

FORGIVING AS GOD FORGIVES

*A Biblical Theology of Conditional
Forgiveness*

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Dedication

*To my wife and daughter,
whose love and patience sustained this work,
and to First Baptist Church of Dallas,
whose faithfulness to the Word of God is a daily
inspiration.*

Preface

This book was born from a conversation — a sustained, sometimes difficult, always illuminating dialogue about what the Bible actually teaches when it commands us to forgive. The questions driving it are not abstract. They arise wherever real people have suffered real wrongs: Where is justice in a theology of forgiveness? Does the wrongdoer escape accountability if I forgive? Am I sinning if I cannot bring myself to forgive someone who has never admitted wrongdoing? Must I restore a relationship with someone who remains a danger to me?

These are not easy questions, and the church has not always answered them well. On one side, a therapeutic culture has infiltrated Christian teaching to the point where forgiveness is treated primarily as a psychological release mechanism — something victims perform for their own emotional health, independent of any moral transaction with the offender. On the other side, a rigid moralism has sometimes weaponized the forgiveness command, pressuring victims into premature pronouncements that paper over injustice rather than address it.

This book argues that both errors arise from a failure to read the Biblical text carefully — to attend to its

vocabulary, its grammar, its literary architecture, and its theological coherence. When we do read it carefully, a remarkably unified and coherent theology of forgiveness emerges. It is neither therapeutic nor moralistic. It is covenantal, relational, and deeply rooted in the character of God Himself.

The central thesis is this: Christian forgiveness is modeled on and participates in divine forgiveness. Because God's forgiveness is conditioned on repentance, the full pronouncement of interpersonal forgiveness likewise awaits repentance. This does not mean the wronged person harbors resentment or withholds mercy — on the contrary, the wronged person is called to maintain an attitude of complete mercy, active pursuit of the offender's repentance, and genuine readiness to forgive. But the formal pronouncement of forgiveness — the spoken declaration that restores the broken relationship — is a two-way transaction that requires both parties.

The single most important conceptual contribution of this book — the key that unlocks most of the apparent contradictions in the Biblical data — is a distinction between three things that Scripture carefully separates but popular discussion routinely collapses together: the attitude of mercy, the offer of forgiveness, and the pronouncement of

forgiveness. These are not three names for the same thing. They are three distinct realities with distinct Biblical grounding, distinct conditions, and distinct pastoral implications. The reader who grasps this distinction will find that most of the apparent contradictions between "unconditional" and "conditional" forgiveness texts dissolve — not because one side wins but because both sides have been talking about different things. This distinction is named here at the outset and developed throughout the book as the interpretive key to everything that follows. A note on the terminology: "pronouncement" is a theological construct designed to organize Biblical data — the term itself does not appear in Scripture, but the reality it describes is present in Luke 17:4's "forgive him," Matthew 18:15's "you have won your brother," and the binding/loosing language of Matthew 18:18. As with any synthetic theological category — think of "Trinity" or "atonement" — the value of the term is organizational and clarifying, not exegetically additional. It names something the Bible consistently does even when it does not use this particular word for it.

A practical note on language: the word "pronouncement" may sound overly formal or judicial — more suited to a courtroom or a church elder meeting than to a marriage or close friendship. In formal ecclesiastical

contexts, that weight is appropriate. But in everyday relationships, the pronouncement of forgiveness is usually as simple as saying "I forgive you" in response to a genuine "I'm sorry." What the threefold distinction captures is this: the attitude of mercy is the grace you carry toward your offender before they ever say a word. The offer of forgiveness is the genuine openness that holds the door unlocked and waits. The pronouncement is the moment you say "I forgive you" — the spoken act of restoring the relationship — which in a healthy friendship or marriage happens naturally and immediately when repentance occurs. The framework is not a bureaucratic procedure. It is a description of what genuine forgiveness actually involves.

One of the greatest literary illustrations of this distinction appears in the opening pages of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The ex-convict Jean Valjean steals the Bishop Myriel's silver candlesticks after the bishop has shown him hospitality. Caught by the police and brought back, the bishop tells the officers that he gave the silver to Valjean — and then presses the candlesticks into his hands as well, saying privately: "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I am buying for you." The bishop's attitude of mercy is unconditional — he harbors no resentment, seeks no

revenge, and welcomes back the man who robbed him. His offer of forgiveness is genuine and open. But notice what he does not do: he does not simply release Valjean from all moral claim. He makes an explicit demand — "you no longer belong to evil, but to good" — framing the gift as a transaction that carries a moral imperative. He treats Valjean as a forgiven man in order to call him to become one. The entire subsequent arc of the novel — Valjean's transformation into a man of extraordinary generosity and sacrifice — is the repentance the bishop's grace called forth. Hugo understood, at the level of literary intuition, what the Biblical framework teaches explicitly: that genuine grace does not dissolve moral accountability but creates it, and that the most powerful form of the offer of forgiveness is one that treats the offender as capable of genuine change.

*This is the forgiveness that honors the
victim. Pursues the offender. And forgives
as God forgives.*

The argument is made primarily through careful exegesis of the key Biblical texts, with particular attention to Matthew 18, which this book argues is the most theologically

rich and architecturally sophisticated passage on forgiveness in the New Testament. This book also engages seriously with the strongest arguments for unconditional forgiveness and with the most influential popular voices in the contemporary church.

A word about method: this book attempts to be accessible to the general reader while remaining exegetically responsible before the scholar. Greek terms are explained when introduced. Theological arguments are developed step by step. Those who wish to pursue particular questions further will find a guide to key works in Appendix C.

The goal throughout is not to win an argument but to understand what God has said — and to find in that understanding both the clarity and the compassion that genuine forgiveness requires. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:5 that the aim of all sound teaching is "love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." That is the aim of this book too. The conditions on forgiveness are not ends in themselves. They are the structure that makes genuine love — love that takes the offender seriously enough to require something real, and takes the victim seriously enough to refuse the cheap substitute — possible.

A personal note: the convictions in this book did not arise suddenly. In December 2008 — nearly eighteen years before this book was completed — I wrote a letter to a friend wrestling with these questions, arguing that biblical forgiveness requires repentance because forgiveness is not the cancellation of a debt as if it never existed but its genuine satisfaction, and that without repentance there can be no true reconciliation because it takes both parties to be at peace. Five years later, in October 2013, I wrote directly to a ministry leader at First Baptist Church of Dallas after hearing Pastor Jeffress preach on unconditional forgiveness — a message that I could not reconcile with what Scripture teaches. That letter laid out the same exegetical case this book develops at length. Pastor Jeffress is a gifted communicator of biblical truth whose ministry I deeply respect, and this book engages his position with the same directness and the same respect that letter intended. The theological instincts were already clear then. The present book is the fruit of nearly two decades of further study, exegesis, and pastoral reflection on those same instincts.

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Introduction: The Forgiveness Confusion

Few commands of Jesus have generated more confusion, more guilt, and more genuine pastoral difficulty than the command to forgive. Christians who have suffered serious wrongs — abuse, betrayal, injustice, devastating loss — are regularly told that their healing depends on forgiving their offenders, often immediately and unconditionally. Those who struggle to do so are sometimes left feeling that their spiritual state is deficient, their faith inadequate, their hearts hardened.

Yet when we turn to the Biblical text itself, we find a picture considerably more nuanced than this popular presentation suggests. Jesus himself conditions forgiveness on repentance in explicit terms. The patterns of God's own forgiveness throughout Scripture consistently involve the

response of the one forgiven. The apostles describe forgiveness in terms that are relational and involve both parties, rather than being merely a private psychological act performed by one person alone.

Something has gone wrong in the church's teaching on forgiveness. This book attempts to diagnose what it is and to recover what Scripture actually teaches.

A word of honesty is needed at the outset. There are passages in Scripture that appear, on first reading, to support unconditional forgiveness — Jesus praying "Father, forgive them" from the cross, Stephen praying for his murderers as they stoned him, and the commands to love and bless enemies without any stated condition of repentance. This book does not ignore these texts. It takes them seriously as genuine Biblical data that any adequate theology of forgiveness must account for. They are examined in detail in Chapters Ten and Eleven. The argument of this book is not that these passages are unimportant — it is that when read carefully in context, alongside the full weight of Biblical teaching, they do not establish the unconditional forgiveness position they are commonly taken to support. The case for conditional forgiveness does not rest on ignoring the hard texts. It rests on reading them more carefully than the unconditional position typically does.

The Problem with Current Approaches

The dominant contemporary approach to forgiveness in evangelical Christianity has been shaped by several influences that are not primarily Biblical. Psychological therapeutic models, filtered through popular Christian self-help literature, have defined forgiveness as essentially an internal release mechanism — something the victim does for their own wellbeing, independent of the offender's response. The offender's repentance becomes, on this view, irrelevant to the act of forgiveness itself.

This approach has genuine pastoral appeal. It liberates the victim from dependence on the offender's behavior. It addresses the real danger of bitterness corroding the spiritual life. It draws on real insights about the psychology of resentment. Authors like Robert Jeffress and Lewis Smedes have articulated it with sensitivity and genuine pastoral care.

But it has a fundamental problem: it fails to adequately account for what the Bible teaches about the nature and purpose of forgiveness. The therapeutic model has identified something genuine — the Bible does command the release of bitterness and the maintenance of a

merciful inner orientation toward those who wrong us. Ephesians 4:31 commands that bitterness, wrath, and malice be put away; Hebrews 12:15 warns against the root of bitterness that defiles many. These are real obligations with real spiritual significance, and the pastoral concern for the victim's wellbeing that drives the therapeutic model is not entirely misplaced. But the therapeutic model has made three critical errors. First, it has reframed acts of obedience and love — releasing bitterness, maintaining mercy — as strategies for emotional self-care, which both secularizes the commands and inverts their orientation. Second, it has made the forgiver's inner experience the center of the act, when Scripture consistently presents forgiveness as oriented toward the offender's restoration. And third, it has concluded from this inversion that the offender's repentance is unnecessary — because if forgiveness is primarily about how the forgiver feels, the offender's response is indeed irrelevant. This is the logic that produces unconditional forgiveness: not from careful exegesis but from a framework that has already moved forgiveness's center of gravity from the offender's restoration to the forgiver's inner state. When forgiveness is defined primarily as what happens inside the victim, the offender's repentance becomes irrelevant — and this departure from the Biblical pattern ultimately fails both

parties by replacing genuine forgiveness and genuine reconciliation with a transaction that leaves the moral reality of the offense unaddressed and the relationship unreconstructed.

The Central Claim of This Book

Forgiveness is not a psychological release mechanism. It is a covenant restored — and covenant restoration requires both parties.

Biblical forgiveness is a covenantal act of restoration between two parties: the offended, who renounces all malice and holds genuine mercy toward the one who has wronged them; and the offending, who turns from the wrong and receives the restoration being offered. It is not the unilateral release of a psychological debt but the mutual re-establishment of a broken relationship — patterned on the way God himself forgives: lavishly, eagerly, and at great cost, but applied upon genuine repentance rather than pronounced in its absence.

This book argues for what we will call covenantal conditional forgiveness. The word "covenantal" refers to the Bible's understanding of the relationship between God and His people as a covenant — a binding, personal commitment

sealed by promises and obligations on both sides, much like a marriage. Sin breaks that covenant; forgiveness restores it. The central claims are:

First, all sin is fundamentally a violation of God's law and covenant, and therefore forgiveness is ultimately God's transaction to make. Human forgiveness participates in and reflects divine forgiveness rather than operating as a parallel independent system.

Second, divine forgiveness is consistently conditional on repentance throughout Scripture. God moves toward sinners in grace before they repent, but the forgiveness itself is applied upon repentance and faith.

Third, the forgiveness Jesus commands his disciples to practice follows the same pattern — conditioned on repentance for the formal pronouncement, but accompanied by an unconditional attitude of mercy, non-retaliation, and active pursuit of the offender's repentance.

Fourth, the authority to forgive carries genuine theological weight — as Jesus teaches in Matthew 18, the forgiveness pronounced within the believing community is authorized and ratified by God himself — which means premature or unconditional pronouncement is not merely

ineffective — it fails to align with the pattern of forgiveness that God has revealed.

Fifth, the goal of Biblical forgiveness is always restoration and reconciliation, not merely emotional release. This goal is what justifies the conditions — they are in service of genuine restoration, not obstacles to grace.

A Map of the Book

The book moves in four stages, each building on what came before.

We begin by asking a prior question that most forgiveness discussions skip: what is sin, and who has the authority to forgive it? If sin is ultimately an offense against God rather than merely against the person who was wronged — and the Bible consistently says it is — then forgiveness is not simply a private transaction between two individuals. It participates in something larger. This foundation, laid in Part One, transforms everything that follows. Rather than asking "what do I owe my offender?" the book asks "what does God's own pattern of forgiveness look like, and how are we called to reflect it?" The Old Testament answer is consistent and clear: God forgives lavishly, eagerly, and without limit — but always in response to genuine

repentance. The New Testament deepens and fulfills this pattern without overturning it.

With that foundation in place, Part Two turns to the Biblical texts themselves. Matthew 18 receives the most extended treatment — not as a collection of verses to be cited but as a unified literary and theological argument to be read from beginning to end. Alongside it, the book examines the Joseph narrative in Genesis, the Corinthian letters, Luke's explicit conditional instruction, and a range of other passages including some that will surprise readers: the psalms that call on God to judge the wicked, and what happens when the offender is not a fellow believer at all. At each point the question is the same — what does this text actually say when read carefully in its own context?

Part Three steps back from the texts to ask how the church has fared in applying them. Popular voices on forgiveness — some very well known — are examined honestly, their genuine insights acknowledged and their significant errors identified. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's warning about cheap grace turns out to be directly relevant. And the book engages real cases: a gymnast who lost her church for speaking out against abuse, a congregation that gave a standing ovation to an unrepentant pastor, and two families who publicly forgave the men who murdered their loved

ones. These are not hypothetical problems. They are the situations where getting forgiveness right — or wrong — makes an enormous difference to real people.

Part Four draws the threads together into a practical theology that pastors, counselors, and ordinary believers can actually use. What does the wronged person owe the offender who has not repented? What does a community do when one of its members causes serious harm? What does it look like — concretely, in real life — to maintain an attitude of mercy without pronouncing forgiveness prematurely? These are the questions the book has been building toward, and Part Four attempts to answer them with the clarity and honesty they deserve.

PART ONE

The Theological Foundation

Chapter One: Sin as Covenantal Violation

The question of who has the authority to forgive depends entirely on what sin is. If sin is primarily a violation of one person against another — a purely horizontal transaction between human beings — then forgiveness is naturally the prerogative of the offended party. They were wronged; they decide whether to forgive. This is broadly how secular and therapeutic models of forgiveness operate.

But the Biblical account of sin is fundamentally different. Sin is, at its deepest level, a violation of covenant with God. It is transgression of His law, rebellion against His authority, offense against His holiness. This is not merely a theological abstraction — it shapes everything about how forgiveness works.

The Radical Claim of Psalm 51

The most striking expression of this truth comes from David in Psalm 51. David has committed adultery with

Bathsheba and arranged the death of her husband Uriah — concrete, devastating wrongs against real human beings. Yet in his prayer of repentance he declares:

*"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done
what is evil in your sight." (Psalm 51:4)*

This statement has puzzled readers who miss its theological point. David is not denying that he wronged Bathsheba and Uriah — the preceding narrative leaves no doubt about that. He is making a claim about the ultimate nature of his offense. Every sin against another human being is, at its root, an offense against the God in whose image that person is made, under whose law the action is governed, and before whose holiness all moral reality is measured.

The implications are profound. If all sin is ultimately against God, then all forgiveness is ultimately God's to grant. Human beings who are wronged participate in this transaction — they are real victims of real offenses — but they do not hold ultimate authority over the moral accounting. God does.

The New Testament Development

Jesus makes the same claim even more explicitly in his response to the paralyzed man lowered through the roof

by his friends. When Jesus says "Your sins are forgiven," the scribes immediately object: "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). Their objection is theologically correct — they simply fail to recognize who they are speaking to. The authority to forgive sins is God's prerogative.

This matters for the question of interpersonal forgiveness in a crucial way. When one Christian forgives another, they are not acting merely as an injured private individual making a personal transaction. They are acting as a representative of the God against whom all sin is ultimately committed — which is precisely why Jesus teaches in Matthew 18 that forgiveness pronounced within the believing community carries the weight of heaven's own authorization behind it. Human forgiveness participates in divine authorization rather than operating independently of it.

Matthew 18:18 and the Perfect Tense

The grammatical point deserves careful attention because it is often obscured in translation. In Matthew 18:18, Jesus says:

*"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth
shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you
loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

The Greek construction uses perfect passive participles — *estai dedemenon* and *estai lelumenon* — which more literally read "will have been bound" and "will have been loosed" in heaven. The significance of this construction is considerable, though it should be noted that scholars read it in different ways. Some see it as indicating that earthly binding and loosing declares what has already been determined in heaven. Others emphasize that the community is authorized to make binding declarations on earth that heaven ratifies. On either reading, the point that matters for this book is the same: the community's forgiveness and withholding carry genuine theological weight, authorized by heaven rather than merely reflecting the parties' personal preferences. The reading adopted here — that earthly binding and loosing participates in and reflects what heaven has established — is the most naturally supported by the perfect passive form, but is offered with the acknowledgment that careful scholars have reached different conclusions.

Human forgiveness therefore does not create forgiveness — it enacts and declares the conditions that the

divine order has established. This means that forgiving someone who has not repented is not merely premature — it departs from the pattern God has revealed for how forgiveness operates, pronouncing what the conditions for genuine restoration have not yet made possible. And withholding forgiveness from the unrepentant is not hardhearted — it is faithfulness to the structure God himself ordained.

This statement requires an immediate and serious pastoral qualification, because it is the sentence in this book most easily misread and most dangerously misapplied. Withholding the formal pronouncement of forgiveness from the unrepentant is faithful — but only when it is accompanied by everything else this book argues is required. A heart completely free of malice and bitterness toward the offender. Genuine prayer for the offender's repentance and wellbeing. Active pursuit of their restoration where possible. And a genuine desire to forgive that is frustrated only by the absence of the repentance that would make it complete. The person who withholds forgiveness while harboring resentment, nursing grievance, or quietly hoping the offender suffers is not exercising faithfulness — they are using the conditions on forgiveness as cover for bitterness. The conditions exist to serve genuine restoration, not to

justify indefinite withholding. "Merciful non-forgiveness" — the only kind this book defends — looks from the outside like patience, not coldness; like longing, not satisfaction; like an open door, not a closed one.

James 4:11-12 — The Authority to Judge and the Authority to Forgive

A passage that rarely appears in discussions of forgiveness but carries profound relevance is James 4:11-12:

"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?"

James is addressing a specific abuse — the presumptuous passing of judgment on fellow believers in a way that usurps God's unique authority as the sole Lawgiver and Judge. But the theological principle he invokes illuminates the entire question of forgiveness with striking clarity.

James anchors his argument in the singularity of divine authority: there is only one Lawgiver and Judge — the one who has the power both to save and to destroy. This is not merely a statement about judicial authority in the abstract. It is a claim about the source and structure of all moral authority. Because God alone is the Lawgiver, only God has the inherent authority to pronounce on violations of His law. Because God alone is the Judge, only God has the inherent authority to acquit or condemn.

The relevance to forgiveness is immediate and direct. Just as believers do not have the authority to judge of themselves — that authority belongs to God and is exercised by human agents only when God delegates and authorizes it — so believers do not have the authority to forgive of themselves. Both judgment and forgiveness originate with God. Both are exercised by human beings only as participants in a divinely authorized framework.

This provides a deeper theological foundation for what Matthew 18:18 calls the authority to forgive and withhold forgiveness within the community — an authority that, as Chapter Four will show in detail, Jesus described using the imagery of binding and loosing. When Jesus grants the community this authority, he is not conferring an independent human power — he is authorizing human

participation in the divine authority that belongs to God alone.

James 4:11-12 therefore cuts in two directions simultaneously. On one hand it warns against presumptuous human judgment — which guards against the moralistic abuse of conditional forgiveness that turns withholding into vindictiveness or self-righteousness. On the other hand it establishes that forgiveness is not a merely human transaction to be dispensed at will — which guards against the therapeutic model that treats forgiveness as a one-sided psychological release the victim performs independently of any divine structure.

Both judgment and forgiveness belong to God. Both are exercised by the community only as participants in His authority, under His conditions, in accordance with His pattern. This is precisely what it means to forgive as God forgives — not to exceed His pattern or to fall short of it, but to enact it faithfully as His authorized agents.

This resolves a potential objection that might arise from the agency argument itself. A reader might ask: "If I am only an agent acting on God's behalf, and God is the one who was truly offended, why can't I be generous and pronounce forgiveness regardless of repentance? Wouldn't that be

more merciful than the Principal?" The answer is that an authorized representative has no authority to exceed the instructions of the Principal. An ambassador who signs a treaty on terms his government has not authorized has not been generous — he has committed an unauthorized act that misrepresents his government and undermines the very authority he was sent to exercise. When a believer pronounces forgiveness on conditions that God's own pattern does not recognize — declaring a covenant restored when the offender has not turned — they are not being more merciful than God. They are acting outside their authorization, misrepresenting the One whose forgiveness they are enacting, and undermining the structure of genuine restoration that the pattern exists to serve.

Paul gives this ambassador relationship its most explicit scriptural grounding in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20: "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." Three features of this passage bear directly on the agency

argument. First, the initiative is entirely God's — "all this is from God." The ministry of reconciliation is not a human invention but a divine commission, originating with God and entrusted to believers as something from outside themselves. Second, the ambassador language is Paul's own: "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." The appeal is God's appeal, not the ambassador's. The ambassador is the vehicle, not the author. Third, the content of the commission is specific: "be reconciled to God" — an imperative, a call to those not yet reconciled, not a pronouncement that they are already reconciled regardless of their response. The ambassador does not declare people reconciled. The ambassador calls them to reconciliation. This is the offer of forgiveness held genuinely open — precisely the structure of the book's threefold framework.

The phrase "not counting their trespasses against them" deserves careful attention here, because it might appear to support unconditional forgiveness — God is not counting trespasses even before anyone has responded. But Paul's context makes clear that this refers to the divine provision of reconciliation through Christ — God has made forgiveness available on terms that need not count trespasses against anyone who comes. It is not a declaration

that all trespasses are already not counted regardless of response. If that were true, the imperative "be reconciled to God" would be meaningless — you cannot call people to be reconciled if they are already reconciled. The "not counting" describes the open offer; the imperative "be reconciled" describes what is required to receive it. This is the offer of forgiveness in its most explicit Pauline form.

The Covenantal Framework

DEFINITION: COVENANT

In the Bible, a covenant is a binding, personal relationship between God and His people, sealed by promises and obligations on both sides — much like a marriage. Sin breaks that covenant. Forgiveness restores it. This is why forgiveness in Scripture is always more than a private feeling — it is the healing of a relationship.

The Old Testament background of covenant is essential here. In the covenantal structure of Biblical theology, sin is not primarily a psychological state, an interpersonal slight, or a legal infraction in a secular sense. It is breach of covenant — a violation of the relationship between a people and their God that constitutes the fundamental structure of their existence.

Forgiveness, within this framework, is covenant restoration — the reestablishment of the broken relationship, the removal of the guilt that has severed fellowship. This is why repentance is not an arbitrary additional requirement tacked onto forgiveness as a condition. It is intrinsic to what forgiveness actually is. A covenant cannot be unilaterally restored by one party while the other party remains in active rebellion. The restoration requires both parties — the gracious initiative of the offended party (which is what distinguishes Biblical forgiveness from mere justice) and the responsive turning of the offending party.

This covenantal framework transforms every subsequent question about forgiveness. The conditions on forgiveness are not obstacles to grace — they are the structure within which genuine grace operates and genuine restoration becomes possible.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation — Two Distinct Acts

It is worth pausing here to distinguish two concepts that popular discussion routinely conflates. Forgiveness is the cancellation of a debt — the release of what the offender owes the offended party. Reconciliation is the restoration of

a broken relationship — the reestablishment of genuine fellowship and trust. These are related but distinct acts. Forgiveness is the necessary precondition for reconciliation but is not the same thing as reconciliation. A person can forgive a debt while the relationship remains broken — if the offending party has not acknowledged the wrong, genuine reconciliation remains impossible even if the offended party has released the debt internally. And reconciliation may require more than forgiveness: for some relationships, genuine restitution is necessary before the relationship can be fully restored; for others, the wrong has been so great that even restitution cannot fully repair what has been broken. The book will return to these distinctions in the chapters on pastoral application, but they belong at the foundations: forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same, and a theology that conflates them creates pastoral confusion at every point downstream.

The distinction also has an important temporal dimension. Forgiveness, like justification, is a legal concept — the declaration of a changed status, the cancellation of a debt. Legal declarations can be instantaneous: the moment the conditions are met — genuine repentance acknowledged and genuine forgiveness pronounced — the debt is cancelled and the legal status changes completely. Reconciliation,

being a relational concept, operates on a different timescale. Relationships are built and rebuilt through sustained experience over time — through demonstrated trustworthiness, through shared life, through the slow accumulation of renewed confidence. A relationship can be legally restored in a moment and relationally rebuilt only over months or years. Both are real and both matter — but they should not be confused with each other, and the wronged person who has genuinely forgiven but not yet fully reconciled is not failing to forgive completely. They are living in the honest tension between what has been declared and what must still be built. Chapter Thirteen addresses the pastoral complexity of this rebuilding process in the hardest cases.

"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." — Hebrews 9:22

Hebrews 9:22 — Repentance Is Intrinsic to Forgiveness

"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Hebrews 9:22)

This verse states one of Scripture's most foundational theological principles: forgiveness is not the waiving of a debt as if it had never existed. It is the genuine addressing of a debt — one that requires real payment, real acknowledgment, and real response. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, the blood of the animal stood as the payment that made atonement possible. In the New Testament the blood of Christ is the payment that makes the forgiveness of sins available to all who repent and believe. In neither case is the debt simply overlooked or declared nonexistent. The debt is real, its weight is acknowledged, and it is genuinely addressed.

This is why repentance is not an arbitrary condition tacked onto forgiveness from the outside — it is intrinsic to what receiving forgiveness actually is. Consider how this works in salvation. God has provided complete and sufficient forgiveness through Christ's atoning death. The provision is not in question. But the application of that provision to an individual requires that the individual acknowledge what they are being saved from. You cannot trust Christ as Savior without first recognizing that you need saving. You cannot receive forgiveness for a debt you do not acknowledge you owe. As Jesus himself put it: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). Who goes to a doctor without recognizing they are ill? The physician can offer healing; the physician cannot treat a patient who insists they are perfectly healthy. The offer is genuine and the provision is complete — but the structure of receiving help requires acknowledging the need that the help addresses.

The same logic governs interpersonal forgiveness. You cannot genuinely absorb a debt that the debtor has not acknowledged. The forgiver can release resentment — can maintain the attitude of mercy, can hold the offer genuinely open — but cannot complete the transaction of forgiveness with someone who does not recognize they are a party to it. This is not the forgiver withholding grace. It is the honest recognition that genuine forgiveness has an object: a real debt, honestly acknowledged, genuinely addressed. When the offender has not acknowledged the debt, there is no acknowledged debt for the forgiveness to address. A "forgiveness" pronounced to someone who does not recognize they have wronged you is not received as forgiveness — it is either ignored, resented, or misunderstood as a declaration that nothing was wrong in the first place. It does not accomplish what forgiveness is designed to accomplish. Repentance — the acknowledgment

of the debt — is not the barrier to forgiveness. It is the condition that gives forgiveness its honest object.

This insight also answers one of the most common objections to conditional forgiveness: "Isn't unconditional forgiveness more loving? Why would a loving God make forgiveness conditional?" The answer is that God's forgiveness is conditional on repentance for the same reason a doctor's treatment requires the patient to acknowledge they are sick — not because the doctor withholds love from the ill person but because the very structure of receiving help requires acknowledging the need. God does not withhold love from the unrepentant. His attitude of mercy toward all people is unconditional. But the transaction of forgiveness — the application of what Christ accomplished to the individual — requires the acknowledgment that makes receiving it possible. Grace cannot be genuinely received by someone who does not believe they need it. The Luke 23:34 passage — Jesus' prayer from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" — is the most frequently cited challenge to this argument, and it is examined in detail in Chapter Nine, where the Pentecost fulfillment of that prayer provides what is perhaps the most powerful single piece of evidence for the conditional forgiveness position in the entire New Testament.

THE HEART OF THE ARGUMENT

"You cannot genuinely absorb a debt that the debtor has not acknowledged." Repentance is not an arbitrary barrier to forgiveness — it is the acknowledgment that gives forgiveness its honest object. Without it, there is no debt to absorb, no wrong to address, and no transaction to complete. This is as true in salvation as it is in human forgiveness: the physician cannot treat the patient who insists they are well.



Causal, Modeled, and Participatory — The Three Dimensions of the Relationship

The relationship between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others is richer and more complex than is often recognized. A common and important account holds that the relationship is primarily causal: because God forgave us, we must forgive others. This causal argument draws on several significant New Testament texts and has genuine pastoral power. But it is not by itself sufficient to establish the conditional forgiveness framework — and understanding why requires distinguishing three distinct but related dimensions: causal, modeled, and participatory.

The Causal Dimension

The causal argument runs as follows: we have been forgiven an unpayable debt; therefore we have no grounds to withhold forgiveness from those who owe us far less. Jesus makes this argument explicitly in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-35. The servant who was forgiven ten thousand talents and refused to forgive a hundred denarii was condemned — not because he violated a rule but because his behavior revealed that he had never genuinely received what was given to him. Genuine reception of grace produces gracious response. The failure to forgive is diagnostic: it exposes a heart that has not been transformed by the forgiveness it claims to have received.

Matthew 6:14-15 strengthens this with a warning: "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." First John 4:11 follows the same logic: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." The movement in all these texts is from what God has done to what we are therefore obligated to do. Divine grace precedes and grounds human obligation.

This causal account is correct and important. It provides the motivational foundation for the whole

forgiveness command. But it has a critical limitation: it does not by itself define the structure of the forgiveness we are to extend. It tells us that we must forgive because God forgave us — but it leaves open the question of what that forgiveness looks like. And here the causal account, taken alone, actually creates a problem for the conditional forgiveness position: if God forgave us lavishly and unconditionally, and we are to forgive because He forgave us that way, does the causal argument not point toward unconditional human forgiveness?

This is precisely the move that advocates of unconditional forgiveness regularly make. They are not wrong to use the causal texts — they are wrong to treat them as sufficient. The causal dimension tells us why we forgive. It does not tell us how. For that, we need the second dimension.

The Modeling Dimension

The modeling argument is structurally different from the causal argument. It does not say "because God forgave you, forgive others." It says "forgive others in the way that God forgives" — pointing to the pattern and manner of divine forgiveness as the standard for human forgiveness.

Ephesians 4:32 is the key text: "forgiving each other, as God in Christ forgave you." The Greek word translated "as" is *kathōs* — a word that carries both causal force ("because") and modeling force ("in the same way that"). In this context the modeling dimension is primary, as the surrounding verses (25-31) consistently describe behavioral obligations that mirror the character and pattern of God rather than merely being motivated by His prior action. The whole section calls believers to lives that reflect the way God acts — not just because He acted that way first.

Colossians 3:13 is even more explicit in its modeling structure: "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." The *kathōs...houtōs* construction — "just as...so also" — establishes both the motivation (as He forgave you) and the pattern (so also you). The second clause is not merely a restatement of the first; it specifies that the manner of our forgiveness is to correspond to the manner of His. Luke 6:36 follows the same logic: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." This is not "because your Father is merciful" — it is "in the way that your Father is merciful." The pattern of divine mercy is the standard, not merely the occasion, for human mercy.

The modeling dimension is what gives the conditional forgiveness framework its structural content.

Once it is established that human forgiveness is to follow the pattern of divine forgiveness — and not merely to be motivated by it — the question of whether divine forgiveness is conditional or unconditional becomes directly decisive for the question of human forgiveness. This book has argued throughout that divine forgiveness is genuinely lavish, eagerly offered, and freely provided — but applied upon repentance and faith. If that is the pattern we are to follow, the conditional structure of human forgiveness follows directly.

This is why the causal argument alone is insufficient. It points to the fact and the lavishness of divine forgiveness as the ground of human forgiveness — which, without the modeling dimension, points toward unconditional human forgiveness. The modeling dimension redirects the question: we are to follow not just the generosity of divine forgiveness but its structure. And the structure is conditional.

The Participatory Dimension

Beyond causation and modeling there is a third dimension that the Matthew 18 and John 20 material introduces: participation. Human forgiveness does not merely reflect on or imitate divine forgiveness from a

distance. It participates in it — acts as its authorized extension into the community and the world.

Paul gives the participatory dimension its most explicit Pauline statement in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. God has "given us the ministry of reconciliation" and made us "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." The ministry of reconciliation is not a human initiative — it originates with God, is accomplished through Christ, and is entrusted to believers as a commission. The believer who calls others to be reconciled to God is not acting independently — God is making His appeal through them. This is participation in the fullest sense: not imitating what God has done from a distance, but being the vehicle through which God's ongoing appeal reaches those who have not yet responded. Chapter One examines this ambassador role in detail; here it is sufficient to note that Paul's language establishes the participatory dimension as fundamental to the New Testament understanding of the believer's role in the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Matthew 18:18's language of binding and loosing — "whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven" — describes not imitation but authorization. The community's act of forgiving the repentant offender is not a human decision that heaven subsequently approves. It is a

human enactment of what heaven has already authorized, grounded in the conditions heaven has established. John 20:23 makes the same point from a different angle: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." The Spirit-empowered community is not merely imitating God's pattern — it is acting as God's agent, extending the reach of divine forgiveness through its own authorized actions.

This participatory dimension has a direct implication for the conditional forgiveness argument that neither the causal nor the modeling dimensions fully capture. If human forgiveness participates in and enacts divine forgiveness — rather than merely being motivated by or imitating it — then the conditions God places on His forgiveness are necessarily the conditions that govern the community's enactment of it. An ambassador cannot sign a treaty on terms his government has not authorized. A community that pronounces forgiveness on conditions that the divine pattern does not recognize is not extending divine forgiveness — it is substituting a human alternative for it, and calling the substitute by the same name.

Why All Three Dimensions Are Needed

Each dimension addresses a different aspect of the question and guards against a different error. The causal dimension establishes that forgiveness is rooted in grace rather than merit — that we forgive out of the overflow of having been forgiven, not out of moral achievement or theological correctness. Without it, conditional forgiveness can feel like a demanding moral standard rather than a response to grace. The modeling dimension establishes the structure of the forgiveness we extend — that it follows the pattern of divine forgiveness, which is conditional on repentance. Without it, the causal dimension points toward unconditional forgiveness rather than conditional. The participatory dimension establishes the authority and weight of the community's forgiveness — that it is not merely a human relational act but a Spirit-empowered extension of divine forgiveness. Without it, the community's binding and loosing can seem like an arbitrary human institution rather than the authorized enactment of heaven's own conditions.

A critical limiting note must be stated here to prevent a serious misreading. The participatory authority the community exercises in forgiving and withholding forgiveness is not independent authority generated from within the community itself. It is entirely derivative — received from Christ, exercised only within the conditions

He has established, and accountable to the divine pattern He has revealed. The community does not possess forgiveness as a sacramental capacity it can dispense at will. It participates in forgiveness as a servant carries out the instructions of a master — faithfully, within specified terms, without exceeding or falling short of what has been authorized. This is why the conditions on forgiveness matter: not because the community has devised them but because they are the conditions of the One whose authority the community is enacting. When the community forgives in accordance with these conditions, it is not generating a human transaction that God then endorses — it is faithfully extending what God has already authorized on the terms He has established.

KEY INSIGHT: THREE DIMENSIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Causal: We forgive because God forgave us. This provides the motivational foundation — forgiveness flows from received grace, not moral achievement. Modeled: We forgive in the way God forgives. This provides the structural content — the pattern of divine forgiveness (conditional on repentance) governs the pattern of human forgiveness. Participatory: Our forgiveness enacts and extends divine forgiveness. This provides the weight — we act as authorized agents of heaven, not merely as individuals making personal decisions.

*We forgive because God forgave us — and
we forgive in the way God forgives. Both
together make conditional forgiveness
genuinely gracious rather than merely
moralistic.*

Together these three dimensions produce a theology of forgiveness that is simultaneously more gracious than the purely moralistic account (because it is grounded in received grace), more structured than the purely therapeutic account (because it follows the divine pattern), and more weighty than the merely interpersonal account (because it participates in the ongoing work of divine forgiveness in the world). This is what it means to forgive as God forgives — to be motivated by His grace, to follow His pattern, and to act as His authorized agent in the community of faith.

C.S. Lewis — whose engagement with the imprecatory psalms appears in Chapter Nine — provides in his fiction one of the most precise literary illustrations of what genuine repentance actually involves. In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the disagreeable boy Eustace Scrubb has

become a dragon through his own greed and selfishness. He tries repeatedly to shed his dragon skin himself, peeling layer after layer — and fails each time, because a new layer of scales always remains underneath. Only when he allows Aslan to tear the skin away — at great and genuine pain to himself — is he restored to his true form. The very first tear, Lewis writes, went so deep that Eustace thought it had gone right into his heart, and it hurt worse than anything he had ever felt. The illustration maps with remarkable precision onto the Biblical account of repentance. Genuine turning cannot be self-administered — it requires a painful external work that the person must submit to rather than perform themselves. The person who repents on their own terms, releasing only what they are comfortable releasing, has not yet reached the genuine turning that Biblical forgiveness awaits. Genuine repentance, like Eustace's undragoning, goes deeper than the person is willing to go alone — and this is precisely why the Biblical framework insists on repentance rather than accepting any sincerely-felt internal resolution as sufficient.

The remaining chapters of Part One will trace how this covenantal framework shapes the Old Testament patterns of divine forgiveness and the New Testament's

understanding of what Christ's atonement accomplished — and what it requires of those who receive it.

Chapter Two: Divine Forgiveness in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is not silent on forgiveness. From the covenantal structure of the Mosaic law through the prophetic appeals for repentance to the great psalms of repentance, a consistent pattern emerges: God's forgiveness is genuine, lavish, and eagerly offered — but it is consistently conditioned on the repentance of the one to be forgiven.

The Sacrificial System as Enacted Theology

The elaborate sacrificial system of Leviticus is often read as mere ritual prescription, but it encodes a profound theology of forgiveness. The sacrifices for sin are not automatic absolution — they require acknowledgment of sin, deliberate presentation before God, and priestly mediation. The Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 is the climax of this system: the high priest makes atonement for Israel, but the accompanying confessional ritual — the laying of hands on the scapegoat and the public declaration of Israel's sins — makes clear that atonement and acknowledgment belong together.

The New Testament's treatment of Christ as the fulfillment of the sacrificial system does not abolish this structure — it deepens it. Christ's atonement is not an automatic universally applied forgiveness but the provision of the basis on which forgiveness is available to those who come to God through him. The structure of acknowledgment and response that the Old Testament sacrifices enacted is not eliminated but transformed.

The Prophetic Pattern

The writing prophets consistently present divine forgiveness as eagerly available but responsive to repentance. Isaiah's great invitation is exemplary:

"Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (Isaiah 1:18)

The lavishness of the promised forgiveness — scarlet becoming white as snow — is matched by the context of the invitation: it follows immediately on the call to "cease to do evil, learn to do good" (1:16-17). The offer is genuinely gracious and genuinely unrestricted by prior moral

achievement — but it is not independent of the turning that constitutes repentance.

Jeremiah's new covenant promise speaks similarly. The covenant written on the heart — which the New Testament understands as fulfilled in Christ — includes the declaration "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more" (31:34). But this is embedded within a covenant structure in which Israel is constituted as God's people through their response of faith and obedience, not as an unconditional blanket applied regardless of their orientation toward God.

The Psalms of Penitence

The great psalms of repentance — 32, 51, 102, 130 — illuminate the experiential structure of Old Testament forgiveness. In each case the movement is from acknowledgment and confession through appeal to divine mercy to the assurance of forgiveness received. Psalm 32 describes the experience of unconfessed sin as physical and spiritual torment, then the relief of confession, and finally the invitation to others to acknowledge their sin before God. As the following section on David and Nathan will show, Psalm 32 may be paired with Psalm 51 in the Davidic tradition — where Psalm 51 is the prayer of repentance at the

moment of confrontation and confession, Psalm 32 may reflect the retrospective understanding of what the period of silence and cover-up had been doing to David's soul. Together they provide an unusually complete psychological and spiritual portrait of the journey from sin through unconfessed guilt to repentance and forgiveness.

What is striking is that the forgiveness follows the acknowledgment — not as a mechanical transaction but as a covenantal response. God does not forgive arbitrarily, nor does He withhold eagerly. He waits, as it were, for the conditions that make genuine restoration possible — which is precisely the turning of the heart that constitutes repentance.

Joseph and His Brothers — The Old Testament Paradigm of Conditional Forgiveness

Before turning to the New Testament, one Old Testament narrative deserves extended treatment as a case study in the conditional forgiveness pattern: the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37-50. This narrative is the most developed and psychologically rich forgiveness narrative in the Old Testament, and it has been cited by both sides of the contemporary debate. A careful reading shows it

consistently supports the conditional position — but with important nuances that the typical summary misses.

The offense committed against Joseph by his brothers is not a momentary lapse or a minor slight. It is premeditated, sustained, compounded, and covered up with deliberate cruelty. When Joseph comes to check on his brothers in the fields near Dothan, they see him coming from a distance and conspire to kill him. Reuben persuades them to throw him into a pit instead — intending to return and rescue him — but while Reuben is absent, the brothers sell Joseph to a passing caravan of Ishmaelite traders for twenty pieces of silver. They then take Joseph's distinctive robe, slaughter a goat, dip the robe in the blood, and present it to their father Jacob with the implication that a wild animal has killed him.

The cover-up is particularly significant. Jacob's grief is devastating — "he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.'" (Genesis 37:35). The brothers watch their father grieve the son they have sold, and they say nothing. This is not impulsive sin followed by immediate remorse. It is sustained deception maintained over years and decades while their father mourns. The moral weight of the offense is enormous.

Joseph in Egypt — Suffering Without Bitterness

What is theologically remarkable about Joseph's conduct during the years between his sale into slavery and his eventual reunion with his brothers is precisely what is absent: bitterness, self-pity, vindictiveness, or the nursing of grievance. Sold as a slave to Potiphar, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife, imprisoned on false charges, forgotten by the cupbearer he helped — Joseph suffers a sustained cascade of injustices without any indication that his spirit has been corroded by resentment toward his brothers.

This is the attitude of mercy that conditional forgiveness advocates identify as the unconditional obligation of the wronged party. Joseph does not pronounce forgiveness on his absent, unrepentant brothers — there is no scene in which he declares them forgiven while languishing in Pharaoh's prison. But neither does he harbor malice, plot revenge, or allow his brothers' sin to define his orientation toward life and toward God. The narrative repeatedly notes that "the Lord was with Joseph" — a phrase that suggests not merely divine blessing but a maintained fellowship that would be incompatible with a heart given over to bitterness.

The theological point is significant. Joseph's attitude of mercy during the years of separation is not the same as the pronouncement of forgiveness that comes at the end of the narrative. The former is unconditional and maintained throughout; the latter is conditional and comes only after repentance has been tested and confirmed. Both are present in the story, and the story's power depends on their distinction.

The Test — Examining the Brothers for Repentance

When Joseph's brothers arrive in Egypt seeking grain during the famine, Joseph recognizes them immediately — they do not recognize him. And here Joseph does something that has sometimes puzzled readers but is exegetically crucial: rather than revealing himself immediately and pronouncing forgiveness, he tests his brothers through an elaborate series of encounters designed to assess whether genuine repentance has occurred.

The tests are not arbitrary or vindictive. They are carefully calibrated to probe the specific character flaws that produced the original offense. The brothers had shown callous indifference to a younger brother's suffering and to their father's grief. Joseph therefore creates situations that

will reveal whether those character flaws remain or have been transformed.

On the first visit, Joseph accuses the brothers of being spies, holds Simeon as a hostage, and demands that they return with Benjamin — Jacob's youngest and now most beloved son. The brothers' immediate response is telling:

"Then they said to one another, 'In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.' (Genesis 42:21)

This is the first acknowledgment of guilt in the narrative — not to Joseph, not to their father, but among themselves. It is not yet full repentance, but it is the beginning of moral self-awareness. The suffering they are experiencing has cracked open a conscience that had been sealed for years. Reuben adds: "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood" (42:22). The brothers are beginning to connect their present suffering with their past sin — a connection that is itself the beginning of genuine repentance.

The decisive test comes on the brothers' second visit, when they bring Benjamin. Joseph feasts with them, then

arranges for his silver cup to be hidden in Benjamin's sack. When the cup is "discovered," Joseph announces that Benjamin must remain as his slave while the others return to their father. This is the precise structural parallel to what the brothers did to Joseph: a younger brother is threatened with permanent separation from his father while the other brothers have the opportunity to save themselves by abandoning him.

The brothers' response reveals that genuine transformation has occurred. They do not abandon Benjamin. They return to Joseph's presence, and Judah — the same Judah who had proposed selling Joseph in the first place — delivers one of the most remarkable speeches in all of Scripture. He recounts in full the situation with their father, acknowledges that Benjamin's loss would kill Jacob, and then offers himself as a substitute slave so that Benjamin can return to his father:

"Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the boy as a servant to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers." (Genesis 44:33)

This is the evidence Joseph has been waiting for. The man who once callously sold his younger brother and watched his father grieve is now offering his own freedom —

his own life — to prevent the same thing from happening again. The repentance is not verbal. It is enacted, costly, and self-sacrificial. It is repentance demonstrated through changed behavior in the precise situation where the original sin occurred.

The Revelation and the Forgiveness

Joseph's response to Judah's speech is immediate and overwhelming. He clears the room of all Egyptians and reveals himself to his brothers — weeping so loudly that the Egyptians outside can hear him. His first words are not accusation but inquiry: "Is my father still alive?" And then:

"I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." (Genesis 45:4-5)

Several features of this forgiveness speech deserve careful theological attention. First, it is explicit and personal — "I am Joseph, whom you sold." The offense is named. Joseph does not pretend it did not happen or minimize it with vague generality. Genuine forgiveness names the wrong precisely because it is precisely that wrong which is being forgiven.

Second, it is theologically grounded — "God sent me before you to preserve life." Joseph's ability to forgive his brothers is not rooted in his own psychological resilience or his natural generosity. It is rooted in a theological interpretation of his suffering that sees divine providence working through even the worst of human wickedness. This is not a denial of the brothers' guilt — Joseph explicitly names what they did — but it is a framework that transforms the meaning of the suffering without denying its reality.

Third, it is genuinely merciful — "do not be distressed or angry with yourselves." Joseph is not merely announcing forgiveness as a theological proposition. He is actively concerned for his brothers' emotional and spiritual state. He does not want the guilt to destroy them. This is the attitude of mercy that has characterized his whole approach — the desire for the offender's genuine wellbeing, which is what makes the forgiveness real rather than performative.

After Jacob's Death — The Completeness of Forgiveness

A coda to the story occurs after Jacob's death, when the brothers fear that Joseph may have been restraining his vengeance out of respect for their father and will now take revenge. They send a message claiming that Jacob had commanded Joseph to forgive them — a message that may

or may not be true but reveals the depth of their continued anxiety about whether the forgiveness was genuine.

Joseph's response is one of the most theologically profound statements in the Old Testament:

"Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones."

(Genesis 50:19-21)

The question "Am I in the place of God?" is exegetically remarkable. It directly anticipates the principle we identified in James 4:11-12 — that judgment belongs to God alone. Joseph refuses to take vengeance not because the offense was minor or because he has suppressed his awareness of it, but because he recognizes that ultimate judgment belongs to God, not to him. This is the theological foundation of the forgiven person's release of vengeance — not denial of the wrong, not therapeutic suppression, but the recognition that God is the ultimate Judge and that placing oneself in His position fails to honor the divine order He has established.

Joseph as Pattern and Paradigm

*Joseph's forgiveness was not premature —
it was patient. He waited for genuine
repentance, and when it came, he forgave
immediately, lavishly, and completely.*

Narrative texts illustrate rather than prescribe — Joseph's behavior, however wise and admirable, does not by itself establish a universal rule for all believers in all situations. What it does do, with unusual richness and detail, is show what the conditional forgiveness framework looks like when it is lived out across an extended period of real human complexity. His testing of his brothers could be read as merely prudential — the caution of a wise man who had learned not to trust too quickly. But the narrative places it within a theological framework of divine providence and covenantal restoration that gives it a significance beyond mere pragmatism.

The Joseph narrative therefore functions as a sustained illustration of the conditional forgiveness pattern that the explicit doctrinal texts — Luke 17:3-4, Matthew 18, the Corinthian correspondence — teach directly. The wronged party maintains an attitude of mercy and

fellowship with God throughout the years of separation — without pronouncing premature forgiveness on absent, unrepentant offenders. When the offenders come within reach, the wronged party does not immediately pronounce forgiveness but creates the conditions under which genuine repentance can be tested and confirmed. When genuine repentance is demonstrated — through costly, self-sacrificial action rather than mere words — forgiveness is pronounced immediately, lavishly, and completely. The theological foundation is not psychological resilience but divine providence: the recognition that God is the ultimate Judge, that His purposes work through even the worst human wickedness, and that the wronged party's role is not to usurp divine judgment but to participate in divine forgiveness when its conditions are met.

This is forgiving as God forgives — and it required testing the brothers' repentance before it could be pronounced.

David, Nathan, and Psalm 51 — A Case Study in Divine Forgiveness

No Old Testament narrative illustrates the pattern of conditional divine forgiveness more vividly or more completely than the account of David's sin with Bathsheba

and the murder of Uriah the Hittite, found in 2 Samuel 11-12 and reflected in Psalm 51. It is worth tracing the full arc of the narrative, because every element of the conditional forgiveness framework appears in it with remarkable clarity.

The sin itself is catastrophic. David, from the roof of his palace, sees Bathsheba bathing and summons her. He commits adultery with her, and when she becomes pregnant he attempts an elaborate cover-up — recalling her husband Uriah from the battlefield and encouraging him to sleep with his wife so that the child might appear to be his. Uriah, a man of honor who refuses to enjoy domestic comfort while his comrades are in the field, frustrates the plan. David then arranges Uriah's death by ordering Joab to place him at the front of the battle and withdraw from him. The cover-up is complete. The narrative records with devastating brevity: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Samuel 11:27).

Nathan's Confrontation — The Role of the Prophet

What follows is one of the most masterly acts of pastoral confrontation in all of Scripture. God sends the prophet Nathan to David — not to pronounce immediate judgment but to bring David to repentance. Nathan does not accuse David directly. He tells a parable: a rich man with

many flocks takes the one beloved lamb of a poor man to feed a traveler rather than slaughtering from his own abundance. David's response is immediate and furious: "The man who has done this deserves to die." Nathan's reply is four words that have echoed through history: "You are the man" (2 Samuel 12:7).

*The willingness to rebuke is itself an act of
love — it is the courageous refusal to
abandon the offender to their sin.*

The prophetic confrontation is not optional background to the story — it is theologically essential to it. The 2 Samuel narrative itself records no spontaneous repentance between the sin and Nathan's arrival — David moves from adultery to murder to successful cover-up without any intervening scene of remorse. Some scholars, however, have suggested that Psalm 32 represents David's inner experience during this interval — a period of unconfessed guilt that produced the physical and spiritual torment the psalm describes before the relief of confession.

Psalm 32 does describe precisely this experience:

"For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (Psalm 32:3-5)

If Psalm 32 does reflect the Bathsheba period — and the traditional attribution is plausible, though not certain — it would mean that David was not without inner awareness of his guilt during the interval before Nathan's arrival. The silence of the 2 Samuel narrative would then be a narrative silence rather than a moral one: the story does not record David's inner turmoil, but the psalm may illuminate what was happening beneath the surface of the cover-up.

This does not fundamentally alter the theological point, however. Whether or not David was experiencing private guilt during the interval, the 2 Samuel narrative is clear that no repentance was expressed, no confession made, and no restitution offered until Nathan's confrontation called it forth. The crushing of unconfessed guilt that Psalm 32 describes — "my bones wasted away... your hand was heavy upon me" — is itself evidence of a conscience under divine pressure rather than at peace with its sin. But

pressure of conscience, however painful, is not yet repentance. It is the precondition of repentance — the tenderizing of the heart that makes the prophetic confrontation effective. Nathan's arrival and his parable supplied what the unconfessed guilt could not supply on its own: the precise naming of the sin and the call to acknowledge it before God. The repentance that follows is genuinely David's — but it is called forth by the prophetic word, not generated independently. This is precisely the Matthew 18:15 principle operating in the Old Testament: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault." Nathan goes. He names the fault. And the naming makes the repentance possible.

This has profound implications for pastoral practice. Unconditional forgiveness advocates sometimes suggest that confronting an offender is unnecessary — that the victim can simply release the offense inwardly without any external engagement. The Nathan narrative challenges this at its root. David's restoration required confrontation. The prophet's courage in speaking truth to the most powerful man in Israel was not cruelty — it was the means by which David's severely estranged relationship with God was restored. Psalm 51's deepest anxiety is not fear of eternal condemnation but fear of relational and covenantal rupture:

"Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me" (51:11). What was at stake was not David's eternal standing before God but the living fellowship, Spirit-empowered obedience, and covenantal intimacy that had defined him as a man after God's own heart — and which unconfessed, unrepented sin had deeply broken. Nathan's confrontation was the instrument through which that broken fellowship could be restored.

David's Repentance — Genuine and Immediate

David's response to Nathan's confrontation is the model of genuine repentance in the Old Testament. He does not deflect, minimize, rationalize, or counter-accuse. He says simply: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13). It is brief, unqualified, and directed precisely where the sin ultimately lies — against God. This is the same recognition that Psalm 51 develops at length:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,

so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment." (Psalm 51:1-4)

Several features of this repentance deserve attention. First, David appeals to God's character — steadfast love, abundant mercy — rather than to his own merit. He brings nothing to the transaction except his acknowledged guilt. Second, the confession is specific and unsparing: "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." There is no attempt to frame the sin more favorably or to distribute responsibility. Third, the covenantal dimension is explicit: "Against you, you only, have I sinned." As we noted in Chapter One, this is not a denial of the real harm done to Bathsheba and Uriah — it is a recognition of the ultimate theological nature of all sin.

Psalm 51 continues with a remarkable prayer for inner transformation rather than merely external forgiveness:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit." (Psalm 51:10-12)

This is precisely the heart language of Matthew 18:35 in its Old Testament form. David is not asking merely for legal acquittal — he is asking for genuine inner transformation, a new heart, a renewed spirit. This is what forgiving from the heart requires and what genuine repentance seeks. The penitent understands that the problem is not merely the offense but the heart from which the offense arose.

Divine Forgiveness — Immediate and Unreserved upon Repentance

Nathan's response to David's confession is equally instructive: "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Samuel 12:13). The forgiveness is immediate — it follows the confession without delay, without a probationary period, without additional conditions. The moment David acknowledges his sin genuinely, the divine forgiveness is pronounced. This is the pattern of conditional forgiveness at its most clear: the condition is met, and forgiveness follows at once.

This does not mean the consequences of sin are eliminated. Nathan immediately adds that the child born of the union will die, and that the sword will not depart from David's house. Forgiveness and consequences coexist. God's forgiveness removes the guilt and restores the relationship;

it does not reverse the natural and judicial consequences that sin sets in motion. This distinction — between forgiveness and the removal of consequences — is crucial for pastoral practice and directly refutes the common objection that conditional forgiveness is too harsh.

The David narrative therefore encodes the complete conditional forgiveness cycle with unusual clarity: sin committed in full knowledge, a cover-up maintained despite what may have been acute inner anguish (as Psalm 32 suggests), prophetic confrontation naming the sin, genuine repentance with full acknowledgment, immediate divine forgiveness, ongoing consequences. Every element contributes to our understanding of what forgiveness is and how it works — and every element supports the conditional rather than the unconditional model. Chapter Eight will extend this principle further through the case of Saul of Tarsus, who represents a more theologically complex version of the same pattern: genuine forgiveness and genuine commission coexisting not merely with consequences but with consequences that are transfigured by grace into something redemptive for the very community that was wronged.

Saul and Samuel — The Counter-Case: When Repentance Is Absent

The David narrative shows what conditional forgiveness looks like when the condition is met. The account of Saul's disobedience and Samuel's confrontation in 1 Samuel 15 shows what happens when it is not. The two episodes are structurally almost identical — a prophet confronts a king about a specific act of disobedience — and yet their outcomes diverge radically. The contrast is not incidental. It is theologically precise, and it validates the conditional forgiveness framework from both directions simultaneously.

The Sin and the Confrontation

God commands Saul through Samuel to utterly destroy the Amalekites — their people, their livestock, everything. Saul partially obeys: he destroys the people but spares the best of the livestock and keeps Agag, the Amalekite king, alive. When Samuel arrives, Saul greets him with a declaration that is almost darkly comic in its confidence: "I have performed the commandment of the Lord" (1 Samuel 15:13). Samuel's reply cuts through it at once: "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" (15:14). The evidence of disobedience is audible.

Saul's response is immediate — but it is not repentance. He deflects: “The people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God” (15:15). The structure is revealing. First, he distributes responsibility to the people, removing himself from the centre of the decision. Second, he supplies a religious rationale — the animals were spared for sacrifice — that reframes the disobedience as devotion. Third, and most telling, he calls the Lord “your God” rather than “my God”: a distancing that may be unconscious but is theologically significant. This is not the voice of a man who has come face to face with his sin. It is the voice of a man managing the optics of it.

Samuel's Verdict — Obedience Better Than Sacrifice

Samuel's response to Saul's excuse-making is one of the most searching prophetic pronouncements in the Old Testament:

“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected

*the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you
from being king.” (1 Samuel 15:22–23)*

The prophetic logic here is precise. Saul’s religious rationale — that the animals were spared for sacrifice — receives a direct theological rebuttal: sacrifice offered in disobedience is not worship; it is a counter that Saul is trying to play against God’s explicit command. Samuel names the underlying reality: this is not piety, it is presumption. And presumption is, in God’s reckoning, equivalent to idolatry — the placing of one’s own judgment above the divine word. The consequence is announced without delay: because you have rejected the word of the Lord, the Lord has rejected you from being king.

Saul’s “Repentance” — Admission Without Contrition

At this point Saul does say the words “I have sinned” (1 Samuel 15:24). On the surface this resembles David’s confession. But the context reveals that the similarity is superficial. Saul’s admission is immediately hedged: “I feared the people and obeyed their voice” (15:24). The confession deflects responsibility even as it acknowledges guilt — the sin is admitted, but it is the people’s fault. More telling still is what follows: “Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the Lord”

(15:25). The request for pardon is real enough; but the primary concern appears to be the restoration of Samuel's presence before the elders and the people. Saul's immediate preoccupation is his public standing, not his standing before God.

When Samuel turns to leave, Saul seizes the hem of his robe and it tears. Samuel interprets the torn robe as a sign: "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you" (15:28). Saul responds: "I have sinned; yet honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord your God" (15:30). The repetition of "your God" rather than "my God" is again conspicuous, and the primary concern — honour before the elders — is explicitly stated. This is the shape of Saul's repentance: acknowledgment of sin coupled with concern for reputation, deflection of responsibility, and no evidence of the broken and contrite heart that characterises David's response to Nathan.

The Consequence That Stands

The critical theological difference from the David narrative is what happens after the admission. When David says "I have sinned against the Lord," Nathan's reply is

immediate: “The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die” (2 Samuel 12:13). There is no comparable divine word of forgiveness and restoration in Saul’s account. Samuel does return with Saul at his request — but only so that Saul may fulfil the killing of Agag that Saul had left undone. The kingdom is not restored. The Spirit of the Lord departs from Saul (1 Samuel 16:14). God does not relent from the announced consequence. The judgment announced — that the kingdom is torn from Saul — stands, precisely because the repentance that might have called forth a different response was never genuinely given.

What the Counter-Case Teaches

Several important theological points emerge from the contrast. First, God is not indifferent to the difference between genuine repentance and its simulacrum. Saul’s account makes clear that the words “I have sinned” are not sufficient on their own. What God responds to is not the verbal formula but the heart reality behind it — the broken and contrite spirit that David exemplifies and Saul conspicuously lacks. The unconditional forgiveness model, taken to its logical conclusion, would require God to respond identically to David’s genuine brokenness and Saul’s self-protective admission. The text will not permit this reading.

Second, this is not a case of God being harsh or arbitrary. Samuel had given Saul the specific divine command; Saul had consciously deviated from it; he had initially denied any wrongdoing; and when pressed, his admission was hedged with deflection and preoccupied with appearances. At every point the pattern is the opposite of David's. The consequence stands not because God is unmerciful but because mercy, biblically understood, is not unconditional indifference to the condition of the sinner's heart. It is the response of a holy God to the opened, broken, surrendered heart — the heart that David brought and Saul did not.

Chapter Three: The New Testament Theology of Divine Forgiveness

The New Testament does not overturn the Old Testament pattern of conditional divine forgiveness — it fulfills and deepens it. Christ's atonement provides the basis on which the divine offer of forgiveness can be extended with unprecedented lavishness and universality. But the conditions on the reception of that forgiveness — repentance and faith — are not abolished. They are, if anything, made more explicit.

Repentance and Forgiveness in the Synoptic Gospels

John the Baptist's ministry begins with a call to "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4) — the connection between the two is structural from the outset. Jesus' own inaugural proclamation — "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17) — continues this pattern. The kingdom's arrival does not dissolve the call to repentance; it intensifies it.

The book of Acts presents the apostolic proclamation in the same terms. Peter's Pentecost sermon concludes with

the command: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The connection between repentance and forgiveness is not incidental — it is the structure of the proclamation. Paul at Athens declares that God "commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). The universal offer is matched by the universal condition.

John's Gospel — Forgiveness and the Spirit

John's Gospel presents the forgiveness commission in its most explicit and theologically concentrated form. In John 20:22-23, the risen Jesus breathes on the disciples and says:

"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:22-23)

Three observations arise immediately from this text. First, the commission is explicitly bilateral — both forgiving and withholding are presented as legitimate and Spirit-empowered acts. The community is not merely commissioned to forgive; it is commissioned to exercise discernment about when forgiveness is and is not

appropriate. Second, the commission is Spirit-empowered — the breath of the Spirit precedes and grounds the authority to forgive. This is not a human authority but a divinely delegated one, which means the conditions under which the divine pattern operates remain in force. Third, the withholding is explicitly authorized — "if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." An unconditional forgiveness theology that prohibits ever withholding forgiveness would prohibit an act that the risen Christ explicitly authorizes.

This Johannine commission is the counterpart to Matthew 18:18's binding and loosing — the authorization of the community's forgiveness and withholding as a Spirit-empowered act with genuine theological weight. The precise language of Matthew 18:18 is examined in detail in Chapter Four.

The Pattern for Human Forgiveness

Before developing the three dimensions of the relationship between divine and human forgiveness, a clarification is needed that will prevent a serious misreading of the argument that follows. The book does not claim that human forgiveness is identical to divine forgiveness. Human forgiveness is analogical to divine forgiveness — modeled on

it, participating in it, reflecting its structure — but the two are not the same in every respect. God forgives with perfect knowledge of the offender's heart, perfect discernment of genuine repentance, and absolute judicial authority over moral reality. We forgive as image-bearers imitating our Creator, not as judges exercising divine authority — which means our discernment of repentance will always be imperfect, the community's exercise of the authority to forgive and withhold forgiveness is derivative and fallible, and the pastoral application of conditional forgiveness requires humility, patience, and a genuine orientation toward restoration. These asymmetries are real and must be respected. The conditions on forgiveness are not weapons for the offended party to wield. They are the structure within which genuine restoration — which requires God's grace in both parties — becomes possible.

The argument of this book does not collapse these asymmetries. It claims something more modest and more carefully calibrated: that the pattern of divine forgiveness — conditioned on genuine repentance, responsive to genuine turning — is the pattern that human forgiveness is called to follow. Not because we are God, but because we are His representatives, called to reflect His character and extend His covenantal structure into the community of faith. The

differences between divine and human forgiveness do not eliminate this structural parallel — they give it its proper theological weight. We forgive in the way God forgives precisely because we are not God, and therefore must follow His pattern rather than devise our own.

These observations establish the God-centered framework within which human forgiveness operates. When Paul commands believers to forgive as God in Christ forgave them, the model he is pointing to is not a blanket unconditional pronouncement applied regardless of response. It is the pattern of lavish, eagerly offered, genuinely gracious forgiveness that is completed in its reception through repentance and faith.

Human forgiveness follows this pattern: the attitude of mercy and readiness to forgive is unconditional — the wronged party maintains no malice, pursues the offender's repentance actively, and holds the offer genuinely open. But the formal pronouncement of forgiveness — the completion of the relational and moral transaction — awaits the repentance that makes genuine restoration possible.

**KEY INSIGHT: THREE THINGS THE BIBLE
KEEPS DISTINCT**

The attitude of mercy — an unconditional inner orientation of goodwill toward the offender. The offer of forgiveness — genuinely holding forgiveness open for the offender to receive. The pronouncement of forgiveness — the formal two-party act that completes the transaction. Most confusion about forgiveness comes from collapsing these three into one.

This framework is further reinforced by James 4:11-12, which establishes that just as believers have no independent authority to judge — that authority belonging to God alone, the one Lawgiver who has power to save and destroy — so they have no independent authority to forgive of themselves. Both judgment and forgiveness are divine prerogatives in which human beings participate only under divine authorization and in accordance with divinely established conditions. The community that pronounces forgiveness or withholds it is acting not as an autonomous moral agent but as the authorized representative of the one Judge and Lawgiver — which is precisely what Matthew 18:18's binding and loosing language encodes.

The Structure of Pauline Forgiveness

Paul's treatment of forgiveness is embedded in his broader teaching on salvation — justification by faith. The forgiveness of sins is part of what it means to be justified —

declared righteous before God — and justification is received through faith, which Paul consistently links with repentance as the responsive turning of the whole person toward God.

The key text for interpersonal forgiveness is Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Conditional forgiveness advocates and unconditional forgiveness advocates both appeal to this verse, but the conditional reading is more precise and more exegetically grounded. The comparison — "just as in Christ God forgave you" — points to a specific kind of forgiveness: the forgiveness that God extended in Christ, which was available to all but applied to those who received it through repentance and faith. Human forgiveness is to follow the same pattern — genuinely offered, eagerly extended, but transactionally completed in response to repentance.

Romans 3:21-26 — Justification and Forgiveness as Parallel Concepts

One further passage grounds the conditional forgiveness argument in the heart of Pauline theology. Romans 3:21-26 is the most concentrated statement of the doctrine of justification in the New Testament — and

justification and forgiveness are parallel concepts that illuminate each other directly.

Paul writes: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." Justification — being declared righteous before God — is the legal dimension of what forgiveness accomplishes. Both describe the same underlying reality from different angles: the debt of sin is addressed, the offender is declared free of its guilt, and the broken relationship with God is restored.

The significance for the forgiveness debate is this: justification is explicitly conditioned on faith — "to be received by faith." The propitiation Christ accomplished is not automatically applied to every person regardless of their response. It is received through faith — which is to say, through repentance and trust. If justification — the declaration of righteousness — requires faith, and if justification and forgiveness are parallel concepts, then the conditional structure of forgiveness is grounded not merely in pastoral wisdom or Old Testament pattern but in the very center of New Testament soteriology. The forgiveness God extends is not unconditional in the sense of bypassing the

human response of repentance and faith. It is conditioned on precisely that response — which is why the call to forgive as God forgives is a call to conditional forgiveness, not unconditional.

There is also an asymmetry in divine reconciliation worth noting. In the divine-human relationship, the offense is entirely unidirectional: humanity has offended God, but God has not offended humanity. This means that in divine reconciliation, only one side needs to be satisfied — God's justice and holiness, which have been violated by human sin. The cross satisfies that side. Human reconciliation with God is therefore possible the moment repentance and faith bring the human person into alignment with what Christ has already accomplished. In human relationships, by contrast, both parties are fallen and both may have contributed to the breakdown — which means the restoration of genuine fellowship may be more complex and may require more than a single act of forgiveness from one side. This asymmetry explains why divine forgiveness can be extended fully and completely the moment repentance occurs, while human reconciliation sometimes requires the longer work of demonstrated change and rebuilt trust that Part Four of this book addresses.

This framework established, we turn to a key Pauline text that the unconditional forgiveness position frequently marshals: Romans 5:8.

Romans 5:8 and the Timing of Grace

The unconditional forgiveness advocate's strongest Pauline text is Romans 5:8: "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This is taken to show that God moved toward us before our repentance, establishing the precedent for unconditional human forgiveness.

The conditional reading, however, is more precise. Romans 5:8 speaks of the timing of Christ's atoning death — he died for sinners before they repented. But the application of that atonement in justification and forgiveness follows repentance and faith (cf. Romans 3:21-26, 5:1). God's movement toward sinners in the atonement establishes the offer and makes it genuinely available — but the forgiveness itself is received, not assumed. The distinction between the provision of forgiveness and its application is crucial and is consistently maintained throughout the New Testament.

Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4 — Forgiveness in the New Community

Paul's household code passages in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 4 embed the forgiveness command in the context of the new community's corporate life, and the framing they provide illuminates both the unconditional and conditional dimensions of forgiveness in a single passage. Colossians 3:12-14 provides the fullest account:

*"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."
(Colossians 3:12-13)*

Three features of this passage are directly relevant to the book's argument. First, forgiveness is embedded in a larger list of relational virtues — compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience — that together constitute the character of the new community. This means the attitude of mercy and readiness to forgive is not an isolated command but part of a whole orientation of the heart that characterizes those who have been clothed in Christ. The unconditional dimension — this inner attitude — is presented as part of the community's basic character, not as a special act reserved for particular occasions.

Second, the conditional clause "if one has a complaint against another" preserves the two-sided structure of forgiveness — it takes two people. The complaint is real — the offense is not to be minimized or denied — and the forgiveness is the response to a genuine interpersonal wrong. The passage does not dissolve the moral reality of the offense into a general attitude of niceness. It acknowledges that real wrongs occur within the community and that forgiveness is the response the community is called to make.

Third, the comparison "as the Lord has forgiven you" — precisely as in Ephesians 4:32 — points back to the pattern of divine forgiveness as the model for human forgiveness. We have established throughout this chapter that divine forgiveness is genuinely gracious and lavishly offered but applied upon repentance and faith. The call to forgive as the Lord forgave therefore points toward the conditional pattern of divine forgiveness rather than away from it.

*"Forgiveness... is not the remission of the penalty... It is the restoration to favor." —
John Murray, Collected Writings*

PART TWO
The Key Passages

Chapter Four: Matthew 18 — The Architecture of Forgiveness

Matthew 18 is the most theologically rich and literarily sophisticated passage on forgiveness in the New Testament. It is also the most misread — typically mined for individual verses without attention to the architecture that gives those verses their meaning. A close reading of the chapter as a whole reveals a unified theological argument of considerable depth and coherence.

The Opening Question and Its Inversion (18:1-5)

The chapter opens with the disciples asking Jesus: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" The question reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the kingdom's value system. The disciples are operating within conventional categories of status, honor, and achievement. Jesus' response demolishes the framework behind the question rather than simply answering it.

Jesus calls a child and places the child in the midst of the disciples. In first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, a child had no legal standing, no social status, no power to reciprocate or reward, and no claim to greatness by any conventional measure. By pointing to the child as the model of kingdom greatness, Jesus enacts a total inversion of the disciples' assumed value system.

The welcoming language of verse 5 is covenantally loaded: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." Jesus identifies himself with the vulnerable, the statusless, the dependent. This identification is not incidental — it governs everything that follows in the chapter. The little ones are not just children; they are a representative figure for the entire category of the vulnerable, the marginalized, and those of low social standing. And Jesus has placed his own identity in solidarity with them.

The Two-Audience Structure: "Anyone" versus "You" (18:6-10)

The chapter then moves to the severe warning about causing little ones to stumble (*skandalizō*), and here a grammatical distinction that most readers miss becomes crucial. Verse 6 uses an indefinite construction — "whoever

causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble" — while verse 10 switches to direct second-person address: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones."

This is a deliberate two-audience structure. The indefinite "whoever" of verse 6 casts the widest possible net — it is not addressed specifically to the disciples. The direct "you" of verse 10 addresses them specifically. The shift in grammatical person signals a shift in the intended audience.

When we read the broader Matthean narrative, the natural referents for the indefinite "anyone" of verse 6 become clear. Matthew has been building a sustained portrait of the Pharisees and scribes as the primary agents of *skandalon* against the people. By chapter 18 the reader has encountered:

Matthew 15:12-14: The disciples report that the Pharisees were "scandalized" by Jesus' teaching. Jesus responds by calling them blind guides who cause others to fall into a pit — using the same root, *skandalon*.

Matthew 16:23: Jesus calls Peter *skandalon* when he adopts the perspective of worldly power rather than the kingdom's inverted values — the only disciple to receive this label.

Matthew 23: The sustained woe oracle against the scribes and Pharisees, culminating in the accusation that they shut the kingdom of heaven against people and prevent others from entering.

The phrase "who believe in me" — *tōn pisteuontōn eis eme* — further supports this reading. It identifies the little ones specifically as believers in Jesus. Those who cause them to stumble are therefore, by implication, those outside this circle of faith — precisely the religious establishment whose power over ordinary Jewish people could be used to destroy their faith.

Skandalizō versus Hamartanō: A Crucial Vocabulary Distinction

The vocabulary of verses 6-9 is equally significant. Matthew uses *skandalizō* — the stumbling-block language — rather than *hamartanō*, the straightforward word for sinning that appears in verses 15 and 21. This is not stylistic variation.

Skandalizō carries a richer, more relational, and more causative meaning than simple sinning. It refers to causing someone to trip over an obstacle placed in their path, luring someone into a snare, destroying someone's faith, causing someone to fall away from their relationship

with Christ entirely. The offense is not merely rule-breaking — it is actively becoming the occasion of another person's spiritual destruction.

The shift in vocabulary therefore precisely tracks a shift in the moral situation being addressed:

Skandalizō (verses 6-9): Your destructive causative action toward another's faith — addressed to "anyone," including those with power over the little ones.

Hamartanō (verses 15 and 21): Their transgression against you personally — addressed to the disciples about how to handle wrongs within the community.

Matthew is making a deliberate moral distinction between two categorically different situations that require different responses. The severe condemnatory language of the millstone warning is appropriate for the *skandalon* offense because it involves the destruction of someone's very faith — and because Jesus has identified himself with the little ones being destroyed.

The Lost Sheep: The Chapter's Theological Center (18:10-14)

The Father's will is that none of the little ones be lost. Every element of the forgiveness process in Matthew 18 exists to serve that one goal.

The parable of the lost sheep in verses 10-14 sits at the structural heart of the chapter and provides the theological framework within which everything else must be understood. Verse 14 makes the governing principle explicit: "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."

The Father's will becomes the moral standard against which all subsequent behavior in the chapter is measured. Every question the chapter addresses — how to handle scandal, when and how to confront, how to exercise binding and loosing authority, how many times to forgive — must be evaluated against this stated divine will that none of the little ones be lost.

This has a crucial implication for understanding conditional forgiveness. The purpose of the conditions on forgiveness — the requirement of repentance — is not to

protect the wronged party's dignity or to exact some moral toll from the offender. It is to serve the recovery of the lost sheep. The conditions are in service of the very restoration that forgiveness aims to accomplish. This is why Bonhoeffer's cheap grace critique is relevant here — unconditional forgiveness, by removing the conditions, may actually undermine the recovery of the lost one by eliminating the moral seriousness that might lead to genuine repentance and genuine restoration.

The Discipline Process and Binding/Loosing (18:15-20)

The discipline process of verses 15-20 is typically read as a legal procedure for punishing wrongdoers, but within the chapter's framework it is better understood as a structured process for recovering the lost sheep. The goal Jesus states explicitly is "you have gained your brother" (verse 15) — recovery and restoration, not punishment.

The three stages — private confrontation, two or three witnesses, the whole church — represent an escalating effort to bring the offender to repentance. Each stage gives the offender another opportunity to acknowledge the wrong and be restored. The community acts as shepherd, pursuing the lost one with increasing urgency.

Verses 18-19 then provide the theological authorization for this process:

"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."

The grammar here, as noted in our introduction, is crucial. The perfect passive participles — *estai dedemenon* and *estai lelumenon* — indicate that the earthly binding and loosing participates in and reflects what heaven has already authorized. The community is not creating forgiveness or withholding it arbitrarily — it is acting as the agent of a divine order that has established the conditions under which forgiveness operates.

This gives the forgiveness that follows repentance a genuine theological weight. When the community forgives the repentant offender, they are not merely making a psychological or relational gesture — they are enacting a transaction that heaven itself ratifies. And when they maintain the binding against the unrepentant, they are not being harsh — they are faithfully holding the conditions that the divine order has established.

Peter's Question and the Seventy Times Seven (18:21-22)

Peter's question — "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" — is a test of whether the lesson of the chapter has been absorbed. It reveals that Peter is still operating within the counting and measuring framework that the chapter's opening was meant to dismantle. He is still thinking about his own rights, his own limits, where his obligation ends.

A child does not ask how many times a parent must forgive before the obligation expires. Peter's question betrays the disciples' continued attachment to the greatness framework — the competitive, hierarchical, rights-based way of thinking about relationships — that Jesus addressed at the chapter's beginning.

Jesus' answer — "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (or seventy times seven) — is not a new higher number. It is a refusal of the counting framework entirely. The point is not a larger limit but the abolition of limit-setting as a category for thinking about forgiveness within the community. The willingness to forgive must be as

inexhaustible as the need for it — which is what the parable that follows illustrates.

Crucially, the context of Peter's question is the discipline process just described. He is asking about a brother who sins against him — *hamartanō*, the relational offense within the community — not about the catastrophic *skandalon* offense addressed in verses 6-9. And the seventy times seven is the answer to how many times a repentant offender must be forgiven — not how many times forgiveness must be pronounced regardless of repentance. Luke 17:3-4's parallel makes this explicit, as the following chapter will show.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35)

The closing parable draws every thread of the chapter together with extraordinary coherence. The servant who was forgiven an unpayable debt — ten thousand talents, an astronomical sum — then throttled his fellow servant for a trivial hundred denarii has failed at precisely the transformation demanded in verse 3. He received the king's forgiveness as an external transaction without it producing the fundamental reorientation of values that genuine encounter with the kingdom requires.

His failure is not merely a failure of generosity. It is a failure to enter the kingdom's value system at all. He is still operating within the greatness framework — asserting his rights, counting and measuring what others owe him, using power over the vulnerable. The king's response is severe: "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?" (verse 33).

It is worth pressing the parable's conditional structure more precisely than is usually done. The king forgave the servant because he "pleaded" with him — prostrating himself, acknowledging the debt, appealing for patience. This pleading is repentance: the servant acknowledged what he owed, submitted himself to the king's judgment, and begged for mercy. The king's forgiveness was lavish and unreserved — but it was given in response to that genuine acknowledgment and appeal. When the king then says "should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave in the same way that I had mercy on you?" — the "same way" includes the responsive structure of the king's forgiveness, not merely its generosity. The servant was expected to treat his fellow servant in like manner: ready to forgive lavishly when his fellow servant acknowledged the debt and appealed for mercy, just as he himself had acknowledged and appealed.

This precision matters because the parable is often read as supporting the causal argument for unconditional forgiveness — you have been forgiven a large debt, therefore forgive others regardless of whether they repent. But the parable's own logic does not support that reading. The king's forgiveness was not unconditional. It was responsive to genuine acknowledgment and appeal. The servant was condemned not simply for withholding forgiveness but for withholding forgiveness from a fellow servant who, like himself, had acknowledged the debt and appealed for mercy — "Have patience with me, and I will pay you" (verse 29). This is the same language the servant himself had used with the king (verse 26). The parallel is exact and deliberate. The lesson is not "forgive unconditionally" but "forgive as you have been forgiven" — which means forgiving in response to the same kind of acknowledgment and appeal that moved the king to forgive you.

The parallel with Jonah is illuminating here. Jonah knew perfectly well that God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster" (Jonah 4:2) — and it was precisely this knowledge that made him resist going to Nineveh. He did not want God's mercy extended to his enemies. His failure was not ignorance of grace but a hardness that refused to let the

experience of grace transform his orientation toward those he despised. The unforgiving servant's failure is the same: he had experienced the king's mercy and it produced no corresponding mercy in him. Both Jonah and the unforgiving servant are presented by Scripture not as theological errors to be corrected but as failures of character — warnings against the hardness of heart that receives grace without being changed by it.

Verse 35 — "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" — brings the heart language into play. "From the heart" in Biblical anthropology does not primarily mean emotionally or feelingly. The heart (*kardia*) is the seat of will, moral reasoning, covenantal commitment, and the whole inner person as oriented toward God. Forgiving from the heart means having one's entire moral orientation reshaped by the experience of having been forgiven an unpayable debt — which is the transformation the servant failed to undergo.

The parable therefore defines what genuine forgiveness requires: not merely a verbal or formal pronouncement, but a transformed orientation toward the offender that reflects the kingdom's inverted values. This is what distinguishes genuine forgiveness from cheap grace —

the pronouncement corresponds to a real moral and relational reality, grounded in genuine transformation, not merely a therapeutic release or a performative gesture.

The Chapter's Unified Argument

Matthew 18 presents a unified theological argument about the nature of the Christian community and its practice of forgiveness:

The kingdom operates by a completely inverted value system in which the vulnerable, dependent, and statusless are the measure of greatness. Jesus identifies himself with these little ones. Those who destroy the faith of the vulnerable — the *skandalon* offenders, who are primarily the powerful outsiders — face severe divine judgment. The community's responsibility is to protect the little ones and to seek the lost sheep.

Within the community, wrongs between members are to be addressed through a structured process of confrontation, escalation, and restoration — all in service of recovering the lost sheep. The community exercises binding and loosing authority that participates in divine authorization. This authority is in service of restoration, not punishment.

Forgiveness within this community is to be inexhaustible in willingness, properly conditioned on repentance in its formal pronouncement, and genuinely transformative in its motivation — arising from the experience of having been forgiven an unpayable debt rather than from therapeutic calculation or social obligation.

It is worth noting that Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* — widely regarded as his most theologically serious treatment of forgiveness — enacts almost precisely this structure in dramatic form. The Duke's elaborate scheme to bring the corrupt Angelo to genuine exposure and acknowledgment before Isabella pronounces forgiveness is a dramatic rendering of the Matthew 18 process: confrontation, escalation, community involvement, and the conditional pronouncement of forgiveness following genuine reckoning. Shakespeare understood, as Matthew 18 teaches, that genuine restoration requires something real from the offender — and that a forgiveness pronounced before that real thing has occurred is not yet the forgiveness that restores.

A Common Misreading — Is Matthew 18 Only About Church Discipline?

A significant interpretive objection to the conditional forgiveness reading of Matthew 18 holds that the chapter addresses two distinct and separable topics. On this reading, verses 15-20 concern church discipline — the formal community process for handling serious sin within the community — while verses 21-35 concern personal forgiveness, which is a separate matter governed by different rules. The discipline process may require repentance for restoration; but personal forgiveness, on this reading, is unconditional and independent of repentance. This is a documented position in popular evangelical teaching and deserves direct engagement, because it is the most sophisticated version of the argument that Matthew 18 does not establish the conditional forgiveness framework the book has been arguing for.

The reading has a genuine observation behind it. Verses 15-20 do describe a community process with recognized authority — two or three witnesses, the gathered *ekklesia*, binding and loosing. And Peter's question in verse 21 — "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" — does shift to the personal and individual register. These observations are correct. The problem is the conclusion drawn from them: that because Peter's question

is personal, the forgiveness it addresses is therefore unconditional.

The Inseparability of Verses 15-20 and 21-35

The most fundamental problem with this reading is that it severs what the text deliberately joins. Peter's question in verse 21 is not a change of subject — it is a direct response to the discipline teaching that immediately precedes it. The word "then" — Greek *tote* — signals temporal and logical sequence, not a fresh departure. Peter has just heard Jesus describe a process of repeated confrontation aimed at winning back an erring brother. He immediately asks: how many times must I go through this? Seven times? The seventy times seven answer is the culmination of the discipline teaching, not a replacement for it. The forgiveness instruction does not stand alone — it answers the question the discipline process raises. How can the two be separated when one is the explicit follow-up question to the other?

The Personal Beginning of the Process

A second problem is that the discipline process itself begins personally. Matthew 18:15 opens: "If your brother sins against you" — the Greek is *eis se*, against you personally. The first stage of the process is explicitly

personal: one wronged individual going privately to one offending individual. There is no community involvement at all at stage one. The community enters only at stages two and three, when the personal approach has failed. If the process addressed only church-level institutional sins rather than personal wrongs, why does it begin with a private meeting between two individuals? The private personal confrontation is not a preliminary formality before the real church process begins — it is the primary and structurally most important stage, precisely because it is personal.

A textual note is worth making here. The phrase "against you" is present in the majority of Greek manuscripts but absent from several early witnesses, which is why some translations — including the NASB — place it in a footnote rather than the main text. A reader using the NASB might therefore wonder whether the personal application of Matthew 18 depends on a contested reading. It does not. Even without the words "against you," the passage still describes a specific interpersonal offense by one community member against another — a brother sinning is a relational event, not an institutional one. More importantly, the first stage of the process — "go and show him his fault in private" — is inherently personal regardless of the textual variant. You cannot go privately to a person

about an offense against the church as an institution. The private one-on-one confrontation of stage one establishes the personal character of the situation beyond any textual dispute. And Luke 17:3-4 — examined below — settles the personal application question independently, since it conditions forgiveness on repentance in a context with no community apparatus at all and no equivalent textual variant.

The Text Does Not Change the Conditions When It Changes the Register

The most decisive exegetical point against the two-categories reading is this: when the text does shift to the personal register in verse 21, it does not change the conditions on forgiveness. The shift from community process to personal question does not introduce unconditional forgiveness — it introduces the seventy times seven standard of inexhaustible forgiveness. And that inexhaustible forgiveness is still consistently structured around the offender's repentance. The parable of the unforgiving servant does not describe a master who forgave unconditionally without any response from the servant — it describes a master whose forgiveness was met with the servant's appeal for patience: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything" (18:26). The servant engaged the

master; the debt was cancelled in response. When the seventy times seven is applied to personal offenses, it describes unlimited responsiveness to repentance — not unlimited pronouncement regardless of repentance.

Luke 17 Closes the Argument

If any doubt remained that the conditional structure applies to personal offenses, Luke 17:3-4 resolves it definitively. Luke's version of the same teaching contains no community process, no witnesses, no *ekklesia*, no binding and loosing. It is a direct personal instruction: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." The conditions are explicit. The context is entirely personal. And the teaching is precisely parallel to Matthew 18. If Matthew 18's conditions only applied to church-level matters, Luke 17's version — which has no community apparatus at all — would have to mean something entirely different from Matthew 18. But they are the same teaching in two different forms. The conditional structure is intrinsic to the teaching itself, not to the community framework that Matthew 18 provides for its more formal applications.

The argument that Matthew 18 concerns only church discipline, and that personal offenses therefore require unconditional forgiveness, correctly observes that

community process is involved in Matthew 18 while incorrectly concluding that personal forgiveness operates by different conditions. The community process of Matthew 18 is not an alternative to personal forgiveness — it is the structured framework within which personal forgiveness operates when the initial personal approach is insufficient. The conditions are the same throughout: repentance enables restoration, inexhaustible willingness awaits it, and the community stands ready to assist when the personal approach alone cannot achieve it.

Matthew 5:23-24 — The Offender's Obligation

"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

Matthew 18:15 addresses the wronged person: if your brother sins against you, go to him. Matthew 5:23-24 addresses the offending person: if your brother has something against you, go to him. Together these two passages create a complete bilateral picture of the obligation

to pursue reconciliation — and their juxtaposition in Matthew's Gospel is theologically deliberate.

The significance of Matthew 5:23-24 for the forgiveness debate is frequently overlooked. The passage establishes several things that bear directly on the conditional forgiveness argument. First, the obligation to pursue reconciliation falls on both parties — not only on the wronged person. The unconditional forgiveness position tends to place all the moral weight on the victim: the victim must forgive, release, and move on regardless of what the offender does. Matthew 5:23-24 corrects this asymmetry directly. The offending person carries an obligation of equal urgency: go, before you offer your worship. The offender is not a passive recipient of the victim's unconditional release — they bear a covenantal responsibility to seek restoration.

Second, Jesus ranks this obligation above even the most sacred acts of worship. "Leave your gift there before the altar and go." Not "complete the offering and then go" — but abandon the offering mid-act and go first. Unresolved broken relationship is not a secondary pastoral concern to be addressed at leisure. It is a first-order theological problem that interrupts worship itself. The person who has wronged another and done nothing about it is not in a position to offer their gift as it should be offered.

Third — and this is the point most directly relevant to the forgiveness debate — Matthew 5:23-24 presupposes that the reconciliation has not yet occurred and that it requires something from the offending party. If the victim were already required to forgive unconditionally — to pronounce the relationship restored regardless of the offender's response — the offender would have nothing to go for. The relationship would already be declared restored on the victim's side. The fact that Jesus commands the offender to go and be reconciled implies that reconciliation is a genuine bilateral transaction that has not yet been accomplished. The offender's initiative and acknowledgment are necessary to make it possible. Jesus does not say "go because your victim has already forgiven you." He says "go and be reconciled" — an act that requires the participation of both.

Fourth, note the precise language Jesus uses: "if your brother has something against you" — not "if you have wronged your brother." The obligation to seek reconciliation is triggered not by the completion of a moral analysis of one's own guilt but by the simple awareness that a relationship is broken. The person who is uncertain about the extent of their fault is not relieved of the obligation. The broken relationship itself creates the obligation, independent of the final adjudication of blame. This is an

important pastoral supplement to the Chapter Fourteen material on ambiguous offenses: even where the degree of culpability is unclear, the obligation to go and seek reconciliation is clear.

Chapter Five: Luke 17:3-4 — The Explicit Conditional

If Matthew 18 provides the architectural framework for a theology of forgiveness, Luke 17:3-4 provides its clearest explicit statement. The passage is brief but exegetically decisive:

"Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4)

The If-Then Structure

The explicit if-then structure of this passage is the most direct statement of conditional forgiveness in the Gospels. Jesus frames the relationship between repentance and forgiveness with a conditional: "if he repents, forgive him." This is not an illustration of reconciliation, as some unconditional advocates suggest — it is a direct instruction about forgiveness itself.

The question of the antecedent — what happens if he does not repent — is sometimes raised as a logical objection. Some argue that because Jesus only addresses what to do when repentance occurs, we cannot infer what to do when it

does not. But this objection underestimates the force of the conditional structure in context. Several factors establish that the implication is intentional:

First, the explicit conditional "if he repents" would be meaningless as a condition if the outcome were the same regardless of whether the condition was met. Conditions in direct instruction are logically significant — the instruction "if he repents, forgive him" necessarily implies that the absence of repentance changes the situation.

Second, the parallel with divine forgiveness — which is consistently conditioned on repentance throughout Scripture — provides the theological framework within which this human instruction operates. The conditional structure of human forgiveness follows the conditional structure of divine forgiveness.

Third, the preceding verse — "pay attention to yourselves" — signals that Jesus is giving careful, precise instruction that requires deliberate attention. This is not casual speech that should be interpreted loosely.

The Seven Times in a Day

The seven-times-in-a-day illustration reinforces rather than qualifies the conditional structure. Jesus does

not say "forgive him seven times in a day regardless of whether he repents." He says "if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

The repetition of the repentance condition — turning and saying "I repent" — seven times is significant. It shows that the condition is not a one-time threshold but a consistent structural requirement. Each instance of forgiveness follows each instance of repentance. The inexhaustibility of forgiveness that Jesus commands is not independence from repentance — it is unlimited responsiveness to repentance whenever it occurs.

This perfectly parallels the seventy times seven of Matthew 18:22. Both passages describe a forgiveness that is unlimited in its willingness and responsiveness — but both locate this responsiveness in relation to the offender's turning rather than as independent of it.

The Relationship to Matthew 18

Luke 17:3-4 and Matthew 18:15-22, read together, present a coherent and mutually reinforcing account of conditional forgiveness. Matthew provides the church community framework — the discipline process, the binding

and loosing authority, the parable of the unforgiving servant. Luke provides the direct conditional instruction. Together they establish that forgiveness in the teaching of Jesus is consistently structured around the repentance of the offender, without ever suggesting that the willingness to forgive should be withheld or that malice toward the unrepentant is permissible.

The Obligation to Rebuke — The Forgotten First Step

A CLOSER LOOK: THE FORGOTTEN FIRST STEP

Jesus' instruction in Luke 17:3 begins not with "forgive" but with "rebuke." The rebuke comes first. This is not cruelty — it is the loving refusal to let someone remain in sin. Nathan rebuked David. Peter rebuked Simon. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees. Genuine love confronts; it does not simply overlook.

Luke 17:3 begins not with the command to forgive but with the command to rebuke: "If your brother sins, rebuke him." This is the step that is almost entirely missing from popular discussions of forgiveness, yet it is structurally prior to forgiveness in Jesus' instruction. The rebuke comes first.

The forgiveness follows repentance. The sequence is not accidental.

The Greek word translated "rebuke" is *epitimaō* — the same word used when Jesus rebukes demons, rebukes the storm, and rebukes Peter for his misunderstanding of the cross. It carries the sense of a sharp, direct, authoritative word that names reality clearly and calls for a response. This is not gentle suggestion or diplomatic hint. It is the loving courage of direct confrontation that names the sin and places it before the sinner's conscience.

This obligation to rebuke is itself an act of love — which is why Leviticus 19:17 places it in exactly that context: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him." The failure to rebuke is not kindness — it is a form of contempt that abandons the offender to their sin rather than seeking their genuine good. The willingness to rebuke is a prerequisite for the possibility of genuine forgiveness, because forgiveness requires that the offense be named and acknowledged rather than silently tolerated.

This is precisely the role Nathan played in David's life. He did not wait for David to repent spontaneously. He went, he named the sin with devastating precision, and he

made repentance possible. The rebuke was the necessary precondition of the forgiveness. Luke 17:3's structure — rebuke, then repentance, then forgiveness — encodes the same sequence in direct dominical instruction.

The Lukan Context — Humility and the Impossibility of the Demand

The immediate context of Luke 17:3-4 is illuminating. Jesus has just spoken about the seriousness of causing others to stumble (17:1-2) — the *skandalon* language that Matthew 18 also uses — and then gives the forgiveness instruction. What follows immediately after is equally significant: the disciples respond to Jesus' forgiveness command by saying "Increase our faith!" (17:5).

This response is pastorally honest. The disciples recognize that what Jesus is asking — rebuke, then forgive seven times in a day if the offender repents seven times — is humanly demanding to the point of impossibility. Their instinct is exactly right: this is not something that can be accomplished by mere moral effort or self-discipline. It requires a work of grace in the heart of the one who forgives.

Jesus' response — that faith the size of a mustard seed could uproot a mulberry tree — is not primarily about the quantity of faith required. It is about the sufficiency of

genuine, however small, authentic faith. The capacity to forgive the repentant sevenfold is not a natural human achievement. It is the fruit of genuine trust in the God who forgives the repentant without limit, and whose forgiveness of us is the only adequate ground for our forgiveness of others. This connects directly to the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 — the servant who had been forgiven an unpayable debt and refused to forgive a trivial one had not genuinely received what he had been given. Genuine reception of divine forgiveness produces the capacity for human forgiveness. The disciples' request for increased faith is therefore not a distraction from the forgiveness instruction but its necessary theological completion.

The reading of Luke 17:3-4 developed in this chapter — that forgiveness is explicitly and deliberately conditioned on repentance — is not a peripheral view within the evangelical tradition. It is the position of some of its most respected voices. John Stott, in his 1964 work *Confess Your Sins: The Way of Reconciliation*, writes with characteristic precision about this passage: "We are to rebuke a brother if he sins against us; we are to forgive him if he repents — and only if he repents. We must beware of cheapening forgiveness. If a brother who has sinned against us refuses

to repent, we should not forgive him. Does this startle you? It is what Jesus taught." Stott wrote these words six decades ago. They have lost none of their force.

"We are to rebuke a brother if he sins against us; we are to forgive him if he repents — and only if he repents. We must beware of cheapening forgiveness... Does this startle you? It is what Jesus taught." — John Stott, Confess Your Sins: The Way of Reconciliation

More recently, an article published on the Desiring God platform makes the same point with elegant logical precision: "Just as it would be improper to rebuke someone who has not sinned, it is likewise improper to forgive someone who has not repented." The symmetry of this formulation deserves careful attention. Luke 17:3 gives two parallel commands — rebuke the sinner, forgive the repentant — and the condition governing the second is as structurally necessary as the condition governing the first. We do not rebuke people who have done nothing wrong. By

the same grammatical and moral logic, we do not pronounce forgiveness on those who have not repented. Each act of repentance precedes each act of forgiveness, not as a bureaucratic requirement, but as the honest recognition that forgiveness is a genuine relational transaction that requires both parties to play their part.

"Just as it would be improper to rebuke someone who has not sinned, it is likewise improper to forgive someone who has not repented... each act of repentance precedes each act of forgiveness." — Desiring God

The Hidden Asymmetry: Which Path Is Actually Harder?

Before turning to James 5:19-20 directly, a prior question needs to be addressed honestly: which path is actually harder — unconditional private forgiveness or the conditional biblical process? The therapeutic model consistently presents unconditional forgiveness as the courageous and demanding spiritual discipline — the heroic inner work of releasing resentment regardless of what the

offender does or says. Lewis Smedes builds his entire framework around this presentation. Forgiving is hard, he argues, because you must do it alone, by an act of interior will, without any cooperation from the offender.

But consider what the Matthew 18 process actually requires. Go to your brother. Tell him his fault. Name what he did. Wait to see whether he repents. If he repents, forgive him — to his face, in the relationship, with full relational exposure. This means initiating a conversation the other person may not welcome. It means risking denial — being told you are wrong, oversensitive, or at fault. It means risking counter-accusation. It means not knowing how the conversation will go. It means being emotionally vulnerable in front of the very person who hurt you.

Unconditional private forgiveness requires none of this. It is self-contained. Nothing can go wrong. There is no confrontation, no risk of rejection, no possibility that the conversation becomes painful in new and unforeseen ways. The offended party processes everything alone, reaches resolution alone, and moves forward — entirely on their own terms, entirely in their own control. The one thing it does not require is the one thing Matthew 18 commands: go to your brother.

The empirical research on conflict avoidance bears this out with striking force. A 2026 national survey found that 85 percent of Americans had avoided at least one conversation in the previous month because it might lead to conflict — with more than a third doing so four or more times. Sixty-one percent regularly conclude that difficult conversations are simply "not worth getting into." Behavioral scientists at the University of Chicago identify the core driver: people avoid confrontation because "you don't know if someone will blame you back or get upset — you're not prepared for all the different turns a conversation could take, which leads you to avoid them." As psychologist Jennice Vilhauer puts it: "A lot of people anticipate that talking about how they feel is going to be a confrontation. That mental expectation makes people want to avoid things that make them uncomfortable."

This is not peripheral data. It is a window into why the therapeutic model is so appealing: it provides a path to resolution that sidesteps entirely the thing most people find hardest about interpersonal conflict — the face-to-face conversation with the person who wronged them. The therapeutic model calls this private resolution "forgiveness" and labels it the demanding spiritual discipline. But what it has actually done is construct a theology of forgiveness that

eliminates its hardest requirement and calls the elimination a virtue. The courage it prizes — the inner courage of releasing resentment — is real but incomplete. The courage the New Testament prizes is the harder kind: the willingness to go.

James 5:19-20 — Unconditional Forgiveness as a Failure of Love

The asymmetry identified in the previous section has a deeper theological grounding than mere psychology. James 5:19-20 provides the scriptural foundation for why the willingness to go — to confront, rebuke, and pursue the wandering brother — is not merely the harder path but the more loving one.

"My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins." (James 5:19-20)

James frames the act of pursuing a wandering sinner and calling them back to repentance as an act of rescue — "save them from death." This is not mild language. The person who is willing to confront, rebuke, and call the wandering brother or sister back to repentance is

performing an act of profound mercy. They are, in the most literal sense, participating in the rescue of another person's soul from judgment.

Now consider what unconditional forgiveness — in the therapeutic sense — actually does. It resolves the offended party's emotional relationship to the offense without doing anything to address the offender's spiritual condition. The offended person achieves inner peace. The offender continues wandering. Nothing has been said. No rebuke has been given. No call to repentance has been issued. The wandering sinner has been left to wander — and the person who privately "forgave" them unconditionally has done nothing to save them from the death that James describes.

This is not a minor observation. It means that unconditional forgiveness, presented as the more loving option, is actually a form of abandonment. To decline to rebuke is not mercy — it is, in the language of Leviticus 19:17, a form of hatred: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor." The frank reasoning — the rebuke — is what love does. Silence in the face of a brother's sin, however accompanied by inner feelings of goodwill, leaves him in his sin and his guilt unaddressed before God.

The phrase "cover over a multitude of sins" in James 5:20 is significant and connects to a text sometimes cited for the unconditional position. Proverbs 10:12 says "love covers all offenses," and 1 Peter 4:8 echoes it: "love covers a multitude of sins." These are sometimes read as endorsements of simply overlooking offenses without confrontation. But James deploys the covering language in a startlingly different way: the covering of sins occurs not through silent internal forgiveness but through the active pursuit of the wandering sinner, the willingness to rebuke, and the resulting repentance and restoration. The covering James has in mind is God's covenantal forgiveness covering the genuinely repentant sinner — accomplished through the human instrument who loved the wanderer enough to go after them. This is not therapeutic covering-over. It is the same pattern the entire book has been describing: the attitude of mercy (which sends the pursuer after the wanderer), the offer of forgiveness (extended through the rebuke and call to repentance), and the pronouncement of forgiveness (covering the sins of the one who returns). James 5:19-20 is not an exception to the conditional forgiveness framework. It is one of its most powerful expressions — and one of the sharpest indictments of the unconditional alternative.

Chapter Six: The Corinthian Correspondence — Apostolic Forgiveness in Action

If Matthew 18 and Luke 17 provide the theological framework and direct instruction for forgiveness, the Corinthian correspondence provides something equally valuable: a real-world apostolic case study in which those principles are applied to an actual situation in an actual church. The two passages — 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 — are best read together, as they appear to address the same individual at two different stages of the same situation. Together they constitute the most detailed picture in the New Testament of the full cycle of church discipline, repentance, and restoration that Matthew 18 prescribes.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13 — The Demand for Judgment

"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:1-2)

The situation Paul addresses is shocking even by Corinthian standards. A man in the congregation is in a sexual relationship with his father's wife — almost certainly his stepmother, and almost certainly an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time offense. Paul's response is equally shocking to modern sensibilities: he demands not pastoral counseling, not gentle encouragement toward repentance, but immediate and decisive ecclesiastical action.

The Corinthian Failure: Tolerance as Arrogance

What strikes Paul most forcefully is not the sin itself but the community's response to it. They are arrogant — puffed up — apparently congratulating themselves on their tolerance and broad-mindedness. Paul's rebuke is withering: their failure to act is not gracious. It is a failure of love, a failure of responsibility, and ultimately a failure of understanding of what the church is and what it is for.

This is a direct pastoral application of the principle that unconditional tolerance of unrepentant sin is not grace — it is cheap grace in Bonhoeffer's precise sense. The Corinthians had confused the absence of judgment with the presence of love. Paul insists that genuine love for both the

offender and the community requires precisely the opposite response.

The parallel with Matthew 18's lost sheep theology is exact. The Father's will is that none of the little ones be lost. The Corinthian man is being lost — not by the community's discipline but by its silence. The community that tolerates unrepentant sin is not protecting its member. It is abandoning him to the consequences of his own rebellion.

The Apostolic Verdict: Remove Him

Paul's instruction is stark:

"When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." (1 Corinthians 5:4-5)

Several features of this instruction deserve careful attention. First, the action is communal — it is to be performed "when you are assembled," not by an individual leader acting alone. This corresponds to the final stage of the Matthew 18 process: the binding and loosing authority is exercised by the gathered community, not by private individuals. The earlier stages of Matthew 18 — private confrontation, then the witness of two or three — are

bypassed here because the sin is already public knowledge within the community, making those preparatory steps unnecessary.

Second, the purpose is explicitly redemptive — "so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." The excommunication is not punitive in the vindictive sense. It is a severe mercy — a withdrawal of community protection designed to make the man face the consequences of his rebellion and be brought to repentance. This is the lost sheep theology in its most demanding form: the shepherd does not abandon the sheep but uses whatever means are available to bring it back.

Third, the language of delivering to Satan echoes the binding and loosing framework. To be outside the church's fellowship is to be outside the sphere of its binding and loosing authority — the realm in which heaven's authorization operates in the community's actions. The removal is a solemn theological act, not merely a social sanction.

The Broader Instruction: Do Not Associate

Paul extends his instruction beyond this specific case to a general principle:

"But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler — not even to eat with such a one." (1 Corinthians 5:11)

The "not even to eat with such a one" is striking in its severity. Table fellowship in the ancient world — and in the Christian community specifically, where the shared meal was the Eucharistic center of community life — was the most intimate expression of shared identity and mutual acceptance. To refuse table fellowship was to make a definitive statement about the boundaries of the community.

This is exactly the practical outworking of Matthew 18's final stage: "let him be to you as a Gentile and tax collector." The relationship continues — Gentiles and tax collectors were not enemies to be hated — but the terms of the relationship change decisively. The unrepentant brother is no longer treated as if everything is normal within the covenant community.

Paul then makes a distinction that is exegetically crucial:

"For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to

*judge? God judges those outside." (1 Corinthians
5:12-13)*

This distinction directly illuminates the two-audience structure identified earlier in Matthew 18:6-10. The community's binding and loosing authority — its responsibility to judge and to discipline — applies within the community. Outsiders are a different category entirely, subject to God's judgment rather than the community's discipline. This is consistent with the reading adopted here that Matthew 18's *skandalizō* warning in verses 6-9 addresses outsiders who harm the little ones, while verses 10-35 address the community's internal responsibilities.

James 4:11-12's principle is also directly in view. Paul is not claiming that the community has independent judicial authority — he grounds the community's action in the name and power of the Lord Jesus (verse 4), and explicitly reserves ultimate judgment of outsiders to God. The community judges within its own sphere as God's authorized agent, not as an autonomous moral tribunal.

2 Corinthians 2:5-11 — The Demand for Forgiveness

The scholarly consensus, though not universal, identifies the offender of 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 with the man

of 1 Corinthians 5. If this identification is correct — and the weight of the argument supports it — then these two passages together provide the most complete picture of the forgiveness cycle in the entire New Testament: accountability, excommunication, repentance, and restoration.

"Now if anyone has caused grief, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure — not to put it too severely — to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him." (2 Corinthians 2:5-8)

The Situation Has Changed: Repentance Has Occurred

The most important observation about 2 Corinthians 2 is what has changed since 1 Corinthians 5. The punishment has been administered. The man has responded — and his response appears to have been genuine repentance. Paul now reverses the direction of his instruction entirely: where before he demanded removal and non-association, he now demands forgiveness, comfort, and reaffirmation of love.

This reversal is not arbitrary or sentimental. It is the logical and necessary completion of the Matthew 18 cycle.

The binding was exercised precisely in order to bring the man to repentance and restoration. Now that repentance has occurred, the continuing withholding of forgiveness would be a failure as serious as the original failure to discipline. The shepherd has found the lost sheep — and now must welcome it back.

The New Danger: Excessive Severity

Paul identifies a new pastoral danger with the same sharpness he brought to the original failure. Just as the Corinthians had erred in the direction of tolerance before, they now risk erring in the direction of excessive severity. The man "may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow." The community that correctly exercised discipline must now correctly exercise forgiveness — and the same community that was slow to discipline may now be slow to restore.

This two-directional concern is a sophisticated pastoral insight that the conditional forgiveness position handles better than either the unconditional or the moralistic alternative. Unconditional forgiveness has no mechanism for appropriate discipline — it collapses the distinction between the repentant and the unrepentant. Rigid moralism has no mechanism for genuine restoration — it mistakes the discipline for the goal rather than the

means. The Biblical pattern maintains both in proper sequence: discipline that serves restoration, and restoration that follows genuine repentance.

The Satanic Danger of Withheld Forgiveness

Paul's final observation in this passage carries theological weight that is rarely noted:

*"Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive.
Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven
anything, has been for your sake in the presence
of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by
Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs." (2
Corinthians 2:10-11)*

Paul frames the withholding of forgiveness from the repentant offender not merely as a pastoral error but as a satanic design. Satan's interest is not in discipline — it is in destruction. When the community uses the legitimate instrument of discipline beyond its proper purpose, refusing to restore the repentant, it has been weaponized by the enemy of the community it thinks it is protecting.

A critical clarification must be made here, because this is a passage that can be misread to cause serious pastoral harm. The "Satanic design" Paul identifies is the desire to see a repentant person destroyed by despair — crushed by guilt that has already been addressed, excluded

from fellowship that genuine repentance entitles them to enter. It is not a Satanic design to require time to rebuild trust after forgiveness has been pronounced. Forgiveness and trust are not the same thing. Forgiveness is the relational act that removes the barrier of guilt and hostility. Trust is rebuilt slowly, through consistent demonstrated change over time, and a forgiven person has no automatic right to immediate restoration of trust or access to positions they previously abused. A victim who says "I forgive you" while requiring a long period of demonstrated change before restoring intimacy or access is not operating under a Satanic design — they are exercising the wisdom that genuine love requires. What Paul identifies as Satanic is the refusal to forgive the genuinely repentant at all — the desire to keep them excluded and crushed indefinitely, not the careful rebuilding of trust that genuine pastoral wisdom commends.

Tolerating unrepentant sin is a Satanic design. But so is refusing to forgive the genuinely repentant. The community that

*navigates between these two errors forgives
as God forgives.*

This is a remarkable pastoral warning. It establishes that conditional forgiveness — properly understood — is not merely permissive about forgiveness when repentance occurs. It is obligatory. The community that withholds forgiveness from the genuinely repentant is not being appropriately strict. It is being outwitted by Satan. The binding was for the sake of the loosing. When the loosing is withheld after the conditions are met, the binding has been turned into an instrument of destruction rather than restoration.

The binding and loosing of Matthew 18:18 therefore cuts in both directions with equal force. Just as premature loosing — forgiving without repentance — departs from the pattern God has revealed, so continued binding after repentance — refusing to forgive the genuinely repentant — is an equal and opposite failure. Heaven ratifies both the appropriate binding and the appropriate loosing. It does not ratify either the premature loosing or the excessive binding.

The Corinthian Correspondence as a Model

Read together, 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2 provide the clearest model in the New Testament for how the conditional forgiveness framework operates in practice. Several summary observations:

The full cycle moves from tolerance/failure to discipline, through community action, through the offender's repentance, to forgiveness and restoration. Each stage is necessary and none can be collapsed into another.

The community acts throughout as the authorized agent of divine authority — in the name of the Lord Jesus, in the presence of Christ — not as an autonomous moral tribunal. James 4's principle is honored: judgment and forgiveness both originate with God and are exercised by the community only under His authorization and within His established conditions.

The purpose at every stage is redemptive — the saving of the man's spirit, his restoration to the community, his reintegration into the covenant fellowship. This is the lost sheep theology applied to the most difficult possible case: the sin was severe, the community's first response was wrong, the discipline was painful, but the outcome —

repentance and restoration — is exactly what the Father's will requires.

Finally, Paul's warning about Satanic designs cuts against both errors simultaneously. Tolerance of unrepentant sin is one design. Refusal to forgive genuine repentance is another. The community that navigates between these errors — maintaining the conditions on forgiveness without using them as instruments of ongoing punishment — is the community that forgives as God forgives.

Simon Magus — A Further Apostolic Case Study

FOR REFLECTION: THE CORINTHIAN PATTERN

The Corinthian correspondence establishes a complete apostolic precedent: the unrepentant offender is removed from fellowship (1 Corinthians 5), the repentant offender is restored with forgiveness and comfort (2 Corinthians 2), and the community plays an active role in both stages. This is not two separate decisions — it is one coherent process, the same process Matthew 18 describes.

One additional case in Acts illuminates the apostolic application of this framework at the level of a single

individual rather than a congregation. The encounter between Peter and Simon the Magician in Acts 8:9-24 is rarely included in treatments of forgiveness but is exegetically significant precisely because of its structural completeness — it contains every element of the conditional forgiveness cycle compressed into a single pastoral exchange.

Simon's prior status in Acts 8 is theologically complex. Verse 13 states that he "believed and was baptized" — language that at face value suggests genuine conversion. But the narrative immediately raises questions: his continued fascination with miraculous signs suggests his profession may have been more wonder at apostolic power than genuine repentance toward God. When he offers the apostles money for the ability to impart the Holy Spirit, Peter's diagnosis is devastating: "your heart is not right before God... you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity" (8:21, 23). Most careful commentators read Simon as either a false professor whose conversion was not genuine, or as someone in a condition of deep spiritual apostasy — a man who had made the outward profession of faith without the inward reality.

Regardless of the precise reading of Simon's status, Peter treats him as someone within the community's

jurisdiction — not as a complete outsider subject only to God's final judgment at the end of time but as a member of the believing community (at least in formal terms) who must be confronted, called to repentance, and offered forgiveness on those terms. Peter's response is worth quoting in full:

"May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." (Acts 8:20-23)

The structure of Peter's response follows the Matthew 18 framework with remarkable precision. He names the sin specifically and without softening — simony, a sin so serious it has given its name to a persistent ecclesiastical crime. He announces the consequence of that sin — "may your silver perish with you" — which functions as the binding that Matthew 18 describes. He calls explicitly for repentance. He offers forgiveness conditionally upon that repentance — "pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you." And the "if possible" is itself significant — it carries genuine uncertainty about whether

Simon's heart is capable of the genuine repentance that forgiveness requires, not a guarantee that the words of repentance will be automatically effective.

Simon's response in verse 24 is equally instructive for what it reveals about the nature of his condition: "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." He asks for the consequences to be averted without expressing repentance for the sin that caused them. This is precisely the structure of remorse without repentance that the book has identified in Judas — the desire to escape consequences without the genuine turning of the whole person toward God that repentance requires. Whether Simon subsequently repented and was restored the text does not say — which is itself pastorally honest about the limits of what apostolic confrontation can guarantee.

The Simon Magus case therefore extends the Corinthian correspondence's teaching in a significant direction. The 1 and 2 Corinthians case study showed the full community exercising binding and loosing authority over a confirmed member. The Simon case shows an individual apostle applying the same framework to a single person whose community membership is itself in question — someone who may be a false professor rather than a genuine believer. This suggests that the Matthew 18 discipline

framework applies not only to confirmed members of the believing community but to those who present themselves as members regardless of the authenticity of their profession, and that apostolic judgment can operate at the individual level as well as the communal one.

Ananias and Sapphira — When God Himself Executes the Binding

The case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 extends the apostolic case studies in a direction that none of the preceding cases reaches — and in doing so it illuminates the ultimate theological foundation of the entire forgiveness framework. It is the most severe case in the New Testament precisely because it is the only one where the divine Judge exercises the binding authority directly and immediately rather than through the community's mediated process.

The offense is carefully described. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property and brought a portion of the proceeds to the apostles while presenting it as the full amount — claiming the social honor of total generosity while privately retaining part of the sum. This is not a spontaneous moral failure or a sin committed in ignorance. It is premeditated, deliberate, and cooperative — husband and

wife agreeing together on the deception before executing it. Peter makes the theological nature of the offense explicit:

"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?... You have not lied to man but to God." (Acts 5:3-4)

The identification of the offense as lying to the Holy Spirit rather than merely to the apostolic community is theologically decisive. This is not ordinary community sin subject to the Matthew 18 process. It is a direct act of deception directed at the divine Person in whom the community exists — the same Spirit whose presence in the community constitutes its covenantal reality. The sin is simultaneously a violation of community trust and a direct offense against God himself, committed with full knowledge and deliberate premeditation.

The Absence of a Repentance Opportunity

What is most striking about the narrative is what is absent. There is no call to repentance. There is no offer of forgiveness. There is no Matthew 18 process of private confrontation, witnesses, and community judgment. Peter confronts Ananias, names the sin, and Ananias falls dead. Three hours later Sapphira arrives, is tested with the same question — "did you sell the land for this price?" — gives the

same lie, and falls dead. The judgment is immediate, sovereign, and final.

The question why there is no repentance opportunity here is not merely one of pastoral curiosity — it goes to the heart of what makes this case theologically distinctive. Several converging factors account for it.

First, the deliberate and premeditated character of the sin places it in a different category from the failures of weakness or ignorance that the Matthew 18 process is designed to address. Ananias and Sapphira had decided, planned, agreed, and executed. The sin was not a stumble but a strategy. The person who has deliberately chosen deception over against the community and its God has not failed to understand the covenantal reality — they have looked at it directly and chosen against it.

Second, the founding moment context is significant. Both Achan's sin in Joshua 7 and Ananias and Sapphira's sin in Acts 5 occur at threshold moments in the establishment of a new community before God. Achan's theft at the founding of Israel's conquest required immediate divine judgment to preserve the integrity of the community's foundation. Ananias and Sapphira's deception at the founding of the Spirit-indwelt church required the same.

The severity of the judgment signals what is at stake — not merely individual sin but the covenant integrity of the community being established. A community whose founding members could lie to the Holy Spirit without consequence would not be the community the Spirit had constituted.

Third, Peter's words to Sapphira carry a particular diagnostic weight: "how is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?" (5:9). The word translated "test" — the Greek *peirazō* — is the same word used for testing God in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:9, Hebrews 3:9). To test the Spirit is to probe the boundaries of His response, to act as though His holiness might be outrun by clever deception. This is the sin of Massah — the fundamental failure of covenantal trust that strikes at the very foundation of the community's existence before God.

Peter's Role — Confrontation Without Execution

A crucial distinction must be maintained. Peter does not execute Ananias and Sapphira. He confronts them, names the sin, and they fall dead — but their deaths are God's action, not Peter's. This is not the community exercising its binding and loosing authority. It is God himself exercising the binding authority that the

community's process mediates in ordinary cases. The James 4:11-12 principle — "there is only one Lawgiver and Judge" — is here expressed not as a limitation on human presumption but as a positive assertion of divine sovereignty: God reserves the right to act directly, bypassing the community's process entirely, when the occasion demands it.

This is why the narrative produces not merely grief or even righteous anger in the community but fear — the specific word Luke uses in Acts 5:5 and 5:11 is *phobos* — the same word used throughout Scripture for the reverent awe produced by encounter with the living God. "Great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things" (5:11). This is not the fear of an arbitrary or capricious God. It is the fear of a God who is present in his community, who takes its covenant integrity with absolute seriousness, and who is fully capable of acting as the final Judge when the occasion requires it.

How This Case Fits the Book's Framework

Ananias and Sapphira do not represent a failure of the conditional forgiveness framework — they represent its ultimate theological foundation made visible. The entire framework rests on the conviction that God is the ultimate

Lawgiver and Judge, that binding and loosing authority is derived from and accountable to Him, and that genuine forgiveness is a real covenantal transaction rather than a social convention. The Ananias and Sapphira case shows what happens when God himself — rather than through the community's mediated process — exercises the binding that the community's sin deserves.

The case also illuminates why the Matthew 18 process exists and what it is for. God does not always intervene directly and immediately — in the ordinary course of community life He exercises His judicial authority through the community's binding and loosing process, giving offenders the opportunity for repentance and restoration that His patience makes available. The Ananias and Sapphira case is the exception that reveals the rule: God's patience in ordinary cases is not indifference but gracious provision of the repentance opportunity that He was not obligated to provide and that Ananias and Sapphira forfeited through the premeditated, knowing character of their sin.

Finally, this case provides the most sobering pastoral word in the entire book about the seriousness of covenant membership in the believing community. To be a member of the Spirit-indwelt church is not a social arrangement. It is a

covenantal relationship with the living God who takes it with absolute seriousness and who is fully present within it by His Spirit. The fear that Acts 5 produces is not irrational — it is the appropriate response to the recognition of who is present in the community and what genuine membership in that community involves. This does not make the community a place of terror. But it does make it a place where the God who forgives lavishly is also the God who judges truly — and where both realities must be held together without softening either.

Chapter Seven: Forgiveness and the Unbeliever — A Necessary Distinction

A significant gap in most treatments of Biblical forgiveness — including many that are otherwise careful and exegetically responsible — is the failure to distinguish between two fundamentally different relational contexts: forgiveness between believers, and the believer's response to an unbelieving offender. The passages examined so far — Matthew 18, Luke 17:3-4, the Corinthian correspondence — all operate within an explicitly within-the-church framework. They address believers wronged by other believers within the community of faith. This chapter asks whether and how the picture changes when the offender is not a believer, and what the Bible actually requires of a Christian whose offender stands outside the covenant community of faith.

This question is not merely theoretical. The cases of the Emanuel Nine survivors forgiving Dylann Roof — the white supremacist who killed nine members of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston in 2015 — and Erika Kirk forgiving her husband's accused killer — both addressed in detail in Chapter Fourteen — involve unbelieving offenders

committing violent crimes. The forgiveness passages most naturally applicable to these situations are not Matthew 18 or Luke 17 but a different and less systematically developed strand of Biblical teaching. Getting this distinction right matters enormously for pastoral practice and for the integrity of the book's overall argument.

The Intra-Community Framework of the Key Forgiveness Passages

The explicitly communal and covenantal character of the primary forgiveness passages is not incidental — it is structural. Matthew 18:15 addresses "your brother" — the Greek *adelphos*, the covenant sibling within the community of faith. The three-stage discipline process presupposes a shared community with recognized authority: private confrontation, two or three witnesses, the gathered *ekklesia*. The binding and loosing authority is exercised by the assembled believing community. Every element of the passage assumes a shared covenantal relationship within which repentance, restoration, and the community's authoritative action make structural sense.

Luke 17:3-4 similarly addresses "your brother." The Corinthian correspondence is entirely about a member of

the believing community — Paul makes the jurisdictional distinction explicit in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13:

"What have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside." (1 Corinthians 5:12-13)

Paul's distinction is not merely pragmatic. It is theologically grounded. The community's binding and loosing authority — its capacity to exercise forgiveness and discipline with heaven's ratification — operates within the sphere of the covenant community. Outsiders are in a different category entirely, subject to God's direct judgment rather than the community's mediated authority. The jurisdiction of Matthew 18 ends at the boundary of the believing community. This means the entire framework of conditional forgiveness developed in the preceding chapters — repentance as the condition for the pronouncement of forgiveness, binding and loosing ratified by heaven, the discipline process of escalating confrontation — applies specifically and primarily to relationships between believers.

Romans 12:17-21 — The Believer's Response to the Unbelieving Offender

When Paul addresses the believer's response to those who wrong them from outside the covenant community, he does not use forgiveness language at all. This is significant. Romans 12:17-21 is the primary text for how believers relate to unbelieving offenders, and its vocabulary is entirely different from the forgiveness passages:

"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17-21)

The framework here is not forgiveness-and-repentance but mercy-and-entrusting-to-God. Several features deserve attention. First, Paul does not command forgiveness — he commands non-retaliation, peaceableness, and active good toward the enemy. These are the behavioral expressions of the attitude of mercy that this book has consistently distinguished from the formal pronouncement of forgiveness. Second, the explicit command is to leave vengeance to God — to entrust the moral accounting to the

divine Judge who alone has perfect knowledge and perfectly just authority. This is not passivity — it is the active recognition that God's justice is more certain and more complete than any human vengeance could be. Third, the means of overcoming evil is explicitly identified as good — active, costly, practical good toward the offending enemy — which anticipates the commands to love one's enemies in the Sermon on the Mount.

The burning coals phrase in verse 20 deserves particular exegetical attention because it is frequently misread in ways that soften the passage's connection to divine judgment. Paul is quoting Proverbs 25:21-22: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you." The dominant popular interpretation reads the burning coals as a metaphor for the guilty feelings that acts of kindness may produce in the offender — the enemy is shamed into remorse by the unexpected generosity, and the "coals" are the internal heat of a convicted conscience.

But this interpretation does not survive careful exegetical scrutiny. The clearest Old Testament parallel to burning coals as a judicial image is Psalm 140:10, which uses the identical imagery in an explicitly imprecatory context:

*"Let burning coals fall upon them! Let them be
cast into fire, into miry pits, no more to rise!"
(Psalm 140:10)*

In Psalm 140 there is no ambiguity — burning coals are the instrument of divine judgment on the wicked, not a metaphor for guilty feelings. The image throughout the Old Testament consistently carries this judicial and destructive meaning: Psalm 18:12-13 describes God's theophanic judgment using coals of fire; 2 Samuel 22:13 uses the same imagery for God's wrathful intervention. The image belongs to the vocabulary of divine judgment, not psychological discomfort.

This means the Proverbs 25 passage Paul cites, read in its Old Testament context, carries a more sobering meaning than the popular guilt-and-remorse interpretation acknowledges. Feeding and giving drink to an enemy is not merely a strategy for making them feel bad about themselves. It is an act of mercy that simultaneously entrusts the outcome entirely to God — the final line of Proverbs 25:22 makes this explicit: "and the Lord will reward you." The "heaping of burning coals" is God's action, not the enemy's psychological response. By acting with mercy toward the enemy, the believer places the enemy

entirely in God's hands — for salvation if the enemy repents, or for judgment if they do not.

This reading powerfully reinforces the chapter's central argument. Romans 12's command to do good to enemies is not a strategy for producing guilt in them — it is an act of complete moral surrender to divine sovereignty. The believer feeds the enemy and leaves the outcome entirely to God, who may use that act of mercy to bring the enemy to repentance, or who may allow it to stand as the evidence of the enemy's inexcusable rejection of grace. The burning coals are God's to apply. The mercy is the believer's to offer. And the two work together precisely because the believer has removed themselves entirely from the role of judge.

The absence of forgiveness language in Romans 12 is not an oversight. It reflects the structural difference between the intra-community framework of Matthew 18 and the believer's relationship to those outside. The *aphiēmi* language — forgiveness as the release of a debt within a recognized covenantal relationship — is not the primary category for addressing wrongs done by those who stand outside that relationship. The primary categories are non-retaliation, mercy, and the entrusting of ultimate judgment

to God — an entrusting that is active and complete, not passive and resigned.

The Commands to Love One's Enemies — Matthew 5:43-48 and Luke 6:27-36

Jesus' commands to love enemies similarly address the believer's relationship to those outside the covenant community — and similarly stop short of using forgiveness language. The commands are specific: pray for those who persecute you, do good to those who hate you, lend without expecting return, greet those who do not greet you. This is the attitude of mercy extended universally, without condition, to all people regardless of their response. It is genuinely unconditional — but it is not forgiveness in the full two-party sense the Bible describes.

The distinction between love for one's enemies and forgiveness is not a fine point of pedantry. It has significant pastoral implications. A believer is commanded to love an unbelieving enemy unconditionally — to pray for them, do good to them, refrain from retaliation against them. But the completion of the forgiveness transaction requires something the commands to love one's enemies do not require: the offender's repentance and the restoration of a

broken relationship. Loving one's enemies can be practiced by one person alone. Forgiveness in its fullest sense — the complete restoration of a relationship — cannot.

This means that when believers respond to unbelieving violent offenders with what they describe as forgiveness, they are most accurately expressing something that the commands to love one's enemies genuinely require of them — the attitude of mercy, the release of personal bitterness, the refusal to be governed by hatred, the active willing of good toward the offender. These are real, costly, genuinely Biblical obligations. The question is whether the word "forgiveness" fully captures them, or whether it imports the two-party relational transaction that Matthew 18 describes into a context where that framework does not straightforwardly apply.

The Gospel as the Primary Response to the Unbelieving Offender

If the formal forgiveness transaction of Matthew 18 applies primarily within the covenant community, and if the believer's obligations toward unbelieving offenders are primarily those of loving one's enemies, non-retaliation, and entrusting judgment to God — what is the distinctively Christian response to an unbelieving violent offender? The

answer the New Testament most clearly provides is not forgiveness pronounced but the gospel proclaimed.

The unbelieving offender stands in need, above all else, not of the believer's interpersonal forgiveness but of God's forgiveness — which is available through repentance and faith in Christ. The believer's most important and most loving response to an unbelieving offender is therefore the proclamation — implicit or explicit — of the gospel: the announcement that genuine forgiveness is available, that it comes through repentance rather than through good deeds or the passage of time, and that the repentance required is a genuine turning of the whole person toward God in Christ.

**A PRACTICAL TAXONOMY: THE BELIEVER
AND THE UNBELIEVING OFFENDER**

Attitude of mercy: unconditional — required always, regardless of the offender's faith or repentance. Release of personal bitterness and desire for vengeance: unconditional. Prayer for the offender's salvation: urgent and primary — the unbeliever's greatest need is not your forgiveness but God's. Proclamation of the gospel: the most loving response available. Formal pronouncement of forgiveness: awaits repentance and faith, which in the unbeliever's case is inseparable from conversion. Entrusting judgment to God: the believer's final resource when all else is exhausted.

This is precisely what Anthony Thompson — whose wife Myra was among those killed — did when he said to Dylann Roof at Roof's first court appearance: "I forgive you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent, confess, give your life to the one who matters most: Christ. So that he can change it, can change your ways no matter what happened to you and you'll be OK. Do that and you'll be better off than what you are right now." Thompson's instinct moved from forgiveness language into evangelistic appeal — and in so doing he landed on what is arguably the most precisely Biblical response available to a believer addressing an unrepentant, unbelieving offender. He held out the offer of forgiveness while pointing to the repentance and faith through which alone it can be genuinely received.

Can a Believer Forgive an Unbeliever?

The question can now be stated precisely: can a believer formally pronounce forgiveness to an unbelieving, unrepentant offender in the full two-party sense that Matthew 18 describes? The answer the Biblical framework suggests is nuanced.

On one hand, the believer can and must maintain an attitude of mercy toward all people without exception — love

toward enemies, non-retaliation, the release of personal bitterness and desire for vengeance, and the active willing of good toward the offender. These are unconditional obligations that apply regardless of the offender's faith or repentance. In this sense, the believer's inner orientation toward the unbelieving offender should be one of genuine mercy — and when believers facing devastating violence respond with expressions of mercy and forgiveness toward their unrepentant attackers, that attitude of mercy is genuine, costly, and deeply admirable, deserving full honor rather than theological correction.

On the other hand, the formal pronouncement of forgiveness — the completion of the two-party covenant transaction that Matthew 18 describes, ratified by heaven — requires a shared covenantal framework that does not exist between a believer and an unbeliever. It also requires repentance, which in the case of an unbelieving offender is inseparable from the broader repentance and faith through which the offender enters the covenant community. In this sense, the believer cannot complete the forgiveness transaction alone with an unbeliever — not because they withhold mercy but because the transaction itself requires two parties in ways that exceed what any one person can accomplish alone.

This does not leave the believer in an impossible or spiritually damaging position. The Biblical commands addressed to believers facing unbelieving offenders — loving one's enemies, non-retaliation, entrusting judgment to God, proclaiming the gospel — are sufficient and complete. They provide everything needed for genuine spiritual health, genuine mercy, and genuine justice without requiring the believer to either pronounce forgiveness prematurely or harbor bitterness indefinitely. The forgiveness transaction remains genuinely open — held out as an offer, grounded in the gospel's announcement of what repentance and faith make available — while its completion awaits the offender's response.

A pastoral priority worth stating explicitly: when the offender is an unbeliever, the question of interpersonal forgiveness, while real, is secondary to the much larger question of their standing before God. The unbelieving offender's greatest problem is not the offense they committed against you — it is their unreconciled relationship with God, over which eternal judgment hangs. The personal wrong they did you is real and may be serious; but it is comparatively small set against the judgment that awaits the unrepentant. This does not minimize the wrong — it puts it in its proper eternal context. The believer who

grasps this will find their energy and prayer naturally redirected: not merely toward resolution of the personal offense but toward the offender's salvation, which is both more loving and more proportionate to what is actually at stake.

When the offender has become persistently resistant to rebuke and unreachable by direct confrontation, the most faithful remaining response is prayer — specifically, prayer for the gift of repentance. Second Timothy 2:25 speaks of correcting opponents "in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." Repentance, this verse makes clear, is not merely a human decision — it is a gift that God sovereignly grants. When the wronged person prays for the offender's repentance, they are asking for something that lies beyond their own power and the offender's own power to produce. They are placing the matter in the hands of the only One who can accomplish what confrontation alone could not. This prayer is not resignation — it is the most powerful and most loving act remaining when every other approach has been exhausted.

A Practical Taxonomy

FOR REFLECTION: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

When the offender is a fellow believer who has repented: forgive fully and immediately. When the offender is a fellow believer who has not yet repented: maintain mercy, pursue their repentance, hold forgiveness genuinely open. When the offender is an unbeliever: love them, do not retaliate, entrust judgment to God, and share the gospel — the only path through which genuine forgiveness becomes available to them.

The Biblical material surveyed in this chapter produces a practical taxonomy for distinguishing the believer's different obligations in different relational contexts:

When the offender is a fellow believer who has repented: the full Matthew 18 framework applies. The formal pronouncement of forgiveness is both possible and obligatory. Heaven ratifies the loosing. Restoration of relationship follows. This is the complete two-party transaction.

When the offender is a fellow believer who has not yet repented: the attitude of mercy is unconditional. Active pursuit of repentance through the Matthew 18 process is required. The formal pronouncement awaits repentance.

The offer is genuinely held open. Personal bitterness and desire for vengeance are excluded.

When the offender is an unbeliever: the attitude of mercy is unconditional. Loving one's enemies — prayer, doing good, non-retaliation — is required. Judgment is entrusted to God. The gospel is proclaimed — the offer of forgiveness through repentance and faith is extended. The full two-party pronouncement of forgiveness in the Matthew 18 sense awaits both the offender's repentance and, implicitly, their coming within the covenant community through faith. Personal bitterness and desire for vengeance are excluded.

In all three cases, the believer's inner orientation is the same: genuine mercy, active good will toward the offender, and the genuine desire for the offender's restoration. What differs is the structure of the transaction and the conditions under which its formal completion becomes possible. This taxonomy is not a counsel of coldness or calculation — it is the framework that allows genuine mercy to be sustained, genuine justice to be honored, and genuine forgiveness to mean something real rather than being dissolved into a therapeutic gesture that ultimately serves neither the victim nor the offender.

Conclusion — A Complete Response to the Unbelieving Offender

The most complete response a believer can make to an unbelieving, unrepentant offender combines all three elements of the taxonomy developed in this chapter: the genuine expression of mercy and love toward enemies that releases personal bitterness and refuses personal vengeance; the entrusting of ultimate judgment to God who alone can execute it perfectly and in His own timing; and the proclamation of the gospel that announces forgiveness as genuinely available through the repentance the offender has not yet undertaken. This is what the believer's response to the unbelieving offender looks like — and it is simultaneously more demanding and more hopeful than either a premature pronouncement of completed forgiveness or a withholding of mercy pending repentance that may never come.

How this framework applies to specific real-world cases — including documented instances of believers responding to unbelieving violent offenders with remarkable public expressions of mercy — is examined in Chapter Thirteen, where the theological analysis developed here can be applied with the full context those cases deserve.

Chapter Eight: Imprecation, Justice, and the Cry of the Martyrs

The preceding chapter argued that the believer's response to unbelieving offenders is primarily characterized by love toward enemies, non-retaliation, and the entrusting of ultimate judgment to God. This chapter addresses a dimension of that entrusting that is present throughout Scripture but rarely discussed in treatments of forgiveness: imprecation — the deliberate, explicit appeal to God to execute judgment against the wicked.

The imprecatory psalms, Jesus' woe oracles against the Pharisees and unbelieving cities, Paul's apostolic judgments, and the martyrs' prayer in Revelation 6 all involve the invocation of divine curse or judgment rather than the extension of mercy. They appear to stand in direct tension with the commands to love one's enemies examined in the previous chapter. A complete Biblical theology of forgiveness must account for them honestly rather than explaining them away.

Imprecation is not the opposite of mercy. It is what mercy looks like when justice is placed entirely in God's hands — and kept out of our own.

The thesis of this chapter is that imprecation and mercy toward enemies are not in contradiction — they are complementary expressions of the same underlying conviction: that ultimate judgment belongs to God alone. When properly understood, imprecation does not undermine the framework of loving one's enemies but makes it theologically sustainable.

The Imprecatory Psalms — The Extent of the Material

The imprecatory psalms constitute a significant portion of the Psalter. Psalms 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, and 137 contain explicit and sustained appeals for God to judge, destroy, or curse specific enemies. Psalm 109 is the most comprehensive, containing a sustained series of appeals for judgment on a named enemy that encompasses not only the offender but his family:

"May his days be few; may another take his office. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children wander about and beg, seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit. May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil. Let there be none to extend kindness to him, nor any to pity his fatherless children." (Psalm 109:8–12)

Psalm 137 concludes with words that have troubled readers across the centuries:

"O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (Psalm 137:8–9)

These are not mild expressions of frustration that can be easily spiritualized. They are specific, sustained, and severe. Any serious engagement with the theology of forgiveness must account for them honestly rather than passing over them in embarrassed silence or treating them as spiritually inferior expressions that the New Testament simply abolishes.

The Structure of Imprecation — Prayer, Not Retaliation

The single most important observation about every genuine imprecation in Scripture is structural: imprecation is addressed to God. It is prayer — an appeal for God to act — not a human act of retaliation. Psalm 109 is not David cursing his enemy. It is David asking God to curse his enemy. Psalm 137 is not the psalmist dashing children against rocks. It is the psalmist declaring that God's judgment on Babylon will be proportionate to what Babylon did to Israel.

This structural observation is not a merely technical point designed to let the psalmist off the hook. It reflects something theologically profound. The imprecatory prayer takes the wronged person entirely out of the role of avenger and places them before God as a petitioner for justice. In this sense, imprecation is structurally identical to the non-retaliation of Romans 12:19 — "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Both the command not to retaliate and the prayer for divine judgment rest on the same foundation: ultimate judgment belongs to God alone and is more certain, more just, and more complete in His hands than in ours.

This means that imprecation, far from being in tension with non-retaliation, is actually its active expression. Non-retaliation says "I will not act in revenge."

Imprecation says "God, please act in justice." The person who prays imprecatory is not taking vengeance into their own hands — they are explicitly handing it to God and asking Him to exercise it. The two impulses are not opposites. They are two sides of the same theological conviction.

Imprecation and Covenantal Justice — Not Personal Grievance

A careful reading of the imprecatory psalms reveals that they are not primarily expressions of wounded personal pride or private grievance. They are consistently grounded in the offense against God's holiness, God's covenant, and God's people. Psalm 139:19-22, one of the most striking imprecatory passages in the Psalter, frames the appeal explicitly in covenantal terms:

"Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies." (Psalm 139:19–22)

The hatred expressed here is not personal — it is covenantal. The enemies are hated not because they wronged the psalmist personally but because they hate God.

The appeal for judgment is grounded not in personal injury but in the psalmist's identification with God's purposes and God's people. This is why the most severe imprecatory psalms are also among the most saturated with confidence in God's character — they are not outbursts of private rage but sustained expressions of covenantal solidarity with a righteous God whose justice the psalmist trusts completely.

"The ferocious parts of the Psalms... are indeed devilish. But their failure to reach the Christian standard does not merely spring from an insufficient development of moral sense. It comes partly from an excessive development of it." — C.S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms

C.S. Lewis, in his characteristically honest engagement with the imprecatory psalms in *Reflections on the Psalms*, distinguished between the psalmist's personal enemies — against whom the love-your-enemy commands clearly apply — and those who are enemies of God and persecutors of His covenant people as such. The imprecatory

psalms are most naturally read as addressing the latter category. Lewis acknowledged this was not always a clean distinction — the same person can be both a personal enemy and a persecutor of God's covenant purposes — but he recognized that it tracks a real theological difference between personal grievance and covenantal justice.

It is worth noting that the objects of imprecatory prayer in Scripture are not exclusively unbelievers or outsiders to the covenant community. Some of the most anguished imprecations in the Psalter are directed at betrayers within the covenant community — the insider who has violated a relationship of trust and intimacy. Psalm 55:12-14 makes this explicit: "For it is not an enemy who taunts me — then I could bear it... But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend." Psalm 109 similarly appears to target a companion and ally (verse 4: "in return for my love they accuse me") rather than a foreign enemy. The most theologically intense imprecations arise precisely from the betrayal of covenant intimacy — which is why they resonate so deeply with those who have been wronged by people who were supposed to protect and love them. The apostate, the false teacher, the treacherous friend, the abusive leader who exploited a position of trust — all are legitimate objects of imprecatory prayer, and Scripture's

own imprecatory tradition is directed at these insiders at least as often as at outsiders.

Jesus and Imprecation — The Woe Oracles

The most important evidence that imprecation is not a sub-Christian spirituality superseded by the New Testament is that Jesus himself engaged in it — explicitly, publicly, and in terms at least as severe as many of the psalms.

Matthew 23's woe oracles against the scribes and Pharisees are structurally imprecatory. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" — repeated seven times — is the invocation of divine judgment in the tradition of the prophetic woe oracle. The language escalates to the most severe:

"You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?" (Matthew 23:33)

This is not gentle rebuke or sorrowful correction. It is explicit, public, prophetic imprecation — the announcement of divine judgment on specific named individuals and groups. Jesus does not pray for the Pharisees' well-being in this context. He announces their condemnation.

Similarly, Matthew 11:20-24 records Jesus pronouncing woe against specific unbelieving cities of Galilee — Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum — in terms that invoke God's final judgment:

*"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!
For if the mighty works done in you had been
done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have
repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I
tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of
judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you."
(Matthew 11:21-22)*

These woe oracles establish beyond reasonable doubt that imprecation — the invocation of divine judgment against the persistently wicked — is part of Jesus' own prophetic practice. The New Testament does not supersede imprecation. It continues and in some respects intensifies it.

Paul's Apostolic Imprecations

Paul similarly engages in imprecation in ways that are often glossed over in discussions of New Testament ethics. In Galatians 1:8-9 he writes:

*"But even if we or an angel from heaven should
preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we
preached to you, let him be accursed. As we said
before, so now I say again: If anyone is*

*preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one
you received, let him be accursed."*

The word translated "accursed" is the Greek *anathema* — the strongest possible term of divine curse and exclusion. Paul uses it twice in consecutive sentences, explicitly, against those who pervert the gospel. This is not a mild expression of theological disagreement. It is apostolic imprecation.

In 1 Timothy 1:20, Paul says he has "handed over to Satan" Hymenaeus and Alexander — a phrase that echoes the Corinthian excommunication of 1 Corinthians 5 but functions in the context of apostolic judgment rather than community discipline. In 2 Timothy 4:14, he writes: "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds." This is Paul entrusting specific personal harm to divine judgment — precisely the structure of imprecation — from the same pen that wrote "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (Romans 12:14).

The apparent contradiction between Romans 12:14 and 2 Timothy 4:14 is itself instructive. Paul commands blessing for persecutors and simultaneously records that he trusts the Lord to repay a specific harmful person. These are not inconsistent. Blessing persecutors operates in the

horizontal human register — Paul's own speech and action toward those who harm him. Entrusting judgment to God operates in the vertical divine register — Paul's confidence that God's justice is real and will be executed. The believer blesses in the horizontal register and entrusts in the vertical. Both at once.

The Martyrs' Prayer — Revelation 6:9-11

The most theologically decisive imprecatory text in the New Testament is also the one most rarely discussed in treatments of Christian forgiveness. In Revelation 6:9-11, John sees beneath the altar the souls of those who had been martyred for their testimony:

"They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been." (Revelation 6:10-11)

This passage is decisive for several reasons. First, these are glorified saints — they are in the immediate

presence of God, beneath the heavenly altar, clothed in white robes. They are not expressing spiritually immature impulses that will be corrected by further sanctification. They are perfected saints in glory. Second, they are praying for divine vengeance — specifically, for God to judge and avenge their blood. Third, God's response is not to rebuke their prayer but to tell them to wait — the answer is coming, but the timing belongs to God's sovereign purpose. The prayer is affirmed; only its timing is deferred.

The Revelation 6 martyrs make it impossible to argue that imprecation is a pre-Christian spiritual impulse that the New Testament overcomes. Glorified saints in heaven, in the immediate presence of God, pray for divine vengeance — and God does not rebuke them. The commands to love one's enemies and the imprecatory prayer coexist in the same vision of the end times, because they operate in different registers and serve different theological functions.

The Eschatological Shift — From Historical to Final Judgment

One genuine development between the Old and New Testaments in relation to imprecation is the increasingly end-times character of divine judgment. The Old Testament psalmist could pray for divine judgment within historical

time — and sometimes saw it executed within his own lifetime. The New Testament increasingly reserves ultimate judgment for the final day of the Lord — the great reckoning at the end of time — while expecting patience in the interim.

This is why the Revelation 6 martyrs are told to "wait a little longer." This is why Paul says "the Lord will repay him" in the future tense rather than asking for immediate historical judgment. This is why Jesus' woe oracles against the Galilean cities invoke "the day of judgment" as the locus of their condemnation. The imprecation is real and the judgment is certain — but its fulfillment is increasingly deferred to the final reckoning at the end of time rather than expected within immediate historical time.

This shift toward final-day judgment has a significant pastoral implication. The believer who has been grievously wronged by an unrepentant offender is not in a position of passive acceptance of injustice. They are in a position of active trust — trust that God's judgment is real, that it will be complete, and that its timing is in God's hands rather than theirs. The imprecatory prayer is the active expression of that trust. It is simultaneously the most honest acknowledgment of the reality of the wrong done and the most complete act of releasing judgment to the only One who can execute it perfectly.

Praying for God's judgment and loving one's enemy are not opposites — they are the two faces of the same coin. The person who loves their enemy prays for their conversion; the person who prays for God's judgment refuses personal vengeance. Both recognize that justice belongs to God alone.

The Synthesis — Imprecation as the Completion of Loving One's Enemies

The apparent tension between loving one's enemies and imprecation resolves when we recognize that they operate in different modes and address different dimensions of the believer's response to evil.

The call to love one's enemies operates in the horizontal human register: the believer's own actions, dispositions, speech, and treatment of enemies. It requires non-retaliation, practical good, prayer for conversion, and the refusal to be governed by hatred. It is genuinely

unconditional — required regardless of the enemy's response.

Imprecation operates in the vertical divine register: the believer's appeal to God to exercise the judgment that the believer has explicitly refused to execute personally. It requires honesty about the reality of evil, confidence in God's justice, and the active entrusting of the outcome to divine sovereignty. It is the active form of releasing vengeance to God.

Far from being in tension, these two orientations depend on each other. The call to love one's enemies is only spiritually sustainable if it is accompanied by the conviction that justice will ultimately be done — that evil is not the last word, that the suffering of the innocent will not be ignored by God, that the unrepentant wicked will face a reckoning they cannot escape. Without this conviction, the love of enemies collapses either into passive acceptance of injustice or into the suppression of the legitimate human sense that wrong has been done and demands redress. Imprecation is what provides that conviction its active expression.

Conversely, imprecation is only theologically legitimate when it is accompanied by the commands to love one's enemies — when the person praying for divine

judgment is simultaneously refraining from personal retaliation, doing good to their enemy, and praying for their conversion. The person who prays imprecatorily while simultaneously nursing personal hatred and planning personal revenge has not understood what imprecation is. Imprecation is the prayer of the person who has genuinely placed vengeance in God's hands — precisely because they have removed it from their own.

A remarkable Proverb makes this qualification explicit from the opposite direction. Proverbs 24:17-18 warns: "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him." The logic is theologically striking: if the wronged person takes personal satisfaction in the enemy's destruction — if they gloat — God may actually withhold or redirect the very judgment they were expecting. Schadenfreude, delight in the enemy's suffering, can apparently move God to show mercy precisely because the attitude of the one wronged has become wrong.

This is the precise converse of Romans 12:17-21. Romans 12 promises that by refusing personal vengeance, doing good to one's enemy, and leaving room for God's wrath, the wronged person activates divine justice —

"heaping burning coals" on the enemy's head. Proverbs 24 warns that gloating over the enemy's fall may suspend that same divine justice. Together they frame the same principle from both sides: loving one's enemy and entrusting judgment to God calls forth divine wrath; taking personal satisfaction in the enemy's destruction may turn it away. The attitude of mercy is therefore not merely a separate obligation running alongside imprecation — it is the very condition under which imprecation is theologically valid.

A candid note is needed here. The dominant and normative register of Biblical imprecation is petition from anguish rather than gloating from satisfaction. The psalmists cry out from suffering; the martyrs of Revelation 6 ask "How long?" in grief; Jesus pronounces woe over Jerusalem with tears. But Psalm 58:10 — "The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked" — presses against this standard in language that even C.S. Lewis acknowledged was among the most difficult in the Psalter to defend. The honest position is not that Biblical imprecation is entirely free of language resembling rejoicing, but that such language represents the raw edge of the tradition — what Bonhoeffer called the vengeance of the suffering, pushed to its extreme — and that Proverbs 24:17-18 establishes the theological norm against

which even that raw edge must be measured. The New Testament, reading the Psalter through the cross, redirects the imprecatory energy toward prayer for the enemy's conversion rather than satisfaction at their destruction — which is exactly what Anthony Thompson modeled when he called Dylann Roof to repent even as he expressed his grief.

Imprecation and the Forgiveness Framework

What does this mean for the book's overall argument about forgiveness? Several implications follow.

First, the imprecatory tradition confirms what the book has consistently argued: ultimate judgment belongs to God alone. James 4:11-12 — "there is only one Lawgiver and Judge" — is not merely a negative prohibition against human judgment. It is the positive foundation for the believer's entrusting of justice to God. Imprecation is the active expression of that entrusting.

Second, the imprecatory tradition establishes that the release of personal bitterness and the release of personal vengeance — both of which the book consistently requires of the wronged person — do not require the suppression of the legitimate conviction that justice must be done. The wronged person is not required to pretend that the offense

was not serious, that the suffering was not real, or that the unrepentant offender faces no ultimate accounting. They are required to place that accounting entirely in God's hands — and imprecation is the prayer that does exactly that.

Third, the imprecatory tradition sheds light on the martyrs' cry of Revelation 6 — which is also the cry of every victim of serious unrepented wrong who waits for justice that has not yet come. The answer they receive is not a rebuke for their prayer but the assurance that justice is coming and the call to wait in the patience of God's sovereign timing. This is the pastoral word to every person waiting for an unrepentant offender to face the consequences of what they have done: the judgment is real, it is certain, it is in better hands than yours, and the timing is God's to determine.

Finally, the imprecatory tradition clarifies the relationship between the believer's forgiveness and God's judgment. The book has argued that the believer who withholds forgiveness from the unrepentant is not usurping God's role — they are faithfully maintaining the conditions that the divine order has established. The imprecatory tradition adds a further dimension: the believer who actively appeals to God for justice against the unrepentant is not failing in mercy — they are expressing the most complete

form of trust in the divine Judge, the conviction that justice is real and that God will execute it, combined with the refusal to execute it personally. This is not the opposite of mercy. It is mercy's most honest companion.

One further New Testament case deserves mention here as a bridge between the imprecatory tradition and the Saul case that follows. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 — examined in detail in Chapter Six — represent one of the rare instances in the New Testament where God's judicial response to covenant violation is executed within historical time rather than deferred to the final day of judgment. When Ananias and Sapphira deliberately lied to the Holy Spirit about their offering, Peter confronted them, named the sin, and they fell dead — not by Peter's action but by God's direct intervention. This is the imprecatory prayer answered immediately: the divine Judge exercising within history the judgment that the community normally appeals to Him to execute at the final reckoning. Its rarity in the New Testament is itself theologically significant — it stands as the exception that reveals the rule, the visible expression of a divine judicial capacity that ordinarily operates at the final judgment but is not less real for being ordinarily deferred. The fear it produced in the early church — "great fear came upon the whole church and

upon all who heard of these things" (Acts 5:11) — is the appropriate response to the recognition that the God to whom imprecatory prayer is directed is fully capable and fully willing to answer it, in His own time and in His own way.

Saul of Tarsus — When God's Justice Is Transfigured by Grace

God's justice is not merely proportionate — it is creative. He can take the church's chief persecutor and make him its greatest builder. This is what it means to trust the God who made Saul into Paul.

The case of Saul of Tarsus provides what is perhaps the most theologically rich illustration in the entire New Testament of what it means to give justice over to God — and of what God's justice can look like when He exercises it sovereignly. It belongs in a chapter on imprecation precisely because it shows that the justice the wronged person entrusts to God is more creative, more complete, and more

redemptive than anything retributive human justice could accomplish.

Saul was the early church's most dangerous persecutor. Acts 8:3 describes him as "ravaging the church, entering house after house, dragging off men and women and committing them to prison." Acts 9:1 says he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." He presided over Stephen's stoning (Acts 7:58), consented to his death (8:1), and obtained letters authorizing him to arrest Christians in Damascus. The suffering he inflicted on the early community — imprisonment, scattering, death — was systematic and severe. On the Damascus road, the risen Jesus confronts Saul directly with the identification that defines the theological significance of all his persecution: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). The identification of the church with its Lord means that every blow Saul struck against a believer was a blow against Christ — which is precisely the theological weight Jesus then communicates to Ananias when he commissions him to go to Saul.

The Commission and the Announcement — Acts 9:15-16

When Jesus commissions Ananias to go to Saul, he makes a statement that deserves far more attention than it typically receives in treatments of Paul's conversion:

"Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:15-16)

The Greek construction of verse 16 is significant: *dei auton hyper tou onomatos mou pathein posa* — "it is necessary for him to suffer many things on behalf of my name." The word *dei* — "it is necessary" — is the same word used in Luke 9:22 for the necessity of Christ's own suffering. This is not casual prediction or vague forewarning. It is divine appointment — the announcement that suffering is integral to Saul's commission in a way that goes beyond the ordinary cost of apostolic ministry.

This announcement comes in immediate juxtaposition with the commission, and its placement immediately after the identification of Saul as the church's persecutor is not incidental. Jesus has just told Ananias — who had heard of all the harm Saul had done to the saints in Jerusalem (9:13) — that this man will suffer much for his

name. The suffering that is appointed for Saul stands in deliberate relation to the suffering he has inflicted.

Three Dimensions of Paul's Suffering

The theological richness of Paul's case lies in the fact that his appointed suffering carries three simultaneous dimensions that cannot be cleanly separated, and which together illustrate something about divine justice that simple retribution could never accomplish.

The first dimension is apostolic cost. Paul suffers because apostolic ministry in a world that resists the gospel is inherently costly. His suffering catalog in 2 Corinthians 11 — beatings, imprisonments, stonings, shipwrecks, constant danger — represents the price of carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth. This dimension would be present for any faithful apostle, regardless of his pre-conversion history.

The second dimension is fitting consequence. What Paul suffers in ministry bears a striking resemblance to what he inflicted on the early church: imprisonment, beatings, the scattering and destabilization of communities he had hoped to build, the constant threat of death. He does not interpret this connection explicitly, but it is present. The man who imprisoned believers is repeatedly imprisoned. The man who oversaw Stephen's stoning is stoned at Lystra and left

for dead (Acts 14:19). Paul never stops being aware of his pre-conversion identity — he mentions it in 1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:13, Philippians 3:6, and 1 Timothy 1:13 — always as the defining background against which God's grace toward him is most vivid. The consequences of what he was and what he did are not erased by his conversion. They remain the permanent backdrop of his apostolic identity.

The third dimension is redemptive transformation. This is what Paul's case adds that David's does not. In Colossians 1:24 Paul writes one of the most remarkable sentences in the New Testament: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." This is not a claim that Christ's atonement was insufficient. It is the claim that Paul's apostolic suffering participates in and extends the pattern of Christ's suffering for the church — which is the very body Paul once attacked. The man who tore the church apart is now suffering to build it up. The consequence of his persecution has been transfigured by grace into the means of the church's construction.

The David Parallel and the Critical Distinction

The Paul case extends the David principle established in Chapter Two. With David, forgiveness and consequences coexist without contradiction: God genuinely forgave David and the sword genuinely did not depart from his house. The consequences were real but essentially parallel to the forgiveness — they did not cancel it, and it did not cancel them.

Paul's case goes further. His consequences are not merely parallel to his forgiveness — they are transfigured by it into something redemptive. The suffering Jesus appointed for him serves the very people against whom the original offense was committed. The judgment is real; its form has been transformed by grace into something that accomplishes more than retribution ever could. God repays Saul not simply with proportionate suffering but with apostolic suffering that builds the church he once destroyed — which is simultaneously more just and more merciful than any simple retribution could be.

The Pastoral Implication for the Imprecation Argument

This has a direct and significant implication for the chapter's central argument about giving justice over to God. The wronged person who entrusts justice to God is not trusting a divine accountant who will simply balance the

ledger of suffering. They are trusting a God whose justice is creative, sovereign, and redemptive — a God who can take the consequences of sin and transfigure them into something that serves His purposes for the very people who were wronged.

The early church that Saul persecuted could not have imagined, in the moment of persecution, that its chief tormentor would become its greatest apostle and suffer more for the name of Jesus than almost any of those he had imprisoned. The justice they might have appealed to God for in their suffering was answered — but answered in a way that exceeded anything retributive imagination could have conceived. The suffering was real. The accountability was real. And the outcome served the church in ways that simple punishment never could have.

This is the deepest pastoral word available to the person who has entrusted justice to God and is waiting for it: God's justice is not simply proportionate — it is creative. It can take the very person who caused the suffering and make them the instrument of restoration. It can transfigure consequences into redemption. It can answer the cry of the martyrs — and the cry of every wronged person who prays as the martyrs prayed — in ways that exceed the imagination

of those who prayed. This is what it means to trust the God who made Saul into Paul.

Chapter Nine: The Passages Cited for Unconditional Forgiveness

Intellectual honesty requires careful engagement with the passages most frequently cited in favor of unconditional forgiveness. This chapter examines each in turn, arguing that while they provide genuine and important insights, they do not establish the unconditional position when read carefully in context. The chapter also examines adjacent passages — Matthew 5:23-24 and the Lord's Prayer — that, far from supporting the unconditional position, actually provide additional evidence for the conditional one.

Before examining individual passages, a prior observation deserves attention because it shapes how every passage in this chapter should be read. Nowhere in Scripture is forgiveness presented as something that benefits the forgiver. It is consistently presented as something that benefits the offender — restoring them to fellowship, addressing their guilt, enabling their restoration. This is not an incidental feature of the biblical material. It is the consistent orientation of every forgiveness command and narrative in both Testaments. The wronged person is called to pursue the offender's repentance, to hold the offer

genuinely open, to pronounce forgiveness when repentance comes — all for the sake of the offender's restoration. The forgiver's own inner peace is a consequence of the process, not its goal.

This observation has a direct and powerful implication for the unconditional forgiveness position. If forgiveness in Scripture is consistently framed as something that benefits the offender — that restores them to fellowship and addresses their guilt — then a forgiveness pronounced without their acknowledgment and receipt is not doing what forgiveness is designed to do. Nothing that forgiveness is meant to accomplish has occurred. The offender has not been restored to fellowship. Their guilt has not been honestly addressed. The relationship has not been genuinely healed. The forgiver has performed a unilateral act and called it forgiveness — but a transaction designed to benefit the second party cannot be completed by the first party acting alone. This is why what the therapeutic model calls "forgiveness" is better named releasing bitterness or the attitude of mercy — both real and genuinely required, but not the same as the bilateral transaction that forgiveness in Scripture describes. The passages examined in this chapter are consistently passages about the forgiver's inner posture in prayer or before God — not about the bilateral relational

transaction that completes forgiveness. Reading them as establishing unconditional bilateral forgiveness mistakes the part for the whole.

"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

These verses are Matthew's explanatory comment immediately following the Lord's Prayer. To read them rightly, it helps to read them alongside the petition they are explaining — Matthew 6:12: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." That petition, examined carefully with the grammatical object distinction in mind, turns out to be one of the most precise statements of the conditional forgiveness framework in the New Testament.

The petition has two halves. The first — "forgive us our debts" — asks God to release the things we owe. The object is a thing: our debts, the accumulated weight of our offenses against God. The petition approaches God in penitence, acknowledging what is owed, and asking for its release. It is not asking God to forgive unconditionally regardless of repentance — 1 John 1:9 makes clear that God's forgiveness is conditioned on confession. The petition is

itself an act of penitence; it assumes the repentance it embodies.

The second half — "as we also have forgiven our debtors" — shifts to persons. The Greek aorist *aphēkamen* — "we have forgiven" — describes a completed action. But notice what the completion describes: not a unilateral internal release of all bitterness toward everyone who has ever wronged us regardless of whether they repented. That reading imports the unconditional framework by the back door. The more precise and more consistent reading is this: we have faithfully completed every forgiveness transaction that repentance made possible. There is no one sitting in our account books as an outstanding unresolved case — not because we have released everyone unconditionally, but because whenever repentance came, we completed the transaction. We have forgiven our debtors — everyone who came to us as debtors and sought release.

This reading is more demanding than the unconditional interpretation, not less. The general claim "I hold no bitterness in my heart toward anyone" is a psychological state that is easy to assert and difficult to verify. The claim "I have faithfully forgiven everyone who has repented and sought forgiveness from me, and I am holding no one in unpaid debt who has sought release" is a

concrete claim about a track record of relational faithfulness. It asks a searching question: has there been anyone who came to you in genuine repentance and was refused? The person who can honestly pray "as we have forgiven our debtors" on this reading is not someone who has achieved a therapeutic inner state — they are someone who has been faithful to the bilateral transaction every time repentance made it possible.

This makes the warning of Matthew 6:14-15 precise and consistent. "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." The person who cannot honestly pray "as we have forgiven our debtors" — because they are withholding forgiveness from someone who has genuinely repented and sought it — is exactly the person this warning addresses. It is the unforgiving servant of Matthew 18, who refused to complete the transaction when his debtor fell before him and begged. The warning is not against failing to achieve a therapeutic inner release unconditionally. It is against refusing to complete the bilateral transaction when the conditions have been met. And the symmetry it establishes runs in the conditional direction: God forgives us when we come to Him in genuine penitence — and we are to forgive others when they come to

us in genuine repentance. Neither side of the equation is unconditional.

Mark 11:25 — Forgiveness in Prayer

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

It is worth saying directly: at face value, this is the strongest single text for the unconditional forgiveness position. It is stated plainly, without qualification, without a repentance condition, in the direct words of Jesus. Any honest reading must acknowledge that it appears, on its surface, to command forgiveness regardless of the offender's response. The question is not whether this appearance is real — it is — but whether a careful internal reading of the passage itself supports that interpretation or points elsewhere. This section argues that the plain reading fails — not because the text is being explained away but because the text is not addressing the question the unconditional forgiveness advocate is asking it to answer.

What the Passage Is Actually About: Seven Internal Constraints

The refutation of the unconditional reading of Mark 11:25 begins not with other passages but with the passage

itself. Six features internal to Mark 11:25 establish that it does not teach unconditional forgiveness — and that the unconditional reading requires importing a question the passage was never asked to answer.

First, the setting is prayer, not confrontation. Jesus says "whenever you stand praying." The command to forgive is embedded within the act of private prayer — not within any instruction about how to treat an offender face-to-face. The passage addresses what happens in your own heart when you approach God, not what you are authorized to pronounce to the person who wronged you when they stand before you seeking restoration. These are entirely different situations, and a text that addresses one does not govern the other.

Second, the grammar encodes an inner disposition, not a performative act. The Greek verb is *aphiēmi* in the present imperative — "be forgiving," not "pronounce forgiveness." The present imperative in Greek describes an ongoing state or disposition of the person, not a one-time bilateral transaction directed at another. This is not a theological imposition on the grammar — it is what the grammar says. "Be forgiving" is categorically different from saying the words I forgive you to the person who wronged

you. The form of the verb makes it impossible for the passage to be commanding the latter.

Third — and this is the observation that cuts deepest — the grammatical object of the verb reveals what kind of forgiveness is in view. In Mark 11:25, Jesus says "forgive, if you have anything against anyone." The object of the verb is a thing — the grievance, the offense, the debt that you are holding against someone. You release the thing you are carrying. Compare this with Luke 17:4, where Jesus says "forgive him" — the object is a person. You release the person from the debt they owe you. These are not the same act. Releasing what you are holding in your own heart is fundamentally internal and unilateral — the other party does not need to be present, does not need to respond, does not need to do anything. Releasing a person from the debt they owe you is fundamentally relational and bilateral — it is a declaration directed at someone that changes the status of a relationship. The grammar of Mark 11:25 places it squarely in the first category: releasing a thing held in the heart. The grammar of Luke 17:4 places it in the second: releasing a person in a relational transaction. The unconditional forgiveness advocate has used a passage about the first kind of forgiveness to override a passage

about the second — but the grammar distinguishes them, and they are not the same command.

This grammatical distinction maps directly onto the book's threefold framework. Releasing a thing — a grievance, a bitterness, a desire for vengeance — is what the book calls the attitude of mercy. It is unconditional, internal, and required of every believer always. Releasing a person — declaring them free of the debt they owe you, restoring them to the relationship — is what the book calls the pronouncement of forgiveness. It is relational, bilateral, and conditioned on repentance. The two acts require the same verb in Greek. They are not the same act.

Fourth, the object also eliminates the offender from the picture entirely. "If you have anything against anyone" — the offender is not present, has not come to the wronged person, has not repented, and is not even the subject of the sentence. The command is entirely between the praying person and God. The passage says nothing about what to do when an unrepentant offender stands before you. It addresses what to release in your own heart when you stand before God.

Fifth, the purpose clause controls the whole passage. "So that your Father also in heaven may forgive you your

trespasses." The forgiveness commanded in Mark 11:25 is instrumentally related to the praying person receiving God's forgiveness — it is about the condition of the heart that approaches God, not about the bilateral restoration of a human relationship. This purpose clause makes it impossible for the passage to be about pronouncing relational forgiveness to a repentant offender. That relational transaction is simply not what the passage is about. The passage is about you and God, not about you and your offender.

Sixth, the passage makes no positive statement about what to do when an offender is present and unrepentant. The unconditional forgiveness reading requires the passage to mean: "Forgive your offender regardless of whether they have repented." But the passage does not say this. It says: "In prayer, release whatever grievances you carry." This is a positive command about the attitude of the heart — not a negative command against requiring repentance. The absence of a repentance condition in a passage about prayer does not establish that repentance is unnecessary in a relational transaction. It establishes that prayer requires a released heart — which is exactly what this book calls the attitude of mercy.

Seventh, the parallel in Matthew 6:14-15 confirms this reading. Matthew's version of the same principle — "if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" — occurs immediately after the Lord's Prayer, in the same context of personal prayer and relationship with God. The Matthew 6 context is not the restoration of a broken human relationship but the believer's approach to God. Read alongside Mark 11:25, both passages are addressing the same thing: what the heart must release in order to approach God with integrity.

**SEVEN INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS ON MARK
11:25**

1. The setting is prayer, not confrontation. 2. The grammar — present imperative *aphiēmi* — describes ongoing disposition, not a performative act. 3. The grammatical object is a thing (grievance), not a person — releasing what you hold, not releasing someone from a debt. 4. The offender is absent from the passage entirely. 5. The purpose clause is Godward — between the praying person and God. 6. The passage makes no positive statement about unrepentant offenders. 7. The Matthew 6:14-15 parallel confirms the prayer/inner life register. None of these observations are imported from outside — they arise from reading the passage on its own terms.

The Canonical Argument — Why the Plain Reading Fails

Even if the internal constraints above were somehow inconclusive, the canonical argument is decisive on its own. If Mark 11:25 means what the unconditional forgiveness advocate claims — that forgiveness must be pronounced unconditionally to anyone who has wronged you regardless of repentance — then Jesus taught irreconcilably contradictory things in the same period of ministry to the same disciples. Luke 17:3-4 says explicitly: "if he repents, forgive him" — the repentance condition is grammatically required. Mark 11:25 on the unconditional reading says: forgive regardless of repentance. These cannot both be true simultaneously. They are not in tension — they flatly contradict each other.

The resolution is straightforward. When two passages appear to conflict, the interpreter must ask which text is directly addressing the contested question. Luke 17:3-4 explicitly addresses the question of interpersonal forgiveness between the wronged person and an offender — it is a direct instruction about how to handle the situation of a brother who sins against you. Mark 11:25 addresses the condition of the heart in prayer. When one text speaks directly to a question and another does not, the former

governs. Luke 17 governs the question of conditional versus unconditional forgiveness. Mark 11 governs the question of what attitude to maintain in prayer. Using Mark 11 to override Luke 17 is a basic hermeneutical error: it imports a question into a passage that was never designed to answer it.

The Adjacent Verse — A Hermeneutical Test

There is one further argument that deserves direct attention because it exposes an inconsistency in the unconditional reading that the advocate rarely acknowledges. Mark 11:25 does not stand alone — it sits immediately after Mark 11:24: "Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you."

If the unconditional forgiveness advocate insists that Mark 11:25 must be read in absolute, unqualified terms — forgiving regardless of repentance because the verse mentions no condition — then consistency demands they apply the same hermeneutical principle to Mark 11:24. Believe that you have received whatever you pray for, and it will be granted. No conditions mentioned. No qualifications stated. If the argument is that the absence of a stated condition in Mark 11:25 establishes that forgiveness is

unconditional, the same argument applied to Mark 11:24 establishes that every prayer of every believing Christian will be answered exactly as prayed.

No serious reader of Scripture accepts that conclusion. Everyone recognizes that Mark 11:24 requires qualification in light of other biblical teaching — prayers according to God's will, the sovereignty of God, unanswered prayers throughout Scripture, Paul's thorn in the flesh. The verse is read in its canonical context, not in absolute isolation. But this is precisely the hermeneutical discipline that the unconditional reading of Mark 11:25 refuses. The two verses stand side by side; if one requires contextual qualification, so does the other. The reader who qualifies Mark 11:24 but not Mark 11:25 is applying an inconsistent method — accepting canonical context when it suits the argument and refusing it when it does not.

Reading Mark 11:25 in its canonical context — including Luke 17:3-4, Matthew 18, the unforgiving servant parable, and the entire pattern of divine forgiveness — is not explaining away the text. It is reading it the way all sound biblical interpretation requires. The condition of repentance is present in the canonical context even when not stated in a given verse. Just as Mark 11:24 does not teach that every prayer is unconditionally answered, Mark 11:25 does not

teach that forgiveness is unconditionally pronounced. Both require the discipline of reading individual verses within the whole counsel of Scripture.

Matthew 5:23-24 — The Bilateral Obligation That Refutes the Unconditional Reading

"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

Matthew 5:23-24 is rarely discussed in the forgiveness debate, but it adds a perspective that is devastating to the unconditional forgiveness position. In Mark 11:25, Jesus addresses the wronged person: in prayer, release your grievances. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus addresses the offending person: before you worship, go and be reconciled to the one you have wronged. Together these two passages create a complete bilateral picture in which both parties have urgent obligations arising from broken relationship.

The significance for the unconditional forgiveness debate is this: Matthew 5:23-24 presupposes that the reconciliation has not yet occurred and that it requires

something from the offending party. Consider what the unconditional forgiveness position implies for the offender's commanded going. If the victim were already required to pronounce forgiveness unconditionally regardless of the offender's response, the offender would have nothing to go for — the relationship would on the victim's side already be declared restored without any action on the offender's part. But Jesus commands the offender to go and be reconciled, which presupposes that reconciliation is genuinely incomplete and that the offender's initiative and acknowledgment are necessary to accomplish it.

The word Jesus uses is significant: not "apologize to your brother" or "ask your brother to forgive you" — but "be reconciled." Reconciliation is a two-party transaction. The offender's going is the necessary first step; the reconciliation itself requires the participation of both. This encodes within the passage the bilateral structure of genuine restoration that this book has argued for throughout.

Matthew 5:23-24 also corrects the moral asymmetry that the therapeutic forgiveness model creates. The unconditional position tends to place all the moral weight on the victim — the victim must forgive, must release, must move on, regardless of what the offender does. Matthew 5:23-24 makes clear that the offender carries an equally

serious and urgent obligation. The offender is not a passive recipient of the victim's unilateral forgiveness. They are required to go, to seek reconciliation, to address what they have done — and this obligation is so urgent that it interrupts even the most sacred acts of worship.

There is a further observation worth noting. Jesus says "if your brother has something against you" — not "if you have wronged your brother." The obligation to seek reconciliation arises not from a completed moral analysis of the offender's guilt but from the awareness that a relationship is broken. Even if the offending person is uncertain about the extent of their fault, the awareness that the brother has something against them is sufficient to create the obligation to go. This is an important pastoral supplement: the person who is unsure whether they have genuinely wronged someone is not relieved of the obligation to seek reconciliation — the broken relationship itself creates the obligation, independent of the final adjudication of blame.

THE BILATERAL OBLIGATION

Matthew 18:15 addresses the wronged person: go to your offender and call them to repentance. Matthew 5:23-24 addresses the offending person: go to your victim and seek

reconciliation. Luke 17:3-4 addresses the wronged person: when repentance comes, forgive immediately and without limit. Together these passages establish that genuine restoration of relationship is a bilateral obligation that falls urgently on both sides — and that neither party is released from their obligation by the other party's failure.

Mark 11:25 is not a counter-argument to this bilateral framework — it is its necessary complement. The wronged person releases their grievances in prayer, maintains the attitude of mercy unconditionally, and approaches God with an open heart. The offending person goes to seek reconciliation before offering their worship. When repentance is met with forgiveness, the bilateral transaction is complete. Mark 11:25 governs the inner life of the wronged person in prayer. Matthew 5:23-24 governs the obligation of the offending person. Luke 17:3-4 governs the moment of restoration. These three passages together tell the complete story — and none of them teach unconditional pronouncement of forgiveness to an unrepentant offender.

One further connection deserves notice. Mark 11:25 is closely parallel to Matthew 6:12 — the petition in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Both passages address the same thing: the

praying person's inner posture toward those who have wronged them. Both connect that inner posture to God's forgiveness of the praying person. And both are prayers — not face-to-face pronouncements of forgiveness to an offender.

What is easy to miss about Matthew 6:12 is that Jesus gave it a full explanation in the very same Gospel. The parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-35 is the detailed picture behind the compressed petition. In that parable the servant who was forgiven a vast debt pleads for mercy and receives forgiveness. He then refuses to forgive a fellow servant a small debt — and is condemned, not because he required repentance but because his hardened heart showed he had never really grasped what he himself had received. The Lord's Prayer petition "as we have forgiven our debtors" is not teaching that we must forgive every offender unconditionally. It is expressing the posture of a heart that has genuinely received God's grace and therefore holds no bitterness, seeks no vengeance, and stands ready to forgive. That is the attitude of mercy — and it is what both Mark 11:25 and Matthew 6:12 are commanding. Neither passage says anything about pronouncing forgiveness to an unrepentant offender. That question is answered by Luke

17:3-4 and Matthew 18 — and the answer there, consistently, is that repentance precedes pronouncement.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

The father's running toward the returning son before any verbal exchange has occurred is taken to show that forgiveness precedes and does not require repentance. But this reading misses a crucial detail.

The son has already repented before he returns. Verses 17-19 describe his coming to himself, his recognition of his sin, and his planned confession: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." The repentance precedes the return. The father's running expresses his readiness and eagerness to forgive — which is exactly what conditional forgiveness advocates require of the wronged party — but it does not precede repentance.

The parable therefore most naturally supports the conditional position: the father maintains an attitude of mercy and a wholehearted readiness to forgive, and the moment repentance occurs — the son's turning and return — the forgiveness is lavishly and immediately extended.

Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13 — Forgiving as God Forgave

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32). "Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." (Colossians 3:13)

These two Pauline commands are among the most frequently cited texts for unconditional forgiveness. The argument runs: God in Christ forgave us unconditionally — before we repented, while we were still sinners — and we are commanded to forgive one another in the same way. Therefore forgiveness must be unconditional.

The argument has genuine force and deserves a direct response. Three observations defuse it without dismissing what is genuinely true in it. First, as the book has established throughout, God's forgiveness is not unconditional in the sense the unconditional advocate assumes. Romans 5:8 — "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" — establishes that the provision of forgiveness was made before our repentance. But the application of that forgiveness to the individual is conditioned on repentance and faith. The cross precedes

repentance; the receipt of its benefits does not. Paul's commands to forgive "as God in Christ forgave you" therefore do not establish unconditional forgiveness — they establish that the model for human forgiveness is the divine pattern, which is itself conditional in its application.

Second, the word translated "forgiving" in both passages is the Greek *charizomai* — to give freely, to bestow grace. This is a different word from *aphiēmi*, which appears in the Luke 17:3-4 conditional instruction. *Charizomai* consistently carries the sense of gracious generous giving — it describes the disposition and orientation of the forgiver rather than the specific performative act of pronouncing forgiveness. This is consistent with the book's claim that the attitude of mercy and the disposition of generous grace are unconditional — it is the formal bilateral pronouncement that awaits repentance.

Third, the context of both passages is the life of the Christian community — people who are already in relationship, already committed to one another, already engaged in the mutual accountability of genuine community life. The Ephesians 4:32 command appears in a passage about the unity of the body: "be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another." This is describing the general orientation of the community toward one another — the

ambient grace that characterizes genuine Christian fellowship — not establishing a rule for the formal pronouncement of forgiveness in every possible situation. Colossians 3:13 similarly appears in a list of community virtues: bearing with one another, forgiving one another. These are descriptions of a forgiving community, not instructions for how to handle specific unresolved sins by specific unrepentant offenders. Read in context, they are fully consistent with the conditional forgiveness framework — they establish that the community is to be characterized by a disposition of generous mercy and a readiness to forgive that is immediately and fully realized when repentance comes.

Luke 23:34 — "Father, Forgive Them"

Jesus' prayer from the cross — "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" — is the most emotionally powerful text in the unconditional forgiveness arsenal. It presents Jesus forgiving his murderers in the act of crucifixion, apparently without waiting for repentance.

Let it be said plainly: the face-value reading of this text genuinely appears to show Jesus extending forgiveness to unrepentant people in the most extreme possible circumstances. This is not an illusion or a misreading that

can be quickly dismissed. It is what the text appears to say, and any honest engagement with it must start by taking that appearance seriously. The unconditional forgiveness advocate who points to this verse is not misreading the Bible — they are responding to a genuine and powerful feature of the text. The question is whether a more careful reading sustains that initial impression.

Several observations qualify this reading. First, and most decisively, this is an intercessory prayer — Jesus is asking the Father to forgive, not himself pronouncing forgiveness. Within the theological framework we have established, this is precisely the appropriate action when the conditions for pronouncing forgiveness have not been met: appeal to the one who ultimately holds forgiveness authority.

Second, the mitigating clause — "for they know not what they do" — is theologically significant. Ignorance has consistently been treated in both Biblical and theological ethics as relevant to moral culpability. This is not the general case of a knowing, unrepentant offender but a specific case where ignorance qualifies the nature of the offense. It does not establish a general principle for all interpersonal forgiveness.

Third, the prayer does not result in universal forgiveness of those present at the crucifixion — the text gives no indication of this. Jesus' intercession is genuine and the Father's willingness to forgive is genuine, but the application awaits the response of those for whom he prays.

Fourth — and this is perhaps the most powerful single observation in the entire conditional forgiveness argument — the prayer has an answer, and that answer is recorded in the New Testament. We do not need to speculate about what "Father, forgive them" ultimately accomplished. Scripture shows us.

In Acts 2, fifty days after the crucifixion, Peter preaches to a Jerusalem crowd — many of whom were present at the cross, and some of whom had called for Jesus' execution. He concludes: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). The response is immediate and striking: "they were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). The Greek word is remarkable — it describes a piercing, a sudden sharp recognition of what they have done. This is the knowledge that was absent at the cross. At the crucifixion they did not know what they were doing; at Pentecost they know. And their response — "Brothers, what shall we do?" — is precisely the

acknowledgment that was not yet present on Good Friday. Peter's answer is equally precise: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Three thousand do. Three thousand receive what the cross made available.

Read this way, Luke 23:34 and Acts 2 form a single narrative unit — the prayer and its answer. The prayer at the cross is not answered by a blanket pronouncement of forgiveness to all present regardless of their response. It is answered when the knowledge comes, when the acknowledgment is made, when the debt is recognized and repentance is offered and forgiveness is received. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" is a prayer for what Acts 2 describes: the gift of knowledge, the cutting of the heart, the "what shall we do?" — and then the forgiveness that repentance makes possible. The cross provides the forgiveness; Pentecost is its answer. Jesus does not pronounce them forgiven at the cross — he intercedes for the gift of repentance that would make receiving it possible. And that gift comes, at Pentecost, to thousands who receive it.

This reading does not diminish the extraordinary grace of the cross prayer. It magnifies it. Jesus is not declaring his murderers already forgiven regardless of their response — he is interceding for them in the most costly

possible way, asking the Father to grant them the repentance and knowledge that alone can make the forgiveness the cross accomplished available to them personally. This is the attitude of mercy and the open offer in their most exalted form: a prayer from the cross for the salvation of those doing the crucifying, answered fifty days later when three thousand of them receive it. The prayer of Luke 23:34 is not evidence for unconditional forgiveness. It is evidence for the most urgent, most costly, most persevering conditional offer of forgiveness in all of Scripture.

A parallel case appears in Acts 7:60, where Stephen, the first Christian martyr, prays as he is being stoned: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The structural parallel with Luke 23:34 is exact. Stephen is dying; his killers are present and unrepentant; he prays Godward for their forgiveness; he does not address them directly or pronounce them forgiven. As with Jesus' cross prayer, this is intercession — the attitude of mercy and the open offer in their most complete form — not the bilateral pronouncement of forgiveness to repentant offenders. The unconditional forgiveness advocate who cites this passage must reckon with the same questions that arise from Luke 23:34: Was Stephen pronouncing his killers forgiven

regardless of repentance? Or was he interceding for the gift of repentance that would make receiving forgiveness possible? The grammar and context both point to intercession. And if Luke 23:34 finds its answer at Pentecost, Acts 7 finds a striking parallel: one of the witnesses at whose feet the coats were laid (Acts 7:58) was Saul of Tarsus — whose encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road is perhaps the most dramatic answer to Stephen's dying prayer that history records. Stephen prays for his killers; the most prominent of them becomes the church's greatest apostle. The prayer of intercession is not unconditional forgiveness. It is something more powerful — the complete entrusting of justice and mercy to the God who answers in ways beyond imagining.

This reading of Luke 23:34 is not a novelty of the conditional forgiveness position. A.W. Pink — whose series on the seven sayings of the Savior on the cross is among the most widely read treatments of these texts in the Reformed and evangelical tradition — makes precisely this argument in his commentary on this passage. Pink observes that Jesus did not personally pronounce forgiveness on his enemies but instead appealed to the Father — and uses this observation as a direct springboard for the conditional forgiveness principle. He then states, with characteristic

directness: "Does Scripture teach that under all circumstances we must always forgive? I answer emphatically, it does not. Here we are plainly taught that a condition must be met by the offender before we may pronounce forgiveness. The one who has wronged us must first repent, that is, judge himself for his wrong and give evidence of his sorrow over it." Pink wrote these words in the middle of the twentieth century, well before the contemporary therapeutic forgiveness movement dominated evangelical culture. His reading of the very passage most frequently cited for unconditional forgiveness as actually supporting the conditional position is a significant piece of scholarly testimony that the conditional reading is not an eccentric novelty but a well-established position within the Reformed and evangelical tradition.

"Does Scripture teach that under all circumstances we must always forgive? I answer emphatically, it does not... a condition must be met by the offender before we may pronounce forgiveness." —

*A.W. Pink, The Seven Sayings of the Savior
on the Cross*

PART THREE

Contemporary Views and Their Problems

Chapter Ten: Popular Voices on Forgiveness — A Critical Survey

The preceding nine chapters have established the Biblical case for conditional forgiveness through exegesis of the key texts, examination of the Old and New Testament patterns of divine forgiveness, and engagement with the passages most frequently cited for the unconditional position. Having established the exegetical foundation, it is worth asking how these conclusions relate to the most influential voices in the contemporary evangelical forgiveness debate. Understanding how popular treatments have gone wrong — and where they have gone right — serves the reader who will encounter these voices in the literature, in the pulpit, and in pastoral conversations. The purpose of this chapter is not to disparage teachers and authors whose pastoral intentions are genuine, but to show how the same texts, read through different frameworks, produce different conclusions — and why the framework matters.

The contemporary Christian conversation on forgiveness has been shaped by a relatively small number of highly influential voices. This chapter surveys the most significant of these, identifying what each gets right, where each goes wrong, and what the Biblical account offers in correction and enrichment.

Robert Jeffress: Forgiveness as Immediate Unconditional Release

Robert Jeffress, senior pastor of First Baptist Dallas and a prolific popular communicator, represents the dominant American evangelical approach to forgiveness in his book *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense*. His position has several defining characteristics.

Forgiveness, for Jeffress, is defined as "a conscious decision to release someone from the debt they owe you." It should be granted immediately, regardless of repentance, because waiting for repentance leads to bitterness, emotional bondage, and spiritual harm. Forgiveness is primarily about the forgiver's obedience and freedom, not the offender's response. It is one-sided — you can and should do it alone, without the offender's participation.

What Jeffress Gets Right

Jeffress correctly identifies the danger of bitterness and resentment corroding the spiritual life of the wronged person. The Biblical command to harbor no malice toward any person — even an unrepentant offender — is real and important. His pastoral sensitivity to people trapped in cycles of resentment is genuine and his concern for their healing is admirable.

He also correctly distinguishes forgiveness from trust and from the removal of consequences. Forgiving someone does not require pretending the offense did not happen, restoring a dangerous person to a position of trust, or eliminating the natural consequences of their actions. These distinctions are important and often overlooked in popular discussions.

Where Jeffress Goes Wrong

BONHOEFFER'S WARNING

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance... grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

When forgiveness is pronounced without repentance, it does not produce more grace. It produces less reality.

The fundamental problem with Jeffress' position is that it redefines forgiveness in therapeutic rather than Biblical terms. His definition — releasing someone from the debt they owe you — makes forgiveness a one-sided psychological act. But the Biblical account of forgiveness is consistently a two-party, relational act. It involves both the offender and the offended, each with a role to play.

Biblical forgiveness is a covenantal act of restoration between two parties: the offended, who renounces all malice and holds genuine mercy toward the one who has wronged them; and the offending, who turns from the wrong and receives the restoration being offered. It is not the unilateral release of a psychological debt but the mutual re-establishment of a broken relationship — patterned on the way God himself forgives: lavishly, eagerly, and at great cost, but applied upon genuine repentance rather than pronounced in its absence.

More seriously, his model implicitly claims to do what even God does not do. God does not pronounce forgiveness on unrepentant sinners — He offers it, pursues it, provides for it in Christ's atonement, but applies it upon repentance and faith. If human forgiveness pronounces what divine forgiveness withholds, human forgiveness has

been defined in a way that is not patterned on God's forgiveness but is actually more permissive than it.

The pastoral danger of Jeffress' model, despite his own qualifications, is significant. In practice, telling victims — particularly victims of abuse, exploitation, or ongoing harm — that they must immediately and unconditionally forgive their offenders can function as moral pressure that minimizes injustice, removes boundaries prematurely, and leaves the offender's behavior unaddressed. The model that was designed to free the victim can paradoxically trap them in a relationship with ongoing danger while calling their obedience into question if they resist.

One specific interpretive move in Jeffress' teaching on Matthew 18 deserves direct engagement because it is both documented in his public sermons and influential in how many evangelicals read that passage. Jeffress distinguishes between Matthew 18:15-20, which he reads as church discipline dealing with sin in the church generally, and Matthew 18:21-35, which he treats as a separate and distinct discussion of personal forgiveness — one that he concludes requires unconditional response. In a sermon on Matthew 18, he states explicitly: "Peter's not talking about sin in the church in general, he's talking about personal offenses" — and uses this shift to argue that personal

forgiveness operates by different and unconditional rules from the church discipline process. This is a more sophisticated argument than simple dismissal of Matthew 18, and it deserves a direct response.

Chapter Four of this book addresses this reading in detail. In brief: the argument correctly observes that Peter's question in verse 21 shifts to the personal register — but incorrectly concludes that the conditions on forgiveness shift with it. Several considerations show why this reading fails. First, the discipline process itself begins personally — "If your brother sins against you" is directed to a specific wronged individual, and the first stage is entirely private. Second, Peter's question is not a change of subject but a direct follow-up to the discipline teaching — the Greek *tote* signals logical sequence, not departure. Third, the seventy times seven standard in response to Peter describes unlimited responsiveness to repentance, not unlimited pronouncement regardless of repentance. And fourth, Luke 17:3-4 — which contains no community apparatus at all — applies the same conditional structure to personal offenses directly: "if he repents, forgive him." If Matthew 18's conditions only applied to church-level matters, Luke 17 would have to mean something entirely different from the same teaching in a different form. It does not.

A Sophisticated Refinement — And Why It Still Falls Short

The more careful advocates of unconditional forgiveness — including voices like Tim Keller who distinguish inward from outward forgiveness — are aware of these objections and offer a refined version of the position that deserves a direct response. They argue that personal forgiveness — the victim's unilateral release of the offender from any personal debt — does not preclude the church's accountability processes or judicial accountability. The church may still withhold restoration pending repentance. The state may still prosecute. The offender still faces consequences in every institutional domain. What unconditional forgiveness addresses is only the personal claim the victim holds against the offender. The victim releases that claim for their own freedom and healing, independently of what the community or the state does. On this reading, unconditional forgiveness and full accountability can coexist without contradiction.

This is a genuinely more careful position than the simple therapeutic model, and it partially accounts for why the book's critique might seem too sweeping. But it still fails, and the failure runs deeper than the cruder version.

First, it redefines forgiveness as something the Bible does not recognize. When the victim releases the offender from any personal accountability to them — cancelling the personal claim without requiring acknowledgment or repentance — they are not doing what Matthew 18, Luke 17, or the Corinthian correspondence describe. All of those passages treat forgiveness as a relational act that restores genuine fellowship. The sophisticated version has essentially renamed "releasing bitterness" as "forgiveness" — which is precisely the conflation this book identifies as the foundational error.

Second, the personal and the relational cannot be cleanly separated. Interpersonal sin is not a financial loan that can be unilaterally cancelled while the friendship continues unchanged. It is a violation of the relationship itself. To say "I forgive you but owe you no acknowledgment, no genuine change, no repentance" is to say the relationship can be restored on the basis of nothing. But the relationship has been genuinely damaged. Forgiveness that requires no acknowledgment and no turning does not heal the damage — it papers over it, leaving both parties in a relationship whose foundation has been quietly shifted without either fully recognizing it.

Third — and this is perhaps the most underappreciated problem — unconditional personal forgiveness does nothing for the offender. If the victim pronounces forgiveness unconditionally, the offender receives exactly the wrong signal: that their sin has been absorbed without cost, that their victim has moved on, that nothing is required of them. This does not call them toward genuine repentance and transformation. It removes the very relational weight that might motivate it. If forgiveness aims at the recovery of the lost sheep — as this book has argued from Matthew 18 — then pronouncing it prematurely removes the most intimate incentive to repentance available to the offender: the knowledge that the person they hurt most directly is waiting for them, genuinely ready to forgive, and holding that offer open for the day they turn.

Fourth, the asymmetry the sophisticated position creates is revealing. The church withholds restoration pending repentance because repentance matters for genuine community life. The state holds accountable because the wrong done is real. But the victim pronounces forgiveness regardless of repentance because the victim's interior peace matters. This implicit hierarchy — community and state operate on serious theological and moral principles, but the victim operates on therapeutic ones — suggests that

forgiveness in this model is not really a moral or theological act at all. It is emotional self-management dressed in the language of grace.

FOR REFLECTION: FOUR FAILURES OF THE SOPHISTICATED POSITION

First: It redefines forgiveness as something the Bible does not recognize — renaming "releasing bitterness" as "forgiveness." Second: It separates the personal from the relational in a way that interpersonal sin does not allow — sin violates the relationship, not just a private account. Third: It removes the most intimate incentive to repentance available to the offender — the knowledge that the person they hurt most is waiting for them. Fourth: Its implicit hierarchy reveals its therapeutic logic — church and state operate on moral principles, but the victim operates on psychological ones.

The book's position is more carefully calibrated than either the crude or sophisticated unconditional positions. The victim is not required to harbor personal resentment or desire for vengeance — those are released unconditionally as part of the attitude of mercy that the book has consistently argued is required of all believers. But the victim's formal pronouncement of forgiveness — the spoken act of restoring the relationship — carries an implicit moral message that unconditional pronouncement obscures: what you did to me matters, it was a genuine wrong, it requires genuine

acknowledgment and genuine turning, and when that occurs I will receive you back completely. That message is more honest, more loving, and ultimately more useful to the offender than the alternative: "I've already processed this, you don't owe me anything."

Lewis Smedes: The Therapeutic Model

Lewis Smedes' *Forgive and Forget* (1984) is perhaps the single most influential popular Christian book on forgiveness of the twentieth century. Smedes explicitly locates forgiveness in the psychological interior of the victim rather than in the relational transaction between offender and offended. Forgiveness, for Smedes, is what happens inside you — a release of resentment that frees you from the power of the person who wronged you.

What Smedes Gets Right

Smedes writes with genuine pastoral wisdom about the experience of being wronged and the corroding power of resentment. His insight that carrying unforgiveness is a form of bondage — giving ongoing power to the person who wronged you — is psychologically astute and has genuine pastoral application. He writes with compassion for people

carrying wounds that others have minimized or failed to acknowledge.

Where Smedes Goes Wrong

Smedes' fundamental error is methodological. He begins with psychological observation and constructs a theology of forgiveness around it, rather than beginning with Scripture and allowing it to define what forgiveness is. The result is that forgiveness becomes primarily about the victim's interior state — which is a real and important pastoral concern but is not what the Biblical texts are primarily addressing.

When forgiveness is defined as an interior psychological release, the offender's repentance becomes genuinely irrelevant to the act — which is precisely the conclusion Smedes reaches. But this makes forgiveness something the victim does for themselves rather than something they do in relation to the offender. It is a therapeutic act, not a covenantal one. The distinction matters because it changes what forgiveness is aiming to accomplish. Biblical forgiveness aims at restoration of the relationship and recovery of the lost sheep. Therapeutic forgiveness aims at the victim's emotional health. These are

not the same goal, and the difference shapes everything about how the practice of forgiveness is understood.

The therapeutic model has also inverted the consistent orientation of Scripture on this point. Nowhere in Scripture is forgiveness presented as something that benefits the forgiver. It is always presented as something that benefits the offender — restoring them to fellowship, addressing their guilt, opening the path to genuine restoration. The wronged person in the Matthew 18 process is not told to forgive for their own emotional health; they are told to pursue the offender's repentance so the offender can be restored. The emphasis is entirely on the offender's restoration, not the forgiver's inner peace. Smedes has taken what is at most a secondary consequence of genuine forgiveness — the forgiver's own release from bitterness — and made it the primary purpose of the act. In doing so, he has constructed a theology of forgiveness that has nothing to do with the offender at all. The offender becomes irrelevant, their repentance unnecessary, their restoration a matter of indifference. This is not merely a different emphasis from the biblical account. It is a different subject entirely.

The consequences of this inversion are more serious than they first appear — and James 5:19-20 makes them

visible. "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins." James frames the willingness to pursue a wandering sinner and call them back through rebuke and confrontation as an act of rescue — saving them from death, covering their sins through the restoration of genuine repentance. The therapeutic model, by making forgiveness entirely interior and entirely unilateral, removes any motivation for that pursuit. If the goal is the forgiver's own inner peace, there is no reason to confront. No reason to rebuke. No reason to do the uncomfortable, relational work of calling the offender back. The offended party simply releases the grievance internally and moves on — leaving the offender's soul entirely unaddressed. What presents itself as the more compassionate option is, by James's account, a failure of love. Genuine mercy is willing to risk the discomfort of confrontation for the sake of the offender's soul. Unconditional forgiveness that bypasses rebuke and repentance does not love the offender more generously — it loves them less completely, abandoning them to the wandering that James says leads to death.

There is also a subtler problem with the therapeutic model's self-presentation: it calls the easier route the harder one, presenting the choice to bypass direct confrontation as

an act of heroic grace — when the hard thing, the thing Jesus commands and James frames as rescue, is to go.

The enduring contribution of Smedes' work is the pastoral insight that unresolved bitterness damages the person who carries it — a point the Bible itself makes and that this book affirms. The problem is not his concern for the victim's wellbeing but his framework for addressing it. Defining forgiveness as interior release is not the only or the best way to address the very real problem of festering resentment. The Biblical framework offers a richer path: not unilateral interior release but the active pursuit of genuine repentance, genuine restoration, and the experience of forgiving — and being forgiven — as the transforming encounter it is intended to be.

Tim Keller: Inward and Outward Forgiveness

Tim Keller, in *The Meaning of Marriage* and various sermons, offers a more nuanced position that distinguishes between what he calls inward and outward forgiveness. Inward forgiveness — the release of resentment, the refusal to harbor malice, the willingness to forgive — is unconditional and is required of all believers regardless of the offender's repentance. Outward forgiveness — the

formal pronouncement of forgiveness, the restoration of the relationship — requires repentance.

What Keller Gets Right

This two-stage framework is considerably more sophisticated than either Jeffress or Smedes and comes much closer to the Biblical picture. Keller correctly identifies that there is something the wronged party must do regardless of the offender's response — maintain a heart free of malice and oriented toward the offender's good — while also recognizing that the full relational restoration of forgiveness requires the offender's participation.

Where Keller's Framework Can Be Refined

The main refinement the Biblical text suggests is in the terminology. Calling both the inner attitude and the formal pronouncement "forgiveness" — distinguishing them merely as inward and outward — risks blurring the distinction in practice. The Biblical texts, particularly Luke 17:3-4, use forgiveness language specifically for the transactional relational act that follows repentance. The inner attitude — the release of malice, the readiness to forgive, the active pursuit of the offender's repentance — is better described in the categories the Biblical text itself provides: mercy, love for enemies, prayer for persecutors,

and the attitude of mercy that holds the offer genuinely open.

Chris Brauns: Forgiveness as Covenantal Promise

Chris Brauns' *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Crossway) is the most careful and Biblically rigorous popular-level treatment of conditional forgiveness available. Brauns defines forgiveness as "a commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability and to be reconciled to that person, although not all consequences are necessarily eliminated." This definition correctly incorporates repentance into the structure of forgiveness, treats forgiveness as a relational commitment rather than a psychological state, and properly distinguishes forgiveness from the removal of all consequences.

What Brauns Gets Right

Brauns' treatment of the analogy between divine and human forgiveness is among the strongest in the popular literature. His insistence that forgiving "just as God forgave you" means following the pattern of conditional divine forgiveness rather than exceeding it is exegetically and theologically sound. His pastoral advice — that the wronged person maintain an attitude of forgiveness, actively pursue

the offender's repentance, and stand ready to forgive immediately upon repentance — correctly identifies the wronged person's obligations without requiring premature pronouncement.

Points for Further Development

The analysis developed in this book extends Brauns' argument in several directions. The grammatical analysis of Matthew 18:18's perfect passive participles, the two-audience structure of Matthew 18:6-10, the significance of the *skandalizō/hamartanō* distinction, and the rich Old Testament background of heart language in Matthew 18:35 all provide deeper exegetical foundations for the conditional position that Brauns argues for largely on theological and analogical grounds.

Jay Adams: Forgiveness as Unconditional Obligation to Attempt Reconciliation

Jay Adams, the founder of biblical counseling, is the most uncompromising advocate of conditional forgiveness among professional Christian counselors. His position, developed in several works including *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, holds without qualification that forgiveness is

conditional on repentance and that the wronged person is not obligated to forgive the unrepentant.

Adams' crucial pastoral contribution is his insistence that the wronged person's obligation is not merely passive waiting but active pursuit of the offender's repentance. The wronged person must harbor no ill will, must actively work to bring the offender to repentance, and must maintain a genuine readiness to forgive. This transforms the waiting period from a grudging withholding into an active pastoral engagement — which is precisely what the lost sheep parable of Matthew 18 requires.

"The wronged person must harbor no ill will, must actively work to bring the offender to repentance, and must maintain a genuine readiness to forgive. This transforms the waiting period from a grudging withholding into an active pastoral engagement." — Jay Adams, From Forgiven to Forgiving

Chapter Eleven: Human Nature, Accountability, and the Empirical Case

The preceding chapter has surveyed the most influential popular voices on forgiveness — identifying what each gets right, where each falls short, and how the Biblical framework refines and corrects each position. This chapter steps back from the survey of specific thinkers to press a broader argument: the case against unconditional forgiveness is not only exegetical and theological. It is anthropological and empirical. The unconditional forgiveness position rests on an unrealistically optimistic account of human nature, and the consequences of adopting it — both in communities and in individual lives — are measurable and predictable. This chapter makes that case and then examines the growing body of empirical research that, while not the basis of the Biblical argument, provides striking confirmation of it.

The Deeper Problem: What Unconditional Forgiveness Does to Human Nature

The surveys in the previous chapter engaged the unconditional forgiveness position primarily on exegetical

and theological grounds — asking whether it correctly reads the Biblical texts and whether it adequately reflects the character of divine forgiveness. But there is a deeper, anthropological problem with the unconditional forgiveness position that deserves direct attention: it is built on an unrealistically optimistic account of human nature, and its practical consequences in communities that adopt it are predictable and damaging.

The Romans 6 Problem

Paul anticipates the problem precisely in Romans 6. After declaring in Romans 5 that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more," he immediately raises what he knows will be the obvious objection to this good news:

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2)

Paul is addressing a specific form of theological reasoning that works like this: if God's grace covers sin, and more sin produces more grace, then sin is not something to be avoided — it is the very occasion for grace to be displayed. His response is not a qualification of grace but a categorical rejection of the logic. Genuine grace does not produce license; it produces transformation. A theology that uses

grace to justify ongoing sin has fundamentally misunderstood what grace is and what it does.

The same logic applies with direct force to unconditional forgiveness. If forgiveness is pronounced regardless of repentance, the incentive structure of the situation works actively against genuine change. The offender receives the benefits of forgiveness — restored relationship, removed guilt, communal reinstatement — without any corresponding requirement for transformation. Why turn from sin when the relational and social consequences are removed regardless? Unconditional forgiveness, applied consistently, produces precisely the dynamic Paul condemns: the removal of accountability that allows sin to continue without consequence. It is not more gracious than conditional forgiveness. It is, in Paul's terms, a different kind of error — the error of treating grace as so abundant that the moral reality of sin no longer matters.

What the Bible Says About Human Nature

This anthropological problem is not a peripheral concern — it runs straight into the heart of what the Bible teaches about human nature from Genesis to Revelation. The Scripture is not naive about what human beings do when accountability is removed.

Genesis 6:5 describes the human condition before the flood in terms that remain accurate after it: "every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Jeremiah 17:9 offers the most searching diagnosis: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" Ecclesiastes 8:11 states the practical consequence with unsettling bluntness: "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil." This last verse is particularly significant — the writer of Ecclesiastes is making exactly the point this section is making. When consequences are removed or delayed, sin increases. This is not a pessimistic cultural observation; it is a Biblical description of fallen human nature.

Paul's extended indictment in Romans 3:10-18 — drawing on a string of psalms — leaves no room for optimism about what human beings will do without the structures of accountability that law, community, and genuine repentance provide. "There is no one who does good, not even one... There is no fear of God before their eyes." The absence of the fear of God — the recognition that wrongdoing has real consequences before a holy Judge — is precisely what produces the catalog of evil Paul describes. A theology that removes consequences from wrongdoing is, in

biblical terms, removing one of the primary restraints on human sinfulness.

The Sacrificial System and the Seriousness of Sin

The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament makes the same point through its elaborate structure. Sin requires atonement — not because God is vindictive but because sin is real and has genuine weight that must be addressed honestly rather than simply overlooked. The Day of Atonement, the sin offerings, the guilt offerings — all of these encode the theological conviction that sin cannot simply be waved away. It must be dealt with. The conditions on forgiveness in the Biblical account are not arbitrary bureaucratic requirements; they are the expression of a God who takes sin seriously enough to require genuine acknowledgment and genuine turning before restoring fellowship.

When this framework is replaced by unconditional forgiveness — forgiveness pronounced regardless of acknowledgment or turning — the implicit message is that sin is less serious than this elaborate Biblical structure suggests. The offender need not face what they have done, need not name it honestly, need not turn from it genuinely. The relationship is restored on the basis of nothing. This is

not a more generous theology than the Biblical account. It is a less honest one.

The Communal Consequences — What Actually Happens

This is not merely theoretical. As the documented cases examined in Chapter Thirteen will show in detail, communities that practice unconditional forgiveness as a matter of policy suffer predictable and serious consequences. When offenders are forgiven unconditionally and restored to positions of trust without genuine repentance and demonstrated change, they reoffend — and the next victims pay the price of the community's theological error. Ecclesiastes 8:11 was not wrong. When the sentence against an evil deed is not executed — when accountability is removed and forgiveness pronounced unconditionally — the heart is fully set to do evil again. This is not a counsel of harshness or suspicion. It is a realistic account of fallen human nature that the Biblical forgiveness framework was designed, in part, to address. The conditions on forgiveness — genuine repentance, demonstrated change, the community's careful exercise of its authority — are not obstacles to grace. They are protections for the next potential victim, and they take the seriousness of sin

seriously enough to require something real before pronouncing restoration.

The Prodigal Son — Grace That Requires Something Real

The Prodigal Son is often invoked as the paradigm of unconditional forgiveness — the father runs to meet the returning son before any formal confession is made. But as this book has argued, the son's repentance precedes his return. "I will arise and go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son'" (Luke 15:18-19). The transformation of heart has already occurred before the reunion takes place. The father's lavish welcome is the response to genuine repentance, not the substitute for it.

The elder son's complaint — that the party seems to reward the prodigal's wasteful behavior — is itself a version of the Romans 6 objection: does this not encourage sin? The father's answer is not "grace is unconditional" but "your brother was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (15:32). The celebration makes sense precisely because something genuine has changed. The son who was dead to genuine relationship is now alive to it. The son who was lost in the far country has actually returned. The lavishness of the welcome is proportionate to the reality of the restoration

— and the reality of the restoration rests on the reality of the repentance.

This is the Biblical picture throughout: grace that is genuinely transformative rather than merely permissive — grace that, as Paul puts it, actively "trains us to renounce ungodliness" rather than simply overlooking it (Titus 2:11-14). The God who forgives lavishly is the same God who requires genuine turning. These are not in tension. They are the two sides of a grace that is serious enough to demand real change and generous enough to celebrate it extravagantly when it occurs. Unconditional forgiveness collapses this structure by eliminating one side of it — and in doing so, it neither honors the seriousness of sin nor produces the genuine transformation that grace is intended to accomplish.

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* illuminates this dynamic with extraordinary psychological depth. Raskolnikov murders a pawnbroker and her sister, convincing himself that extraordinary men are above ordinary moral law — that consequences will not reach him. The novel's entire arc is the unraveling of that conviction. But it is the character of Sonya who most precisely illustrates the thesis of this book. Sonya loves Raskolnikov throughout his denial, his evasion, and his psychological deterioration.

She maintains an attitude of complete mercy toward him — no resentment, no abandonment — and holds genuinely open the offer of forgiveness and redemption. But she does not pronounce him restored. She insists, with increasing urgency, that he must confess — must go to the crossroads, bow down, and acknowledge publicly what he has done. "Go now, this very minute, stand at the crossroads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, 'I am a murderer!'" Sonya's love is not therapeutic release — it is the love that takes the offender seriously enough to refuse the easy exit of unacknowledged guilt. Her refusal to let Raskolnikov off the hook of genuine acknowledgment is, in the fullest sense, an act of mercy. Dostoevsky, writing from deep within the Russian Orthodox tradition, understood what the Biblical framework teaches: that Ecclesiastes 8:11 applies not only to external consequences but to the soul's own reckoning — and that the person who escapes without genuine acknowledgment has not escaped at all, but only deferred a reckoning that will find them anyway.

**THE FOLLY OF GRACE WITHOUT
ACCOUNTABILITY**

When forgiveness requires nothing, sin costs nothing. The Biblical framework — repentance, genuine turning, honest

acknowledgment — is not an obstacle to grace. It is the structure that makes grace produce what it is meant to produce: real change, real restoration, and real protection for those who might otherwise become the next victim.

What the Research Shows — Empirical Confirmation of a Biblical Argument

This book's argument for conditional forgiveness rests on Biblical and theological foundations, not therapeutic or empirical ones. The case has been made throughout from the grammar of Matthew 18, the structure of Luke 17:3-4, the apostolic practice of the Corinthian correspondence, and the consistent pattern of divine forgiveness across both Testaments. Empirical research cannot settle theological questions, and a forgiveness theology built primarily on psychological findings would be precisely the therapeutic model this book has consistently critiqued.

That said, it is worth noting — as a supplementary observation, not as a primary argument — that the growing body of empirical research on forgiveness, unforgiveness, and premature forgiveness provides striking confirmation of

the very distinctions this book has been making. When the therapeutic and scientific evidence consistently supports healthier outcomes associated with the conditional forgiveness view, that alignment further undercuts the case for unconditional forgiveness. If the unconditional forgiveness position were correct, we would expect the research to show that the fastest, most unilateral, most unconditional forgiveness produces the best outcomes. That is not what the research finds.

The Health Benefits of Releasing Bitterness

The empirical research on forgiveness is extensive and consistent in its findings about the benefits of releasing resentment and bitterness toward offenders. Studies from Johns Hopkins Medicine, published peer-reviewed journals, and large-scale randomized controlled trials all find that releasing negative emotions toward offenders is associated with significant health benefits: reduced risk of heart attack, improved cholesterol levels and sleep quality, lower blood pressure, and reduced levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. The largest-ever randomized controlled trial of a forgiveness intervention — involving 4,598 participants across five countries including conflict zones such as Colombia, Ukraine, and South Africa — found significant reductions in unforgiveness, depression

symptoms, and anxiety symptoms among those who underwent the forgiveness process.

These findings align with what this book calls the attitude of mercy — the unconditional release of bitterness, resentment, and the desire for personal vengeance that this book has consistently argued is required of every believer regardless of the offender's response. What the research measures as beneficial is precisely this inner release, not the formal two-party pronouncement of restored relationship. The therapeutic research, properly understood, confirms the attitude of mercy — the unconditional dimension of the book's framework — rather than the unconditional pronouncement of forgiveness.

The Costs of Unforgiveness

The research on the costs of unforgiveness is equally consistent. Chronic resentment and bitterness activate the body's stress response continuously, releasing cortisol and adrenaline. Peer-reviewed research has linked this chronic stress to elevated blood pressure, increased cardiovascular risk, weakened immune function, disrupted sleep, and a range of psychological consequences including depression and anxiety. Researchers have identified what they call the "injustice gap" — the ongoing mental computation in which

the wronged person balances the amount of injustice done against subsequent events — as a significant driver of sustained psychological harm when it is never resolved.

These findings confirm this book's consistent position that harboring resentment and bitterness is genuinely harmful to the person who carries it — and that the attitude of mercy is not merely a moral obligation but a genuine benefit to the one who practices it. The costs of unforgiveness, properly understood, are the costs of the wrong inner attitude rather than the costs of withholding the formal pronouncement of forgiveness from the unrepentant.

The Costs of Premature Forgiveness — The Most Theologically Significant Finding

The most theologically significant research findings concern what happens when forgiveness is extended prematurely or under pressure — and here the empirical evidence directly confirms the book's central argument in ways that are difficult for the unconditional forgiveness position to answer.

Researchers have identified what they call "pseudo-forgiveness" — a premature declaration of forgiveness that does not reflect actual internal change. It produces a

surface-level declaration accompanied by suppressed anger and continued avoidance of the real injury. It looks like forgiveness from the outside while functioning more like emotional bypassing on the inside. The psychological concept of pseudo-forgiveness maps almost precisely onto what this book calls premature pronouncement — the declaration of restored relationship before the conditions for genuine restoration have been met.

Even more striking is a peer-reviewed study that found that in marriages characterized by frequent or serious transgressions, the tendency to forgive actually predicted continued psychological and physical aggression. The researchers concluded that forgiving frequent or major offenses — including verbal and physical abuse — may be inadvisable because repeat occurrences of such offenses outweigh the benefits of forgiveness. This is a direct empirical confirmation of the Ecclesiastes 8:11 principle: when the sentence against an evil deed is not executed, the heart is fully set to do evil again. The removal of the interpersonal consequence of withheld forgiveness produces not gratitude and transformation but emboldening.

Research in trauma psychology has similarly found that pressure to forgive abusers — particularly when that

pressure comes from communities with an interest in minimizing what happened — can function as a continuation of the original harm. It tends to center the abuser at the expense of the victim, can exacerbate shame, and may interfere with the genuine emotional processing that authentic forgiveness requires.

What the Research Cannot Tell Us

A careful note is needed here. The empirical research operates with a definition of forgiveness that is primarily therapeutic — the release of negative emotions, the reduction of the injustice gap, the cessation of rumination. This is closer to what this book calls the attitude of mercy than to the full Biblical concept of forgiveness as a two-party covenantal transaction. The research therefore confirms the benefits of the attitude of mercy and the costs of chronic bitterness — it does not directly measure the outcomes of conditional versus unconditional pronouncement of forgiveness in the full Biblical sense.

This means the research should be used carefully. Those who would use it to argue for unconditional forgiveness on therapeutic grounds are making the same methodological error as Smedes — beginning with psychological observation and constructing a theology

around it, rather than beginning with Scripture. What the research does demonstrate, with considerable force, is that the unconditional forgiveness position — in its typical form — produces not the health benefits its advocates promise but a mixed and sometimes harmful set of outcomes. Premature forgiveness bypasses genuine processing and harms the forgiver. Unconditional forgiveness in abusive relationships emboldens the abuser. Pressured forgiveness in traumatic contexts reinjures the victim.

The research confirms what the Bible teaches: genuine forgiveness requires genuine change — and forgiveness that bypasses that requirement serves neither the victim nor the offender as well as its advocates claim.

Chapter Twelve: Bonhoeffer, Cheap Grace, and the Cost of Unconditional Forgiveness

Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not write a systematic treatise on interpersonal forgiveness. But his theology of grace, discipleship, and community contains some of the most penetrating insights available for evaluating the contemporary forgiveness debate — insights made more urgent by the historical catastrophe that gave them birth.

Cheap Grace: The Most Dangerous Enemy of the Church

The Cost of Discipleship opens with what Bonhoeffer calls the most dangerous enemy of the church: cheap grace. His description of it is worth quoting at length because it maps with remarkable precision onto what we have identified as the unconditional forgiveness position:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross,

grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate.

The phrase "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance" is the unconditional forgiveness position stated exactly. Bonhoeffer's objection is not that this is insufficiently strict — it is that it is insufficiently serious about what forgiveness actually is and what it actually accomplishes. Forgiveness that requires nothing of the recipient is not more gracious — it is less real.

Cheap Grace and German Christianity

Bonhoeffer's critique is not merely theoretical. He wrote with acute awareness of what cheap grace theology had done to the German church. Christians who had been assured of unconditional grace — baptized, confirmed, and presumed forgiven regardless of repentance or transformation — had no moral resources to resist the National Socialist ideology that engulfed Germany. The grace that had been preached to them asked nothing and changed nothing, and therefore produced nothing when something was desperately needed.

This historical observation carries genuine weight for the contemporary forgiveness debate. A theology of unconditional forgiveness — in which the pronouncement of

forgiveness is independent of the offender's repentance and transformation — does not merely make a different theological claim than conditional forgiveness. It produces different people: people for whom moral seriousness, genuine accountability, and the costly work of real reconciliation are all optional because grace is presumed to cover everything regardless.

Bonhoeffer's insight had been anticipated in literature decades earlier by Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor — one of the most searching fictional examinations of cheap grace ever written. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Inquisitor tells Christ that his gift of freedom was simply too demanding. People do not want the costly grace of genuine transformation and genuine accountability — they want bread, miracle, and authority. The Inquisitor has replaced costly grace with a system that asks nothing and gives everything, and he presents this as an act of mercy. Dostoevsky understood, as Bonhoeffer would articulate three decades later, that this is not mercy but its counterfeit — a system that flatters people rather than saving them, and that ultimately denies the seriousness both of sin and of the human capacity for genuine change.

Costly Grace: What Genuine Forgiveness Requires

Against cheap grace Bonhoeffer sets costly grace:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.

Forgiveness in this framework is genuinely costly — it costs the offender acknowledgment, repentance, and the surrender of self-justification. It costs the wronged person the sustained effort of mercy, the active pursuit of the offender's repentance, and the willingness to absorb the ongoing pain of wrong while holding the offer of forgiveness genuinely open. Neither party gets off cheaply.

This is precisely the picture that the careful exegesis of Matthew 18 produces. The king's forgiveness of the servant's unpayable debt is lavish and unearned — but it is received by a servant who prostrated himself, acknowledged his debt, and appealed for mercy. And the lesson of the parable is that genuine reception of that grace produces a transformed person, one who now relates to others from the

same orientation of mercy. Cheap forgiveness — pronouncement without response, grace without transformation — is what the unforgiving servant practiced, and it revealed that he had never genuinely received what he had been given.

Life Together: Confession and Absolution in Community

Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* addresses confession and forgiveness within the Christian community in terms that directly illuminate the Matthew 18 framework. Bonhoeffer insists on the practice of individual confession to a brother or sister in the community — not as a mechanical ritual but as the means by which sin is brought into the light and its power is broken.

The connection to Matthew 18's discipline process is clear. The private confrontation of verse 15 — "show him his fault" — is the initiating act of bringing sin into the light. The subsequent stages are an escalating version of the same act. And the forgiveness that follows repentance is pronounced by the community not on its own authority but as Christ's representative — which is precisely what the binding and loosing language of verses 18-20 establishes.

Bonhoeffer's insight that the brother who hears confession and pronounces absolution does so not on his own authority but as the representative of Christ gives the interpersonal act of forgiveness the same theological weight that our analysis of the perfect passive participles in Matthew 18:18 established. When Christians forgive each other in accordance with the conditions Christ established, they are enacting a transaction that heaven ratifies — and the conditions therefore matter.

Chapter Thirteen: The Hardest Cases — Pastoral Wisdom for Real Situations

Theological precision about forgiveness is important, but it must be translated into pastoral wisdom that serves real people in real situations. This chapter addresses the hardest cases — those where the question of conditional versus unconditional forgiveness is most urgent and where getting it wrong causes the most harm.

The Unrepentant Offender

The most common pastoral situation is the wronged person whose offender has not repented — perhaps has not acknowledged wrongdoing at all, or has minimized it, deflected it, or responded with counter-accusation. What is this person required to do?

The Biblical answer, developed throughout this book, has several components that must be held together:

First, the wronged person is required to maintain a heart free of malice, bitterness, and desire for vengeance. This is unconditional and is required regardless of the offender's behavior. It is not optional and it is not easy — but it is what the New Covenant community is called to. The

resources for this are not primarily psychological but spiritual: prayer for the offender, release of vengeance to God (Romans 12:19), and the ongoing experience of having oneself been forgiven an unpayable debt.

Second, the wronged person is called to actively pursue the offender's repentance — not passively waiting but lovingly engaging, following the Matthew 18 process where applicable, working for genuine restoration. This is the lost-sheep orientation that the Father's will in Matthew 18:14 requires of the community.

An important qualification must be stated here, however, because "actively pursue" can become an unbearably heavy obligation if applied without discernment. There are situations where active pursuit of the offender is not possible, not safe, or not appropriate — and in these situations, distance and non-contact are not failures of the forgiveness framework but expressions of wisdom and faithfulness within it. The abuse survivor who has no safe way to engage her abuser is not failing to forgive by maintaining protective distance. The person estranged from a dangerous family member is not failing the lost-sheep theology by keeping boundaries in place. The victim of an offender who has died, emigrated, or become inaccessible is not failing by entrusting the matter entirely to God. In all

these cases, "active pursuit" takes forms other than direct engagement: sustained prayer for the offender's repentance, a genuine willingness to receive repentance if it ever comes, and the release of personal bitterness and vengeance to God. These are the irreducible minimum — and they are genuinely demanding enough without adding the requirement of direct pursuit in every situation. The obligation is not to pursue the offender regardless of circumstances. The obligation is to remain genuinely oriented toward their good, whatever form that practically takes.

Third, the wronged person is not required to pronounce forgiveness before repentance occurs, and should not be pressured to do so. Such pressure — however pastorally well-intentioned — asks the victim to do something God does not do and may actually impede the genuine restoration it is hoping to achieve.

Fourth, the wronged person should be helped to understand that withholding the formal pronouncement of forgiveness is not the same as harboring resentment. The two are entirely compatible with each other: a heart full of mercy, genuine desire for the offender's repentance and restoration, and active prayer for the offender, combined

with the honest refusal to pronounce forgiveness before its conditions are met.

Abuse and Ongoing Harm

The pastoral stakes are highest when the offense is abuse — physical, sexual, emotional, or spiritual — and when the offender remains a potential danger. The unconditional forgiveness model is most dangerous in precisely these situations, and the misapplication of forgiveness language has caused genuine and serious harm to abuse survivors in Christian communities. The following documented cases illustrate what this harm looks like in practice — and what faithful, theologically grounded engagement with forgiveness looks like in contrast.

Case Study One: Rachael Denhollander, Larry Nassar, and the Cost of Speaking Out

When Rachael Denhollander became the first person to publicly accuse Larry Nassar — the USA Gymnastics team doctor who sexually abused her beginning when she was fifteen years old — she did so as a committed evangelical Christian who had spent years studying Scripture to understand what justice and forgiveness actually require. Her case is particularly instructive because it illustrates simultaneously what sound conditional forgiveness

theology looks like in practice, and what the institutional failure of cheap grace theology costs its victims.

In her sentencing statement at Nassar's trial in January 2018, Denhollander addressed him directly with words that constitute one of the most theologically precise public statements on conditional forgiveness made in recent memory:

"You spoke of praying for forgiveness. But Larry, if you have read the Bible you carry, you know forgiveness does not come from doing good things, as if good deeds can erase what you have done. It comes from repentance, which requires facing and acknowledging the truth about what you have done in all of its utter depravity and horror, without mitigation, without excuse... I pray you experience the soul-crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me — though I extend that to you as well."

Every element of the conditional forgiveness framework is present in this statement. Denhollander maintains an attitude of mercy — she extends forgiveness even as she speaks — while recognizing that genuine

forgiveness requires genuine repentance, which she calls on Nassar to pursue. She insists on justice — she simultaneously asked the court for the maximum sentence — understanding that justice is the foundation on which genuine forgiveness rests, not its enemy. And she refuses to allow Nassar's performance of religious behavior (carrying a Bible, claiming to pray for forgiveness) to substitute for the genuine repentance that forgiveness requires.

*Justice is the foundation for forgiveness.
Only because God brings justice perfectly
can we release our desire for personal
vengeance. — Rachael Denhollander*

What makes the case doubly instructive is what it cost her. In her same statement, Denhollander told the courtroom that speaking out "cost me my church and our closest friends." She later elaborated to Christianity Today that her church community had failed to support her advocacy for survivors, effectively treating her pursuit of justice as a disruption to be managed rather than a wrong to be addressed. She described the church as "one of the worst places to go for help" for sexual abuse survivors — not

because the gospel fails, but because the church's misapplication of forgiveness language had made it a place where abusers are protected and victims are silenced.

The mechanism of harm she identifies is precise: in her conservative evangelical context, the word "forgiveness" was applied in ways that protected her father rather than holding him accountable, and that pressured her toward premature reconciliation before any genuine repentance had occurred. This is the therapeutic and cheap grace model of forgiveness operating at its most damaging — not because it is too generous with forgiveness, but because it is imprecise about what forgiveness actually is and what it actually requires.

Case Study Two: Andy Savage and the Standing Ovation

In January 2018, Jules Woodson publicly disclosed that Andy Savage — then a pastor at Highpoint Church in Memphis, Tennessee — had sexually assaulted her when she was a seventeen-year-old high school senior and he was a twenty-two-year-old youth minister at a Baptist church in suburban Houston in 1998. When confronted with the disclosure from the pulpit of Highpoint Church, Savage acknowledged what he called "a sexual incident" twenty years earlier, expressed regret, and asked for forgiveness.

The congregation's response was immediate: a standing ovation.

The standing ovation was not grotesque in its intent — the congregation was responding to what appeared to be genuine brokenness and humility from their pastor. But the optics were devastating for Woodson, and the theology behind the response was precisely the cheap grace that Bonhoeffer warned against. The congregation offered instant, corporate, unconditional forgiveness before any genuine process of accountability had been established, before any independent investigation had been conducted, before Woodson herself had been heard, and before any assessment of the adequacy or sincerity of Savage's repentance had taken place.

Woodson described the response as "disgusting." She had not been contacted before Savage's public statement. She disputed his characterization of events. And the community's insta-forgiveness — however well-intentioned — had the effect of closing the matter before it had been properly opened. The binding and loosing authority of the community was exercised prematurely, loosing what had not been properly examined, in a way that left the victim without voice, without justice, and without the

acknowledgment of wrong that genuine repentance requires.

This case illustrates with unusual clarity the distinction between the three categories this book has consistently maintained. The congregation's emotional warmth toward their pastor — their attitude of mercy — was entirely appropriate and even admirable. Their willingness to hold the offer of forgiveness genuinely open was right. But the formal, corporate pronouncement of forgiveness — enacted by a standing ovation before any process of accountability, investigation, or genuine two-way repentance and reconciliation — was a misapplication of forgiveness language that served the institution at the expense of the victim. It was, in the precise sense Bonhoeffer intended, cheap grace.

Case Study Three: The Systemic Pattern — Forgiveness as Institutional Protection

The Denhollander and Savage cases are not isolated incidents. They reflect a documented systemic pattern within evangelical Christianity in which forgiveness language is routinely deployed to protect institutions and offenders at the expense of victims. A 2019 investigation by the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News documented that nearly four hundred Southern Baptist

leaders had been convicted of or pleaded guilty to sex crimes against more than seven hundred victims since 1998, and that in many cases institutional responses had prioritized the offender's restoration over the victim's protection.

The Evangelical Council for Abuse Prevention has documented the specific mechanism by which this occurs. When abuse is treated as a relational conflict rather than a crime — which the misapplication of Matthew 18:15 frequently produces — victims are counseled to approach their abusers directly, confess their own faults in the "conflict," extend forgiveness, and pursue reconciliation. Church authority that should protect the vulnerable is instead used to pressure them. As the Council notes, when an abuser offers a quick confession upon confrontation, Matthew 18's forgiveness instruction is turned against the victim: if she is slow to forgive or restore the relationship, she is treated as unrepentant and uncooperative.

Paige Patterson, then president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, was forced into early retirement in 2018 after reports surfaced that he had counseled a rape victim to forgive her assailant rather than call the police — treating a criminal offense as a matter of personal forgiveness and spiritual reconciliation rather than as a crime requiring civil accountability. This is the logical

endpoint of the unconditional forgiveness model applied in an abuse context: justice is dissolved into therapy, accountability is replaced by premature restoration, and the most vulnerable members of the community — the little ones Jesus warned about in Matthew 18:6 — are left without protection.

The Cambridge Papers study on abuse in evangelical organizations identifies five consistent factors in these institutional failures: wrong expectations about what forgiveness requires; wrong priorities that place institutional reputation above victim protection; a wrong reading of biblical stories that obscures rather than illuminates the dynamics of power and abuse; a wrong approach to sin that treats criminal behavior as merely interpersonal conflict; and a wrong view of love and justice that mistakes premature forgiveness for grace. Every one of these five factors is directly addressed by the conditional forgiveness theology developed in this book.

What Faithful Engagement Looks Like

These cases also illuminate, by contrast, what faithful engagement with forgiveness looks like in abuse contexts. Denhollander's own statement is the model: maintaining a genuine attitude of mercy and even extending forgiveness

while simultaneously insisting on genuine repentance, demanding justice, refusing to allow performed religiosity to substitute for genuine accountability, and understanding that justice is the foundation on which genuine forgiveness rests rather than its opposite.

Her observation that "justice is the foundation for forgiveness" is theologically precise. Only because God brings justice perfectly can she release her desire for personal vengeance. Only because the moral reality of the offense is taken seriously — named, condemned, and met with appropriate consequences — can genuine forgiveness mean something. Forgiveness that bypasses justice does not produce more mercy. It produces less reality — a performative transaction that leaves the moral truth of the offense unaddressed and the victim without the acknowledgment of wrong that genuine healing requires.

The cases above establish several principles that deserve direct statement. First, forgiveness — even in the conditional model — does not require restored relationship or restored trust, and it never requires the suspension of civil accountability. Criminal offenses are also crimes, and reporting abuse to civil authorities is not a failure of forgiveness — it is the appropriate exercise of justice that Denhollander rightly insisted upon simultaneously with her

extension of mercy. Trust, where it can be restored at all, is rebuilt through demonstrated change over time — not through a verbal declaration or a standing ovation.

Second, the Matthew 18 process, when applied to abuse situations, looks different in practice than in ordinary interpersonal conflict. The private confrontation of verse 15 may not be safe or appropriate. The community's role in exercising binding and loosing authority may be crucial for protecting the vulnerable. The *skandalon* language of verses 6-9 — with its millstone severity — is directly applicable to those who abuse the vulnerable, and the two-audience structure of that passage places abusers squarely in the category of "anyone" who faces divine judgment, not in the category of the erring brother who is to be gently confronted.

Third, pastoral counselors and church leaders must resist any pressure — institutional, social, or theological — to move abuse survivors toward premature forgiveness. The documented pattern of institutional harm described above flows directly from exactly this pressure. The path to genuine healing runs through honest acknowledgment of wrong, proper civil accountability, genuine repentance, and patient restoration — not through premature pronouncements that serve the institution's reputation at the victim's expense.

When the Impulse to Forgive Is Genuinely Admirable — Charleston and Erika Kirk

The cases examined above involve institutional misuse of forgiveness language to protect offenders and silence victims. They represent forgiveness theology at its most damaging. But the conditional forgiveness framework must also engage a very different category of case — one where the impulse to forgive is genuinely admirable, spiritually serious, and publicly courageous, and where the theological question it raises is more delicate and more pastorally urgent precisely because of the moral height from which it is spoken.

The families of the Emanuel Nine in Charleston, South Carolina, and Erika Kirk, widow of Charlie Kirk, deserve not criticism but honor. What they expressed in the immediate aftermath of devastating, public violence reflects a genuine and costly orientation of mercy that the book has consistently affirmed as unconditional. The question this book must ask — gently, and with full respect for the circumstances in which these statements were made — is whether the specific theological frameworks they invoked fully capture what Biblical forgiveness requires and what the offenders actually need.

The Emanuel Nine — Charleston, 2015

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof attended a Bible study at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, sat with the congregation for an hour as they welcomed him, and then opened fire, killing nine people including the senior pastor and state senator Clementa Pinckney. Roof was a self-described white supremacist who later wrote in a jailhouse journal that the killings were "worth it" and expressed no remorse. He was convicted of thirty-three federal counts and sentenced to death.

Less than forty-eight hours after the massacre, at Roof's first court appearance, members of the victims' families addressed him directly. What they said has been widely described as one of the most extraordinary public acts of forgiveness in recent American history. Nadine Collier, daughter of victim Ethel Lance, said through tears: "I forgive you. You took something very precious from me and I will never talk to her ever again. But I forgive you."

Not every family member responded the same way. Gary Washington, son of victim Ethel Lance, said to Roof that he would be "burning in hell." Gail Jackson said she hopes his soul burns in hell. Shirrene Goss told him: "One day it's going to come to you... and you're going to have to

beg for forgiveness." These responses — the full range of human grief — are themselves pastorally significant and should not be erased by the narrative of universal forgiveness that dominated public coverage.

But the most theologically precise statement came from Anthony Thompson, husband of victim Myra Thompson, who said to Roof:

"I forgive you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent, confess, give your life to the one who matters most: Christ. So that he can change it, can change your ways no matter what happened to you and you'll be OK. Do that and you'll be better off than what you are right now."

Thompson's statement is remarkable in the precision with which it holds together the two elements this book has consistently distinguished. He extends forgiveness — maintaining the attitude of mercy and the genuine offer — while simultaneously calling for repentance. He does not treat the forgiveness as the end of the transaction but as the beginning of an appeal. In this sense his statement is closer to the conditional forgiveness framework than it might first appear: it is not the pronouncement of a completed two-party transaction but the generous, costly extension of an

offer, paired with an urgent call to the very repentance that would complete it.

Survivor Felicia Sanders expressed a similar instinct: "I forgive him and I also thank God that I am alive to tell the story. I believe in repentance — I believe God will forgive him too." The explicit invocation of repentance suggests that even in this moment of extraordinary pastoral generosity, the instinct toward conditional forgiveness was present beneath the surface of the public statements.

What the conditional forgiveness framework would say about Charleston is this: what these families expressed in the immediate aftermath of devastating loss was primarily an attitude of mercy — the release of personal bitterness and the refusal to be consumed by hatred — which this book has consistently described as unconditional and genuinely admirable. To the extent that they also pronounced formal forgiveness to an unrepentant offender who subsequently wrote in his journal that the killings were worth it, the Biblical framework would suggest that what was needed — and what Thompson's statement came closest to providing — was not the pronouncement of completed forgiveness but the generous offer of forgiveness and the urgent call to the repentance that alone makes it receivable.

The families' moral instinct was right. The question is whether the language of forgiveness fully captured it.

It is also worth noting what the Charleston families did not do: they did not seek to prevent civil accountability. They forgave — or offered forgiveness — and simultaneously supported the full force of civil justice. Roof was prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced to death, and none of the families who expressed forgiveness moved to obstruct that process. This is the two-sphere principle operating exactly as it should: the attitude of mercy in the personal realm, and the support for civil justice in the institutional realm, held together without contradiction.

Erika Kirk — September 2025

On September 10, 2025, Charlie Kirk — conservative activist and founder of Turning Point USA — was assassinated by a gunman while speaking at Utah Valley University. Eleven days later, at a memorial service attended by between ninety and one hundred thousand people, his widow Erika Kirk addressed the accused killer directly from the platform:

"On the cross, our Savior said: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' That man — that young man — I forgive him. I forgive him because it's what Christ did. And

it's what Charlie would do. The answer to hate is not hate. The answer — we know from the gospel — is love. Always love."

The statement is courageous, costly, and grounded in explicit Biblical reasoning. Erika Kirk is a committed Christian who was not speaking carelessly or therapeutically but from the depths of genuine faith at the most painful moment of her life. The book owes her that acknowledgment before it says anything further.

And yet the theological framework she invokes deserves the same careful examination the book has applied throughout. She grounds her forgiveness in Luke 23:34 — the cross prayer, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" — which is precisely the passage Chapter Nine of this book examines as the unconditional forgiveness camp's strongest text. As argued there, this is an intercessory prayer rather than a pronouncement of forgiveness — Jesus is appealing to the Father rather than himself declaring the transactional completion of forgiveness. It is a model of intercession for the unrepentant, not a model of two-party forgiveness pronounced without repentance.

She also said in a later interview: "A lot of people in this world think that forgiveness is a weakness or that when

you forgive, you forget. And it's the exact opposite. It's a form of freedom." This is the therapeutic model of forgiveness — forgiveness understood primarily as the victim's personal release from bitterness, independent of the offender's response. As this book has consistently argued, there is genuine truth in this: the attitude of mercy, the release of personal bitterness and desire for vengeance, is genuinely unconditional and genuinely liberating. But the therapeutic model risks collapsing the full Biblical meaning of forgiveness into this interior psychological release, losing the two-party relational dimension that the formal pronouncement of forgiveness requires.

Tyler Robinson, the accused killer, had not repented at the time of Erika Kirk's statement. He had been charged with aggravated murder, with prosecutors seeking the death penalty. There is no public indication of any remorse, confession, or turning toward God. The offender for whom she expressed forgiveness was, by every available indication, unrepentant.

Erika Kirk's public declaration of forgiveness eleven days after her husband's death was a heroic first chapter. The second

*chapter — the call to repentance — is what
would honor Tyler Robinson's soul.*

What the conditional forgiveness framework would say to Erika Kirk is offered not as a criticism of her — she acted from genuine faith and extraordinary grace under the most devastating circumstances imaginable, and this book honors what she did — but as a theological note on the incompleteness of the moment. She was heroically right as far as she went — and that what she expressed deserved a second chapter that her grief and the circumstances did not permit her to write in that moment. The first chapter was magnificent: a genuine orientation of mercy, a release of personal bitterness, a refusal to let hatred define her response to hatred, grounded explicitly in the cross. These are real and precious and deeply Biblical. The second chapter — the one Anthony Thompson wrote when he called Dylann Roof to repent and give his life to Christ — is not a correction of the first. It is its completion. It is what transforms an expression of mercy into a genuine appeal: you are forgiven if you will turn; the door is open; what you most need is not my pronouncement but God's, and that requires the repentance you have not yet undertaken. Erika

Kirk's first chapter honored her husband's faith and her own. The second chapter would honor Tyler Robinson's soul.

Erika Kirk also did something significant that her statement about forgiveness should not obscure: she expressed full support for civil proceedings, publicly stating that she wants cameras in the courtroom and that justice should run its full course. Like the Charleston families, she held together the attitude of mercy and the support for civil accountability — which is precisely the two-sphere principle this book has argued for. In this respect, whatever theological questions her forgiveness statement raises, her overall response models the integration of mercy and justice far better than the institutional cases of Savage and Patterson.

What These Cases Teach

Charleston and Erika Kirk teach something different from and more pastorally delicate than the abuse institution cases. They teach that the impulse toward mercy in the face of devastating violence is itself a fruit of genuine faith — not a theological error to be corrected but a spiritual instinct to be honored and, where necessary, refined. The conditional forgiveness framework does not say these families and this

widow were wrong to feel what they felt or express what they expressed. It says that what they felt and expressed is best understood as the attitude of mercy and the genuine offer of forgiveness — which is unconditional — rather than the formal pronouncement of a completed two-party transaction, which requires the repentance that in both cases had not occurred.

"I forgive you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent, confess, give your life to the one who matters most: Christ." — Anthony Thompson, addressing Dylann Roof in court

What these families expressed was a heroic first chapter — the attitude of mercy and the genuine offer of forgiveness expressed at enormous personal cost and moral height. The second chapter is the one Anthony Thompson began when he called Dylann Roof to repent and give his life to Christ. The first chapter without the second leaves the offender with a gift they cannot fully receive; the second chapter without the first would be empty confrontation without love. Together, as Thompson modeled, they

constitute the most complete response available — honoring the victim's mercy and the offender's need in a single act that is both gracious and honest. Clarifying what the families did does not diminish it. It completes it.

The pastoral implication is not that Christians facing devastating violence should be more restrained in their mercy. It is that the church should equip them with a theological framework robust enough to honor their mercy, sustain it through the long journey, and channel it most effectively toward what the offender most urgently needs — which is not simply to be told they are forgiven, but to be called, as Anthony Thompson called Dylann Roof, to the repentance without which forgiveness cannot be fully received and genuine restoration cannot begin.

Chapter Fourteen: Civil Accountability, Pastoral Wisdom, and the Hardest Questions

The case studies in the preceding chapter raise questions that require direct Biblical and theological engagement. On what grounds can the church insist on civil accountability even after genuine repentance? How should the community respond when repentance seems incomplete or insincere? What happens when an offender refuses rebuke entirely? This chapter addresses those questions systematically, providing the theological foundations that undergird the pastoral judgments the cases require.

The Biblical Basis for Civil Accountability Even After Repentance

The cases examined in the preceding chapter raise a question that deserves direct Biblical engagement rather than mere assertion: on what theological grounds can a church insist that civil accountability remains appropriate even when genuine repentance has occurred? Is this not a failure of grace? Does not the gospel's offer of forgiveness supersede the state's interest in punishment?

The answer is no — and the Biblical basis for that answer is both clear and theologically rich. It rests on several distinct but mutually reinforcing foundations.

Romans 13 — Two Institutions, Two Mandates

The most foundational text is Romans 13:1-7, where Paul establishes that civil government is a divinely ordained institution with its own God-given mandate entirely distinct from the church's:

"For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." (Romans 13:4)

Several features of this text are directly relevant. First, Paul writes this to a church — to believers who understand forgiveness, who practice it, and who are called to extend it. He is not writing to pagans who lack a theology of grace. His point is precisely that civil government's mandate to punish wrongdoing operates in a sphere entirely distinct from the church's mandate to forgive. These are two different God-ordained institutions with two different God-given functions, and the proper exercise of one does not cancel the proper exercise of the other.

Second, Paul describes the civil authority as "God's servant" — not merely a human institution to be tolerated but a divine agent carrying out God's own wrath against wrongdoing. When the church redirects a crime away from civil authorities into an internal process of forgiveness and reconciliation, it is not being more godly than the state — it is usurping a function God has specifically delegated to a different institution. To tell a rape victim to forgive her assailant rather than call the police is not to elevate grace above law. It is to misappropriate the church's authority into a domain where God has placed a different authority.

Third, the civil authority's mandate is framed in terms of the wrongdoer's action — "if you do wrong" — not the wrongdoer's spiritual state. Whether or not the offender has repented is entirely irrelevant to the state's God-given mandate to respond to the wrong done. Repentance addresses the offender's relationship with God and with the community of faith. It does not address the state's obligation to the victim and to public order.

David — Forgiveness and Consequences Coexisting

The David narrative, examined in detail in Chapter Two, provides the most powerful Biblical illustration that divine forgiveness and ongoing consequences are not in

tension. Nathan pronounces forgiveness immediately upon David's confession: "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Samuel 12:13). The forgiveness is genuine, immediate, and unreserved — complete the moment repentance is expressed, with no probationary period, no further conditions, and no lingering withholding.

But the consequences are not removed. Nathan continues in the very next breath: the child will die, the sword will not depart from David's house, and his wives will be taken by another in public view. These are not punishments that undo the forgiveness — they coexist with it throughout the remainder of David's life. God simultaneously forgives David and allows the judicial and natural consequences of his sin to unfold.

This is the clearest Biblical proof that forgiveness does not cancel consequences — including civil and judicial ones. If God Himself forgave David while simultaneously allowing the consequences of his sin to continue, there is no theological basis for claiming that the church's forgiveness of an offender should cancel the state's legitimate interest in accountability. Grace does not nullify consequence. The cross does not eliminate the sentence.

Genesis 9:6 — The Imago Dei as the Ground of Civil Accountability

The Biblical basis for civil accountability goes deeper than institutional arrangement. Genesis 9:6 grounds the civil response to violent crime in the theological dignity of the victim:

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his image."

The reason violent crime demands civil accountability is not primarily deterrence, social utility, or rehabilitation — though all of these may be legitimate secondary considerations. It is because the victim is made in the image of God. The offense against the victim is an offense against the *imago Dei* that constitutes the victim's fundamental dignity. That offense creates a claim that exists independently of the offender's spiritual state. Whether the offender has repented does not alter the fact that a person made in God's image was violated. The victim's dignity, not the offender's spiritual journey, is the ground of civil accountability.

This has direct application to abuse cases. When a church redirects an abuser away from civil accountability on the grounds that he has repented, it implicitly treats the

victim's suffering as a matter that can be resolved by the offender's internal spiritual transaction. It treats the *imago Dei* violation as healed by the offender's confession. But the victim's dignity as an image-bearer is not restored by the offender's repentance alone — it requires the acknowledgment of the full moral and civil weight of what was done, which is precisely what civil accountability provides.

Zacchaeus — Genuine Repentance Produces Restitution

The account of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 illuminates what genuine repentance actually looks like in relation to the harm done to others. When Jesus announces that salvation has come to Zacchaeus's house, Zacchaeus's immediate response is not merely internal spiritual transaction but concrete restitution:

"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." (Luke 19:8)

Zacchaeus does not say "I have repented, therefore the debts are cancelled." He says "I have repented, therefore I will make right what I made wrong." Genuine repentance in Scripture consistently involves, where possible, addressing the harm done to others — not merely the

internal spiritual state of the offender. In cases of financial fraud, this means restitution. In cases of criminal violence or abuse, where restitution in the simple sense is not possible, it means at minimum the full acknowledgment of the wrong before every appropriate authority — including civil ones — and the acceptance of whatever consequences that acknowledgment brings.

A critical clarification is needed here. The argument is not that civil accountability is a condition of forgiveness — as if the church must wait for the offender to be convicted and sentenced before pronouncing forgiveness. That would make forgiveness contingent on punishment rather than on repentance, which is a different error entirely. The church forgives upon genuine repentance, full stop. Civil accountability operates on a completely separate track governed by a completely separate divine mandate.

The Zacchaeus point is therefore more precisely stated this way: genuine repentance naturally produces a willingness to make right what was made wrong, and naturally produces honest acknowledgment of the full weight of the wrong before every appropriate authority. Zacchaeus was not told "pay fourfold and then you will be forgiven." Jesus came to his house, salvation came first, and out of that genuine encounter Zacchaeus offered restitution.

The restitution was the fruit of repentance, not its price. Similarly, an offender who has genuinely repented will not resist civil accountability — not because it is a condition of forgiveness but because genuine repentance includes honest acknowledgment of the full reality of the wrong, and that acknowledgment extends to civil authorities as well as to God and to the community of faith. An offender who claims repentance while actively evading civil consequences raises serious questions about whether the repentance is genuine — whether it is the godly grief that produces salvation or the worldly grief that seeks only relief from guilt.

The Practical Principle

These Biblical foundations produce a clear and carefully structured practical principle. The church forgives the genuinely repentant offender — that is the church's mandate, exercised upon genuine repentance, independently of what civil proceedings may follow. The state holds the offender accountable for the crime — that is the state's mandate, exercised because of the wrong done, independently of the offender's spiritual state. The victim is cared for and supported through both processes. And the church actively supports rather than obstructs the civil process, because doing so is not a failure of grace — it is

faithfulness to the God who ordained both institutions for the good of his image-bearers.

To tell an abuse victim to forgive her abuser rather than call the police is therefore not a choice between grace and law, mercy and justice, or the gospel and the state. It is a confusion of institutional mandates that collapses two distinct divine commissions into one and serves neither the gospel nor justice. The church can say simultaneously: "We forgive you upon your genuine repentance" and "We are reporting this to civil authorities because that is what God's ordained civil servant requires." These are not competing statements. They are the simultaneous exercise of two God-ordained responses to serious wrongdoing — and together they constitute the full Biblical answer to the question of what it means to take both grace and justice seriously.

The Victim's Choice — A Different and More Personal Question

What has been said above about civil accountability applies primarily to the church as an institution. But a careful pastoral theology must distinguish the church's institutional responsibility from the victim's personal decision — because these are genuinely different moral situations.

The church as an institution has obligations that the individual victim does not bear in the same way. In most jurisdictions, pastors and church leaders are mandated reporters — they carry a legal obligation to report known or suspected abuse of minors to civil authorities, independent of anyone's wishes including the victim's. Beyond the legal obligation, the church as a community has a duty of care to its members that requires it to take seriously any threat to the vulnerable within the congregation. These institutional obligations are grounded in Romans 13 and in the Matthew 18 framework for protecting the little ones — and they are not optional.

The victim, however, occupies a different and more personal moral position. She has every right to pursue civil accountability — the state's mandate exists partly for her protection, and the vindication of her dignity as an image-bearer is precisely what civil justice is designed to provide. But she is not obligated to be the instrument of that accountability herself. Scripture nowhere requires victims to prosecute their offenders. Her decision about whether and how to engage civil authorities is hers to make freely, in light of her own circumstances, safety, wellbeing, and judgment about what will serve her genuine healing.

Paul's counsel in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 is instructive here, with appropriate qualifications. Paul discourages believers from taking one another to civil court for disputes within the community, preferring internal resolution — and goes so far as to say "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" This passage addresses civil commercial disputes between believers, not criminal violence, and it must not be misapplied to pressure abuse victims into silence. But it does establish an important principle: the choice not to pursue civil action is a legitimate Biblical option that reflects genuine spiritual generosity, not weakness or enabling. Neither path — pursuing civil action or declining to — should be stigmatized by the church or framed as more or less spiritually faithful than the other.

What matters pastorally is that the victim's choice in either direction is genuinely free — not coerced by the church toward premature forgiveness that bypasses accountability, and not coerced by the church toward civil action she is not ready for, does not want, or judges to be harmful to her own healing. The church's role toward the victim is to provide unwavering support, honest pastoral care, and full information about her options — not to make the decision for her. If she chooses to report, the church stands alongside her. If she chooses not to report, the church

respects that choice without treating it as a spiritual failure — while recognizing that the church's own institutional obligations regarding civil reporting may operate independently of her decision, particularly where the safety of others in the congregation is at stake.

This distinction matters enormously in practice. The documented harm in cases like those described above arose not from victims making wrong choices about civil reporting but from churches making institutional choices that prioritized the offender's reputation and the community's comfort over the victim's protection and the full acknowledgment of the wrong. The correction runs primarily at the institutional level — not at the level of judging victims for the choices they make about their own cases.

When Repentance Seems Incomplete or Insincere

A frequent pastoral complexity is the situation where the offender has offered what appears to be repentance — perhaps apologized, perhaps expressed regret — but the wronged person is uncertain whether the repentance is genuine. How much repentance is enough? What are the marks of genuine repentance?

The Biblical materials suggest several marks. Genuine repentance involves acknowledgment of the specific wrong done, without minimization, deflection, or rationalization. It involves genuine sorrow for the harm caused rather than merely for the consequences experienced. It involves changed behavior where behavior is relevant. And it involves genuine submission to whatever process of accountability and restoration the community or relationship requires.

The wronged person is not required to accept a performance of repentance that lacks these marks. At the same time, they are called to be genuinely open to the possibility of authentic repentance and genuinely ready to forgive when it occurs — not setting impossibly high standards as a way of permanently withholding forgiveness.

When the Offender Refuses to Receive Rebuke — Proverbs 26 and Matthew 7:6

The Matthew 18 process assumes that confrontation, properly conducted, gives the offender the opportunity to respond. But what happens when confrontation is met not with repentance or even honest denial but with contempt —

when the offender has become, in the language of Proverbs, wise in their own eyes and beyond reach of correction?

Proverbs 26:4-5 poses the problem with deliberate tension: "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." The two verses sit side by side and appear to contradict each other — and this is intentional. The wisdom tradition is acknowledging that there is no single rule that applies to every encounter with the persistently unjust. Sometimes confrontation is required to expose the folly; sometimes continued engagement only drags you down to the level of the one who refuses correction. Wisdom is the capacity to discern which situation you are in.

Jesus addresses the same reality in Matthew 7:6: "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you." The pearls in this context are not material valuables — they are the costly gifts of honest rebuke, genuine concern, and the offer of forgiveness. There is a point at which continued offering of these gifts to someone who consistently refuses them and responds with contempt or hostility brings harm to the one offering rather than benefit to the one who refuses. Jesus is not counseling

indifference or abandonment — he is acknowledging the limits of what one person can accomplish when the other has closed themselves to correction.

Taken together, these passages provide the scriptural basis for what might be called the legitimate non-pursuit category — the recognition that the Matthew 18 process, faithfully followed, can reach its end without resolution, and that at that point the wronged person is not obligated to continue indefinitely. The decision to stop pursuing is not a failure of love or a lapse into bitterness. It is the honest acknowledgment that the offer has been made and refused, that continued pursuit is producing harm rather than restoration, and that the matter must now be entrusted to God. The wronged person prays from a distance — praying, in the words of 2 Timothy 2:25, "in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." Praying for the offender's repentance is not passive resignation — it is the recognition that repentance is ultimately a gift of God, and that the wronged person's most powerful remaining act is to ask for that gift on behalf of the one who has refused every other offer.

When There Are No Witnesses — And When You Are Not Sure You Were Wronged

Two pastoral situations arise so commonly that a practical theology of forgiveness must address them directly, even though they fall outside the clean-case model Matthew 18 describes. The first is the offense that cannot be corroborated — where the victim knows what happened but the offender denies it and no additional witnesses exist. The second is the situation where the victim is genuinely uncertain whether a real moral wrong occurred at all, or whether they are simply in pain. Both are more common than theological discussions typically acknowledge, and both deserve honest engagement.

No Witnesses: Must the Wronged Person Simply Drop It?

Matthew 18:16 instructs the wronged person, if private confrontation fails, to take one or two others along so that "every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses" — echoing the evidentiary standard of Deuteronomy 19:15. What happens when no additional witnesses exist? Must the wronged person simply drop the matter and move on?

The answer requires understanding what the witness requirement is actually for. The two-or-three-witness standard in Matthew 18 is not primarily for the victim's benefit — the victim already knows what happened. It serves the community's interest in establishing a fair, reliable process before formal binding and loosing authority is exercised. The witnesses protect the accused from unchecked private accusation and ensure that the community acts on solid ground. Their absence does not mean the offense did not occur or that the victim was not genuinely wronged. It means the community's formal process cannot be activated.

This is a genuinely important distinction. The victim who has no corroborating witnesses is not required to pretend the offense did not happen, to pronounce the matter resolved, or to treat the offender as if all is well. What they cannot do is bring the community's formal authority to bear — that requires the evidentiary standard Matthew 18 establishes. The matter must be held differently: continued private appeal to the offender if appropriate and safe, honest acknowledgment to trusted counselors of what occurred, prayer that the offender's conscience will be moved, and ultimately the entrusting of the matter to God who requires no witnesses because He sees all things perfectly.

This is precisely where the material in Chapter Nine on praying for God's judgment becomes most pastorally urgent. The wronged person whose offense cannot be established before the community is not left without recourse — they have the most powerful recourse available. The God to whom they entrust the matter does not need two or three witnesses. He was present. He knows what happened. And He will judge with a completeness and accuracy that no community process could ever achieve. Entrusting the matter to God is not resignation — it is the most theologically serious response available to the person who cannot obtain the community's formal justice.

*The God to whom the wronged person
entrusts the matter needs no witnesses. He
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He will judge with a completeness no
earthly process could ever achieve.*

Practically, this means the wronged person without witnesses must hold two things together that feel in tension: honest acknowledgment of the wrong without requiring the community's formal confirmation of it, and genuine release

of personal vengeance to a God whose judgment is more certain than any earthly verdict. They are not required to forgive in the formal sense — repentance has not occurred and the process cannot be completed. But they are required to maintain the attitude of mercy, to pray for the offender, and to trust that the God who sees in secret will repay openly.

When You Are Not Sure You Were Wronged

The second situation is subtler and in some ways more common. Matthew 18:15 opens with a conditional: "if your brother sins against you." The entire framework is activated by a genuine moral wrong. But life frequently presents situations where the question of whether a genuine sin occurred is itself uncertain — where the hurt is real but the moral wrong is ambiguous.

Consider the example of a close friend who begins a relationship with someone you had been dating informally, without commitment or covenant. Were you sinned against? Your friend may have acted unwisely, perhaps even disloyally in the broader sense. But if there was no explicit commitment, no broken promise, no moral obligation violated — the other person made their own free choice, and your friend responded to it — the situation may involve

genuine pain without genuine sin against you specifically. Pain and being sinned against are not the same thing, and treating them as identical does harm to both the victim and the accused.

FOR REFLECTION: WAS THERE A SIN?

Before invoking the Matthew 18 framework, honest self-examination is required. Ask: Was there a genuine obligation that was violated — a promise, a covenant, a clear moral duty? Or was there a painful outcome that no one was obligated to prevent? Would a wise, uninvolved person recognize a genuine wrong, or would they see a painful circumstance with no wrongdoing? Pain and being sinned against are not the same thing. Not every hurt is a moral wrong — and treating a painful circumstance as a sin creates injustice in the opposite direction.

This matters theologically because the Matthew 18 framework presupposes a genuine sin. Invoking its process against someone who may not have actually sinned against you is itself a kind of injustice. Before applying the framework, the wronged person owes themselves — and the accused — honest self-examination: Was there a genuine moral wrong here, or am I in pain from a situation that, however difficult, involved no sin against me? These are different situations requiring different responses.

Several questions help with this discernment. Was there a genuine obligation that was violated — a promise, a covenant, a clear moral duty? Or was there simply a painful outcome that no one was obligated to prevent? Did the other person act with genuine malice or deception, or did they make a choice that hurt you without intending harm? Would a wise, uninvolved person looking at the situation recognize a genuine wrong, or would they see a painful circumstance that involved no wrongdoing?

When genuine doubt exists, a few pastoral principles apply. First, the private conversation of Matthew 18:15 may still be valuable — not as an accusation but as an honest inquiry. "I felt deeply hurt by what happened and I need to understand it better" opens a different kind of conversation than "you sinned against me and owe me repentance." The former may lead to genuine understanding, clarification, or even an acknowledgment of regret that provides some healing; the latter escalates a situation that may not warrant it.

Second, wise counsel from trusted others — friends, pastors, counselors — can help discern whether a genuine sin occurred. We are often poor judges of our own cases, prone to both under-reacting to genuine wrongs and over-reacting to painful but blameless circumstances. The

community's role in discernment is not only for the Matthew 18 process but for the prior question of whether the process is warranted at all.

Third, and most importantly, forgiveness in the formal sense may not be the primary category for ambiguous situations. What the person genuinely needs may be better described as acceptance, grief, or the release of bitterness — none of which require the other party's repentance because they are responses to a painful reality rather than to a moral wrong. A person can release their bitterness over a relationship that ended painfully without ever pronouncing formal forgiveness to someone who may not have sinned against them. Insisting on the forgiveness framework in situations where it does not apply can actually impede healing by locking the person into a relational dynamic — victim requiring repentance from an offender — that may not accurately describe what happened.

None of this makes the pain less real or the situation less difficult. It simply means that genuine pastoral care requires asking the prior question honestly: was there a sin here, and against whom? The answer shapes everything about how the situation should be addressed, what the person genuinely needs, and what — if anything — they are called to forgive.

The Long Road to Forgiveness

For deep wounds — betrayal, abuse, devastating loss caused by another's sin — the process of arriving at genuine forgiveness from the heart is rarely quick. The heart language of Matthew 18:35 is demanding precisely because it requires genuine transformation, not merely a decision or a declaration.

Pastors and counselors working with deeply wounded people should understand that the journey toward forgiveness is exactly that — a journey. The obligation is not to arrive immediately but to be genuinely oriented in the right direction: away from vengeance and malice, toward the offender's good and repentance, genuinely open to pronouncing forgiveness when conditions are met. The journey may be long and the destination may seem impossibly far away. But the resources of the gospel — the ongoing experience of being forgiven an unpayable debt, the work of the Spirit in producing genuine heart transformation, the community of the church as the context within which binding and loosing operate — are precisely suited to the demand.

Hugo's *Les Misérables* offers two further literary illustrations that sharpen the pastoral picture. Inspector

Javert represents the failure of justice without any category for genuine transformation. He cannot accept that a man who was a criminal can become genuinely changed — his moral universe has no room for repentance as a real and transforming event. When Valjean spares Javert's life — an act of pure grace toward an enemy who has hunted him for decades — Javert's entire framework collapses. He cannot live in a world where grace and transformation are real, and he takes his own life. His tragedy is not cruelty but rigidity: a justice that is real but incomplete, that knows how to hold the guilty accountable but does not know what to do when the guilty person has genuinely changed. The lesson for pastoral application is that a forgiveness theology that insists on conditions but has no category for genuine repentance and transformation when it occurs has made the same error as Javert — it has turned a legitimate instrument into an absolute one.

The character of Thénardier illustrates the opposite failure — and the one this book is more concerned to address. Thénardier is offered grace repeatedly: Valjean saves his life at the barricades without Thénardier even knowing it. He remains entirely unrepentant, continuing to extort, deceive, and exploit to the end of the novel. Hugo does not redeem him. He ends the book in America, dealing

in slaves. The honest literary acknowledgment that grace offered does not automatically produce repentance is important pastoral realism: the wronged person who maintains the attitude of mercy and holds genuinely open the offer of forgiveness is not guaranteed that the offer will be received. Some Thénardiens remain Thénardiens. The conditions on forgiveness are not a mechanism that guarantees restoration — they are the honest recognition that restoration requires something real from the offender, and that when that real thing does not come, the wronged person's obligation is to entrust the matter to God rather than either to pronounce a forgiveness that has not been completed or to harbor a bitterness that destroys them from within.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* makes a related point with particular force. Dimmesdale's refusal to confess his sin publicly — while Hester bears the community's shame alone — produces decades of spiritual and psychological deterioration. His eventual public confession at the novel's climax, which costs him his life, is the moment of genuine repentance — and Hawthorne frames it as liberation rather than defeat. *The Scarlet Letter* illustrates what the Biblical framework teaches about unconfessed sin: that the person who escapes public

acknowledgment has not truly escaped. The weight of unconfessed guilt accumulates rather than dissipates, and the only genuine resolution is the honest acknowledgment before God and community that the Biblical framework requires.

Peter and Judas — Two Betrayals, Two Responses, Two Outcomes

No pair of figures in the New Testament illustrates the difference between repentance leading to forgiveness and non-repentance leading to destruction more starkly than Peter and Judas. Both were disciples. Both were in the inner circle of Jesus' followers. Both betrayed him on the same night. And yet their stories end at the opposite poles of the human condition. Their contrast is not incidental to the Gospel narratives — it is a deliberate theological and pastoral juxtaposition that illuminates everything this book has argued about the nature of repentance and forgiveness.

Two Betrayals

Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver — identifying him to the soldiers with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:47-49). The betrayal is calculated, premeditated, and commercially motivated. It is

the deliberate use of the most intimate gesture of greeting as the signal for arrest.

Peter's betrayal is different in character but not in substance. Three times, as Jesus is being tried before the high priest, Peter denies knowing him — the last denial accompanied by cursing and swearing: "I do not know the man" (Matthew 26:74). Where Judas' betrayal was cold and calculated, Peter's is panicked and cowardly. But both are genuine betrayals. Both involve the denial or delivery of Jesus under pressure. Both constitute a profound violation of the relationship of discipleship and love that had defined the previous three years.

Two Responses to the Recognition of Guilt

What distinguishes Peter and Judas is not the nature or severity of their betrayal but their response when guilt lands on their conscience. Matthew records both responses in close proximity, and the contrast is deliberate.

When Peter denies Jesus the third time, the rooster crows. At that moment, Luke tells us, "the Lord turned and looked at Peter" (Luke 22:61). That look — across the courtyard, in the midst of his trial — is enough. "And he went out and wept bitterly" (Matthew 26:75). The weeping is the beginning of genuine repentance — the breaking of a heart

that has recognized what it has done and cannot bear the weight of it.

Judas also recognizes his guilt. When he sees that Jesus has been condemned, Matthew records that "he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood'" (Matthew 27:3-4). This is a striking moment. Judas confesses his sin explicitly — "I have sinned" — and names it precisely — "betraying innocent blood." The acknowledgment of guilt is real. The priests' response is contemptuous: "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And Judas, receiving no absolution, no path forward, no community of restoration, "went and hanged himself" (27:5).

The Theological Distinction — Repentance versus Remorse

The difference between Peter and Judas is not that Peter felt guilty and Judas did not. Both felt the weight of what they had done. The difference is what each did with that guilt — and more precisely, toward whom each turned with it.

The Greek word Matthew uses for Judas' change of mind is *metamelomai* — a word that carries the sense of

regret, remorse, or a change of feeling, but without the full covenantal turning that the New Testament associates with genuine repentance (*metanoia*). Judas felt the crushing weight of what he had done, but he turned with it not toward Jesus but toward the chief priests — the very agents of Jesus' condemnation. When they offered him no relief, he turned on himself. His end was self-destruction, not restoration.

Peter's weeping, by contrast, is the beginning of a turning toward rather than away. He does not attempt to undo what he has done through his own action. He does not take the guilt into his own hands. He weeps — and he waits. And the risen Christ comes to him.

Peter's Restoration — Repentance Answered by Forgiveness

The restoration of Peter is one of the most tender scenes in the New Testament. In John 21, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. After breakfast, he turns to Peter and asks him three times: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Three questions — one for each denial. Peter is grieved by the third asking, but he answers each time: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you" (John 21:17).

Jesus does not lecture Peter about his betrayal. He does not extract a formal confession or rehearse the details of what happened in the high priest's courtyard. He asks about love — the present orientation of Peter's heart — and commissions him to ministry: "Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep." The restoration is complete, immediate upon repentance, and transformative in its effect. Peter, the denier, becomes Peter the shepherd — entrusted with the very care of those he has been called to serve.

The contrast with Judas could not be more complete. Judas carried his guilt to the chief priests, who could not forgive him, and then destroyed himself. Peter carried his grief to Jesus — not verbally, not with a formal speech of confession, but through weeping and waiting — and received restoration from the only one who could grant it.

Pastoral Implications

The Peter and Judas contrast carries several urgent pastoral implications for the conditional forgiveness framework.

First, it establishes that remorse alone is not repentance. Judas felt genuine remorse — his confession "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" is theologically

accurate and apparently sincere. But remorse that turns inward, that attempts to resolve guilt through self-punishment or self-destruction rather than through genuine turning toward God and the community, is not the repentance that makes forgiveness possible. Pastors must learn to distinguish between the grief that leads to repentance and the grief that leads to destruction — a distinction Paul makes explicitly in 2 Corinthians 7:10: "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."

Second, it establishes that the direction of the turning is everything. Peter turned toward Jesus. Judas turned toward the agents of condemnation, found no relief, and turned on himself. The wronged person who withholds forgiveness from the genuinely repentant is, in a terrible sense, placing themselves in the position of the chief priests — offering the penitent nowhere to go. This is precisely the satanic design that Paul warns against in 2 Corinthians 2:11: the excessive severity that overwhelms the repentant with sorrow rather than welcoming them back.

Third, it establishes that there is no forgiveness for those who never repent — not because God is unwilling, but because forgiveness requires the turning that makes it receivable. Judas is not an example of unconditional

forgiveness withheld by a harsh God. He is an example of someone who never turned toward the one who could have forgiven him. The offer was as genuinely available to Judas as to Peter. What differed was not the availability of forgiveness but the response of the one who needed it.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the story of Peter is the pastoral answer to the question this chapter has been addressing: what does the wronged person do while waiting for repentance that has not yet come? They do what the risen Christ did. They remain present. They hold the offer genuinely open. They ask the question that goes to the heart of the matter — not "Do you confess your sin?" but "Do you love me?" And when the answer comes, they restore immediately, completely, and with a commission to fruitful service.

The pattern that emerges from Peter and Judas is the same pattern the Old Testament encodes in the contrasting accounts of David and Saul, examined in Chapter Two. In each pair, the failure is genuine and the guilt is acknowledged; in each pair, one man responds with genuine, unhedged brokenness and is restored; in each pair, the other produces an admission that falls short of true repentance — whether through deflection, self-concern, or despair that turns inward rather than Godward — and

receives no comparable restoration. The consistency across both Testaments is not coincidental. It is the signature of a God whose mercy is both boundless and responsive — responsive, that is, to the opened and surrendered heart.

PART FOUR

Conclusions and Practical Guidance

Chapter Fifteen: A Biblical Theology of Forgiveness — Summary and Synthesis

We are now in a position to draw together the threads of our argument into a coherent Biblical theology of forgiveness. This theology is rooted in careful exegesis of the key texts, responsive to the theological tradition, and attentive to the pastoral demands of real situations.

The Core Claims

First: All sin is ultimately a violation of God's covenant and law. This means forgiveness is ultimately God's transaction to make, and human forgiveness participates in and reflects the divine authorization rather than operating as an independent parallel system. The binding and loosing language of Matthew 18:18, with its perfect passive participles, encodes this participatory relationship grammatically.

Second: Divine forgiveness is consistently conditioned on repentance throughout the Old and New Testaments. God moves toward sinners in grace before they repent — establishing the offer, providing the basis in Christ's atonement, pursuing the lost sheep. But the application of forgiveness — the completed transaction of covenant restoration — follows repentance and faith. This pattern is not an Old Testament remnant superseded by the New — it is deepened and clarified in the New Testament.

Third: Human forgiveness follows the same pattern. The wronged person is required unconditionally to maintain an attitude of mercy, non-retaliation, prayer for the offender, and genuine readiness to forgive. The wronged person is called to pursue the offender's repentance where this is safe, appropriate, and possible — and where direct pursuit is not possible, to remain genuinely oriented toward the offender's good and open to receive repentance if it comes. But the formal pronouncement of forgiveness awaits repentance — not because the wronged person's dignity requires it, but because genuine restoration requires it. The conditions serve the recovery of the lost sheep.

Fourth: The purpose of forgiveness is always restoration and reconciliation — the recovery of the lost sheep, the reconstruction of the broken relationship, the

reintegration of the offender into genuine community. This purpose is what justifies the conditions and distinguishes them from mere moralism. Conditions that serve genuine restoration are expressions of love, not obstacles to it.

This claim needs defense rather than assumption, because it is doing significant structural work in the argument. Why must forgiveness aim at restoration? Could forgiveness not exist as a complete act independent of any relational outcome — a unilateral release that is finished when pronounced, regardless of whether relationship is ever restored?

The Biblical answer is no — and the grounds for that answer are found in what forgiveness actually is in the Biblical narrative. Throughout Scripture, forgiveness is consistently described in relational and covenantal terms: the removal of the barrier that separates, the restoration of access to God's presence, the healing of the breach between parties. Psalm 51's deepest anxiety is the loss of relational intimacy — "cast me not away from your presence." The prodigal son's restoration is complete only when he is received back into the father's house, clothed, feasted, and welcomed. Paul's instruction to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 2 is not "be at peace with the situation" but "restore and receive him back." The binding and loosing

language of Matthew 18 describes a community that is either separated from or reunited with its member. In every case, forgiveness is the act by which a broken relationship is healed — not an interior state that exists independent of the relationship it addresses.

This does not mean forgiveness requires perfect reconciliation in every case. Trust is rebuilt slowly, and some relationships remain permanently altered by what has occurred. Forgiveness without full reconciliation is a genuine pastoral reality and is not a contradiction in terms — it describes a situation where the barrier of guilt and hostility has been removed but the relationship has not yet been fully reconstructed. What forgiveness cannot be, on the Biblical account, is an act that is indifferent to whether restoration ever occurs. The shepherd who pronounces the sheep found and then does not bring it home has not found it. The father who forgives the prodigal but does not throw the feast has not really welcomed him back. Forgiveness that aims at nothing more than the victim's interior peace has redefined forgiveness as something the Biblical texts do not recognize.

Fifth: Pronouncing forgiveness prematurely — before repentance — does not accomplish more forgiveness than the conditional model. It accomplishes less, because it

bypasses the conditions that make genuine restoration possible and substitutes a therapeutic or performative gesture for the real moral and relational transaction.

Three Things That Must Not Be Collapsed

The analysis of this book has repeatedly encountered confusion that arises from collapsing three distinct things that the Biblical texts carefully distinguish:

THE THREE OBLIGATIONS OF THE WRONGED PERSON

First: Maintain a heart completely free of malice and hatred toward the offender — unconditionally, regardless of their response. Second: Actively pursue the offender's repentance, holding forgiveness genuinely open and working for their restoration. Third: Pronounce forgiveness when genuine repentance occurs — immediately, completely, and as a two-party act that heaven itself ratifies.

The attitude of mercy — the unconditional orientation of the heart toward the offender's good, with no malice, no desire for vengeance, and genuine readiness to forgive. This is required of every believer toward every offender regardless of repentance.

The offer of forgiveness — the genuine, open, actively communicated availability of forgiveness to the offender if they repent. This is also unconditional in the sense that it must be genuinely available to every offender. The wronged person should never be in a position of hoping the offender does not repent so that they can continue to withhold forgiveness.

The pronouncement of forgiveness — the formal relational and moral transaction in which the wronged party declares forgiveness and the restoration of the relationship begins. This is conditioned on repentance because it is the completion of a two-party transaction that requires both parties.

Most of the apparent contradictions in the Biblical texts about forgiveness dissolve once these three things are distinguished. Passages that seem to require unconditional forgiveness are typically addressing the attitude of mercy or the offer. Passages that condition forgiveness on repentance are addressing the pronouncement.

What This Means for the Church

The church's teaching on forgiveness needs recovery and reform. The therapeutic model that has largely captured

popular evangelical discourse on this subject has genuine pastoral appeal and captures real Biblical goods — emotional healing, freedom from bitterness, the release of personal vengeance to God — but it fails to adequately account for the relational and covenantal structure of forgiveness that the Biblical texts consistently describe, and its departure from that structure ultimately fails the people it is trying to help.

Pastors need the confidence to teach that requiring repentance before pronouncing forgiveness is not hardhearted — it is faithful. They need to be equipped to distinguish the attitude of mercy (unconditional) from the pronouncement of forgiveness (conditional). They need pastoral wisdom to apply the Matthew 18 process in ways that serve genuine restoration rather than mere conflict resolution.

Counselors need the clarity to resist the pressure to help clients "forgive" prematurely in ways that paper over genuine injustice and remove appropriate boundaries. The genuine healing of the wounded person runs through honest acknowledgment of wrong, not through therapeutic forgiveness declarations.

Ordinary believers need to understand that struggling to forgive someone who has not repented is not a sign of spiritual failure — it is a sign of taking moral reality seriously. The call is not to manufacture a feeling of forgiveness but to maintain the orientation of mercy, pursue the offender's repentance, and hold the offer genuinely open.

Forgiving as God Forgives

The title of this book — *Forgiving as God Forgives* — expresses its central thesis. The pattern of human forgiveness is the pattern of divine forgiveness: lavish in mercy, eager in offer, inexhaustible in patience, genuinely gracious in reception — and conditioned on the repentance that makes genuine restoration possible.

This is not a lesser vision of forgiveness than the unconditional model. It is a greater one — because it takes seriously what forgiveness is actually trying to accomplish. Forgiveness is not a psychological release mechanism. It is a covenantal restoration. And covenantal restoration, by its nature, requires both parties.

The church that learns to forgive as God forgives will be a community capable of genuine reconciliation, genuine

accountability, and genuine grace — the costly grace that Bonhoeffer described, the grace that changes people rather than merely covering them. This is the community the world needs to see, and this is the forgiveness the gospel makes possible.

THREE OBLIGATIONS OF THE WRONGED PERSON

First: Maintain the attitude of mercy unconditionally — no malice, no bitterness, no desire for personal vengeance. Second: Actively pursue the offender's repentance — through rebuke, through the Matthew 18 process, through prayer, through the gospel. Third: Pronounce forgiveness unreservedly the moment genuine repentance occurs — immediately, completely, without probationary conditions. The first obligation is unconditional. The second is urgent and active. The third is conditional — and when the condition is met, it is to be met with the same lavishness with which the Father welcomed home the prodigal son.

Paul reminds Timothy that the aim of every charge, every teaching, every pastoral instruction is "love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5). That is the aim of the conditional forgiveness framework too. The conditions on forgiveness — repentance, genuine turning, honest acknowledgment — are not bureaucratic barriers erected by a loveless theology.

They are the structure that makes genuine love possible: love that takes the offender seriously enough to require something real of them, and takes the victim seriously enough to refuse the cheap substitute that asks nothing and changes nothing. Forgiveness that requires repentance is more loving, not less — because it aims at the offender's genuine transformation, the victim's genuine healing, and the relationship's genuine restoration. It aims, in Paul's precise phrase, at love from a pure heart. That is what forgiving as God forgives looks like. And that is what the church is called to embody.

*"The aim of our charge is love that issues
from a pure heart and a good conscience
and a sincere faith." — 1 Timothy 1:5*

Appendix A: Key Greek Terms

Skandalizō / Skandalon

The verb *skandalizō* and its noun *skandalon* derive from the word for a trap or snare. In the New Testament the terms carry the meaning of causing someone to stumble, luring someone into sin, or destroying someone's faith. The terms are distinctly causative and relational — they describe an action that makes another person fall, not merely one's own transgression. Matthew uses this vocabulary in 18:6-9 rather than the simple sin vocabulary (*hamartanō*) to convey the causative and destructive nature of the offenses he describes.

Hamartanō / Hamartia

The standard New Testament vocabulary for sin. *Hamartanō* (verb) and *hamartia* (noun) carry the basic meaning of missing the mark — failing to hit the target of God's righteous standard. Matthew uses this vocabulary in 18:15 and 18:21 when describing the relational offenses within the community that the discipline process and forgiveness instruction address.

Aphiēmi / Aphesis

The primary New Testament vocabulary for forgiveness. *Aphiēmi* means to send away, release, let go. *Aphesis* is the noun form — forgiveness as release. The imagery is of releasing a debt or a captive.

A grammatical distinction within the usage of *aphiēmi* adds important nuance to the forgiveness debate. When the verb takes a thing as its object — "forgive, if you have anything against anyone" (Mark 11:25) — the act of releasing is internal and unilateral. You release the grievance, the bitterness, the offense that you are holding in your own heart. The other party does not need to be present or to respond. This is what the book calls the attitude of mercy. When the verb takes a person as its object — "forgive him" (Luke 17:4) — the act is relational and bilateral. You release the person from the debt they owe you, declaring them free and restoring the relationship. This is what the book calls the pronouncement of forgiveness. The same Greek verb covers both acts, which is why popular discussion so easily conflates them — but the grammatical object distinguishes them, and they are not the same command. Mark 11:25 commands releasing a thing; Luke 17:4 commands releasing a person. The conditions appropriate to each are correspondingly different.

Kardia

The Greek word for heart, used throughout the New Testament to designate the seat of will, moral reasoning, covenantal commitment, and the whole inner person as oriented toward God. The Hebrew background (*lev*) reinforces this: the heart is not primarily the seat of emotion in the Biblical worldview but the center of the whole person's orientation. Matthew 18:35's "from the heart" therefore designates the whole inner person's genuine covenantal commitment, not merely an emotional feeling of forgiveness.

Estai Dedemenon / Estai Lehenon

The perfect passive participle constructions in Matthew 18:18, typically translated "will be bound" and "will be loosed" but more precisely "will have been bound" and "will have been loosed." The perfect tense indicates completed action with ongoing results, and the passive voice indicates that the binding and loosing is accomplished by a prior divine action. The earthly binding and loosing participates in and reflects what heaven has already authorized — it does not create the authorization but enacts it.

Epitimaō

The verb translated "rebuke" in Luke 17:3, where Jesus commands: "If your brother sins, rebuke him." *Epitimaō* carries the sense of a sharp, direct, authoritative word that names a reality and calls for a response. It is the same word used when Jesus rebukes demons (Mark 1:25), rebukes the storm (Mark 4:39), and rebukes Peter for his misunderstanding of the cross (Mark 8:33). Its use in Luke 17:3 establishes that the rebuke which precedes forgiveness is not a gentle suggestion but a loving act of direct confrontation that takes both the sin and the sinner seriously.

Metamelomai / Metanoia

Two distinct Greek words both sometimes translated "repentance" in English, but carrying meaningfully different senses. *Metamelomai* describes regret, remorse, or a change of feeling — an emotional response to the consequences of one's actions. *Metanoia* (from *meta*, change, and *nous*, mind) describes a genuine turning of the whole person — a change of mind, direction, and orientation toward God. The distinction is crucial in the contrast between Peter and Judas in the Gospel narratives. Matthew 27:3 uses *metamelomai* of Judas — he felt remorse — while Peter's

weeping and subsequent restoration describe *metanoia* in action. Genuine repentance in the Biblical framework is *metanoia* — a comprehensive turning — not merely the emotional distress of *metamelomai*.

Kathōs

A Greek conjunction translated variously as "just as," "as," or "because," used in the key forgiveness commands of Ephesians 4:32 ("forgiving each other, as God in Christ forgave you") and Colossians 3:13 ("as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive"). *Kathōs* carries both causal force ("because") and modeling force ("in the same way that"), making it a pivotal word in the question of how divine forgiveness relates to human forgiveness. When Paul uses *kathōs* in these passages, he is pointing not merely to God's forgiveness as the motivation for ours (causal) but to God's forgiveness as the pattern for ours (modeling) — which means the conditional structure of divine forgiveness governs the structure of human forgiveness.

Anathema

The Greek word translated "accursed" or "devoted to destruction," used by Paul in Galatians 1:8-9 ("let him be accursed") — twice in consecutive sentences — against

anyone who preaches a gospel contrary to the one Paul proclaimed. *Anathema* is the strongest possible term of divine curse and exclusion in the New Testament, derived from the Old Testament concept of *ḥērem* (devoting something to destruction before God). Its use in Galatians 1 is one of the clearest examples of apostolic imprecation in the New Testament — the explicit invocation of divine judgment against specific offenders — demonstrating that imprecation is not abolished in the New Testament but continues in apostolic practice.

Appendix B: The Forgiveness Passages — A Comparative Chart

The following chart summarizes the key forgiveness passages in the New Testament, their context, vocabulary, and the conditions (or absence of stated conditions) in each.

Passage	Context	Key Vocab	Condition	Significance
Matt 6:14–15	Lord's Prayer	<i>Aphiēmi</i>	No stated condition	Addresses the attitude of the heart toward others
Matt 18:15–35	Church discipline	<i>Aphiēmi</i> , <i>hamartanō</i>	Repentance implied by process	Full ecclesial framework; binding and loosing
Mark 11:25	Prayer instruction	<i>Aphiēmi</i>	No stated condition	Addresses prayerful attitude of heart; not formal pronouncement
Luke 17:3–4	Direct instruction	<i>Aphiēmi</i>	Repentance explicitly required	Clearest conditional statement in the Gospels

Passage	Context	Key Vocab	Condition	Significance
Luke 23:34	The crucifixion	<i>Aphiēmi</i>	Intercessory prayer only	Special case: ignorance mitigates; not a general model
Eph 4:32	Community ethics	<i>Charizomai</i>	Modeled on God's forgiveness	Conditional pattern: as God in Christ forgave you
Col 3:13	Community ethics	<i>Charizomai</i>	Modeled on God's forgiveness	Same structure as Ephesians 4:32
1 Cor 5 / 2 Cor 2	Church discipline	<i>Aphiēmi</i>	Repentance required for restoration	Complete apostolic case study: discipline → repentance → forgiveness

Appendix C: For Further Reading

In Favor of Conditional Forgiveness

Brauns, Chris. *Unpacking Forgiveness*. Crossway, 2008. The most careful and Biblically rigorous popular-level treatment of conditional forgiveness.

Adams, Jay. *From Forgiven to Forgiving*. Calvary Press, 1994. Uncompromising and practically focused treatment from the founder of biblical counseling.

Murray, John. "Forgiveness." In *Collected Writings of John Murray*. Banner of Truth, 1977. Concise and theologically precise treatment from a leading Reformed theologian.

Significant Related Works

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. SCM Press, 1959. Essential for understanding the cheap grace critique of unconditional forgiveness.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. Harper & Row, 1954. Crucial for understanding confession, absolution, and community in relation to forgiveness.

Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace*. Abingdon Press, 1996. The most theologically sophisticated engagement with forgiveness, reconciliation, and justice available.

Popular-Level Works

Jeffress, Robert. *When Forgiveness Doesn't Make Sense*. Waterbrook Press, 2000. Representative of the unconditional forgiveness position; pastoral and practically focused.

Smedes, Lewis. *Forgive and Forget*. Harper & Row, 1984. The most influential popular-level therapeutic model of forgiveness.

Appendix D: Scripture Index

Each entry is hyperlinked directly to the Scripture reference in the text. References discussed in multiple chapters are listed separately for each chapter.

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