



Reflecting on Jesus' teaching on forgiveness from a positive psychological perspective

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In its quest for a non-medical, pro-health approach to psychotherapy, positive psychology surprisingly focuses on concepts that are biblical and specifically present in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. In this paper, (1) the teaching of Jesus in the synoptic tradition on forgiveness will be compared to recent positive psychological approaches (e.g. McCullough & Witvliet); attention will be paid to the (2) contexts of forgiveness (interpersonal and/or political); (3) the (philosophical) positive or negative judgement on forgiveness as a positive notion (e.g. the Buddhist concept of karma, [e.g. Arendt, Deridda, Wolterstorff]); (4) the (perceived) positive role of forgiveness in psychotherapy; (5) the 'techniques' or method of forgiveness when the latter seems difficult; and (6) the relation between forgiveness and religion or spirituality.

'I decided if I don't forgive, I would still be in prison.' (Nelson Mandela)

'If you don't forgive you break the bridge you yourself must travel over.' (Anonymous)

Introduction

One would wonder why the name of God would appear in one of the films which depict the most explicit scenes of violence ever seen in a film. To a certain extent the title, *Only God forgives*, says it all, for in the film rivalry among the characters leads to one brutal killing after another. The film's message is clear – if it is a message and not merely entertainment for the perverse spectator who enjoys seeing explicit violence – the message being that amongst human beings only hatred and rivalry exist, and no love or forgiveness. God may forgive, but if so, his forgiveness has no consequence for curbing human hatred and violence.

In her book, *The human condition*, the German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt,¹ who (apart from philosophy under Martin Heidegger) studied (Christian) theology in Marburg (see Butler-Bowdon 2013:21), remarked that Jesus of Nazareth 'was the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in human affairs' (Arendt [1958] 1998:238). According to Arendt, Jesus' view on forgiveness should not too soon be interpreted in terms of the later 'Christian religious message', being one of those aspects of Jesus' message which 'sprang from experiences in the small and closely knit community of his followers, bent on challenging the public authorities in Israel' (Arendt [1958] 1998:239). In Arendt's distinction between *labour* (with the body to survive), *work* (creation of human art[ifacts]), and *action* (inter-human social and political activity), forgiveness belongs to the third category, indicative of its importance for the well-being of humanity.

Although Christians may be delighted by Arendt's observation, the more so because of her Jewish background, it is an open question whether she is entirely correct in her observation. In the Old Testament, God is indeed the granter of forgiveness to humans, but interpersonal human relationships are more regulated by the *lex talionis* (eye for eye, or reciprocity code, or justice, *tsedaka*) than mutual forgiveness. The term *salach* occurs 46 times in the Old Testament and is always used with God as subject (Stamm 1976:151).² However, in the inter-testamental period the idea of human forgiveness appears in Sirach 28 (dated about 180 BCE), which has a remarkable resemblance with Jesus' teaching in the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:12, 14–15; cf. Table 1). Furthermore, Vermes (1973:67–68) indicated that mutual human forgiveness was advocated in the Qumran community, although God forgiving humans is prominent (Vorländer 1977:1264; cf. 1QS III, 6–12; XI, 3; CD II, 3 III, 18; 1Q HIV, 37; VII,18,30,35). Moreover, we have in the rabbinic tradition, to be dated after Jesus, prescriptions regarding interpersonal forgiveness, often in exposition of texts like Deuteronomy 13:18 and Micah 7:18 (Strack & Billerbeck [1926] 1969:424–426; see also Cohen 1968:228–230). It is also difficult to imagine that no notions on forgiveness

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1. For an excellent exposition of Arendt's view (in Afrikaans) see Schoeman (2004:100–191). The recently released film, entitled *Hannah Arendt*, is also recommended.

2. In the few instances (Gn 50:17; Ex 10:17; 1 Sam 15:25) where human forgiveness seems to be at stake (Joseph asked by his brothers, Pharaoh asks Moses, and Saul Samuel), the expression *nisa awon* ['carry the sin'] is used, and not *salach*.



TABLE 1: Divine and human forgiveness in Sirach and the Lord's Prayer.

Sirach 28:2–5	Sirach 28:2–5	Matthew 6: 12, 14–15	Matthew 6: 12, 14–15
² ἄφες ἄδικηματα τῶ πλησίον σου καὶ τότε δεηθέντος σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου λυθήσονται	² Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.	¹² καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν.	¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
³ ἄνθρωπος ἀνθρώπου συντηρεῖ ὀργὴν καὶ παρὰ κυρίου ζητεῖ ἴασιν	³ Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord?	¹⁴ Ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφήτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος.	¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; (cf. Mk 11:25)
⁴ ἐπ' ἄνθρωπον ὅμοιον αὐτῷ οὐκ ἔχει ἔλεος καὶ περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτοῦ δεῖται	⁴ If one has no mercy toward another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?	¹⁵ ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφήτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οὐδὲ ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν.	¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.
⁵ αὐτὸς σὰρξ ὢν διατηρεῖ μῆτιν τίς ἐξυλάσεται τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτοῦ	⁵ If a mere mortal harbors wrath, who will make an atoning sacrifice for his sins?	-	-

amongst humans exist in Eastern religious traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese) or amongst pagan Western writers (e.g. Aristotle and Seneca, cf. Wolterstorff 2009:209–213). Arendt's view therefore needs some qualification.

However, as Wolterstorff (2009:209; see also Schoeman 2004:174–181) remarks, Arendt's observation is still accurate in the sense that whereas in other traditions forgiveness may play a marginal role, in Jesus' thought it constitutes a – or *the* – systematic place (or central role). As such it can be related to many other aspects of the core of his teaching, especially the alleviation of human suffering, the social acceptance of so-called 'sinners' and outcasts (Scheffler 1993:99–100), and love for the neighbour that extends to include even the enemy. In fact, love for the enemy is inconceivable without forgiveness.

Despite its central role in Jesus' teaching, the notion of mutual human forgiveness sacrificed its prime role in subsequent Christianity. After Jesus' death and deification he himself became the prime message and faith in him and his sacrificial death ensured forgiveness of personal sin and heavenly salvation. As Bultmann said: '*Aus der Verkündiger ist der Verkündigte gemacht*' (1968:1–2; cf. also Vermes 2005:140). Although mainstream Christianity would maintain that there is no contradiction here, and although forgiveness may (and does) often occur in Christian contexts, the history of Christianity testifies (as we all know) to the contrary. Forgiveness does not seem to be the trademark of Christianity, not past, nor in the present. Who doubts this, only needs to make a thorough study of the Crusades; judgements with regard to heresies, church discipline, inquisitions, mutual rivalry amongst Christians and Christian countries³ and the existence of numerous churches (especially in Protestantism).

In what follows I will, in order to be confronted by the radicalism of Jesus' message, briefly summarise Jesus' teaching of forgiveness as found in the synoptic tradition. After that the conscious and 'scientific' reflection on forgiveness by positive psychologists will be scrutinised and related to Jesus' message, the purpose being twofold: to

3. Does one need to be reminded again that the world wars of the 20th century involved so-called Christian countries? Of course one can argue that they were led by their governments. But this is exactly the point: if forgiveness (on the individual as well as the social and political level, as Arendt argues with regard to Jesus) would have been regarded as central in those Christianities, the ordinary people of those countries would not have been fooled into those wars. They would have resisted, as the early Christians (who were much more 'uneducated') resisted violence in the first three centuries (cf. Gollwitzer 1960; Grundmann 1960; Yoder 1972).

confirm Jesus' understanding of forgiveness through added authority that comes by way of positive psychology, and to enrich the latter through the religious understanding that comes from Jesus of Nazareth. Many people in the Western world who are Christian may benefit from this, and it also speaks to a secularised world for which concepts such as forgiveness have become optional. Thereafter some problems regarding forgiveness (or negative critique) will be noted. The method or way to forgiveness will briefly be reflected upon, followed by some concluding remarks.

Forgiveness in the synoptic tradition

That forgiveness is central to Jesus' teaching will be argued by the most prominent historical Jesus scholars⁴ (e.g. Bornkamm 1975:112; Bultmann 1968:24–25; Casey 2010:231; Crossan 1991:436, 1994:47–124; Dunn 2003:589–592; Hahn 2011:63–91; Robinson 2007:252; Sanders 1985:38–40, 200–204; Vermes 1973:35, 58, 67–68; Wright 1996:264–274). Crossan (1991:436) locates it (as expressed in the Lord's prayer, Mt 6:12) amongst the first substrata of the Jesus tradition and his translation (cf. Table 2; cf. 1994:47) focuses on the economic aspect of debt. According to him:

Jesus words about forgiveness are taken too readily in an exclusively religious sense as pertaining only to sins. They pertained originally to debt. Whatever tithes and taxes poor peasants might owe God through Temple or priesthood are cancelled. But they, in turn, must cancel the debts others owe then as well. Forgiveness means all must cancel debts. (Crossan 1994:152; cf. also 2011:143–162)

This interpretation is possible because of the different meanings that are implied by the term *afesis* or the verb *afiemi* (see Bultmann 1933:509–512). It means to release, to let go, to pardon (debts), and is even employed for divorce (the husband letting the wife go). In all but the latter there is a positive aspect that is not merely expressed by 'forgiveness', namely the idea of freedom or liberation (cf. Lk 4:18).

In the gospel tradition John the Baptist was the first to use the term forgiveness (*afesis*) in the sense of God's forgiving of human sins, as implied by the expression 'the baptism for the forgiveness of sins' (Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3). In Luke's paradigmatic Nazareth pericope (Lk 4:18), Jesus (quoting Is 61) refers to the release of captives and the oppressed, which in the Lukan

4. Forgiveness is underplayed or overlooked by some (biased?) present-day constructions; for example, Aslan (2013), Borg (2006) (unexpectedly), Craffert (2008) and, Spong (2007).



TABLE 2: Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:4 and Crossan's translation.

Matthew 6:12	Luke 11:4	Crossan's translation
καὶ ἄφεσ ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν· And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.	καὶ ἄφεσ ἡμῖν τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν, καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.	Forgive the debt owed by another As God forgives that owed by you.

context most probably refers to his exorcisms (freedom from demon possession, see Scheffler 1993:46). The synoptic Gospels are indeed the writings which employ the terms *afesis* and *afiemi* the most (118 from 172 times in the New Testament), indicating its importance in the Jesus tradition.

In the *Benedictus*, John's father refers to political liberation as well as freedom from sins which will be realised by the coming of Jesus (Lk 1:77). In the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–31) we see the concept of forgiveness particularly at work as far as forgiveness by God and its interconnection with human forgiveness is concerned (although *afesis* or *afiemi* is not used). The entire parable is an argument for the unavoidability of human forgiveness in view of the fact that God (the father in the parable) has forgiven humans. The unforgiving attitude of the oldest son (a mirror of those in 1st-century Judaism who opposed Jesus's attitude of forgiveness) is exposed. Luke has the habit of saying beforehand why Jesus told a specific parable, and in his redactional note in 15:1–2 he indicates that Jesus told the parable as an apology for his social behaviour of eating with toll collectors and 'sinners'. It is thus not merely religious forgiveness of sinners that is at stake, the latter is as it were axiomatically supposed, but the social consequences such forgiveness has. Jesus' teaching on divine and human forgiveness as one event has the implication that religion cannot be used as a tool to classify people anymore. The consequence is that it promotes people's positive acceptance of those who by the reigning opinion of society are ostracised and looked down upon (see Scheffler 1993:99–102; cf. also Hellerman 2007). From a hermeneutical perspective this could have implications for a present-day psychological diagnostic system (e.g. DSM V) in so far as the classification of 'pathologies' and syndromes have a pejorative value.

After these remarks on Luke's peculiar material, we return to the synoptic tradition which Luke shares with his sources and which constitutes the strongest evidence for the historical Jesus' attitude towards forgiveness.

Forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer (already quoted and from the Q tradition, see Table 2) deserves our special attention for three reasons. Firstly, a close comparison between the Matthean and Lukan versions emphasises the close link between human and divine forgiveness. The fact that this notion is also communicated in Mark 11:25 (not transmitting the Lord's Prayer) testifies to the originality of this close link in the teaching of Jesus.⁵ Matthew 6:12 uses the aorist of *afiemi*,

5. Mark 11:25 reads: Καὶ ὅταν στήκετε προσευχόμενοι, ἄφιετε εἰ τι ἔχετε κατὰ τινος, ἵνα καὶ ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ἀφή ὑμῖν τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν.

ἀφήκαμεν ('we have forgiven', referring to the human act of forgiveness that has already taken place), thereby seeming to imply that human forgiveness of the fellow human being precedes or is a condition to receive God's forgiveness – a much debated and radical idea in the context of 1st-century Judaism. Luke's use of the present tense (ἀφίομεν, 'we are forgiving') is no less radical because it implies the continuing act of forgiving, which the praying follower of Jesus executes 'in the act of praying'. Forgive us as we are forgiving now, while we speak. The prayer becomes an act of forgiveness. Jesus' teaching as reflected in the Lord's Prayer does not allow for any postponement as far as forgiveness is concerned. The present-day predicament regarding the Lord's Prayer is that its radicalism is ironically curbed by its being too well known. It is often prayed in churches by churchgoers as a ritual, without them realising what they pray and the implications of it. That leaves the possibility of leaving the service with resentment still in the heart.

The second aspect to be mentioned regarding the Lord's Prayer is the use of the terms τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ['our debtors'] in Matthew and παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ['every one indebted to us'] in Luke (the latter emphasises inclusivity). Who should be included in forgiveness? Only individuals, or also groups like the contemporary Romans? Does the concept of forgiveness only imply to interpersonal human relationships, or does it have political implications (involving nations or groups) as well? This is important since there prevails a strange inconsistency in humanity as far as this is concerned. Nations (ancient as well as modern) would expect their followers *not* to kill and fight one another within the constraints of the own society, but if it comes to interstate conflict an opposite rule applies. Then it is expected in terms of patriotism and the interest of the state at large (which we all know usually entails the interests of the reigning political leaders⁶) to kill for God and country (still clearly displayed against a side wall of the British parliament buildings without the otherwise quite critical British public seeming to care). However, the words implied by both Matthew and Luke's versions leave us in no doubt (those that owe us) and everyone that owes us – any and all debtors or perpetrators. In Jesus' context the Romans (whose values Jesus did not share at all) are therefore included, as clear from the famous saying on the second mile (referring to the forced carrying of the bag of a Roman soldier, Mt 5:41).

The third aspect to be mentioned regarding the Lord's Prayer is its centrality in the teaching of Jesus. Jesus' religion was to

[Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses].

6. One is reminded of the adage attributed to Texas Guinan (1844–1933): 'A politician is a fellow who will lay down your life for his country' (quoted in Scheffler 2001:154).

**TABLE 3:** Forgiveness and the healing of the paralytic boy.

Matthew 9:2–6	Mark 2:3–11	Luke 5:18–25
And just then some people were carrying a paralysed man lying on a bed.	³ Then some people came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.	Just then some men came, carrying a paralysed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; ¹⁹ but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.
When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.'	⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'	²⁰ Then he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you.'
³ Then some of the scribes said to themselves, 'This man is blaspheming.'	⁶ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷ 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'	²¹ Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?'
⁴ But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts?'	⁸ At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?'	²² When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?'
⁵ For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk?'	⁹ Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?'	²³ Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk?'
⁶ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he then said to the paralytic – 'Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.'	¹⁰ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he said to the paralytic – ¹¹ 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.'	²⁴ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he said to the one who was paralyzed – 'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.' ²⁵ Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.

a large extent non-ritualistic (he for one did not follow John's practice of baptism, cf. Jn 4:2). However, the one ritual that he retained was the act of praying, but then explicitly not in the way that was currently done by Pharisees employing long extended public prayers (Mt 6:5–6). Jesus prescribed a short prayer which his disciples should recite every day and the contents of this prayer concerns the core of his teaching regarding the coming of God's kingdom (which consists of the alleviation of human suffering), the daily bread for oneself whilst being co-opted to provide it for one's fellow, and the act of forgiveness which is actually the living out of the command to love the enemy (cf. the excellent discussion by Crossan 2011:143–162). Merely by being part of the Lord's Prayer (to be prayed daily) underpins Hannah Arendt's interpretation that forgiveness in human affairs was central to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.

Healing and forgiving the paralytic boy

The tradition of the healing of the paralytic boy (cf. Table 3) is transmitted in Matthew 9:2–8, Mark 2:3–11 and Luke 5:21–26 (see Aland 1973:124).

The tradition of the healing of the paralytic boy (which strangely for the modern mind combines Jesus' acts of healing and forgiveness) explains and emphasises the radical importance of forgiveness in Jesus' teaching and its challenging effects, which actually disturbed the current order (religious and otherwise) in which Jesus lived. As far as the theme of forgiveness is concerned there exists no essential difference between the three versions. It can therefore be readily accepted that the views expressed are those of the historical Jesus. Three aspects are significant.

Firstly, paralysis in 1st-century Judaism was not interpreted as a mere handicap but as a sign of being a sinner who is punished by God (Grundmann 1973:59). Jesus for a moment shares this view held by the audience and his act of healing consists in forgiving the paralytic his sins. By this the link between sickness and sins is broken. The sick did not have

to bear the extra burden of being sinners and social outcasts anymore.

Secondly, by forgiving the paralytic Jesus implies that humans should also forgive sins. The Son of man – in its earliest understanding as uttered by the historical Jesus – simply means a 'human being'. Humans have the authority to do so and should do so. In Arendt's ([1958] 1998:238) words: 'The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth.'

Thirdly, Arendt is also right by asserting that by his teaching that humans should forgive sins, Jesus was bent on challenging Jewish authority, and this challenge ultimately led to his crucifixion. Forgiving the paralytic his sins, Jesus according to the watching scribes was blaspheming, just as he was doing so in – according to their view – breaking of the Sabbath laws. For us today, for whom forgiveness is an automatic given recognised by our faith, it is difficult to grasp why such a just and good man as Jesus was crucified, but we should imagine ourselves that in his own context it made perfect sense. He was a blasphemer (Küng 1975:325), who by forgiving did and promoted what only God could do, and in the process he was also challenging the current legal system that operated with the *lex talionis* or reciprocity code.

This brings us to the other synoptic tradition, which deals with the dynamic of the functioning of interpersonal forgiveness amongst Jesus' followers.

Unlimited forgiveness

What is at stake here is the question of repentance (as a prerequisite) before forgiveness and the obligation to forgive and how many times one should forgive (cf. Aland 1973:253, 312). According to Crossan (1994:166), 'The numbers mean simply unlimited forgiveness'. The more radical version in Matthew 18:21–22 does not, unlike its parallel in Luke 17:4, mention repentance prior to forgiveness. According to

Crossan, the radical version goes back to Jesus. The parable of the unforgiving debtor (although peculiar to Matthew, cf. Mt 18:23–35) possibly also goes back to Jesus and emphasises the necessity to forgive, attempting to create a willingness to forgive in the reader even by negative reinforcement (Mt 18:35).

Jesus' disciples would have sensed that interpersonal forgiveness is not an easy matter. By saying seven times or 70 times seven Jesus says one should forgive without limit, and this leaves the question open whether Jesus' teaching could not be exploited by the abuser. Matthew's version (probably Q,⁷ not requiring prior repentance) seems to emphasise that this should be ignored by the forgiver.

If forgiveness is to be preceded by repentance (Luke's version), what about cases in which the victim wants to forgive for the sake of his or her own well-being, but the perpetrator has no sense of having done anything wrong? This probably constituted no problem for Matthew, Q, or even Jesus. One should forgive even if not asked,⁸ because one has been forgiven by God (Mt 18:35). It also correlates with the Lord's Prayer where the petitioner has forgiven already or while praying (cf. above). If forgiveness is dependent on the willingness of the perpetrator to ask for it, the victim is still exposed to and in the power of the whimsical perpetrator, and not liberated. His or her act of forgiveness for their own well-being (as well as that of the perpetrator) should therefore occur unconditionally, a pill probably too bitter for Luke to swallow (despite his report of Jesus' unconditional forgiveness of his crucifiers on the cross, Lk 23:34).⁹

But there is another problem. Is forgiveness an absolute obligation, to which the perpetrator has a right? Is forgiveness not in essence based on generosity and mercy? This question already brings me into the realm of positive psychology, to which I now turn.

Positive psychological reflection on forgiveness

In its quest for a non-medical, pro-health approach to psychotherapy, positive psychology surprisingly focuses on concepts that are biblical and specifically present in the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Whereas our focus is here on forgiveness, other concepts explored by positive psychology include the notion of compassion, love, humility, gratitude and many others (cf. Scheffler 2014:1–8; Snyder & Lopez 2005). By zooming in on such concepts as forgiveness, positive psychology is not trapped in a diagnostic medical model that diagnoses people as having certain deficiencies, which classifies them and actually increases their sickness

7.The Q version predates the ultimate Matthean version, where prior negotiation is presupposed (Mt 18:15–18).

8.This view seems to be similar to that of Nelson Mandela for a reason of his own: "For all people who found themselves in the position of being in jail and trying to transform society, forgiveness is natural because you have no time to be retaliative" (uttered in 2000, cf. Hatang & Venter 2011:105).

9.Although Luke 23:34 is omitted by some manuscripts, it truly reflects Jesus' stance on forgiveness (cf. also Ac 7:6).

or suffering. Here we can only mention the example of homosexuality which was regarded as an ailment until 1973 when it was removed from the DSM III, as well as Asperger Syndrome (long argued by Aspergers themselves as being a 'diffability' and not a disability) which was only recently removed. By focussing on positive notions like forgiveness, positive psychology seeks to contribute to psychological health and happiness. It represents a proactive approach to psychology (without denying that psychological ailments do occur, cf. Maddux 2005:13–25).

Having been introduced to Jesus' views as preserved for us in the synoptic tradition, it is amazing to discern what happens when psychologists begin to study the concept scientifically, as has been done by McCullough and Witvliet (2005:446–458) and others (e.g. Worthington 1998). Insight into the positivity of forgiveness is gained, which corroborates and enhances Jesus' outstanding breakthrough 2000 years ago. However, some problems regarding forgiveness also come to the fore.

McCullough and Witvliet (2005:447) observe that although the concept of forgiveness functions in all the main religions, 'social theorists and social scientists basically ignored forgiveness for the last three centuries. Forgiveness fails to warrant even a footnote in 300 years of post-Enlightenment thought'. If this judgement is right, one can ask if the severe neglect of this important and central notion of Jesus' thought actually can account for the countless wars in Christian history and the division amongst Christian churches, the *odium theologicum*, and also the failure in interpersonal relationships between human beings in the capitalistic Western world, for instance in marriage, family or business affairs (what in Germany is called *Ellenbogenkultur*).

In the words of McCullough and Witvliet (2005:446), positive psychology points to the fact that the natural response to a feeling of being wronged is revenge and resentment, and that forgiveness demands a conscious decision to act otherwise. According to Smedes, we cannot simply forget a wrong, because 'the wrong sticks like a nettle in our memory. The only way to remove the nettle is with a surgical procedure called forgiveness' (quoted in McCullough & Witvliet 2005:446). According to Arendt, we need forgiveness in human affairs for it is the remedy for the irreversibility of human action; it frees us from not being haunted and consequently paralysed by our past actions and it liberates us for future positive action. She comments:

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we can never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever ... (Arendt [1958] 1998:237)

Towards defining forgiveness

Forgiveness as such is (as with many other such value concepts) difficult to define, and McCullough and Witvliet

(2005:447) go about the problem by firstly distinguishing it from other concepts, in other words, what forgiveness is not:

- It is not *pardoning*, which is a legal concept.
- It is not *condoning*, which justifies the wrong done.
- It is not *excusing*, which holds that extenuating circumstances led to a certain act.
- It is not *forgetting*, which implies the slipping out of memory or conscious awareness.
- It is not *denial*, which insistently does not recognise the wrongfulness of an act or the harm done.
- It is not *reconciliation*, which refers to the restoration of a broken relationship.

However, as far as reconciliation is concerned it should to my mind be noted that a reconciliatory process is most often the logical consequence after forgiveness has occurred. Interestingly, in the Louw and Nida New Testament Dictionary, reconciliation and forgiveness are discussed as part and parcel of the same semantic field (1988:502–503). This corroborates with Jesus' view that one should leave one's sacrifice at the altar (thereby making the ritual service to God second priority) and reconcile with the brother if the latter feels wronged (Mt 5:24).

But how could one describe forgiveness positively? McCullough and Witvliet (2005:447–448) mention three 'senses', namely as a *response*, a *personality trait* or disposition, and as a *characteristic of social units*.

- As a *response* (which occurs in the attitude of a victim towards a transgressor) forgiveness implies a change of feeling and thinking which develops (gradually) towards positive behaviour towards the transgressor.
- As a *personality disposition* forgiveness is actually a trait which different people may have to a greater or lesser extent. Some can then be typified as 'forgiving' and others less so. As any other personality trait this can be measured with psychometric instruments according to different scales.
- As a *characteristic of social units*, forgiveness (as intimacy, trust or commitment) functions on a group level. Marriage, family and certain communities are then expected to have forgiveness functioning in them on a regular basis. If there is no forgiveness, marriages will not last, and the high divorce rate can be probably be attributed to the fact that forgiveness does not play an efficient role any more. The same can be said of a church congregation which claims to live by Jesus' principles.

These features (especially the third) can easily be discerned in the teaching of the historical Jesus. In Mark 10 he warns against divorce and motivates it in terms of the intimacy that had initially occurred in marriage (becoming one flesh is mentioned twice). By saying, 'you are all brothers' (Mt 23:8), Jesus takes up the sibling relationship to typify his followers (Hellerman 2007:326), and in Luke 17:3–4 he explicitly expects a commitment from his followers to forgive one another unrestrictedly.

Positive aspects of forgiveness as affirmed by positive psychological research

Various instruments and tests are listed by McCullough and Witvliet indicating a positive correlation between forgiveness and other aspects of life, for instance the TRIM inventory (measuring the motivation of avoidance and revenge) and the Trait Forgiveness Scale or Forgiveness Likelihood Scale (2005:448).

In the main, research results are positive, showing forgiveness to be as beneficial to victims as to perpetrators. The results are briefly summarised as follows (McCullough & Witvliet 2005:449–453):

- *Older people* reveal a higher form of moral reasoning and are more likely to forgive as an expression of social harmony and love instead of restitutive forgiveness or lawful expectational forgiveness that was preferred by younger people.
- As far as personality attributes are concerned, forgiving people report *less anxiety, depression and hostility*. They are less neurotic, less resentful, less narcissistic, less exploitative and more empathetic and agreeable, thus revealing socially acceptable behaviour. Forgiveness therefore has a positive influence on human psychological well-being (see also Briggs 2008:33–56).
- Apologies and *positive post-transgression actions* (or good deeds by perpetrators) tend to create a gap between a person and his or her deeds in the mind of the victim, leading to empathy and forgiving.
- Satisfactory interpersonal *relationships* facilitate forgiveness and forgiveness has the potential to re-establish broken relationships.
- A positive correlation exists between forgiveness and *mental health*.
- A positive correlation exists between forgiveness and *physical health*.
- In specific experiments, where imaginary forgiveness activities were practised over against no such practices in a control group, it was found that (at least for the short term) forgivers made positive *emotional gains*.

To summarise: On the basis of their research, McCullough and Witvliet (2005:447) regard forgiveness as positive for human well-being; in fact, they voice no criticism against the concept of forgiveness. However, such criticism has come from philosophical (and even religious or ethical) quarters.

Problems of forgiveness

In certain trends of Buddhist thought, forgiveness (and even compassion involving the alleviation of human suffering) is regarded as too much of an intervention strategy which interferes with a person's karma or deserved punishment (Van Zyl, pers. comm., 2013). I will not elaborate here, except to mention that in Christianity the notion of cheap grace is also mentioned as contrary to forgiveness.



TABLE 4: Forgiving without limits (Q and Jesus).

Matthew 18:21	Luke 17:3b-4	Jesus (sec. Crossan)
²¹ Then Peter came and said to Him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?'	³ Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.'	Forgive not sevenfold but seventyfold sevenfold
²² Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'	⁴ 'And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him.'	

More serious is the criticism that persistent forgiveness (70 times seven) may lead to continued exploitative behaviour often experienced in cases of rape (see Van der Schaaf & Dreyer 2004a, 2004b), or in marriage where forgiveness is expected as a kind of rule. Women often suffer, but this is not limited to one sex. A counter-argument could be that such cases are a minority that exist by virtue of exceptional pathology and should be distinguished and treated as special cases. Unfortunately, monogamous marriage (as happens so often in cases of rape) provides a structure which is undetected by the rest of society and constitutes a haven for such exploitation. A solution could be that marriage should exist in the context of a larger community (e.g. a religious organisation), which because of their positive propensity to their fellow human beings would detect exploitive behaviour. This, however, goes against the trend in Western society towards privacy and individualism where 'everyone minds his own business'.

From philosophical circles the philosopher Jacques Derrida criticised forgiveness in a lecture in South Africa whilst the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was in session (published in Derrida 2001). At that stage, because the Commission was a national institution, it was expected to operate in a certain fashion. Perpetrators were expected to confess or acknowledge their crimes before the Commission (or else they could be persecuted); if they did confess they were granted amnesty by the state, that in the same breath expected the victims to forgive the perpetrators. Because of the severity of the atrocities involved, this did not happen in many cases, with the perpetrators then obtaining the moral high ground. Derrida argued that in such cases people would be bereaved of their freedom not to forgive and to work through their pain in a way appropriate to their own character. One would then have to conclude that Jesus was wrong in saying that people should forgive, or at least that his command should rather be interpreted as a strong admonition based on the fact that the forgiveness would still be done voluntarily and being based on mercy and love. A (to my mind excellent) poem by the Afrikaans poet Antjie Krog (2014a:28-29, 2014b:28-29)¹⁰ (cf. Figure 1 for the Afrikaans, with an English translation) gives vivid expression to the surmised positive and negative aspects of a forced process of forgiveness. To my mind the 'counter-exposition' (see poem) represents exactly the purely religious aspect (only God can forgive) of forgiveness against which Jesus polemicised, and which – despite its ostensible piety – proves to be false.

10.Krog reported for the SABC on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) while it was in sitting; she wrote two books related to her experience of the TRC and its aftermath (Krog 1998, 2013).

The way to forgiveness

At this stage it should already be clear that forgiveness is no easy matter, therefore it gains such respect when it occurs.

Having been convinced by the emotional benefits that forgiveness entails, and really suffering because of continued resentment (in the case of victims) or feelings of guilt (in the case of perpetrators), many people seek to give or obtain forgiveness but do not know how.

On an internet website (www.wikihow.com/forgive), 12 steps to forgiveness are explained. The website is open to anybody and surely will have some measure of success, fluctuating according to people's propensities. Although such popular advice may be unscientific, it may at least facilitate people to walk on the road of forgiveness, which in some cases may be a long one.¹¹

But what measures can be taken that pass the test of scientific scrutiny?

Forgiveness in most cases is not something that occurs instantly and spontaneously. A conscious decision should be taken to be part of what can be called a forgiveness *programme*. According to McCullough and Witvliet (2005:454), taking part in an intervention that occurs in a *group* context is more successful. How these interventions are carried out may vary (clinical, preventative or psycho-educational). Taking part in such a programme seems to be more important than the way it is conducted, since research has indicated that more success is gained in programmes that last longer than six hours, than those that last less than six hours. It may be that attending proper church services, where an attitude of forgiveness is propagated and prevails, can also serve as such an intervention, although church-going has so far as I know, not been subjected to research in so far as forgiveness is concerned.

Individual psychotherapy with forgiveness as a treatment goal is not ruled out; it has also been proven to be more efficacious than no treatment at all. Even self-treatment (reading literature or accessing internet websites) may be effective, although involving professional people seems to be more effective.

Wolterstorff in his reflection on Jesus and forgiveness (2009:214) suggests that forgiving and loving the enemy is related, and that loving the enemy according to the

11.For popular psychological advice on forgiveness, emphasising that forgiveness is a technique that one does for one's own sake, see Van Wijk (2010:71-82). See, however, Wolterstorff (2009).



hou jou oor teen die skeur van my land	hold your ear to the tear in the skin of my country
<p>Cynthia Negewu: <i>dié ding wat hulle versoening noem . . . as ek dit reg verstaan... as dit meen dat die oortreder die man wat Christopher Piet vermoor het as dit meen dat hy weer menslik word hierdie man sodat ek, sodat almal van ons ons menslikheid kan terugkry ... dan stem ek saam dan ondersteun ek dit</i></p>	<p>Cynthia Negewu: <i>this thing they call re- conciliation ... if I am under- standing it correctly ... if it means this perpetrator this man who has killed Christopher Piet if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us can get back our humanity ... then I agree then I support it.</i></p>
<p><i>eksposisie:</i> mnr Barnard het sy menslikheid verloor hy kon moor omdat hy nie langer menslik was nie</p>	<p><i>exposition:</i> Mr Barnard lost his humaneness he could kill because he was no longer human</p>
<p>om hom te vergewe open die moontlikheid vir hom om volkome te verander en sy menslikheid te herbekom</p>	<p>to forgive him would make it possible for him to change completely and regain his humanity</p>
<p>om haar seun te ontbeer het vanselfsprekend ook haar eie menslikheid geaffekteer</p>	<p>to have lost her son naturally also affected Mrs Ngewu's own humanity</p>
<p>indien die moordenaar ontbrand deur vergifnis begin om te verander en sy medemenslikheid te herwin</p>	<p>if the killer inspired by forgiveness begins to change in order to regain his shared humanity</p>
<p>open dit vir ons almal die moontlikheid om te begin uitreik na ons eie volle menslikheid</p>	<p>it would open up for all of us the possibility of reaching out towards our own full humanity</p>
<p>maw ek vergewe jou sodat jy kan verander <i>hier</i> heel word <i>hier</i></p>	<p>in other words I forgive you so that you can change <i>here</i> become whole <i>here</i></p>
<p>sodat ek my eie interverweefdheid-tot-samehang kan herstel om my volle mensheid reeds op aarde te vier</p>	<p>so my own interwovenness-towards-interdependence can be restored and I can live out my fullest humanity here on earth</p>
<p><i>teen-eksposisie:</i> mnr Barnard verstaan nie vergifnis so nie hy glo aan die individu en dat net Jesus hom kan vergewe</p>	<p><i>counter-exposition:</i> Mr Barnard does not understand forgiveness in this way he believes in the individual and only Jesus can forgive him</p>
<p>met 'n vergifnis wat hom 'n nuwe mens in die hiernamaals maak amnestie is bloot 'n wetlike proses want moor was 'n opdragsaak</p>	<p>through a forgiveness that will resurrect him in the afterlife amnesty is a purely legal process because killing was following orders</p>
<p>met dieselfde verbystering wat hy ongevraagd vergifnis ontvang het ontvang hy nou die woede en wrok van die mense wat sien</p>	<p>with the same bewilderment that he received the unasked-for forgiveness he now receives the rage and resentment of people who see</p>
<p>dat hy nie verander nie dat hy nooit <i>sal</i> verander nie omdat hy nie verbonde aan hulle voel nie en hulle besef</p>	<p>that he has not changed that he will <i>never</i> change because he does not feel connected to them and they realise suddenly</p>
<p>hulle het vergeefs interverbondenheid probeer inweef in die concrete bunker wat in mnr Barnard se witheid leef</p>	<p>that it is futile to try to weave interconnectedness into the concrete bunker that lives inside Mr Barnard's whiteness</p>

FIGURE 1: Poem by Antjie Krog on forgiveness.

instructions Jesus gave would promote forgiveness. The other cheek should therefore be turned, one should pray for the victim or the perpetrator, and do good deeds to the benefit of the other (Mt 5:38–43; Lk 6:27–36). Forgiveness can ideally be granted when it is asked for and if the perpetrator seeks it (Lk 17:3–4). However, in case this does not occur, forgiving unconditionally (the radical Jesus way) can be

facilitated by doing good deeds to the benefit of the other, alleviating resentment in the own heart, and may even help the perpetrator to seek forgiveness and ultimately reconciliation.

It is important to note that love for the enemy and forgiving in Jesus' teaching occurs on an individual level as well as



on a macro-level, contrary to Christian practice (especially in the Western world) where Christian nations promoted it on individual level while making war with one another on a macro-level. A positive argument for the possibility for forgiveness in a wider political context is that uttered and practised by Nelson Mandela, the former South African president, who in his own lifetime reached almost iconic status. His lack of bitterness and forgiving behaviour after being released after 27 years in prison impressed especially whites in South Africa and contributed much to the fact that they accepted and even flourished in the new political dispensation. When asked about his secret for forgiving, Mandela answered that if he had not forgiven he would still be in prison, and that life is too short to be bitter.¹² Besides demonstrating concretely that forgiveness is possible in a modern world which seems to doubt it, also in the political realm, Mandela is clearly a case where forgiveness contributed to an individual's own well-being and through that to society at large.

Some statements in conclusion

Forgiveness should relinquish its subsidiary role in contemporary Christianity and be rediscovered as the trademark of Christianity in a broken world. A diminishing Christianity stands in need of reformation and should be urged to act as an agent for forgiveness. Reformation is more important in the ethical sphere of existence than in the search for consensus as far as doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues are concerned.

Arendt ([1958] 1998:238) correctly pointed out that forgiveness can also function in the secular world; it is not restricted to an exclusively Christian context. In Jesus' context there was in any case no separation between a religious and profane world. He operated openly in society, and not in a church context.

It should further be realised that forgiveness is a difficult, continuing process that demands definite actions from those seeking it. This may involve treatment but also specific benevolent deeds towards the other.

Forgiveness remains a meaningful voluntary act and promises liberation for the perpetrator, as well as the victim (cf. the first part of Krog's poem in Figure 1).

With McCullough and Witvliet (2005:455) we conclude that as 'interdependent people, we simply have too much at stake to ignore the promise of forgiveness as a balm for our species' destructive propensities'. However, it is as radical and demanding as a surgical procedure.

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12. After being asked in 1991 by Snyman (pers. comm., 2014, Bloemfontein) why he was not bitter after being in prison for 27 years, Mandela answered: 'Life is too short to be bitter.'

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