



POWER
TO

FORGIVE

*How The Gospel
Frees Us From Bitterness*

DANIEL ADDO

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Author’s Note: To protect the identities of the individuals mentioned in the stories I relate in this book, I have chosen to change the names. Only the names of public figures and my immediate family members have not been changed. Thank you for your understanding

DEDICATION

*To my Darling wife, Terralynn
Your support is invaluable; your love, inestimable.
Thank you*

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Soli Deo Gloria

Foreword

P*ower to Forgive* is a book on a serious subject, yet written in a calm, easy-to-read, and sometimes humorous way. You will definitely laugh, then maybe cry afterward. At least that was my experience.

Not surprisingly, this book carries the personality of its writer. I have known Daniel for many years, not just as my son, but also as a fellow follower of Jesus. Daniel is a godly person with a human face. A church boy who knows how to laugh and play. A man of God who knows that you first have to be human to qualify for God's service! A stickler for holy living, yet never judgmental toward others. Pastor Daniel writes with the clinical touch of a professional counselor, yet his tone throughout is conversational and friendly.

The pages ahead are filled with so much spirituality, yet it is communicated with so much humanity. This is not another religious book that is disconnected from real life. It's a deeply spiritual book that is immediately relevant to our human experiences. Daniel doesn't just tell you what to do. Rather he mainly guides you to the place where you will know the best thing to do. That "best thing" is to forgive, especially because the power to do so is available!

As you read this book, you will sense that Pastor Daniel is on your side. He's on the side of the person who has been betrayed and hurt, advocating for your healing by pointing you to Christ. As Pastor Daniel relates, forgiveness is what you do in response to God's command to forgive and His offer of free forgiveness. Yet, as Daniel so eloquently proves, forgiveness is also for yourself; it is for your good and joy in God. After all, why should you be controlled by the hurt and negativity of offenses done against you when you can walk in the freedom of forgiveness?

To not forgive is to carry a heavy load in your head and heart. It steals your peace, your focus, and even your health! So when we forgive, we do ourselves a lifelong favor, and we put ourselves on the path of true freedom.

Power to Forgive shows us that forgiveness is not just noble, but POSSIBLE! I am personally so grateful to God that the world has a book like this—a book that reveals the power resident in the gospel of Jesus Christ to make us forgiving people. I can boldly say that this book will change your life.

—Bishop Fred Addo
Founder, Supernatural Love Ministries

Introduction

I met Craig in the fall of 2015 after moving to the United States from Nigeria to pursue a master's degree in counseling. My first few encounters with Craig were rather unpleasant, as he seemed distant and rude, and never had a positive thing to say. So I decided I would avoid him. I had really tried my best to break through with this guy, but each time I was met by a thick, unbreakable wall. Exasperated by the heaviness of his personality, I wrote Craig off and decided to keep my distance. However, much to my chagrin, my attempts to avoid him didn't work out well. Craig and I lived on the same floor in the dormitory of our university, so I ended up having to spend much of my time around him. Thus I had to endure his constant bitter speech.

One day Craig and I had an encounter that completely infuriated me. I felt so upset that I said something like, "What is wrong with you? You go around making sure that everyone feels this sadness you carry. Why can't you be happy? Why can't you ever have an encouraging word? I can no longer endure your heavy presence."

Knowing Craig, I expected that he would have just the right words to cut me down. I just knew that I was about to get it big time—with a fair amount of cussing too! But to my surprise he began to cry. It shocked me so much that I didn't know what to do. So I said, "I'm sorry, Craig. I shouldn't have said that." Craig—this big, tough guy—just sat there and wept. After a while he looked up at me and said, "You don't know me. You don't know what I've been through." Then he walked off and left me standing there, feeling ashamed of myself.

That evening I decided to go and apologize to Craig. I found him in his room, still visibly downcast from our earlier encounter. As I began to speak, he cut me off and said, "Let me tell you about my life." It turned out that Craig was just a hurt little boy with lots of wounds inflicted by close family members. His rudeness was his way of keeping people away; he didn't want anyone to get close enough to hurt him again. Over time Craig and I built a

friendship. I even had the chance to apply the skills I was learning in my counseling classes to help him heal. We would meet often and have conversations about processing through pain, healing, and change. Then one day I brought up forgiveness.

I said to him, “You know, you cannot truly heal from this until you decide to forgive your family.” Craig sighed, looked away, and then said, “Yes, I know, Dan, but I don’t think I have the power to forgive them.” He spoke such honest words that they’ve never left me!

The truth is, Craig is not alone in this struggle. Many of us have been—or still are—exactly where he was that day. We know that forgiveness is the pathway to healing, we know that we ought to forgive, and if we are Christians, we know that we are even commanded to forgive as Christ forgave us. Our problem is not one of knowledge; it is a problem of power. Who among us hasn’t felt impotent at the thought of forgiving a deep wound? Haven’t we all longed to let go of the bitterness and live in the freedom of forgiveness? If we are honest, we will say like Craig, “I don’t think I have the power to forgive.”

It is because of this seeming powerlessness in the face of bitterness that I have authored this book. I firmly believe that though forgiveness is hard, it is not impossible. There is power to forgive, and that power is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the message of how God came to us through Christ to live for us and then die for us, thereby securing our forgiveness with Himself and empowering us to forgive others by His Spirit. In this book we will consider the power that is available in Christ—a power that does not reside anywhere else. We will gaze at the cross of Christ until it melts our hearts and breaks the hold of bitterness on us. The pages ahead are full of power because the gospel is the power of God (Romans 1:16).

I invite you to journey with me as we receive grace and power to forgive through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 1

God Doesn't Quite Get It!

Some of you picked up this book because you are fully aware of the power of the gospel to produce a heart of forgiveness. You are convinced that the gospel is the power of God that not only saves us from sin, but also enables us to do what He has commanded, like forgive. You understand that the gospel doesn't only address our moral behavior, but also has a lot to say about our emotional struggles with grief, bitterness, and hurt (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). You have chosen this book out of your conviction that God, through the gospel, can heal your hurt and enable you to forgive your offenders. If this describes you, great! I pray that God will use this book to confirm your belief in the power of the gospel to address your specific heart needs.

However, others of you may be wondering what the Bible, and by extension this book, can possibly teach you about forgiveness. For some of you it is difficult to see how the ancient texts of scripture can address the deep and very real pain that you feel today. Of course, you might admit that the Bible is a good religious book, but you may be skeptical about its power to address the pain in your heart. Perhaps you've been hurt, heartbroken, betrayed, or cheated; maybe the people you love most have lied about you and even abandoned you. "So," you may be wondering, "what can a religious book that begins with two naked people and a talking serpent say to my fractured heart? How can this God who seems so transcendent understand the inner workings of my broken soul? Yes, there's a story in the Bible about Jesus calming a raging storm, but can He calm the storm raging in my heart right now?"

Maybe you have pondered these questions and concluded that the God of the Bible doesn't quite get it! He's too high up there, too holy, too big to understand your pain. You may have trouble seeing how the various stories

of the Bible really apply to you in the midst of your pain. Can God really speak to your hurt? Does His Word have anything to say to your troubled heart? If this describes you, then I won't pray for you just yet. I'll pray later, but for now, I'll tell you a story—two, actually.

Story 1: The Company Takeover

The first story is about Dave, the founder of a Fortune 500 company. He built his company from scratch and grew it into a multibillion-dollar enterprise with various sites around the world. Dave had a son named Jack, a handsome young man with great leadership potential. Everyone who knew Jack loved him for his natural charm and good looks. He was the type of guy people loved to rally around.

Dave might have been a successful businessman, but life at home was rocky. Some internal conflict had estranged Dave and his son, Jack. For many years they didn't speak to each other, and eventually Jack moved to a different country to get away from his father. After a few years, through the mediation of some of Dave's friends, the two reunited. They met to iron out their differences, but it felt forced on both sides. While it seemed to work on the surface, inside his heart Jack still felt angry.

Jack's deep-seated anger manifested when he started planning to forcefully take over his father's company. Dave, now an old man, was neglecting some of his leadership duties. He had worked hard all his life and was worn out and tired. Jack saw this weakness and capitalized on it. He went to the board members of the company and began whispering about his father's growing incompetence. Using his charm he won them over, along with other key company stakeholders. Soon enough, together with one of Dave's best friends, Jack took over the company and pushed his father out, establishing himself as the new chief executive officer. Betrayed, hurt, and confused, Dave left the company he had labored so hard for. He had always dreamed that Jack would run things one day, but not like this. Dave's dream had come true, but not in a way he envisioned. Disillusioned, Dave left the country after hearing rumors that his son was now seeking to end his life. Can you imagine what it would feel like for a father to be so badly hurt by his own son? In Dave's words: "My own son did this to me—my Jack."

Story 2: Were We Ever Real?

In the second story we find Joshua—someone you might call "the new kid on the block." He had moved from Lebanon to Dallas to start a church,

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and after only about three months his meetings were packed out. Because of his unique gift in teaching, preaching, and healing the sick, Josh quickly rose to prominence. He drew crowds of men and women because his ministry was effective and powerful. However, as often is the case with great success, Josh began to attract opposition. Some pastors who had been in Dallas longer than Joshua did not feel that he deserved the attention he was getting. They started plotting how to run him out of town.

In Josh's church he had chosen some close friends to work with him. He personally mentored and prepared these men and women, teaching them spiritual truths and giving them opportunities to minister. Amongst these was Pastor Yudah. Because of Yudah's degree in accounting, Josh put him in charge of the church finances. Josh trusted him as a friend and let him in on many intimate details of his life, but Yudah had ulterior motives. He had come to Josh's ministry not out of a sincere desire to serve, but for his own self-aggrandizement. He wanted to enjoy the benefits of popularity and wealth.

Josh served in ministry simply because he wanted to please God. He had no interest in fame and fortune, and he often communicated this to his close friends, especially Yudah. Being a wise leader, Josh could see that Yudah had his eyes fixed on a totally different goal. Unfortunately the more Josh tried to talk to Yudah about the importance of pure motives in ministry, the more Yudah rebelled. Soon rebellion turned into bitterness. Yudah was not enjoying the benefits he'd anticipated when he joined Josh's ministry. And though he had been stealing from the church, it wasn't enough to sustain the lifestyle he envisioned. So he grew bitter. He soon left the church—angrily, I should add. He teamed up with some of the pastors that had it out for Josh. He started to release false information about Josh, claiming that Josh had embezzled church money and used it to elevate his lifestyle. Because of his accounting prowess, Yudah had worked the books to make it look like Josh had been the one stealing the money that Yudah himself had stolen. So when a third-party investigative team stepped in to check the details, they found Josh guilty. They locked him up in prison, and he lost his church and his reputation.

From prison Josh wrote a letter to his old friend who had betrayed him. One line read, "Were we ever real? Was our friendship and brotherhood ever true?" It would take a few years before Yudah would confess to his crimes out of an overwhelming sense of guilt, but by this time Josh's wounds had

already festered. Can you imagine what Josh experienced? To be betrayed by one you trusted so much? To be betrayed by one to whom you had entrusted your purse?

“What Is All This About?”

Okay, I know you’re wondering why I shared these stories. I can hear the protest: “What do these stories have to do with the Bible’s ability to address my emotional pain?” We’ll get to that in a moment, but you have to admit that these are good stories, right? They capture the pain and betrayal that often lace human relationships. Whether it is Dave and his rebellious son or Josh and his two-timing friend, we have all heard and/or experienced relational damage as painful as this. In fact popular TV dramas often capture these kinds of stories, with their raw emotion, keeping us riveted by the ugly but all too real dysfunction of human relationships. This is the stuff of good TV.

But what if I told you that these two stories are actually from the Bible? Yes, I made some alterations and modernized the details of the stories. However, the first story is from the tragic tale of David (Dave) and his son Absalom (Jack) as recorded in 2 Samuel 13–18. The second one is the story of Jesus (Joshua is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek name Jesus) and His disciple-friend Judas (Yudah). Again, the stories did not quite happen as I told them. David, for instance, did not run a Fortune 500 company. However, the emotions he experienced were just as real when Absalom (David’s son) and Ahithophel (David’s close friend and adviser) connived to steal the throne (2 Samuel 17:1-3). Similarly Jesus didn’t move from Lebanon to Dallas, but when He lived on earth as God in human flesh, His close friend Judas betrayed Him—with a kiss, I might add (Luke 22:48).

What is my point? Simply this: The Bible has a lot to say about our emotional struggles because it is honestly raw about the emotional struggles of its characters. In other words the Bible can address your real pain because its stories are about real people who experienced real hurt. In the scriptures we see anger, betrayal, fury, tears, rivalry, jealousy, and loss. Every emotion you can imagine is captured within the pages of scripture. If you really consider the Bible, without the veil of religion, you will see that it is a deeply emotional book. From Adam’s loving poem in Genesis 2 (v. 23: “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”) to Jesus’s agonizing cry to the Father in Matthew 27 (v. 46: “Why have you forsaken me?”), the Bible is not silent about emotions. And it is certainly not silent about pain. The God of the

Bible speaks to the whole person: spirit, soul, and body (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

God Gets It

One of the most amazing things about the Bible is that in it we find a God who expresses His feelings. Contrary to popular opinion God is not a stoic. In scripture we find God expressing love (Jeremiah 31:3), being jealous (Exodus 34:14), rejoicing (Zephaniah 3:17), and expressing grief (Genesis 6:6). Surely a God like this understands your pain.

God's regard for and expression of emotions are most clearly seen in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who is God, came on earth in human flesh so that humanity would see what God is truly like. The writer of Hebrews says it like this: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the *exact representation of his being* ..." (Hebrews 1:3). In other words, if you want to know God's character, look at Jesus. When Jesus was on earth, He wasn't a stoic. The gospel accounts of His life reveal Him as being moved by compassion (Luke 7:13), experiencing hurt (John 11:33), and even crying (John 11:35). Yes, Jesus cried. Don't skip by that too quickly: God came to earth and He cried. Christianity is the only religion whose God has shed tears. In fact the Old Testament prophet Isaiah described Jesus as "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem" (Isaiah 53:3). Did you see that? Jesus is described as being familiar with pain and suffering. He knows what it's like to be rejected, betrayed, misunderstood, and despised.

Powerful Compassion

Jesus gets your pain. The writer of Hebrews tells us: "Because [Jesus] himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). Have you noticed that those who haven't suffered are often unable to bring true comfort? Their lack of firsthand experience with pain makes them glib. It is not so with Jesus! Because He endured shame, He can help you in shame; because He endured rejection, He can empathize with you when you've been rejected.

So does God get it? Yes, He does! Can the Bible speak to your pain? Yes, it can! Jesus, the main character of all scripture, experienced pain firsthand, having been deserted by friends, betrayed by allies, and accused of things He did not do. Jesus, the God-man who never sinned, was crucified on a shameful Roman cross, surrounded by enemies who mocked and

scoffed at Him. They spat on His face, they called Him names, and then they killed Him (Matthew 26:67-68; 27:27-37). Yet the cross was not an accident! It had always been the predetermined will of God to send Jesus to die for our sins, as an expression of His love for us (Acts 2:22-23). Through Christ's suffering we now have peace with God, access to God, and hope in God (Romans 5:1-3). Through His suffering we know that God will redeem our painful suffering for our good and His glory (Acts 2:22-24; Romans 8:28). Through Christ's suffering we know that God identifies with us in our grief and pain; He is able to be fully compassionate with us when we walk through dark seasons, because He has tasted cosmic suffering (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15). Jesus is a compassionate savior.

But that's not all; there is more! Jesus is not only a compassionate savior, He is also a powerful healer. When we walk through deep pain, we need more than empathy and compassion; we also need healing. We need to know that pain is not eternal, that it has an expiration date. This is the good news that Jesus brings to us! After His crucifixion Jesus was buried in a borrowed tomb for three days. When it seemed like evil had won and all hope was lost, He rose victoriously with all power and authority in His hands (Matthew 28:6, 18). The cross of Jesus proves His compassion for us in suffering, but His resurrection manifests His power to heal our pain. This is exactly what we need in the midst of our painful toil in this world: a perfect counselor—one who is compassionate enough to understand us and yet powerful enough to heal us! That's who Jesus is: our compassionate healer. He can weep with us in pain and then touch us with His healing hands. He'll help you forgive those who have wronged you, just like He forgave us when we hung Him on the cross. He'll give you the power to forgive!

I pray that God will use this book to show you His heart for you—His mercy, love, and forgiveness. I pray that your eyes will be opened to see how much you have been forgiven in Christ and that this will move you to forgive all your offenders, in Jesus's name. Amen.

This book is about forgiveness, but before we plunge into this topic, let's talk about conflict!

CHAPTER 2

Why Are We Always Fighting?

Forgiveness exists because conflict is inevitable, and because conflict is inevitable, the only hope we have for long-lasting, meaningful relationships is to continue practicing forgiveness.

—Daniel Addo

Jim and Sandy stood in front of the minister at their wedding, and with a touching combination of smiles and tears flowing down their cheeks, they exchanged vows. Theirs were not tears of sadness, but tears of joy. A handsome man in his late twenties, Jim stared at his beautiful bride as he read his handwritten vows from a piece of blue cardstock paper. In his vows he spoke about how he would love Sandy, how he would give his life for her, and how they would grow old together. Sandy also wrote and proclaimed her vows: She promised never to leave Jim, she promised to be his best friend, to pray for and support him. It was truly a beautiful moment.

As I looked around the room, almost everyone was crying—everyone except me. This surprised me because I am a pretty emotional guy. Well, actually I am more than “pretty” emotional; I am a very emotional guy. Just ask my wife and she’ll tell you how I cried during almost every episode of *This Is Us*—and don’t even get me started on *Titanic*. But for some reason, on this day I wasn’t crying. Even I couldn’t understand why! I thought, “Dan, where are the waterworks? Why aren’t you bawling at this emotional exchange of words?” It took me awhile, but I finally figured out why my eyes were dry.

It wasn’t that I did not feel moved by the beauty of the moment; it’s just that I couldn’t help but notice that no part of their vows spoke about how they would continue to love each other during times of conflict. It was all

about the good days, about the daisies and lilies, with nothing said about the rainy days and valley experiences that characterize every marriage. The traditional wedding vows—adopted by many church denominations and exchanged by couples for many years—speak about loving each other in good and bad times, for better or worse. But Sandy and Jim’s vows seemed to envision a world in which there was only better, no worse. And even though I wasn’t married at the time, I knew enough about the world and relationships to know that conflict was going to be a part of their lives. I knew the inevitability of conflict for even the best marriages; they were going to face it! Thankfully, before the end of the ceremony, the minister preached a good word about loving each other through the dark days. It was at this point that I began to cry, because someone had brought a sense of reality to this ceremony.

The truth is, we are all like Jim and Sandy. We envision a world in which there is no conflict. We want to live in a world where relationships are perfect. Something in us is crying for a world without betrayal, pain, and offense. Unfortunately that is not the world we live in. Our world is laden with conflict on every side. It shows up in our interpersonal relationships at home and work, and even in the international relationship between countries. Indeed, there is as much war in our families as there is in the Middle East. We are living in a broken, fractured world ... but in the beginning it was not so (Matthew 19:8).

Creation

When we go back to Genesis—the Bible’s account about the origin and beginning of humanity and the world—we see that when God created the world, there was nothing but peace. In fact, as you read through Chapter 1 of Genesis, which captures the seven days of God’s creation, you find that one phrase keeps being repeated: “And God saw that it was good.” This phrase signifies the goodness of God’s original creation in all its beauty and perfection. God created a perfect, peaceful world, the kind of world that Jim and Sandy envisioned in their vows. Eden of the past is the utopia that humanity still searches for today; we are on a quest to reclaim our original home.

Three Kinds of Peace

Three kinds of peace characterized God’s original creation. First, a **vertical peace** existed between God and humanity. Sweet fellowship marked

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the relationship between God and our first parents, Adam and Eve. God made them in His image so that they would enjoy His love and bounty, rule as vassals over His creation, and reflect His character. He provided for their needs and made sure that the conditions of the earth were conducive for their living (Genesis 1–2). God appears in Genesis not just as a powerful creator but also as a loving parent. We see Him doing what an expecting mother does when she prepares for the arrival of her baby: She makes conditions conducive for her child, and this was what God did in creation. There was vertical peace between God and humanity!

The second kind of peace that we find in the garden of Eden is a **horizontal peace** between the man and the woman. The first time Adam saw Eve, he said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh ...” (Genesis 2:23). That may sound ancient and archaic to most of us in the twenty-first century, so let me translate. Adam said something like, “Wow, look at that hot mama!” Okay, maybe that is a poor translation, but you can at least hear the tone of joy and delight in Adam’s words. Long before Solomon wrote his love songs, Adam uttered the first love poem found in scripture. His heart was drawn to the woman. The two of them would rule as co-regents over God’s creation, partnering together to reveal His fullness and reflect His nature in the world. There was peace among humanity!

Before I tell you about the third kind of peace in the garden, let me say this: The reality of the horizontal peace that humanity enjoyed in Eden is the reason why we find conflict and pain so disheartening. We are heartbroken when our relationships end in hurt and betrayal because something in us knows that it wasn’t meant to be this way; something deep within us remembers Eden and tells us that God originally created us for the kind of love Adam and Eve enjoyed before the fall. Our hurt becomes magnified by this innate memory of Eden’s perfection. In her book *Epic of Eden*, Sandra Richter puts it beautifully when she writes, “humanity ... recognizes the ‘wrongness’ of this world and continues to cry out for the world as it should be—Eden.” Conflict and relational damage are so distressing to us because we remember Eden; in the core of our DNA we know that when God created humanity, it was for peace, not war.

The third kind of peace that characterized Eden was **natural peace**. God created a perfect world and put a beautiful garden in it. The vivid description in Genesis about the opulence and beauty of Eden is truly breathtaking. There were lush trees and gardens, rivers that carried gold and

precious stones, and animals of various kinds living together (Genesis 2:9-14, 19). When I think about the natural peace of Eden, perhaps the one thing that amazes me the most is the harmony among the animals. I just imagine the lion and the goat living peacefully in one space, wild animals living in perfect harmony with domestic animals without having them for lunch. This was the degree of peace that characterized the natural order of God's original creation. There were no tornadoes, no earthquakes, no "survival of the fittest"—just peace. God's creation was beautiful, whole, and full of what the Hebrews call "shalom"—complete and total peace.

Having bestowed this threefold peace on humanity, God had only one rule: Don't eat fruit from the forbidden tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). As long as humanity obeyed this command, they would remain in the blessedness of God's peace.

Fall—How It All Went Wrong!

So if God's original creation was so good and peaceful, what went wrong? How did we end up with this hot mess that we call our world? In one word, SIN!

At the serpent's subtle and deceptive suggestion, Adam and Eve disobeyed God. Rather than choosing to be vassals under God, our first parents wanted to rule autonomously. They wanted to be their own gods, deciding for themselves what is good and bad. Their decision fractured the vertical peace that had existed between God and humanity. Adam and Eve set themselves at enmity with God by disobeying His law and choosing to side with Satan—God's archenemy. They ate the forbidden fruit and, by that singular action, introduced sin, shame, and hiding into the human race. This broke the vulnerable, "naked" relationship we once had with God. Adam and Eve sewed coverings of fig leaves to hide their shame; they no longer felt free to take long evening walks with God because they had ruptured their relationship with Him (Genesis 3:8-11).

Do you realize that even today humanity still hides from God? Men and women around the world continue to run from Him, siding with Satan and biting into every fruit God has forbidden. And still to this day humanity experiences a deep sense of shame; we all have a feeling that something is amiss. We are crying out for something to fulfill us, but we don't quite know what it is! Humanity is, for lack of a better word, restless, searching for something that seems eternally elusive. The truth is that this "something" we are looking for, is really a "someone"—God. We are longing for the freedom

of relationship we had with Him in Eden. And even though He is constantly beckoning us to come to Him, we still run away from Him. This is the utter restlessness of humanity—running away from the one person we need most. Rather than come to God “naked” and vulnerable, we are still sewing our fig coverings; these are things we do to compensate for that sense of emptiness within. Some of us use relationships and sex to make up for the inner void. Others use money and achievement, and still others use mere religion. But at the end of the day we still feel empty and void because fig leaves don’t make for good coverings; they don’t quite substitute for the covering that God Himself has provided in His Son, Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:27).

Natural Disaster

Once humanity disobeyed God, it all went downhill from there. As a consequence of our sin God cursed the ground and the natural order (Genesis 3:16-19). Because Adam was intimately tied to the ground from which he was formed, his sin had implications for it too. When Adam sinned, we lost natural peace; we traded lush gardens for thorns and thistles. Floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and natural disasters have become the order of the day. I live in Oklahoma, so I can tell you all about tornadoes and the destruction they bring. Just the other day I saw a CNN headline that read, “A tornado ripped through a Louisiana college town in severe weather that left 5 dead in 2 states.” Horrific, but this is our world. The natural peace of Eden has been traded for natural disasters. According to the apostle Paul, creation (or the natural order) is groaning, waiting to be released from the decay and death brought about by God’s curse on humanity’s sin (Romans 8:18-21). Paul goes on to say that the natural world around us is in pain, like the pain of childbirth (v. 22). The natural world is longing to return to Eden’s perfection; it is longing for the peace of the garden and the serenity of God’s original world. In other words, not only are people longing, but the very ground under our feet is crying out too!

Relational Damage

As we just saw, when Adam and Eve ruptured humanity’s vertical peace with God, we also lost the natural peace of creation. But that’s not all we lost. Remember, three kinds of peace existed in Eden. As we see in Genesis 3, humanity also lost the horizontal peace that existed between the man and woman. When God confronted Adam about his sin, the man who had once sung a love poem to Eve now spoke with a different tone: “The woman you

put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12). The romance had ended and now it was only blaming and strife. This was the beginning of the war between the sexes that still plagues our world today. Shortly after this in the Genesis narrative, we meet Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve. They introduce us to the first case of murder and attempted cover-up in human history (Genesis 4:8-9). Not too long after Cain and Abel, we read about the violence and corruption in the ancient world that made God’s judgment necessary in the flood: “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5). If this description of the world sounds familiar, it’s because it is. This is an accurate description of the world we live in today. To this day men and women blame each other in their homes and marriages, brothers and sisters are fighting over land and inheritances, relationships are ending in heartbreak and strife, and nations are going to war against each other. Conflict is rampant in our world. It spreads like a malicious virus, devouring our relationships and causing pain in our lives. And if I am going to be honest with you, that’s how things are going to be until the end of time. Harsh, right? But don’t close this book yet. Stick with me!

Conflict and the Fall

The point I’m making is: In this world that Adam and Eve chose, conflict is inevitable. This was why Jim and Sandy’s vows didn’t bring me to tears. They did not fully reflect the reality of the present world we live in. Their vows were reminiscent of God’s perfect creation but did not deal adequately with the effects of the fall for all aspects of life. The reason I bring this up is because I fear that many people are not prepared to do the difficult work of forgiving because they are not adequately prepared for the inevitability of conflict. A healthy sense of the imperfection of people and the brokenness of our world is necessary if we are going to have long-term relationships. We need to be prepared for difficulty and hurt. This is what the wise Solomon in Ecclesiastes meant when he said, “There is ... a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 8). As Solomon observed life “under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:14), he noticed that every relationship goes through a pattern of peace and conflict; some seasons are marked by closeness and love, and others by conflict and distance.

Please understand that I’m not saying we should live with an unhealthy expectancy of conflict, but rather that we should live with a healthy

preparedness for conflict. There is a difference. Expectancy denotes that we are looking for conflict even when it is not there; preparedness means that when conflict does happen, we have a worldview that can handle it. Without such a worldview we will be unwittingly surprised when people hurt us, we will be caught off guard when our spouses are imperfect, and we will be unduly overwhelmed when we read news headlines about war. Failing to have this worldview has caused many young couples to divorce. They expected marriage to be a walk in the park because they did not think through the implications of the fall and the hard work it takes to be in a long-term relationship. In this world there will be conflict ... but that is not the end of the story.

Redemption and Consummation—How God Is Making Things Right!

Given the inevitability of conflict, should we just fold our arms and go through life only looking through the lenses of the fall? No! As I contended in the last section, while it is important to be prepared for conflict and to think through the implications of the fall for our relationships, it is also important for us to recognize that God has done something to fix our world and relationships. The fall is a vital part of the human story, but it is not the end of our story. Redemption and hope for restoration still remain because God has done something to repair the vertical, horizontal, and natural disorder in our world. What has He done?

Exile and Reentry

As a final consequence of humanity's sin, God exiled Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. In part this was an act of grace to keep them from eating from the tree of life in their fallen state, but it also marked the loss of paradise (Genesis 3:22-23). When God exiled our first parents, scripture says that "he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life" (v. 24). Cherubim are those fearful creatures that absolutely terrified Ezekiel when he saw a vision of God at his commissioning to ministry (Ezekiel 1). Throughout scripture they appear as the symbolic guardians of God's presence, highlighting His holiness and separateness from sinful humanity. Wherever cherubim are, people are generally not welcome. For example, their form was embroidered on the thick veil that barred access to the Most Holy

Place (denoting God's presence) in the temple (Exodus 26:30-31). Cherubim were also sculpted above the ark of the covenant, which was placed in the Most Holy Place (Exodus 25:17-22; 26:34; Hebrews 9:3-5). Only the high priest was allowed to enter this area, and he could do this only once a year—with the blood of bulls and goats, at the risk of his life if he did not follow God's detailed instructions (Hebrews 9:6-7). The point: Cherubim = Not Welcome! So when we see these fearful creatures in front of Eden as humanity is exiled, we immediately understand what God was communicating.

Furthermore, the fact that the cherubim guarding Eden also had flaming swords adds some interesting detail. This vivid picture of cherubim and swords makes a clear point: The only way people are going to get back into Eden is if someone goes under the flaming sword. Someone must pay the price and give their life to reclaim Eden. The good news is that in His love, God, whom we sinned against, provided that someone—not just anyone, but His Son Jesus Christ, for no one else would do (Hebrews 10:4-7).

On the cross Jesus the Son of God went under the sword. He who was perfect and spotless was literally hacked and sliced in order to pay for the sins of Adam and his children. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins" (Isaiah 53:5 NLT). It wasn't for His own sin and rebellion, but for the sins of humanity that Jesus died. God gave His Son to pay for our offenses and grant us access to Eden. Amazing!

Now, because Jesus has gone under the sword, we don't have to. He endured the cross so that all who believe in Him will have everlasting life (John 3:16). Just as Adam's sin lost Eden for all people, Christ's death has reclaimed it for those who believe in Him. As proof of this, Matthew, the author of the first gospel, tells us that at the moment Jesus died, something symbolic happened: The huge veil (with cherubim embroidered on it) that barred people from entering the Most Holy Place in the temple was torn by some supernatural means (Matthew 27:51). This was God's way of saying, "Eden is open!" (Hebrews 10:19-20). Jesus has taken the flaming sword, and the cherubim have been displaced; people now have access to God, and the vertical relationship has been fixed forever. Whoever believes this truth and puts their faith in what Jesus did on the cross has peace with God and access to Him (Romans 5:1-2)! This is the gospel: The vertical relationship is fixed forever!

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What about the horizontal relationship with each other? This also finds its remedy in the cross of Christ. Think about it: We were enemies of God deserving death and hell, but in His grace and through the sacrifice of His Son, God forgave us and restored us to relationship with Himself. Now we are children of God with full access to all of God's love, grace, and peace (Ephesians 2:1-8). We sinned, He forgave; we rebelled, He died for our rebellion. Isn't this a beautiful display of grace and forgiveness? When we look at the cross, we see how much we have been loved and forgiven. God gave His best for those who spat on His face.

The whole premise of this book is that God's forgiveness, which we see in Christ's cross, is so compelling and beautiful that it empowers us to forgive those who have hurt us. To be the recipient of such undeserved grace changes the chemistry of our hearts so that we are willing to forgive those who hurt us. The message of redemption in Christ is the power that will heal all our relationships; those who have been forgiven in Christ will forgive others. We will learn to love our enemies because when we were enemies of God, He loved us enough to give His only Son for us (Romans 5:10). In this book we will learn to look at the cross until it moves us to live, love, and forgive like Christ.

Does this mean that once we believe the gospel, our relationships will be perfect? Not at all! Remember, I already argued that there will always be conflict on this side of eternity. The many commands in the New Testament to bear with each other and forgive one another show us that even in the Christian church, relationships are tough (for example, Ephesians 4:1-2, 31-32). Don't believe me? Think about the sharp contention between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-39). However, those who believe the gospel have a powerful resource to forgive and mend even the worst offenses because they have been forgiven of the worst offense possible: sin against a holy and righteous God.

A time is coming at the end of history when God will make all things perfect; He will wipe every tear from our eyes and we will be rid of all sin (Revelation 21:3-4; 22:1-5). In that day forgiveness will be unnecessary because all conflict will have ceased. Swords will be put down and people of different nations will worship together in eternal peace and harmony (Revelation 7:9). But until that day we must continue to forgive as we have been forgiven in Christ. Empowered by the gospel, we can love those who hate us and pray for those who despise us!

Now, just in case you are wondering, “What about the natural order? Does God have a plan for natural creation?” Yes, He does! But I’ll let Him tell you by Himself! Read Isaiah 11:1-9, Revelation 21, and Revelation 22:1-5. Halleluiah, Eden will be regained and surpassed in the eschaton—threefold peace in the very presence of God! This is good news!

While conflict will always be a part of our lives on earth, it won’t last forever. The world Jim and Sandy envisioned is not an illusion; it will be our reality someday! One day forgiveness will be unnecessary because there will be nothing to forgive. But for now, since we are still earthlings, let’s move forward in our discussion of forgiveness.

CHAPTER 3

The Command to Forgive

As part of my master's program in counseling, I had to complete about eight hundred hours of an internship at a counseling firm in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This internship prepared us as future counselors by giving us an opportunity to practice what we had learned in the classroom while under the supervision of a more seasoned professional. While I was an intern, my supervisor and I saw many teenagers and their families. We had the privilege of walking with them through their struggles and facilitating their healing. It was truly a learning season for me.

The site where I did my internship was not church-affiliated or Christian by any means, so many of the clients I saw were atheists or agnostics. I was a PK (preacher's kid) who had worked mostly in church settings and who was attending a Christian university at the time, so the counseling site was my primary contact with the outside world, taking me from my usual comfort zone and into a whole new community with its own language, culture, and rules. I found my experience in this "outside world" to be both fascinating and frustrating at the same time.

It was fascinating because I quickly learned that people in the world are often more honest about their pain than those in church. I found that many of my clients didn't feel the need to speak Christianese ("It is well" or "The Lord is my strength"); they simply said it as it was! Not only were they more honest about pain, they were more honest about everything. There was no denying faults, sugar-coating feelings, or dancing around issues. They simply had no masks on. They were in pain and needed help!

Yet my experience as an intern was also frustrating. There I was in contact with people who desperately needed Jesus, but I couldn't tell them about Him because it was (and still is) against the rules of professional counseling to proselytize. While I was able to help them through pain and

difficulty, I couldn't introduce them to the Ultimate Helper. It was like putting a Band-Aid on a broken leg! Frustrating!

The Fight to Forgive!

I remember one time during my internship when I saw a client who had been physically and emotionally abused throughout her life.* As we spoke about healing, I suggested forgiveness as a necessary step toward her recovery. As soon as I did this, she shut me up. She would have none of it and she told me that plainly (remember what I said about honesty?). She said, "I can never let it go and I would prefer if you never suggest forgiveness again." As the counseling relationship developed, I went on to explain what forgiveness means and how it would benefit her. I told her that forgiveness does not justify the wrong done to her but frees her from being controlled by it. I worked hard and long to bring her to a point of even considering forgiveness, and while we did make progress over time, it wasn't without severe struggle.

This experience taught me something that I already should have known: The human heart is not naturally oriented toward forgiveness! We fight against it with everything within us, we prefer to get even, we want to hurt those who hurt us, and when we can't hurt them back, we lock them in the prison of our hearts where we continuously belittle them. I was reminded by this client that forgiveness does not come naturally to us.

Someone reading this may argue that forgiveness was so difficult for my client because she was not born again. To this I respond, "Possibly." It is possible that because my client had not experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, she struggled with forgiveness. I will never deny that possibility. However, I don't think the matter is that simplistic. The reason I say so is this: As a counselor, I suggested forgiveness to this non-Christian lady and she revolted, but as a pastor I have suggested forgiveness to many mature Christians (at least in my estimation), and to my surprise their response was not all that different from my client's! I have heard believers say things like, "I will never forgive her for what she did to me. I can't let it go." I have seen Christians passionately pursue vengeance and hold on to malice while refusing to listen to any admonitions to forgive. Why is this? It's simple: Even though believers have the Spirit of God, there is still an ongoing

* The account presented here is a composite of the stories of several clients I saw during this time.

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war with the flesh (Galatians 5:17). Therefore those who have genuinely been converted may still struggle to live in the light of their new selves. And that's why the apostle Paul said the following to the church in Colossae, comprising people who were saved and who had already crucified the old life (Colossians 3:3):

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. (Colossians 3:5-8)

The question on my mind as I read this is, "If the saints in Colossae have already died with Christ to the old life (Colossians 3:3), then why does Paul tell them to put the works of the 'earthly nature' to death (Colossians 3:5)?" The answer is that there's a sense in which believers have already decisively died to sin (Romans 6:1-6) and another sense in which believers should still be killing sin (Romans 8:12-13). Confused? You need not be! When we place our faith in Christ, we are made new. Our sinful nature is crucified, we receive God's holy nature, our desires are transformed, and our hearts become softened toward God. We have decisively died to sin's mastery (Romans 6:6-7). Yet there are still lingering effects of sin in what the Bible refers to as "the flesh." In Bible terms the flesh is not necessarily the same as the physical body; rather it is the principle of sin that rules fallen humanity. The flesh is the place from which all sin and self-righteousness spring, and it corrupts our thoughts, desires, and affections. Though believers have a new nature in Christ, we must still overcome the flesh. Our minds have been trained to think contrary to God's will, we have formed habits that are antichrist, and we still live in a body that naturally sides with sin. This lingering influence of the flesh is what needs to be put to death. We need to mortify the attempts of the flesh to gain control over us. Christians no longer live in the flesh so as to be ruled by it, but we can still be affected by it (Colossians 2:11-12; 3:5-10; Romans 8:5-9). So, though we are new in Christ, we still have a war to fight against the flesh (Romans 8:12-13; Galatians 5:16-18).

This means that conversion is not the end of our spiritual battle with the flesh; it is the beginning. Before conversion we don't battle the flesh, but instead only yield to it. We just agree with the principle of sin and self-righteousness because it rules our lives. At conversion, however, we are changed into new people who, by the Spirit of God, begin a lifelong struggle against the flesh. To become a Christian is to enter into the battlefield, to wage war on the flesh, to begin the struggle for holiness. And you better believe the struggle is real! Sanctification is a long, hard process that involves putting to death the impulses of the flesh in a world that does not support righteousness, while under the tempting influence of an enemy (Satan) who wants us to fail! All this would be virtually impossible but for the powerful work of God's Spirit in us!

Based on this we should not quickly jump to the conclusion that my client struggled simply because she was not saved. While this is definitely true, it is more accurate to speak in terms of the general difficulty of forgiveness, even for those who have been saved. The hope is that as one grows in Christ, forgiveness will become easier. But this does not mean that it will ever come without a fight! Forgiveness is a fight! Forgiveness is costly and does not come without blood, sweat, and tears—just ask Jesus! (Luke 22:44).

Commanded, Not Suggested

To be honest with you, I fully understand the struggle to forgive. I have personally experienced the difficulty of forgiveness even as a Christian, so I do get it! It feels better to hold a grudge, it feels wiser to seek revenge, and it appears more just to treat others how they treat us. The flesh tells us to avenge ourselves, the world system around us supports this way of thinking, and Satan works continuously to convince us that it is right to do so! We may sometimes think that we have a right to walk in bitterness and offense. The only "problem," though, is that as we look through the pages of scripture, God does not merely suggest forgiveness, He commands it. From the Old Testament and especially in the New, believers in Christ are commanded to forgive. It is not the suggestion of a counselor-in-training, but the commandment of Almighty God. It carries the full weight of His authority, sovereignty, and glory. The same authoritative word that spoke creation into existence now commands us to forgive. Difficult as it may be for us to forgive, God clearly commands it. Let us survey just a few of the commandments to forgive in Scripture:

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First of all, in Leviticus 19:17-18, God said, “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart.... Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people....” This is a clear command to not hate and to forgive. Note that God does not say, “I think you should not seek revenge.” No, He gives a definite command: “Do not!”

The wisdom literature is in agreement with the Pentateuch: Proverbs 20:22 reads, “Do not say, ‘I’ll pay you back for this wrong!’ Wait for the Lord, and he will avenge you.” Here is another command not to avenge ourselves. It is not suggested; it is a command—“Do not...!” This proverb provides some motivation for why we should obey this command: God’s justice—“He will avenge you.” However, we should not miss the weight of the command: Do not pay back wrong!

As we move into the New Testament, Jesus clearly tells us, “... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Luke’s rendering of this command in Luke 6:27-36 goes into great detail about what it means to love our enemies. It is staggering to consider the things that Jesus commands. They are so staggering that many have attempted to find loopholes in the commands to “turn the other cheek” or “do to others as you would have them do to you.” As you survey the scriptures, you will find that Jesus doesn’t only command forgiveness, He also commands love for enemies. Let that sink in a bit. King Jesus commands us to forgive!

The apostle Paul makes it explicit in Ephesians 4:31-32: “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” And then in Colossians 3:13 he says, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Here the apostle Paul, speaking under the inspiration of the Spirit, commands us to forgive each other.

Peter, another apostle of Jesus Christ, admonishes us to rid ourselves “of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind” (1 Peter 2:1). This command is particularly moving when you place it within the broader context of Peter’s first epistle. This epistle was written to those who were enduring great suffering and persecution at the hands of nonbelievers. We know that being persecuted unfairly can lead to bitterness and anger, yet God commands us to be rid of all malice in such situations.

I could go on and on, but you already get the point: All through scripture we find imperatives to forgive. God is continually saying that this is the way

to deal with hurt, this is the way to deal with offense, this is the way to deal with a grudge: Forgive!

What Is Forgiveness?

Having briefly surveyed the Bible's teaching on forgiveness, this is a good time to define what the word actually means so that we can be on the same page. In his book *Unpacking Forgiveness*, author Chris 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 is by far one of the best definitions of forgiveness I have ever come across. Similarly I define forgiveness simply as bearing the cost of the offenses done against you just as Christ bore the cost of your sins. The command to forgive, then, is a command to withhold vengeful punishment and seek reconciliation with our offenders. It is important to note at this point that forgiveness does not always mean immediate removal of consequences. It does not even always preclude pursuing justice. Forgiveness is first an attitude of the heart that refuses to pursue personal vengeance and that seeks the good of the offender rather than his or her harm. Furthermore, forgiveness ultimately seeks reconciliation with the repentant offender, though this is not always immediately possible. I recognize that these definitions may bring up several questions in your mind, so I will unpack them more fully in Chapter 10 and Appendix B.

The Goodness of the Command

Chances are that if you have read the Bible even cursorily, you already know that God commands forgiveness. I don't imagine that you read the above section about God's command to forgive with any bit of surprise, but my hope is that the Spirit has opened your eyes to see the weight of God's command to forgive. We all know somehow that God commands us to forgive. What may not be so plain however is, Why does God command us to forgive? Is God just a tyrant who demands certain things from us? Does He not care about the offenses we've endured? Is He aloof and disconnected in such a way as not to care about our pain? Hopefully, if you've read the first chapter of this book, you know that God is not harsh, distant, or disconnected. But the question still remains: Why does God command forgiveness?

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We can answer this question by first answering a more basic question: Why does God command us to do anything at all? Or to state it another way: What is the purpose of the law? Why has God commanded us to not cheat, lie, steal, etc.? Why does He command us to do some things and not do others?

There are many ways to answer this question, but one simple answer is that whatever God commands, He commands for our good and joy (Psalm 19:8). Of course, a more foundational answer to this question is that God commands us to do what most glorifies Him (1 Peter 2:11-12, Matthew 5:16). He commands us not to steal because not stealing reflects that we recognize His ownership of all things. He commands us not to lie because not lying reflects His awesome truthfulness. However, for the purpose of this discussion, we will look to the secondary reason why God commands us: for our good and joy. Ultimately God's glory and our good are connected in a very intimate way; that is to say, we experience the most good when we are concerned about bringing God glory (Psalm 16:11). In other words the primary reason why God gives us His moral law (to glorify Him) and the secondary reason (our good) are intimately connected, but we are going to focus on the secondary reason.

Everything that God has told us to do or not do is for our own good and joy. Unfortunately many of us see God as a cosmic killjoy who gives us many rules and regulations to keep us from freedom and flourishing. Quite to the contrary, God commands us so we can experience true freedom. He commands us—not to keep us from joy, but to put us on the path of true joy in Him. He is a good Father who loves us too much to let us destroy ourselves. He gives us laws to safeguard us from the destruction of sin and the barrenness of unrighteousness. God commands us for our good!

Moses understood this when he said the following in his final speech to the Israelites: “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, *and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?*” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13). Did you read that last part? God gave them (and indeed us) His laws and decrees for their (and our) good! He wants us to flourish, to be truly free, and to experience true joy, and so He gives us His law. When God says, “Don't do this or that,” He's not restricting us, He's

freeing us. The law is a gift of love from our Father to show us how to truly enjoy the life He has given us.

Have we not seen the effects of sin on people and societies? We've all witnessed how sexual immorality and perversion have ravaged lives, and we've seen how lying and false accusations have destroyed homes and produced wide-scale mistrust in the corporate world. Indeed, we can agree with Solomon that, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people" (Proverbs 14:34). God commands us against sin and toward righteousness because He loves us and wants what is good for us. He is a Father screaming at us, "Don't destroy yourselves. I love you too much to not tell you what to do!" God commands us because He loves us!

It has always been Satan's trick to convince us that God is holding out on us. This is what he did in the garden with our first parents, and it is what he still does today. He wants us to believe that when God commands us not to sin, He is trying to keep us from happiness. He tricked Adam and Eve into believing God wasn't for them and that His commands were burdensome (Genesis 3:4-5). He said in essence, "God doesn't want you to be happy, and that's why He's kept you from this delicious fruit. He's keeping you from true delight." Satan tempts us first by making us doubt God's character. If he can succeed at this, then he can get us to mistrust God's good laws and act in destructive ways. But thank God that we know better! In Christ we can affirm what John says: "his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). We can be sure that God is good and that He loves us; we can be sure of this because of His lavish grace, which He has poured out on us in Christ. A God who is willing to give His only Son to die for our sins will never command us to do anything that is ultimately harmful for us—NEVER! What God commands, He commands for our good and joy! Rightly understood—and removing all attempts to earn salvation through it—the law of God is a gift of His love, teaching us what is best for us (Isaiah 48:17).

Having answered that basic question, we can return to our original question: Why does God command us to forgive? Based on the discussion above, we can answer that God commands us to forgive for our own good and joy in Him. We can be sure that when God says to forgive, He's not trying to destroy us, He's trying to free us. We can be sure that forgiveness not only glorifies God but also does us good! It is good for us to forgive.

It is interesting to see the amount of scholarship that has come out from academia on the positive effects (physical and otherwise) of forgiveness and

the negative effects of refusing to forgive. One article by Johns Hopkins Medicine stated that:

Studies have found that the act of forgiveness can reap huge rewards for your health, lowering the risk of heart attack; improving cholesterol levels and sleep; and reducing pain, blood pressure, and levels of anxiety, depression and stress. And research points to an increase in the forgiveness-health connection as you age.

The first time I read that, I thought, “Wow, forgiveness sure is good for me.” I will not go into all the scientific details about what happens in the body and mind when we walk in bitterness. I do think, though, it is worth reading about the physical, emotional, and psychological strain that we endure when we refuse to forgive. For now I will only point out that science has confirmed something we already know from scripture: Forgiveness is good for us! Or as Traci Stein puts in an article for GoodTherapy, “...reaching a place of forgiveness can free one from a virtual prison of negative thoughts and burdensome emotions, which typically only prolong the feelings of anger and suffering generated by the original offense.” Isn’t it interesting that we are seeing the wisdom and goodness of God’s command confirmed by science? Of course, we do not need the confirmation of science to obey God’s commands. Science is beneficial to us to the extent that it confirms and conforms to biblical truth, but if science ever disagrees with scripture, we would do well to stick with God’s truth. However, it is always a delight when God is proven right by science.

Forgiveness and Spiritual Health

Forgiveness is good for our physical, emotional, and psychological health. But that’s not all, because most importantly forgiveness is good for our spiritual health. I believe this is what Jesus meant when He said in the Lord’s Prayer, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). We are not to conclude from this scripture that we earn God’s forgiveness by forgiving others. Scripture is clear that we will never earn God’s forgiveness. It will always be a gift of sheer grace based solely on Jesus’s costly sacrifice, and it will be received by faith (Ephesians 2:8; Acts 13:38-39). However, our daily experience of God’s forgiveness is contingent on our willingness to forgive. I am not suggesting that God withholds daily forgiveness until we forgive others, but that we will struggle

to know God's forgiveness in our own life experience if we refuse to forgive. The trouble is not with God's gracious supply of forgiving love, but with our capacity to receive it. When we walk in bitterness, we do not see or perceive clearly; we are not in a place where we can easily receive all that God has for us.

I'm sure you know this in your own life. Is it easy to pray when you have decidedly refused to forgive? How about studying the Bible? Do the scriptures seem to pop out with fresh insight when bitterness beclouds your heart? Is your fellowship with other believers fruitful when you are angry? Can you have the deep sweetness of fellowship with God while also holding on to a grudge? The answer in each case is "No!" We will find that malice significantly hampers our spiritual health and our joy in God. With this in mind we can fully understand why Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." Jesus enables us to see the emptiness of religion practiced in offense, whether in causing it or harboring it. We may raise our hands in worship and sing the old hymns of the saints, but we will know it to be void if we are not in harmony with each other. I know this all too well! So we can see that God commands forgiveness for our good, not only physically, emotionally, and psychologically, but primarily spiritually! We forgive for the glory of God and our enjoyment of Him. This is the highest good there is.

Moving Ahead

Before we move on, let's review what we've covered in this chapter. First, God commands forgiveness. He mandates us both in the Old and New Testaments to rid ourselves of bitterness and offense, and to be reconciled to our offenders. But we have also seen why He does this. He commands us not as a bully demanding our total subjection, but as a loving Father desiring the good of His children.

Does understanding the goodness of God's commands enable us to keep them? Is it enough to know that God commands forgiveness for my good? Of course not! After all, I know many things are good for me, yet I do not do them. I know that exercise is good for me, yet each day I snooze my workout alarm. I know that eating vegetables is good for me, yet each day I choose chocolate chip cookies over broccoli. I know that—Well, you get the point! Just knowing the goodness of God's commands does not necessarily

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enable us to fulfill them. So what does? That's what we are going to discuss in the next chapter: the difficult challenge of God's command to forgive and the source of the power to obey it!

CHAPTER 4

This Is Too Hard

In the last chapter we discussed the goodness of God's commands. Particularly we learned that God commands us to forgive our offenders for His glory and our own physical, psychological, and spiritual health. We saw clearly that God is a good Father who gives us good commands so we can live the good life. The command to forgive is for our good and not for harm; indeed, all of God's commands are for our benefit. However, we also recognized that we know many things are good for us, yet we don't do them. Every day I read articles online that tell me of the many benefits of exercise for my body, yet somehow I am not able to muster enough willpower to go to the gym. Similarly, I have been talking about making my diet greener for months now. Yet when I go through the Chick-fil-A drive-thru, I ask for a Spicy Chicken Deluxe Sandwich (Yum!) rather than a salad (Yuck!). This is because of a principle I have found to be true in many areas of my life: **Good Things Are Often Hard Things**. In other words the things that are good for me are usually hard to do. On the flip side the things that harm me the most come naturally and require little sacrifice.

Think about it: Why are all the foods that are supposedly good for us not so appealing? Why does healthy food have to be so bland (I don't care how much you spice up quinoa, it still tastes like nothing in particular to me)? Why can't chocolate chip cookies be healthy? Why does exercise require strain and discipline? As you scan through life, you will find that good often means difficulty, greatness always requires sacrifice, and the easy way out is usually a shortcut to destruction. Good things don't come easy! It's the same with God's good command to forgive: Just knowing that it is good for us to forgive does not immediately move us to forgive because, frankly, forgiveness is hard.

Luke 17

No story in the Bible better depicts the difficult challenge of forgiveness than the story Luke told about the disciples and Jesus in Chapter 17 of his gospel. One day, as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem, He talked to His disciples about important issues. He first warned them about being the cause of sin in others (vv. 1-2). He told them that even though people will sin, there is great danger for those who cause others to sin. Whether by offense or temptation, the disciples had to be careful never to be the reason why others sin, Jesus said. This is a relevant message for us today, as we must be careful that we are not the cause of sin in others.

After Jesus spoke about not offending others, He then commanded His disciples about how to handle offenses against them: **“... If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them”** (v. 3). I can imagine that the disciples were nodding and affirming what Jesus said up to this point. And then, suddenly, Jesus added, **“Even if they sin against you *seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them”*** (v. 4). Luke next tells us that the apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” (v. 5). The nodding had stopped and now they were suddenly asking for an increase in faith.

What is going on here? These men had worked miracles, preached the gospel, and seen great healings. They had walked with Jesus for over two years and had participated in His glorious ministry. But suddenly Jesus confronted them with the gravity of what it means to forgive, and they immediately felt that they did not have enough faith to obey this command. It would seem that for these men, casting out demons was easier than forgiving offenders. Jesus showed them how lavish the offer of forgiveness should be, and they trembled under the weight of this command.

“Give us more faith!” is the cry of everyone who has seriously contemplated the demands of Christian forgiveness. It is another way of saying, “I don’t have what it takes to forgive my offenders.” Truly, forgiveness can leave one feeling impotent. Who hasn’t experienced the crippling power of offense and stared at biblical commands to forgive with a sense of helplessness? The disciples heard Jesus’s commands to forgive and immediately felt themselves to be inadequate.

Matthew 18

We find an account similar to Luke 17 in Matthew 18. There, Jesus was dealing with nearly the same issues as those he tackled in Luke 17. He warned the disciples about being the cause of sin in others (Matthew 18:6-9),

especially about despising those under their pastoral care (vv. 10-14). Jesus then laid down a step-by-step procedure for dealing with offenses in the church (vv. 15-20). At this point Matthew reports that Peter asked Jesus a question: **“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”** (v. 21). Most reputable commentators point out that Peter was being generous here in his offer of “seven times.” Popular rabbis at the time taught that forgiveness should be offered to an offender three times, and upon a fourth offense the offended party was free to stop forgiving. So when Peter asked Jesus if seven is the limit, he was going above and beyond the social conventions of his time. Peter was being generous! Peter probably expected Jesus to say, “Well done, thou good and forgiving servant.” There was no way he could have anticipated Jesus’s response: “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (v. 22).

“Huh? Jesus, what did You just say? Seventy-seven times?”

Some Bible translations render Jesus’s words as “seventy times seven” times, which would be 490 times. Peter had thought himself lavish in his forgiveness, yet there was Jesus upping the stakes! Isn’t it just like Jesus to show us the mediocrity of our social conventions and ideas of virtue? Read Matthew 5 and see how Jesus’s interpretation of the law superseded anything the strictest pharisee could have ever imagined.

Please understand that in offering “seventy-seven” or “seventy times seven” as a response to Peter’s question, Jesus was not saying that He is expecting us to keep a logbook of offenses. We are not to see this as some kind of upper limit on forgiveness, after which we can withhold it. No, Jesus was playing off Peter’s words. Peter offered seven, so Jesus said, “Not just one seven, but several sevens upon sevens upon sevens.” Jesus’s ultimate point was that we are called to always offer forgiveness to our offenders. He was really saying that there is no upper limit on forgiveness. We just keep on forgiving.

Though the text does not say it, I can imagine that Peter felt dumbfounded. For one who was usually so vocal, Peter was suddenly silent. Like the event in Luke 17, Peter was confronted with the magnitude of Christian forgiveness and he just went quiet. Just like many who have read this scripture, Peter was no doubt asking, **“Where is the power to forgive? Can anyone give me more faith? Where do I find the strength to be this generous in my offer of forgiveness?”**

Thankfully Jesus does not leave us hanging. There is power to forgive, and Jesus will show us where it resides! God does not just give us commands and say, “Go do this!” No, He gives us great resources that empower us to forgive as freely as He does.

The rest of Matthew 18 answers the question: **Where is the power to forgive?** Jesus tells a story that speaks directly to this issue. But it is not just any story; it is a beautiful **gospel** story. It is a story about God’s forgiveness, mercy, and grace. It is a story that shows us how great our sins are and how awesome is the God who forgives them. In essence Jesus points to the gospel as the place from which we draw strength to forgive. The story Jesus tells highlights the costly forgiveness we have in Christ and offers this to us as the reservoir of spiritual power to forgive. Believing the gospel, knowing it, and experiencing it is how we learn to forgive. The gospel is “the power of God ...” (Romans 1:16).

The Gospel Is the Power

The gospel is the good news about the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While most Christians have heard the gospel, they most often think of it as the message they needed to believe in order to become Christians. This is true, as one cannot be said to be a Christian without believing the gospel. However, the gospel is not just entry-level stuff; it is the power of God to live the Christian life. In other words we don’t just begin by believing the gospel; we continue by the gospel. Or as pastor, author, and speaker Dr. Timothy Keller has so eloquently written it in his article “The Centrality of the Gospel”: “The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of Christianity.” The New Testament writers did not think of the gospel as Christianity 101, but rather thought of it as the central message of Christianity from which we never graduate. For the apostles the power to live the Christian life was wrapped up in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They understood that we are saved by grace and that we grow by grace. In his book *Gospel*, J. D. Greear put it like this:

You see, the gospel not only tells us about the power of God; the message of the gospel is *itself* the power of God. By the power of the Spirit, the hearing of the gospel re-creates our hearts to love the things God commands.... Believing the gospel is not only the way we become Christians, it is the power that enables us to do, every moment of every day, the very things Jesus commands us to do.

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Greear is saying what Paul said to the church in Colossae many years ago: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7). Paul is making the point that the Colossians must not look for any new revelation as they continue the Christian life. Rather they must continue to grow in their understanding of the message they first received, which is the gospel. Growing as a believer is about maturing in your comprehension of the gospel and learning how to apply its truths to various aspects of life. Christian growth is concerned with deepening one’s roots in the gospel, thereby tapping more resources from its power. As we grow in our understanding of the gospel, the Spirit of God changes us and empowers us to do the things that God has commanded. The gospel is the power that brings salvation from beginning to end, and it is the power to obey all of God’s commands. Let me show you an example of how Paul returns to the foundational message of the gospel to inspire obedience in believers.

The Gospel and Racism

The church in Galatia was a church dear to the heart of the apostle Paul. He had planted this church and nurtured its members in the truths of the gospel. To this Gentile church, Paul made it clear that acceptance by God required only Christ and His substitutionary sacrifice. They did not need to be circumcised or keep any of the Jewish festivals to be saved. Christ had completely fulfilled the ceremonial aspects of the law and, through His Spirit, had enabled them to live a life pleasing to God. They only needed faith in His finished work.

However, as soon as Paul left Galatia, a false Jewish sect called the Judaizers invaded the Galatian church and perverted the purity of the gospel. They told the Galatians that to be saved, they needed to obey the Jewish laws, including circumcision and other dietary laws. This threw the church into confusion. Paul wrote the book of Galatians as a letter to correct this error.

In the midst of his letter to the Galatians, Paul relates an encounter he had with Peter. Peter had come to visit the church in Antioch, and because he believed the gospel that Paul preached, he ate with the Gentiles even though he was a Jew. In the ancient Near Eastern culture, sharing a meal with someone was considered to be the highest form of fellowship and acceptance. So by eating with the Gentiles, Peter had affirmed and celebrated their oneness in Christ. He did not think that their non-kosher food made

them inferior, because they were one with Him in Christ (Galatians 2:12). Peter, like Paul, believed that “we can’t win God’s approval by what we eat ...” (1 Corinthians 8:8 NLT).

However, when the Judaizers came to Antioch, Peter began to draw back; he no longer ate with the Gentiles. He began to act as though they were inferior, thus lending credence to the Judaizing error that Gentiles must keep Jewish laws to be saved. This, as you can imagine, infuriated Paul, as it should have, since the purity of the gospel was at stake. Peter’s actions would have been interpreted by the Gentiles to mean that their salvation was not complete and that they needed to be circumcised and adopt a kosher diet in order to be saved (Galatians 2:12-13). This, according to Paul, would render what Christ did on the cross useless, for “if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21).

How would Paul handle this? Would he simply say, “Stop this racism” or “Stop discriminating against God’s people”? That would surely have been one way to do it, but Paul knew that this way doesn’t work. So instead of just hurling commands at Peter, Paul reminded him that by drawing back and separating himself from the Gentiles, he was not **“acting in line with the truth of the gospel”** (Galatians 2:14). In other words Paul went back to the gospel! Paul went on to essentially preach the gospel to Peter by reminding him that he was not saved by his Jewishness, his circumcision, or his diet. Instead he was saved by faith in what Jesus had done—the same faith that the Gentiles had exercised toward Christ. Peter ought therefore not to discriminate against the Gentiles because they, too, had faith in Jesus and were saved (Galatians 2:14-16).

Apparently for Paul it was not sufficient just to say, “Don’t do this!” No, he reminded Peter of the particulars of the gospel. Peter was acting like a racist because he forgot the gospel, and only a refresher on the message would bring him back to correct behavior. In other words Paul believed that the power to overcome discrimination and racism in the church was found in the gospel. Here we see that for Paul the gospel is the power not only to save us from sin, but to make us obedient to God in every aspect of life! And it is not only Paul who believed this. I could show you many examples in the New Testament where the apostles return to the gospel message as the power for continued obedience. We are saved by the gospel and we grow by the gospel.

Jesus's Story

Before Paul or any of the apostles ever used the power of the gospel to produce obedience, Jesus did it first. As we saw earlier in our discussion of Matthew 18, Peter remained dumbfounded at Jesus's response to him—"seventy times seven"! As Peter looked at Jesus in disbelief, Jesus told him a gospel story! Jesus believed, and I do too, that the power to forgive is in the gospel. We receive strength to forgive as we look at that old rugged cross where God's Son died in our place to forgive our offenses. As we gaze and stare at such grace, the Spirit of God produces in us the power to forgive.

In the next few chapters we will gaze at the gospel. We will look thoroughly at the story Jesus told to Peter and see how the good news of Christ empowers our obedience. Buckle up as we listen to our God who tells great stories.

CHAPTER 5

The King Who Settles Accounts

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

Matthew 18:23-25

When we left off in our discussion of Matthew 18, Peter was dumbfounded and flabbergasted at Jesus's response to his question—"How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" Peter offered seven times as a suggestion, but Jesus shot it down by saying, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (vv. 21-22). As we saw in the last chapter, Jesus was not giving an upper limit on forgiveness, but rather He was saying that there is no limit to the offer of forgiveness. This left Peter speechless.

Jesus surely saw the look of hopelessness in Peter's eyes. Peter's body language must have said, "I can't do this, Lord! Where is the power to forgive?" In response to Peter's unspoken question, Jesus told a gospel story. Jesus often taught deep theology using simple stories—what we call *parables*. A parable is a simple story used to illustrate truths about the kingdom of God. In this parable the plot begins with a King who settles accounts.

"Who Is This King of Glory?"

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king....

—*Matthew 18:23*

A big part of understanding parables is knowing who the characters in the story represent. This allows us to make sense of the spiritual truth being taught. So we must begin our discussion of this parable by asking, “Who is the King?”

By asking this question we are joining the psalmist of old, who asked, “Who is this King of glory?” (Psalm 24:8). It would seem that this is an old question—the quest to find the true King of the universe. Thankfully the psalmist answered his and our question: “The Lord Almighty—he is the King of glory” (v. 10).

The King in this parable, then, represents God—the Lord Almighty. From the very beginning of scripture, God revealed Himself as King. In Eden He was the suzerain Lord over Adam and Eve. Though they were to rule over creation, it was clear to them that they ruled as vassals of a greater King (Genesis 1:26-30). The One who made all things was the true King over creation. This is why David began Psalm 24 (which we just mentioned) by saying, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters” (vv. 1-2). The point is that part of God’s kingship is His authority as Creator of all that exists.

God also revealed Himself as King over His covenant people, Israel. When you study scripture, you will find that Israel was never meant to have a human king, or at least their human kings were never to be seen as ultimate kings, but rather as representatives of God (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). God was Israel’s King! Israel was to be a theocracy, run directly by God through His priests and prophets. Many scholars have noted that the giving of the law at Sinai was similar to how suzerain kings made covenants with their vassals. In other words the giving of the law at Sinai was God’s way of saying, “I am your King who has redeemed you from slavery in Egypt, and these are the commands you must keep as My people.” It is this understanding—that God was Israel’s King—that made Samuel so sad when the Israelites asked for a human king “such as all the other nations” (1 Samuel 8:4-8). These people had the best King ever, yet they wanted a human king they could see and touch. The Lord had led Israel’s armies through the wilderness, yet they wanted a man whom they could call king. Even when God did acquiesce to their request for a king, it was with the understanding that this king would rule on His behalf. The various kings of Israel were to be vassals of the Great

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King—God. This is why when they disobeyed Him, He dispossessed them of the throne. God was Israel’s true King.

God not only revealed Himself as Israel’s King, but also as King over all the nations of the world. He was not some local deity who ruled over one nation, but the “Lord of kings” (Daniel 2:47). King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon recognized this after Daniel recounted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and interpreted it for him:

King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.” (Daniel 2:46-47)

Here was the most powerful world ruler of the time, bowing down before a Hebrew exile because he had recognized the greatness of Daniel’s God. God is the King over kings. He reigns sovereign over all nations at all times of human history. He sits supreme over the events of the world, providentially moving things toward His eternal ends. God, then, is the King in this parable.

Our modern democracies with their provisions for voting, parties, and politics have made the language of monarchy foreign to us. It is important to note that God is revealed in scripture not as president but as King. He is the moral Lawgiver before whom all people are subjects. And though only those who are saved recognize Him as King now, a day is coming when all creation will bow before Him and recognize His rule (1 Corinthians 15:22-28; Philippians 2:10-11).

Jesus begins His gospel story by introducing us to the King. Where better to start the story of the gospel than with God? Indeed, as Paul says, the gospel is the “gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). It is God’s gospel. He is the originator and starting place of the gospel.

The Justice of the King

*Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.
—Matthew 18:23*

The first thing Jesus tells us about God the King is that He wanted to settle accounts with His servants. What does “settle accounts” mean? Obviously this is the language of accounting. As the story progresses, we find that the King had loaned money to His subjects, but some of them had not paid Him back. In settling accounts, then, the King was requiring that His subjects clear up their debts. He was unwilling to allow the accounting books remain unbalanced. Here is a king who is so meticulous that He holds His subjects accountable. He is a King who makes sure that accounts are settled.

I believe that by this description, Jesus is drawing our attention to the justice of God. The God of the Bible is a righteous judge whose justice demands that He holds humanity accountable for sin. In His grace God gave each of us life and breath so that we will worship, glorify, and enjoy Him forever, as well as treat each other with kindness and respect. However, all of us have turned our backs on God and used the life He gave us for our own purposes. Rather than enjoy Him, we try to find joy in sex, money, and power; we take God’s good gifts and make idols out of them. Rather than glorify Him, we live for our own glory. Rather than treat others with love and respect, we abuse and mistreat those who have been made in God’s image. This is why the apostle Paul summed up the whole human condition in these words: “... **all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Please don’t skip over those words too quickly: *All have sinned*. Jews, Americans, men, women, moral, immoral, educated, and uneducated—all have sinned. Each of us has incurred a debt because we have failed to give God the glory due Him. This parable is saying to us that one day God is going to settle accounts with us. As Paul writes elsewhere:

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God “will repay each person according to what they have done.” (Romans 2:5-6)

“What’s with All This ‘Wrath’ Stuff?”

A lot of people, even Christians, have problems with the concept of God’s wrath. I have many friends who say things like, “Don’t talk about God’s wrath; only talk about His grace.” I understand where they are coming from, as many of us have been plagued by those awful depictions of God as

an angry old man just waiting to destroy us at the slightest sin. In reaction (overreaction?) to such depictions of God, we want to rid Him of all wrath by pretending the Bible doesn't speak about it. There is also a sense in which we are being influenced by our modern culture to be indifferent to God's wrath. As J. I. Packer so accurately writes in *Knowing God*, "The fact is that the subject of divine wrath has become taboo in modern society, and Christians by and large have accepted the taboo and conditioned themselves never to raise the matter."

Overall I think the root problem is a gross misunderstanding of what it means to speak of "God's wrath," even among Christians. When we hear the word "wrath," we often think of it in merely human terms: We picture an ogre-type God who can lash out anytime in unpredictable ways. However, God's wrath is not arbitrary or whimsical. It is not the impulsive outburst of irrational anger from an unstable deity. Paul writes that the day of God's wrath will reveal "**righteous judgment**" (Romans 2:5), not irrational anger. Again, Packer is helpful: "God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil. God is only angry where anger is called for."

All this means that God's wrath is a holy wrath; it is manifested in His justice against sin and unrighteousness. Because God is just, He cannot simply wink at sin and pretend it does not exist. We cannot speak of a righteous and holy God who merely sweeps sin under the carpet and looks the other way. Even in our civic lives we would be appalled by a judge who does not uphold justice. When we take a case before a judge, we want him or her to be fair, to grant justice to the oppressed, and punishment to the oppressor. God, who is the Judge of all judges, cannot simply wink at the sins that destroy people, relationships, and creation. God cannot truly be holy and good if He is not just. His wrath, then, is His patient (because it always comes after much grace and many warnings and opportunities to repent), calculated, and righteous anger against sin and evil. His justice demands that He settle accounts with sinners (2 Peter 3:9-10).

The God of Love Is a God of Justice

A lot of people revolt against any idea of God's justice, claiming that what we find in the **New Testament** is a God of love, not a God of justice. They point to the cross and say, "See, God loves the world so much that He gave Jesus to die. Such a God has no wrath." In response I usually say,

“Paradoxically we cannot fully understand God’s love until we understand His justice.” It is true that the cross is a manifestation of God’s love, but we must also see it as a manifestation of God’s absolute justice. The cross shows us that God is so just that **He sent Jesus Christ His Son to pay the price for our sins**. God didn’t simply wink and say, “Just forget about sin.” No, His justice **had to** be satisfied and payment **had to** be made for sins; our account **had to** be settled.

In that one event—the crucifixion of Christ—we see both the love of God and His justice. Or as someone put it, “On the cross His love provided what His justice demanded.” God’s love does not exist in a vacuum. His love is manifested in how He saved us from His holy wrath through the substitutionary sacrifice of His Son. But without the backdrop of God’s justice, His love is an illusion.

Do you want to see how loving God is? Look at the cross, where **God the Son willingly gave Himself** for our sins. Do you want to know how just God is? Look at the cross of Christ where the Son of God was crucified in our place to pay the penalty for our offenses. Of course, the cross is foundationally about God’s love. This is why John writes, “God *so loved* the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). In other words the cross does not primarily show us an angry God needing appeasement, but a loving God providing forgiveness. To paraphrase something N. T. Wright so often says: The famous John 3:16 doesn’t say, “God so *hated* the world that He *killed* His Son,” but rather, “God so *loved* the world that He *gave* His Son.” Yet we must never deny the reality of God’s justice. On the cross God was settling accounts for all who believe in Him by placing upon Christ the wrath we deserved.

But what about those who don’t believe in Jesus’s work and sacrifice? Should they simply believe in a generic God of love? No, at least that’s not what the apostle John taught: **“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them”** (John 3:36). It is either you accept the settlement that God has provided in Christ, or you will have to settle your account by yourself (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10). F. F. Bruce says it like this: “Those who repudiate the salvation procured by Christ will find none anywhere else.” Oh that people would put their faith in Christ who is our only hope!

God Is Just Because He Is Loving

A God who does not settle accounts is not loving at all. A God who does nothing about injustice and evil cannot be said to be loving (or moral for that matter). In other words God's justice is not His dark "shadow side." Quite the contrary, His justice is a consequence of His love. One of the ways we know that God loves people is His anger against the evil that destroys us. He will not look at that which ruins people and relationships with any approval. He is so committed to our well-being that He will banish evil and all those who defiantly side with it forever (Revelation 21:8).

All our groaning and sighing about the injustice and pain in this world, all our longings for peace and righteousness, the hurt we feel when a helpless girl is repeatedly raped by her powerful uncle—God sees, knows, and feels all of it! In His love He has promised that a day is coming when He will triumph over injustice by banishing evildoers forever (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9). He will prove to be our good Father who rids the world of oppression and injustice. This is love!

*In his book *Delighting in the Trinity*, Michael Reeves says:*

"Love cares, and that means it cannot be indifferent to evil. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Rom 12:9). Only such love is sincere." *(his emphasis)*

Sincere love must hate evil. If it doesn't, it is mere sentimentality! Therefore God is not just in spite of his love; He is just because of His love. It is because God is loving that He is just. Would you consider a father to be loving who does not care about oppression done against his children? Would you consider him a good father who just indulges his children and lets them do whatever they want to do? Do we praise parents who never discipline their children or teach them about the consequences of disobedience? No!

True love cares and cannot be indifferent to evil. Indeed, to be indifferent is not love. It is the opposite of love. Indifference is the final stage of hatred! It is because God loves humanity and the world that He must of necessity be just and angry against sin! It is further proof of God's love that He came in Christ to endure the wrath that we deserved. What an amazing God!

God's Justice and Forgiveness

The justice of God is not an abstract doctrine with no relevance for our lives. It is a most practical doctrine that should at the least give us a sense of urgency in missions and evangelism. Moreover, for the purpose of this book, the truth about God's justice has practical implications for our quest to forgive. How so?

Well, because God is truly just, the cries in our hearts for justice will be fulfilled by our Father, who will do something about evil eternally. He will settle accounts! This is good news for those who have been deeply hurt. We can know that the God of justice is not flippant about the evil that has been done to us. Knowing this gives us the freedom to forgive and love our enemies. It allows us to choose not to pursue personal vengeance because we can entrust perfect judgment to God. We know that all sins against us will be paid for, either through the sacrifice of Jesus (preferably) or by the just judgment of God over sins. Therefore the apostle Paul says to us: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, **but leave room for God's wrath**, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

Similarly the apostle Peter said about Jesus: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. **Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly**" (1 Peter 2:23).

What all this means is that the truth about God's justice is as foundational to forgiveness as the message of His love. If you really trust God's justice, you won't have to avenge yourself! Revenge is proof that we think ourselves more righteous than God; it means we do not trust His perfect justice. Do you trust God? If you do, you won't have to avenge yourself. He can handle it in any way He sees fit. Ours is to love and do good to our offenders (Romans 12:19-21).

Let's Move On

So far in this gospel parable we have been introduced to the King and His justice, but there's so much more ahead. This is a King like no other, so let's return to the parable and see what happens next.

CHAPTER 6

The Weighty Debt We Cannot Pay

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

—*Matthew 18:23-25*

Jesus has already introduced us to the King and His justice in this gospel parable, and now He introduces us to a man who owed the King. Jesus does not tell us this man's name or his nationality, and we have no details about his life beyond the simple description "a man." I think this is intentional. Jesus is being as vague as possible because this man represents all humanity before God. He is you and I; he is all of us. We are the ones who have incurred a great debt before God because of our sins.

The Bible often uses the language of debt to describe our sins against God. For instance, in his lesson on prayer Jesus taught us to say, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). There, as in the parable before us, Jesus describes sin as a debt (See also Luke 7:41-47). To sin is to owe God! This is certainly not a common way of thinking about sin. We think of sin mostly in relational terms (breaking trust with God), but this language of accounting is quite foreign to us. So what is the rationale for this metaphor?

In his book *The Truth of the Cross*, R. C. Sproul explains this concept of sin by stating that because God is the sovereign King of the universe and has

supreme authority over all He has created, He has the right to impose moral obligations on us (Genesis 2:15-17). Just as the government has the right to issue seat belt laws because of its authority over citizens, so also God has the right to issue laws to all people. When the government issues morally sound laws, as citizens we are obligated to obey them; we can say that we “owe” the state our compliance. In the same way, Sproul writes, “When He [God] does so [issues commands], we ‘owe’ obedience to Him. If we fail to perform the obligations He places on us, we incur a debt. So according to this understanding of sin, God is the Creditor and we are the debtors.” Thus, God, the moral Lawgiver and Creator of all things, has given us many moral laws through our conscience (Romans 2:15), through His revelation in creation (Romans 1:19-20), and especially through the scriptures (Exodus 20), but we have broken these righteous laws of God. We have failed to give God His due, and so we are debtors!

So just how much is this debt that we owe God? Jesus says that the man in the parable, who represents you and me, owed the King ten thousand bags of gold. Wow! Ten thousand bags of gold! Let that figure sink in for one moment! In *The Moody Bible Commentary*, Michael Rydelnik states that converting ten thousand bags of gold to US dollars would be “several billion dollars.” Apparently this figure is so great that it is not possible to give an exact estimate in US dollars. And in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, D. A. Carson writes:

We glimpse some idea of the size of the indebtedness when we recall that David donated three thousands talents of gold and seven thousands talents of silver for the construction of the temple, and the princes provided five thousand talents of gold and ten thousand talents of silver (1Ch 29:4, 7).

In other words this man owed more in gold than King David and his princes gave for the construction of Solomon’s temple! That is staggering! Jesus’s description of this man’s debt makes it clear that it is a very great debt, so great that it is almost unthinkable how anyone could owe this much. But lest you think that this is just parabolic hyperbole, recognize that Jesus is saying, “This is how much you owe God. This is how much your sins cost—an unfathomable amount of debt.”

“Really? But I’m Not That Bad!”

I know what you’re thinking! You’re saying to yourself, “I haven’t done anything that bad. Sure, Hitler and Stalin might owe that much, but not me. I’m generally a good person.” The truth is that we don’t often think of our sins as being this weighty. We justify our sins and give them nicknames like “white lies” and “minor infractions.” We measure our sins by the standards of society and say, “Yes, I am not perfect, but I am not as bad as other people I know.” When we measure our sins by human standards, we lose sense of their true gravity before God. Human culture has always had a way of downplaying the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin.

In his book *The Holiness of God*, R. C. Sproul again helps us reclaim the true seriousness of sin before a holy God: **“Sin is cosmic treason.”** Even the smallest sin against Almighty God is cosmic treason. To understand this, let us take an example from civic life. Breaking a local state law brings some measure of punishment. However, breaking a federal law brings even greater punishment. Similarly, if someone punches a citizen of the United Kingdom, he or she will attract punishment, but if that same person were to attempt to punch the queen of England, that act will bring severer punishment. The principle is this: **The higher up you go, the greater the debt incurred.** Therefore, because of who God is, disobeying Him is costly and puts us in great debt. To disobey Him is to defy the King of the universe, deny His right to rule, and challenge His authority. It is treason on a cosmic level.

I believe that our small view of sin may actually stem from a small view of God. If we know Him to be the highest authority, then we will understand the weight of the smallest offense against Him. Again, we turn to Sproul from *The Truth of the Cross*:

In the smallest sin we defy God’s right to rule and to reign over His creation. Instead, we seek to usurp for ourselves the authority and the power that belong properly to God. Even the slightest sin does violence to His holiness, to His glory, and to His righteousness. Every sin, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is truly an act of treason against the cosmic King.

Though we are prone to downplay them, our sins are really costly. This is a point that the Bible makes continuously. Think carefully about the myriad of sacrifices that people brought to make atonement for sins in the Old Testament. Think of the blood, the smoke, the ceremonial washings, and the

priests who could not sit—these all make the point that sin is costly. One might say, “Well, that’s the Old Testament. We are in a new dispensation and shouldn’t think of sin this way.” Is that true? Is sin less costly in the New Testament? Anyone who talks this way has not thought carefully about the cross. Look at the cross and see who died there. Think about the final sacrifice given for sin. It was none other than God the Son, the preexistent Word who put on flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1-14). Our sins were so costly that it took God to come down and pay for them. He did not send a prophet, teacher, or righteous person, because only God could pay the ultimate price! The cross therefore reveals the love of God, who was willing to send His Son, but it also reveals the cost of our sins because God had to come down to pay for them. It is our sins that killed the Son of God. Truly our sins are weighty! The hymn writer Thomas Kelly captures this thought perfectly in “Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted”:

*Ye who think of sin but lightly
Nor suppose the evil great
Here may view its nature rightly
Here its guilt may estimate
Mark the sacrifice appointed
See who bears the awful load
'Tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed
Son of Man and Son of God*

Now is a good time to pause and reflect on what Jesus is communicating to Peter and indeed to us in this parable. Remember that Peter has come to Jesus asking how often he should forgive his offenders. By way of this parable Jesus’s response is essentially, “Peter, have you contemplated your own sins before God? Have you thought of His absolute holiness and the many ways you defy Him? Do you know that you owe ten thousand bags of gold?” You know, one of the things that can happen when we are offended is that we become self-righteous. We can start to look down on our offenders and see ourselves as more holy than we truly are. Therefore Jesus is saying the place to begin this journey of forgiveness is to focus vertically, not horizontally. Look up, remember who He is, and then remember who you are and what you owe. It is weighty—ten thousand bags of gold—and yet He forgives us lavishly! More about that later, as I must not get ahead of Jesus in this story. Let’s return to the text.

The Stain We Cannot Hide

As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

—Matthew 18:24-25

Jesus continues the story by saying that this man could not pay his debt. This should come as no surprise. I mean, how could he repay that much? Where would he start? How could he make up ten thousand bags of gold? Even kings in the ancient Near East at the time Jesus told the story would have had to tax their people severely to come up with ten thousand bags of gold. This man really had no hope of paying! We should not think that selling his wife and children into slavery would somehow pay the debt. They would have to work two lifetimes to make up that money. That's precisely the point: They would literally be paying with their lives forever!

Jesus wants to get across that we cannot pay the debt we owe God. We simply cannot. Jesus is opening our eyes to see the inability of humanity to atone for our sins. Though we may try and strive, we are not rich enough to pay back this debt. In her famous hymn "Grace Greater Than All Our Sin," Julia Johnston captures this same truth:

*Dark is the stain that we cannot hide;
What can avail to wash it away?*

The stain in this hymn is the stain of sin. It is the deep sense in all of us that we are guilty, that we owe something, that we are unclean. The hymn writer is saying that we on our own cannot wash away the stain of sin. We may try to hide it, but we cannot wash it away by ourselves. Though she's using a different metaphor, Julia Johnston is echoing the message from Jesus's story: **"he was not able to pay ... the debt."** The Old Testament prophet Isaiah also spoke about our inability to wash away this sin-stain: **"We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment"** (Isaiah 64:6 ESV). Isaiah is declaring that our sins have stained us and made us unclean, and even though we may try, we cannot cover this stain. All our good deeds and attempts to hide the stain will not work. All our righteousness will not offset the debt. Indeed, as Paul the apostle says, **"no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the**

works of the law” (Romans 3:20). This is the reality: You may tell yourself that you’re basically a good person, but that will not get rid of the stain! God requires more than being “basically a good person.” He requires perfection!

In his book *Jesus the King*, Dr. Timothy Keller points out that in our modern society, people don’t really believe in sin and judgment, yet we still wrestle with feelings of guilt. We can’t seem to escape the feeling that we are unclean, that we are somehow dirty. Keller goes on, “We have a deep sense that we’ve got to hide our true self or at least control what people know about us. Secretly we feel that we aren’t acceptable, that we have to prove to ourselves and other people that we’re worthy, lovable, valuable.” Where do these feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and uncleanness come from? The Bible says that they are the result of sin; sin leaves us feeling dirty (Psalm 51:2). The Bible says that we owe a debt that we cannot pay; we carry a stain that we cannot wash away! The Bible says that these feelings of guilt are not just a subjective feeling. They are an objective reality. We have broken the law of God! And while the modern person may philosophize about sin and judgment, we know deep within our hearts that there is a stain we cannot hide, an unrest we cannot quiet, a guilt we cannot atone for.

Putting Makeup on the Stain

Though it is clear to us as modern people that we cannot wash away the stain, we spend most of our lives trying to put “makeup” on it. I’m talking about all those silly attempts to cover the guilt, those empty promises to “never do it again” (whatever “it” may be in your life). This is exactly what the man in Jesus’s story did:

*Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. **At this the servant fell on his knees before him. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything....”*** (Matthew 18:25-26)

It is obvious to everyone hearing (and now reading) this story that this man cannot pay his debt, yet he is still trying to convince himself that he can. When he should be crying, “Have mercy on me,” he’s still saying, “I will pay back everything.” This is human pride at work; rather than accepting our helplessness and asking for mercy, we make promises! “I’ll be a better man” ... “I’ll spend more time praying” ... “I’ll do better this year.” Most of the

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time we don't keep these promises, and even when we do, it doesn't seem sufficient to wash away the stain. We still know we are guilty; we know we need more than makeup to cover up our outsides. We know we need something permanent that will clean us from within. It is just as Jesus said:

“Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them?” ... He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”
(Mark 7:18-23)

Jesus says that our uncleanness does not stem from anything on the outside; therefore the cleaning cannot be an outside-in work. The stain is an inner stain, so we need an inner cleaning. We need to be washed, but it is not a washing we can achieve on our own. We need someone who can wash us from within and make us new. As the Bible says, we need to be born again (John 3:3-6), which means we need an entirely new life and not just some makeup to cover the stain. We are not just bad people needing good instructions; we are dead people needing new life (Ephesians 2:1-4; Titus 3:5-7).

Instead of acknowledging our helplessness, we stay busy trying to cover the stain. You know what much of human religion is? It is an attempt to cover the stain with makeup. In the parable, when the servant says, “I'll pay back everything,” he's going the way of man-made religion. All religions are based on the premise that we can somehow be good enough to atone for our sins. They all tell us that if we do more good works than bad, then God (or the gods) will accept us. So we work and work, trying to do things on the outside to get rid of the inner feelings of guilt. We wear modest clothes, restrain our language, cry during worship, give to the poor, and pray incessantly. All these are good things, but they can't offset the debt, they can't atone for sins, and they can't wash away the stain. Nothing we do can take away our guilt. As with the makeup we put on our faces, our good works only provide a temporary covering (Hebrew 10:1-4).

For so long in my life I was like this man, promising to pay back my debt rather than asking for mercy. I thought that if I could do more for God, then He would have no choice but to approve of me. But working always left

me feeling restless, as I was never sure if I had done enough or if my motives were pure enough. The more I analyzed my works, the more I found reasons why they were inadequate. I was trying to offer God little pieces of copper to pay a debt worth ten thousand bags of gold. One day I came upon a scripture I had read many times, but on this day, it really hit home:

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. (1 Peter 1:18-19)

That day, it struck me that if I could wash away the stain on my own, God would not have had to send Jesus to die. If I had enough resources to pay for my sins, then the cross was a waste of time. The cross is a testament to the inability of humanity to pay for our sins. This is why all through His ministry, Jesus kept saying, “The Son of Man **MUST** die.” There is no other way! A debt of ten thousand bags of gold requires that someone with infinite riches lavish His wealth on us. We needed something more powerful than the stain; we needed something worth more than gold.

On the cross Jesus, who was infinitely rich, became poor so that we “through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). As we saw above, Peter says that His blood is “precious.” Though we cannot pay for our sins, Jesus was more than able to pay the price for them eternally. He is more precious than ten thousand bags of gold! His death on the cross made the provision for the cleaning we need (Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-22). He died so that we can receive new life and get rid of the stain forever! This is why Julia Johnston, whose hymn we looked at earlier, included such a powerful refrain about God’s grace:

*Dark is the stain that we cannot hide;
What can avail to wash it away?
Look! There is flowing a crimson tide;
Whiter than snow you may be today.
Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within
Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.*

His grace is truly greater than all our sin; His blood can wash away the stain!

The Story So Far

Where is the power to forgive? Let me summarize Jesus's answer so far based on this parable: "Recognize that there is a just King who settles accounts, and because of your sins against Him, you owe a great debt. No matter how hard you try, you cannot clear this debt because it is far above your capacity."

This is what we have covered so far, but this is not the end of the story. We are just about to enter the good part—the good news that empowers us to forgive the worst offenses: forgiveness through the cross of Christ. Are you ready?

CHAPTER 7

The Lavish Mercy of The King

At this the servant fell on his knees before him. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

—Matthew 18:26-27

When we last saw the servant of the King, he was on his knees promising to pay back the ten thousand bags of gold he owed. As we discussed in the last chapter, this man was promising to do the impossible. He was attempting to do something that humans have been trying to do since Babel: In our pride we’ve been trying to build towers to reach God, rather than acknowledging that we cannot reach Him, and therefore He must come to us in grace. This man was trying to work to make himself acceptable to the King. We saw clearly how he should have been asking for mercy and acknowledging his helplessness. Instead we saw him going the way of human pride by promising to pay back everything!

At this point we wonder what the King will do. Will He accept the man’s promise to pay back everything? Will He make this man and his family eternal slaves, requiring that they work to pay off their debt? Will the King ask him to pay some of it but not all? With the way the story has been going, any of these responses would be appropriate. We expect some form of retribution or consequence. The reader is prepared for a hard sentence, or at least an agreement on some sort of payment plan. We are hardly prepared for the next words that roll out of Jesus’s lips: ***“The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.”***

What?!! Let him go? Go where? Go free? Did he really just cancel the debt? All ten thousand bags of it? Our minds are full of questions as we read the King's words. This turn of events is startling. The King's mercy catches us off guard, and our minds can't fit it into any category. It just seems to come out of nowhere, and to be honest, it doesn't seem to make much sense. *"He took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go!"* Just like that? We expect him to pay something; we expect him to be held accountable in some way. But this announcement of grace is totally unexpected!

The Surprise of Grace

The truth is that grace is always a surprise. It always comes to us and shakes up our comfortable categories. Grace sweeps us off our feet and can sometimes make us uncomfortable. Grace is a challenge to our religious minds, and yet it is the greatest comfort for our restless hearts. Why do you think gospel preachers are often attacked? When we proclaim the lavish mercy of God, we are charged and maligned with words like "blasphemer" or "licentious." Something about the freedom of God's grace startles and scares people. No one would blink if the King said, "You must pay a quarter of what you owe," but now that He has let the man go, we feel ruffled. This is the nature of grace: It literally knocks us off our high horse and leaves us speechless at the goodness of God. While we are going about trying to merit God's attention or trying by all means to avoid Him, mercy comes to us like a boisterous wave and proclaims, "Your sins are forgiven." Grace seeks out the poor, needy, stubborn, and broken; grace justifies sinners and grants us gifts we cannot earn. God's grace is always a surprise! No one is ever fully prepared for the lavish way in which God forgives sinners. Indeed, we must pray to know the love of God that "surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19).

I often think about another parable that Jesus told—the one about the lost (prodigal) son in Luke 15. This boy had insulted his father and run off with his portion of the inheritance, but then he shamefully came home after squandering everything. He had his apology speech written and was prepared for his father's punishment, or at least a brief lecture. As the boy came home dressed in rags and smelling like a pig, Jesus tells us that "... while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). Everyone listening to Jesus would have been surprised at the father's reaction. In that culture of shame and honor, the son's insult of his father's authority would have been considered unforgivable. What's more,

respectable men didn't run in that culture. We expect that the father would sit down and wait until his son begs and begs, but we are surprised to see him run, hug, and kiss the rebel son. This is the nature of grace: It is always a surprise.

Everyone was surprised that Jesus would invite himself to Zacchaeus's house (Luke 19:7), everyone was surprised that He was a friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19), and we are surprised that the Master in our parable forgave His servant freely! Grace is always a surprise! Amazing grace!

The Why of Forgiveness

The question might be asked, why does the Master forgive His servant? Why does He cancel his debt and let him go? Is it the depth of his tears and begging? Is it the sincerity of his promise to pay back everything? Is it because the King believed he was genuine enough? No! Jesus is clear: ***"The servant's master took pity on him."*** In other words the King lets this man go not because of anything he has done, but because of His own mercy and grace (Titus 3:5). It isn't because his repentance is so deep, or his tears so genuine; it is simply because of the Master's compassion. Remember that up until this point the servant has not asked for mercy. He has only asked for time to pay back everything. Rather than grant him time, the Master has given him complete forgiveness. So this man is not getting what he asked for; he's getting more than he could ever dream to ask. His repentance is weak in the sense that he's still asking for time, not mercy. Therefore we cannot say that the servant has been forgiven because of his deep "repentance." If you ask me, he hasn't done much repenting at all. Yet the King in His magnificent grace is willing to forgive him. Clearly the reason for this forgiveness does not reside in the man, but in the nature of His King: ***"The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love"*** (Psalm 145:8).

Friends, it is not the depth of our repentance that saves us. It is not our expression of grief or the volume of our tears that brings forgiveness. We are saved because we have a compassionate King who has chosen to save us despite the weakness of our faith and pitifulness of our repentance. We must realize this: Nothing in us qualifies us for God's mercy, and if we could qualify for mercy, it is not mercy but merit (Deuteronomy 7:7-8; 9:4-6). As the apostle Paul says, ***"... he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy"*** (Titus 3:5).

Let me say this very clearly to avoid any misunderstanding: *Faith and repentance are essential to salvation* (Acts 20:21). Repentant faith is how we obtain

everything that Christ has secured for us in His death, burial, and resurrection. However, repentant faith is not the ultimate cause of salvation. It is the conduit through which we receive salvation. Therefore we should never look to the strength of our faith or the depth of our repentance for salvation. Instead we must fix our eyes on the compassion of our savior. As Dr. Timothy Keller brilliantly states in his book *The Reason for God*, “It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you.” In the same vein popular English preacher of the eighteenth century Charles H. Spurgeon says:

Remember, therefore, it is not *thy hold* of Christ that saves thee—it is Christ; it is not *thy joy* in Christ that saves thee—it is Christ; it is not even faith in Christ, though that be the instrument—it is Christ’s blood and merits....

And Augustus Toplady, hymn writer of the seventeenth century, declares it like this in “Rock of Ages”:

*Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

All of these witnesses are echoing the truth of scripture! The *why* of God’s forgiveness does not ultimately reside in us, but in God (Ephesians 2:4-5). Therefore our confidence should not lie in how sorry we are or how much we believe, but in how good He is. He takes pity on this servant whose repentance is weak. He chooses to cancel his debt and let him go. What a gracious King we have!

Why does God forgive our sins? Because He is gracious! Why am I saved today from hell, condemnation, and judgment? Because God is merciful (Psalm 51:1). Why has He cancelled my debt and let me go? Because of His great love! Why can I be confident that I will be reunited with Him forever? Because of His faithfulness! Nothing in me, everything in Him! As the prophet Jeremiah says, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail” (Lamentations 3:22). Therefore, if we must boast, let us “boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31). The reason for forgiveness resides not in us, but in the grace of the King. We receive this grace with the open and empty hands of faith and repentance.

The How of Forgiveness

We have seen that the reason for forgiveness does not reside in anything we do, but simply in the compassion of the King who saves. Jesus says it plainly: ***“The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go”*** (Matthew 18:27). But there is one more question that demands an answer: **How can the King forgive just like that?** In other words, how is it that He can just cancel the debt? Is He going to pretend that the debt never existed? How will He settle accounts? What about the justice of the King that we discussed in Chapter 5? How can we reconcile the King’s justice with the mercy He has just shown? Does the King neglect justice in order to show mercy? Or is there a way He can be both just *and* merciful?

Here’s the question we are really asking: **How is it that God can forgive our sins so freely? How is it that He can just let go of our great debt?** The answer: ***For God to forgive us freely, He Himself must bear the cost for our sins.*** In other words, while forgiveness is free for us, it came at a great cost to God. To return to our parable, for the King to let this man go freely, He must bear the cost of those ten thousand bags of gold. He must either find a way to replace it by Himself or He must live without it. Whatever the case, the freedom enjoyed by the servant came at a cost to the King. The reason the servant could go freely is because the King chose to bear the cost by Himself. The truth is that someone must bear the cost and pay the debt. So when the King forgives, He’s saying, “I will bear the cost in Myself so that you can go freely.” This is how forgiveness works: The one who is wronged bears the cost so that the offender doesn’t have to. Remember how I defined forgiveness earlier? *Bearing the cost of the offenses done against you just as Christ bore the cost of your sins.*

Let me give a practical example to buttress this point. If someone runs into your car on the highway, you can handle it in one of two ways. One way is to say, “Pay me back for the damages you have done.” In this case the person who hit you will bear the cost for the repairs of your car. But what if you say, “Don’t worry about it, I’ll handle it by myself?” In this case you have let the person go freely, but that means you are going to have to pay for the repairs by yourself. The person walks away freely only because you are willing to bear the cost. This explains the *how* of God’s forgiveness: It is free for us because it costs God. Someone had to pay for our debt against God. The good news of the gospel is that God chose to pay what we owed so He could grant us forgiveness and freedom.

This is why the cross of Christ is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. The only way that God could forgive us and cancel our great debt is by bearing the cost in Himself. He did this by paying the price for our sins through the death of His Son Jesus Christ. On the cross God endured the punishment for my sins against Him. Jesus Christ, who is God, came in human flesh to bear in Himself the weight of our offenses. He came to pay for our sins by dying the death that we deserved. We, like this servant, can have our debts cancelled because God paid for them in His Son. God did not simply gloss over our offenses or pretend they did not exist. No, He paid for them in Christ. Our forgiveness is free, but it is not cheap. God did not forgive us “just like that.” His justice required that payment be made, and His love provided the offering for our offenses. On the cross of Christ, then, we see that God upheld both His justice and mercy. Sins have been paid for (thereby satisfying the claims of justice) so that mercy can be given freely to those who trust in Christ. The apostle Paul speaks about this by saying that because of the cross, God is both just and the justifier (forgiver) of those who have faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:26).

God didn’t “just” forgive us. No, He bore the cost of our sins through the cross of Christ so that we would not perish (Isaiah 53:10; John 3:16). A great exchange took place on our behalf. The debt we owed was credited to Jesus’s account so that He died in our place. Our sins were placed on Him. The ten thousand bags of gold we owed was charged to Him. He died in our place, bearing our debt. But more than that, His perfect righteousness was credited to our account. We received His perfect record, the very righteousness of God given to humanity (2 Corinthians 5:21)! Sure, forgiveness came to us freely, but it cost God His Son. The *how* of forgiveness is seen in the divine decision of the Godhead to endure, through the cross of Christ, the punishment for the wrongs we have done. The Father willed our forgiveness, the Son accomplished it, and the Spirit now applies it to our hearts! What an awesome God we serve!

“The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.” When we read these words, we must not skim over them quickly. Jesus doesn’t go into full explanation about how the King cancelled the debt, but I have no doubt that as Jesus told this story, His mind went to the cross. He thought about what it would take for countless men and women to walk debt-free: **“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be**

killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Luke 9:22). The apostle Paul lays out the truth of our forgiveness and canceled debt by saying:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. (Colossians 2:13-14)

This is the glorious good news of the gospel: All who believe in Jesus will have their stains cleansed, their debts paid, and their sins forgiven! Those who put their faith in Him no longer owe the King ten thousand bags of gold. We are debt-free and have been made children of God (John 1:12). We walk with boldness and confidence before the King, knowing that He has no wrath toward us. All the anger we deserve has been totally poured out on Christ, and there is no condemnation for those who trust in Jesus (Romans 8:1). We are justified, covered in Christ’s righteousness, and acquitted of every charge against us. We can hear the voice of Jesus saying to us forever, “I have paid. Your debt is cancelled. You are free to go!”

Because God paid for our sins through the death of His Son, we can go free like the servant in this story. The difference, though, is that the gospel makes us more than forgiven servants; it makes us children of God (Galatians 3:26). Because we are children of God, His Spirit lives inside us (Galatians 4:6), empowering us to live above sin and enamoring us with the truth of our eternal salvation (Romans 8:16). He is the Spirit of power and love, the very life of God in us.

As Spirit-sealed children of God, we still wrong our Father; we still sin. When we do, the devil whispers words of doubt in our ears: “God cannot love you after you did this or that.” In such times we must look to the cross, where Jesus paid in full and secured our forgiveness and relationship with God. We must say with the apostle John: “... **if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins ...**” (1 John 2:1-2).

Notice that even though John refers to Jesus as an advocate, He is an advocate “with the Father.” It means that the Judge is now our Father. God no longer sits on the judgment seat for those who are in Christ. He sits on the family couch, reclining with us in everlasting fellowship. This is not to suggest that believers will not be judged by their works to determine their

rewards in God's coming kingdom (2 Corinthians 5:9-10). The point I am making is that we now relate to God **primarily** as Father, not Judge. And because we are His children, we are eternally secure by His grace (Romans 8:1; 14-17; 31-39). The judgment that believers will face will determine our rewards, not our eternal destiny (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). This is what the cross of Christ has secured for us and it is glorious! To hear the King say, "I forgive you, I have cancelled your debt, and I have claimed you as My child"—this is glorious!

The Cross and Our Perspective on Pain

The cross of Christ not only shows us how God forgives us, but it also helps us have the right perspective of our hurts and pains. While Jesus hung on the cross, it seemed that God had abandoned Him. Where was the Father when they spat on Jesus and slapped His face? How could God allow His Son, whom He loved, to be hurt by people so badly? It looked like a failure on God's part because it seemed that evil had prevailed over righteousness. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. It was through Christ's cross—through the seeming victory of evil—that God would save the world. Though God seemed absent, the cross was always a part of His plan to save humanity. In other words God brought the greatest good out of the greatest evil that has ever befallen the world.

What does this say to us in our travail with offense and hurt? When it seems that we have been abandoned by God and the pain we feel seems aimless, we can be sure that God is with us and that He is able to bring good out of our suffering. While we bear the cross of offenses done against us like Christ did, we can know that God has a plan and He is able to work all things together for our ultimate good (Romans 8:28). The cross of Christ empowers us to forgive by showing us that God can use the evil done against us to bring good in our lives and the lives of others. It is just as Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery: **"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"** (Genesis 50:20).

Gaze

*I hear the words of love,
I gaze upon the blood,
I see the mighty sacrifice,*

POWER TO FORGIVE

*And I have peace with God.
(from "I Hear the Words of Love")*

By gazing (looking continuously, intently, and voraciously) at the cross and the lavish forgiveness we have in Christ, we are empowered to forgive others. We must think about how much we owed and what we deserved from the King. Then we must think about His mercy and the offering of His Son. We must contemplate and be consumed with the love that not only forgave our debt, but also made us beloved children of God. Indeed, the rebels have been made children. What great love, what great mercy! It is by thinking about, enjoying, and meditating on the depth of this forgiving love that we learn to forgive our offenders. That's the whole point of this parable: God has done something so monumental in forgiving us that it ought to change how we respond to our offenders. The love of God changes us at such a foundational level that we become loving (Titus 3:1-8; Philippians 2:1-5; Luke 7:47).

Peter asked, "Where can I find the power to be lavish in forgiveness?" Jesus essentially answered, "On the cross, where I will die as a manifestation of God's lavish love for you." Those who have been forgiven this much will forgive much! Or at least that's what one would expect, but as we will see, the story is about to take a twist.

The Story So Far

Where is the power to forgive? Let me summarize Jesus's answer so far: "Recognize that there is a just King who settles accounts, and because of your sins against Him, you owe a great debt. No matter how hard you try, you cannot clear this debt because it is far above your capacity. But your King is gracious, and in His kindness, He cancels your debt by bearing the cost in Himself. He lets you walk debt-free as if you never sinned when you turn to Him in faith and repentance."

CHAPTER 8

The Absurdity of Vengeance

If we have learned anything about Jesus so far, it's that He is a master storyteller. This parable has been full of drama, thrill, unexpected turns, and plot twists. Many times Jesus has had us at the edge of our seats, just wondering what will happen next. And with each development of the story we have been surprised at the characters and how they have acted. However, we are about to experience the biggest surprise so far. This is the plot twist of plot twists:

The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded. (Matthew 18:27-28)

In the last chapter we read about the grand display of mercy shown to this servant by his Master. The story rose to a high as we wondered about the surprise of grace and the goodness of the Master. We were moved by the compassion of God and the greatness of His mercy. But now, like a nail to a tire, we feel deflated by the response of the servant to such amazing grace. We all expect that after such an experience of forgiveness, this servant would come out with a new, softened heart. We expect him to follow the example of his Master by canceling every debt and giving free hugs to every offender. Instead we read that he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins, grabbed him, choked him, and demanded payment. Again, we are full of questions. How could he do such a thing? Didn't he remember what just happened? All of this is so absurd! And that is precisely the point Jesus is making: **Vengeance is irrational in light of the forgiveness that we have already received in Christ. For a believer in**

Christ, there is no good reason not to forgive. This may sound like a harsh statement in light of the offenses we might have endured, but it is a true statement in light of the forgiveness we have received in Christ. Unforgiveness is absurd and irrational for those who have tasted of Christ's mercy.

In this chapter I want to point out three areas of irrationality with regard to unforgiveness. These three areas show up in certain words that Jesus chose in telling this story:

1. **Irrational because we are “fellow servants”:** Jesus said that after the servant received forgiveness from his Master, he went out and found one of **“his fellow servants”** who owed him and began to choke him. The words “fellow servant” jump out at me every time I read this parable. I see in these words the common **humanness** that we share with our offenders. There is only one Master: the Lord Almighty who is perfect and sinless. The rest of us are fellow servants, subject to sin and liable to offend each other. This means that we are really not too different from our offenders; we are human like them. We sin against others and need forgiveness as much as our offenders. When we are sinned against, we have a tendency to pull God-rank. We become self-righteous and act as though we have never sinned.

How would our lives change if we understood that we are fellow servants with our offenders? How different would our response be if we acknowledged the fact that as humans “We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2). My sins against others may not be identical to the offenses I have endured, but the truth remains that I am human, and I will sin against others, and this should humble me and change how I respond to my offenders. The common humanness I share with my offenders should produce a kind of compassion for the brokenness we all express in various sins. One person in scripture who really understood this concept of fellow “servanthood” (humanness) is Joseph. When his brothers asked him for forgiveness for selling him into slavery, he responded by saying, “Am I in the place of God?” (Genesis 50:19). In other words, “What right do I have to withhold forgiveness when I am human just like you?” Or as Jesus says, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone ...” (John 8:7). Unforgiveness is irrational in light of the fact that none of us is without sin. We are fellow servants.

- 2. Irrational because of the comparative weight:** Jesus tells us in this parable that the servant found a man who owed him a **hundred silver coins** and choked him. Jesus is intentional about mentioning how much the first servant was owed. By giving us the value of the debt, Jesus makes two important points. First of all, Jesus acknowledges the weight of offenses against us. In first-century Rome, a hundred silver coins was a significant amount. Jesus doesn't say that the first servant was owed two bronze coins or one denarius. He gives a significant amount in order not to diminish the weight of the offenses we often endure. Jesus acknowledges the pain and the weight of sin against us. Having said that, the second reason Jesus gives us the value of the amount owed to the first servant is to highlight how small it was in comparison to what he himself had owed his Master. So on the one hand Jesus says, "The offenses against you are weighty," yet on the other hand He says, "The offenses against you are comparatively small."

Think about it: This man owed his Master in gold, but he was owed in silver. He owed in thousands, but he was owed in hundreds. He owed in bags, but he was owed in pieces. I believe that the point Jesus is making is clear: **If God was willing to let go of our debt despite its overwhelming size, we should be willing to let go of debts against us no matter how weighty they seem to us.** Jesus is saying, "No matter how much others have sinned against you, it will never compare to the weight of your sins against God." Yet God freely forgives all our sins! So unforgiveness is irrational in light of the comparative smallness of the offenses against us.

- 3. Irrational because of mercy already received:** As Jesus continues His story, he says that after the servant choked his offender, "**His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back'**" (Matthew 18:29). These words are crucial because they are strikingly similar to the words that the servant used in begging his Master. He told the King, "**Be patient with me ... and I will pay back everything.**" One would think that as he heard similar words from his fellow servant, they would ring a bell in his heart and cause him to remember the response of his King to him. You would think that he would say, "I also fell on my knees and said similar words to my Master, and He let me go, so I must let this man go too." Yet, as we have already begun to see,

he responded differently. Is it not amazing that we ask God for forgiveness and celebrate the freedom of His mercy, but when others ask for our forgiveness, we withhold it from them? Absurd to say the least!

Sometimes people ask us for forgiveness using the same words we use in our prayer to God! “I am so sorry. I messed up and I wish I could take it back.” How many of us have not said similar words to God? Yet when those words are directed toward us, we say, “I can never forgive her for how she insulted me!” This is absurd. All through scripture the biblical writers see God’s forgiveness as motivation for ours. In their minds those who have really enjoyed God’s mercy cannot withhold it. So Paul says things like, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). Similarly he says to the Colossian church, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). Evidently Paul thinks that the forgiveness we have received from Christ is powerful enough to make us forgiving people. And if we truly know it and sense its power in our hearts, we will agree with him. Unforgiveness is irrational in light of the gospel!

Outraged

As the story progresses, Jesus tells us that:

*His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.” But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. **When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.***
(Matthew 18:29-31)

As I write now, I am a little bit emotional. I’m thinking of this man, who just awhile ago was spared from prison by his gracious Master. Now here he is throwing someone else in prison. He didn’t make happen for others what God did for Him. The mercy of God didn’t make him merciful. He put his fellow servant in prison.

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Truly, prison is an adequate metaphor for unforgiveness, isn't it? In a sense, when we refuse to forgive, we are locking our offenders in the prison of our hearts. We torture them in our thoughts, malign their whole person in our minds, and wish them misfortune and hurt. In a word we "imprison" them. The irony, though, is that with all these thoughts and negative feelings directed toward our offenders, we end up imprisoning ourselves. We lose our freedom to love, to give ourselves fully, to enjoy life. We become so obsessed with thoughts about our offenders that we lose ourselves in the process. We can be so wrapped up in what they did to us that we lose our own freedom. Perhaps this is what Corrie ten Boom meant when she said, ***"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you."*** The servant in our story refused to forgive and instead imprisoned his offender, and eventually himself.

Jesus says that after the servant put his offender in prison, the other servants who saw what happened were **"outraged."** That is a powerful word—outrage! According to *Thayer's Greek Lexicon*, the Greek word *lupeó* translated as "outrage" in this verse means to make one uneasy and cause grief. In other words the other servants felt overwhelmed with grief when they saw a man who had enjoyed forgiveness throwing someone else in prison. Something just didn't feel right!

Maybe you're reading this, and like me you're feeling outrage toward this man. It is natural to read this story and echo the feelings of the "other servants." However, I would have you remember that the servant in this story represents you and me when we refuse to forgive others. What I'm saying is, don't be too quick to dissociate yourself from those feelings of outrage. What the other servants felt toward this man is what you should feel toward yourself when you find that you are becoming comfortable with unforgiveness. For the believer in Christ, unforgiveness should feel uneasy! Don't get me wrong, I understand that forgiveness can often be a process. I know that it often takes time to heal and let go of the offense. I will talk about this in detail soon. However, those who have been forgiven in Christ should never be comfortable with unforgiveness. We should not just accept it as normal and allow it rule in our hearts. We operate by a new Spirit, by the nature of our Father who causes His sun to shine on the righteous and unrighteous, by the One who loves those who hate Him (Matthew 5:45). So, I say again, the believer in Christ should never be comfortable with unforgiveness. While we work through the process of forgiveness, we must

never justify vengeance! We must feel the same outrage these servants felt and turn our eyes to the cross of Christ, where we can find the power to forgive.

Forgiveness Is Logical

Jesus rounds up his story with the following words:

*When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. **This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.***

(Matthew 18:31-35)

So word gets back to the King, with the other servants saying something like, "The man You forgave has thrown his debtor in prison." The King sends for the servant and says, "I forgave you all that debt because you begged Me to." And then He adds words that I pray will bubble up in your spirit: **"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"** In other words Jesus thinks forgiving others is logical in light of God's forgiveness of our sins! Jesus thinks that it makes sense that forgiven people forgive people. Jesus thinks it is logical that one who has been so loved and forgiven should show love and forgiveness. **"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"** You get the sense that Jesus is saying, "This is a no-brainer!"

Now we can see very clearly that the goal of God's forgiveness is that we ourselves might become merciful. As He has been to us, so we must be to others. Yet it is not always so, right? We will see some reasons why in the next chapter, but for now we must know that we have an obligation to show mercy because of Christ's mercy. However, our obligation to be merciful is not the kind that flows from fear or a desire to pay Him back. It is the kind of obligation that flows from an understanding of the depths of His love. It is the kind of obligation that made Paul say:

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For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)

This is not the obligation of mere duty; it is the obligation of pure delight. His love ought to transform us to the point that we cannot remain comfortable with thoughts, feelings, and actions of unforgiveness. Christ's love should control us!

Before I close out this chapter, it is necessary to address the last few verses of Jesus's parable. In the story the Master throws his "wicked servant" into prison after learning of his actions. Then Jesus said, **"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."** Is Jesus teaching that we earn eternal life by forgiving others? A casual reading of this scripture can be used to support a kind of salvation by works. Based on this scripture some posit that salvation is by grace plus works of forgiveness and mercy. However, scripture is clear that salvation is by grace through faith alone. Therefore Jesus is not saying that we earn salvation by forgiving others. He is simply saying that we demonstrate ourselves to be saved by forgiving others. To put it negatively, if a person persists in habitual and unrepentant acts of vengeance, it may be proof that such a one has never been saved. Notice all the qualifiers I used in the last statement. I am not talking about one who is struggling to forgive and fighting thoughts of vengeance. I am not even talking about one who acted in vengeance and then later regretted such actions. I am talking about one who has settled on vengeance and justifies it, pursuing it at every chance without any regard for God's mercy. Such a person proves by such persistent acts of disobedience that they may never have been saved. The decision to not forgive may be proof that one does not truly know God's forgiveness.

Again, Jesus's point is that forgiven people forgive people. This is one of the ways we prove we are saved. So the big question is: Are you acting like our heavenly Father? This is a good time for you to ask yourself some personal questions: "Have I put my faith in Jesus? Have I believed the gospel? Do I know Christ as the only hope of acceptance with God? Have I taken shelter under His mercy?" If yes, then: "Am I seeing progressive fruits of love and mercy in my life? Do I find myself repaying evil with good? Am I comfortable with unforgiveness and vengeance?" Remember, forgiven people forgive people!

If you have not believed the gospel, now is a good time to do so! Hurry to **Appendix A** before you read the rest of this book.

The Complete Story

Where is the power to forgive? Let me summarize Jesus's answer: "Recognize that there is a just King who settles accounts, and because of your sins against Him, you owe a great debt. No matter how hard you try, you cannot clear this debt because it is far above your capacity. But your King is gracious, and in His kindness He cancels your debt by bearing the cost in Himself. He lets you walk debt-free as if you never sinned. Believing this and accepting it as true empowers you to forgive as you have been forgiven. The King's nature is reproduced in those who truly accept His mercy."

CHAPTER 9

The Disciplines of Forgiveness

We've made it through Jesus's story that demonstrates the thesis of this book: The power to forgive is in the gospel of Christ! We've seen that God's mercy ought to make us merciful; indeed, we have seen that forgiven people forgive people. Yet, as we saw in the last chapter, this isn't always the case. As with the unforgiving servant in the parable of Jesus, we sometimes act like those who have never experienced God's amazing grace. There is sometimes a disconnect between what we believe and how we behave. We say, "I believe that Jesus died for the forgiveness of my sins, and I believe that I have a new nature by the Spirit." Yet, when people hurt us, we act no different from those who do not believe what we claim to believe.

Why does this happen? One answer is that for many of us, the gospel of Jesus Christ is a nice doctrine that we enjoy intellectually (which we should) but have never experienced in the depths of our souls. It is possible to know a lot of stuff and yet not have it shape our lives in a deep and meaningful way. Knowledge is powerful, but if we are not careful, we will acquire knowledge for the sake of knowing alone. This is the kind of knowledge that puffs up (1 Corinthians 8:1-2); it is the kind that does well in seminary and Bible school but does not do much to affect the heart or transform one's life.

I like to differentiate between two kinds of knowledge: The *knowledge of information* and the *knowledge of intimacy*. The knowledge of information is what I have been describing already—the type of knowledge that does not go beyond the intellect. Another way I like to refer to this kind of knowledge is as “blogger knowledge.” I'm thinking particularly about certain bloggers who know a lot about the rich and famous celebrities of Hollywood. They know, for instance, when Ashton Kutcher was born, where he got married, and where he vacationed last summer. They have a lot of information about him.

Yet there is a sense in which they do not truly know the man. What makes him sad or happy? Is he depressed? How does he feel about his career? These bloggers would be unable to answer these deeper life questions. Kutcher's close family and friends on the other hand may be able to answer these questions in a heartbeat because they know him. They know him not merely through information gathered, but because they have spent intimate time with him. They know *him*, not just things about him.

This is what can happen to many of us where Christ is concerned. Knowing a lot of information about God, being able to quote monumental amounts of scripture, or even leading Bible studies does not necessarily mean that we have an intimate relationship with Jesus. Of course, we cannot have intimacy without information, but it is possible to have information without intimacy. As James so shockingly says, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder" (James 2:19). A good paraphrase of this scripture would be, "**Demons have good theology too!**" But this theological knowledge does them no good because they do not respond appropriately in saving faith.

Ours is an age of intellectuality without experience! Even in the church we have made an idol out of information. There has never been a time when believers have had more access to Christian books and materials. Furthermore, the Internet gives us fingertip, seemingly light-speed access to much more than any past generation could have imagined. Yet morality among Christians seems to be at an all-time low. What is the problem? We have made information an end in itself instead of a means to a greater end—knowing Christ in living experience! Given our tendency to make knowledge an end in itself, it is easy to see how we can pontificate about the gospel and yet not have its message of forgiveness bleed into our relationships. It is possible to know the dynamics of justification, adoption, sanctification, and all the other "—tions," and not have these truths draw us closer to the actual person—Jesus Christ. Let me say this as clearly as possible: The ultimate aim of theology is doxology. That's a fancy way of saying the ultimate aim of studying about God is that we should glory in Him, enjoying Him and delighting in Him. Indeed, this is the chief end of humanity! When this happens, we begin to reflect the love and grace that we experience from Him in a richer way. The gospel is not just a set of ideas. It is about being brought into a personal relationship with Jesus, which changes everything.

Forgiveness is not just a concept. It is embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of a person—Jesus Christ. Person, not mere principle!

Notice Paul’s language in Galatians 1:6: **“I am astonished that you are so quickly *deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.*”** Paul did not simply say that the Galatians were deserting the gospel, but that they were deserting the One who called them. The gospel is about Christ; it is about being united with Him in a living relationship! Just as an intimate relationship with any person produces influence, so also our relationship with Christ. It changes us!

So how do we bridge the gap between our belief in forgiveness and our reluctance to forgive? The answer: **knowing Christ intimately through spiritual disciplines.** Through faith we are eternally in *union* with Christ, and through spiritual disciplines we foster our *communion* with Christ. By “spiritual disciplines” I’m talking about practices like Bible study and prayer, through which we commune with God. The rest of this chapter will show how we can use spiritual disciplines to know Christ better, which will then make us more like Him in our expression of mercy to others.

The Discipline of Study

The first discipline that we will explore is Bible study. The Bible is a book of God’s self-revelation. In it God has shown us who He is. We cannot truly know God without studying the Bible. Outside Scripture we will come up with our own ideas of God, which will be conditioned by our cultures, families, and experiences, rather than by truth. Therefore the starting place of all intimate relationship with God is in the scriptures.

Because the Bible is a book, it involves the use of our minds. This means that intimacy with God begins with knowing things about God. However, it does not end there. In other words we should not study the Bible in the same way that we might study for a physics exam. I remember being in school and cramming lots of information into my mind for a particular physics exam. I knew that I wasn’t ever going to use this information in my life, and I certainly didn’t love the author of the textbook I was reading, but I needed to pass the exam! So I studied hard and long, but soon after the exam I was done with all that information about elasticity (I mean, who cares about that stuff?). This is exactly how *not* to approach the Bible. The scriptures were not given to us so that we could pass a Q&A exam; God gave us His Word so that we would know Him. This means that as we approach the Bible, we must be resolute about meeting its Author in its pages. We want to know what He’s

like, what He wants from us, what He's doing in the world, and His program for the church. The ultimate quest of all good Bible study is that we might better know God, especially as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

All intellectual exercise, divorced from this goal, breeds know-it-alls, not disciples. Check out this scripture: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). This scripture tells us so many things! For one, it shows that it is possible to be diligent in the study of scripture and yet miss the whole point—which is Christ. In the case of the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking, they were sincere in their study, yet because they were disconnected from Christ, they were removed from the life found in Him as seen in the scriptures. So, again I say, the goal of Bible study is to know Christ: to see Him, hear Him, love Him, and live for Him. Even in our reading of the Old Testament, we should be looking for Christ and His gospel. This, after all, is the message of all scripture (Luke 24:25-27; Romans 1:1-4; Romans 3:21). In view of this I never begin my Bible study sessions without saying a little prayer that goes something like:

*Lord, please open my eyes to truly see You in this text.
I don't only want to learn new stuff; I want to see Jesus.*

This prayer sets the tone for everything that happens in my study session. As I look over Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and different translations (obviously my mind is heavily engaged), my ultimate goal is to see a person, not just to be excited by new ideas. I recognize that in the pages of scripture, God is talking to me and revealing His Son. So while I read the Bible intellectually like every other book, I receive it spiritually as the very Word of God for my life. God is speaking as I study, and I must listen with full attention and concentration. My heart must be engaged as I hear Him affirm, correct, instruct, and comfort me (2 Timothy 3:16). As I study, I must ask myself about the ways in which I must become more like Jesus, all the while reveling in the record of the things He has done for me. All my interpretation and exegesis must end in application. In other words I must be concerned with the ways in which I can apply to my life what I have just learned. Again, the aim of all this is to grow up into the "whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Bible study is not less than an intellectual exercise, but it is so much more: It is hearing the voice of God!

In the scriptures we are exposed to the mind of God! In this book we see the face of Christ as it is revealed in the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4-6).

How does all this apply to forgiveness? In times when I've been wronged, I make it a duty to study about how God forgave me in Christ. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Obviously I cannot obey this scripture if I do not know how God forgave me. So I look at Christ; I study His life and especially His death. I look at the One so gracious that from the cross of His death, He spoke words of mercy: "... forgive them" (Luke 23:34). I look at the One who endured the spitting, jesting, and beating of humanity; the One who hung on the cross for those who dared Him to come down! I sit with these thoughts and meditate on them. I recognize that He not only died for the world in general, but for me in particular. I think of the power He had at His disposal to hurt those who were hanging him. Yet, with such great restraint, He stayed there and drank the bitter cup reserved for me. These thoughts lead me into personal thanksgiving: "Thank You, Jesus, for dying for me and forgiving my sins at great cost to Yourself." Then I start to ask myself, "Do I really have grounds for holding such and such against my brother or sister given this kind of mercy?" I must think, "Though I might have power to harm my offender, Jesus used His power to save me when I was His enemy."

You see, all of this removes forgiveness from the realm of a nice doctrinal concept and takes it into the realm of my relationship with Christ and others. It is possible to articulate the doctrine of the cross without asking how the story about the Jewish rabbi hanging on an obscure Roman cross changes things for you today! When my mind and heart have engaged with Christ, and I have considered His truth for my life and practice (we may call this the discipline of *meditation*), Bible study has accomplished its goal. Then I move on to the next discipline, which is prayer!

The Discipline of Prayer

One of the most amazing letters that the apostle Paul wrote is his missive to the church in Ephesus. And one of the things that stands out about this letter is how much it's punctuated with prayer. Many believers have drawn strength from the prayers of Ephesians 1 and 3, and rightly so. They open our eyes to the place of prayer in living the victorious Christian life.

In Ephesians 1:1-14, Paul begins by praising God for all the blessings He has given us in Christ. It is a marvelous outburst of praise to God for

adoption, redemption, forgiveness, wisdom, acceptance, and all other spiritual blessings that we have received in Christ. After this hymn of praise Paul begins to pray! His first prayer is that God will give the believers in Ephesus the **“Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you will know Him better”** (1:17). This is interesting! Keep in mind that the saints in Ephesus already had the Spirit of God, or else they would not be saved (v. 13)! In fact Paul had earlier already claimed that one of the benefits they received in Christ was “wisdom and understanding” (v. 8). So why is he praying that God will give them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation if they already had these things? Almost all commentators recognize that Paul is praying for their spiritual progress. In other words he is praying for their growth. He prays that they would better perceive and appreciate the gifts they already have in Christ. Though Paul has just informed them that they have these blessings (vv. 1-14), he prays that they might progress in their grasp and expression of these gifts.

Paul prays “... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe ...” (vv. 18-19). The truth is, these saints already know these things; Paul has already expounded these truths to them in his gospel preaching. So what is He praying for? He is not praying that they would receive more information, but that they would experience God in a deeper and more meaningful way. He is praying that they would more fully grasp and be shaped by what they already know! Knowing about it was not enough; they needed prayer!

This is very important! For a long time in my life I did a lot of study and very little praying! The consequence of this was that I had a big head and very little personal experience of God. I could tell you about the love of God and about His power to change, but I constantly doubted His love for me and saw little of His power to change me. In a sense these truths were on audio when they needed to be on video! What changed things for me? Prayer! Prayer enabled me to experience the power in my theology! It brought concepts to life as I spoke with God and asked Him to make real what I had read. Here emerges a concept that you must never forget: **Between gospel reading and gospel living is gospel praying! We must pray!**

Ephesians 3 further expounds Paul’s firm belief in the power of prayer for Christian progress. He prays that **“... out of [God’s] glorious riches he**

may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (vv. 16-17). Again, I want to ask, “Does Christ not already dwell in the hearts of the believers in Ephesus?” Of course He does! Paul himself has spoken of God’s power in the Ephesians (1:19) and about how they are God’s dwelling place through the Spirit (2:22). So we understand that his prayer here is for a fuller experience of God’s power in such a way that Christ’s presence within them will be more evident in their lives. In a similar vein Paul prays for them to fully grasp God’s love (3:17-19). He had already told them about God’s love, and no doubt they knew it intellectually. His prayer is that they would experience it in their hearts and know it in their deepest being. When this happens, Paul says that they will be “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (v. 19). He is talking here about such a deep experience of God’s love that nothing can convince them otherwise. It is an experience so powerful that it empowers them to walk in unity, humility, and patient love with each other (4:1-3).

With all this in mind it is safe to say that Paul does not think that merely knowing about the benefits of Christ is enough; we must pray them into full expression in our lives. We pray so that the Spirit of God will take the Word of God and so apply it to our hearts that we might live in obedience by the power of God!

How does this apply to forgiveness? We must pray that God’s forgiveness in Christ will become so real to us that we experience it. We must ask that the Spirit makes the Word of God take deep roots in our hearts. We must ask for the Holy Spirit to help us really know how much we are forgiven so that we can easily forgive others. We need the Spirit’s help if we are ever going to forgive, and the primary way that we receive a “supply of the Spirit” is through prayer (Philippians 1:19 KJV)! True forgiveness is a Spirit work—a supernatural endowment to perceive God’s forgiveness and extend it to others. Therefore we must pray! Here is a sample prayer that one might say in times of overwhelming bitterness:

My Father, I am so deeply hurt! What Josh said about me yesterday has really saddened me. Lord, I know that You have forgiven me of much worse on the cross. I rejoice in Your mercy and forgiveness, which You lavished on me. Help me to truly grasp just how much You love me so that I will be able to love like You. Spirit of God, please take these truths and plant them

*deep in my soul and empower me to forgive Josh as I am forgiven
in Christ. Amen.*

In this simple prayer we have taken what the Word says and asked the Spirit to help us experience it and live it out in practice. We have acknowledged that forgiveness is not by our own power, but by the Lord's mighty power within us through His Spirit. This is an important discipline of forgiveness—praying for the Spirit's help! Prayer is a way of saying, "I recognize that I can't do this on my own." Prayer is the end of self-sufficiency!

Praying for Our Offenders

Another part of the discipline of prayer relevant to forgiveness is praying for our offenders. This, I would say, is the "silver bullet." From my personal experience it is almost impossible to pray for someone and hate them at the same time. It is either prayer will keep you from bitterness or bitterness will keep you from prayer. But once you begin praying for your offenders, the bitterness slowly but surely begins to dissipate.

Where am I getting this wild idea from? Jesus actually commands it: "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, **pray for those who mistreat you**" (Luke 6:27-28). Did you see that? Pray for those who mistreat you! That's a command from Jesus.

I once heard a preacher say, "Well, Jesus said to pray for your enemies, but He didn't specify the content of the prayer." He went on to insinuate that people should pray against their enemies' progress. Is this right? No! Indeed, nothing could be further from the truth! How could Jesus say in one breath, "Love your enemies," and then in another, "Pray against your enemies." Such duplicity is not becoming of the Son of God. No doubt the content of this prayer is for the good of those who mistreat us, not their downfall. Jesus would not call down fire from heaven on those who rejected Him (Luke 9:54-55), so He could never instruct us to pray against our enemies. It is not in keeping with His character. You might be wondering why I am mentioning this at all. Some might argue that it is so clear what Jesus is saying that to discuss the alternative is a waste of time. I wish this were true. In Nigeria, where I was born and raised, some churches still pray against their enemies. They call down fire and ask that God would cause their enemies to "fall down and die." They look to the imprecatory psalms of David as justification for

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this practice, with no concern for the context or purpose of David's prayers. To those who engage in such prayers, I say: This "is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus" (Ephesians 4:20-21).

The example that we see in Christ is of One who loves His enemies. Jesus doesn't just tell us to pray for our enemies; He actually models this. Dr. Luke tells us in his gospel that after they crucified Jesus and hung Him between two criminals, He uttered words that would have shocked the Romans and Jews present: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). He spoke these words from the cross. We often speak of Christ's high priestly duty that He is now fulfilling for us in heaven, but from this scripture we see that even on the cross He was interceding for us—for those of us who were His enemies (Romans 5:10). This is the example of Christ! He prayed for His offenders. Having the authority to destroy the Roman soldiers with a word, He chose rather to pray for them. This is the way of Christ!

As a young boy, whenever I would think about this extraordinary mercy of Christ displayed from the cross, I would often find myself saying, "Well, this is Jesus. He is God, and that is why He can be so lavish in His mercy. I am not God!" Then one day I happened upon the story of Stephen in the book of Acts. He was being stoned by a mob because of his defense of the gospel. Again, it is Dr. Luke who tells us that just as he was about to die, Stephen said, "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them**" (Acts 7:60). Stephen was a man just like me, but he had so experienced God's mercy that he was able to offer it himself. He lived for Christ and died like Christ; He died praying for those who stoned him. This is one of the ways that forgiveness happens: Prayer will suffocate hatred and bitterness. A sample prayer for your offenders might go something like this:

My Father, Jenny really hurt me. I am deeply offended, and I feel bitterness rising in my heart for her. But, Lord, because You have been merciful to me, I can't hold bitterness in my heart. Therefore, Lord, I pray for Jenny. I pray that she will grow in grace and progress in her walk with You. I wonder if she acted the way she did because of some personal insecurity or hurt. Dear God, heal her. I ask, Father, that You give us a chance at complete reconciliation as You heal my heart too. Amen.

Continuously say a prayer like this for your offenders and watch as bitterness flees from your heart! Believe me, it works!

The Discipline of Service

In addition to asking us to pray for our offenders, Jesus also told us to “do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27-28). Continuing on in Luke 6, Jesus gives us some examples of what doing good looks like. First, it involves giving material things to our offenders (v. 30). It also involves lending to our offenders without expecting any returns (v. 34). All of this can be summed up in the word “service.” Jesus is calling us to do things—practical things for our enemies. He says, “**Do** to others as you would have them do to you” (v. 31). Jesus is calling us to serve our offenders in practical ways!

Why might a discipline like this be important? Well, it is because of an oft forgotten principle: **We are more likely to act our way into feeling than to feel our way into acting.** In other words sometimes we must first do before we feel. It is true that feeling can drive behavior, but the reverse is also true. I recognize that it may seem counterintuitive and inauthentic to act “against” our feelings, but feelings very often follow our actions. So, when we have been hurt and we cannot seem to feel positively about our offenders, an act of service may be the missing piece of the puzzle. Buying a gift for your offender while you are still feeling hurt or cooking a meal for your husband as you process through the painful argument may help you move past the pain.

Now, I recognize that there are some situations where service is not possible or advised. Particularly in situations where immediate reconciliation is not in view or the other party is harmful or unrepentant, acts of service may not be possible. But in normal circumstances acts of service enable us to forgive. Service to an offender is an act of faith; it is our way of saying that we will not be led by our feelings but will subject them to God’s Word. When we find bitter feelings arising, an act of service may be most helpful. I have found this to be true in my own life.

I recognize that there is a sense in which acts of service may be used to mask bitterness. This is not what I am calling for at all. What I am saying is that in the struggle to forgive, if we find that prayer and study still leave us with negative feelings, doing something good for your offender can often be helpful. The foundational difference between masking bitterness and doing an act of service is that in the latter there is a decision to forgive. This is not a hypocritical act; it is an act of faith.

Another benefit of the discipline of service is the effect it may have on your offenders. When people hurt us, they often expect that we will respond in like fashion. Acts of compassion and kindness totally disarm our enemies; they often are not expecting kindness and do not know what to do with it. First of all, kindness **stuns** our offenders. They will ask, “How is it that a person I have treated so badly can treat me with such kindness?” There is something rather surprising about good given in place of evil!

Secondly, kindness also **shames** our enemies. By this I mean that it causes them to think about themselves and their actions, to recognize their wickedness and the wrong they have done. This is what I think Paul meant when he said that by being kind “you will heap burning coals on his [your enemy’s] head” (Romans 12:20). In his book *Gospel*, J. D. Greear comments on this scripture: “The person who receives your kindness in response to their sin is shocked into awareness. Your kindness to them makes them see the absurdity of their selfishness and helps awaken them to the blessing of relationship.” My father, Bishop Fred Addo, playfully puts it like this: “Kill your enemies with kindness!” He’s referring to power of kindness to awaken awareness in those who hurt us.

Finally, practical kindness may be the final key used by God to **change** your enemies. Paul continues in Romans 12 by saying: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v. 21). Good overcomes evil! When we refuse to retaliate, it disarms evil and stops the spread of hate. So Paul also says, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” (v. 20). Practical acts of service are an important discipline of forgiveness! Do good to those who harm you. It helps you and your offenders too.

The Discipline of Fellowship

The last discipline of forgiveness that we will consider is the discipline of fellowship. One of the greatest gifts God has given us is the gift of each other. God has designed Christian community to be one of the primary means of growth and sanctification for the believer. Brothers and sisters in Christ doing life together, through ups and downs, joy and pain, encouraging and challenging each other—this is how we grow!

As the human body grows through mutuality and interdependence, so also the body of Christ. Conversely, just as a body part separated from the whole withers, so also does a Christian separated from the believing community. I often hear the question, “Must one go to church to be a

Christian?” My response is usually, “Can one have vibrant faith outside Christian community?” The scriptures do not foresee that faith can grow in isolation! The fact that we ask such questions is proof of the radical individualism of Western culture and its influence on the rest of the world. The Bible assumes that believers will be doing life together as a community. As many have noticed, most of the commands and promises in scripture are written in the plural. So while we read, “I know the plans I have for you ...” from Jeremiah 29:11, and then typically personalize this promise, what God really is saying is, “I know the plan I have for you all....” Scripture mostly addresses the corporate body. That is not to say that God does not have individual plans for each of us, but scripture assumes that our individual lives are lived within the context of community.

The writer of Hebrews said to the suffering church in danger of backsliding, “But encourage **one another** daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13). What this means is that if we are going to stand firm against sin, we need daily encouragement from other believers. This scripture takes for granted that we will be in relationship with other believers. It seems to assume a kind of mutual accountability that allows you to warn me against sin and vice versa. Sadly the twenty-first-century church has largely abandoned this ideal. Even those of us who go to church regularly do not have many friends who know the details of our lives. We are not confessing our sins, sharing our struggles, or receiving encouragement from anyone. In short, body ministry is not happening!

What does all this have to do with forgiveness? Well, because we are not sharing our lives with others, we are allowing the sin of bitterness to run amok in our hearts. This means that for most of us nobody is keeping us from the deceitfulness of sin through regular encouragement and warning (Hebrews 3:12-13). The church is meant to be a healing community where we can practice honest confession and receive encouragement and support in our fight against sin. With this in mind, James commands us: **“Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”** (James 5:16). As we open up to brothers and sisters about our struggles with bitterness, we give them an opportunity to pray with us, to admonish us, to encourage us toward forgiveness and healing. We submit ourselves to body ministry!

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A true healing community allows us to be honest about our failures and yet challenges us to pursue healing. A healing community is one where the cancer of bitterness is rooted out before it spreads to the whole body. Led by the Spirit of God, brothers and sisters in Christ are enabled to use their gifts to supply what is lacking in our lives at any given time (1 Thessalonians 3:10). What I am saying is that you need Christian friends who can speak into your life when you're hurt—those who can bear your tears, listen to your rants, and patiently walk with you toward healing. We need those who can rejoice with us and also mourn with us. We need those who can pray with us when we are too hurt to open our mouths. This means that we must risk being vulnerable and humble ourselves enough to know that we need others. This is what it means to practice the discipline of fellowship. We must take full advantage of all that there is in the Christian community.

Another important benefit of practicing the discipline of fellowship is the part that the Christian community may play in mediating between two members of the body. Think of how Paul fought to bridge the gap between Onesimus and Philemon. In that masterful letter Paul pleads and urges Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother and forgive him completely (see Paul's letter to Philemon). This is what we have been called to be as God's church: peacemakers like our Father in heaven. Indeed, this is our goal for every relationship within the church: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace ..." (Colossians 3:15).

Though the discipline of fellowship is often neglected, God never meant for us to do Christianity alone! Or as Eugene Peterson masterfully puts it in his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*: **"No Christian is an only child."**

CHAPTER 10

What Forgiveness Is Not!

Hurray! We have made it to the final chapter of this book! What a journey it has been! I want to pause and thank you for hanging with me thus far. I don't know how long it has taken you to read this book, but the fact that you're still reading brings joy to my heart. Before I close out and let you pick up some other book, there is one more topic that I have to address!

Remember in Chapter 3 when I defined forgiveness as *bearing the cost of offenses done against you just as Christ bore the cost of your sins*? I promised that I would flesh out the meaning of this definition in fuller detail. As I said in Chapter 3, a definition like this could raise a million questions. One might ask, for instance, does forgiveness mean immediate reconciliation? Or does forgiveness mean refusing to pursue justice in criminal offenses? So many questions may pop up from a definition as simple as mine. Therefore, what I plan to do in this chapter is keep my promise to flesh out my earlier definition of forgiveness by expanding on it and then discussing what forgiveness is not.

When I say that forgiveness is bearing the cost of offenses done against you, I mean that forgiveness is a decision to refuse to make your offender pay for what they did to you. In other words forgiveness is the opposite of vengeance. When we are vengeful, we will do anything to make sure that the person who hurt us also feels the pain they caused us. If we have the power to hurt them, we use it. When we don't have the power to hurt our offenders, we imagine their downfall, we malign them in our hearts, and we take any chance to destroy their reputation—all of this with the goal of making sure they pay for what they have done to us. Forgiveness, then, is the decision not to be vengeful, not to rejoice when our offender fails, not to pay them back

for what they have done. Forgiveness is a decision to let go of bitterness and replace it with love for the offender.

The problem with vengeance is that while it may produce a measure of satisfaction, it eventually makes us evil. First, evil is done to us, and then we become it. Rather than overcoming evil, we spread it. We become hardened, angry, and hateful as we plot and daydream about our offender's harm. In our attempt to make our offenders pay for their sins, we end up becoming like the evil we have endured and spreading the cycle of hatred and bitterness.

When we forgive others, we stop the cycle of hatred that has pervaded much of human relationships. Rather than paying evil for evil, we are choosing to bear the pain in ourselves. We are essentially saying, "The cycle of hatred will end with me. I will bear the painful cost of evil until I overcome it." This means that true forgiveness is costly suffering. When we forgive, we are choosing to carry our cross like Christ; we take the evil directed toward us and bear it patiently. Dr. Timothy Keller, whom I have quoted several times already, describes forgiveness like this in his book *The Reason for God* (with my emphasis in bold):

*Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay for what they did. However, to refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is agony. **It is a form of suffering.** You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. **It hurts terribly.** Many people would say it **feels like a kind of death.** Yes, but it is a death **that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism.***

Keller is acknowledging that forgiveness is hard, and it hurts! In his words it is a kind of death. Vengeance offers a quick consolation that leads to long-term death, but forgiveness is an initially painful death that leads to resurrection and freedom. By refusing to spread the hate, you are bearing it painfully. But as you do so, refusing to retaliate even in your thoughts and imagination, you will find that the anger will slowly dissipate. You will come out on the other side with a new kind of peace and freedom. You won't be hard or bitter and you will have stopped the cycle of hatred. It may not feel

good initially, but as Keller goes on to say in *The Reason for God* (and I promise this is the last time I'm quoting him; with my emphasis again in bold), "Forgiveness must be granted before it can be felt, but it does come eventually. **It leads to a new peace, a resurrection. It is the only way to stop the spread of the evil.**"

To forgive, then, is to be like Christ in His death and resurrection. It means that I fight to remove all thoughts, feelings, and actions of vengeance and choose rather to patiently endure the cost of offenses done against me, knowing that after this death is a glorious resurrection.

What Forgiveness Is NOT

The above expansion of what forgiveness is still leaves us with some questions. In this section I will deal with what forgiveness is not:

1. **Forgiveness does NOT mean denying an offense:** Too many confuse forgiveness with denial. In an attempt to forgive, they refuse to acknowledge that they have been hurt. They brush over offenses with choruses of "It doesn't matter, and I'm not really hurt." The problem with this reaction is that it amounts to suppression of feelings, which eventually leads to bitterness and an eventual outburst of anger. Have you ever had those friends who seem to never get offended? Everyone commends them for their patience and ability to let things slide. Then one day, out of nowhere, they erupt and begin to dig up issues from a million years ago. What they thought they had forgiven was merely denied and suppressed! And the truth is, we can only suppress our feelings for a while. What we store in our hearts, even when we refuse to acknowledge it, will eventually come out! It may show up in subtle ways like withdrawal from relationships or in more overt ways like angry outbursts—but it will surely spill! True forgiveness begins with acknowledging that you have been hurt. As a matter of fact, you cannot forgive what you don't acknowledge. You must first accept that you have been hurt and then you can decide not to repay the person who has hurt you.

This decision not to repay your offender doesn't mean that you won't confront him or her. Forgiveness does not remove the need to confront an offender; it just changes how and why we

employ confrontation. When we have forgiven, we are not seeking to lash out at the person and cause them pain, but to bring reconciliation to the relationship and help them grow. It is Jesus who says, “If your brother or sister sins against you, **rebuke them ...**” (Luke 17:3). Jesus is saying, “Don’t deny it and pretend it never happened; instead, rebuke them! Bring it up in a spirit of love and gentleness!” (**See Appendix B: “The Process of Forgiveness” for more on this.**)

As one whose default response to hurt is denial, I can categorically say that many of my relationships would have survived if I had just accepted hurt, decided to forgive, and even brought it up with my offender at a time when I wasn’t volatile. Instead I chose to deny that I had been hurt, and it eventually cost me some of my most precious friends. True forgiveness begins with the acknowledgement of hurt. The decision not repay our offenders in kind is very different from refusing to acknowledge that they hurt us. **Forgiveness says, “You hurt me, but I am not going to hold it against you.”**

- 2. Forgiveness does NOT always mean immediate reconciliation:** Given the definition of forgiveness as deciding to bear the cost of offenses done against you, does it mean that forgiveness must always lead to immediate reconciliation? I often hear this question when a conversation about forgiveness comes up. My response is: **The ultimate goal of forgiveness is reconciliation; however, forgiveness does not always lead to immediate reconciliation.** One might ask: What is the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation? Well, forgiveness is about deciding not to entertain any thoughts, feelings, or actions of bitterness against an offender. It is primarily about choosing to bear the cost of an offense rather than giving hate for hate. Reconciliation, on the other hand, is about restoring the relationship with an offender; it is what happens when trust has been restored and the relationship is fully mended. As I already said, forgiveness has complete reconciliation as its ultimate goal. However, this is not always

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immediately attainable. One reason for this is because the offer of forgiveness depends on you alone, but reconciliation depends on the repentance and trustworthiness of the offender. We are called by God always to offer forgiveness and to choose not to act in vengeance. This is a command that does not depend on how sorry the offender is. However, while God wants us to restore our relationship with our offenders, full reconciliation is dependent on their repentance and trustworthiness (Matthew 18:15-17).

The offer of forgiveness, then, is not conditional, but full reconciliation is. In many cases it is important for the offender to prove their trustworthiness over time. In some situations abuse victims have forgiven their abusers and restored the relationship immediately, only to be met by more abuse. Such serial offenders should definitely be offered forgiveness (Luke 17:3-4), but wisdom demands that some true change be evident over time before the relationship is completely restored. So forgive by all means and work toward reconciliation as you see genuine repentance and change in the offender. **Sometimes forgiveness means saying, “I have no bitter feelings toward you, but I need some time to trust you again.”**

- 3. Forgiveness does NOT mean forgetting:** Have you ever heard the phrase “forgive and forget”? This phrase gives the idea that a staple part of forgiveness is totally forgetting about the offense. But the truth is that forgiveness is a removal of the pain, not a removal of the memory. In other words, if you have a functioning mind, you will remember the hurt that an offender has caused you. True forgiveness is not about forgetting; it’s about what you choose to do when you remember an offense. Does your memory of the offense cause you to bring it up with the offender over and over again? Does your memory reproduce feelings of bitterness and thoughts of harm? Does the memory produce cursing and desires to malign your offender? True forgiveness is the fight to bless your offender when the memory of the hurt comes to mind. True

forgiveness is deciding not to bring up the offense every chance you get. It is one thing to remember that something happened, and quite another to remind the offender of what they did five years ago. Forgiveness is remembering the offense but refusing to allow that memory dictate how you treat your offender. We must not condemn ourselves if we seem to remember what has been done to us. Not forgetting does not mean you haven't forgiven; it just means your memory works! As time goes on, and God heals your heart, the memory of the offense will come up less and less. That's a sign that forgiveness is happening. The truth is that there are some memories of hurt that will stick with us for life. But where forgiveness has occurred, remembering the offense won't consume us with hate or bitterness. We can even tell stories of how we were hurt and how through God's grace we have overcome the bitterness! **Forgiveness says, "I remember what was done to me, but I refuse to let it control me."**

4. **Forgiveness is NOT always a one-time decision:** While forgiveness begins as an initial decision, it is consummated in several subsequent decisions to keep on forgiving. In other words forgiveness is both an event and a process. After I acknowledge that I have been hurt, I must first decide in that moment that I will forgive. But that is just the beginning; I must keep deciding to forgive every time I am tempted to be bitter. The struggle not to be bitter does not end at once. It is a recurring thing. Therefore we must fight by the Spirit of God, using the gospel, to keep on forgiving our offenders. What all this means is that just because you still **feel hurt** doesn't mean you haven't forgiven. It just means you are still in the process of letting go of the hurt. This is freeing because many of us feel defeated when we decide to forgive but still find that we feel hurt. We ought to know that forgiveness is rarely a one-time, climactic event! We keep on forgiving over time.

In one of his letters to Malcom, C. S. Lewis put it like this (my emphasis in bold): "Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had forgiven someone I

had been **trying to forgive** for **over thirty years**. **Trying, and praying** that I might.” I want to draw your attention to the words “trying” and “praying” used by Lewis. Here is a man who had decided to forgive, yet really had to keep on pressing to fully let go of the feelings of pain. As we use the spiritual disciplines outlined in this book, we fight by the Spirit of God to keep on forgiving. **True forgiveness says, “I have forgiven you and I will keep on forgiving you.”**

5. **Forgiveness does NOT mean forgoing justice in criminal cases:** Many people push back against the biblical teaching of forgiveness because they think that forgiveness precludes the pursuit of justice. Unfortunately some within the church have perpetuated this kind of thinking. In the wake of the #MeToo and #ChurchToo scandals that have hit the church in recent time, much has been brought to light. Pastors have rightly asked young women who were abused to forgive their offenders. But they have refused to allow for the judicial processes that should follow such criminal offenses (Romans 13:3-5). The result of this is that some offenders get off with nothing more than a smack on the hand, and even end up abusing other people.

True forgiveness can commingle with a desire to see justice served. How so? Remember that forgiveness is a decision not to act in bitterness toward an offender. It is possible to decide to forgive and yet seek justice for the good of the offender and the protection of other possible victims. In other words the pursuit of justice where forgiveness has happened is motivated by love, not vengeance. Such love understands that discipline and punishment can be helpful for the offender; it is pursued so that the offender grows and changes. Such love also looks out for other possible victims who may be harmed if an offender is not jailed. Again, the important thing is that justice is pursued not with the intent of getting back at the offender, but for the purpose of seeing redemptive discipline happen.

A perfect example of this happened in the case of Larry Nassar and former gymnast, Rachael Denhollander. Rachael was a fifteen-year-old girl when she was first abused by Larry, a respected doctor at Michigan State University. Sixteen years and over 150 victims later, Rachael was the first to publicly make allegations of sexual abuse against Larry. As a gymnastics doctor, Larry had abused these women, groping and sexually violating them, under the guise of treatment. In her impact statement to Larry during court proceedings, Rachael said the following words to him:

The Bible you speak of carries a final judgment where all of God's wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you. Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you. 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.

Rachael had forgiven Larry. She prayed that he would experience God's forgiveness, and she publicly extended her forgiveness to him. Rachael preached the gospel in court that day and showed that she genuinely cared for Larry's soul. Yet she wanted him jailed—not so that he would suffer aimlessly, but rather that he would truly face what he had done and be brought to true repentant faith. Throughout her impact speech Rachael also showed concern for the other victims (over 150 girls, some as young as age six) who had been abused by Larry. Again, her desire for justice was not about spreading hatred; it was for Larry's ultimate good and the protection of other girls!

Rachael was asked in an interview with *Christianity Today*, "What does it mean to you that you forgive Larry Nassar?" Her response is a perfect encapsulation of all that I have been discussing in this chapter. It also reflects

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Rachael's conviction (which I wholeheartedly share) that the pursuit of justice and personal forgiveness are not incompatible. Here is her response:

[Forgiving Larry] means that I trust in God's justice and I release bitterness and anger and a desire for personal vengeance. It does not mean that I minimize or mitigate or excuse what he has done. It does not mean that I pursue justice on earth any less zealously. It simply means that I release personal vengeance against him, and I trust God's justice, whether he chooses to mete that out purely eternally, or both in heaven and on earth.

Amen, Sister Rachael! Amen!

Final Remarks

As we close out our time together, I can think of no better way to do it than with a prayer for you:

My Father, I pray that You bless every reader. I do not know what kind of pain they have had to endure, but I know that You are a healer. I pray that by Your Spirit, You will empower them to forgive. Help them let go of the hurt and bear the pain like You did on Calvary. But as they endure, may they also look to the joy ahead; the peace and freedom of true forgiveness. Make the gospel come alive in their hearts as they experience Your love and forgiveness. May they see that in the message of the cross is the power to forgive, and may they also be reconciled to their offenders. I thank You, Lord, because You hear me always, in Jesus's name. Amen!

Appendix A

Responding to the Gospel

If you are reading this section, it means that you want to believe the gospel—the good news about what Jesus has done for you. A good summary of the gospel message is found in the book of John in the Bible. John summarizes it like this: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16).

God, in His love, created us so that we would enjoy Him and glorify Him forever. But in our sin we rebelled against Him and chose rather to follow Satan—God’s archenemy. We sinned against God by refusing to follow Him and by choosing to live according to our desires. God’s justice demanded that we be punished for our rebellion against Him, which is also a rebellion against all that is good and right in this world.

God could have responded with immediate judgment against us. But as John tells us, He “loved the world.” God does not desire to see anyone perish; instead He wants people to be restored to relationship with Him (2 Peter 3:9). So in His love God sent His Son Jesus Christ, who is Himself God, to come into the world as a human being. Jesus willingly came to our world, faithfully lived a perfect life, and painfully died a substitutionary death. He died to take the judgment that you and I deserved. God put our sin on Him such that when He died, He died for our offenses. God gave His Son to die so that you and I wouldn’t have to die eternally (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

Jesus died, was buried, and three days after, rose victoriously from the grave! His resurrection was proof that God accepted His sacrifice, which means we can be assured that our sins are forgiven. If Jesus had stayed in the grave, we would never quite be sure if His mission was accomplished or not. But God vindicated Him by raising him up from the grave (Romans 1:4; 4:25;

Acts 2:24). Now that He is risen, He has offered everyone who believes in Him eternal life! This is more than “living forever.” It is really God coming to live in us through His Spirit. God essentially gives Himself to the one who believe in Jesus’s death, burial, and resurrection. This action of God’s self-giving is for the purpose of an eternal relationship based on the forgiveness secured through the cross of Christ. Those who believe the gospel are restored to the perfect relationship that marked humanity before sin. This is the gospel. Furthermore, God’s Spirit in them begins the process of changing them to become more and more like Jesus. Sin becomes less appealing, and righteousness become more delightful to those in whom the Holy God lives.

Paul the apostle says that “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). It’s really that simple: believe that Jesus has died for your sin and paid the full price for all your offenses, and believe that He has risen from the dead and restored you to relationship with God! If you believe this and keep on trusting in Jesus alone, you are saved!

Jesus Himself says simply, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). To repent means to turn away from sin and self-righteousness; to change your mind about sin and your own ideas of worthiness and to choose to follow the way of Christ. It means to agree with God’s evaluation of sin and turn to Christ as the answer and hope for salvation. This means that repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin: I turn from my old life in repentance, and I embrace my new life in Christ by faith.

If you would like to do this, please say the following words:

Dear God, I believe that You sent Your Son, Jesus Christ, to die for my sins. I acknowledge that I have sinned against You, but from this day forward I am turning from my old life and embracing all that Jesus has done for me. I believe that He is alive and is right now seated in heaven, pleading for me. Because You cannot reject His pleading, I know that You will accept me as Your child. I believe that by what He has done for me, I now have the same status that He has with You. You love me as Your son/daughter. I receive Your life as mine and I trust in You for my salvation. You are Lord of my life and I am Yours forever. Amen!

Appendix B

The Process of Forgiveness

My purpose for writing this book has been to show the reader where to find the power to forgive, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have journeyed with you through Jesus’s gospel parable, showing how the story’s elements combine to empower us to be forgiving people. However, I have not dealt so much, if at all, with the process of forgiveness. I recognize that most people approach a book like this in search of practical steps to reach forgiveness. What I have mostly done is deal with the inner, heart-level dynamics of forgiveness, rather than focus on the actual process of forgiveness. There are other books, such as *Unpacking Forgiveness* by Chris Brauns, that deal with the process of forgiveness in more detail. I highly recommend that you read *Unpacking Forgiveness* for a more thorough treatment of forgiveness. However, I will briefly discuss a few steps that are important to reach forgiveness and reconciliation when possible:

Acknowledge the Hurt

Many people, especially Christians, deal with hurt by pretending it does not exist. In an attempt to forgive, we often deny that we have been hurt at all. However, as discussed in Chapter 10, forgiveness does not mean denying an offense. Quite the contrary, true forgiveness begins by acknowledging that you have been hurt. One of the most startling scriptures in the Bible is Ephesians 4:26, where Paul says, “Be ye angry, and sin not . . .” (KJV). I want you to notice that Paul actually commands us to “Be angry”—it’s an imperative! Anger by itself is not necessarily a bad emotion. But sinful anger that becomes bitterness, brawling, slander, and malice is bad. There is a sense in which to not be angry at injustice is unnatural. Because we have been created in the image of a just God, whenever we witness an injustice or have

one done against us, we are supposed to be angry. So Paul says, “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26). What this means is that it’s okay to acknowledge that you have been hurt. It’s even okay to be angry and frustrated about the offense. There is nothing Christian about suppression. Christians take sin very seriously and are justly angry wherever it is found. However, as Paul adds, we must not stew in anger or allow it to metamorphose into its evil cousin called *bitterness*. The first step of forgiveness is accepting that a wrong has been done to you.

Pray

If we are going to obey Paul’s admonition to “not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26), then after we have acknowledged the hurt, we must rush to God with our anger. When we are hurt, there is a natural instinct to tell someone about it. More often than not, we find a friend or a spouse to tell about the offense. Sadly such conversations can quickly become an exercise in belittling the offender, or at least fanning the flame of anger in the offended. This is why it is important to rush to God with our feelings of anger. While there is nothing inherently wrong with involving the right people when we are hurt, I believe that we should go to God first. In prayer we have an opportunity to be honest with God about how hurt we feel. It is not out of place to say, “*God, I am so mad at Sheila. I am overwhelmed by anger and I’m tempted to blow up.*” Is God afraid to hear such prayers? Not at all! The book of Psalms teaches us that God is able to handle a wide range of human emotions, including anger.

In this initial stage when the offense is still fresh, you may not be ready to pray for the offender just yet. It is important not to rush too quickly into praying for the offender just because you think that’s what you’re supposed to do. This initial prayer is simply talking to God about how you feel, and asking Him for strength, perspective, wisdom, and comfort. This prayer may continue for several days or weeks, depending on the magnitude of the offense. As you continue to pray, you will reach a point where you can begin praying for the offender and moving toward the next few steps. Again, because every case is different, there is no timeframe for moving from one step to another. The important thing is to be talking to God about how you feel, asking Him for strength to forgive, and eventually praying for the offender.

Decide to Forgive

In reality, for a believer, the decision to forgive is one that comes before the offense. In other words **forgiveness is to be fore given**. I must have the state of mind that says, “I will forgive whenever I’m hurt,” so that when someone does hurt me, I will have already made the decision to forgive. That being said, it is important to make a conscious decision to forgive in every case of offense. This means that you must decide to graciously pardon the offense against you. You must decide to bear the cost of the sin done against you without bitterness, slander, or malice. You must decide that you are not going to make this person pay for what they did against you. You will not give hate for hate; instead you will overcome hate with love.

This is where much of the information in this book comes in. Using the spiritual disciplines to engage your heart with the gospel, you must remind yourself about how Jesus responded to you when you were His enemy. Your decision is to freely offer forgiveness to this person and to love them as Christ loved you. Of course, as already discussed in Chapter 10, this decision is rarely a one-time event. We must keep applying the gospel to our hearts as we continue to resolve to forgive.

Go to the Offender

True forgiveness will be incomplete without approaching the offender. Listen to what Jesus says: “If your brother or sister sins, **go and point out their fault**, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, **you have won them over**” (Matthew 18:15). Similarly Jesus also says, “If your brother or sister sins against you, **rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them**” (Luke 17:3). Jesus commands us to confront our offenders! One might ask why a step like this is necessary. It is important to note that Christian forgiveness has as its ultimate goal the restoration of the relationship. From the Bible’s perspective, forgiveness should ultimately lead to a reconciled relationship, though this is not always immediately attainable or even possible. Notice that Jesus’s goal for confrontation is that the offended will win over the offender. From a Christian perspective, forgiveness is not merely about letting go of the feelings of bitterness, but ultimately about reconciling with a brother or sister. Forgiveness is not only about a healed individual; it is also about a healed relationship. Confrontation gives the offended party an opportunity to extend forgiveness to the offender. This also gives the offender the opportunity to repent, grow, and reconcile. If

forgiveness was merely a private matter, we could deal with the feelings of bitterness without ever approaching the offender. But because Christian forgiveness cares about the growth of the offender, as well as the restoration of the relationship, we must rebuke and confront the offender.

Remember, as we just saw, Jesus says, “... **rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them.**” This raises the question, “What if the offender does not repent?” Jesus answers this question in Matthew 18:16 by saying that the offended party should confront the offender again, but this time with one or two other believers present. These must be carefully chosen people who honor God’s Word and value relationships. Remember, the goal is reconciliation, not a witch hunt. If the offender still does not repent, the church leadership should be called to mediate (v. 17). And if the offender still does not listen to the church, Jesus says, “... treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (v. 17).

The question, then, is: How should Christians treat a pagan or tax collector? For one thing, this means that reconciliation cannot happen with this person until he or she repents. The unrepentant offender cannot be given the benefit of a restored relationship. However, we are not to seek revenge or harm, or live in bitterness. We are still called to love such a person even though they have set themselves against us as our enemies. We are still to seek their good and pray for them. We are to pray that their heart would change and be ready to restore the relationship should they ever repent. Remember that as Christians we are called to love our enemies and pray for those who spitefully use us (Matthew 5:44). We are to leave room for God’s wrath, trusting that He will mete out justice when and how He sees fit (Romans 12:19).

Confrontation is a vital step of forgiveness. But for this step to be effective, it is important not to confront an offender when you are still volatile. This will defeat the purpose of bringing healing to the relationship. That is why I have placed this step after prayer and a decision to forgive. To lash out at an offender and insult them will accomplish the opposite of bringing reconciliation to the relationship. Instead a kind tone, clear speech, and measured emotions will accomplish the task. Remember that confrontation is done in an attitude of love: You are as concerned about the growth of the offender as the mending of the relationship. This is not an attempt to embarrass the offender, but to bring healing (Proverbs 27:5-6).

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Finally, I must add that not every offense requires confrontation. We can overlook some offenses without bringing them up to the offender. We must remember that we are dealing with human beings who sin. If we bring up every offense, we will not have time to do much else in life. How will we know which offenses require confrontation? There's no hard, fast rule. Sometimes it may sting in a way that requires confrontation, or the offended may recognize that the offender needs to know the effect of their actions so they can change. In every case we need wisdom to know what to do. Thankfully God is more than willing to give us such wisdom when we pray (James 1:5).

Once an offender repents, the relationship may take awhile to return to its original place. This is normal. There is that awkward phase of trying to figure out what the "new" relationship looks like. Both parties must patiently walk through this phase with love. Some relationships never return to their original place. In some cases the offended party may insist on some consequences for the good of the offender. Forgiveness does not always mean the immediate removal of consequences. Rather the willingness of an offender to submit to consequences may be the greatest proof of repentance. An offended party may request some space or time off. It is important that such requests be granted. Relationships are tricky and there are no set rules. In all things we look to the wisdom of scripture and the help of the Spirit to enable us to navigate our relationships with integrity.

Praise for the Author

With a compelling and captivating writing style, Daniel Addo approaches the complex topic of forgiveness with insight, honesty, and sensitivity. In *Power to Forgive* he offers practical and helpful guidance that is realistic about the challenges but hopeful about the possibilities. While he validates the difficulties inherent in the process of forgiving, he recognizes the significant therapeutic benefits it offers and toward that end provides a clear and hopeful path forward. I highly recommend Daniel's contribution to the body of work on this critical subject.

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Daniel Addo is a pastor, singer, songwriter and author. A 2018 masters of counseling graduate of Oral Robert's University, Daniel is committed to bringing change and healing to every life he encounters. He does this through his preaching, singing, and writing. He has written 2 books, produced 2 albums, and is currently serving as a part of the ministry team at International Gospel Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He is married to Terralynn Addo and they live in the Tulsa area.