

Forgiveness

In what sense, if any, can Matthew 6:12 be a guide for interpersonal forgiveness today?

Method

This essay will give consideration of the Biblical injunction to forgive one another, particularly as stated in Matthew 6:12. In order to better understand the place of such an injunction in today's world it will be necessary to first look briefly at the place of forgiveness within the current social setting. It is also important to look at forgiveness within the context of both complimentary and opposing concepts before considering some of the major criticisms of forgiveness. Bringing these various strands together will enable a distinction between 'therapeutic' and Christian forgiveness to be drawn prior to making some concluding remarks.

It is important that this exercise in practical theology is carried out rigorously for, as in many areas of life, a poor understanding of the theory may lead to poor practice. Also, for theology to work it must be rooted in an actual need. Too often theologians have been accused of answering questions that no-one are asking. As Ballard and Pritchard (1996 p.31) say, '[Practical theology's] primary task is precisely to focus the whole theological enterprise on the demands, hopes, fears and actual practices of the community of faith so that its life in the world may be faithful to the gospel and relevant to its time.'

What follows is an attempt to come to terms with the Biblical injunction to forgive. The modal followed here is that of the interpretive cycle of preunderstanding – the Biblical text – the concrete situation, each linked by continual reflection. That Scripture should have primacy in this cycle of theological reflection is important. Writing on the wider issue of Biblical hermeneutics, Duncan Ferguson (1987 p.191) says,

God has spoken in Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures bear witness to this gracious approach of God to the human family. Without this universal element, in fact,

no re-evaluation or reinterpretation would be possible at all. We lay hold of God's Word by faith, and faith, in its attempt to communicate Christianity to the present age must avoid an over accommodation of the biblical message to the current mood. The present age may inform and rightly should inform our exegesis, but an interpretation that gives primacy to faith argues that the present age must ultimately be brought before the forum of the Christian message. Through such an interpretation Christ is made to speak; he presents himself to us in the pages of Scripture. Any viewpoint that attempts to find in Scripture only hints of eternal truths is an alien point of view to the Christian message. Yet this 'faith hermeneutic' is always checked by historical study to prevent the unbridled reign of subjectivity.

To Ferguson's 'historical study' we may wish to add other disciplines, but the point remains.

Forgiveness in today's world

Forgiveness has been defined as the 'willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgement and indifferent behaviour towards one who unjustly injures us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love...' (Enright and North 1998 p.107) Whilst this definition is essentially a psychological rather than a theological one, its great advantage is that it contains both negative (abandoning one's rights) and positive (fostering new attitudes) aspects. Because the negative aspects of forgiveness often outweigh the positive in popular thinking, forgiveness is frequently misunderstood and so unfairly criticised and ignored in situations where a proper understanding and application would lead to beneficial change.

Forgiveness has a wide area of application. Firstly, one may think of those situations in life where an individual hurts or offends another. No law is broken but damage to a relationship is done. Secondly, there are many trouble-spots in the world, such as the Middle East or Northern Ireland, where old wrongs are constantly used to justify new ones. Thirdly, there are those situations where real (that is, legal) wrong has been done, where personal injury as a result of neglect or wilful damage has been

suffered. For the sake of simplicity this last group will be the major area under consideration here, particularly where interpersonal injury (that is injury where both the injured party and the wrong-doer are identifiable individuals) is involved.

Our society increasingly seeks to allocate blame for every wrong experienced, and to find reasons for all events. This process may be necessary if people are to come to terms with difficult circumstances; a reason, even a bad one, can go some way towards healing the psychological and spiritual wounds that often accompany trauma. However, alongside this need explanation has grown an assumption of blame and a compensation mentality. “Where there’s blame, there must be a claim!” is the advertising slogan of one of the many insurance companies that encourage injured parties to seek compensation through the courts. Often compensation is seen as a mitigation of suffering, but such an assumption is highly suspect. Indeed, the commitment in time and energy to pursue a compensation case is likely to keep the perceived injury in the foreground of one’s consciousness, maintaining the hurt, without hope of healing. As Mary Ann Coate (1994 pp.83-4) says:

It is partly the conviction that forgiveness is born of need which always makes me sad when I read of compensation cases being pursued to extremes. I feel sad even in the cases of well documented and totally acknowledged disasters, such as the losses of the Herald of Free Enterprise and the Marchioness, the Lockerbie bombing or even the terror in Northern Ireland. Yet I do think that as long as we are hell-bent on getting compensation and punishment for the offenders there remains a profound isolation and estrangement in our inner selves.

Note that what is needed is *more* than compensation. Forgiveness should not be seen as an alternative to justice and reconciliation. Rather, it should operate within that framework.

The meaning of Matthew 6:12

Christians often repeat Jesus’ words known to us as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ (Matthew 6:9-13). Its fifth petition is most commonly quoted as, ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we

forgive those who trespass against us.’ Superficially, the meaning of these words seem quite straight forward. For many these words are fundamental to an understanding of what it means to be Christian. Yet there is no clear consensus as to the significance and application of these words.

Before assessing the relevance, if any, of Matthew 6:12 to today’s world, two questions need to be carefully examined: (i) what are the precise details of this particular verse and (ii) how does the larger context affect those details. The larger context is here taken to be not the Lord’s Prayer alone, but the whole of the Sermon on the Mount (*ie* Matthew 5:1-7:29).

Matthew 6:12 in detail

While the Greek text behind this verse is straight forward with no major variations in the different sources, a precise translation is difficult to arrive at because the underlying language is not Greek but Aramaic, the language Jesus himself spoke. This not only raises questions as to the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus, but also gives important clues as to his own understanding of these words.

The first of these issues is seen in the word ἀφῆκαμεν, which is the first person plural aorist form of ἀφίημι (the voluntary release of a person or thing over which one has legal or actual control, to release from guilt or punishment). Traditionally, ἀφῆκαμεν has been translated by the English perfect tense, ‘... we forgive’ (*cf* AV), and sees God’s forgiveness and ours as parallel, but independent, activities – he forgives us *and* we forgive others. Others (*eg* Jeremias) have suggested the reason for this unusual tense is that Matthew has had to translate the Aramaic present-perfect tense, which has no equivalent in Greek. In this case the best English translation of the original would be, ‘... we also herewith forgive’ (Jeremias 1967 pp.92-3), that is, we are forgiven *therefore* we forgive others. However this introduces an unnecessary element into the process of understanding. Perhaps the simplest translation would be to use the perfect tense and so read, ‘... we have forgiven’ (*cf* RSV and NIV). The problem (as many would see it) with this translation is theological, in that it gives the appearance of contingency to God’s forgiveness – he forgives us *because* we forgive others. Many would want to see forgiveness as unconditional, rooted in the completed

work of Christ on the cross. This particular translation, however, is reinforced by the parenthesis following the prayer (vv 14f, *cf* 18:21-35).

The second issue is related to the use of *οφειλημα*, translated as ‘trespass’ in the Book of Common Prayer and the AV. It is an unusual word to use in such a context. The more common New Testament word for a wrong is *αμαρτια* (used by Luke in his version of this prayer in Luke 11:4). The normal meaning of *οφειλημα* is a debt, something which is owed, as of wages for work done. It is, in turn, a probable translation of the Aramaic word *hoba*, which means both a debt, in the same sense as the Greek, and a wrong done. On a number of occasions Jesus used this ambiguity in his teaching (see Luke 7:36-50) to stress that any wrong-doing is a debt owed to some one. This emphasis may be seen by comparing other images of wrong-doing in the Bible. In particular, wrong as law-breaking, that is the outward and wilful breaking of a legally binding code of conduct, and wrong as rebellion, that is an attitude of mind and heart that seeks its own purposes and disregards others, particularly God.

A proposed translation of this verse is, therefore, ‘And release us from guilt and punishment that is due to us for the wrongs we have done to others, as we have released those who have done wrong to us.’ Note also the following. Firstly, forgiveness does not stand alone or separated from the rest of the prayer. This petition is linked to both the preceding and subsequent petitions by ‘and’ (Gk. *και*). Forgiveness is to be seen as part of a larger experience which includes provision and protection. Secondly, it is people who are forgiven, not events. By referring to wrong-doing as debt it is shown that there is no such thing as a victimless wrong. Thirdly, in some way forgiveness is conditional. Such an interpretation does not strike at the nature of God – he remains forgiving (*cf* Nehemiah 9:17) even if he does not always forgive. It is rather that the unforgiving lack the ability either to accept or extend forgiveness. Each of these points will be considered later.

Matthew 6:12 in context

The question remains as to the relevance of this verse. Briefly considering the wider context, in this case the Sermon on the Mount, it is not necessary to be detained by questions of the unity of chapters 5, 6 and 7, nor its relationship to Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49). The main concern is with the author/editor’s intention as a

guide to understanding this passage. There have been a number of suggestions as to how this should be done. Carson (1984 pp.126f) lists the following as the most important:

1. An exposition of law designed to drive men to cry for grace.
2. A moral road map toward social progress.
3. A set of moral standards used catechetically within Matthew's community.
4. A set of ethical demands, applying to all believers in every age and every circumstance.
5. A summons to personal decision and authentic faith.
6. An 'interim ethic' to remain in force till the soon-expected consummation.
7. An intensifying or radicalising of OT moral law.
8. Law for the millennial kingdom first offered by Jesus to the Jews.

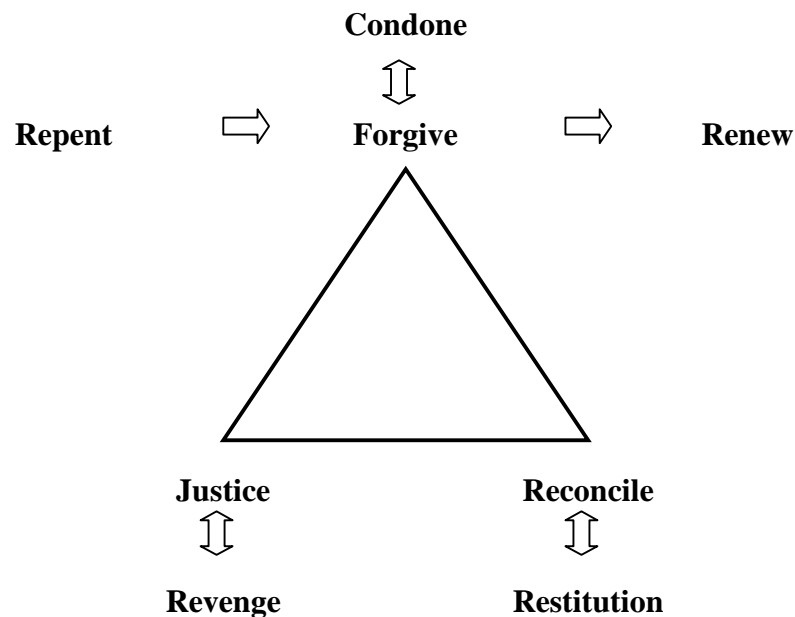
All of these attempts to give a theological framework to the Sermon on the Mount fall short in some way as none of them take the integrity of the passage, and indeed the whole of Matthew, seriously. Matthew himself gives us the information we require for he states that Jesus delivered this sermon to 'his disciples' (ch 5:1). France (1985 p.106) says,

The Sermon thus makes no claim to present an ethic for all men; indeed much of it would make no sense as a universal code. It is concerned not with ethics in general, but with discipleship, with man in his obedience and devotion to God, not with a pattern for society. To interpret it legalistically as a set of rules is to miss the point; it represents a demand more radical than any legislator could conceive, going far beyond what human nature can meet, a demand for perfection (ch 5:48).

If Matthew 6:12 is to be seen as part of the whole sermon, it also must be addressed to the community of faith. It is not a command to all men to forgive, nor yet an ideal for society to strive for. It is, rather, a call to the community of faith to live by a radical alternative. Jesus is in effect saying to his disciples, 'You see how the world acts; it is not to be like that with you.' (*cf* Luke 22:25f.)

Forgiveness in context

Forgiveness does not stand in a vacuum, but must be seen as one of a number of Biblical themes, which raises a number of questions: What is the relationship between forgiveness, justice and reconciliation? Is the progression of repentance to forgiveness to a renewed life inevitable? What are the consequences of not forgiving? Some of these relationships may be represented diagrammatically:



It will be seen from this that forgiveness is not straightforward. It is inextricably linked with a number of theological, ethical and psychological concepts. The issue is further complicated by confusion as to the meaning of these concepts. To many, forgiveness is synonymous with condoning a wrong done, a plea for justice may be replaced with a cry for revenge and reconciliation is seen to equate with restitution or compensation. If these issues are not faced forgiveness will be seen as either meaningless or impossible. The offended party will always feel a victim, if not to the offender then to a system that called on him or her to continue to suffer some form of loss. The offender, on the other hand, will feel he or she has ‘got away with it’.

A further context, which cannot easily be shown in a static diagram, is that forgiveness is not so much an event as a process. Many minor wrongs of no real consequence may be shrugged off with a ‘Never mind, I forgive you’, but deep hurts are not so easily passed over. Those who have suffered such hurt tell of the need to forgive

the wrong doer by a conscious act of will each day. This is not to say that the original act of forgiveness was ineffective but recognises that change takes time.

Finally, forgiveness must also be seen in the wider context of our post-modern society. Forgiveness, at least in its Biblical sense, does not fit well with into our current world view. As Gregory Jones (1995 p.37) says,

If all that ultimately matters is individual autonomy, then forgiveness and reconciliation – which are designed to foster and maintain community – are of little importance. If all that we evaluate are isolated acts rather than people's character, then forgiveness – which enacts and reflects a quality of character and thus cannot be confined to an 'act' that people do – is relatively insignificant. If we are on a path of inevitable progress, then there is little need – as forgiveness requires – to reflect on the past and attempt to reclaim it through repentance. If what ultimately matters is the successful use of technique, then we will only deploy forgiveness if it is useful to further control and is easily quantifiable – perhaps through a series of easily identified 'steps'.

He goes on to say, 'Though forgiveness should be at the heart both of Christian theology and the practices of Christian community and life, it has largely been co-opted by the therapeutic grammar of modern Western life.'(1995 p.47) Indeed, forgiveness is a surprisingly popular concept. Numerous self-help groups, counselling services and web sites exist to encourage forgiveness in a wide variety of situations. Unfortunately, a large number of these (though by no means all) encourage forgiveness with no reference to other considerations. For example, one web site gives the following advice.

Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself. It is not something you do for someone else. It is not complicated. It is simple. Simply identify the situation to be forgiven and ask yourself, 'Am I willing to waste my energy further on this matter?' If the answer is, 'No' then that's it! All is forgiven. (James 2001?)

Similarly, many counsellors (this author included) have had to work through deep issues with people who have been encouraged to forgive without reference to the whole situation, either by well meaning friends or pastors, or by a superficial understanding of Biblical passages such as Matthew 6:12 and 14f.

Such failure to see forgiveness in its wider context, as part of a larger process, rather than just a single event, inevitably leads to further misunderstanding. Together with a misunderstanding as to the basic nature of forgiveness, this has led to many objections being raised concerning forgiveness.

The problem of forgiveness

Having given some consideration to the Matthean call to forgive and how this forgiveness sits in context with other concepts, it is now possible to consider some objections to the idea of forgiveness. These may be broadly divided into two groups, psychological and ethical.

Psychological objections

With some noticeable exceptions (eg Enright and North 1998) few modern psychologists have much to say on the subject of forgiveness. To be sure, words like forgiveness, guilt and sin are more at home in the theological rather than psychological areas of life. From the time of Freud and Jung these concepts have been described in relational and developmental terms. In recent decades psychology, following the lead of popular writers such as Tom Harris and Eric Berne, has sought to develop ‘positive’ approaches to human behaviour. These positive approaches would see the natural state of mankind as ‘I’m OK – you’re OK’. As Harris (1973 p.219) says, ‘What he does is not the primary problem; it is rather what he considers himself to be. I am convinced that we must acknowledge that this state ... is the primary problem in our lives.’

The danger of these approaches is that forgiveness is seen as a ‘negative’ response to personal injustice, equated with denial. Forgiveness, therefore, risks avoiding facing up to past hurts and so blocks the path to self-acceptance and wholeness. Furthermore, forgiveness is often seen as a ‘weak’ response to wrongs, whether perceived or actual. Because of the emphasis placed on questions of self-image, self-worth and self-fulfilment by many psychologists, including some Christian therapists¹, attention has centred on the psychological causes of alienation and

¹ See, for example, publications from the Westminster Pastoral Foundation

disorientation, largely rejecting the theological concepts of forgiveness, sin and guilt as unhelpful at best and at times a threat to personal development.

However, far from being either a negative or weak response, forgiveness confronts situations head on, both the wrongs done and reactions to them. Only when the full implications of a wrong are faced can forgiveness take place. As Coate (1994 p.83) says, 'The move towards forgiveness starts from an awareness of deep personal need.' Forgiveness is, therefore, both a positive and strong response. It is positive because it seeks not only to turn away from, but also to turn toward, something. It replaces anger and bitterness with compassion and hope. It is a strong response because it requires a commitment on the part of the injured party to face the wrong done and meet it with a constructive attitude. As Mahatma Gandhi is attributed as saying, 'The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.'

Finally, because it should be seen as a process rather than an event, forgiveness does not close off past events. It was Shakespeare who made the king say, 'Pray you now, forget and forgive.' (*King Lear*, Act 4, scene 7) These words have passed into modern culture but a brief reflection will show them to be untenable. Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat their errors and so nothing will change. One counsellor, specialising in the area of child sexual abuse says, 'Forgiveness is the only way in which we can both simultaneously embrace and be free of our pasts.' (Hancock and Mains 1988 p.69) Forgiveness remembers, but refuses to allow the memory of past wrong to control the present or the future.

Ethical objections

Forgiveness has also been challenged on ethical grounds. Firstly, it is claimed, forgiveness refuses to take wrong seriously. If one person steps on another's toe and apologises the other may answer, 'That's all right.' meaning, 'It doesn't matter.' But if someone deliberately stamps on another's toe and the other were to respond in the same way they would be ignoring the seriousness of the situation by failing to acknowledge that there is something wrong with their relationship.(Baker 1995 pp.4-5) As Susan Hylen (2000 p.148) says, 'The concept of forgiveness loses its power when it is seen as condoning rather than limiting or healing sin.' It is because of this particular criticism that many find it difficult to forgive, or rather to believe that forgiveness should be

confined to events of no consequence. But does, 'I forgive you' really mean the same as 'It doesn't matter'? This is not the image to be seen in the Gospel account of the death of Jesus. Here God says very loudly that it most certainly does matter. Forgiveness, from a Christian perspective, is, quite literally, a matter of life and death. It is by taking wrong seriously that forgiveness is given meaning.

The second ethical objection to forgiveness is that it is impossible. Very few wrongs are between two people only and one person has no right to forgive, or imply forgiveness, on behalf of another. In this case, Gordon Wilson had no right to forgive those who murdered his daughter, Marie, in the bombing of the Enniskillen Remembrance Day Parade in 1987 because only the one wronged (*ie* the daughter) could do so. This is true, in as far as it goes. One can only forgive in as far as one has suffered and lost, but it does not follow that because one cannot forgive everything one cannot forgive anything. This objection is based on the false understanding that forgiveness is the same as 'letting off' or an absolution from guilt. However, 'the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness.' (Jones 1995 p.5)

A third ethical objection to forgiveness is that forgiveness itself is immoral. Forgiveness, it is held, by allowing wrong to go unpunished, blurs the distinction between right and wrong. This is closely connected to the psychological objection that sees forgiveness as weak and a denial the wrong done. It is here more than in any other aspect of forgiveness that a distinction between 'therapeutic' and 'Christian' forgiveness may be drawn. The former, by making no appeal outside of itself, must choose between forgiveness and punishment. It is doubtful that those who insisted on being present at the execution of the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh in an attempt to find closure on past events will find it any easier to put those events behind them.

On the other hand, Christian forgiveness maintains the distinction between right and wrong not by making forgiveness and punishment alternatives but by passing the right to punish to another. When Christians forgive someone who has done them harm they are not saying that this person should not be punished, but rather relinquishing their right to punish them. By forgiving they are, in effect, passing that person over to God, who says, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay.' (Deuteronomy 32:35). This has led to

the further objection that ‘Christian’ forgiveness is no forgiveness at all, simply passing the buck. However, giving up the personal right for revenge and passing the wrongdoer into the hands of another may be seen as a mark of maturity and integrity.

One further ethical objection is that offering forgiveness implies moral superiority. By accepting forgiveness from another there is the tacit acknowledgement by the forgiven that a wrong has been done and that he or she is at fault. However, according to the Matthew 6:12, the ground for forgiving others is not rightness in the face of another’s wrong, but a common, shared wrongness. Indeed, if one cannot accept forgiveness how then can that person forgive, except in a superior, self-righteous way that sees the speck in another’s eye but ignores the plank in its own (Matthew 7:3-5).

‘... as we forgive one another’

Gregory Jones (1995 p.xi) says,

‘While I applaud the growing conviction – or at least the hope that forgiveness can become a means of breaking apart cycles of violence, vengeance, and bitterness, I suggest that the issues need to be more carefully situated within the Christian doctrine of the Triune God.’

This Christian distinctiveness needs to be emphasised if forgiveness is not to be seen simply as a tool of psychology. The distinction between ‘therapeutic’ and Christian forgiveness must be recognised. ‘Christian forgiveness is not a response to the need of sinners to feel good about themselves.’ (Baker 1995 p.7) It is rather the central means whereby broken relationships are restored, primarily between God and mankind but also between people. ‘It stands as the action of God in the face of the sinful behaviour of man, and is based on [the completed work] of Christ.’ (Vorländer 1986 p.701)

Christian forgiveness, therefore, finds its true expression in God’s forgiveness of sinners. Interpersonal forgiveness may be seen as a reflection of this and so cannot stand alone. The relationship between being forgiven by God and forgiving one another finds expression in Psalm 51, a penitential psalm traditionally linked to David’s adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent events. In this prayer two important aspects of forgiveness are seen. The first is that no matter what the wrong done may be, all sin is

considered as an affront to God (v4) which ultimately only he has the power to forgive. Furthermore, forgiveness does not allow the wrong-doer to hide from his actions but confronts him with the painful reality of his life (v3). ‘This is not the fleeting mood of a depressed conscience, but the clear knowledge of a person who, shocked by that knowledge, has become conscious of his or her responsibility... and sees things as they really are.’ (Weiser 1962 p.403)

The second aspect of Christian forgiveness is that it leads to restoration (*eg* v12). Forgiveness is seen as a creative act. ‘This is not a creative work in the sense of creation-out-of-nothing, but a creative work in the sense of bringing order and peace where chaos and hopeless turbulence were before.’ (Tate 1990 p.30) This aspect is not totally absent from secular ideas of forgiveness but whereas for the Christian it is central, therapeutic forgiveness treats it as a (welcome) by-product, secondary to the forgiver’s well being.

It is out of this distinctive experience of God’s forgiveness that Christians are called to forgive one another (*cf* Matthew 18:21-35). The exegesis of Matthew 6:12 above shows that forgiveness does not stand alone but is an integral part of the life of the community of faith. This relational aspect of forgiveness, seen in people being forgiven, not events, brings the community together in a shared experience, for all have sinned and all need to be forgiven and so all need to forgive. Finally, forgiveness is conditional, but this contingency does not affect the giving of forgiveness, only its receipt, for how can the unrepentant, that is one who does not recognise the wrongness of his or her acts, receive forgiveness. But just as God is the one who forgives, so the community of faith, as those called to follow the Forgiving One, are to be forgiving. That forgiveness is not always received does not alleviate the need to be forgiving.

Conclusion

There are great difficulties inherent in applying forgiveness, particularly in situations where the wrong is on-going, such as domestic violence² and child abuse³, or in ‘high-

² For the part played by forgiveness in cases of domestic violence see Hylan 2000 together with Jones comments on the application of forgiveness in similar circumstances (Jones 1995 ch 1).

³ *cf* Hancock and Mains 1998.

profile' cases such as popular attitudes toward Myra Hindley⁴. However, if the above interpretation of Matthew's Gospel is correct and the theology that grows out of this interpretation is sound, then it may be hoped that the practice, no matter how difficult it may be to apply, will also be correct.

Jesus' model of forgiveness is of the highest standard, a call to perfection no less. In it he offers, through the witness and practice of his community, a radical alternative to all secular theories of forgiveness. Of course, as one observer has noted, 'Christian congregations are often places where there seems to be a lot to hide because people fear the condemnation of their friends or their pastors.' (Oliver 2000 p.4) The reality of the situation does not alter the requirement, and Christians must be the first to change.

While it is true that everyone may benefit from the giving and receiving of forgiveness and many currently intractable situations would be altered for the better by its application, this essay has attempted to show that forgiveness in its deepest sense can only be experienced in the context of a relationship with God. 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' is, therefore, not a command to all the world to forgive. It is rather a call to the community of faith to live a different way. This radical alternative then becomes a sign to the world that there is another way of doing things.

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⁴ The history of the Moors Murderers, especially Myra Hindley, is an interesting study in the application and lack of forgiveness. This story, and the way it has affected many people, can be traced through a number of web-sites, particularly <http://newssearch.bbc.co.uk/> search = Hindley

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