“Grace, Gratitude, and Forgiveness”

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***Introduction***

American culture cries out for greater forgiveness. A brief scan of an internet news site or daily newspaper illustrates again and again and again how rare it is for people, communities, and even churches to live at peace with each other. Offenses, whatever their magnitude, lead to broken relationships, violence, and even murder.

For instance, in the United States conventional wisdom holds that approximately half as many couples get divorced each year as get married. While that number is often contested, recent studies by Sheela Kennedy and Steven Ruggles of the University of Minnesota demonstrate that the divorce rate among persons over age thirty-five has doubled over the last two decades. They furthermore found that of Americans aged 60-65 who had ever been married in 2010, nearly 45% of them had been divorced at least once, while only 17% of persons in that same age bracket had been divorced at least once in 1970. [[1]](#footnote-1) Although many factors lead to this dramatic increase, the lack of forgiveness after various kinds of offenses is the foundation out of which these factors grow.

In the church world, broken relationships have led to the splintering of previously strong denominations. One example is my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Beginning in 2011, the denomination has taken stands on sexual integrity with respect to ordination and marriage which have led to a break between the conservative and progressive wings of the church. Hundreds of churches have left the denomination rather than seek reconciliation within the body of Christ.

Grievances without forgiveness, tragically, have led to escalating violence throughout American society. One major American city has seen shootings mar 2014 holiday weekends. In the city of Chicago, Illinois, shootings left nine dead and sixty injured over the July 4th Independence Day weekend,[[2]](#footnote-2) while Easter weekend saw similar statistics: forty shot and nine killed.[[3]](#footnote-3) School shootings are another measure of violence in the United States; by some measures seventy-four school shootings occurred between the Sandy Hook elementary school massacre in December 2012 and June 2014, an average of 1.37 shootings per week.[[4]](#footnote-4) A society in which primary, secondary, and college students face gun violence on a more than weekly basis is a culture in deep need of reconciliation.

At the heart of each of these examples are individuals whose relationships with others have been broken, at times irretrievably. In this paper I offer a response to the lack of forgiveness embodied in these and other situations from a Reformed theological perspective. Rather than simply focusing on the ethical command to forgive (see, for example Matthew 18:21-22, where Jesus commands Peter, and us, to forgive our offenders seventy-seven times), I will use the theological construct of grace and gratitude to explore first God’s forgiveness of our offenses, before moving onto how our gratitude for this forgiveness can motivate us to forgive those who offend us. Along the way I will draw on the work of theologians, ethicists, and Bible scholars Charles Wiley, Brian Gerrish, Gregory Jones, and Dale Bruner, as well as explore scriptures from Psalms, Matthew, Romans, and Second Corinthians.

I write from the context of the North American church, and, in particular, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This is a largely white, largely middle- and upper-middle-class church which seeks to move beyond these current categories. For myself and many members of the church, the violence facing parts of society in the United States and throughout the world rarely comes close to home, though the lack of reconciliation impacts each of us in large and small ways. I also look almost exclusively at forgiveness at an interpersonal, rather than societal or corporate, level.

The paper begins with a discussion of grace and gratitude: its history and place within the Reformed tradition. I move next to a brief exploration of God’s gracious, undeserved forgiveness of us (from Romans 3 and Psalm 103), before linking this forgiveness with our response to forgive others (Matthew 18:21-35). The remainder of the paper explores what shape our grateful response might take, exploring Matthew 5, 2 Corinthians 5, and Romans 12.

My prayer is that the insights applicable to my own context expressed in this paper will, by the power of the Holy Spirit, also connect with you who read this work out of the Rwandan and African context. With this prayer offered, I turn now to a discussion of grace and gratitude.

***Grace and Gratitude***

In an unpublished paper, Presbyterian theologian Charles Wiley draws on centuries of insight when he states crisply,

What emerges from the core of our identity that compels us to practice Christian community, proclaim the gospel, and work for justice? *Grace and gratitude.* Grace and gratitude succinctly and winsomely describes the *charism*, the gift of the Reformed tradition.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Wiley goes on to appreciate the various charisms of other Christian traditions before stating, “Grace and gratitude is our gift to the wider church.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In recent decades, the theologian who has most significantly explored the twin themes of grace and gratitude is Brian Gerrish, professor emeritus of the University of Chicago. His book (whose main title is unsurprising), *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*, looks into Calvin’s writings to discover how the Swiss theologian’s perspective on the Lord’s Supper permeates his basic theology of God’s graciousness and our grateful response.

In this book, Gerrish draws on Calvin to write that the Eucharist “is a gift of God, but—like every gift—it is also an invitation to give thanks.”[[7]](#footnote-7) At greater length, Calvin encapsulates the interplay between grace and gratitude at the Lord’s Table in this way:

In [the Eucharist] we both are spiritually fed by the liberality of the Lord and also give him thanks for his kindness. . . . In this sacrament . . . the Lord recalls the great bounty of his goodness to our memory and stirs us up to acknowledge it; and at the same time he admonishes us not to be ungrateful for such lavish liberality, but rather to proclaim it with fitting praises and to celebrate it by giving thanks.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Gerrish broadens this view of the Lord’s Supper into a much wider theological construct, writing,

What becomes clearer in the final edition of Calvin’s *Institutes* is that the father’s liberality and his children’s answering gratitude, or lack of it, is not only the theme of the Lord’s Supper but a fundamental theme, perhaps the most fundamental theme, of an entire system of theology.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Not surprisingly, this fundamental theme is present in many of the confessions included in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Confessions*. For instance, the Second Helvetic Confession affirms that we are “Justified by grace through faith in Christ and not through any good works, yet we do not think that good works are of little value and condemn them. We perform these works not “so that we may earn eternal life, . . . nor for ostentation, . . . nor for gain, . . . but for the glory of God, . . . to *show gratitude to God*, and for the profit of our neighbor.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adds that “In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives.”[[11]](#footnote-11) More generally, the Heidelberg Catechism’s three-part structure (“of man’s misery,” “of man’s redemption,” and “thankfulness”) might alternatively be called “guilt,” “grace,” and “gratitude.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The French Baptismal Liturgy, though not included in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s *Book of Confessions* or *Book of Common Worship*, proclaims beautifully the themes of grace and gratitude:

For you, little one,

the Spirit of God moved over the waters at creation,

and the Lord God made covenants with his people.

It was for you hat the Word of God became flesh

and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

For you, [*name*], Jesus Christ suffered death

crying out at the end, “It is finished!”

For you Christ triumphed over death,

rose in newness of life,

and ascended to rule over all.

All of this was done for you, little on,

though you do not know any of this yet.

But we will continue to tell you this good news

until it becomes your own.

And so the promise of the gospel is fulfilled:

“We love because God first loved us.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Finally, Karl Barth further claims and explicates the fundamental nature of grace and gratitude to the Reformed faith when he writes in the *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 “Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning. . . . If the essence of God as the God of humans is grace, then the essence of humans as God’s people, that which is proper to and demanded of them in covenant with God, is simply thanks.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Grace and gratitude, then, is fundamental to the Reformed faith. Its focus on God’s goodness toward us and our thankful response back heavenward shapes our understanding of both theology and ethics. It impacts everything from why a preacher would spend time working on a sermon if the Spirit graciously makes it God’s Word (regardless of the preacher’s activity)[[15]](#footnote-15) to why Christians work for environmental health (in gratitude for the creation God has given us to steward).

In the rest of this paper, however, we will consider how grace and gratitude is the foundation to forgiveness and reconciliation after an offense. As Colossians 3:13b puts it, “Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”[[16]](#footnote-16) We turn first to the question of God’s forgiving us.

***God’s Gracious Forgiveness of Human Sin***

Romans 3; Psalm 103

The primordial history of Genesis 1-3 asserts that God created humanity in the divine image and set us in a garden where we would have everything that we could ever want or need. Rather than responding in gratitude for this grace, we turned away, demanding a life without limits or guidance. In the words of Karl Barth, this lack of gratitude is, simply, sin:

Only gratitude can respond to grace; this correspondence cannot fail. Its failure, ingratitude, is sin, transgression. Radically and basically, all sin is simply ingratitude—man’s refusal of the one but necessary thing proper to and required of him with whom God has graciously entered into covenant.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This sin has permeated humankind since our earliest days. In Romans 3, Paul first states that God is faithful even though Israel (and humanity) has been faithless in return (Rom 3:3-4). He moves on to quote Jewish scripture after Jewish scripture[[18]](#footnote-18) to demonstrate that “all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin” (Rom 3:9b). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The conclusion is damning: sin taints each of us and holds us captive.

The amazing, great, and gracious good news of the Gospel is that God does not leave us in our sin. Despite our sin, we can now be “justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith” (Rom 3:24-25). This redemption is pure grace: Jesus does not redeem us because we have finally gotten our act together, or because we deserve it in any way, or because our lives were not so bad after all. No, Jesus redeems us despite our faithlessness which could by all rights separate us from God. This free gift is by definition grace: unearned and undeserved, yet at the same time priceless.

God has declared this forgiveness of our offenses since our disobedience in the garden, with Psalm 103 serving as a prototypical example. This hymn of praise is filled with words of grace that describe all that God has done for us: healing all our diseases, redeeming our life from the Pit, crowning us with steadfast love, satisfying us with good as long as we live, and working vindication and justice for all who are oppressed (Ps 103:2-6).

Most central to this psalm, however, is a declaration of God’s forgiveness of our sin:

The Lord is merciful and gracious,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always accuse,

nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins

nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,

so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west,

so far he removes our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion for his children,

so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

For he knows how we were made;

he remembers that we are dust. (Ps 103:8-14)

Again, God graciously extends these benefits to us despite our sin. In fact, Ps 103:8 is a sentence repeated consistently throughout the scriptures, and it first pops up at a very surprising moment in Israel’s history. One might think that the first time it is proclaimed would be when Israel was on its best behavior. Perhaps while Adam and Eve were in the Garden before the snake came onto the scene…or maybe when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were standing up for their faith in the fiery furnace…or maybe when Jonah came to his senses in the belly of the whale.

However, the first time God’s goodness is proclaimed in this way comes just after the Israelites made the golden calf (Exodus 24).[[19]](#footnote-19) Moses returns from 40 days with God on the mountain and finds the Israelites worshiping an idol, rather than the One who had led them out of slavery in Egypt. In anger Moses destroys the tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. Two chapters later, after Moses has spent time with the Divine in the tabernacle, Moses makes new tablets and God passes before him to proclaim,

The Lord, the Lord,

A God merciful and gracious,

Slow to anger,

And abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

Keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,

Forgiving iniquity and transgression of sin. (Exodus 34:6-7)

The Israelites did not first hear that God was compassionate and gracious when they were at their best. Rather, they heard that God was slow to anger and abounding in love when they were at their worst. They heard that God forgave their sins just after they were doing most what God didn’t want them to be doing: putting their trust in an idol.

God forgives our sin as a gracious gift in Jesus Christ. This grace leads to a grateful response, as we will see in the next section of this paper.

***Linking God’s Gracious Forgiveness with our Grateful Response***

Matthew 18:21-35

As mentioned earlier, Colossians 3:13 challenges us “Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Matthew 18:21-35, often called the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, finds Jesus making this same point in the form of a story of a man who must have sold himself into slavery because he could not pay off his debt. 10,000 talents is worth around $3.4 billion at today’s minimum wage in the United States.[[20]](#footnote-20) The king forgives him for this debt that he could never repay.

Next we readers discover that another slave owes the first slave a debt of 100 denarii, or about $5,800 at today’s minimum wage in the United States. The first slave refuses to forgive him—sinfully refuses, if we remember Barth’s statement that ingratitude is simply sin by another name. Jesus exaggerates these amounts to make his point: because God has forgiven us for countless sins that we could never pay back, we should forgive others.[[21]](#footnote-21) Jesus tells the parable to help us understand why we need to forgive…and to give us some help in actually doing so.

This help comes in the shape of perspective. We often get so focused on ourselves and how we’ve been hurt that we start to lose perspective. Yet remembering how much God has forgiven us helps us to be more forgiving to others. Our sin could separate us from God, and we could never pay the price for this sin. Amazingly, God forgives us when we ask for pardon. No matter what we’ve done or how serious we think they must be.

That’s great news, but it’s not the only news in the story. We remind ourselves of the other news every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer and say, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Somehow God forgiving us is tied up with our forgiving others. Jesus closes the parable with very difficult words. The king turns over the unmerciful slave to the jailers to be tortured for all eternity. Then Jesus says “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Mt 18:35). In other words, if we live lives which deny the gratitude which can and should come from God’s forgiving us, we are living lives of sin. This sin has tragic ramifications which cannot be ignored.

However, Jesus shares this parable so that we will not have to face these deadly implications. Dale Bruner explains that Jesus has confidence in us and that his parable can change our behavior so that the warnings about hell never have to come true.[[22]](#footnote-22) The possibilities work like this: we sin and ask forgiveness; God forgives us. We then have a choice to make: do we become ungrateful and resist this forgiveness of others? If we sin in this way, the ramifications are tragic. Yet if we let Jesus’ words in this parable change us, we can gain a better perspective and respond in gratitude.

As James Montgomery Boice points out, it is not that forgiving others in and of itself saves us. That would mean what we do is what saves us. The Bible consistently states that we cannot be saved by our actions. It’s our faith in Christ which saves us. What this parable points out, though, is that if we have the kind of faith that Christ calls us to have, we do indeed forgive others. By forgiving others, we show that our faith has penetrated our whole being. We’ll show that our faith isn’t just something that we believe, but something that changes the way we live.[[23]](#footnote-23)

If the parable really does change our lives, we will remember how much God has forgiven us, and we will begin to forgive others who have hurt us. Instead of just working to treat people the way that we would like them to treat us, the Spirit will give us a new perspective—and we will start treating people the way that God has treated us. In the remaining sections of this paper, we will look at some concrete ways for us to do just this.

***The Shape of our Grateful Response to God’s Gracious Forgiveness***

In this section of the paper, I will look at three separate passages (Matthew 5:21-25, 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2, and Romans 12:1-2, 14-21) to explore what shape our gratitude might take. After all, simply knowing that our best response to God’s forgiveness is our forgiving others is insufficient to help us know how we might best work toward forgiving them. Knowing that this reconciliation is difficult to achieve, I write in this section of the guidance from the scriptures about how we might best live out our gratitude for what God has done for us by grace through Jesus Christ.

Out of Gratitude, Act with Urgency (Matthew 5:21-25)

In the section of the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5:21-25, Jesus warns that if we are angry with a brother or sister, we will be liable for judgment and even to the “hell of fire.” This warning is so serious that Jesus tells us that if we are coming to the altar in worship, and realize that we have broken relationships, we should leave the altar, go to be reconciled, and then come back. Otherwise, we will be thrown into prison. With this warning, however, come some explicit instructions for how our gratitude for God’s gracious forgiveness might take shape.

Commentator Bruner explains that this passage includes the first of six so-called “Antitheses” (“But I say to you’s”) which stretch through the end of Matthew 5.[[24]](#footnote-24) Five of the six of these share the same structure: the old commandment, Jesus’ new command (which is not actually an antithesis, but instead an intensification of the earlier command), and little steps of obedience for acting out this new command. These little steps are ways that Jesus seeks to shape our actions of gratitude for God’s gracious forgiveness—that our response might be urgently prioritized and undertaken.

For our passage at hand, the pattern is as follows:

1. The old commandment

*v. 21 You have heard it said, . . . “You shall not murder.”*

1. Jesus’ new command

*v. 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment…*

1. Little steps of obedience.

*v. 23-4 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.[[25]](#footnote-25)*

Jesus commands us to have urgency in seeking reconciliation with each other when our relationships are broken. The first kind of urgency is one of significance—that the broken relationship is important enough that it is even more significant than leaving an offering at the altar.

The altar is a place of sacrifice—a sacred space where the Jewish people gave things up to God. They surrendered not just those things which were unimportant to them, but those things which were of utmost importance to them.[[26]](#footnote-26) The altar in Jesus’ time was a means of reconciliation with God. His challenge for worshipers to leave the altar and prioritize reconciliation with others as a step toward reconciliation with God shows the urgency with which we must approach making amends with those with whom we have a broken relationship.

Christians today do not offer sacrifices at an altar in worship, yet when we are at our best, we bring our whole selves to worship and offer them up to our Lord. In the American context, however, we often go to church as an escape from all the troubles of our lives. Quotes such as the following are not unusual: “At church I get to forget about everything else going on outside. It’s a time for me get refocused and start my week off right, without worrying about everything else that’s going on in the world. It’s a great escape from all the pressures all around me.”

Yet Jesus gives the hard work of reconciliation an urgency of significance that calls this attitude into question. Rather than coming to worship as an escape from the broken relationships in our lives, he calls us to remember those broken relationships, even (and especially) at worship. He challenges us to prioritize our relationship with others and couple them to our relationship with God. Reconciliation on earth is related to reconciliation on heaven, and therefore has the first kind of urgency to which we must pay attention: the urgency of significance.

The second type of urgency highlighted in this passage is an urgency of chronology: Jesus tells his listeners to take action right away, before they leave their offering at the altar. They are not to ponder when they might approach their family member to discuss past offenses. They are not to make plans about how they might get in touch with their former best friend at some other time. They are not to leave Jesus’ counsel to work toward reconciliation in the back of their mind and think about it perhaps the next time they make their way to the temple.

No, Jesus calls them to work for reconciliation today. At this very hour. *Now*. Forgiveness is more important than any other commitments, than any other obligations. Although present-day Christians do not celebrate live sacrifices at an altar, we cannot escape the chronological urgency Jesus imposes here. An analogy might be that when we think of someone with whom we have a broken relationship, we must seek them out immediately, before the next time we head to worship. We cannot put peace off until it is convenient or until we have gathered the courage to deal with the situation. A life of gratitude for what God has done for us through the grace of forgiveness moves urgently to embrace others who have hurt us or whom we have hurt.

In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus guides and shapes our grateful response to God’s gracious pardon. In the next two parts of the paper, I will explore what the apostle Paul has to say to mold our response.

Out of Gratitude, Forgive and Remember (2 Corinthians 5:14-6:1)

An English proverb which has been in circulation since the 1500’s states that we should “forgive and forget,” which *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms* defines as “both pardon and hold no resentment concerning a past event.” This dictionary uses the phrase in a sentence as follows: “After Meg and Mary decided to forgive and forget their differences, they became good friends.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Unfortunately, simply “forgiving and forgetting” is a difficult, if not impossible, way to respond in gratitude to God’s gracious forgiveness. It seems to deny all of the emotions wrapped up in the hurt that we feel after an offense. It risks downplaying the pain that has caused the break in the first place. Most importantly, it suggests a pattern starkly different from the one we see in 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:1.

In this passage, Paul tells us that out of gratitude we should no longer live for ourselves but rather but for Jesus who died for us. This means that for anyone in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, and the new has come. In Christ God reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry and message of reconciliation. This means that we are Jesus’ ambassadors, asking others to be reconciled to God as we ourselves have been reconciled. The passage concludes with a clear exposition of grace-and-gratitude: “As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain” (2 Cor 6:1).

Particularly important to countering the idea of “forgive and forget” is Paul’s statement that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against us” (2 Cor 5:19). The reconciliation which God accomplished in Christ did not simply whitewash away our sin. God did not simply act as if these sins had not happened or that they had no impact. Instead, God came as Jesus Christ and died upon the cross, painfully and purposefully, so that the world could be reconciled to himself. The Triune God did not forgive and forget our offenses; instead God held our sin to be so important that Jesus Christ chose the cross to accomplish our reconciliation.

God gives us this reconciliation, and gives us as well the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18). This ministry is our grateful response to the gracious gift of forgiveness. If the ministry follows God’s lead, then we do not seek to forgive and forget, as if the offense never happened or didn’t matter. Instead, we seek to forgive and remember, because our offenses did indeed take place and have significant ramifications. Paul helps us to see that this is a faithful way to shape our grateful response to God’s gift of grace: reconciliation.

In theologian L. Gregory Jones’ book *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* explores how forgiving and remembering imitates the divine act of forgiveness, writing that

The overarching context of a Christian account of forgiveness is the God who lives in Trinitarian relations of peaceable, self-giving communion and thereby is willing to bear the cost of forgiveness in order to restore humanity to that communion in God’s eschatological Kingdom. That is, *in the face of human sin and evil, God’s love moves toward reconciliation by means of costly forgiveness.[[28]](#footnote-28)*

Forgiveness and pardon was costly to God; our grateful response to this cost is that we take it seriously as well: not by trying to forget quickly what has happened, but by sharing our pain with those who have hurt us. This necessary step moves us closer to reconciliation and restoration of community.

Jones explores Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s concept of cheap grace as opposed to a costly forgiveness—the kind that Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 5-6 and the kind that shapes our own grateful response that works toward reconciliation. Drawing on Bonhoeffer, Jones writes “there is no grace without judgment. Sin cannot be overlooked or forgotten; it must be confronted and judged in the context of forgiveness.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

This means that when someone has hurt us, we must be willing to speak with them about the pain that their action has caused us. Taking these sins seriously means that both the offender and the offendee do not brush off the pain of what has transpired. It may be easier in the short term to act as if nothing serious has happened, but the ministry of reconciliation to which Paul calls us is a ministry of slights which are worth talking about and offenses which merit discussion; a ministry of honesty and difficult conversations.

However, Jones warns us that the tone of these conversations must be one of Christ-like love: “Human sin is forgiven only because it is confronted and judged. But that judgment is wholly in the service of mercy, reconciliation, and new life. . . . Through God’s eschatological judgment of grace, human brokenness is overcome and communion is restored.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

When we speak the truth in love during these difficult conversations, both parties remember the pain that has come as a result of the offense. In our best moments, we remember what has happened carefully, so that we can live into a future which is distinct from the past. When we remember together what has happened, the offender is much less likely to repeat the sin, and the one hurt is more likely to move more urgently toward reconciliation in the future. It is not easy, but by both parties’ remembering the pain that has come before us, a lasting reconciliation and peace is more likely to come.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Of course, it was not easy for Jesus to march to Calvary. But the *Via Dolorosa* brought lasting reconciliation and peace. When we respond to this grace by developing a ministry that forgives and remembers, our grateful response can lead to an enduring restoration of relationships.

Out of Gratitude, Forgive Counter-Culturally (Romans 12)

Forgiving and remembering, or forgiving at all, is counter-cultural in a society that struggles with the lack of reconciliation, anger, and violence I discussed in this paper’s introduction. Apparently this was the case in first century Rome as well, for Paul encourages his readers to resist conformity to the world as we discern the will of God.

Romans 12:1-2 sits at one of the great grace-and-gratitude hinges of all of the books of the Bible. After eleven chapters of describing humanity’s predicament and God’s answer of forgiveness, redemption, and salvation in Jesus Christ, Romans now moves to our grateful response to all of this grace. In these two short verses, Paul appeals us to live sacrificially and to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we can discover God’s will.

Much of the rest of the book of Romans centers on depicting what this transformed life looks like. While he immediately begins (vv. 3-8) by cautioning us not to think too highly of our own place among others because different members of the body of Christ have different gifts. He turns next, however, to a series of commands (vv. 9-21) which return again and again to the theme of reconciliation and forgiveness. Paul writes,

* “bless those who persecute you” (v. 14)
* “live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty” (v. 16)
* “do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . . live peaceably with all” (v. 17)
* “never avenge yourself” (v. 19)
* “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink” (v. 20)
* “do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v. 21)

American culture all too often revolves around trying to get our own way and win every battle. If there’s a disagreement, the culture says that we should escalate. If someone offends us, we give that person a piece of our mind. They respond in kind. The cycle goes on and on, until the pressure builds so much that something finally explodes. American culture tells us that escalation is the way to go.

Paul tells us, on the other hand, that reconciliation is the way to go. It is the proper and fitting response to God’s reconciling us in Jesus Christ. He calls us to a cruciform life where we take concrete steps to forgive, such as those listed just above.

Doing so means going against the culture. While all Christian traditions are counter-cultural at some level, the Amish tradition is one strand of the faith which is particularly so. This family of faith descended from the Anabaptist tradition arising in Europe in 1525. In the 1690s, the Amish became a distinct part of this tradition in Switzerland and part of present-day France. In the present-day United States, the Amish live in communities, separated from the rest of culture. While “buggies, beards, and bonnets” is too dismissive a description of their many counter-cultural practices, it does encapsulate some of the largest differences in this community from American society as they seek to follow Jesus Christ faithfully.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The world got great insight into another aspect of their counter-cultural life together in early October, 2006: their work of reconciliation. One day that month, at a one-room schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, the children began their day by reading a Bible passage. Then they stood and prayed the Lord’s Prayer together. After singing some hymns, they began their lesson. Less than two hours later, Carl Roberts, a neighbor to their community, walked in with a gun. He shot and killed five schoolgirls, and injured five others seriously. He then took his own life.

As stunning as this was, what happened flabbergasted the world even more.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The Amish survivors realized pretty quickly—the afternoon of the shooting as a matter of fact—that there were other victims besides the girls. They started thinking about Roberts’ widow and children—and that they were victims, too, who had lost not just their husband and father, but also their privacy. They had to bear the shame of having their loved one inflict so much pain.

Amos, an Amish minister, said this is what happened that first night:

There were three of us standing around at the firehouse that evening. We just thought we should go and say something to Amy, Roberts’s widow. So first we went to her house, and no one was there. Then we walked over to her grandfather’s house, and no one was there. So we walked over to her father’s house, and she, her children, and her parents were there alone. So we just talked with them for about ten minutes to express our sorrow and told them that we didn’t hold anything against them.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The grace these Amish extended to the Roberts family didn’t end there. When the Roberts family gathered to bury the gunman, more than half of the seventy-five mourners were Amish. They even went so far to take a portion of the money that came flooding in from all parts of the nation, and give it to the shooter’s widow’s family. They continue to proclaim forgiveness in the face of such horror.

The mind struggles to think about how the Amish could ever do this. The loss of a child is so devastating—and to lose a child in these circumstances, even more so. The power of their forgiveness—their ability to respond to God’s grace with gratitude—is certainly unique in the American context. Their grateful response is one that can help to shape our own.

The book *Amish Grace,* written by Donald Kraybill, Steven Nolt, and David Weaver-Zercher assert that the reason that the Amish could forgive in such difficult circumstances is because they had been practicing forgiveness their whole lives. Rather than escalating, they had forgiven in much smaller situations, again and again and again, so when it came time to forgive in a much bigger situation, they were ready. As one bishop reported in the aftermath of the shooting, “Forgiveness was a decided issue. It’s just what we do. . . . It was spontaneous. It was automatic. It was not a new kind of thing.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

The Amish community regularly studies the gospel of Matthew and its many stories of forgiveness (including the two passages discussed earlier in this paper).[[36]](#footnote-36) They focus on forgiving by thinking about Jesus’ words in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Their schoolbooks lift up stories of forgiveness.[[38]](#footnote-38) They only have communion twice a year, and before they take it, they meet together for members to forgive those who have wronged them so that they can have communion together as one community.[[39]](#footnote-39) They fast together ahead of time for God’s help in the work of forgiveness.[[40]](#footnote-40) All of these practice enable them to respond to offenses more easily with gratitude as they rest in the knowledge that God has forgiven them graciously in Jesus Christ.

One significant takeaway from the book comes when the authors quote the work of Everett Worthington. He’s a scholar who has identified two types of forgiveness: decisional, and emotional. Worthington defines decisional forgiveness as “personal commitment to control negative behavior, even if negative emotions continue.” Decisional forgiveness means that we decide not to act in revenge, but it does not necessarily mean that we feel any less unforgiving. However, it does mean we will not act in unkind ways toward the person who hurt us.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Later, emotional forgiveness may come. Worthington defines this latter stage as that time when “negative emotions (resentment, hostility, and even hatred) are replaced by positive feelings.” When our feelings of anger and hostility change, we experience emotional forgiveness—usually a much longer process than decisional forgiveness.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Distinguishing between decisional and emotional forgiveness is another way to shape our own response to God’s gracious pardon of our sins. Linking this insight with other preparation undertaken by the Amish gives us guidance as to how we can most faithfully (and counter-culturally) show our gratitude to God. When combined with forgiving and remembering (taking our offenses seriously just as God took our sin seriously in Jesus Christ) and the sense of urgency with which we can take these offenses, we gain an increasingly developed way in which we can live out our faith and work toward reconciliation and peace in our relationships.

***Conclusion***

In this paper, I have worked to use the theological construct of grace and gratitude to shape an understanding of forgiveness at a primarily personal level. I began by explaining the place of grace and gratitude within the Reformed Tradition, before moving next to exploring one aspect of God’s grace toward us: the forgiveness of our sin. After linking this forgiveness to our own grateful response of forgiving others, I explored some specific ways that our forgiveness of others might be shaped.

While writing this paper, I have never forgotten how very challenging it is to forgive those who have hurt us. Whether the pain caused by the offense is momentary or long-lasting, aching or debilitating, it is sometimes overwhelming to move toward forgiveness.

And yet, it’s what Christians do.

In the aftermath of the Nickel Mines tragedy, the world over was surprised by the Amish faithful’s ability to forgive. In turn, this surprise surprised them. As one Amish man put it, “Why is everybody all surprised? It’s just standard Christian forgiveness; it’s what everybody should be doing.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

By God’s grace, and because of our gratitude, may his tribe increase.

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1. Sheela Kennedy and Stephen Ruggles, “Breaking Up Is Hard to Count: The Rise of Divorce in the United States, 1980-2010,” *Demography* 51, no. 2 (2014), 587-598. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gillian Mohney, “More than 60 Shot, 9 Dead in Chicago’s Bloody Holiday Weekend,” <http://abcnews.go.com/US/violence-mars-chicago-holiday-weekend-50-reportedly-injured/story?id=24446308>, (July 7, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “At least 9 dead, 32 injured in Chicago Easter weekend shootings,” <http://rt.com/usa/dead-injured-chicago-violence-820/>, (April 21, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dylan Stableford, “The 74 school shootings since Sandy Hook,” <https://news.yahoo.com/us-school-shootings-list-134025238.html>, (June 11, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Charles Wiley, “Grace & Gratitude,” (Presbyterian Mission Agency, 2014), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Calvin, *Joannis Calvini opera selecta*, ed. Peter Barth, Wilhelm Niesel, and Doris Scheuner (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1926-52), 1:155; quoted in B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 1:136, 145, 146, 148; quoted in Gerrish, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gerrish, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of the General Assembly, "The Second Helvetic Confession," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part I, The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Ky.: The Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 82 (5.117-118). Emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of the General Assembly, "A Brief Statement of Faith," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part I, The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Ky.: The Office of the General Assembly, 2002), 268 (10.4). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Inherent in the theological concept of grace is our guilt. Without guilt, there is no reason for grace, and a grace which does not take our guilt seriously is cheap, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Eglise Reformee de France, *Liturgie* (Paris: Edition Berger-Levrault, 1955), 202 (translated by Joseph Small). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 4, pt. 1, *Die Lehre von der Versöhnung* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1953), 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Charles B. Hardwick, “Surveying the Sermon: The Use of Listener Questionnaires for More Faithful and Effective Preaching,” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2007), 99-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This and all subsequent scriptures taken from the New Revised Standard Version. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Barth, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Paul quotes (in order) Eccl 7:20, Ps 14:2-3; 5:9, 140:3; 10:7; Is 59:7-8; Ps 36-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. James L. Mays, ed., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching,* vol. 8, *Psalms,* by James L. Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. One denarius is equivalent to one days’ wage. At today’s minimum wage in the United States ($7.25/hour), one denarius equals $58 for an eight-hour day. A talent is equivalent to 6000 denarii, or $348,000. 10,000 talents therefore equal approximately $3.48 billion. 100 denarii are today worth approximately $5,800. See Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook (Matthew 13-28)*, vol. 2 of *Matthew: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Pierre Bonard, *Matthieu*, 2d ed.(Paris: Delachaux et Niestle, 1970), 277; quoted in Bruner, 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bruner, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. James Montgomery Boice, *The Parables of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody Publishing, 1983), 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook (Matthew 1-12)*, vol. 1 of *Matthew: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 207-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “Offering,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, eds. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 603. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Quoted in “Forgive and Forget,” <http://www.answers.com/topic/forgive-and-forget> , (July 11, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), xii. Emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. In reading Catherine Claire Larson, *As We Forgive* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), I have learned about the Rwandan form of justice *gacaca* and the Umuvumu Tree Project, which seem to live out the “forgive and remember” mindset more fully than efforts at restorative justice in the United States. I am incredibly eager to learn more about these efforts during my visit. See Larson, pp. 63-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 22-3. My subsequent description of the events of the Nickel Mines tragedy comes from this work. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The incredible, faithful generosity of the Amish is a sign of the amazing reconciliation seen in Rwanda in the aftermath of the genocide, about which I learned in Larson’s *As We Forgive.* I am very eager to learn more about this reconciliation during my visit. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 114-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 203-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 209 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 248-53 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 261-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 271-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)