which illustrates the importance Matthew places on this statement.<sup>41</sup> The basic symmetry of the parallelism is broken by the chiasm; in verse 14, *paraptomata* is the object of the *protasis*, but in verse 15 it is the object of the *apodosis*, thus emphasizing the point further.

Although a direct link exists between God's forgiveness and one's own forgiveness, Hagner notes that God's forgiveness is always prior. These verses clearly indicate that one should find it unthinkable to enjoy God's forgiveness without extending forgiveness to others.<sup>42</sup> D. A. Carson reiterates the profound importance forgiveness holds within the community if believers expect effectiveness in prayer.<sup>43</sup> Fourth-century church father John Chrysostom felt that Jesus' words about forgiveness contain a heavy reproof for those who do not forgive others, and even asks God for vengeance on their enemies. He adds that nothing makes Christians so like God as a readiness to forgive the wicked and the wrongdoer.<sup>44</sup>

Concerning the relationship between human forgiveness and divine forgiveness, Gowen reasons that if believers only had Matthew 6:14-15, they might feasibly argue that Jesus said one must show himself or herself worthy of receiving God's

forgiveness by extending forgiveness to others. This argument, however, stands in contradiction to everything else taught in Scripture. The context of the saying in the Sermon on the Mount shows the reader what Jesus meant; it is a part of Jesus' definition of His followers. In fact, throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes impossible demands on those who consider themselves His disciples in order to prove a point about the qualities His followers should possess.<sup>45</sup>

John Patton's interpretation of the text does not make the conditional element of the prayer sequential (i.e., God forgives because a person has first forgiven others). He quotes Joachim Jeremias who notes, "The willingness to forgive is the outstretched hand, by which we grasp God's forgiveness."<sup>46</sup> Patton suggests that God's forgiveness and humanities' forgiveness may be simultaneous.<sup>47</sup> Rudolf Bultmann comments that forgiveness has only been truly received when it results in a heart of forgiveness. The Lord's Prayer teaches that only those who extend forgiveness can ask for forgiveness.<sup>48</sup> M. Robert Mulholland Jr. adds that Jesus is simply alluding to the fact that forgiveness profoundly affects one's relationship with God. Unforgiveness locks a person into bondage and shuts him or her off from God; the hatred clogs one's receptors from receiving God's grace and the person becomes incapable of accepting God's forgiveness.<sup>49</sup> Although this passage emphasizes the relationship between divine and human forgiveness, any link between the concepts of human forgiveness and reconciliation is absent.

### **Ephesians 4:32**

Ephesians 4:32 declares: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you," which echoes a reciprocal forgiveness. Paul uses the word *charis* to direct the readers to be kind and tenderhearted to one another.<sup>50</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln notes that the command to forgive comes after a list of destructive vices (v. 31) and extols virtues intended to promote communal living. Lincoln adds that the believer's motivation for compassion emanates from Christ's forgiveness. God's saving activity serves as a prototype for the conduct of believers.<sup>51</sup>

Chrysostom declared that "one who forgives does good to his own soul and to that of the one who has received forgiveness."<sup>52</sup> William Hendriksen notes that believers are exhorted to forgive just as freely, generously, wholeheartedly, spontaneously, and eagerly as Christ forgave them. Again, Paul's motive for forgiveness is that the believer has been forgiven much and should in turn forgive others.<sup>53</sup> This verse echoes the theme that forgiveness of others should stem from one's gratitude for his or her own forgiveness, but lacks a clear connection to reconciliation as a required part of forgiveness.

### **Traditional Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Although forgiveness is a common theme in the New Testament, the biblical account is surprisingly different when it comes to the usage of the term reconciliation, which occurs sparingly (Matt. 5:24; 1 Cor. 7:11) and refers to relationships between people. In all other instances, the Greek noun, *katallagē*, and verb, *katallasso*, are used exclusively for God's supreme act of reconciling

humankind or the world to himself. In all of these uses, human beings are in no way actively involved, but are granted reconciliation.<sup>54</sup> Although the term "reconciliation" is used infrequently in the New Testament and the main biblical passages on human forgiveness do not appear to support reconciliation as a prerequisite for forgiveness, the New Testament indicates a correlation between the two concepts. For example, Vincent Taylor argues that the parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:21-35) is a clear portrait of forgiveness and reconciliation; once the debt has been cancelled, normal relations would be restored.<sup>55</sup> Norman Perrin agrees with Taylor and adds that the parable reinforces the regulation concerning the necessity for reconciliation within the Christian community.<sup>56</sup> Taylor also sees the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 9:11-32) as a classic example of forgiveness and reconciliation as the son experiences restoration to the fellowship of the home and the reestablishment of a broken relationship. Other biblical examples linking the two concepts include the directive for reconciliation in Matthew 5:23-24 and Paul's instructions to Philemon regarding the reception of Onesimus. While the word "forgiveness" does not appear in either text, the link between forgiveness and reconciliation is implicit. By investigating each instance when Jesus mentions forgiveness, Taylor concludes that forgiveness is usually related to an object, variously described as "sins," "trespasses," "blasphemies," or "debts."<sup>57</sup> This suggests that forgiveness involves a cancelling of obstacles in order that reconciliation may occur. Taylor adds that while there is no case where forgiveness is synonymous with full reconciliation of broken relationships in Acts and the epistles, forgiveness is a necessary action for reconciliation to occur.<sup>58</sup>

While Taylor does not overtly see the theme of reconciliation in Acts, Martin Mittelstadt argues that, in the Luke-Acts narrative, peace functions as a means of identifying humans as being reconciled to both God and each other.

In the midst of a broken world full of conflict and human self-interest, Luke reveals God's desire for communities formed by human inclusivity. Mittelstadt contends that Luke envisions the establishment of a new community, driven by a message of radical love and marked by peaceful reconciliation.<sup>59</sup>

In the Gospels, Donald Guthrie sees the actualization of forgiveness in the removal of barriers. As some biblical examples involve the cancelling of debts, Guthrie argues that this indicates forgiveness is to be regarded as a prerequisite for the renewal of fellowship, although not equivalent to reconciliation itself. While it appears Guthrie may be leaving room for the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation as separate concepts, he goes on to say that while the distinction between the two should be noted, it should not be overemphasized; there is nothing biblically to suggest that divine forgiveness was ever offered without a call to return to God.<sup>60</sup>

Although several biblical examples support the link between forgiveness and reconciliation, the majority of the theological support for the traditional view comes from the example of divine forgiveness. Herwart Vorländer notes that although sinful humanity has destroyed their relationship with God, forgiveness is the means by which this relationship is restored. Divine forgiveness includes both making no account of sin and the acceptance of the sinner. He adds that while the term *aphiēmi* almost disappears in Paul's writings, the proclamation of forgiveness

still appears as a measured and systematized doctrine. Divine forgiveness is more than just remission of past guilt; it includes total release from the power of sin and restoration to fellowship with God. Vorländer adds that Paul further expresses these concepts in his doctrine of justification and reconciliation to God, and gives the task of proclaiming this forgiveness to the church.<sup>61</sup> George E. Ladd agrees with Vorländer and says that the second blessing of reconciliation with God is reconciliation among estranged people. The barriers between them are done away with and, those who are reconciled to God are to enjoy peace with each other.<sup>62</sup>

If, according to the traditional theological view, divine forgiveness (which includes reconciliation) is the model for human forgiveness, it is understandable that David Augsburger expresses concern for definitions of forgiveness that stop short of reconciliation. He feels that the real work of forgiving is not just the release from hatred, resentment, suspicion, and hostility in the forgiver, but is found in "regaining the sister and brother as a full sister, as a true brother."<sup>63</sup> The idea that "forgiveness is necessary, but reconciliation is optional" is not what Jesus had in mind in Luke 17:3-4 when He commands unconditional forgiveness. Furthermore, forgiveness based on release for one's own conscience is not truly Christian; the goal is "community restored, not private perfection maintained."<sup>64</sup> Goppelt concurs that, as Jesus' forgiveness demonstrates, human forgiveness should consist of more than declarations; namely, it should include the restoration of fellowship.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, L. Gregory Jones criticizes the Western therapeutic model of forgiveness and argues that this model turns forgiveness into a privatized forgiveness, simply making one's own mind and heart feel better. This is a cheapened form of forgiveness and true forgiveness, modeled after God's own redemptive action, must culminate in a healing of what has been broken; it is a way of living life with others, rather than simply an inner way of life.<sup>66</sup> Lewis B. Smedes agrees with Jones, but further declares that the final stage of forgiveness is when one can "invite the person who hurt you back into your life" and it "depends on the person you forgive as much as it depends on you."<sup>67</sup> Smedes notes that some circumstances do not allow full restoration of the former relationship, like a divorced couple that has since remarried. However, he advocates that unless the offender has died or is unknown, a reunion of some sort, within the bounds of reality, must take place.<sup>68</sup>

### **Common Understanding of Forgiveness in the Church**

This traditional theological view of forgiveness permeates much of the church's outlook and teaching on forgiveness; therefore, churchgoers reflect this traditional perspective. William P. Young's best-selling book, *The Shack*, illustrates how the traditional view commonly shapes Christians' perception of forgiveness. Young's book deals with a character named Mack who grew up in the church with an alcoholic father who served as a church elder. For Mack, his church-fed understanding of forgiveness includes reconciliation with the offending party, forgetting that the wrong was committed, and is seen as something that is offered only by the offender.<sup>69</sup>

On a more global scale, Geoffrey W. Sutton recalls his travels to Kenya to help victims of the 2008 inter-tribal violence, which included victims being hacked to death by machetes, rape, and burning people alive in churches. Sutton was

stunned when he heard a pastor tell these distraught people that they needed to “forgive and forget” what had happened to them.<sup>70</sup> Upon surveying a group of Christian college students in the United States about forgiveness, Sutton also found that almost 71 percent of the Christian college students believed that true forgiveness meant reconciliation with the person who offended you.<sup>71</sup>

Gary Bruegman notes that the majority of the Christian clients whom he counsels struggle with what it really means to forgive. Bruegman observes that his Christian clients generally see forgiveness and reconciliation as synonymous and they fear that their forgiveness would require reconciliation. This fearful belief actually hinders Christian clients from making steps to work through the process of forgiveness. However, Bruegman notes that once his clients realize that forgiveness does not require reconciliation, they seem surprised and relieved. Overall, Bruegman has observed that churches fail to sufficiently address the profound impact forgiving others can have on the overall healing process of relationships.<sup>72</sup>

Brian Upton notes that while Christian clients seem to have a clear understanding of forgiveness, they have a limited grasp of how one actually goes about the process of forgiveness and the majority of clients also view reconciliation as necessary for forgiveness. He also agrees with Bruegman that the fear of having to engage the offender, stemming from their belief about the nature of forgiveness, hinders them from engaging forgiveness. While Upton notes that he has witnessed churches adequately address and encourage proper channels to forgiveness, the broader experience of his clients suggests this is not the case on a larger scale.<sup>73</sup>

## REVIEW OF CURRENT BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE LITERATURE ON FORGIVENESS

The previous chapter reviewed the traditional theological position on forgiveness and some of its impact on the church. Based on that information, one can assess the typical view of leaders in the field of behavioral science. While some theologians and church-goers may see reconciliation as necessary to achieve forgiveness, people within the behavioral science discipline typically view the two concepts as two different issues.

### **Forgiveness Compared to Reconciliation and Trust in Behavioral Science Scholarship**

Everett L. Worthington, one of the leading scholars in the behavioral sciences on forgiveness, disagrees with the traditional theological view and says that forgiveness does not necessarily require reconciliation. Worthington sees reconciliation as restoring trust in a relationship when trust has been damaged and separate from forgiveness.<sup>74</sup> In some cases, reconciliation is unwise or impossible, as in the case of a wife who is physically abused or a deceased parent.<sup>75</sup>

According to Worthington, forgiveness is internal and occurs when negative emotions are replaced, but reconciliation is interpersonal and requires behavior replacement, which is not granted, but earned within the relationship.<sup>76</sup> In a valued and ongoing relationship, forgiveness can motivate reconciliation and restoration of trust by setting limits on the relationship until the offender proves

his or her capacity to grow in trust. Because forgiveness and restoration require dealing with fallible people where one cannot fully know the motives and intentions of another person, God commands forgiveness, but He does not require reconciliation.<sup>77</sup> Since reconciliation requires mutually trustworthy behavior, if one party refuses to act in a trustworthy manner, then trust cannot be established.<sup>78</sup>

Robert D. Enright notes that reconciliation occurs when two people come together following a separation, but forgiveness is the moral action of one individual that starts as a private act, an unseen decision within the human heart. One can forgive and not reconcile, but one cannot truly reconcile without some form of forgiveness. If the offender remains unrepentant and unchanged, then reconciliation is not possible—although one can still extend the gifts of compassion, love, and benevolence to the person.<sup>79</sup> While forgiveness is free, trust must be earned, and sometimes trust is never justified. For instance, a chronic pedophile should never be trusted with caring for children, even if the pedophile has been forgiven.<sup>80</sup>

According to Nathan R. Frise and Mark McMinn, people within the psychological community view forgiveness as a unilateral act of mercy offered to the offender by the forgiver. As a unilateral act of mercy by one individual, forgiveness operated independent of the offender's behavior. Reconciliation is distinct from forgiveness because it requires bilateral actions such as repentance and a restoration of the relationship.<sup>81</sup>

In the area of behavioral science, most psychologists view forgiveness as an intrapersonal event (between two people) and see the act of forgiveness towards

another person as an aspect of reconciliation.<sup>82</sup> While behavioral scientists may disagree with the traditional theological view and see forgiveness as possible apart from reconciliation, Sutton makes an important point regarding the potential difference the distinction could make:

Regardless of psychologists' emphasis on separating the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation, survey research indicates that most people view the concepts as intertwined. That is, forgiveness includes reconciliation. To the extent that beliefs influence behavior, we would expect differences in progress toward forgiveness and reconciliation between those who separate the act of forgiveness from the reconciliation and those who do not separate the concepts.<sup>83</sup>

If Sutton is correct, then the important message that forgiveness does not necessarily require reconciliation may make a measureable difference in the lives of those who currently do not have that understanding.

### **Steps to Forgiveness**

Even if a Christian understands the biblical mandate to forgive, he or she may not be sure how to go about the actual steps of reaching a state of forgiveness. The topic of forgiveness has grown in popularity in the last few decades and related psychological literature has expanded exponentially.<sup>84</sup> Sutton notes that this recent surge in psychotherapy research indicates that people can learn to forgive others and adds that several prominent forgiveness models exist that fit with general

Christian beliefs concerning forgiveness. Worthington, in particular, uses Rodger Enright's model and shows how clients can REACH (an acronym referring to five different stages) forgiveness.<sup>85</sup> Worthington, who dealt with the brutal murder of his own mother and forgave her killer, believes that forgiveness, as an emotional experience, cannot be achieved unless a person changes his or her emotions. He adds that the REACH model of forgiveness is "rooted in replacing negative emotions associated with anger, fear, and unforgiveness with positive emotions associated with empathy."<sup>86</sup>

The first of the five REACH stages asks the offended person to recall the hurt. One can respond to hurt in many ways, but in the process of recalling past wounds, one should be as objective as possible. Worthington notes that empathy serves as the key step in forgiving. One should imagine the offending incident or symbolic event from the view of the perpetrator. Although contrary to the view of the offended, Worthington points out that most people do not act from evil motives, but simply attempt to meet their own perceived needs in what seems the best possible manner at the time.

The second stage of the forgiveness model is empathy. Worthington identifies three stages to empathy: (1) the shallowest level understands the view of the other person, (2) the middle level involves identifying emotionally with the other person, and (3) the deepest level involves feelings of compassion as well as emotional identification. The deepest level of empathy must be achieved if the offended wants to achieve forgiveness. Sometimes, an act is too terrible to empathize with—like a child who is molested—so the offended person can employ sympathy for the offender instead.

Because simply understanding someone's motives is not enough to inspire forgiveness, stage three includes giving an altruistic gift of forgiveness. This stage echoes New Testament teachings on forgiveness: seeing forgiveness as a gift and realizing that the offended also needs forgiveness and has received God's forgiveness. Worthington defines altruism as "unselfish regard for another person ... giving the other person something simply for his or her own good."<sup>87</sup> Remembering when one has received freely given forgiveness brings up feelings of gratitude, which engenders the desire to extend the gift of forgiveness to another person.<sup>88</sup> Robert D. Enright also concludes that forgiveness is a gift to the offender and an act of mercy towards someone who does not deserve it.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, forgiveness is not simply a negative action (forgoing resentment), but a positive act that generously reaches out to another person.<sup>90</sup>

Once an individual has reached this stage of forgiveness, he or she can move on to stage four, which is to commit publically to forgive. Since doubts about the reality of the act of forgiveness or moments that bring back the original pain can arise, a person should make a public commitment to forgive. Worthington explains that hurt is wired into the brain; sights, sounds, and thoughts that remind the offended of the painful incident will biochemically change the brain by causing electrical and chemical signals in the brain to run a familiar path. This path of signals brings the painful emotions back to the surface. He notes that forgiveness does not necessarily stop the memories of the hurt and the attached immediate emotions.<sup>91</sup> In fact, those painful emotional images are mental prototypes that the

mind uses to protect itself from threat.<sup>92</sup> Worthington adds that one should not necessarily want to stop the painful memories, as these memories can act as a warning sign to refrain from recklessly trusting those who do not deserve to be trusted. However, once the immediate reaction passes, forgiveness replaces the emotions that the offended feels and enables him or her to experience love, empathy, sympathy, and compassion rather than being bound to hatred and bitterness.<sup>92</sup>

Through the final stage, Worthington invites individuals to hold on to forgiveness. Many people who arrive at this stage of forgiveness think they will never remember the hurt again. If they do remember the original offense, they feel that the forgiveness was a fraud. However, practicing forgiveness is an act of self-control, like building up a physical muscle; it requires an uphill fight to maintain.<sup>93</sup> Sutton adds that when Jesus tells people that they are to forgive seven times seventy, He is establishing a long-term pattern and makes forgiveness a personality trait or disposition.<sup>94</sup> Worthington lays out six actions that help the offended hold onto forgiveness: (1) realize that the pain of a remembered hurt is not unforgiveness, (2) do not dwell on negative emotions, (3) remind yourself that you have forgiven the person, (4) seek reassurance from a friend or partner, (5) use the forgiveness documents you created, and (6) think through the five REACH steps again.<sup>95</sup>

While some studies indicate that some people experience rapid forgiveness, a person should not feel discouraged if forgiveness does not occur right away, as forgiveness generally happens over time.<sup>96</sup> Everett L. Worthington, Taro A. Kurusu, Wanda Collins, Jack W. Berry, Jennifer S. Ripley, and Sasha N. Baier's research compares the act of forgiveness to "kicking down the Berlin Wall, chipping away at it— hammer blow by hammer blow—or blowing it suddenly apart. When the wall is breached, people can run through the holes into freedom."<sup>97</sup>

#### INTERSECTION OF DIFFERING VIEWS ON FORGIVENESS BY THEOLOGIANS AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENTISTS

Now that the differences between the traditional theological position and typical behavioral science position on forgiveness and reconciliation have been noted, the question still remains as to whether or not these differences exist at a deeper level within the disciplines. It is one thing to gather points of agreement and disagreement among authors across various fields and quite another to support the suggestion that a greater level of partiality to a specific view exists based primarily on professional background. Does a difference in viewpoint exist, not only for theologians with a traditional position on forgiveness, but for theologians, in general, compared to those in the behavioral science field?

#### **Study Regarding Perceived Differences in Defining Forgiveness by Theologians and Behavioral Scientists**

Nathan R. Frise and Mark R. McMinn note that over the past decade many psychologists concluded that forgiveness involves two separate processes—in other words, forgiveness can occur with or without reconciliation.<sup>98</sup> For psychologists, this idea holds important clinical implications. If reconciliation is a prerequisite of forgiveness, then an individual could not forgive a deceased offender or it might

put an individual in harm's way.

Frise and McMinn suggest that the relational focus of each discipline could account for the differing perspectives of theologians and psychologists. For instance, psychologists often work with clients who are forgiving past offenders who may not be living or may even be a stranger to the offended party. In these cases, reconciliation with the offending party would not be a reasonable goal for psychotherapy. Christian theologians, on the other hand, often begin their observations with God's relationship to humanity. The traditional view of forgiveness (Chapter 1) supports this perspective, as God's unlimited forgiveness and reconciliation with wayward humanity is seen as a model for forgiveness between humans. While Christian communities seek to exemplify this type of forgiveness and reconciliation, the context of a professional setting can present sharply contrasting experiences for psychologists. Consequently, Christian theologians and psychologists may have distinct views on what the concept of forgiveness entails.

Frise and McMinn conducted a study to examine whether or not Christian theologians and psychologists really have different views on the subject of forgiveness and reconciliation. Subjects rated their agreement or disagreement with the statement: "True forgiveness means that a person is restored to an ongoing relationship with the offender." The study indicated that between more religious psychologists, less religious psychologists, and theologians, the more religious psychologists were significantly less likely to see reconciliation as a part of true forgiveness than the less religious psychologists and theologians. The study asked the same question to a group of psychologists and theologians who were experts in the area of forgiveness. The result indicates that the expert psychologists were significantly less likely to say that reconciliation was a part of true forgiveness than expert theologians. Overall, 85 percent of the psychologist participants saw forgiveness and reconciliation as separate constructs, while only 44 percent of theologians saw them as separate. Although this certainly suggests a disparity in the way the different groups see the issue, almost half of the theologians agreed with the psychologists. The study also showed that the psychologists emphasized the interpersonal nature of forgiveness and possible relational dangers of reconciliation. Interestingly, not one theologian mentioned the possible dangers of reconciliation.

Although psychologists and theologians adhere to differing perspectives, Frise and McMinn believe merit exists in integrating the views of both sets of scholars as they seek to each describe a fundamental process and activity that occurs in human life. Subjective forgiveness may be a precursor to relational forgiveness; at times, forgiveness might be an end in itself when a restored relationship is not possible (as in the case of death) or deemed unwise or dangerous (as in the case of abuse). Despite the perceived differences in viewpoints, Frise and McMinn hope that by considering the differing perspectives on forgiveness, the dialogue will sharpen both disciplines and, ultimately, help those who seek to forgive their offender. <sup>99</sup>

### **Support for Instances of Non-Reconciliation from Theological Scholarship**

The biggest concern regarding reconciliation involved the practical question of whether or not an individual must return to a dangerous, abusive situation in order to fully forgive the abuser. Psychologists and counselors deal with these types of situations on a daily basis; thus, this reality possibly explains the differences in opinion between the disciplines. The question remains: Is there no biblical evidence that clearly supports non-reconciliation in the case of an unhealthy abusive relationship?

Elaine A. Heath says that when wounded Christians face a choice between either severing the marital relationship, or living in victimization by an unrepentant, violent spouse, they need to know that God is their helper in the painful, life-saving process of ending their marriage. Although it is a difficult verse to translate, Malachi 2:16 provides an important message for the church—one not often heard from many pulpits.

Covenant is the primary literary theme in Malachi. Malachi 2:16 presents part of the third disputation concerning marital faithfulness, both figurative and literal. Heath notes that the first part of Malachi 2:16 would, in fact, read: "I hate divorcing,"<sup>100</sup> but the less-mentioned second section of the text should read as "and one who covers his garment with violence." Taken from its root, *bgd* denotes acting "faithlessly," "treacherously," and "perfidiously."<sup>101</sup> Heath points out that *bgd* is a euphemism for "acts that were improper within the setting of a community composed of equal partners in covenant with God."<sup>102</sup> This includes cheating, swindling the gullible, defrauding the poor and helpless members of society—all of which qualified as *begeding*. *Bgd* serves as a key word in this periscope, as it occurs five times in Malachi 2, underscoring the faithlessness and treachery of the people. Heath also adds that *bgd* ties in with the word for "violence," *hamas*, so that the concept of a violent, treacherous spouse in Malachi 2:16 becomes very clear.

The meaning of the phrase, "covering his garment with violence" has brought much debate in scholarly circles. However, Heath feels that the best interpretation is based on the Hebrew custom of a man placing his garment over a woman as part of the marriage rite; thus, the phrase is referring to the wife. The word *hamas* appears in the Old Testament fifty-eight times and can refer to violence through slander and abusive language, institutionalized violence in the form of unjust government, some sort of economic exploitation, physical brutality, and generally destructive behavior. The Hebrew view of violence is profoundly holistic, incorporating all aspects of life.

Heath concludes that it is justifiable to view Malachi 2:16 as a link with divorce to domestic violence—God hates both, but His judgment is against the violent spouse. In the context of verses 10-16, as well as Deuteronomy 24:1-4, divorce motivated by greed (economic or otherwise) is seen as a form of violence and reprehensible to God. Domestic violence in all its forms, whether physical, sexual, emotional, or spiritual, is a lifestyle of covenant-breaking in what should be the most sacred of human relationships.

God hates divorce because it is the death of a relationship; however, He hates violence even more, as it can both kill the relationship and the individuals.<sup>103</sup> If Heath is correct and God allows the breaking of a relationship as sacred as

marriage on the basis of abusive and untrustworthy behavior, then it seems possible to suggest that the same principle can be applied to other categories of relationships as well.

Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark agree with Heath's interpretation of Malachi 2:16 and note that the Bible also speaks in many other places against violent behavior. When it comes to bringing His people out of a place of violence into safety, Yahweh is a God of action.<sup>104</sup> If Heath, Kroeger, and Nason-Clark are correct, there are times when God allows an individual to separate himself or herself from an unhealthy situation and not restore the relationship.

Heath, Kroger, and Nason-Clark are not the only theologians who would agree with the typical behavioral science concept of forgiveness and reconciliation. While the broader biblical evidence supports that forgiveness is connected to and usually leads to reconciliation (as noted in Chapter 1), some theological scholars argue that forgiveness does not have to result in reconciliation. Robert J. Schreiter maintains that reconciliation can only come about if the nature of the violence perpetrated is acknowledged and its conditions for reappearance or continuation are removed. If these sources of violence are not named, examined, and taken away, reconciliation will not come about—otherwise, the person experiences a truce, but not peace.<sup>105</sup>

Mulholland also sees biblical forgiveness as possible without reconciliation. He notes that the forgiveness of Colossians 3:13 is not a special formula for reconciliation. Forgiving in such an unconditional way does not mean that the one who wronged another person will repent, apologize, make restitution, and restore the relationship—unconditional forgiveness is required for reconciliation, but reconciliation is still an entirely different matter.<sup>106</sup> James G. Williams agrees that while forgiveness is a precondition for reconciliation, and reconciliation is desirable, it is not essential to forgiveness; an individual must determine whether or not it is wise to reconcile, based on the character of the offender.<sup>107</sup> Although the number of theologians who hold the traditional view of forgiveness outnumber theologians who do not see reconciliation as required for forgiveness, this latter group of scholars still contributes a strong voice in the ongoing discussion.

## APPLICATION OF PRINCIPLES

While reconciliation is seemingly desirable in healthy relationship, forced or unwise reconciliation may hinder a person from moving forward with the forgiveness process. The message that reconciliation is not necessary in order to fully forgive another individual is one that can have a deep impact on those who are not yet aware of this possibility. Once an individual understands the separation between forgiveness and reconciliation, the person finally feels free to start the previously feared process of forgiveness. In light of this observation and the knowledge that many churchgoers still have an intertwined understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation, the question becomes: How can the church increase awareness of the topic in the congregation?

Depending on the level of time and effort that a particular church devotes to the topic of forgiveness, the pastoral staff can enrich the congregation's awareness of

what forgiveness entails through a variety of means. The first answer may appear obvious, but a sermon series explaining forgiveness can ensure that the majority of the congregation receives biblical teaching on this crucial subject. If the sermon series addresses the heartbreaking issue of abuse and the rights of the abused to flee from their abuser while still extending forgiveness, the church can potentially reach people currently facing these difficult types of situations. Highlighting the idea that forgiveness is possible without reconciliation can free an individual to move toward forgiveness.

In addition to looking at biblical passages on forgiveness, the pastor could briefly teach a forgiveness model, such as the REACH model, and distribute an informational handout to give the congregation a framework on how to forgive. Also, the sermon series could address common side effects of unforgiveness, such as bitterness or anger, as many people may not realize they have resentment built up against other people until they address the root of those feelings.

A church could also invite an expert guest speaker to address the topic of forgiveness. For instance, the expert could address the issue of forgiveness from years of counseling other people through their pain, while also sharing his or her own personal testimony of how forgiveness can be achieved in difficult circumstances. Smaller churches might consider contacting the local Christian counseling center for a speaker. The local Christian counseling center may also be able to help the church with forgiveness workshops. In this smaller setting, licensed counselors could work directly with the people who need assistance as they address personal issues in the forgiveness process.

While the aforementioned suggestions can help spread a general understanding and awareness regarding forgiveness, some congregants will achieve greater success through a more personal approach. Therefore, the church could provide an option for one-on-one pastoral counseling or sessions with a licensed Christian counselor for individuals who desire an individualized route.

## CONCLUSION

In considering the differences between the traditional theological view and behavioral science view of forgiveness and reconciliation, perhaps Frise and McMinn said it best when they noted that the nature of the truth can shift slightly when viewed through a particular field of study.<sup>108</sup> While the Bible is clear on many points, believers must discern the gray areas or exceptions with the help of the rest of Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

The traditional viewpoint demonstrates that, in God's perspective, forgiveness resulting in reconciliation is important; when practiced in the real world, forgiveness and reconciliation provide a reflection of sinful humanity's reconciliation to God. On the other hand, the behavioral science community—and its like-minded theological supporters—also make a strong case for the idea that forgiveness does not always necessitate reconciliation. The latter perspective extends a viable answer for hurting Christians, as discussed previously. Even though there is no hope of reconciliation, Sarah can begin to forgive her deceased father for his sexual molestation. Julie can know that God cares about her and her children's well-being, and while moving toward personal forgiveness and healing,

she can part from an unrepentant and abusive husband. Charlie can also release his anger and forgive his ex-wife, now realizing that full forgiveness is possible without having to go outside the bounds of reality and restore their previous relationship.

Individuals who are hurting and afraid to start the process of forgiveness because they fear that forgiveness demands reconciliation need to know that forgiveness is possible without a forced reunion. Regarding the complex relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, one theologian presented states: "Reconciliation is the *telos* of forgiveness, but maybe not fully in this life."<sup>109</sup> The Christian is called to show gratitude and humility for their own gift of forgiveness by freely extending that same gift to others, but a restoration of the relationship may not always be wise. While these situations may not be ideal, the Christian's future still holds a promise of eventual healing. When forgiveness and reconciliation do occur in this world, it is a significant reflection of God's actions toward humankind; when reconciliation does not occur, an individual can still experience hope as he or she anticipates God's complete restorative work in eternity.

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## **EXCURSUS**

Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark agree with Heath's interpretation of Malachi 2:16 and note that in addition to Malachi 2:16, the Bible speaks in many other places against violent behavior. Even household slaves were not to be

abused as Exodus 21:26-27 notes. Violence is seen as a characteristic of sinful people and brings the judgment of God (Ps. 11:5-6; Ezek. 7:11; Joel 3:19; Obad. 10; Hab. 2:17; Zeph. 1:9). God even told Noah that He was destroying the earth because of violence in Genesis 6:11. Proverbs 11:29-30 and 24:15 also condemn violence in the home and abusive speech is another basic theme in Scripture (Ps. 27:12; 52:2-4; 55:9; 140:11; Prov. 18:21; Hosea 12:1; Mic. 6:12; Matt. 5:22).

Kroeger and Nason-Clark add that when it comes to bringing His people out of a place of violence into safety, Yahweh is a God of action. David praises the Lord for delivering him from violent men (2 Sam. 22:49; Ps. 18:48) and God's mercy and power liberate and defend victims of cruelty and oppression. Psalm 103:6 notes, "The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" and Psalm 12:5 says, "'Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise,' says the LORD. 'I will protect them from those who malign them.'" Isaiah 54:11-17 and 60:17-18 state similar promises of protection.

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7 For more information about the Bible speaking out against violent behavior, see Excursus.

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