

# Unpacking Forgiveness on a Page

**Motivate to unpack** – Chapter 2 “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” Unpacking forgiveness is not only the right thing, it’s also the best thing. Jesus’s yoke is easy and his burden is light.

**The Cross** – Chapters (3–5) Christ died as the substitute for those who believe (Isa 53:5). The first principle of forgiveness is that we forgive others as God forgave us (Matt 6:14–15; Eph 4:32).

**Providence** – God works all things together for good for his people (Rom 8:28). We are not victims. See Joseph narrative (Gen 45:5–7, 50:19–20)!

**Eternal Punishment** – If we maintain an orthodox view of hell, we know: (a) We can’t refuse to forgive. (b) God is just. We don’t need to worry that people simply get away with sin (Rom 12:19; 2 Tim 4:14–15; Rev 6:10).

**The Church** – Forgiveness must be unpacked in Christian community, both in terms of Matt 18, but also be processed there as we work through the various complexities of life together, see for instance that Paul addressed the book of Philemon to the whole church.

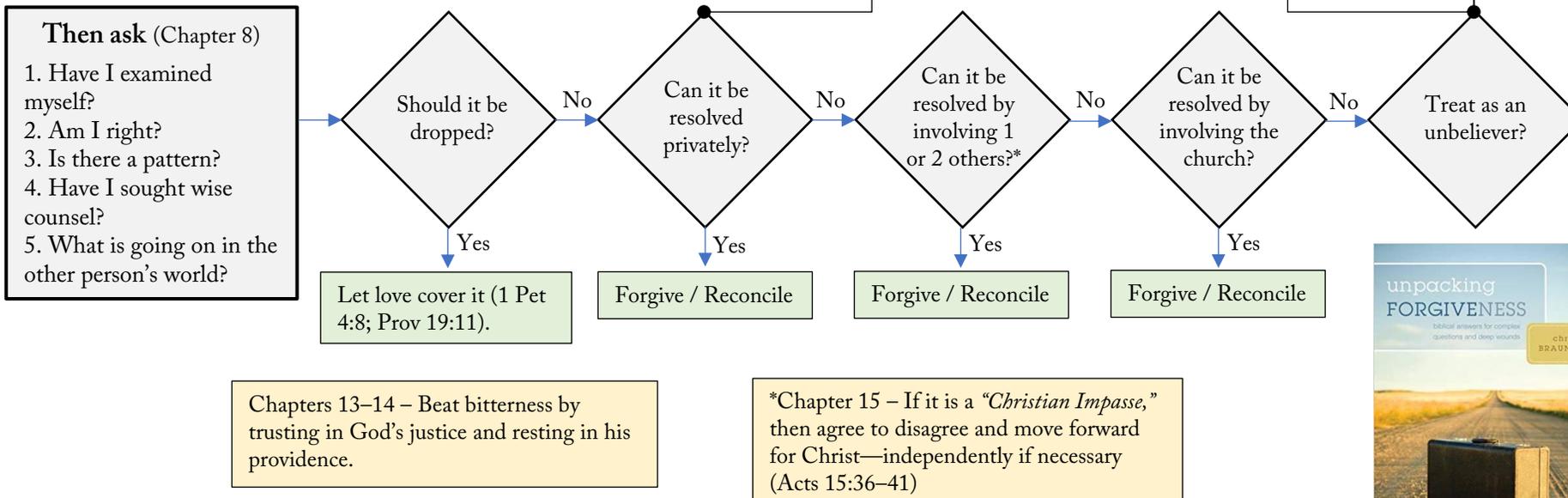
## From the Beginning, Be:

1. *Committed* to learning from the Bible & using a biblical definition.
2. *Gracious*: whatever someone has done to offend you pales in comparison to what you have done to offend God.
3. *Humble*: Chapter 6 – The way up is down.
4. *Just*: Chapter 12 – God does not ignore injustice.
5. *Urgent and motivated*: Chapter 7 – If you do not act biblically, many will suffer! See also Matt 18:5–7.

Chapters 11–12 – *If the person is unrepentant of a serious offense* (Rom 12:17–20):

1. Determine not to take revenge.
2. Offer grace and love.
3. Leave room for the wrath of God.

Chapters 6–10  
Matt 18:15–17



A Very Brief Non-Academic Forgiveness Bibliography  
From Pastor Chris Brauns

For those motivated to think more about forgiveness, here are some helpful (non-academic) resources. Read (or listen) with discernment! See also my handout, [“Others on Conditional Forgiveness.”](#)

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### Others on Conditional Forgiveness

From Pastor Chris Brauns, adapted from a previous post, this draft 11/8/22<sup>1</sup>

In my book *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Crossway, 2008), I emphasized the conditional nature of forgiveness. Christians should always be willing to forgive.<sup>2</sup> We must love our enemies and show them love. But forgiveness can take place fully only when the offending party repents.

In the evangelical church, the therapeutic view of forgiveness (forgiveness as a private emotional strategy) has triumphed to such an extent that biblical forgiveness sounds strange or extreme.

Yet, conditional forgiveness (or what I prefer to call Gospel centered forgiveness) is a topic addressed and taught by many others. Here is a wide sample of excerpts of what others have said or written in connection to conditional forgiveness. The point is not that these all agree with me or one another. They are not all Christian and they do not all agree. These sources do not even always agree with themselves! But these are relevant to the discussion. Of course, those motivated to investigate further, should read the entire context of the quotes.

#### Jay Adams (1929-2020)

Jay Adams argues without qualification that forgiveness is conditional. Notice Adams' balance in stressing that Christians *are* obligated to try and bring an offender to repentance.

What shall we say then? It is clear that forgiveness-promising another never to bring up his offense again to use it against him -- is conditioned on the offenders willingness to confess it as sin and to seek forgiveness. You are not obligated to forgive an unrepentant sinner, but you are obligated to try to bring him to repentance. All the while you must entertain a genuine hope and willingness to forgive the other and a desire to be reconciled to him or her. Because this biblical teaching runs counter to much teaching in the modern church, it is important to understand it. Such forgiveness is modeled after God's forgiveness which is unmistakably conditioned on repentance and faith.<sup>3</sup>

#### Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)

People who know themselves somewhat also know how terribly difficult true and complete forgiveness is, and how it can only be granted after a serious struggle with oneself.\* Certainly an assortment of sinful attributes such as envy, hatred, and vindictiveness, which cannot be part of God's character, play a large role here. But there are also countless cases in which forgiveness is simply impossible and impermissible. When our honor and good name, our office and our dignity, have been publicly assaulted, no one is prepared to forgive without public redress, merely on the basis of a private

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Brauns, "Others on Conditional Forgiveness - A Brick in the Valley," *A Brick in the Valley: The Web Site of Pastor and Author Chris Brauns* (blog), February 18, 2008, <http://chrisbrauns.com/2008/02/others-on-conditional-forgiveness/>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Jay Adams, *From Forgiven To Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God's Way* (Amityville, NY, 1994), 37.

apology and confession of wrongdoing.\* And when actionable crimes have been committed, the civil government is called, not to forgive but to punish, since as God's servant it has to uphold justice and does not bear the sword in vain (cf. Rom. 13:4).<sup>4</sup>

Kit Barker ([Sydney Missionary and Bible College](#))

The biblical portrayal of forgiveness is that there is only one kind of forgiveness and that it is conditioned upon repentance. Unconditional forgiveness has little support in Scripture. *There is no explicit command to forgive offenders who remain unrepentant.* There are many commands to forgive (e.g., Mark 11:25), but they either mention repentance explicitly as a condition or require that it be implied on the basis of (1) the immediate context; (2) those passages where it is explicit; and (3) divine forgiveness, where we see the movements of forgiveness more clearly.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding conditional forgiveness, Barker makes five points:

1. First, conditional forgiveness justly labels the offense as an offense and is predicated by the offender having done the same . . .
2. Second, conditional forgiveness is an act of justice in that it honors the moral stance the offender has taken with respect to their wrongdoing . . .
3. Third, conditional forgiveness acts justly towards the offender, allowing them to be confronted with their offense and offering them an opportunity to respond.
4. Fourth, conditional forgiveness promotes justice in that it models divine forgiveness.
5. Finally, conditional forgiveness promotes reconciliation.<sup>6</sup>

He later adds:

I fear that therapeutic articulations of forgiveness not only misrepresent the nature of forgiveness, but they can also promote unrealistic expectations of healing, especially when they circumvent justice and trivialize the offense.<sup>7</sup>

Craig Blomberg ([Denver Seminary](#))

When no true repentance has occurred, it can actually be counterproductive or even harmful to “forgive” in the sense of acting like everything is all right again. . .

Our analysis has yielded a coherent interpretation of Matthew 18:15-35. No part of this half chapter need be seen as contradicting any other part. When a believer sins against another, Jesus provides a specific multi-step process to facilitate repentance as often as possible. True repentance will be accompanied by both an acknowledgement of

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<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4, Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 180.

<sup>5</sup> Kit Barker, “Drawing Pictures in the Water: The Place of Penitence in the Art of Forgiveness,” in *The Art of Forgiveness*, ed. Philip Halstead and Myk Habets (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books / Fortress Academic, 2018), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Barker, 27–28.

<sup>7</sup> Barker, 30.

wrongdoing and, over time, a change in behavior. When true repentance occurs, true believers will extend forgiveness that leads to reconciliation.<sup>8</sup>

### Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

A German pastor who stood against the Nazis and was excepted by them. Bonhoeffer warned about “cheap grace.”

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.<sup>9</sup>

But do we also realize that this cheap grace has turned back on us like a boomerang? The price we are having to pay today in the shape of the collapse of the organized church is only the inevitable consequence of our policy of making grace available to all at too low a cost. We gave away the word and sacraments wholesale, we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without condition. Our humanitarian sentiment made us give that which was holy to the scornful and the unbelieving. We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was rarely ever heard.<sup>10</sup>

### Ardel Caneday ([University of Northwestern St. Paul](#))

With the tragic case of the murder of Pastor Fred Winters in view, Caneday unfolds the biblical logic for conditional forgiveness. Caneday reasons:

1. Forgiveness always concerns sin.
2. God forgives confessed sin.
3. God’s forgiveness correlates to our forgiveness.
4. Our forgiving must be like God’s forgiving of our sins.
5. God’s forgiveness of sin is for the repentant and so is ours.
6. Not to grant forgiveness of sins to the unrepentant is not the same as being unforgiving

Caneday takes the time to explain some of the problems that result from unbiblical teaching on forgiveness. Here is one quote:

If we “unconditionally forgive” the sins of unrepentant people we subvert the gospel of Jesus Christ, mock God, and diminish the glory of the cross. Those who advocate and practice “unconditional forgiveness” do so out of misunderstanding the gospel’s teaching. While thinking that they embrace the magnanimity of God’s mercy and grace, without realizing it, they actually sabotage the magnanimous grace of accomplished through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, “On Building and Breaking Barriers: Forgiveness, Salvation and Christian Counseling with Special Reference to Matthew 18: 15-35.,” *The Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 146.

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, First Paperback Edition ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1963), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, ed. Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 58.

One of the more helpful distinctions Caneday makes is his point that, “Not to grant forgiveness of sins to the unrepentant is not the same as being unforgiving.” Hence, Caneday stresses,

We must always be ready to forgive, eager to forgive, praying that the Lord would grant repentance to the unrepentant person in order that both he and we may grant forgiveness of sins.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, Caneday writes:

Let us forgive sins like God forgives as he grants forgiveness to us when we repent. As God is forgiving and not filled with bitterness or with grudge-bearing, so we are obligated to be forgiving, always eager and ready to forgive everyone who sins against us and promptly to grant forgiveness when they repent. If we would be like God, we must not bestow forgiveness of sins to people who refuse to repent of the evil they commit against us. Jesus states plainly that we are obligated to discern when to forgive and when not to forgive sins committed against us (cf. John 20:23). To forgive the sins of the unrepentant is not right; it is not godlike. To yearn to forgive and promptly to grant forgiveness when repentance is forthcoming is godliness; it is to be like God who has graciously forgiven our sins which we confess.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A.B. Caneday, *Must Christians Always Forgive?* (Center for Cultural Leadership, 2011), 16, <http://www.lulu.com/us/en/shop/a-b-caneday/must-christians-always-forgive/paperback/product-16539784.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Ardel Caneday, “Faithful Theology: Preserving Distinctions without Separation,” <https://Credomag.Com/>, September 24, 2011, <https://credomag.com/2011/09/faithful-theology-preserving-distinctions-without-separation/>.

S. Carmy ([Yeshiva University](#))

When we pardon those who trespass against us because we have been told that it's good for our physical or mental health, we're doing something different [than forgiveness]. We are acting not for the benefit of the offender, but for our own sake. We confuse a freely offered, transcendent act of love with the psychological equivalent of a laxative." Shalom Carmy.<sup>13</sup>

John N. Day

John Day wrote a book about the Imprecatory Psalms.

In this, the Christian must embrace the tension inherent in reflecting both “the kindness and severity of God (Romans 11:22). It is a tension that previous generations of the faithful have also faced. The imprecatory psalms are a reminder that a war is raging. It is a war of opposing powers, with casualties, traitors, and triumphs. The principal weapon of that warfare is the dual-edged message of the gospel—a message not of sweet passivity, but of life and death itself.<sup>14</sup>

The assurance of God’s ultimate justice (then) frees radical love (now).”<sup>15</sup>

It is legitimate at times for God’s present people to utter prayers of imprecation or pleas for divine vengeance - - like those in the psalms - - against the recalcitrant enemies of God and his people. Such expression is consistent with the ethics of the Old Testament and finds corresponding echo in the New.<sup>16</sup>

Ligon Duncan ([Reformed Theological Seminary](#))

In a round table discussion, Duncan said:

This is a question that many Christians have never thought through. I think that Christians who have themselves harbored unjustified bitternesses and have been unforgiving in places and in ways that they should have been forgiving, often when they are confronted with and gripped by the radical teaching of Christ on forgiveness, out of sorrow for their own sin, read Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness in such a way that they understand it to mean that forgiveness is an automatic obligation in every circumstance, irrespective of the repentance of the other party. And, again, I think that that is a mistake. I believe that forgiveness always has in view reconciliation, and reconciliation is always two-sided. So if there is not a repentance corresponding to a forgiveness, then very often

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<sup>13</sup> Shalom Carmy, “Litvak at Large: Did Joseph Forgive His Brothers,” *First Things*, no. 285 (September 2018): 18–19.

<sup>14</sup> John N. Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. April-June (2002): 115.

<sup>15</sup> Day, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Day, 109.

there is an impossibility of reconciliation. I think that whatever we think about forgiveness, forgiveness is a component to what is a larger picture, and the larger picture is reconciliation. And reconciliation is necessarily two-sided. Consequently, I think it is important for us to talk about both forgiveness and readiness to forgive. There may be circumstances where a reconciliation is impossible, but a readiness to reconcile can still be present with a believer. Consequently, I would want to make that distinction when I was counseling a believer who was in a circumstance where there was not a present possibility of reconciliation of the relationship. Instead of telling them that they need to forgive or they will become bitter, I think I would rather say that you need to be ready to forgive and not to be captured by your bitterness.<sup>17</sup>

Kairos Document from S. Africa issued in 1986

“In our situation in South Africa today it would be totally unChristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed. Any such plea plays into the hands of the oppressor by trying to persuade those of us who are oppressed to accept our oppression and to become reconciled to the intolerable crimes that are committed against us. That is not Christian reconciliation, it is sin. It is asking us to become accomplices in our own oppression, to become servants of the devil. No reconciliation is possible in South Africa without justice.

What this means in practice is that no reconciliation, no forgiveness and no negotiations are possible without repentance. The Biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it quite clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless he or she repents of their sins. Nor are we expected to forgive the unrepentant sinner. When he or she repents we must be willing to forgive seventy times seven times but before that, we are expected to preach repentance to those who sin against us or against anyone. Reconciliation, forgiveness and negotiations will become our Christian duty in South Africa only when the apartheid regime shows signs of genuine repentance.”

Derek Kidner (1913-2008)

Kidner commenting on Stephen’s prayer for those who stoned him.

Stephen’s prayer for his enemies could be answered only through their repentance, as indeed it was in the case of Saul.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A Roundtable Discussion on Forgiveness: Derek Thomas Interviews Ligon Duncan and Justin Taylor, (Reformation 21, accessed October 23 2007); Previously available at [http://www.reformation21.com/Upcoming\\_Issues/Forgiveness\\_Roundtable/354/](http://www.reformation21.com/Upcoming_Issues/Forgiveness_Roundtable/354/).

<sup>18</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, ed. D.J. Wiseman, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 30.

John MacArthur ([Grace Community Church](#))

John MacArthur argues that for small matters there are times when forgiveness is unilaterally and unconditionally granted.<sup>19</sup> But, MacArthur also argues that conditional forgiveness is at times appropriate:

It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional . . . There are times when it is necessary to confront an offender. In such cases, unconditional forgiveness is not an option. These generally involve more serious sins— not petty or picayune complaints, but soul-threatening sins or transgressions that endanger the fellowship of saints.<sup>20</sup>

John Murray (1898-1975)

Forgiveness is a definite act performed by us on the fulfillment of certain conditions.... Forgiveness is something actively administered on the repentance of the person who is to be forgiven. We greatly impoverish ourselves and impair the relations that we should sustain to our brethren when we fail to appreciate what is involved in forgiveness.<sup>21</sup>

Arthur Pink in a sermon, [“The Word of Forgiveness”](#)

“Notice Christ did not personally forgive His enemies. So in [Matt. 5:44](#) He did not exhort His disciples to forgive their enemies, but He does exhort them to “pray” for them. But are we not to forgive those who wrong us? This leads us to a point concerning which there is much need for instruction today. Does Scripture teach that under all circumstances we must always forgive? I answer emphatically, it does not. The Word of God says, “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” ([Luke 17:3,4](#)). Here we are plainly taught that a condition must be met by the offender before we may pronounce forgiveness. The one who has wronged us must first “repent,” that is, judge himself for his wrong and give evidence of his sorrow over it. But suppose the offender does not repent? Then I am not to forgive him. But let there be no misunderstanding of our meaning here. Even though the one who has wronged me does not repent, nevertheless, I must not harbor ill-feelings against him. There must be no hatred or malice cherished in the heart. Yet, on the other hand, I must not treat the offender as if he had done no wrong. That would be to condone the offence, and therefore I should fail to uphold the requirements of righteousness, and this the believer is ever to do. Does God ever forgive where there is no repentance? No, for Scripture declares, “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” ([I John 1:9](#)). One thing more. If one has injured me and repented not, while I cannot forgive him and treat him as though he had

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<sup>19</sup> John MacArthur, *Forgiveness: The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 122–28.

<sup>20</sup> MacArthur, 119–28.

<sup>21</sup> John Murray, “A Lesson in Forgiveness,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 3 (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 191.

not offended, nevertheless, not only must I hold no malice in my heart against him, but I must also pray for him. Here is the value of Christ's perfect example. If we cannot forgive, we can pray for God to forgive him." A. Pink<sup>22</sup>

John Piper (Bethlehem Baptist Church)

In a [sermon](#), John Piper pointed to the conditional forgiveness.[8] While Piper allowed that at points Christians should forgive unconditionally he also added:

One last observation remains: forgiveness of an unrepentant person doesn't look the same as forgiveness of a repentant person.

In fact I am not sure that in the Bible the term forgiveness is ever applied to an unrepentant person. Jesus said in Luke 17:3-4 "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." So there's a sense in which full forgiveness is only possible in response to repentance.

But even when a person does not repent (cf. Matt. 18:17) we are commanded to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27). The difference is that when a person who wronged us does not repent with contrition and confession and conversion (turning from sin to righteousness), he cuts off the full work of forgiveness. We can still lay down our ill will; we can hand over our anger to God; we can seek to do him good; but we cannot carry through reconciliation or intimacy.<sup>23</sup>

But elsewhere Piper writes:

Can we forgive a person who doesn't think he's done wrong and we think he has, or if he doesn't ask for any forgiveness? The answer is we can and we must. We must do our part in the forgiveness. This is what Jesus meant, I think, when he said, "Love your enemies . . . bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" ([Luke 6:27-28](#)). They are still our enemies when we do that. They have not asked for any forgiveness, and they don't think they need any, making life miserable for us — and they think they ought to. We are to bless them, and that blessing means that our part of the inward forgiveness has happened. The opposite of forgiveness is holding a grudge, but blessing is the opposite of holding a grudge, and so blessing is a kind of forgiving.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur W. Pink, "'The Word of Forgiveness' by Arthur W. Pink," accessed April 7, 2021, [https://www.the-highway.com/forgiveness1\\_Pink.html](https://www.the-highway.com/forgiveness1_Pink.html).

<sup>23</sup> John Piper, "As We Forgive Our Debtors: What Does Forgiveness Look Like," 1994, [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/868\\_As\\_We\\_Forgive\\_Our\\_Debtors/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/868_As_We_Forgive_Our_Debtors/).

<sup>24</sup> John Piper, Can I Forgive Someone Who Doesn't Confess Wronging Me?, *Desiring God*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/can-i-forgive-someone-who-doesnt-confess-wronging-me>.

Dennis Prager (Talk Show Host)

Dennis Prager warned against automatic forgiveness in a *Wall Street Journal* article:

The bodies of the three teen-age girls shot dead last December by a fellow student at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., were not yet cold before some of their schoolmates hung a sign announcing, "We forgive you, Mike!" They were referring to Michael Carneal, 14, the killer.

This immediate and automatic forgiveness is not surprising. Over the past generation, many Christians have adopted the idea that they should forgive everyone who commits evil against anyone, no matter how great and cruel and whether or not the evildoer repents.

The number of examples is almost as large as the number of heinous crimes. Last August, for instance, the preacher at a Martha's Vineyard church service attended by the vacationing President Clinton announced that the duty of all Christians was to forgive Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber who murdered 168 Americans. "Can each of you look at a picture of Timothy McVeigh and forgive him?" the Rev. John Miller asked. "I have, and I invite you to do the same."

Though I am a Jew, I believe that a vibrant Christianity is essential if America's moral decline is to be reversed. And despite theological differences, Christianity and Judaism have served as the bedrock of American civilization. And I am appalled and frightened by this feel-good doctrine of automatic forgiveness.<sup>25</sup>

David J. Reimer (St. Andrews)

Reimer's article, "Stories of Forgiveness: Narrative Ethics and The Old Testament," is a concise gold mine on forgiveness narratives in the Old Testament.<sup>26</sup>

Reimer explains that in knowing Old Testament stories of forgiveness, our own understanding of forgiveness is "enriched and sustained."<sup>27</sup> He writes:

Rather, we deal here with stories which invite us into their world, and we enter it our own world is re-created. . . . To learn for ourselves how to be moral people as far as forgiveness is concerned means not simply to follow through certain obligations, but to allow our actions and our understanding of the world to be shaped by the Bible's stories of forgiveness as affirmation of life.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dennis Prager, "The Sin of Forgiveness," *The Wall Street Journal*, 1997, <http://www.dennisprager.com/forgiveness.html>.

<sup>26</sup> David J. Reimer, "Stories of Forgiveness: Narrative Ethics and the Old Testament," in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld*, ed. Robert Rezetko, Timothy H. Lim, and W. Brian Aucker (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 359–78.

<sup>27</sup> Reimer, 378.

<sup>28</sup> Reimer, 378.

In terms of whether or not forgiveness is automatic in Old Testament narratives, Reimer concludes, “These stories give no sense that the offended is under an obligation to forgive.”<sup>29</sup> However, he does demonstrate that forgiveness is considered a matter of life and death.<sup>30</sup>

Ken Sande (Formally Peacemakers, now [RW360](#))

Ken Sande agrees that there are times when a matter should be overlooked.<sup>31</sup> And, he also agrees that in most ideally forgiveness should follow repentance. Sande pictures forgiveness as a two-stage process. In his words:

When an offense is too serious to overlook and the offender has not yet repented, you may need to approach forgiveness as a two-stage process. The first stage requires having an attitude of forgiveness, and the second, granting forgiveness. Having an attitude of forgiveness is unconditional and is a commitment you make to God . . . By his grace you seek to maintain a loving and merciful attitude toward someone who has offended you . . .

Granting forgiveness is conditional on the repentance of the offender and takes place between you and that person . . . When there has been a serious offense, it would not be appropriate to [make the promises of forgiveness] until the offender has repented.<sup>32</sup>

Colin Smith ([The Orchard](#))

Smith began a sermon titled, “When God Can’t Forgive,” in the following way:<sup>33</sup>

**(Introduction to the podcast)**

Is it a Christian obligation to forgive where there is no repentance? Can there be forgiveness without reconciliation? What are you you to do if you are faced with a situation where there is no sign of repentance and reconciliation seems impossible. Welcome to unlocking the Bible with pastor Colin Smith and Colin you realize that you just asked some really huge questions right there?

Yeah and sadly some really relevant ones as well I mean for so many there's this struggle that you face with a situation where they're just isn't the prospect of reconciliation right now and the reason for that is there's no repentance and perhaps the issue was a major issue and here's someone who's carrying on in a pattern of life that is desperately destructive and without any sign of turning. And what are you to do as a Christian? How are you to honor the Lord? And I think that's a question that many believers many

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<sup>29</sup> Reimer, 377.

<sup>30</sup> Reimer, 374.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 77–99.

<sup>32</sup> Sande, 210–11.

<sup>33</sup> Collin Smith, “When God Can’t Forgive, Part 1” (Orchard (Unlocking the Bible), Barrington, IL, August 30, 2017), <http://unlockingthebible.org/broadcast/god-cant-forgive-part-1-2/>; Collin Smith, “When God Can’t Forgive, Part 2” (Orchard (Unlocking the Bible), Barrington, IL, August 31, 2017), <http://unlockingthebible.org/broadcast/god-cant-forgive-part-2-2/>.

Christians would say . . . “I really want to know the answer to that because that is my heart's desire.” And you know there are different responses to that question that you would hear from different pastors -- pastors I esteem very, very highly -- sometimes it's not easy to know how to apply the bible to particular situations of difficulty.

- **1:29** - What I'm going to share today I want to do in a spirit of genuine humility recognizing that others would say something different but sharing what's honestly been my conclusion from my own study of the scripture and study historically of some great Christian leaders who've tried to address this question, “What is the calling of God for a Christian when you're faced with someone who does not repent?” And part of the answer to that comes from seeing how does God look upon the person who does not repent we're going to explore that together and I went to offer but I've tried to offer pastorally to other people in a way that I hope will be helpful to some who are facing this really, really tough circumstance . . .

(From the recorded sermon) - The message that I want to bring today has been brewing in my mind for over two year. it began with a conversation that I had back then with a good friend who is a wise pastor and also has been to me a good mentor. I asked him when we met up two years ago what he was working on.

And he said to me, “Colin I'm convinced that we've got it wrong over this whole matter of forgiveness.”

“Really,” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he said. “We tell our people that God calls you to forgive every offense even if there is no sign of repentance. And God himself doesn't do that.”

“Yes,” I said. “But, of course, the reason that we do that is that if I don't forgive I end up being chained by bitterness.”

To which he said, “Why would you think that the only alternative to forgiving is bitterness? Do you really think that God is bitter with those he has not yet forgiven.”

Well, that got me thinking as I hope it does you too. And going back to the scriptures on this whole question of forgiveness and repentance and reconciliation. And, of course, the big question is how are these three related together?

Justin Taylor ([Crossway](#))

In a post “[Is Forgiveness Always Right and Required?](#)”

“Love your enemies” is something that we should do at all times and in all places. It is modeled after God’s love for his enemies, whom he loves even when they are “unjust” and “evil” (Luke 6:35). At the same time, our forgiveness of others is likewise modeled upon God’s forgiveness of sinners, whom he forgives conditioned upon their repentance.

God does not forgive apart from repentance; neither should we. In major offenses, we are not to forgive the unrepentant.

In the event of a tragedy that involves the loss of human life brought about by wanton human sin, it is therefore wrong for Christians to call upon immediate forgiveness in the absence of repentance. Such a call both cheapens and misunderstands the biblical doctrine of forgiveness.<sup>34</sup>

Douglas Wilson (Christ Church)

We cannot forgive those who are defiant, however much we might like to. Because forgiveness is a transaction, if someone steals your car, you can't run down the street after them, yelling out your forgiveness.

But you can have a heart full of forgiveness, full to the brim, ready to overflow the moment repentance appears. Until that happens, there is no forgiveness. We need to distinguish forgiveness in principle and forgiveness accomplished.<sup>35</sup>

Nicholas Wolterstorff (Yale University)

Can I forgive Hubert if I believe that he is not contrite? Believing that he continues to stand behind what he did, can I nonetheless form and enact the resolution not to hold it against him? Suppose I believe that Jesus commands us to forgive the one who has wronged us whether or not he is penitent. Can I, out of what I believe to be my Christian duty, form and act on the resolution not to hold against him what he did to me even though I believe that he is impenitent?

I doubt it. I can be *willing* to forgive him – when he repents. I can have a forgiving disposition toward him. But it appears to me that no longer to hold against someone the wrong he did one while believing that he himself continues to stand behind the deed, requires not treating the deed or its doer with the moral seriousness required for forgiveness; it is to downplay rather than forgive.<sup>36</sup>

But suppose I am mistaken about this. Suppose it is possible fully and completely to forgive the person who has wronged one while knowing full well that he continues to stand firmly behind what he did. Then I would say, first, that such an action is unacceptably arbitrary. We are to suppose that one continues to hold against some people the wrong they did one; one is not a moral wimp who waves aside all wrongs done to one. So why is one not holding this wrong against the wrongdoer, when one holds other wrongs against other wrongdoers? What is the morally relevant difference?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Justin Taylor, "Is Forgiveness Always Right and Required," 2007, <http://theologica.blogspot.com/2007/01/is-forgiveness-always-right-and.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas Wilson, *For a Glory and a Covering: A Practical Theology of Marriage*, Illustrated edition (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2006), 95.

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "What Is Forgiveness?," in *Justice in Love*, Reprint edition, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Eerdmans, 2015), 173.

<sup>37</sup> Wolterstorff, 173.

“Jesus is nowhere in the New Testament reported as issuing any such command. Whereas he enjoins us to love our enemies and seek to do them good, he nowhere enjoins us to forgive them.<sup>38</sup>

An implication of this position is that one cannot forgive the wrongdoer who is dead if one believes he was never penitent, nor the wrongdoer who has sunk into dementia. In such cases, one lives with the regret that forgiveness never became possible. There is no escape in this life from this feature of our human condition. We have to cope with it, not pretend that it is in our power to undo it.<sup>39</sup>

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Reviewed by Chris Brauns.

If I could have chosen for a topic for Tim Keller to write about, forgiveness would be high on the list. No subject is more central to the Christian life. God's forgiveness is the greatest need for all who fall short of the glory of God. And, in a broken world, if we're to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must understand how to forgive and be forgiven.

In his new book [\*Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?\*](#), Keller tackles this subject at last.

While all (or nearly all) recognize the fundamental importance of forgiveness, there's widespread debate about how to understand forgiveness and live it out. Many in our late-modern age question whether grave offenses should ever be forgiven. Even Christians who know we're to pray "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" struggle to agree on a basic definition. And, as Keller points out, there's an ongoing discussion about "the apparent contradiction between forgiveness and justice, the sense that we will have to choose one over the other" (xviii).

### **Defining Forgiveness**

One of the strengths of *Forgive* is that Keller outlines a careful four-part definition of forgiveness that lays the groundwork for discussion (9–10). He summarizes four actions that constitute forgiveness:

1. "[It is] to name the trespass truthfully as wrong and punishable, rather than merely excusing it."
2. "It is to identify with the perpetrator as a fellow sinner rather than thinking how different from you he or she is. It is to will their good."
3. "It is to release the wrongdoer from liability by absorbing the debt oneself rather than seeking revenge and paying them back."
4. "It is to aim for reconciliation rather than breaking off the relationship forever."

Each component is vital. "If you omit any of these four actions," writes Keller, "you are not engaging in real forgiveness" (10).

### **Countering Current Obstacles to Forgiveness**

Another strength of Keller's summary of forgiveness is that it guards against two prevalent obstacles to Christian forgiveness. The first of these obstacles is therapeutic forgiveness, an understanding of forgiveness as a private emotional strategy done for the benefit of the one forgiving (29-31).

Keller's definition of forgiveness counters therapeutic forgiveness. He argues that forgiveness means absorbing the debt and refraining from revenge. Contra therapeutic forgiveness, forgiveness aims for reconciliation and is not merely a private emotional strategy.

We desperately need Keller's response to therapeutic forgiveness. Many if not most Christian books on forgiveness promote a therapeutic understanding and in so doing redefine a word that is central to the gospel. Keller warns, "The resources for healing relationships and strengthening community are being eliminated by a therapeutic culture (31)."

The second obstacle to Christian forgiveness that Keller counters is that of a new "shame and honor culture," sometimes called "cancel culture." Keller explains that in the new shame and honor culture being a victim grants status: "the further *down* the existing social ladder one is, the greater honor is possible (31)." This culture values fragility and outrage and, thereby, disincentivizes forgiveness. After all, if unresolved differences provide a platform for being outraged, forgiving offenses forfeits status. "Forgiveness is seen now as radically unjust and impractical," Keller writes, "as short circuiting the ability of victims to gain honor and virtue as others rise to defend them. And so this culture is littered with enormous numbers of broken and now irreparable relationships" (32).

Again, Keller's response is much needed. Most of us have witnessed social media interactions that have devolved into participants seeking to gain status through victimhood rather than people finding healing.

### **Pastoral Insights for the Repentant and the Offended**

Those processing the complexities of relating to people who've hurt them will benefit from the pastoral and practical insights in *Forgive*. For example, distinguishing worldly sorrow (as in the person who's sorry he got caught) from godly grief (one who is truly repentant) is one of the most challenging aspects of processing broken relationships. In this context, Keller outlines the distinguishing characteristics of biblical repentance and warns against those who say they're repentant but who only feel sorry for themselves and seek to manipulate those they hurt:

Self-pity looks like repentance, but it is self-absorption, and that is the essence of sin . . . . Repentance begins where self-pity ends. . . . There is a kind of false repentance that is excessive. The person is filled with loud and intense self-loathing, cries, and tears. Listeners feel compelled to tell them they aren't that bad, they aren't that guilty. And this is the very point of such self-flagellation – it tries to pressure others and even God not to accuse but excuse and pardon. The inner logic goes something like this: "If I beat myself up enough, surely this will atone for my sin and no one will ask me for anything else." (146, 147, 148)

Keller also offers convicting insights for how we view those who have offended us.

If a cartoonist wants to make someone look ludicrous, she can create a caricature. She can take something about a person's fate that's unusual or a bit unattractive and exaggerate it, making it prominent so that the person looks foolish. That's exactly what your heart does when someone wrongs you. You think of them one-dimensionally, in terms of that one thing they've done to you. . . . If somebody has lied to you, you tell yourself "She lied because she is just a liar!" But if you are ever caught in a lie, and someone asks why *you* lied, you say, "Well, yes, but it's complicated." (165)

## Should Victims Automatically “Pay” the Cost of Offenses?

Throughout *Forgive*, Keller rightly emphasizes that victims shouldn't feel they have the right to harbor bitterness.

Yet, at times, it seems that Keller pushes so hard against the tendency to bitterness that he risks becoming unbalanced in ways that are in tension with justice. I'll give two examples.

First, Keller tells victims that internal forgiveness is unconditional. Regardless of the offense, those offended should *always* internally pay the cost of offenses. In making this point, Keller summarizes internal forgiveness as having three components: (1) Identifying with the wrongdoer. (2) Absorbing the debt, that is, inwardly paying the debt of the wrongdoer yourself rather than make him pay it. (3) Willing the good of the wrongdoer (164-171).

The first and third aspects are consistent with biblical teaching. We should all recognize we're sinners who have been forgiven much. And we should pray for the best for our neighbor, even for those who have offended us. Christians should love their enemies.

But the idea that the offended should automatically pay the debt of the wrongdoers, even when the offender is unrepentant, is problematic. Consider the situation of victims of the worst sorts of violence. Keller advises:

When you are wronged, the perpetrator owes you a debt . . . your forgiveness means you bear the cost of what the man has done, rather than him bearing it. There is always a cost to wrongdoing and it must fall on someone. Either the wrongdoer bears it or someone else must (166-167).

Should victims be counseled when processing the wrong done to them that they should inwardly choose to pay the offense of the debt of unrepentant offenders? To be sure, the offended must endure pain without being defined by hatred and bitterness. But to tell victims that they must internally pay the cost of unrepentant offenders is neither helpful nor consistent with New Testament examples.

Paul doesn't take this approach with Alexander the metalworker ([2 Tim. 4:14](#)). Nor does he with the offenses committed against the Thessalonians ([2 Thess. 1:3-10](#)). Rather than picturing themselves as paying down the cost of what is done by unrepentant offenders, victims should be advised to proactively show love and not take revenge. Where the cost is concerned, it's more consistent with Scripture to assure victims that God is just. Turn the matter over to him. The price justice requires for this offense will be paid in one of two ways. Either the offender will repent and believe, in which case Christ paid for the offense. Otherwise, the unrepentant offender will face a just Judge.

Indeed, this is how Peter summarized Jesus's response on the cross. The Lord didn't revile or retaliate. He made no threats. He took on himself the penalty for the sins of his people. And where the unrepentant are concerned, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly ([1 Pet. 2:21-](#)

[25](#)).

As an antibitterness strategy, teaching that victims should automatically pay the offenses committed against them regardless of the repentance of the offender may not be effective—it could build bitterness instead. It may also compromise the witness of the church to an onlooking world if we're reluctant to speak about how offenders will face the wrath of God.

### **Leave Room for God's Wrath**

This brings us to a second and related area of concern regarding balance. Though Keller does write about God's wrath at length in *Forgive* (71–85), he's cautious about comforting victims with the truth that unrepentant offenders will stand before God. He warns against an attitude that would delight in the thought of an offender facing God's judgment: “‘Leave room for God's wrath' has often been interpreted like this: ‘Yes—leave it to God. God will let them have it! And in a way that you cannot!’” (195).

Christian victims ought not to take sinful pleasure in another's destruction; instead, Jesus calls us to love our enemies. However, as I have said above, the Bible doesn't see it as inconsistent with Christian love to rest in the truth that God is a just Judge ([Ps. 37](#); [Rom. 12:17–21](#); [2 Tim. 4:14](#)). A loving Christian who renounces revenge but trusts the justice of a holy God is not bitter or angry. Indeed, trusting in God's justice should move us to love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, explaining his compassion for the Nazis who would execute him, wrote from prison, “It is only when God's wrath and vengeance are hanging as grim realities over the heads of one's enemies that something of what it means to love and forgive them can touch our hearts.”

Keller counters the idea of victims being comforted by the justice of God, writing, “If we don't tell God what to do with his wrath but allow him to send it when and where he wills, what does he do with it? In Jesus Christ God comes and takes the penalty of justice himself” (195).

Elsewhere, Keller summarizes, “The message of the prophets, then, is that no amount of human evil and recalcitrance can ultimately stop God's forgiveness from finding its way to us” (64). While Keller is clear that God's forgiveness is conditioned on repentance in the larger context of *Forgive*, such statements should be qualified in the immediate context. Jesus's forgiveness doesn't break through for the unrepentant, nor does Christ bear their punishment ([John 3:36](#)).

### **Eyes on King Jesus**

Cornelius Plantinga painted the right word picture when he [wrote](#), “Anybody who thinks hard about forgiveness will start a lot more rabbits than he can catch. The topic raises a whole nest of questions, and the good answers will seldom be the easy ones.” In a constructive way, Tim Keller's *Forgive* will begin many discussions. He has flushed out any number of forgiveness rabbits to be pursued even if doing so requires a trip into the briar patch. I look forward to engaging further with them in the days to come.

As for balance and the difficult situation of grave offenses and unrepentant offenders, perhaps Keller's book gives this writer a needed push. In my book [Unpacking Forgiveness](#) (Crossway,

2008), consistent with the position argued by [a number of other theologians](#), I emphasized that forgiveness is conditional. I argued that Christians ought always to have an attitude of forgiveness – that is, we should always offer the gift of forgiveness -- but that forgiveness takes place only when the offender is repentant. I remain persuaded of that position. But it is not lost on me that some might weaponize an incomplete and distorted understanding of the conditional nature of forgiveness as a license for harboring bitterness and resentment and taking revenge if only in small ways. Perhaps in that regard Keller's work warns those who would weaponize conditional forgiveness.

The best thing that could be said of any book on forgiveness is that it focuses on the cross and King Jesus. This is beautifully true of *Forgive*. Keller invites the reader to consider Christ, to understand how he atoned for sin, to be moved by his example: "Don't let yourself be twisted. Take in what Jesus Christ has done, put your little story about what people have done to you in the big story of what he did for you, and you'll have the power you need to grant forgiveness" (181).

Since *Unpacking Forgiveness* was published, I've spoken and engaged with so many people in my own congregation and with people across the country and on the other side of the ocean. In addition to what I've seen as an author and pastor, I've experienced betrayal and pain alongside my extended family. Both pastorally and personally, there's been a lot of forgiveness to unpack. Thinking about those with whom I've interacted, including my own family, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend Keller's book.

## *Is Totally Forgiving God Okay?*<sup>1</sup>

Kendall, R.T. *Totally Forgiving God: When It Seems He Has Betrayed You*. Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2012.

R.T. Kendall anticipated controversy when the title of *Totally Forgiving God* was first suggested. He shares:

A few years ago, a very dear friend of mine said, “RT, I know what should be the title of your next book.” “What is that?” I asked. “*Totally Forgiving God*,” he replied. “Oh dear,” I swallowed. My immediate thought, I am ashamed to admit, was about what the critics will say when they see the title but won’t read the book. (xxiii).

Now enter the critic, I suppose. But I want to assure Dr. Kendall that the review offered here is not the work of the critic he feared. I write as a brother in Christ, and I *have* interacted with Kendall’s insights. Yet, as Kendall predicted, I do have questions about his title not to mention his thesis. Indeed, the central question I wish to address in this review is whether or not it is appropriate to forgive God.

### **Strengths of the Book *Totally Forgiving God***

Before moving to the heart of the matter, several strengths of TFG should be acknowledged. Reading TGF, one quickly appreciates Kendall’s pastoral warmth. He states that it is his goal to “uphold the God of the Bible as faithfully as I can while also sharing with you some of the things I have learned and observed (15).” He wants to help readers move from being upset with God to being in the place of Habakkuk (Habakkuk 3:17-18) (222). That goal in mind, Kendall transparently shares the pain of losing his mother when he was still a teenager. His concern for others going through such pain comes through. As a fellow shepherd, I truly appreciate Dr. Kendall’s pastoral heart.

Another strength of TFG is that Kendall adamantly rejects the notion that our pain results from mistakes made by God. More than once, Kendall stresses that God is blameless (3, 7). In the context of the death of his own mother, he quotes his father as saying, “God is too wise to err and too kind to be unmerciful.” Kendall writes of his father’s counsel, “I believed that then, and I believe it today (3).”

Dr. Kendall is also to be commended for explicitly rejecting [open theism](#):

According to open theism, not only do we influence [God], but also this God depends on input from us to know what to do next! One of the leading proponents of this theology actually acknowledged publicly that this God may not even win in the end!

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Brauns, “Review: *Totally Forgiving God: When It Seems He Has Betrayed You*,” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), August 20, 2012, [http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/totally\\_forgiving\\_god](http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/totally_forgiving_god).

In any case, if you adopt this kind of God, you can be sure you would not have a need to forgive Him for anything; He doesn't even know any more than you do (203)!

### Therapeutic Forgiveness

If you only skimmed Kendall's previous quote on open theism, it is worth reading again for two reasons. First, it highlights Kendall's insistence that God is sovereign. Yet, Kendall's criticism of open theism also illustrates the curious logic Kendall follows when concluding that it is appropriate for people to forgive God. Kendall reasons:

- If God is not sovereign and omniscient, then he does not know more than people.
- If God does not know more than people, he does not need us to forgive Him.
- Therefore, the open theist should not forgive God. Conversely, those who hold to the sovereignty of God should forgive him.

If you find yourself scratching your head trying to follow Kendall's argument, you are not alone. Is it not obvious that the exact opposite is true? A limited god would need forgiving, not a sovereign, perfect God. How could Kendall possibly conclude that it is up to people to let God off the hook?

Kendall insists that it is appropriate to "let God off the hook," that is forgive God, because he defines forgiveness as a matter of private feelings. Forgiveness does *not* necessarily have anything to do with moral culpability. This being the case, an appropriate way to move beyond being angry with God is to forgive him. He writes:

Total forgiveness means letting *everyone* who has hurt us in any way off the hook. *This includes God* if we feel He has hurt us by allowing what He did (emphasis his, 179).

Notice the word "feel." If you *feel* that God has hurt you, then forgive him.

Kendall's position is similar to the one defended by Lewis Smedes in his influential book, *Forgive and Forget*. L. Gregory Jones labels this understanding of forgiveness as "therapeutic forgiveness." Interacting with Smedes, Jones traces the inevitable trajectory of therapeutic forgiveness:

Smedes's therapeutic forgiveness, manifested both in its excessive internalization and its bypassing of issues of sin and culpability, find its *reduction ad absurdum* when he suggests that we not only can but indeed ought to forgive God. It does not matter that God is not culpable; what matters are my own feeling and health. (*Embodying Forgiveness*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 52).

Of course, this is exactly the trajectory that Kendall followed in TFG.

Someone may counter, “Is it not a good thing to stop feeling angry with God?” The answer to that question is, “It depends.” It is *not* a good thing if the way one arrives at not feeling angry is to forgive God.

Forgiving God implies that God is somehow morally culpable. While Kendall went to great lengths to argue that this is not what he meant, he recognized that the implication is present. The implication of culpability is why Kendall swallowed when someone first suggested the title and said, “Oh dear.”

God does not need to be pardoned of any wrongdoing. And when people say that they forgive God there is the clear implication of blame, regardless of whether we claim to do it without that intent (*Unpacking Forgiveness*, 67).

Likewise, Ed Stetzer, who wrote [the foreword to \*Totally Forgiving God\*](#), also conceded that the idea of forgiving God would be “sure to ruffle some feathers.” Stetzer went on to say, “But the point here is so clear: God is perfect, and just yet our hearts often hold bitterness toward Him--- and we need to let that bitterness go and trust God (xvii).”

Stetzer is correct that Kendall repeatedly insists that he does not believe God makes mistakes. However, I would not accept that TFG clarifies how bitter people should properly process their pain. Rather, Kendall takes a term of critical importance, forgiveness, and eviscerates it of its biblical meaning. There may be a time to ruffle someone’s feathers. But not if the feathers you are ruffling are those of the One who gathers us under his wings (Psalm 91:4).

Elsewhere, I have written an [overview of biblical words on forgiveness](#). Here space only permits us to consider Colossians 1:13-14:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Biblical forgiveness has everything to do with moral culpability (cf. 1 John 1:9-10). Forgiveness is all about the remission of sins. Yet, Kendall reduces it to a feeling and eviscerates an important word of its biblical meaning.

Kendall and Smedes’s promotion of therapeutic forgiveness creates numerous other problems that I have outlined at length in [Unpacking Forgiveness](#). In the end, this view of therapeutic forgiveness and the correlate [unconditional forgiveness](#) create bitterness rather than defeating it.

Those who struggle with anger towards God should be pastorally encouraged to work through the book of Job. If they do so prayerfully, by the time they reach chapter 38, they will be ready to hear the Lord speak to them out of the whirlwind of his exalted greatness. Surely anyone who plunges into Job 38 will not return thinking it is necessary to “let God off the hook”!

## Another Other Area of Concern

Throughout TFC, Kendall creates a very muddled picture of how God reveals himself. Kendall describes numerous times when God spoke to him or others through visions and the visions were not accurate. For example, God revealed to Kendall and others that his mother would be healed. Yet, she was not (2).

At another point, Kendall summarizes a series of visions God gave him, some of which were not fulfilled.

Visions. They all came to me unsought and seemed equally credible. They were not dreams, by the way; they were open visions. If they weren't of God, you could have fooled me! They were absolutely real. And yet some were literally fulfilled; others were not. Why? (56-57)

This is not the place to write a treatise on special revelation. But if Kendall is going to use such examples, he owes his readers more of an explanation. Does he believe that all Christians should expect to hear from God through visions? Were his visions from God or weren't they? Does he believe that God sent him visions that were misleading?

## Conclusion

One final time, let me stress that Dr. Kendall is very careful to insist that God does not make mistakes. It would be unfair to not include that point. However, this book which speaks often of "totally forgiving God" and "letting God off the hook" will imply to many that somehow God is culpable. In the end, such therapeutic, [unconditional forgiveness creates far more problems than it solves](#).

No one would deny that there is a need for Christian books that encourage those experiencing disappointment. But given the concerns outlined here, I would not recommend TFG. Those who struggle with anger and disappointment would be better served to read Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988). L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* is recommended as an academic treatment of therapeutic forgiveness.

*Chris Brauns* is the pastor of [the Red Brick Church](#) in Stillman Valley, IL. He is the author of [Unpacking Forgiveness](#) (Crossway, 2008), [When the Word Leads Your Pastoral Search](#) (Moody, 2010), and the forthcoming [Bound Together: How We are Tied to Others in Good and Bad Choices](#) (Zondervan, 2013).

Brauns, Chris. "Forgiveness and Virginia Tech - A Brick in the Valley." *A Brick in the Valley: The Web Site of Pastor and Author Chris Brauns*, May 5, 2007. <http://chrisbrauns.com/2007/05/forgiveness-and-virginia-tech/>.

As a pastor, this week I have considered what I would say to one of the Virginia Tech parents who lost a child. In these days and years of Columbine, Oklahoma City, and now the Virginia Tech massacre, it is a question we all face. How should we respond to such evil?

Some believe that Christians should immediately forgive. One web site contends that Cho Seung-Hui deserves to be "respectfully and lovingly remembered just like the rest of the victims."

Automatic forgiveness on the part of Christians is common. From Oklahoma City to Columbine, some rush to forgive regardless of whether or not they were victims. And some forgive even if the offender does not repent.

However, well intentioned, such automatic forgiveness is misguided. Not only is it inconsiderate of the families of victims; it also undermines a proper understanding of the justice of God and the integrity of grace.

Alternatively, Romans 12:17-21 summarizes three guidelines for a proper Christian response to evil. First, Paul admonishes his audience not to take revenge. He repeats this point three times (Romans 12:17, 19, 21). Virginia Tech victims cannot respond with vindictive hatred towards Cho Seung-Hui, his family, or others they believe are responsible. Revenge is not an option for Christians.

In a second guideline, Paul tells Christians to authentically love all people. "Let love be genuine . . . If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Romans 12:9, 18)." Amish families exemplified genuine love when they offered financial assistance to the family of their daughters' murderer. Overwhelmed by such love, the widow of the shooter, Marie Roberts responded, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world." It would be an act of stunning beauty if Christian victims reached out lovingly to the family of Cho Seung-Hui.

But the third guideline Paul offers is that Christians should, "Leave room for the wrath of God." Indeed, this is why Paul argued that Christians should refrain from revenge. Christians can rest in the certain truth that God will accomplish perfect justice. Such a confidence in the justice of God guards Christians from the bitterness that poisons those who believe it is their job to retaliate.

Paul later shared with Timothy how he put this truth into practice. "Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him . . . (2 Timothy 4:14-15a)." Paul does not say he forgave Alexander. Neither is he bitter. He trusts God for justice.

Some argue that Jesus automatically forgave those who crucified Him. But this is not the case. Jesus prayed that they would be forgiven, which demonstrates that they were in fact, not yet forgiven. It was the *repentant* criminal next to him that Jesus forgave (Luke 23:34-43). Similarly, Stephen prayed that his killers would be forgiven (Acts 7:60). His prayer was answered in part when Paul repented, and was subsequently forgiven, on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1ff).

Others, based on a therapeutic, privatized understanding of forgiveness, argue that forgiveness is strictly for the sake of the person doing the forgiving. Forgiveness is understood as a feeling. But this is contrary to how Scripture defines forgiveness. Biblical forgiveness is a commitment by the offended to graciously pardon the repentant from moral obligation or liability. It is reserved for the repentant (Luke 17:3-4). Biblical forgiveness is not a private matter. It is a transaction between two parties.

Ultimately, the perfect response to evil is given by the Lord Himself, ". . . He did not retaliate. . . Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23b)." And He forgives all who repent and believe in Him (John 3:36).

Pastor Chris Brauns  
The Red Brick Church of Stillman Valley