

THAT'S NOT FORGIVENESS: HOW THE CROSS RECOVERS FORGIVENESS IN A
WORLD THAT FAILS TO FORGIVE

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ABSTRACT

Forgiveness is one of the most misunderstood concepts in our world today. Sinful people are adept at twisting forgiveness to be self-serving vehicles to fulfill their own sinful desires or to justify their sinful desires. Scripture is about forgiveness, and it has much to say about Christian forgiveness. Scripture tells the Christian that he must forgive. This paper explores why the Christian forgives, how the Christian can forgive, and what his forgiveness looks like in a secular world that both hates and lacks true forgiveness. This paper serves as a practical guide for Christians as they fix their eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of their faith, and as they love others by forgiving.

INTRODUCTION

“We should forgive our enemies... but not before they are hanged.” – Heinrich Heine¹

Such a jarring quote may make us gasp at such a hollow example of forgiveness. Yet, although we may never say out loud with Heinrich Heine, “We should forgive our enemies... but not before they are hanged,” we perhaps relate to it more than we care to admit. We often find ourselves forgiving our enemies... but not before it is earned, not before conditions are met, not before personal satisfaction is found, not before justice is served, not before me, myself, and I, above all else. Such forgiveness feels natural and enticing. It feels rational and fair. But that’s not forgiveness.

Underneath Heine’s quote is an undercurrent of contempt for forgiveness. Today, that same undercurrent of contempt subtly continues to flow into our society. The one who forgives is often perceived as someone who disrespects themselves and the wrongdoer by excusing the harm done. He is seen as someone who perpetuates systemic, unchecked wrongdoing. He is accused of undermining, degrading, and all but destroying justice in one fell swoop with his act of forgiveness.

For these reasons, even Christians can find that Heine’s quote is a sentiment that rings true, though we may blush at the thought. While we may never think we would resort to hanging our enemies, Jesus knows we can easily foster such anger and let it fester in our sinful hearts. So, Jesus lovingly warns us, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not

1. Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), was a German poet, essayist, journalist, and literary critic.

murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matt 5:21–22, NIV). Yes, the Lord knows that we shudder at the thought of murdering and hanging our enemies! But Jesus knows, a little hatred in our hearts is equivalent to the murderous hatred we find so abhorrent! Such hatred poses a threat to our very souls. Most importantly, such hatred often begins with that undercurrent of contempt for forgiveness that Heine depicts. This contempt for forgiveness inevitably flows into the greater riptide of unforgiveness that many find themselves drowning in today. For this reason, Jesus’ very next words in verses 23 and 24 of Matt 5 are “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” Jesus tells us to “be reconciled” with our enemies to avoid such judgment. Likewise, in the next chapter of Matthew, he tells us, “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). In Mark, he similarly tells us, “If you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins” (Mark 11:25).

Jesus makes it clear: extending forgiveness to others is essential to the life of the Christian, and it must not be begrudging or come from a heart filled with anger. Said another way, Jesus might simply say, “We should forgive our enemies” with no added conditional clause like Heine’s “but not before they are hanged,” indeed, with no conditional sentiment at all! In fact, we can confidently say he would tell us, “Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col 3:13), penned by Paul under the Spirit’s inspiration. But such relevant words thus reveal yet another

connection to forgiveness, a connection that reveals another *dimension* of forgiveness: there is a distinction between the Vertical Forgiveness (VF) we receive from the Lord, and the Horizontal Forgiveness (HF) Jesus wants us to extend to others. This is the key to unlocking the HF Jesus longs for us to lavish upon those who sin against us.

But what exactly is forgiveness, both Vertical and Horizontal? What is the relationship between these two dimensions? What does the secular world have to say about such forgiveness, and how does secular forgiveness differ from Christian forgiveness? How can and should a Christian forgive? All of these questions rest on the heart of the Christian who lives in a world mired in an undercurrent of contempt for forgiveness and a riptide of unforgiveness.

Only a proper understanding of VF found at the cross produces the HF Jesus wants the Christian to have. This HF is naturally and exclusively motivated by the VF we have received from God—a stark contrast to the secular world’s motivation to forgive. Any semblance of forgiveness that is not drawn from this VF from God is nothing else than a coping mechanism that attempts to deal with sin instead of forgiving sin. That’s not forgiveness. Such coping mechanisms, derived from a failure to understand forgiveness as defined by the cross, attempt to redefine forgiveness without the cross. These coping mechanisms destroy forgiveness and provide nothing of value to the victim and nothing of value to the perpetrator. In fact, failing to forgive from the cross harms the victim and perpetrator more than the secular world realizes. While the secular world may object to Christian biblical HF, all objections made against it are met fully and entirely at the cross.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the topic of forgiveness is widely discussed in literature, six sources were particularly useful in my research regarding the differences and similarities between biblical and secular forgiveness, as well as identifying the motivation to forgive. The resource that was most useful to this thesis was Timothy Keller's² *Forgive: How Can I and Why Should I?* Keller addresses the very topic this paper aims to tackle: only Christian forgiveness is true forgiveness. Another essential resource that offered an accurate Confessional Lutheran perspective was Kober³ and Rockenbach's⁴ *Unforgivable? How God's Forgiveness Transforms Our Lives*. Kober and Rockenbach's strong Lutheran perspective was foundational in their writing, making Keller's sometimes ambiguous language more concrete from a doctrinal perspective. Jacob and Rachel Denhollander's⁵ peer-reviewed article "Justice: The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse" also proved invaluable. Their perspective of God's forgiveness and justice colliding at the cross and the impact it has on victims of abuse were crucial in answering the world's

2. Timothy Keller was the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. He also co-founded Redeemer City to City and is the author of 31 other Christian books, including the New York Time's bestselling books *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, as well as *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* and *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*.

3. Ted Kober currently serves as Senior Ambassador Emeritus for Ambassadors of Reconciliation. In 2021 Concordia Seminary awarded him a Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

4.. Rev. Dr. Mark Rockenbach is a Professor of Practical Theology, director of personal growth and leadership development, director of the institutional review board and director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

5. Jacob Denhollander graduated from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and is currently pursuing his doctorate at University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Jacob's wife, Rachel Denhollander is a lawyer and former USA Olympic gymnast. She was the first female athlete to publicly accuse Larry Nassar, her former USA Gymnastics doctor, of sexual abuse. She has written a memoir, *What is a Girl Worth?* In it, she details her life and experience as a survivor of sexual abuse. Together they pursue their passion of exploring Christian atonement and sinful abuse.

objections to biblical forgiveness. The Lutheran Confessions, as found in the Book of Concord, provided another doctrinal foundation for this paper.⁶ The Lutheran Confessions clearly demonstrate why Christians forgive in their lives of sanctification, a theme often lacking in much of the literature on this topic. Finally, two resources provided a secular perspective on the motivation of secular forgiveness compared to that of biblical forgiveness: Dr. Derek Brookes’⁷ peer-reviewed article, “Moral Grounds for Forgiveness,” and Dr. Andrew Fiala’s⁸ peer-reviewed article, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice.” These sources share commonalities regarding the topics of the definition of biblical forgiveness, justice and forgiveness, the motivation to forgive, and the failures of secular forgiveness. They also speak to the cross’ role in our forgiveness.

The Definition of Biblical Forgiveness

Biblical forgiveness differs significantly from secular forgiveness. The two are not the same in essence because of the difference in motivation. Keller’s book and Kober and Rockenbach’s book identify the motivation to forgive: the cross. Both Keller and Kober and Rockenbach present a similar definition of forgiveness in both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Kober and

6. All Book of Concord quotes are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

7. Dr. Derek Brookes has a PhD in philosophy from the Australian National University. He also has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Philosophy from the University of Adelaide, in which he graduated first in his class. He has taught philosophy in several Australian universities.

8. Dr. Andrew Fiala has a PhD in philosophy from Vanderbilt University, an M.A. in Philosophy from California State University, and a B.A. in philosophy from the University of California. He is the author and editor of more than a dozen books and 50 scholarly articles. He currently serves as a Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Ethics Center at Fresno State.

Rockenbach generally define forgiveness as “setting aside the right to recall another’s sin and use it against him.”⁹ Keller further defines forgiveness when he says,

To forgive, then, is first to name the trespass truthfully as wrong and punishable, rather than merely excusing it. Second, it is to identify with the perpetrator as a fellow sinner rather than thinking how different from you he or she is. It is to will their good. Third, it is to release the wrongdoer from liability by absorbing the debt oneself rather than seeking revenge and paying them back.¹⁰

Justice and Forgiveness Intertwined with Motivation to Forgive

The relationship between justice and forgiveness is a particularly debated topic in the literature of forgiveness. The two seem to be in tension with each other, as Brookes and Fiala note. It appears we are faced with a tragic choice when we are wronged: forgive or pursue justice. This tension also relates to the motivation to forgive or to not forgive others. For Brookes and Fiala, forgiveness preserves the future, a worthy motivation. However, the pursuit of justice upholds the integrity of the past and the self-respect and worth of the victim and perpetrator, another worthy motivation. Essentially, Brookes and Fiala conclude that the decision to pursue forgiveness or justice is up to the victim, but the two cannot be pursued simultaneously. However, both may occur independently of each other.

The Denhollanders offer a new perspective on the relationship between justice and forgiveness by looking at the cross of Christ. The cross reveals two truths: God pursues justice and forgiveness simultaneously. Therefore, Keller concludes that no such choice need be made; both forgiveness and justice can and should be pursued both at once and simultaneously by the

9. Ted Kober and Mark Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?: How God’s Forgiveness Transforms Our Lives* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2023), 23.

10. Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2023), 10.

Christian, just as God pursues both. Keller emphatically repeats that this must be governed by the cross, as it moves us to love instead of seek vengeance. Kober and Rockenbach also add another consideration when contemplating the tension between justice and forgiveness: consequences can and still should be applied to sin. This, too, can be done in love and not in vengeance.

The Failures of Secular Forgiveness

Secular forgiveness is ultimately no forgiveness at all due to the lack of love received from the cross and distributed to others, Keller concludes. Kober and Rockenbach add to Keller's observations when they note that secular forgiveness is really just coping dressed up as something other than what it truly is. They conclude that this coping often leads the victim to fall prey to the "loop of unforgiveness," which is accompanied by a failure to or a refusal to forgive biblically. Kober and Rockenbach define this loop of unforgiveness as "allowing unforgiveness to dwell in your heart [which] subjects you to an unending cycle of anger, fear, and loneliness."¹¹ This loop of unforgiveness robs the victim of true lasting peace and relief by making an idol of peace that can never be attained. Such idolatrous thoughts leave the cross behind.

The Cross as it Relates to Our Forgiveness of Others

In order to break this loop of unforgiveness that marks the failure of secular forgiveness, the Christian must look to the cross. While Keller is rooted in the cross, Kober and Rockenbach

11. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 88.

demonstrate their Confessional Lutheran approach by emphasizing that the forgiveness Jesus expects us to have will naturally flow from the cross. As we freely forgive, and even as we struggle to forgive in our Christian lives, Kober and Rockenbach remind the Christian that forgiveness starts and ends at the cross. The Denhollanders also note that one's self-worth is found at the cross: the cross shows victims that God cares about justice and cares for them personally.

This thesis, together with the aforementioned resources, defines what true forgiveness is and how it looks in the life of the Christian, contrasting it with secular forgiveness in five main parts. Part One defines exactly what VF is according to Scripture. Part Two explains what HF looks like in light of the VF the Christian receives. Part Three identifies how the secular world reacts to biblical forgiveness. Part Four exposes the world's counterfeit models of forgiveness as failures to truly forgive. Finally, Part Five shows that the cross guides and shapes the Christian's life of forgiveness.

PART 1: WHAT IS VERTICAL FORGIVENESS?

The key to understanding biblical HF in the life of a Christian rests on the VF that the Lord gives to his people. This VF can only be found in one book, the Bible, and it can only be found in one person, Jesus Christ. When the Christian understands God's VF, HF naturally and joyfully flows from his heart.

The Bible is About Forgiveness

Following Adam and Eve's fall into sin, human beings have become stained with sin. Scripture tells us that "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Rom 5:12). Since the fall, David describes the sinful condition of mankind: "Surely I was sinful from birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5). Isaiah tells us what sin does to human beings: "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, like the wind our sins sweep us away" (Isa 64:6). So swept away in sin is mankind, that Paul plainly tells us, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). He adds "there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom 3:12). Finally, our sin that has so thoroughly swept us away kills: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). This is a death not just physical, but spiritual and eternal, too. The world and everything in it is cursed with sin and therefore marked for death.

However, God loves this world and the people in it. Because he loves this world so much, he deigned to save it from sin and the physical and eternal death that accompanies it. But in order to save the world, he must clean up the mess of sin that we have created. How should he deal

with sin? He doesn't cope with sin. Instead, Jesus tells us that the King of the universe forgives sin.

Vertical Forgiveness: The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Jesus tells us a parable that reflects how he deals with sin: he forgives sin, entirely and completely. From the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Jesus tells us that VF names the debt of sin that we owe the Lord, it pays for the debt we owe, it reconciles us to the Lord, and it is a gift from the Lord.

²¹ 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?"

²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go (Matt 18:21–27).

Vertical Forgiveness Names the Debt of Sin

What a joke it is for the servant to ever think he could "pay back everything" to the last dime! Jesus wants his listeners to realize the insurmountable and incomprehensible debt the servant owes the king. His language reveals this: "The talent was the greatest currency denomination in the empire, and ten thousand was the highest number for which the Greek language had a specific word."¹² Such is the debt that all servants of this world owe, you and I included. All people owe

12. Keller, *Forgive*, 5.

the King of the universe an insurmountable and incomprehensible debt because of our insurmountable and incomprehensible sin. When Jesus tells us the king brought the servant to him to settle his account, he shares this key truth about forgiveness in both dimensions: “Forgiveness starts with truth-telling, with exposure rather than a cover-up of excuses of half-truths.”¹³ Forgiveness starts with naming the debt, or the sin, that has taken place, just as the king brought the servant to him and named the debt before him.

Vertical Forgiveness Pays the Debt We Owe

Yet in Jesus’ parable, somehow the debt must be paid, even if the servant and his family are sold into perpetual servitude. Jesus tells us the debt does get paid, but not by the servant. Instead, it is paid by the king himself. Rather than following through on his right to make the servant and his family suffer for their inability to repay the debt, he relinquishes his right to demand payment. Verse 27 is at the heart of forgiveness: “The servant’s master took pity on him,” when he had every reason not to, “and he canceled his debt,” by paying for it himself. “The story hints at the extraordinary costliness of forgiveness ... even a great king would find this debt impossible to forgive without destabilizing his kingdom.”¹⁴ Thus, another aspect of God’s VF is revealed: it is incredibly *costly*, often manifested in the form of absorbing a debt incurred against oneself.

For the King of our universe, the reason VF is so costly is because our God is both loving *and* holy. Many people are comfortable saying that God is love and assume he is not nearly as holy as he makes himself out to be. However, they do not realize that if God were only love, suddenly

13. Keller, *Forgive*, 8.

14. Keller, *Forgive*, 8.

sin would become something that in fact does *not* bring death and condemnation—a sentiment that makes Satan dance with joy. Gerhard Forde warns against the danger of believing that God is *only* love:

The proclamation that God is love has been so endlessly drummed into us that it has become a pitiable platitude, a meaningless cipher. Since God is love, love, love, forgiveness can just be taken for granted ... where forgiveness is no longer paramount, the “gospel” of affirmation and acceptance takes over. Things are not wrong, they are just different, and need non-judgmental affirmation and acceptance.¹⁵

Still others may be inclined to think that God might instead excuse sin, “winking it away,” like a grandfather winking at his grandson when he is naughty—an unspoken agreement that he will let it slide and not discipline him by telling his mother about what he has done.

But God isn’t solely a God of love, and he’s certainly not a grandfather who winks away and excuses sin. God is not only love—he is also holy. “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty!” (Isa 6:3). Isaiah knew that such a holy God cannot and will not tolerate sin. “‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty’” (Isa 6:5). The writer to the Hebrews says, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22). God’s holiness demands a payment for sin. Only our God, who is both loving and holy, provided and supplied that very payment, though at a great cost to him. For the Lord, forgiving us cost him his one and only perfect Son, whom he gave up for this world that he loves so dearly. For Jesus, the cost to forgive was spiritual separation from his Father in heaven, as he cried out on his cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46) and bore the brunt of sin for sinners. God’s love and holiness manifested at Christ’s cross, where the insurmountable and incomprehensible debt that all sinful people owe to

15. Gerhard O Forde, “Is Forgiveness Enough? Reflections on an Odd Question,” *Word & World* 16.3 (1996): 305.

the Lord was paid in full. The Lord himself lovingly absorbed the cost of our sin while upholding his holiness. The Lord doesn't "wink away" sin; he doesn't excuse it; he doesn't minimize it. That's not forgiveness. The Lord forgives sin. Keller aptly summarizes, "because he's loving, there's free, free, free, free, free grace for us. But because he's holy, it was *costly* grace, *infinitely* costly grace."¹⁶

Vertical Forgiveness Reconciles Us to the Lord

One more observation must be noted regarding verse 27. Jesus tells us the king "let him go." The significance of this statement is often missed: The servant left in a restored relationship with the king. Because his debt was wiped clean, he was restored to the status of an upstanding citizen, in proper relationship with the king and his fellow servants. In the same way, when the Lord forgives our sins through the high cost of sacrificing his Son out of his love and holiness, he restores our relationship with him, reconciling us to himself. Worthington notes, "When people receive the gift of divine forgiveness for their sinful nature, they are reconciled (e.g., a restored relationship) to God by being adopted into the divine family."¹⁷ In Christ, we are no longer enemies of God, separated from him because of our massive debt of sin against him. He has justified us through Christ, reconciling us to himself as if we had never sinned. The Apology to the Augsburg Confession says, "to justify signifies, according to forensic usage, to acquit a guilty one and declare

16. Keller, *Forgive*, 134

17. Everett Worthington, "'Mere' Christian Forgiveness: An Ecumenical Christian Conceptualization of Forgiveness through the Lens of Stress-And-Coping Theory," *Religions* (2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/REL10010044>

him righteous, but on account of the righteousness of another” (Ap IV 305). This justification has a clear purpose: it reconciles us to the King of the universe. In Rom 5:9–11 Paul says,

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

In 2 Cor 5:18, Paul spells it out even more clearly: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” In Jesus, we are forgiven, declared not guilty, and are reconciled to God.

Vertical Forgiveness is a Gift from the Lord

VF that reconciles us to the Lord is truly a *gift* from the Lord. When VF is viewed in the light of God’s mercy and grace, it can be nothing else.

Forgiveness is mercy and grace. Mercy is not receiving what you deserve. It’s a release from the consequence of eternal death. Forgiveness is the mercy of undeserved justification. Grace is receiving what you do not deserve. It’s a gift without strings. Grace is God’s undeserved love revealed in forgiveness.... Forgiveness is God’s gift to you. You do not deserve the gift. You cannot buy it anywhere. And there is nothing you can do to earn any part of it. It is a free gift.¹⁸

Likewise, the Formula of Concord reminds us that, since God’s VF is given to us freely as a gift, there is nothing that we have done, are doing, or can do to earn it. It states,

Accordingly, we believe, teach, and confess that our righteousness before God consists in this, that God forgives us our sins by sheer grace, without any works, merit, or worthiness of our own, in the past, at present, or in the future, that he gives us and reckons to us the righteousness of Christ’s obedience and that, because of this righteousness, we are accepted by God into grace and regarded as righteous (FC Ep III 4).

18. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 20.

This is a gift that is eternally yours; you can be assured of it through Christ's resurrection. Johann Gerhard¹⁹ notes, "In the resurrection of Christ we were absolved from our sins so that they might no longer be able to condemn us before the judgment seat of God."²⁰ Romans 4:25 tells us that the explicit reason why we can look at Jesus' resurrection and be assured of our justification is that he was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

In summary, our sins have separated us from the Lord. Yet because God is a God of love and holiness, he forgives us, absorbing the high cost of sin by providing the payment in Christ Jesus and his cross. Because of Christ and his resurrection, we can be certain that this gift of forgiveness, which justifies us, also reconciles us completely to the Lord. Yet VF is not a gift that sits on a dusty shelf in our hearts. VF moves us into action every single day.

What Does Vertical Forgiveness Do to Us?

The VF we receive from the Lord gives us a new identity in Christ. Our new identity moves us to love by forgiving others. This is a natural outpouring of love from the Christian since the Christian's identity flows from VF. This new identity is marked with a wealth of humility and joy from which the Christian can freely forgive.

19. Johan Gerhard (1582–1637) was a seventeenth-century Lutheran theologian. He is highly regarded as one of the most prominent Lutheran theologians to follow in the footsteps of Martin Luther and Marthin Chemnitz following the Reformation.

20. Johann Gerhard, *On Good Works*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, Aaron Michael Jensen, and Joshua J. Hayes, trans. Richard J. Dinda, *Theological Commonplaces / Johann Gerhard 20* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2019), 189.

Vertical Forgiveness Gives a New Identity in Christ

VF has a profound impact on its recipients: it shapes and molds them into an entirely new creation, giving them a new identity, one that is divorced from the sinful nature that hates to forgive. “Because we are all redeemed by Him, we belong to Jesus.... If I focus on my identity as a child of God, my fear, love, and trust in Jesus will be revealed in the way I treat others.”²¹ Our identity has shifted from an unforgivable, sinful person to a dearly loved child of God, forgiven and precious in God’s sight. From this new identity flows a spiritual flood of love, both for God and neighbor.

Vertical Forgiveness Moves Us to Love by Forgiving

The VF that God shows to us in his Son is whole and complete—in Christ, we are fully justified and freely forgiven. This justification and forgiveness that make up our identity also molds our ability and desire to love. The Apology tells us that the Holy Spirit lives within us, giving us a new desire to love God and our neighbor:

Because faith truly brings the Holy Spirit and produces a new life in our hearts, it must also produce spiritual impulses in our hearts.... Therefore, after we have been justified and reborn by faith, we begin to fear and love God, to pray for and expect help from him, to thank and praise him, and to obey him in our afflictions. We also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses (Ap IV 125).

Consider this parable of Jesus, which he spoke to Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7:41–43, 47:

Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more? ⁴³ Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.... ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

21. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 22, 38.

The woman at Jesus' feet loved Jesus so much because she was forgiven so much, as her faith had abundantly made clear. Gerhard explains, "good works as fruits of the righteousness of the Spirit and of faith then follow those who are justified."²² Perhaps the antithesis to Gerhard's statement is Jesus' own words, "But whoever has forgiven little loves little." Like the woman at Jesus' feet, our heart rejoices in God's forgiveness for us and is moved to show love to the Lord. Yet our forgiven heart also manifests itself in love for each other. John wrote, "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). John further tells us that we have been brought to life and made to love, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death" (1 John 3:14). The Lord wants us to love. But how can we show love to one another? Perhaps the better question is this: How did God show love? "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Love and forgiveness are beautifully intertwined with each other on the cross. Without love, there can hardly be any forgiveness, indeed, no forgiveness at all.²³ Paul tells us in Colossians 3:13b, 14, "Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Love binds together our hearts of forgiveness. Love for each other, which extends forgiveness to others, is only possible through the costly gift of VF that reconciles us to the Lord.

22. Gerhard, *On Good Works*, 104.

23. Don Carson, "Just War | Don Carson," *The Gospel Coalition*, 24 August 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/just-war/>. Don Carson is emeritus professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and cofounder of The Gospel Coalition. He obtained his doctorate from University of Cambridge, his Master of Divinity from Central Baptist Seminary, and he Bachelor of Science from McGill University. He has edited and authored numerous books.

Vertical Forgiveness Humbles Our Hearts to Forgive

VF that shapes our identity and moves us to love also fills our hearts with deep humility. When your faith sees the immense cost of forgiveness on the cross and the new, restored, reconciled relationship freely gifted to you, it stands in awe. “It moves us to say, ‘Lord, you did not exact payment for my debts from me, but Jesus paid for them with his life. Now, what right do I have to exact payments for their debts to me?’”²⁴ It leads us to realize, “Just as Jesus did, I will treat others with love, kindness, forgiveness, even if they have wronged me.”²⁵ The forgiveness we receive humbles our hearts to keep us from becoming our own ‘little king’ that demands payment from other servants, and that fails to see our own massive debt that the Lord has forgiven.²⁶

Therefore, a proper understanding of VF will move us to forgive all those who have incurred a debt against us. Regarding the fifth petition of the Lord’s prayer, Luther remarks that when we ask the Lord to forgive us our sins, we “will find that we are no more righteous than anyone else, that in the presence of God all people must fall on their knees and be glad that we can come to forgiveness. Let none think that they will ever in this life reach the point where they do not need this forgiveness. In short, unless God constantly forgives, we are lost” (LC III 90–91). When we become lost, we become unforgiving. “To remain unforgiving means you remain unaware of your own need for forgiveness.”²⁷ When we are unaware of the VF we receive, we become like the Unmerciful Servant, demanding payment for sins committed against us, refusing to forgive because we refuse to realize God’s forgiveness extended to us. No wonder Jesus warns

24. Keller, *Forgive*, 175.

25. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 38.

26. Keller, *Forgive*, 17.

27. Keller, *Forgive*, 18.

against such unforgiveness: it's a reflection of a heart that has rejected God's VF in his Son Christ Jesus, a threat to our very soul! However, when we are aware of the VF we have received, it gives us a humility that makes forgiving others not only possible, but natural.

Vertical Forgiveness Fills Our Hearts with Joy to Forgive

VF that shapes our identity and moves us to love also fills our hearts with profound joy. In Christ, we have received an abundance of immeasurable grace. David writes in Ps 65, "Where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy" (Ps 65:8). But why should God's people "call forth songs of joy"? And how can Paul tell us to "rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil 4:4)? David answers such questions in the very same Psalm: call forth songs of joy and rejoice in the Lord always because, "When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions" (Ps 65:3). Luther understood that God's forgiveness is the greatest cause for joy in our hearts, too. He says, "But such a confident and joyful heart can never come except when one knows that his or her sins are forgiven" (LC III 92). Such a joy transcends transgressions that have been committed against us. If someone were to harm us and sin against us, they cannot rob us of this spiritual joy we have in Christ. We instead spread the wealth of joy we have, generously forgiving as we ourselves have been forgiven, forever drawing from the endless treasure of forgiveness the Lord has made us an heir to. "Christ is not just outside us, modeling forgiveness and urging us to forgive, Christ also lives within. From Christ, we receive the power and the willingness to forgive."²⁸ Christ's presence and forgiveness, Worthington notes, "is also intended

28. Mikkel Gabriel Christoffersen, "Forgiving Others: Pastoral Care of Forgiveness in Post-Secular Societies," *Religions* 14.9 (2023): 12, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091106>.

to activate gratitude to God, which translates into motivation to pass along mercy, grace, and forgiveness to other humans. Having experienced divine love shown through divine forgiveness, Christians are expected to show love to both in-group and out-group members.”²⁹ Because we are aware of the VF we have received, it gives us a wealth of infinite joy that makes forgiving others not only possible, but natural.

Yet extending such forgiveness is still hard to come by for the Christian heart. When we fail to love God and neighbor, when we make ourselves our own ‘little king,’ there is still forgiveness for these sins, too. “The only thing that will change a servant from acting like a king is getting a view of the amazing love of the King who became a servant.”³⁰ Perhaps C.S. Lewis has yet the best definition of forgiveness that summarizes well the VF we have received. “Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, without excuse, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it.”³¹ To extend such forgiveness to others is impossible. *Almost* impossible. “But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life, how can we do it? Only I think by remembering where we stand. To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”³²

29. Worthington, “‘Mere’ Christian Forgiveness,” 4.

30. Keller, *Forgive*, 17.

31. C.S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness,”
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ba1996cc3c16a0da704f61c/t/5f35a431f19ea847b33e78b1/1597350961141/On+Forgiveness+CS+Lewis.pdf>, 1.

32. Lewis, *On Forgiveness*, 2.

PART 2: WHAT DOES HORIZONTAL FORGIVENESS LOOK LIKE?

Horizontal Forgiveness as Described by Jesus

Jesus knows that this sinful world, filled with sinful people, needs guidance in HF. The Christian receives such guidance from Jesus' words in Luke 11:4, Mark 11:25, Luke 17:3–4, and Matt 18:15–20. These passages taken together emphasize the need for HF in the Christian's life.

Luke 11:4 and Mark 11:25 – Christians Forgive

Luke 11:4 says, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." Mark 11:25 says, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." These passages seem to suggest that Jesus qualifies the reception of VF by our ability to horizontally forgive others. But if that were the case, then God's VF would in fact be no forgiveness at all. Gerhard explains, "If our pardoning wrongs was the cause and merit of the forgiveness of sins, then forgiveness would no longer be forgiveness but a reward owed for our merit ... forgiveness is a work of love, love is a fruit of faith, and faith seeks and finds the forgiveness of sins in Christ."³³ Therefore, "It would be obtuse to understand these passages as if they were suggesting a person earns forgiveness by

33. Gerhard, *On Good Works*, 231.

forgiving others.”³⁴ Indeed, Jesus does not teach works-righteousness in these passages. Martin Luther clarifies that our HF doesn’t earn VF; instead, HF is a healthy sign of the VF we have humbly and joyfully received. Luther explains in his commentary on the fifth petition of the Lord’s prayer:

If you forgive, you have the comfort and assurance that you are forgiven in heaven—not on account of your forgiving (for he does it altogether freely, out of pure grace, because he has promised it, as the gospel teaches) ... but instead, because he has set this up for our strengthening and assurance as a sign along with the promise that matches this petition, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” Therefore, Christ repeats it immediately after the Lord’s Prayer, saying in Matthew 6:14, “if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.... Therefore, this sign is attached to the petition so that when we pray we may recall the promise and think, “Dear Father, I come to you and pray that you will forgive me for this reason: not because I can make satisfaction or deserve anything by my works, but because you have promised and have set this seal on it, making it as certain as if I had received an absolution pronounced by you yourself” (LC III 95–96).

Daniel Johnston notes that “my forgiving attitude actually highlights and clarifies my relationship with Jesus!”³⁵ Gerhard aptly summarizes, “Our forgiveness is not the cause but the mark of forgiveness before God.”³⁶ If Jesus isn’t saying that we earn VF because of our HF, what is he saying? What is the main point of these passages? The main point is simple; do what Christians humbly, joyfully, and naturally do: *forgive*. In Mark 11:25, the present imperative is emphatic: Jesus simply and always wants us to forgive, because this is simply what his forgiven children naturally do. Mark’s application to Christians today is that “if you realize or remember that you are holding something against someone, you must forgive them on the spot.”³⁷ Thus,

34. Carson, “Just War | Don Carson.”

35. Daniel J. Johnston, “I Need to Forgive my Impenitent Neighbor” (2013): 6.

36. Gerhard, *On Good Works*, 231.

37. Keller, *Forgive*, 104.

from Mark 11:25, we learn yet another crucial aspect of HF. Forgiving is not forgetting; it is an act of the will.

Forgiveness is a decision, an act of the will. It is not passive, waiting for time to pass so that we forget. Remembering no more is a commitment not to dwell on the offense.... Forgiveness is not dependent on the sinner's actions. There is nothing you can do to earn God's forgiveness. Imagine if God were to say to you, "I'll forgive you, but only when you jump through all these hoops and prove that you're worthy." Impossible! We can never do enough good to pay for our sin. Accordingly, when we forgive others as God forgives, we forgive without conditions, without requirements, without demands. Remember, it is an undeserved, unearnable, free gift.³⁸

Finally, Luke 11:4 says that we forgive "everyone" who sins against us. Johnston summarizes, "Our Savior here does not indicate that we are to withhold personal forgiveness from anybody.... Rather Jesus tells us to willingly forgive, following the pattern of his own willing forgiveness for us!"³⁹ There is no need to wait to forgive for a specific reason. There is no need to forgive only certain people and only when certain conditions are met. That's not forgiveness. There is only a need to forgive quickly and promptly.

Do Luke 11:4 and Mark 11:25 Contradict Luke 17:3–4?

Luke 17:3–4 reads, "So watch yourselves. If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. 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." Luke 17:3–4 tells us we should rebuke our brother or sister and then, *if* they repent, forgive them. Yet Mark 11:25 tells us that we should forgive others immediately, and Luke 11:4 says we should forgive everyone! So then, does Luke 17:3–4 contradict Mark 11:25 and Luke 11:4? No.

38. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 23

39. Johnston, "I Need to Forgive my Impenitent Neighbor," 4.

To understand why these verses do not contradict each other, one must first understand Luke 17:3–4. Jesus lays two responsibilities on the Christian: to rebuke sin and to forgive when there is repentance for the sin. “The responsibilities to confront and to forgive are equally laid on us.”⁴⁰ Yet, “Luke’s primary interest does not lie in rebuke itself, but in the repentance and forgiveness such a rebuke would hopefully lead to.”⁴¹ The point being, just as the Lord’s VF reconciles us to himself, so our HF should strive to reconcile with others. In Luke 17:3–4, Jesus tells us that such reconciliation can come about by rebuking sin and celebrating repentance with the announcement and joy of extending HF to the sinner. Therefore, taken together, Mark 11:25 and Luke 17:3–4 reveal that forgiveness can have *two meanings that overlap*. “Sometimes the forgiveness of which the NT speaks presupposes repentance on the part of the offender and sometimes not.”⁴² In Mark 11:25, such a presupposition of repentance is not in view; therefore, “‘forgive them’ means inwardly being willing to not avenge oneself,”⁴³ just as God didn’t rightfully punish our sins. We might refer to this forgiveness as “attitudinal forgiveness,” as Keller does.⁴⁴ In Luke 17:3–4, such a presupposition of repentance *is* in view. Therefore, “‘Forgive them’ means ‘reconcile to them’”⁴⁵ just as God has reconciled us to himself.⁴⁶ In either case, the victim of

40. Keller, *Forgive*, 104.

41. Yon-Gyong Kwon, “Forgiveness, Faith, and the Lordship of Jesus: A Contextual Reading of Luke 17:1-10,” *신약연구* 11.3 (2012): 627.

42. Carson, “Just War | Don Carson.”

43. Keller, *Forgive*, 106.

44. Keller, *Forgive*, 106.

45. Keller, *Forgive*, 106.

46. And just as Jesus wants us to do in Matt 5:23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

wrongdoing must inwardly/attitudinally forgive. Whether one repents or not makes no difference. Keller clarifies, “These are not two kinds of forgiveness, *but two aspects or stages of it*. One could say that the first must always happen, and the second may happen but is not always possible. Attitudinal forgiveness can occur without reconciliation, but reconciliation cannot happen unless attitudinal forgiveness has already occurred.”⁴⁷ Therefore, a distinction must be made between reconciliation and forgiveness, as Jesus makes in Mark 11:25 and Luke 17:3–4. Reconciliation is not always possible. Enright says, “When people forgive, they offer a positive stance toward one who is undeserving because of the offense. They need not join into a precious relationship (i.e., they need not reconcile, if the offender insists on maintaining their injurious stance).”⁴⁸ While reconciliation is not tantamount to forgiveness, HF does strive for reconciliation, as Jesus says in Luke 17:3–4. So, when Jesus tells us in Luke 17:3–4 to rebuke sin and forgive the sinner after repentance—to be reconciled to them—an inward, attitudinal forgiveness as described in Mark 11:25 has *already taken place* in the heart of the Christian. When a Christian rebukes sin and forgives the repentant sinner, he is simply announcing the HF that is already present in his heart. Jesus does not contradict himself in describing what HF looks like in Mark 11:25 and Luke 17:3–4; he simply is describing two aspects of HF.

47. Keller, *Forgive*, 107. Emphasis mine.

48. Robert D. Enright, “Counseling Within the Forgiveness Triad: On Forgiving, Receiving Forgiveness, and Self-Forgiveness,” *Counseling and Values* 40.2 (1996): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1002/J.2161-007X.1996.TB00844.X>.

Matthew 18:15–20 – How the Forgiving Christian Rebukes Sin in Love

In Luke 17:3–4, Jesus tells us that part of HF that strives for reconciliation involves rebuking sin.⁴⁹

Matthew 18:15–20 tells us what rebuking sin looks like,

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. ¹⁸ “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ “Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

These verses directly precede the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. The reason for this is that Matt 18 is a “growing crescendo of care that climaxes in the teaching regarding the unlimited forgiveness that Jesus’ disciples will extend to one another,”⁵⁰ highlighted by the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.

Matthew 18:15–20 is one piece in the larger context of Matthew 18 and must be read in light of that context ... the primary goal is never to ‘convict’ the sinner or even to establish the ‘rights’ of the brother against whom the sin occurred. The brother who has sinned is a brother in need of repentance, restoration, and reconciliation. The one against whom he has sinned must go out to him and try to gain him back as a brother.⁵¹

49. Leviticus 19:17 also says that failure to rebuke sin makes one accountable for that sin: “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.”

50. Jeffrey A Gibbs and Jeffrey J Kloha, “‘Following’ Matthew 18: Interpreting Matthew 18:15-20 in Its Context,” *Concordia Journal* 29.1 (2003): 11.

51. The following is Gibbs’ summary of the structure of Matthew 18: “We may summarize the overall structure of 18:1-35 as follows. In response to the disciples’ misinformed question, Jesus reveals that the “greatest” in the reign of heaven are really the neediest, those who require the most care from other disciples. So crucial is this truth that those who receive and minister to such “little ones” should realize that they are really caring for Jesus Himself (18:1-5). Not only are the disciples to receive such needy fellow-disciples, they must at all costs avoid causing them to stumble into sin and unbelief (18:5-10). Yes, Jesus teaches, when one such needy fellow-disciple seems to be like a sheep wandering away from the safety of the flock, other disciples must seek after him and bring him back (18:12- 14). Even if it is a case of being personally and clearly sinned against, the disciple must go out to

Matthew 18:15–20 sheds further light on what HF looks like. After we inwardly forgive, Jesus says that HF is not motivated solely to “point out their fault” just to win an argument, but instead to win the brother or sister back—it is motivated by love. Without love from VF, we would be moved “not to persuade and reclaim them, but just to tell them off and so to pay them back. They will sense the ill will immediately and will become defensive and angry, and will not admit where they have been wrong. And so they will be far less likely to ever repent in response to your confrontation.”⁵² HF lovingly rebukes from a heart filled with VF to win them back.

Therefore, according to Matt 18:15–20, HF is accomplished by approaching the individual one-on-one, lovingly protecting their reputation as much as possible. This is done by approaching the individual multiple times, not just once. “Jesus uses the refrain ‘if he ... then you are to ...’ five times in this text. We should not abandon the person who has not repented, but consistently engage them with the hope that they will not reject the gift of forgiveness.”⁵³ If conversations break down, stall, or become impossible due to hostility, Jesus then instructs us to involve the community. Keller notes that

The one or two others have a dual function. On the one hand, they can help you refine your understanding of what happened and speak more persuasively. They can call you out if you are speaking excessively or unhelpfully. On the other hand, they can confirm to the perpetrator that he or she is truly in the wrong and that repentance is required. Two or three is more persuasive than one. To involve one or two others is in some ways a strategy for holding both parties accountable.⁵⁴

the brother or sister who sinned and seek to gain him or her (18:15-20). And how broad shall this forgiveness be when brother sins against brother? As broad as the forgiveness that the disciples have received from God, their heavenly Father (18:21-35). Thus it shall be in the community of those who have come under the blessings of the reign of heaven, now present in Jesus, who has come to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).” Gibbs and Kloha, “‘Following’ Matthew 18,” 18.

52. Keller, *Forgive*, 187.

53. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 112.

54. Keller, *Forgive*, 188.

Finally, if still no progress has been made in lovingly trying to win them back, Jesus then tells us to take the issue to the Church, as it has now grown in scale and threat to the brother's or sister's soul.

Taking the matter to the Church leads us to ponder the Ministry of the Keys. Motivated by love, one can announce to a sinner who has not repented of their sin that, although you forgive them personally and inwardly, and although the Lord has objectively forgiven their sin on the cross, they are in grave danger of not receiving the subjective benefits from our forgiveness and the Lord's forgiveness. Kober and Rockenbach summarize,

The granting of forgiveness is not dependent on repentance, but the receiving of forgiveness is dependent on repentance and faith. If they don't repent, you forgive them in the name of Christ and pray that they will repent. If they refuse to repent, they will not receive [the benefits of] forgiveness; but if they repent, they will receive the gift of forgiveness earned by Jesus Christ.⁵⁵

Motivated by love, we lovingly warn them that they are retaining their sin and jeopardizing the VF that the Lord longs to lavish on them.⁵⁶

The Need for Horizontal Forgiveness

While Jesus explains to us what Horizontal Forgiveness looks like for the Christian, he also explains what HF doesn't look like for the Christian. In doing so, he demonstrates why HF is crucial for the Christian life. In the last half of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, Jesus tells us what HF should never look like.

55. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 113.

56. The Ministry of the Keys and the role of confession as it relates to forgiveness is not within the main scope of this paper. However, for a more exhaustive understanding of the Ministry of the Keys and the role of confession in the life of a Christian as it pertains to VF, see Luther's Large Catechism Part V: A Brief Exhortation to Confession.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matt 18:28–35).

What happened to this forgiven servant in Jesus’ parable? It is outrageous that he doesn’t likewise forgive another servant for the minuscule debt that was owed to him! Gerhard notes that “whoever does not forgive his neighbor bears witness by that very act that either he never had true faith or that he has lost it again.”⁵⁷ Jesus says so himself, “All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (John 13:35). Clearly, by all outward indications, the Unmerciful Servant had no awareness whatsoever regarding the massive debt that was forgiven to him from the King, evidenced by his lack of desire and his inability to forgive his fellow servant. If he had understood the King’s forgiveness to him (VF), he would have forgiven his fellow servant in a similar manner (HF). The Formula of Concord says, “Once people are justified, the Holy Spirit also renews and sanctifies them. From this renewal and sanctification the fruits of good works follow” (SD III 41). Paul likewise writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Rom 12:1). Without such a view of God’s mercy, our very souls are in grave danger, as Jesus makes clear in his parable. Therefore,

57. Gerhard, *On Good Works*, 231.

HF must be rooted in the VF that the Lord has shown to his children. Without a view of God's mercy, there is no motivation for HF. In such a sad case, the individual who fails to forgive will indeed not be forgiven their sins—they have no view of the VF shown to them, just like the Unmerciful Servant.⁵⁸

Jesus also knows that Christians need to exercise HF for their own sake, too. Recall Luke 17:3–4. Jesus says, “*So watch yourselves...*” before he tells us to forgive in the hopes of reconciliation with those who have wronged us. Typically, when someone wrongs us, our focus is directly on the one who wronged us. Jesus’ imperative to “watch ourselves” seems counterintuitive to our natural reaction to wrongdoing. However, Jesus is expressing a beautiful truth about HF. Although HF is primarily concerned with showing love to others based on the VF we have received from Jesus, HF also blesses the one who extends forgiveness. When Christians horizontally forgive, they avoid the “bitter root” that the writer to the Hebrews warns against. “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (Heb 12:15). When we have been wronged, it is all too easy for us to water the “bitter root” in our hearts, to foster a heart of unforgiveness that leads to the anger that Jesus warns against in Matt 5:21,22. Our sinful flesh loves to water these hidden roots of bitterness, clinging to anger and shunning HF, forgetting, leaving behind, perhaps rejecting the VF we have received from the Lord entirely. “Watch yourselves,” Jesus says. “See to it,” the writer of the Hebrews says, to not let the bitter root choke out our New Man’s desire to forgive others. One way to “watch ourselves” and to “see to it” is to forgive, lest the bitter root of unforgiveness you sinfully cultivate in your heart make you into an unbelieving and Unmerciful Servant.

58. Gerhard, *On Good Works*, 231.

PART 3: HOW DOES THE SECULAR WORLD VIEW BIBLICAL FORGIVENESS?

Scripture's understanding and demonstration of forgiveness does not sit well with the secular world. Chief among the objections to biblical forgiveness is the perception that it lacks, throws away, or even destroys justice. Another common objection to biblical forgiveness is that the world often believes forgiveness shows disrespect to oneself and even to the perpetrator. Finally, a third common objection to biblical forgiveness is that Christian forgiveness is "radical." From these objections arise three models of forgiveness that frame the world's understanding of forgiveness: the Non-Conditional Forgiveness Model, the Transactional Forgiveness Model, and the No-Forgiveness Model. Each of one these models is not compatible with biblical HF.

Objection One: Forgiveness and Justice Are Mutually Exclusive

Perhaps the most significant issue that the world has with forgiveness is the perception that forgiveness and justice are pitted against each other. Forgiving someone seemingly relinquishes the right to pursue justice. Fiala says, "Justice and forgiveness each represent important values in human life. But these values obviously conflict. It seems that it would be unjust to the victims to leave the perpetrators unpunished."⁵⁹ Therefore, when one is wronged, a tragic choice must be made between the distribution of forgiveness or the pursuit of justice. "For tragic conflicts, there

59. Fiala, "Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice," 498.

is no easy resolution. In fact, to choose between justice and forgiveness is to sacrifice one substantial good for another.”⁶⁰ For the world, there is no link between justice and forgiveness, but instead, there is a great divide. You cannot have both at the same time. Boon adds, “Refusing to forgive and reconcile upholds a moral response to injustice.”⁶¹ Therefore, the secular world believes that forgiveness and justice are mutually exclusive.

The question for the world then becomes a matter of identifying when to forgive and when to pursue justice. Fiala says that when our self-worth is questioned, “there are good reasons to pursue justice with a view to righting past wrongs. Respect, either for oneself or for others, demands that wrongs be righted ... justice keeps us true to the past.”⁶² Yet there is a place for forgiveness, too. “But other times, there are good reasons to direct our attention to the future with a view toward healing and rebuilding. Forgiveness can allow us to escape a cycle of vengeance and revenge ... it allows for the possibility of beginning again, creating something new, and moving forward into a future pregnant with possibility.”⁶³ In all of this, “the key is to recognize the importance of each approach and keep them in creative tension with each other.”⁶⁴ For the world, this “creative tension” is found nowhere in the God of the Bible: “The difficulty of religious approaches to the question [of forgiveness] is that we are left with apparently

60. Fiala, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice,” 498.

61. Susan D. Boon, et al., “Reconsidering Forgiveness and Unforgiveness: A Call for a More Nuanced Understanding of Unforgiveness,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* (2025): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/SPC3.70047>. Susan Boon is a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary. She has a PhD in Psychology from the University of Waterloo.

62. Fiala, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice,” 498.

63. Fiala, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice,” 498.

64. Fiala, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice,” 500.

paradoxical beliefs and antithetical demands about how God wants us to combine justice and forgiveness.”⁶⁵

Objection Two: Forgiveness Destroys Your Self-Worth

The world perceives biblical HF as dangerous because it threatens your self-worth. In Brookes’ view, each human being has worth: “We are moral equals insofar as we have the same inherent worth or intrinsic value as human beings.”⁶⁶ Respect shown to others and to the self are ways to uphold this universal basic value of human life. “When we show respect for someone, we are acknowledging, honoring, or upholding their moral equality as a fellow human being. Likewise, when we speak of ‘self-respect,’ ‘self-worth,’ or ‘dignity’ in this context, we are referring to the way in which we recognize and uphold our own moral equality.”⁶⁷ But when you have been wronged, your value as a human being is called into question. When this occurs, Brookes suggests that there are two responses you could have. One response is to go on the “offensive,” and the other is to go on the “defensive.”

We can go on the ‘offensive.’ This strategy can manifest itself in feelings of hatred, vindictiveness, vengefulness, and in acts of (or at least plans for) revenge.... When we respond in hatred toward the person responsible, we are not merely re-asserting our own moral equality. Instead, we are denying the equality of the person responsible. There is an alternative, which we might call a ‘defensive’ response. This involves thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that serve as a buttress against the messages of contempt. The chief defensive emotion is resentment, otherwise known as ‘indignation.’... Unlike

65. Fiala, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice,” 501.

66. Derek R. Brookes, “Moral Grounds for Forgiveness,” *IJAP* (2021): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.5840/IJAP2021129158>.

67. Brookes, “Moral Grounds for Forgiveness,” 2.

hatred, it does not affirm my humanity by denigrating yours. Instead, it places a ‘protective shield’ around my own self-respect.⁶⁸

Within Brookes’ framework, we can see the Unmerciful Servant follow the “offensive” approach, while the “bitter root” described in Hebrews is found in the “defensive” response.

Brookes warns against forgiveness that is granted without an apology or recompense, because it throws away all semblance of self-respect by not taking either the “offensive” or the “defensive” stance to protect ourselves.

Suppose that we have yet to hear a sincere apology from the person who has wronged us, and so we have not yet experienced forgiveness. Nevertheless, we go ahead and offer them ‘forgiveness.’ What would this convey to the person responsible? It would surely communicate to them that we do not care about their ongoing contempt for us.... If we were to offer forgiveness in the absence of a sincere apology, this would reflect a disregard for our own inherent worth. It would demonstrate a lack of self-respect.⁶⁹

Additionally, Brookes contends that forgiveness also destroys the self-worth of the perpetrator.

He argues: “Suppose I put myself in the shoes of the person responsible for causing me harm. If I were them, I would want the opportunity to initiate the work of moral repair as a matter of my own dignity and self-respect. I would not want to be pre-empted by an offer of forgiveness before I had undertaken the necessary moral changes within myself.”⁷⁰ For the world, biblical HF not only disrespects the self but also the perpetrator, damaging the self-worth of both.

Another perceived danger with biblical HF is that it is often equated with forgetfulness. Therefore, “Forgiveness may contribute to the perpetuation of cycles of relational

68. Brookes, “Moral Grounds for Forgiveness,” 6.

69. Brookes, “Moral Grounds for Forgiveness,” 7.

70. Brookes, “Moral Grounds for Forgiveness,” 7.

violence”⁷¹ between individuals. For example, “women who forgive their abusive partners are more likely to return to the relationship.”⁷² Such dangerous forgiveness is often shown because “victims minimize or even deny the harm they have suffered” by forgiving.⁷³ Forgiveness can also be weaponized against victims. Oprean says, “Making forgiveness a demand can itself be a form of violence.”⁷⁴ Forgiveness should therefore be reconsidered. “Researchers studying interpersonal forgiveness should critically examine whose interest forgiveness serves and the contexts in which it might be inappropriate to encourage people to forgive.”⁷⁵

The world also thinks that forgiveness damages your status in our newly emerged shame-and-honor culture. Keller argues that, although we no longer live in a shame-and-honor culture of the past, where offenses were considered an affront to honor and brought shame to an individual, a new shame-and-honor culture has emerged, one that assigns value to victimhood and to those who defend victims.

People today are encouraged to respond with outrage to even the slightest offense, as was true in the older societies. However, the difference today is this: Modern therapy sees individuals as being oppressed and controlled by society’s expectations, roles, and structures. Greater honor and moral virtue are assigned to people the more they have been victimized and subjugated by society or others in power. The further down the existing social ladder one is, the greater honor is possible. Ironically, then, we have developed “a shame and honor culture of victimhood.”⁷⁶

71. Susan D. Boon, et al., “Reconsidering Forgiveness and Unforgiveness: A Call for a More Nuanced Understanding of Unforgiveness,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* (2025): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/SPC3.70047>.

72. For example, “women who forgive their abusive partners are more likely to return to the relationship.”

73. Boon, et al., “Reconsidering Forgiveness and Unforgiveness,” 3.

74. Daniel G. Oprean, “Biblical Models for the Practice of Forgiveness in Public Life,” *JHSS* XI.No. 1 (2020): 13.

75. Boon, et al., “Reconsidering Forgiveness and Unforgiveness,” 4.

76. Keller, *Forgive*, 70.

Therefore, forgiveness is not only at the expense of self-worth, but also at the expense of social currency and clout: to forgive is to relinquish your currency of victimhood. Instead, a visceral reaction against wrongdoing committed against you or someone else upholds these new cultural values of victimhood. In many ways, such a reaction is expected and praised, almost—ironically—religiously. To forgive is then viewed as a greater sin than the sin committed, and anyone who speaks against the cultural norm is “a heretic and must not be looked at, let alone engaged.”⁷⁷ This is often referred to as “cancel culture.” Alan Jacobs writes,

When a society rejects the Christian account of who we are, it doesn’t become less moralistic but far more so, because it retains an inchoate sense of justice but has no means of offering and receiving forgiveness. The great moral crisis of our time is not, as many of my fellow Christians believe, sexual licentiousness, but rather vindictiveness. Social media serve as crack for moralists: there’s no high like the high you get from punishing malefactors. But like every addiction, this one suffers from the inexorable law of diminishing returns. The mania for punishment will therefore get worse before it gets better.⁷⁸

In summary, the world rejects biblical HF because it appears to be harmful to oneself and even to the perpetrator by diminishing inherent self-worth and robbing yourself of the valuable currency of victimhood in the new shame-and-honor culture that has developed.

Objection Three: Biblical Horizontal Forgiveness is “Radical Forgiveness”

Biblical HF rooted in VF is perceived as “radical” to the world. Fiala explains this radical forgiveness with an example. When an Amish community was viciously attacked by a gunman, resulting in multiple fatalities, they “gathered together around the value of forgiveness ... even

77. Andrew Sullivan, “Is Intersectionality a Religion?,” *Intelligencer*, 10 March 2017, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/is-intersectionality-a-religion.html>.

78. Alan Jacobs, “Vengeance – The Homebound Symphony,” n.d., <https://blog.ayjay.org/vengeance/>.

attending a memorial for the gunman. The most extraordinary aspect was that it was not possible for the dead gunman to make amends or repent. This is ‘radical forgiveness.’”⁷⁹ In other words, biblical HF, in which forgiveness is distributed whether one repents or not, whether amends are made or not, or whether justice can be/is pursued or not, is “radical.” Regarding this biblical, horizontal, “radical” forgiveness, Fiala says, “Radical forgiveness goes beyond any economic exchange that can be comprehended in terms of rational self-interest.”⁸⁰ Fiala understands the cost of HF, but he doesn’t understand the cost of VF that motivates Christians to freely undertake the cost of biblical HF. “It is this religious basis that makes radical forgiveness difficult for humanists to comprehend.”⁸¹ In other words, because the world does not understand, perceive, or believe in VF, biblical HF is radical to the highest degree. It simply does not make sense to the secular world.

Secular Models of Forgiveness Are Not Compatible with Biblical Horizontal Forgiveness

In light of these three main objections, three general models of forgiveness are employed in the secular world. These three models are the Non-Conditional Forgiveness model, the Transactional Forgiveness model, and the No-Forgiveness model. However, each of these models is not compatible with biblical HF.

79. Andrew Fiala, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice,” *HeyJ LIII* (2012): ?, <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1468-2265.2010.00637.X>.

80. Fiala, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice,” 495.

81. Fiala, “Radical Forgiveness and Human Justice,” 495.

The Non-Conditional Forgiveness Model

The Non-Conditional Forgiveness model stems from Objection One to biblical HF: forgiveness and justice are mutually exclusive. The Non-Conditional Forgiveness model pressures victims to forgive without pursuing justice. This model of forgiveness “focuses strictly on inner emotional healing for the victim, on ‘getting past it and moving on,’ but then ends up letting the perpetrator off the hook.”⁸² Sadly, the Christian church has often fallen victim to this malicious trap of forgiveness due to its lack of correctly understanding VF, too. Many churches pressure victims to forgive because it’s the “right thing to do,” while completely ignoring justice and the consequences of sin. “The abused who did not immediately ‘forgive and forget’ were said to be vindictive. The call to forgive was often the way churches or Christian institutions guarded their public image and reputations rather than redressing wrongs.... Christianity, it seems, is concerned with individual forgiveness, not social justice.”⁸³ The Non-Conditional Forgiveness Model pushes the individual to forgive and forget. However, that’s not forgiveness. Christians are not to simply forgive and forget, primarily because forgiveness is not equivalent to forgetting, nor is it its purpose. Kober and Rockenbach explain,

“Forgive and forget” implies that a sin can only be forgiven if we can forget. If someone took a chainsaw and cut your arm off because she was angry with you, you would not walk around ignoring the fact that you only have one arm. When people asked you about how you lost your arm, you wouldn’t respond, “Oh, I kind of forgot I was missing an arm. I don’t really remember how I lost it.... Attempting to forget so that you can forgive is an ungodly approach to forgiving that keeps us in the prison of unforgiveness. We do not forgive to forget. Neither do we wait to forgive until we forget. We forgive others because God in Christ forgives us. Connecting forgiveness with forgetting takes our focus off Jesus and what He has done and promises for us.”⁸⁴

82. Keller, *Forgive*, 33.

83. Keller, *Forgive*, 24.

84. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 188–189.

Some Christians will cite Jeremiah 31:34, where the Lord says, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” to pressure Christians to forgive by simply forgetting the harm done to them. However, when God says he “will remember their sins no more,” he’s simply saying he will not treat us according to what our sins deserve, not that he literally wipes away from his memory our sin.⁸⁵ Instead, he wipes away our sin with Christ’s blood, and although we are stained with sin, he clothes us with Christ’s robes of righteousness.

Lastly, there is a perception that forgiveness and justice are mutually exclusive. This is simply not the case. Infinite forgiveness and absolute justice collide in perfect harmony at Jesus’ cross. The Lord both forgives and pursues justice immediately and at once on the cross. Likewise, our HF should also reflect forgiveness and the pursuit of justice, against what the Non-Conditional Forgiveness model advocates for. This crucial understanding of forgiveness and justice combined will be further discussed later in this paper. For these reasons, the Non-Conditional Model of forgiveness is not forgiveness, and therefore it is not compatible with biblical HF.

The Transactional Forgiveness Model

The Transactional Forgiveness model stems from Objection Two (HF destroys your self-worth) and Objection Three (HF is “Radical” Forgiveness) to biblical HF. The world thinks that forgiveness is far too disrespectful and harmful to the self and far too radical. Therefore, forgiveness “should happen only when the person responsible disavows their message of

85. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 189.

contempt. Then the moral breach has been repaired.⁸⁶” This model is the opposite of the Non-Conditional Model of Forgiveness. This model makes forgiveness something that is earned transactionally, often by pursuing some form of justice. “Forgiveness is distributed only when there is enough weeping, imploring, and apologizing—typically involving considerable self-abasement. In the end ... it is a gauntlet through which the perpetrator is forced to run until he or she is wounded sufficiently.”⁸⁷ That’s not forgiveness. That’s revenge-seeking, driven not by love, but vengeance. The Christian, on the other hand, forgives whether there is repentance on the part of the perpetrator or not, motivated by love, not vengeance. Therefore, this model is not forgiveness, and therefore not compatible with biblical HF.

The No Forgiveness Model

This model of forgiveness stems from all three objections. Because biblical HF is seemingly untenable, and yet because the previous two models of forgiveness have their own shortcomings as well, the world is often tempted to “take their ball and go home,” leaving forgiveness behind entirely. Keller notes that the appeal to not forgive at all “singles out women and minorities, telling them they should not forgive since they have historically been given so little advantage or opportunity. Other opponents argue that forgiveness is inherently opposed to the pursuit of justice and accountability for perpetrators.” It is no wonder such thoughts and feelings about not forgiving are common: When the Non-Conditional Forgiveness Model and the Transactional Forgiveness Model—models in which there is no true forgiveness—are forced upon others, why

86. Boon, et al., “Reconsidering Forgiveness and Unforgiveness,” 5.

87. Keller, *Forgive*, 25.

not cut to the chase and simply withhold forgiveness entirely? Likewise, people will often shrug their shoulders with a pithy appeal that “only God can forgive,” justifying their position of unforgiveness by ignoring the clear teaching of Scripture regarding the Christian’s motivation to forgive.

Boon contends that it is neither natural, beneficial, nor wise to forgive. He suggests that unforgiveness is a perfectly viable option when one has been wronged: “The belief that unforgiveness may be detrimental and a barrier to healing neglects the protective function it may sometimes serve ... negative emotions may be leveraged to reveal injustice or advocate for positive change, enabling victims to maintain autonomy and moral agency.”⁸⁸ For the world, forgiveness is costly, and the only well to draw from when you extend it is from the well of your inherent self-worth instead of the well of VF the Lord has shown to you. For the world, it is much cheaper to simply withhold forgiveness when you lack VF. For these reasons, unforgiveness becomes a perfectly viable and even preferred option compared to forgiveness. Therefore, with no forgiveness to worry about, “forgiveness is abandoned completely in favor of the pursuit of justice for the victim.”⁸⁹ Suffice it to say, that’s not forgiveness. Since the No Forgiveness Model is not forgiveness, it is clearly not compatible with biblical HF.

88. Boon, et al., “Reconsidering Forgiveness and Unforgiveness,” 5.

89. Keller, *Forgive*, 28.

PART 4: WHY DO SECULAR MODELS OF FORGIVENESS FAIL?

The secular models of forgiveness, driven from the objections to biblical HF, fail because they lack the necessary element of VF. They also fail because these models of forgiveness are merely coping mechanisms, not genuine forgiveness. These coping methods actually lead to a “loop of unforgiveness,” though the world may not realize it, which causes them harm. Finally, these secular models of forgiveness make the pursuit of peace into an idol that can never be found without VF.

An Empty Well – No Vertical Forgiveness

For the world, biblical HF is radical. It is distributed at the expense of self-worth and self-respect. It is not compatible with justice. Such would be the case if not for the VF the Lord gives to his people and which is received in Christ. This marks the primary difference between secular forgiveness and biblical HF forgiveness: Christians have an infinite well to draw from that gives them the humility and joy to forgive, while the world has an empty well of VF to draw from. This well of VF, previously discussed, is more than a surface-level divine command to blindly forgive for forgiveness’s sake. It is rather a response of love to love given. The Sons of Korah write in Ps 87:7b, “all my fountains are in you,”—the Lord’s well of VF bubbles up in our hearts, it makes us into a fountain that gladly pours out generous and endless portions of biblical HF. When biblical HF pours out of our hearts of faith, it is manifested love that will forgive sins,

repented for or not, whether reconciliation is possible/wise or not, just as Christ, the manifestation of love, has forgiven us. Because the world lacks this crucial infinite well of VF to draw from and that transforms them into a fountain of love, there is rarely humility attached to forgiveness, and hardly, if ever, any degree of joy in forgiving. Without VF, the world must either twist forgiveness into self-serving vehicles or abandon forgiveness entirely, whether in the name of “justice” or in the pursuit of upholding their own self-worth. Therefore, secular forgiveness fails because it has no VF to draw from.

Secular Forgiveness is Coping that Leads to a Loop of Unforgiveness

Without VF, when the secular world is wronged, it must deal with the sin committed against them through the explained models above. However, these models are not forgiveness at all. Rather, they are simply coping mechanisms. Coping is defined as “healthy or unhealthy strategies to address stressful situations.”⁹⁰ Kober continues to explain that

The various [secular] forgiveness processes tend to have one thing in common: they offer coping mechanisms that help clients create strategies that will help them cope. Coping mechanisms are not new to the psychological world; rebranding them as forgiveness, however, is a new approach. The rebranding of coping mechanisms as forgiveness satisfies the client’s desire to forgive, but it does not faithfully represent what God means by forgiveness.⁹¹

The issue with these coping models is that they assume the ability to forgive originates from within. Therefore, the burden is on the victim to find a way to make this forgiveness possible, or to live with the consequences if they choose not to forgive. But coping with a problem does not resolve or fix the problem; it simply manages and minimizes it, hoping for some amount of

90. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 22–23.

91. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 8.

relief. When forgiveness becomes a coping mechanism that looks within a person for strength and hope, it leads to a deadly loop of unforgiveness.

When caught in a loop of unforgiveness, the focus is primarily on me and how I am hurt or unjustly suffering. My attention is only on how I have been hurt by that person, fanning the flames of anger and malice. Even if I don't outwardly act on my feelings, my heart keeps the coals of unforgiveness burning hot. My thoughts relive the offense, feeding the anger. My words retell the offense to others, and I look for validation of my feelings. Some who care about me will reinforce my justification, not realizing that their "comfort" hurts me even more.⁹²

It should come as no surprise that our culture of victimhood encourages and catalyzes this loop of unforgiveness. Yet although the world may be able to cope with and minimize the consequences of unforgiveness, it cannot entirely escape them.

Unforgiveness may cause some pain for the offender, but its greatest harm is done to the one withholding forgiveness. Allowing unforgiveness to dwell in your heart subjects you to an unending cycle of anger, fear, and loneliness. It may begin with a single major offense by one person. But just like a whirling tornado destroys more property and picks up more rubbish, unforgiveness against one person sucks in more offenses by more people. It leads to more personal trauma in one's heart, and that individual is more susceptible to increasing pain in life.⁹³

Secular Models of Forgiveness may seem like they can offer hope, but in reality, they are coping mechanisms. These coping mechanisms lead to a loop of unforgiveness, and what the writer to the Hebrews calls the "bitter root" that makes one into an unbelieving and Unmerciful Servant. Said another way, the secular models fail because they simply cope with sin instead of forgiving it, which spirals them into a loop of harmful unforgiveness.

92. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 89.

93. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 88.

Secular Forgiveness Chases After the Idol of Peace

At the heart of the loop of unforgiveness is idolatry. The secular world idolizes peace. This peace is attained only when they can receive whatever they need from their preferred forgiveness model. Perhaps they need a “sense of finality” and a desire to “close this chapter” of their life. Perhaps they feel they need “justice to be served” by their own hands or by the long arm of the law. Perhaps they feel they need to make of their heart a stone, forever nursing a grudge that may find peace in anger, or, eventually, in forgetfulness. Either way, the desire to find peace becomes so idolatrous and idealized that it can never be found. No amount of soul-searching and no amount of justice distributed is ever able to fill the God-shaped hole in our heart. Instead, true peace that surpasses all understanding comes from Christ crucified. God does not cope with our sins. He forgives them. This is a radically different approach, and yet it offers far more than what any psychological method has to offer. “God did not cope with our sin; he forgave it through the suffering, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. This is good news for you!”⁹⁴ The good news of Jesus and the VF we receive gives us true and lasting peace. Secular models of forgiveness fail because they make peace into an idol, ignoring the true peace that comes from VF.

94. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 9.

PART 5: HOW DOES THE CROSS GUIDE AND SHAPE THE CHRISTIAN'S LIFE OF FORGIVENESS?

The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to “Fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Heb 12:2–3). Christians must fix their eyes on Christ, on his cross, and on his love for them. It is here at the cross that our Savior shapes the Christian's life of forgiveness. When Christians fix their eyes on Christ and his cross, the loop of unforgiveness is broken. Likewise, when Christians fix their eyes on Christ and his cross, they see that the cross answers the worldly objections to biblical forgiveness: justice and mercy are seamlessly combined rather than mutually exclusive, our self-worth is upheld and validated rather than destroyed, and forgiveness is not radical. It is miraculous.

The Cross Breaks the Loop of Unforgiveness

The loop of unforgiveness is familiar and relatable to Christians and non-Christians alike. The key to breaking this loop of unforgiveness is to focus on Christ and his cross. “The key to overcoming unforgiveness is to focus on what God has done for you through Christ. Remember that you have been cleansed from your past sins. Christ died for you. He rose again for you. He

ascended into heaven for you. He is coming again with power and glory for you.”⁹⁵ Yet, do not Christians still struggle to forgive? Indeed, Christians do struggle to forgive. Yet struggling to forgive is distinct from outright refusal to forgive. Christians will always struggle with sin, as Paul describes in Romans 7. Paul wrote, “So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me” (Rom 7:21–23). Yet as we struggle to resist sin in our lives, we are still forgiven. After Paul concludes that his struggle with sin should condemn him to hell, he exclaims, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24–25). Paul focuses on Christ who delivers him from his sin. Therefore, when struggling to forgive, focus on Christ and his cross—it reminds you that he forgives every sin you struggle with, even the sin of unforgiveness. At the same time, focusing on Christ and his cross also reminds us that he came to bear the punishment for all sin, including the sin of refusing to forgive. Such a refusal to forgive is essentially a refusal to accept forgiveness for the sin of unforgiveness! Should one not recognize their sin and their need for forgiveness of *every* sin, there is no forgiveness for that individual subjectively. John the Baptist makes this clear. The Pharisees and Sadducees in Matt 3:1–12 did not realize their need for baptism that forgives their sin, since they did not recognize that they had sins that needed to be forgiven. So, John lovingly warned them, “The ax is at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” Note, too, that the Unmerciful Servant did not *struggle* to forgive; he *refused* to forgive.

95. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 96.

To be clear, when you struggle with the loop of unforgiveness, Christ through his cross has forgiven that sin, too. He took all your anger, rage, wrath, bitterness, malice, hatred, and unforgiveness to the cross, and he forgave you so that you can live a life free from anger, wrath, bitterness, malice, hatred, and unforgiveness—a life free from the loop of unforgiveness. “In your struggle to forgive, he is there with you to forgive you again and again, to strengthen your faith, to enable you to do what you can never do on your own—forgive as God forgave you.”⁹⁶ Worthington adds that God’s forgiveness can “guide people toward repentance, confession, renewal (of spirit and psyche), and life within that body of believing, valuing, and practicing Christians.”⁹⁷ In view of God’s great mercy, repent and believe the gospel message of Christ crucified for the forgiveness of all your sins, even your sin of struggling with unforgiveness! In view of God’s great mercy, be free from the sinful prison of unforgiveness. “Acceptance or absorption of pain is at the heart of forgiveness. The offended person soaks up the pain, as a sponge does water, so that he or she does not transfer that pain back to the offender or others.”⁹⁸ Enright’s statement relates to Christ and to his children. The cross not only breaks the loop of unforgiveness but even transforms it into the beautiful loop of forgiveness.

Answering Objection One: Justice and Forgiveness are Combined at the Cross

While the world objects to forgiveness for many reasons, perhaps the primary reason it rejects forgiveness is because it believes that forgiveness relinquishes, destroys, or undermines justice.

96. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 251.

97. Worthington, “‘Mere’ Christian Forgiveness,” 3.

98. Enright, “Counseling Within the Forgiveness Triad,” 110.

The world cannot conceive of a way that forgiveness and justice are combined because the world does not understand the foolishness of the cross. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). In the foolishness of the cross that saves, we see God’s power: his love and holiness are combined to bring justice and forgiveness together and at once. Without the cross, forgiveness and justice *are* mutually exclusive. But justice and forgiveness are not mutually exclusive to God. Keller writes, “God is not just a God of love or a God of wrath. He is both, and if your concept of God can’t include both, it will distort your view of reality in general and of forgiveness in particular.”⁹⁹ So, how can God be both holy and loving? Answer: The two are not in tension with each other; they are united with each other. Nowhere is this more evident than the cross of Christ. It is here at the cross that infinite love and absolute justice meet.

So then, how does the cross shape the way Christians understand the relationship between justice and forgiveness? Answer: The two are not in tension with each other; they are united with each other. Just as the Lord values justice and lavishes love, Christians are to do the same.

Forgiveness that automatically throws away justice is not forgiveness. Note how the Denhollanders explain the relationship between justice and forgiveness,

Does the fact that God offers everyone eternal life mean that a victim should offer their abuser the opportunity to escape criminal or civil penalties? The short answer is a resounding, “No!” The character of God as revealed at the cross demonstrates that justice is good and right. When our response to victims denies the need for justice, or pits justice against forgiveness as though the two were incompatible or dichotomous, we fail to affirm the holiness of God. God himself does not deny the need for justice but couples his forgiveness with the satisfaction of the requirements of justice. But the converse of this is that, if one denies the crookedness, they have minimized the value and reality of that

⁹⁹ Keller, *Forgive*, 74.

which is straight. Christian responses which minimize the evil of abuse have in turn minimized the righteousness and holiness of God.¹⁰⁰

The Lord prescribes his people to pursue justice and forgiveness simultaneously in Lev 19:17–18: “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. ‘Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.’” We observe from Leviticus that three things are prohibited: we are not to seek revenge, we are not to pay back in kind, and we are to not bear a grudge. However, the Lord also tells us to do two things: rebuke sin and love your neighbor. A connection is thus made between rebuking sin and loving your neighbor. We know we can love our neighbor by forgiving them—not seeking revenge and not bearing a grudge—but the Lord tells us we also love them by rebuking their sin! “The command to not hold a grudge is a clear command to forgive. Yet we see a remarkably nuanced approach to forgiveness. We are to forgive and to confront wrongdoers about their sin. Justice and mercy are seamlessly combined.”¹⁰¹ The motivation to follow the Lord’s moral law given in Leviticus is also critical for the Christian to understand: “I am the Lord” is the motivation. Justice and love must be combined in our actions because they are combined in the Lord. The Lord himself makes this plain, when as he passes in front of Moses he says about himself, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (Exod 34:6–7). The cross is entirely consistent with who the Lord is: holy (justice) and loving (forgiveness).

100. Jacob Denhollander and Rachel Denhollander, “Justice: The Foundation for a Christian Approach to Abuse (ETS 2018),” *The 70th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2018): 8.

101. Keller, *Forgive*, 90.

Therefore, biblical HF *does not* destroy or undermine justice. Rather, it combines justice and forgiveness, as the Lord does and as he is.

The cross is essential to shaping the life of forgiveness for the Christian as they pursue and uphold justice as God would have them do. The cross guides the Christian's pursuit of justice and forgiveness, keeping us from falling into further sin and the dangerous loop of unforgiveness.

Should we fight for justice in our world, especially when vulnerable people are being oppressed or unfairly treated? Yes. But we need to be careful not to sin as we strive to bring about godly justice. When we sin to achieve our goals, no matter how godly we think they are, we have crossed a line and made ourselves God. May God grant us the wisdom to seek justice while still honoring His precepts.¹⁰²

Keller echoes Solomon, “Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely” (Prov 28:5). The Christian's pursuit of justice may or may not include civic justice. It may or may not include enforcing natural consequences for sin that are not already present. What this pursuit of justice looks like is ultimately guided by love, and there is no blanket formula for what it looks like.

However, what is always true and universal is that the Christian's forgiveness that pursues justice in love must start at the cross. Without seeking the Lord at the cross, justice and love are not combined, and they do become mutually exclusive, as the worldly objections and models of forgiveness illustrate. Without seeking the Lord at the cross, even for Christians, our pursuit of justice turns into revenge that is best served cold. Without the cross, our love is replaced with vengeance, and suddenly, forgiveness is entirely absent. Without seeking the Lord at the cross, our desire for peace through justice—instead of peace through Christ—becomes an idol, fueled by a loop of unforgiveness. Therefore, fix your eyes on Jesus and on his cross. It humbles us to not

102. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 209.

pursue justice from a heart of vengeance and/or self-righteousness, but from a heart of love. It gives us the joy to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Answering Objection Two: The Cross Upholds Your Self-Worth

The world often perceives forgiveness as something that diminishes your value in the sight of others. Forgiveness is frequently weaponized to silence an outcry of injustice at the victim's expense. However, it is at the cross that victims' self-worth is upheld and vindicated.

The Denhollanders note that “research has shown that one of the greatest needs for a survivor of abuse is to have their pain and experience validated—affirmed as real ... this sense of injustice and desire for vindication is upheld at the cross.”¹⁰³ It is at the foot of the cross that victims' cries are heard and echoed and that the Lord shows how much he hates sin. The cross also expresses consequences of sin, “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22b). Beautifully and simultaneously, victims see the Lord punish injustice while also relating to being a victim of injustice. It is there at the cross that the Lord of all creation cries in deep pain at the wrong that has been laid upon him: the sins of the whole world. It is there at the cross that victims are entirely heard and validated. The Denhollanders summarize, “As survivors of abuse are seeking to know if the evil they experienced is seen and believed, desiring to know that it matters, evangelicals can answer with a resounding ‘Yes!’—pointing to the cross, where God incarnate suffered, and saying, ‘This is how much it matters.’”¹⁰⁴

103. Denhollander and Denhollander, “Justice,” 7. From this point forward, only “Denhollander.”

104. Denhollander, “Justice,” 9.

The cross not only upholds victims' self-worth, but it also shows them an example of the opposite of abuse. The Denhollanders (of whom Rachel is a survivor of sexual abuse) share "the reason most abusers engage in sexual abuse is not simply about sexual release; they enjoy the imbalance in power and control they are able to demonstrate. It is critical that survivors are able to define, understand, and relearn these foundational concepts." The cross enables the Christian to re-learn the foundational concepts of what a loving relationship looks like. So important is this concept that I will quote the Denhollanders at length, since they explain so well:

The cross stands in stark opposition to the behavior of an abuser, providing the ultimate example of each of these concepts that abuse destroys. In the incarnation, at the cross, the Son sets aside his divine prerogatives—the strong becomes weak. God himself enters into human brokenness and accomplishes on behalf of mankind what humans neither deserve nor can accomplish by themselves. The one who is owed obedience as creator enters into creation to render that which is due him. At the cross, God acts for others—to overcome evil, uphold justice, free the enslaved, and restore creation. God himself perfectly identifies with the victim because he himself has willingly subjected himself to injustice. The cross is the ultimate repudiation of the idea that power is to be wielded for the benefit and pleasure of those who possess it. In the cross, victims have the framework and foundation for beginning to properly define and understand concepts which were twisted, subverted and manipulated during their abuse, and begin to heal the damage which was done.¹⁰⁵

This truth is also beautifully evident in Mez McConnell's article on Gen 22 and the comfort that Jesus' substitution for us on the cross brings to survivors of abuse. He writes,

The cross shows me that the trinitarian God that I worship stands in direct opposition to the traits of our abusers. God does not wield His power to harm others. Jesus gives it up to become man. Jesus does not use His lofty position of power and prestige to dominate us. Instead, He becomes weak, poor, and lowly. God does not sit far off, distant from our pain. Instead, in Jesus, He came near and experienced all of the world's brokenness, yet without sin. He accomplished for us on the cross what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. At the cross, God acts for the weak, the oppressed, and the abused. To overcome evil. To uphold justice. To free the enslaved. God Himself perfectly identifies

105. Denhollander, "Justice," 10.

with all the victims of vile manipulation and power plays. The cross is the greatest demonstration of that we have ever seen or ever will see.¹⁰⁶

Biblical HF does not destroy our self-worth. It is precisely because the Christian is so valuable in God's eyes that they are free to extend such valuable forgiveness to others. Forgiving someone does not and cannot diminish our value in God's eyes. Enright explains, "a forgiver who knows that the act was unjust can see his or her own status as equal to the other person, regardless of the other's stance toward the offended person."¹⁰⁷ The Lord has shown us how much he cares for us on his cross. Therefore, when the Christian fixes his eyes on Jesus and his cross, he is free to forgive without worrying about losing his self-worth, since his self-worth is founded and upheld at the cross.

Answering Objection 3: Forgiveness Isn't Radical, it's Miraculous

Peter writes in his second letter,

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ³ His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Pet 2:2–4).

Grace and peace belong to the Christian through faith in our Lord's "divine power." Such divine power equips us with "everything we need for a godly life." His divine power has made "very great and precious promises" ours. These precious promises enable us to participate in the Lord's

106. Mez McConnell, "The Rock-Solid Hope of Penal Substitutionary Atonement (Part 3) | 20schemes Equip," <https://20schemesequip.com/rock-solid-hope-penal-substitutionary-atonement/>.

107. Enright, "Counseling Within the Forgiveness Triad," 110.

own “divine nature,” which leads us to escape “the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.” Likewise, when John the Baptist implored his listeners to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, it was “a proclamation of a new possibility created by the redemptive will and work of God”¹⁰⁸—VF gives us a “new possibility”—the ability to show love that was not possible before and that is so different from the world. Therefore, when Christians express biblical HF, it is nothing less than miraculous, just as VF is nothing less than miraculous. It’s no wonder the world sees biblical HF as radical—it’s impossible and completely untenable for the sinful flesh to show biblical HF without drawing from the infinite well of VF from the cross.

The core issue for the world and its perception of biblical HF is that the world doesn’t know what true forgiveness is. While Scripture never lays out a dogmatic definition of forgiveness, it defines true forgiveness as the cross: justice and mercy combined, victims heard and supported, love shown to all. *That’s* forgiveness. Why wouldn’t such forgiveness be labeled as radical by the world’s standard when it defines forgiveness as: justice *or* mercy, victims *not* heard and *unsupported*, *excusing* sin to all? But the world sadly doesn’t understand: That’s *not* forgiveness.

Ironically, “radical” VF and HF both give what the world so desperately wants, yet it is precisely what it rejects. When VF is pondered and HF is expressed because of faith in Christ, the Christian’s faith lays hold of “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, [which] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:7). Such a peace that surpasses all understanding, perhaps to a radical degree, is found only in Christ Jesus at his cross.

108. Martin H Franzmann, “Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics,” *Concordia Journal* 36.2 (2010): 128.

CONCLUSION

“We should forgive our enemies... but not before they are hanged.” – Heinrich Heine

Ted Kober relates a story about a man named Gene. Gene grew up with his mother, who had him out of wedlock. Gene never knew his father, but he was familiar with the deep hatred he held in his heart against his father. It followed him all his life. His emotional well-being and his faith were ravaged and crippled by the loop of unforgiveness. “Anger burned inside him. Although he grew up in church, he became angry at God. How could a loving God allow him and his mother to live in such a condition? He stopped attending worship.”¹⁰⁹ After some time drifting away from God and church, a friend invited him back to church. Gene began going to church regularly again, grounding himself in God’s Word. Gene’s pastor even invited him to teach Sunday School. But it was when Gene taught the children about God’s loving forgiveness for them that he realized he was a hypocrite that Jesus warns against. “How could he teach about a forgiving Jesus when he himself couldn’t forgive his earthly father and even resented his heavenly Father? He decided to resign as a Sunday School teacher.”¹¹⁰ But Gene still had one last lesson to teach the Sunday School children: the Passion of the Christ. Gene was confronted with Jesus’ words on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Gene cried out loud, “I

109. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 87.

110. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 93.

can't forgive him! I don't want to forgive him! I hate him! God help me!"¹¹¹ But as Gene struggled through his sin of unforgiveness and as he pondered the cross and fixed his eyes on Jesus—the author and perfecter of his faith—he realized that Jesus was praying for Gene. “Father, forgive Gene, for he doesn't know what he is doing.”¹¹² He also realized that Jesus was praying for his father, too. “Father, forgive Gene's father, for he doesn't know what he is doing.” Gene realized that Christ had died and risen for Gene's sin of unforgiveness, and he had died and risen for his father's sin of abandoning his son in life. They both were forgiven. From Gene's realization of the VF he and his father had received from Christ, Gene extended biblical HF to his father. “Gene experienced a peace like he'd never had before. He forgave a man he'd never met but had hated for most of his life. His battle of unforgiveness was over.”¹¹³

Later in Gene's life, his mother told Gene that his father was dying from cancer. She shared with Gene his father's phone number. After Gene had realized that he had already forgiven his father in his heart, he dialed the phone, only to learn that his father had been transferred to a different hospital for treatment. Gene's father died before he was able to talk to him. Yet while Gene never got to speak with his father, “he learned that the man had married another woman and had three children.” Ted Kober then writes, “In 1989, my father died from cancer. And that's when I learned that I have an older brother named Gene.”

Of course, many emotions overwhelmed Ted at the news of having a long-lost brother that his father had never raised nor talked about. But then Ted realized that his extended family had

111. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 93.

112. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 93.

113. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 94.

known about Gene his whole life and yet had never told him. Ted admitted that he felt betrayed. “I became angry at my own relatives. I felt betrayed. How could they live as if this never happened? Gene and I attended the same high school (a few years apart). I shopped often at where he worked. Gene even thought about applying for a job with my dad’s company where I worked. We attended sister churches in the same town.”¹¹⁴ Ted also wrestled with guilt concerning Gene. Was Gene angry at Ted and his siblings? Did he harbor resentment and jealousy in his heart, knowing that Gene never had the same opportunities and experiences as Ted and his siblings because his father had chosen them over Gene? Ted and his siblings went to talk to Gene about these complex feelings and issues Gene may have had. “Gene explained that if he had met us years earlier, he would have hated us. But then he told us his story of how God healed him while he was teaching Sunday School. Gene remembered that he was forgiven, and that enabled him to forgive a father he never met. Gene held no resentment toward us.”¹¹⁵ *That’s* forgiveness. Gene fixed his eyes on the cross, and from God’s infinite well of VF, he humbly and joyfully loved his father and Ted’s family by forgiving. “That was a life-changing event for me. Gene reminded me how forgiven I am in Christ. I learned to forgive my relatives for what I considered decades of betrayal.”¹¹⁶ *That’s* forgiveness. Ted fixed his eyes on the cross, and from God’s infinite well of VF, he humbly and joyfully loved his family by forgiving them.

Still, Heinrich Heine’s quote has endured through the ages because it rings with truth for so many people today. Our world today tries to forgive, but hardly for the right reasons, and rarely with anything but selfish desires in their hearts, until finally whatever it calls forgiveness is no

114. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 94.

115. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 95.

116. Kober and Rockenbach, *Unforgivable?*, 95.

longer forgiveness at all. I imagine Gene and Ted together would take Heine's quote and make some edits: "I should forgive our enemies... because Jesus was hanged on a cross for me." On his cross, Christ forgave every enemy of the world, even the enemies that wrong us, and especially the enemy that lives within us, not because he was forced to and not because we offer him something in exchange, but rather, he did this "for the joy set before him" (Heb 12:2). This VF must always make up the core of the Christian's faith, just as it did Gene's and Ted's. Without the heart of VF beating in the Christian, faith falls into disarray and disrepair, and the once believing and merciful Christian will soon become an unbelieving and unmerciful Christian.

The Christian forgives because he has received free and full forgiveness from God. Jesus' teaching on biblical HF reveals how this forgiveness takes shape in the Christian life: a Christian always loves his neighbor by forgiving him in his heart, before, after, and whether there is repentance or not. The Christian's heart is full of love, and so therefore love is at the heart of his forgiveness. Yet such love may sometimes dictate that the Christian rebukes sin and withholds an announcement of forgiveness in the hopes of bringing them to repentance, while still maintaining an inward forgiveness in his heart.

However, the world perceives biblical forgiveness as untenable; it pits mercy and justice against each other, it thinks that it harms the individual who forgives, and is simply radical. Therefore, the world "forgives" within the framework of three main models: the Non-Conditional Model, the Transactional Forgiveness Model, and the No-Forgiveness Model. Each of these models fails to truly forgive anyone of anything. Additionally, the world's version of "forgiveness" fails to truly provide the benefits the world so desperately seeks because it launches the individual into the downward spiral of the loop of unforgiveness. Essentially, the

world fails in forgiveness because it lacks the true source of forgiveness: VF. Therefore, it lacks the treasure of love and the peace that comes from the gift of VF from the Lord.

The world's objections to biblical forgiveness are fully and completely met at the cross. The display of forgiveness at the cross shows that biblical forgiveness does not pit mercy and justice against each other, it does provide support and worth to the individual, and it is not radical—it is miraculous. As the Christian strives to forgive as he has been forgiven, he must be guided by the cross, even when he struggles to forgive. Therefore, the biblical concept of forgiveness gives what the world desires. Yet even so, it gives more than justice and mercy combined and more than self-worth and preservation: “radical,” miraculous forgiveness provides peace that surpasses all understanding.

I pray this paper will serve as a helpful guide to understanding why and how the Christian forgives instead of succumbing to the world's hollow forgiveness. In a world that is so desperate to prioritize the self, biblical forgiveness prioritizes the self by taking your eyes off yourself. My research is not comprehensive. There is a wealth of literature on the topic of forgiveness. Rather, my research strived to capture the essence and core of the issue. Forgiveness is always going to be contextual; it will always be laced with complexity and nuance that one single paper would never be able to cover exhaustively. However, providing a general framework is beneficial for pastors who counsel members through forgiveness and for parishioners who are confused about what forgiveness means and looks like in their life with others. I believe further avenues of research can and should be pursued in the area of Christian forgiveness. For example, the relationship between the Ministry of the Keys and the confession of sins in the life of the Christian—as it relates to our HF and the Lord's VF—is a very intriguing topic that was not within the scope of this paper. Another topic that should be further pursued is forgiveness's place

in America's new culture of shame-and-honor. Contemplating what civic justice and the consequences of sin look like as the Christian pursues justice in love for the perpetrator would be another area to pursue. Finally, the fascinating concept of self-forgiveness is another interesting topic that was not addressed in this paper.

APPENDIX

This appendix serves as a quick reference guide for pastors counseling their members through forgiveness or their struggle with unforgiveness. It is not exhaustive.

Should I forgive?

- Yes

Do I need to forgive?

- Yes.

Is it wise and healthy for me to forgive?

- Yes.

Is it possible for me to forgive?

- Yes.

How is it possible to forgive?

- The Vertical Forgiveness you have received from the Lord humbles your heart and gives it joy, transforming it from a cold, callous heart into a living and loving heart. One way your humbled and joyful heart shows love is by forgiving others.

Does loving-forgiveness revoke my right to pursue justice and consequences for sin?

- No.

Why not?

- God is both loving and holy. When God forgave the world on the cross, he pursued justice and mercy at once. Therefore, our forgiveness can and should pursue justice and mercy at once, too.

Does that mean I can forgive and pursue justice at once?

- Yes.

How can I extend such justice and mercy in my forgiveness?

- After you have internally forgiven, your heart of faith must be carefully guided by love and the cross. You can only pursue God pleasing justice and mercy when it is guided by God's love for you and the individual.

What if I am struggling to forgive?

- God forgives the sin of struggling to forgive, too.

What if I refuse to forgive?

- Your stubborn sin of unforgiveness reflects your lack of awareness for the Vertical Forgiveness you have received at the cross; like the Unmerciful Servant, your soul is in danger.

What about the Ministry of the Keys?

- The Ministry of the Keys tells the individual how God feels about their repented-for or unrepented sin. Whether or not the individual is repentant, God still expects his people to horizontally forgive. Though we have objectively forgiven their sin in our hearts, and

though God has objectively forgiven all sin on the cross, unrepented sin rejects the subjective benefits of forgiveness from the Lord and possibly the subjective benefits of our forgiveness. Out of love, we may warn the individual that they are retaining their sins by rejecting God's forgiveness since they do not think they need to be forgiven of their sin. Out of love, we may refrain from announcing our forgiveness to the individual so as not to make him comfortable in his sin, though we have inwardly forgiven them nonetheless.

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