

# *Youth Theology Institute Journal*

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### *“Our Wild and Reckless God: What Does Forgiveness Mean?”*

*June 26–July 1, 2011*

For five days in late June and early July of 2011, approximately twenty high school youth gathered at Augsburg College to explore the theme of forgiveness. We read Simon Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower* together. We spent 12 hours together in class exploring and arguing about forgiveness. We visited Mt. Zion Temple in St. Paul and heard Rabbi Esther Adler describe for us a Jewish understanding of forgiveness. We visited the Basilica of St. Mary and learned the complex history and theology of the Roman Catholic sacrament of reconciliation. We viewed stunning variations on the Prodigal Son in Thrivent Financial for Lutherans art gallery. We sampled Hell’s fine cuisine and enjoyed an evening with the Saints. This journal reflects the thinking of 15 of these students. In here you will find a variety of essays, which are essentially exercises in the art of theological meaning making; the students’ process of constructing knowledge and meaning from within their tradition and their own experiences.

This journal begins with two essays exploring the limits of forgiveness. Taylor Hjermsstad argues that God’s ability to forgive has no limits, but our forgiveness must be limited. Ben Vlasak also claims God’s forgiveness to be unlimited but goes on to point out our own limitations and how they prevent us from being able to understand God’s unlimited forgiveness and from being able to practice forgiveness fully. These two essays open up this topic, and its complexities, in helpful way that is not easily resolved.

From there, we move to two essays which present forgiveness as something that is an essential part of understanding our own humanity and being. Anna Kytonen-Coffman argues that we can only live in a state of spiritual well-being if we learn how to forgive authentically. Abigail Bennett shows us how we learn more about our own character and person through the act of forgiveness.

Two more essays offer a deeper look into forgiveness through our liturgical act of confession and absolution where we confess what we have done and what we have left undone. Will Howitz explains that being a bystander is as bad as being an oppressor as it is vital that we regularly confess our “bystanderness”. Amber Kalina reminds us that God’s never-failing love produces within us both humility and compassion which enable us to both seek and grant forgiveness for things done and left undone.

Two students delve deeper into expressions of forgiveness in other religions. Austin Orth claims that Christians can, and should, take a lesson on forgiveness from Judaism so that we might no longer take the gift of forgiveness for granted. Alexandra Smith explores expressions of forgiveness within Christianity, Judaism and Islam in order to explain how each of these religions addresses humanity’s natural inclination to *not* forgive.

Multiple essays make use of the social sciences, current events, and pop culture as the authors attempt to articulate why forgiveness is necessary and difficult and how it works. Abby Kalina weaves psychology and theology together in order to explain why forgiveness cannot be given on behalf of another person and why it cannot be forced.

Hannah McLean engages current events, specifically the interreligious violence of Northern Ireland and the subsequent efforts towards reconciliation, to argue that large-scale, intentional, public efforts towards reconciliation and forgiveness is the only thing that will solve most of the world’s current conflicts. Natasha Grindorff explores four tragedies and the victims’ near-heroic ability to forgive for help in learning how we can grow in our ability to forgive and the role that limits to forgiveness might play.

Bella Nordahl presents Ronnie Dunn’s song “Bleed Red” as an example of how God’s forgiveness extends to all people. Joe Kempf uses many examples from scripture and pop culture to argue that

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forgiveness actually comes prior to, or even regardless of, repentance. Tyler Newman uses two films by Clint Eastwood to demonstrate how Hollywood can, and does, promote forgiveness as a necessary alternative to revenge. Lastly, Wes Kimball mines the relationships in *The Lord of the Rings* for examples of how to forgive and what may come of it.

We had a formative week together. It was a week full of laughter and learning. Forgiveness is a complex issue and one we will never look at in the same way again. We hope these essays might invite you, the reader, into a deeper exploration of the depth and breadth of Christ's forgiveness for all God's people.

Enjoy!

Jeremy Myers

Assistant Professor of Religion – Youth and Family Ministry Augsburg College

*Is There a Limit to Human Forgiveness?*

*Taylor Hjermstad, Kenyon, MN*

Forgiveness is a broad subject and can mean several things. Forgiveness, to me, is getting that pressure off your chest and moving on, letting the past be the past. Even with all the forgiveness, there should be limits, only for humans since God has no limits. Like Heinrich Heine said, “God will forgive me. It’s his job.” Limits for humans do not mean not forgiving someone because you do not want to; you just have to have good reasons behind it. Reasons are the story of Bob and Mike, the crime is too tremendous for forgiveness, repentance does not happen, the person keeps on making the same mistake, when forgiveness is said it is not meant, and people have their own restrictions. No matter what forgiveness is, it should have boundaries.

In the story of Bob Enright, Mike shot Bob’s son in the back of the head. Of course, Mike ended up going to jail for punishment. During that time, Mr. Enright put forgiveness into action. He started by writing letters to Mike while he was in jail. When he started writing the letters, they were not polite. It took Mr. Enright a couple of times to start telling Mike that he forgives him for his crime. Mike got these letters and could not believe this man is forgiving him for killing his son. Knowing that a man could forgive his wrong, Mike began to change.

Mike started searching and eventually found God and became a pleasant person because of it. During the transformation, Mike and Bob started having conversations in person, and in time Bob and Mike became close. After a while, Mike and Bob did many things for each other. Bob even married Mike and his wife.

It takes a very strong person to forgive Mike for his offense, which Bob is, but he did not need to go any farther. Bob taking that extra step to make amends with Mike just seems a slight bit wrong. It’s hard to comprehend how a man could be best friends with his son’s murderer. I personally believe that Mike has crossed the limits of forgiveness. I agree that he was trying to move on from his son’s death but talking and seeing the man responsible for the death is maybe stopping Bob from fully moving on. Bob should have seen that limits needed to come in play but he decided to go against them. Not everyone will agree that there should be limits as Bob shows that in this story.

Is there a time when the punishment is too extreme that forgiveness should not be used? If there is not one now, there should start to be one. Many of the extreme punishments were created by famous murders. They were either one person or a whole group. They include the Klu Klux Klan, Jeffrey Dahmer, Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson, and many others. All these people or groups murdered several or millions of people. They used forms of torture that can make a human cringe. Their crimes included lynching, cannibalism, rape, gas chambers, and countless other ways. All of their goals to end lives were for selfish reasons. Reasons to make themselves feel better about the world and their own lives. Is it possible for a person to forgive these hideous crimes that should have never been committed? How can even the strongest, most understanding person grant forgiveness? No one should. All of the crimes were far too extreme to let the murderer be granted forgiveness. In most cases, the person or groups really did not care, as they would be too pleased with themselves. It is tough and nearly impossible to forgive those kinds of things. People should not have to be put through that kind of situation. And people like this deserve to be shunned by society for their crimes. It is hard to comprehend why they did these sorts of things.

In the bible, it says, “...ask for forgiveness and repent, God will grant it...” (Acts 8:22 NIV) What if the person wanted forgiveness for their sin but did not repent? Should their wish be granted? It is hard to forgive someone at all, but to forgive someone who does not want to or will not repent, is almost unattainable. When they do not even try to repent, it seems the person does not really care if they are forgiven or not. It makes the person put up a wall instead of forgiveness. It makes them set up restrictions

for the same thing in the future. Restrictions should be exercised to help people make decisions of how to deal with these sorts of problems. It would help the person get through the issue peacefully. In the end, they would feel better about themselves. It is not their fault that they cannot forgive someone for not repenting. They are just doing what they feel is right. They are not trying to be hard to work with; they are just doing what they believe. The person just wants the person who wronged them to ask for repentance.

“Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’ (Matthew 18:22 NIV) God can keep forgiving people time after time for the exact same sin. God will keep forgiving you know matter what. People on the other hand will not keep forgiving you. If people do not learn after keep repeating the same sin, why should a person keep forgiving you? Many people draw limits at that. They do not understand that people do not change after that same outcome keeps happening. A case in point is you bring of glass of grape juice into a room with a white carpet and spill it. Your parents or guardians get mad at you but they forgive you because it is the first time. A couple days later, you do the exact same thing. They get angry at you but they still forgive you even though it took a little more this time. The next day, you do it again. This time your parents or guardians are completely irritated at you and do not forgive you. They draw the limit because you did not learn and drawing that limit is all right. After realizing that people will draw limits on forgiveness and not forgive you every time, you might actually stop doing that same offense and be a better person.

It is has been said that when you forgive, really forgive. Everyday forgiveness happens but most of the time, people do not really mean it. They just say they forgive you because they feel it is the right thing to do, not because they want to. Numerous people would say that they do that exact same thing. Would you rather have someone say they forgive you but do not really mean it or would you rather have someone not forgive because they actually do not? Several people would say that they would want to hear forgiveness either way so they can feel relieved of all their guilt. But how can they be truly content with themselves if real forgiveness was not given? Their guilt would still be lingering and would never be fully gone. Why would someone want to live that way with themselves? Boundaries set the rules clear on why the person did not forgive them.

Many people have their own restrictions when it comes to forgiving because they do want to forget. They do not want to forget what you have done to them and they do not want you to forget either. The hurt or stress that was caused to them was too great. It might have been taking a small thing without asking like a book or shirt, or it could be an immense thing like breaking their trust or breaking something very personal to them. Another reason why people will not forgive is because they think it is unfair. They feel like justice has not been done or no accountability has taken place. They feel like when they get hit, they should hit back, almost like when everyone was in elementary school. They are struggling with themselves on why or why not they should forgive the person who has done them wrong. People do not want to forgive because they feel that when the person hurt them, they betrayed their trust. Forgiving that person would be bringing that trust back and they do not want to risk getting hurt again. They do not want to go through all the pain and emotions again. People do not forgive because it is an ongoing process. Forgiveness is a daily effort that will test you with painful memories that you cannot let go of. When these things come up, you get mad at the person all over again and forgiveness is out of the question. You do not want to move on after that. You keep going back to square one on the process no matter how far along you are. Many people do not forgive seeing as they are dealing with their own problems like ego issues, feeling jealous, and not being self-confident. A big ego will not let someone forgive because they think they are better than everyone else and people should make the first move. Self confidence is the same way except the person does not apologize because self confidence usually means you have courage, strength, and you believe in yourself. When people do not believe that they have any of those things, they believe that they do not have the ability to forgive people because they do not have any power. Low self

confidence holds the person back from really forgiving someone and moving on. Jealousy also holds a person back because something might have been stolen from them, like a job or a car. They do not want to forgive because the other person seems better off. No matter the situation, people have their own restrictions. People are not able to move on from a big decision like forgiving very quickly. People are often criticized for holding on and not wanting to forgive. People set their own limits on their own on how far they will forgive someone. Once you past the limit, many people will not let it go and cannot move on.

Malcolm Forbes once said, “The only unforgivable sin: Being unforgiving.” This statement is correct because God always forgives but it does not occur under different circumstances for humans. There are a number of conditions where forgiveness cannot happen because of limits. A few limits include the story of Bob and Mike, the punishment is far too extreme to ever forgive, the person does not repent, the individual does not learn from their mistakes and keeps making them, when people say they forgive you, they do not really mean it. There are countless ways to define forgiveness and there are countless ways to interpret forgiveness. No matter what forgiveness it or how it is used, there should be limits for humans but not for God.

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## *Limitless Forgiveness*

*Ben Vlasak, Stillwater, MN*

Limitless forgiveness is the basis for the Christian belief that we are saved by grace, through faith and not through our acts. It is this abounding grace that sets God's forgiveness apart from our own. I believe that humans hold the capacity for limitless forgiveness. We all forgive and are forgiven, and even though we view forgiveness differently we all know what it is and why it is important. But what is different between us and God is that even though we know what limitless forgiveness is we cannot begin to understand it in the slightest way.

Our human nature is not to forgive but to seek justice. Our sense of justice is imprinted on everything we do and it is why this abounding grace is so foreign to us. We see things singularly, part by part, act by act, and because of this we are bound to a limited concept of forgiveness. Limited forgiveness, as opposed to limitless, is a more black and white understanding of grace. Rather than forgive for the entirety of our sin as a whole, we forgive for a single act, committed at a single time by a single being.

Forgiveness is shaped by how we see sin. Most humans see sin most clearly as a point on a timeline. Each sin is a mark that shows what was done where, against who and by whom, and the time and the situation. Each sin is addressed individually like a case in a court room. Our opinions are forever changing, and with it, our decisions and perceptions of everything we know. How we think about a person or an idea can change day to day and the same goes for sin.

In Judaism, forgiveness is regarded as a very personal thing that is between an offender and the offended. I believe in this view of forgiveness because it is a complex process and is intertwined in our deepest feelings, "I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin," Romans 7:25. The meaning of forgiveness is immense and I think that to fully grasp what forgiveness is one must understand it at a personal level or the meaning of it is lost entirely. But are there limits to one-to-one forgiveness? Do boundaries of distance, communication and death make forgiveness impossible? I believe forgiveness does not rely on a concrete message from one to another, but rather a feeling that is mutual between both people to truly exist.

Sin in a view of limited forgiveness both varies and is independent. Killing a human being and not doing the dishes are obviously two very different things but whether or not they are different in how they are forgiven is what is important. We often have problems addressing certain sins that we think are too great or too complex to understand and it brings in to question if there are sins that are truly unforgiveable or not. We can look at any sin and just say that we forgive it but to truly forgive something it needs to be felt as real and not just said. Here is why we as humans are limited in our ability to forgive in that we cannot always find the courage and have the understanding to forgive, "For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature, for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out," Romans 7:18.

Boundaries to forgiveness are limited by mental barriers and our own ability to forgive. This applies to both our ability to show grace unto others and what we have the power to forgive for. The question is what can we forgive and whether it is ok to forgive on behalf of another. One can forgive another for a sin but the sinner must seek more than one person's forgiveness. In any and all cases of sin there is more than one offended, the sinner has both offended another being and has offended God himself. Everything we know was formed and created by God and as a result any sin against creation is a sin against God himself. In many cases sin also involves multiple people, affected either directly or indirectly in some way.



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Because of the personal nature of forgiveness and the spread of sin to others it is impossible to forgive for another. We cannot pardon sin when it is not ours alone to forgive.

All sin is linked to God. Sin against creation is a sin against the creator, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and lay bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account,” Hebrews 4:13. In this God is connected to all sin but does that mean that he can forgive it? Forgiveness on behalf of another takes away it’s meaning between two humans so the question is whether or not, because God is divine, he has the power to forgive for another, “If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender,” 1 Samuel 2:25. I believe that although we cannot forgive for another God is different not just because he is connected to all our sins but he is connected and in each of us. We as humans are independent from one another but God holds a connection to all that links him to us.

Limited forgiveness is something we understand but limitless forgiveness is completely different in our human perspective. Limitless forgiveness is something we will never understand or experience as humans because of our nature, “We cannot ‘psychologize’ God’s forgiveness. God’s actions are outside and above our human sciences.”(Tranvik, Mark). The way we see everything is constantly changing and so how we forgive is always changing as well. Limitless forgiveness is not only defined as vast and enveloping but is in fact a constant. The constant is how God sees the world and the people in it in love. His care and as a result, his forgiveness, never changes.

Sin is a part of human nature. There is no avoiding it and it is a part of what defines us. We see sin in a limited view as distinct and individual acts in one’s life. God, however, sees things in a constant and so sees sin as a whole part of one’s life, as a state of being. This state changes from person to person but regardless of whatever condition the sinner may be in it is disregarded. The fact is that we all sin and varying levels do not matter, “Grace is not about finishing last or first; it is about not counting.”(Phillip Tancey, as quoted by Mark Tranvik). Only the sin that is present in our nature and is forgiven as such is important to God.

In limitless forgiveness, sin becomes all the same. Rather than see sin as acts, sin is viewed as a part of one’s life. Regardless of what sins you have committed, what matters is that sin is present in you, “Imperfection is the prerequisite for forgiveness. Light only gets in through the cracks.”(Tranvik, Mark). With this view on sin all there is left to forgive is our human nature and the idea of unforgiveable sin vanishes. Boundaries mean nothing to the capacity of limitless forgiveness, in the fact that limitless forgiveness covers everything in one. God’s forgiveness applies to everyone and everything, “the Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him,” Daniel 9:9.

Sin is part of who we are. It is our nature and our definition. How we see this sin that is such a huge part of life is what defines our forgiveness. We as humans are only capable of understanding a limited view of forgiveness between one another, but our capacity for forgiveness holds much greater potential. We may not always be able to forgive one another but God will always be able to forgive us for who we are as human beings.

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### *The Importance of Christian Forgiveness*

*Anna Kytönen-Coffman, Rochester, MN*

In October of 2010, three-year-old Kai Leigh Harriott was struck by a stray bullet that left her paralyzed from the chest down. The accidental shot was the result of an argument on the first floor of the apartment building she lived in. In the courtroom, televised for the whole world to see, Kai and her mother, Tonya David, both made the decision to forgive. “I made the decision before I even reached the hospital. I don’t know why, but I did. I believed that she would live and not die, if I forgave,” Tonya explained. Kai’s victim impact statement reflected this decision, “I forgive Anthony Warren. What he done to me is wrong but I still forgive him.” Since the incident, Tonya David has started the organization *Forgiveness is the Way* to promote forgiveness, with its motto being, “The quality of life that you live each day is determined by the choices you are willing to make,” (Fox25 News Boston). Because Tonya and Kai were able to forgive, they are now able to live in a state of spiritual well being. Through a Christian lens, the only way to live in a state of spiritual well being after injury is through the process of interpersonal forgiveness.

According to the Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, true forgiveness is defined as accepting moral responsibility and practicing interpersonal reparation following relational injury in which one is morally culpable. Interpersonal forgiveness does not mean pardoning, excusing, or condoning the offense and/or offender. It simply means gaining an understanding of who the offender really is and working towards understanding why the offense was committed. It also means trying to replace feelings of hot anger with those of contentment.

People face many situations in life where some sort of apology may be expressed. These situations, or better referred to as burdens, are usually just glitches in the road and do not always require the entire forgiveness process. Burdens that are life changing or that may leave a lasting impression on one’s life are the burdens that require true forgiveness. When something that is life changing, for the worst, occurs in any given person’s life, they must figure out how they are going to cope with the situation. Forgiveness is just another coping mechanism, which is used in specific situations or circumstances. It’s used when one is offended or injured, either physically, mentally, or emotionally. The goal of forgiveness is to try to understand or comprehend the offender and the offense, get to a point of emotional stability, and have mercy on the offender and offense. According to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, mercy is defined as compassionate treatment or willingness to spare. It’s very important to have mercy on both the person and situation; having mercy on only one of the two doesn’t rid the anger building up inside the victim. Forgiveness isn’t easy, and in order to full-heartedly begin the process, a person must be willing to get rid of a large majority of their anger. If the anger is still there when a person begins the process of forgiveness, the anger will distract the victim from trying to comprehend the situation and work toward a resolution. Furthermore, if the victim is not able to fully comprehend or take in the situation, they will never be able to fully accept what happened, and working towards a resolution will be a struggle. This also means the process of forgiveness will be much more of a struggle than anticipated.

Rabbi Esther Adler-Rephan stated in her sermon titled Forgiveness, “Psychological and physiological studies have repeatedly demonstrated that unforgiving living affects both our emotional and physical well-being, and can exacerbate or even cause heart disease, GI disorders, depression, anxiety, and a host of other painful conditions.” Her statement is completely understandable: People have become accustomed to holding on to old hurts and grievances, which can make living life hard for them. When stress builds up in a person, they are more likely to develop conditions like depression and anxiety, which

has been proven by many researchers or scientists who study how stress affects the human body<sup>1</sup>, so their quality of life will therefore substantially decrease. Stress is almost always present within situations or circumstances in which forgiveness is needed. When forgiveness is needed, stress from the situation will build up and cause any one of the health issues previously mentioned to occur, therefore causing them to live in a state that does not include spiritual well-being.

Although forgiveness is very important, it is also a very challenging process to go through. It can take weeks, months, or years for someone to forgive another, and sometimes no one is able to completely forgive. Complete forgiveness is not necessary, it's the process of forgiveness that is. One of many crucial aspects of the forgiveness process is to remember that everyone is human, and therefore everyone makes mistakes. God forgives us, and it is our Christian duty to forgive those who hurt us. Gaining an understanding of who the offender is and why he/she made that poor decision is another crucial aspect of the process. It's hard to forgive someone when one does not have a good understanding of who the offender is; forgiveness is much easier when judgment is refrained. If judgment was not refrained and the victim thought only negative thoughts about the offender while in the process of forgiveness, they wouldn't get very far. In order to truly discover who a person is, the victim must enter the process of learning who the offender really is with an open mind and an open heart. Judging is the opposite of this; there are no open minds when judging.

When injury occurs to a person that changes their life forever, it's often hard for a person to commit to forgiveness. Especially with events like murders and betrayal, the victim is angry and therefore thinks they have no reason to forgive. One of the many outcomes of forgiveness, in the realm of living in a state of spiritual well being, is the chance for the victim to grow in their faith. God puts obstacles in front of people because he wants them to grow in their faith. Forgiveness is proof that a person has faith in God; it's not an easy thing, so when a person makes the decision to being the process of forgiveness, it shows that people have faith that God is always with them, watching and guiding their lives. Kai Leigh Harriott and Tonya David are proof of this. Because of their willingness to forgive, their faith lives have substantially grown. They are now spreading the word about forgiveness since they know what a big impact it can have in any person's life, and how it is the only way to live in a state of spiritual well-being after injury. Like the motto of Tonya's organization says, the quality of life you live each day really is determined by the choices you are willing to make, and forgiveness is most definitely one of those choices.

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<sup>1</sup> helpguide.org (Non-profit, expert resources to help resolve health challenges.)

## *The Effects of Forgiveness on the Human Soul*

*Abigail Bennett, Sunfish Lake, MN*

*Guard your thoughts, for they become your words.*

*Guard your words, for they become your actions.*

*Guard your actions, for they become your habits.*

*Guard your habits, for they become your character.*

*Guard your character, for it becomes your destiny.*

*-alternately attributed to Rabbi Hillel (1<sup>st</sup> Century), Frank Outlaw, Lao Tzu*

What exactly is forgiveness? Webster's *Colligate Dictionary*<sup>i</sup> defines forgiveness as, "the act of forgiving." But if we dive deeper to look at the definitions of forgiving and forgive, you will find that forgiving is to be "willing or able to forgive," and in order to forgive you have, "to cease to feel resentment against (an offense)." Today we take the act of forgiveness for granted. If you think back to the last time that you genuinely forgave someone, would you remember how you were affected, or how your attitude toward forgiveness was changed? In this paper, I will explore the meaning of forgiveness, and the effect that forgiveness has on both the forgiver and the wrongdoer. I will attempt to show that the act of forgiveness is a central component of what makes up our character and the human soul.

But how does forgiveness affect the human soul? The *Encyclopedia Britannica*<sup>ii</sup> defines soul as "the material aspect of essence of a human being, that which confers individuality and humanity, often considered to be synonymous with the mind or the self." If you are willing to forgive someone of their wrongdoings, would you have a better understanding of that person? In order to understand the effects of forgiveness on the human soul you must first be able to understand the character of the person you are forgiving. By understanding the person's character, you will see their own personality and how they are affected by forgiveness.

What is character? The online Freedom Dictionary defines character as "the combination or qualities of features that distinguishes one person, group, or thing from another." A person's character shows their individuality. It is the combination of actions that they have undertaken in response to events in their life. A person can endure a traumatic event like losing a parent, and depending upon how they choose to deal with that situation, the outlets they choose for their actions, they can define the kind of person they are. They can choose helpful ways to deal with stress and learn to forgive people involved in the loss. They can learn from the pain. They can acquire understanding and wisdom. They can seek consolation through restorative, healthy works, or they can take a downward spiral. Over time, repeated negative choices can break down the way that person responds to life. The combination of life events and how we choose to move on with the experience we've gained from such hardships, or good fortune determines our character.

How is character formed? Our character is molded from the events that we have faced in our lives. It is the result of how we choose to solve the problems that we face in our daily lives. An example of how character is formed is: two children, if one wants a cookie and the first child decides to throw a tantrum, believing that they will get the cookie; but then fails because the attitude was inappropriate; then the second child has learned from observing that whining is not as successful a tactic as politely asking, "May I please have a cookie?" So, by being able to observe, you learn from others' mistakes and you can learn from your own mistakes.

The actions that you allow other people around you to see can allow them to form their own opinions about you. And those opinions can influence how you will be treated, either positive or negative.

Therefore, it is important to set good examples, and to consistently be you “best self.” You can’t repeatedly behave badly and expect that people will respect you. Even though the best of us, who try hard all the time, occasionally, take one or two steps back. Then we can learn from mistakes and regain the respect that we have lost. Instead, people can take a big step back, depending on what they’ve done. In order for that person to be forgiven they cannot expect to gain the respect back over night. They can slowly regain the respect, but it cannot be as it once was.

Throughout history religions have dealt with forgiveness in a variety of ways. One of the best examples is how the Roman Catholic Church during the middle ages was dealing with forgiveness. At that time, penance, or the act of working towards forgiveness had become formalized. It was a part of daily life. When someone had sinned they would go to the priest of the church in their town and they would confess their sin in great detail. Some of the sins were very minor and required very little penance, then there were some that required more penance. Some were even thought to be forgiven by God if charitable donations to the church were made. This devolved into the practice of selling indulgences. Indulgences were to lessen your time in purgatory. It was believed that when a person died their soul went to purgatory. Purgatory was more of an in-between heaven and hell, it was a place where the souls of the dead would remain until they ready for heaven. The length of stay depended on the sins that you forgot to confess during life. If it was a minor sin, you could wait a few months or a year, but if it were heinous like murder, etc. it could last a few hundred years. In addition, living relatives could buy indulgences for deceased relatives. As often happens with systems like this, there was corruption, and things spiraled way out of hand. When the Pope wanted to rebuild St. Peter’s Basilica, in Rome indulgences skyrocketed to raise more money for the church.

The indulgence system caused concerns in many people. One was a monk from Germany by the name of Martin Luther. Luther had been newly appointed. He felt that no matter what he would do, he could not live up to God’s expectations, and was an unworthy servant to the Lord. Believing that he was constantly being tempted by the devil, he would consistently go to the Bible and look for answers of forgiveness. At a turning point in his life a weight was lifted off Luther’s shoulders when he read Paul’s Letter to the Romans. One of the key points that stood out was, “a person is justified from a faith apart from works prescribed by the law (Romans 3:28)”<sup>iii</sup>. Until that moment, Martin Luther had thought that grace is earned by the work you do.

In our Latin Bible, "repent" has come to mean "to do penance." But in the original Greek it means "to change one's mind"--and that is what Jesus meant. Jesus didn't ask for penance...works, deeds or rituals...he asks for a simple change of heart. Salvation is not earned by pilgrimages to Rome, veneration of relics, or Masses attended. We need only Jesus Christ. Jesus paid for our sins. Salvation is a gift from God." (Martin Luther)<sup>iv</sup>

So what does this mean for our own well being? In every day life we experience situations that will require us to ask for forgiveness. For example, we may say unkind things to family members, or if friends are joking around they may say something that unknowingly hurts someone else’s feelings. In these situations we need to acknowledge our own wrongdoings and accept them as our own. And, the people we have hurt need to also acknowledge our wrongdoings. Next, we have to express genuine feelings of remorse, and ask forgiveness from the offended person. If that person is convinced of your remorse, and chooses to, then they may forgive you. Sometimes they will be hesitant with forgiveness. When that happens, the person asking for forgiveness may need to be patient and give the forgiver some space and time to think about it. Sometimes an act of reparation or repayment to the injured person is in order. But regardless of that, the forgiver needs to “change one’s mind” (Luther) about the guilty person. That act, of “changing one’s mind” leads the forgiver to develop deeper empathy for the wrongdoer, and

to look for similarities they both might have. Quite possibly the forgiver can find more ways to get to know the wrongdoer.

“I have come to understand forgiveness as a relinquishing of my right to harbor resentment, suffer, and remain a victim. It is a loosening of the hold of the offense and the offender have on my soul, a liberation from captivity. When I forgive, I release the injury’s power over me – it may no longer determine my thoughts, words or actions.” (Adler-Rephan , 2)<sup>v</sup>

So the act of forgiving is a growth experience for the human soul. People who forgive are learning empathy for others, and have a chance for greater intimacy with the people they forgive.

We have been discussing forgiveness from the forgiver’s point of view. What about from the point of view of the forgiven person? Once we are forgiven, we can learn to forgive ourselves. It will define our character as loving, forgiving people.

What I have tried to demonstrate in this paper is that, although we may never forget, we can learn to forgive. If we learn to forgive wrongdoers, we can gain a better understanding of ourselves, and through that process our character can grow, and help us define who we will be as a person. It will define the essence of our own human soul.

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<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica, Micropedia*, Volume 11, p. 25, Fifteenth Edition, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Brecht, Martin (translated by James L. Schaaf, *Martin Luther, Volume 1: His Road to Reformation, 1483-1521*, Fortress Press, January 1, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Opening the Door to Luther*, Mosaic Television, Spring 2001, <http://www.elca.org/co/Luther/index.html>. Public television host Rick Steves traces the history of Martin Luther’s life, his travels in Europe, and the historic effects of his teachings.

<sup>5</sup> Adler-Rephan, Rabbi Esther, “Rosh Hashanna -1 Tisheri 5765,” September 15, 2004.



*The Bystander Effect: Forgiving Inaction*

*Will Howitz, Shoreview, MN*

“Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and, deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone” (Prayers of Confession). This confession of sin, commonly spoken during worship, is a reminder that God forgives His people for the sins they have committed and for the help they did not provide to others who needed it. It can be easy to understand cases where one is the aggressor and needs forgiveness, but it can be much more difficult to understand why when one has left something undone that they too need forgiveness. Even though God forgives His people when they do not help others, it can be more difficult for His people to forgive themselves due to their remorse, especially when they realize the ramifications of being a bystander. God wants His people to understand why being a bystander is wrong and that they need to forgive themselves. This concept will be illustrated by biblical passages, the ABC show, *What Would You Do?*, hosted by John Quinones, and experiences from the Holocaust.

There are many biblical passages that exemplify God’s attempts to explain to His people how being a bystander is a sin and requires forgiveness. First, in the Good Samaritan story Jesus describes how a priest and a Levite both ignore a Jewish man who had been beaten and robbed on the side of a road. Instead, it is a Samaritan who helps him despite the differences between the two. At the end of the story Jesus asks a lawyer which man from the story was a neighbor to the man on the side of the road. The lawyer replies, “He that showed mercy unto him” (Luke 10: 37, NRSV). By pointing out how doing a good deed for someone, like the Samaritan did for the Jew, Jesus gets the idea across that by doing the opposite of such an act is a sin equivalent to having been the aggressor in the situation. Therefore, being a bystander is a sin, and God’s people need to forgive themselves as God forgives them. A second example comes from the book of Jeremiah. In it, the Lord says, “Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place” (Jeremiah 22: 3, NRSV). In this passage, God skillfully places two commands side by side. In the first sentence He indicates that His people must not stand by idly while others are being wronged, while in the second He indicates that His people must not be the ones that wrong others. He is voicing that being a bystander is just as bad as being an oppressor, chiefly because both allow others to be mistreated. Thus, a logical conclusion is that God’s people need to realize that inaction is indeed a sin. Once that is understood, God’s people should forgive themselves for their mistakes because God forgives them. One final paradigm can be found in the book of Deuteronomy. In chapter fifteen it states, “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be” (Deuteronomy 15: 7, NRSV). The two key words here are “hard-hearted” and “tight-fisted.” The first is intended to describe one who turns away or ignores another while the second is meant to be an adjective for someone who is disinclined to offer financial aid. In the global community, God’s people are bombarded by those seeking aid for others in need. God wants His people to open their hearts and purse strings to help them. It can be hard to forgive oneself for not being able to help all those causes, but God forgives them, so they need to forgive themselves.

In addition to the Bible, the ABC show, *What Would You Do?*, portrays being a bystander as inappropriate and insinuates that personal forgiveness is essential. Children die in cars due to excessive heat every year when they are left inside of them while their parents go about other business. To see who would stop and help, *What Would You Do?* set up a scenario with a realistic-looking doll in a sealed car with speakers that emitted the sound a crying baby. Hundreds of people passed without doing anything. Only a few did anything to help. One was a mother who noticed and called 911. When interviewed as to

why she did what she did, she responded, “I just know it [leaving a child in a hot car] is obviously the wrong thing to do” (Black). Her awareness of the potential risk of death motivated her to act. The implication made by the show is that the public has an obligation to assist those who cannot help themselves and in this case, by not helping and remaining a bystander, the child could die. If the child were real and had died, members of the community who saw the child, but did not act, are just as responsible as the parent is for leaving the child in the car in the first place. When people realize from this example that they were wrong not to act, they may feel guilty. Those bystanders are in need of forgiveness, are deserving of it, and should forgive themselves as God forgives them. Another scenario set up by the show involved a 17-year-old son revealing his homosexuality to his mother, who in turn, verbally abuses him in a coffee house. As with the first situation, many people do not say anything, but eventually one woman intervenes. She attempts to create understanding between the mother and son and reduce the tension. In the follow-up interview she defends her actions, saying, “I thought about just getting my coffee and going, but then I felt I would be complicit if I did that [left the building], if I didn’t say anything” (Son Comes Out). Her answer is something to live by. If God’s people do not prevent wrongs such as this, then they condone them because they fail to depict them as wrong in the first place. Condoning injustice by one’s silence is sinful. Luckily, the confession of sins exists to remind God’s people to forgive themselves because He forgives them. In one last case, several actresses were hired to be waitresses and one actor was hired to be a rude customer whose job it was to berate the individual serving him and make ludicrous demands. For example, he would interrupt her while she was taking care of another table, talk on the phone while ordering, and even follow her around the dining room. Only two people actually confronted this man. One person in particular was very vocal and acted almost immediately. When John Quinones came over to her table to talk to her, she supported her actions by discussing her immigrant parents, the hard work they do in less than ideal circumstances, and said, “And when you’re exposed to those kind of things, you have a sensitivity to injustice. You know, you want to stand up for people” (Chenetz). A lesson can be learned from her because she understands what oppression and mistreatment can look like. She also realizes that not intervening to prevent such injustices is not okay. Oppression and inaction only work to foster indecency. The *What Would You Do?* television program showcases human nature. It presents the motives and ramifications of people’s actions and inactions. And, through that provides a learning opportunity for God’s people where others are not jeopardized. God’s people can learn from their potential mistakes. They can also see the embarrassment and guilt from some of the bystanders who were interviewed. Again, knowing that God forgives His people can help them know it is okay to forgive themselves.

Even though present day entertainment provides valuable lessons, historical events such as the Holocaust are even better ways to learn about what can happen when the majority of people become bystanders and whether they can find forgiveness with passing time. In the novel, *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, he writes a story about his experiences during the Holocaust as he and his father attempt to survive the ordeal. The most important piece comes at the end when Elie looks at himself in the mirror. He writes, “From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me” (Wiesel 109). The suffering and malnourishment he endured led him to the brink of death, but he was one of the six million that did not perish. If only there had been more dissent or a greater number of people who would have voiced the wrongs being done to the Jewish people and other targeted minorities, then perhaps the death toll would not have been so inconceivably high. It took hundreds of thousands of bystanders to allow this event to occur. As a result, it has taken and still is taking time for those who lived during that era to comprehend their own failures, let alone forgive themselves for their inactions. Simon Wiesenthal, author of *The Sunflower*, writes his novel about a single experience during the Holocaust. One day, while being forced to work at a hospital, he is pulled aside to listen to a dying SS soldier as he recounts his sins and asks for forgiveness from him. It is on the march to this hospital that Simon narrates, “...I asked myself if it was only the Nazis who had persecuted us. Was it not just as



wicked for people to look on quietly and without protest at human beings enduring such shocking humiliation?" (Wiesenthal 57). His thoughts indicate just how wrong it is to do nothing for those in need and that being a bystander is just as sinful as being an aggressor. By placing these two kinds of people as equal, it draws the connection that committing an atrocity and demonstrating a lack of mercy are equally sinful. However, in the confession of sins, God forgives all His people's sins and once that is understood the sinner should forgive himself or herself. Finally, there was a prominent Protestant pastor who lived through the Holocaust and spent seven years in concentration camps. His name was Martin Niemöller. Following his rescue, he gave many lectures and at one he spoke,

"First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out --  
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out --  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out --  
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me -- and there was no one left to speak for me" (Niemöller).

This statement is the best paradigm as to why bystanders are just as bad as oppressors. At some point, each of God's people will be in a group that may be persecuted in some way. Therefore, one must act. However, because of God's grace, when they fail to do so, they have to realize they are worthy of forgiveness.

In conclusion, the Bible, the ABC show, *What Would You Do?*, and experiences from the Holocaust all provide great references as to why being a bystander is just as wrong as being the aggressor. As stated previously, when this is understood, one will realize that forgiveness by oneself must be done because it signifies that one has learned from their mistakes and can work to do better in the future. That is a significant purpose for the inclusion of the "what we have left undone" portion of the confession of sin. It may be one of God's ways of helping His people to forgive themselves.

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### *Entwined: Self, Humanity, and Father*

*Amber Kalina, Perham, MN*

Heads bow over hymnals as the pastor begins the confession. “Most merciful God, we confess...” A man stands three pews from the front. His heart pleads along with his lips. The image of his wife running from his raised hand replays in his mind, and guilt forces his head lower. “...what we have done...” A woman stands three pews from the back. Her cheek prickles when her fingers push the tender spot. Bitterness forces her head lower. “...what we have left undone...” Man and woman raise their voices together. “Lord, have mercy on us.” (ELCA 95). The iniquity of human nature burdens mankind. Sin escapes in bouts of unchecked words and actions. It lingers in feelings of anger and betrayal. Despite typically being deemed as a transgression against God, sin encompasses more than an individual and the Divine. This is because sin often results, as in the instance with the man and woman, from interpersonal conflict. Yet, those who trespass against others seek God's forgiveness above the forgiveness of victims, and victims do not find merit in allowing the trespasser to go without justice. One finds comfort when reconciled with God or having received compensation, but the human relationship does not benefit. Although more difficult to do, there is no better way to apologize and show love to God than to make amends with a neighbor.

What first needs to be addressed is the insurmountable love of God. According to a professor of the New Testament, the predominant force in the kingdom of God is not justice, but mercy (Tiede 278). Jesus conveys this image in the parable of the prodigal son. When the younger son returns home after squandering his inheritance, he encounters a father who runs to accept him (Luke 15: 20, NRSV). The father does not question or condemn; he shows radical love. Not only is the father's love profound with the prodigal, but he demonstrates enduring love towards the older son through his patience. A typical parent might get angry at the son's stubbornness when he refuses to partake in the celebratory homecoming party. However, the father leaves the celebration and listens to his son's complaints. Then, he calmly explains his actions to allow the older son to understand (28-32). God is this compassionate father. He goes out to each of His children and envelops them with grace, no matter their mistakes or misgivings. Some call His love “unfair” because the undeserving receive parties at their homecomings (Bell 168). It covers the righteous and the unworthy, those who are home and those who stray from home; it is “both/and, not either/or” (Craddock 188).

The love of God further shatters human conceptions, for it cannot be earned. In human relationships, kind words and charitable acts often result in heightened approval or affection. Man possesses a direct ability to influence how others feel towards him. However, the apostle Paul states, “For by grace you have been saved... not the result of works” (Ephesians 2: 8-9, NRSV). Grace is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Although mankind nails Him there, Jesus chooses the cross “to break the barrier between God and His people” (Tranvik). In other words, Jesus unleashes God's love to the world through His acts alone. He does all the work to reconcile man with God. Human measure plays no role. What makes God's love even more unique is it does not diminish. Mankind finds confrontation over the smallest details. Emotions rapidly fluctuate from love to hate, peace to anger. As is apparent in the parable of the prodigal son, this is not the case with God. The father loves the prodigal just as much when the son leaves as when he returns. In Romans, Paul explains, “[Nothing] in all creation will be able to separate [people] from the love of God in Christ Jesus...” (8:39, NRSV). No downfall is great enough to conquer love's upward draft.

When one looks at the immensity of God's love – inclusive, unattainable, yet infinite – one cannot mortally comprehend its sheer magnitude. The image of innocent Jesus hanging on a cross out of pure love for a guilty world is impossible to understand. It overwhelms the senses with awe and replaces fear of condemnation with joy of salvation. Regardless, man goes to God in prayer and asks for forgiveness; at the very least, an avid Christian confesses once a week during Sunday service. Doing so is invaluable.

Man recognizes the wrong he commits when he admits sin. Thereby, he frees his conscience of burdens. Every genuine apology has worth, but, too often, people stop here.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor who conspired to assassinate Hitler, explains how many view sin as an account; "...because it has been paid, everything [e.g. grace and forgiveness] can be had for nothing" (43). However, he refutes such a definition because it demotes Christ's sacrifice to "cheap" instead of upholding its "costly" nature (44-5). The father has a robe and sandals waiting; he does not need to hear a word. Therefore, importance lies in how man reacts to God's forgiveness, not how he confesses. Apology loses its strength when the offense reoccurs. Man and sin are inseparable, so mistakes are certain to happen. Yet, Jesus asks for change. He tells the adulterous woman, "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8: 11, NRSV). He encourages her to respond to His forgiveness through her behavior. If she follows His instruction, the way she interacts with her neighbors will be altered for the better. Forgiveness does not mean do nothing. Rather, forgiveness offers the opportunity to prove remorse by acting differently.

One cannot forget that man serves God through serving man. The love one has for God and the love one has for man is indistinguishable. The greatest single commandment is to love God and neighbor together (Luke 10: 27, NRSV). Jesus, Himself, comes to the world "not to be served but to serve..." (Matthew 20: 28, NRSV). He goes out to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and free the possessed. He does this all in accordance to the will of God because what one does for a neighbor is done for God. Jesus proclaims in a parable, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me" (25: 40). Therefore, how one treats his or her neighbor reflects how he or she treats God. When man expresses remorse to a victim he has hurt and seeks to make matters right with the victim, he demonstrates his remorse to God. When a victim shows love to those who have wronged him or her, the victim embodies trust and love to God. Man is not able to control God's love, but he has control over how he reacts to it. Two appropriate responses, then, are humility and compassion.

A humble attitude comes from recognizing Christ's sacrifice as a divine act of grace. Man's unworthiness of such a loving act makes him lose his pride and gain humility. Those who exhibit humility do not place themselves above others; instead, they prioritize others. This includes placing others' needs first, whether physical or psychological. Humans are not perfect, though, so humility encompasses another essential trait: strength to admit doing wrong. In relationships, such ability restores harmony in tense situations. However, unless a genuine accident occurs, people typically find apologizing difficult. The act makes a person feel vulnerable; the victim has power to reject the apology and demand restitution. Yet, an attempt at peaceful reconciliation defeats remaining silent. Humility on the perpetrator's part helps victims feel compassion and forgive. Unlike with God, measures – confessing, apologizing, completing penitential works – can be taken to earn the fallible love of a human. One must be willing to complete those measures if he or she expects the relationship to survive. "[Humility] is a way that brings much personal humiliation and insult, but is indeed the way to him, our crucified Brother" (Bonhoeffer 129).

Compassion is the direct product of God's love. Jesus asks His followers to be like God in offering mercy and forgiveness because God forgives them first. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36, NRSV). In the parable of the king and the indebted slave, the king relieves the slave of his debt "out of pity" (Matthew 18: 27, NRSV). While God forgives debts that can never be repaid, He trusts man to forgive the comparably smaller debts of his brothers and sisters. When the slave proves unmerciful to a fellow slave with a much smaller debt, the king recants his own pity (28-35). This is not to say God will not forgive man for not forgiving his brother (Hare 218), but the push for human mercy is apparent. Compassionate people recognize humanity as more than sin; they know blunders happen, and they do not hold negative feelings from those instances, just as the father neglects the transgression and embraces the son. To show compassion means to give up justice, but one regains the lost because of it.

The alternative action that can occur outside of humility and compassion is less than peaceful; it is dangerous. When the perpetrator refuses to show remorse and the victim cannot forgive, anger and bitterness escalate. Feelings not assuaged fester and spread; they grow into thoughts of revenge. Those who commit revenge often do so in ways equal to or greater than the offense inflicted upon them. In a study of 37 school-shooters, 29, or 71%, felt “persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident” (Vossekuil et al 21). Although there are different factors involved behind mass killings, desire for revenge is a common crux. The Oklahoma City Bombing – which claimed 168 lives – was an act of revenge on the federal government after the Waco incident – which resulted in the death of 75 (Rosenberg). Relationships experience great damage from revenge because “disputes can persist through many cycles” (Stillwell et al 254). When a victim chooses to repay the perpetrator with hostility, the perpetrator, in turn, becomes a victim and the once-victim becomes the perpetrator. The roles continue to switch with each vengeful act. Anger met with anger creates a spiral of disaster (260). Jesus does not condone acts of violence. “Such behavior... is foreign to those who live under the reign of God” (Craddock 90). Remember, how one treats a brother reflects how one treats the Father.

To apologize to a neighbor is to admit personal fault. To forgive a neighbor means to relinquish one's right to justice. Both actions are difficult to accomplish, yet completing them demonstrates remorse and love to God. Man cannot earn God's love, for a love that is not lost cannot be regained. God's love covers all through Jesus' sacrifice; man's works plays no part. So, man can only react to what God provides. He does so by acting humble and showing compassion and, therefore, rejecting revenge. Mankind serves God through these actions that serve man. “Let us share the peace,” the pastor announces. Voices fill the space. Three rows from the back, the woman rises. She carefully steps around the well-wishing congregants and into the aisle. Tentatively, the woman strides forward to the third row from the front. He steps into the aisle to meet her. The sight of her swollen, discolored cheek restricts the air in his throat. Being so close to the man, her breath fails to remain even. Both struggle to speak the words on their hearts: “I am sorry,” and “I forgive you.” However, God's love gives strength in the most difficult circumstances, and apologizing and forgiving encompasses more than self and humanity.

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*Forgiveness: A Jewish Perspective*

*Austin Orth, Eagan, MN*

*Dedicated to Rachel Davison: Mother of four, and my friend. I Love You.*

Forgiveness is quite a familiar word to us Christians because of the idea of Jesus forgiving us by dying on the cross. We all think that we know forgiveness and we are good at forgiving. Do we really? Are we really doing the correct thing when it comes to forgiveness? I believe that, as Christians, we do not understand fully what it means to truly forgive someone for what they may have done. As Christians, we can learn a lot about forgiveness through Jewish holidays and traditions or ideas, specifically: Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, and the idea of Tzadaka. By observing and taking note of the different things Jewish peoples do during these times and what they believe, we can begin to understand that forgiveness is a whole lot more than what we Christians think it is. We do work for our forgiveness, but the Jewish people work harder. They strive for it more and further. Hopefully, we can begin to use these ideas in everyday life ourselves, just like the Jewish people do.

During the week that I stayed at Augsburg, I was opened to the idea of forgiveness, not just the fact that forgiving others is good, but that forgiveness is something that we really don't understand and could explore more deeply. I had the privilege of visiting an actual Synagogue. There I spoke with Rabbi Esther. What she told me was, that in Judaism one may apologize and ask for forgiveness three times, but after the third time then it is the fault of the other person for not accepting the apology. This intrigued me greatly so I decided to ask more about this. So as soon as I got back to Burnsville MN, I set up an appointment with Rachel Davison. Rachel is a mother of four wonderful children and happens to be Jewish. She agreed to answer some questions I had about the religion.

Rachel brought up the idea of “*Tzadaka*”, which is basically justice. An example of “*Tzadaka*” would be giving money to people in need, just out of the goodness of your heart. She says that when you see someone on the side of the road holding a sign, for example, you must think of Tzadaka. You're supposed to forgive for no reason. The Jewish people believe that it is not in our power to decide what is wrong with that person and just assume that their position is any different or any harder than ours. We must forgive them for their weaknesses because as far as you know, they may have had no control over those weaknesses. In Rachel's case, whenever she sees someone on the side of the road that needs money, she first forgives that person for whatever they may have done or had done to them to get them to a place where they must ask for help. She then reaches into her wallet and whatever the biggest bill is, that's what she gives to the person in need. Imagine if Christians did this as well. The world would be that much nicer of a place.

Moving from ideas to actual rituals, there is a holiday in Judaism called Rosh Hashanah. This is a ten day period of repentance in which it is said that God inscribes the fate of every living person for the upcoming year in either the Book of Life or the Book of Death. These ten days are used for reflection, self examination, consideration of our moral responsibilities, and it provides each person a chance to restore relationships with other human beings and God. During the ten days of Rosh Hashanah, Jews reflect upon their actions of the past year in order to obtain forgiveness for their transgressions in hopes of influencing God's final judgment about the two Books. Next to seeking forgiveness with God, Jews must also seek forgiveness from people that they may have wronged over the past year before going to God.

There are a few steps to Rosh Hashanah. First, a person must realize that they have made a mistake or wronged someone and genuinely want to change for the better. Then, they must seek to make amends for their actions in a sincere and meaningful way. Finally, they must demonstrate that they have truly learned from their mistakes by not repeating them in the year to come. When one Jew is sincere in his or her



efforts to forgive during Rosh Hashanah, it is the responsibility of other Jews to offer forgiveness during these Ten Days of Awe. If you try to think of any holidays in Christianity in which we are called to action, to forgive anyone and everyone, you cannot find one. We focus more on the fact that Jesus died for us so now we are free from all sin. Yes, this is true, but where is the drive? We have all the attitude that we forgive, but where is the action on our part? Forgiveness is truly an incredibly important concept in Judaism. Sure we celebrate that Jesus died so that God could forgive all of our sins, but we don't try nearly as hard as the Jews do. They even go as far as to purposely go out into the world and forgive their friends, family, and even complete strangers and they get forgiveness from those people in return.

At the end of the incredible ten day period of Rosh Hashanah, is a day that is called Yom Kippur. On this day they must first acknowledge the sins they have committed against others and make reparations. They ask for forgiveness and it is expected that just as each of us hopes that others will forgive us, we are expected to forgive others for their sins against us. After doing this, they must turn to their failures in their relationship with God, try their absolute best to fix whatever problems that may have occurred, and hope to make an even better relationship than they may have had before. Jews are assured that if they are indeed sincere in their repentance towards God then God will indeed forgive them.

In order to obtain this forgiveness from God however, Jews must have a 25 hour period of fasting, worshiping, and thoughtful reflection on the past year. This time is intended to encourage an inner change, a return to living life, if you will, as God and the tradition expects of them. Rachel Davison explained to me that there is an idea known as Shabbat, in which Jewish families create an "Island of Peace" within their family around you and in your community. "Bringing your friend to the flower, not the flower to them" is something that Rachel said that I believe really captures the importance of this idea of Shabbat during Yom Kippur. To get to that perfect place of repentance and reconciliation, you must first forgive all of those around you and especially yourself. You cannot get there if you're holding a grudge.

This day of Yom Kippur is also intended to encourage a sense of awe in God and instigate the practice of restraint in the area of our drives, such as hunger, sex, and anger as they are guided towards a more spiritual and meaningful way of life. Some Jews go about this by praying in a way that is very unique to Judaism. They do this by using something called a Prayer Shawl. A Prayer Shawl covers you from the outside world. It's like the people using them are saying "I'm about to talk to God, so go away please". When they can make this separation from the ordinary world to the holy world, it reminds them to act like God would. This day forces you to forgive even the most "ordinary" of problems, like talking back to a friend or teacher. Those things seem insignificant when put into perspective.

These holidays and ideas and everyday actions say that we can indeed be forgiven by human beings and God. Although this forgiveness doesn't come easily, we must work hard for it. Again I refer back to trying to find something in Christianity that puts as much focus on forgiveness as the Jewish religion does. That's right, you can't. This is because compared to Judaism; we take for granted the forgiveness that was given to us when Jesus died on the cross. Christianity doesn't show enough action about forgiveness towards others. We need to have more drive. Even though we have different beliefs, we all live together under the same sky. If we took the time to observe, research, even become a part of a Jewish person's life and celebrations like I was able to do in Rachel's family, we could learn immensely about forgiveness. As of right now, we look like we don't really care and we just always expect forgiveness from God and others. Being able to share my time and my life and love with the wonderful people in Rachel's family, and being able to meet Rabbi Esther has opened my eyes to a whole other world of possibilities when it comes to forgiveness. Now, whenever I see someone in need or someone that is maybe just a little different, or even a lot different, I forgive, regardless of what may have happened. It very well may not be their fault that it happened to them. So go out into the world and

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experience a Jewish community. Open your mind to the possibilities. Who knows, you may just learn something about God, and even yourself.

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### *Why Is Forgiveness So Difficult?*

*Alexandra Smith, White Bear Lake, MN*

Humans are imperfect beings – prone to mistakes, repeated failures, and disappointment to themselves and others – and therefore the need for forgiveness is an essential part of human existence, both the need to ask for it and the need to give it to others. Religions around the world recognize the necessity for mankind to improve and in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the ability to forgive is a virtue, for it means a commitment to reconciliation and mercy. Many people, however, lack this virtue and, consciously or subconsciously, they choose instead to foster resentment and a need for revenge towards those who have done them wrong – even though this could lead to anger, resentment and even the loss of lifelong relationships. Why are humans hesitant to forgive, reluctant to follow a more virtuous path towards reconciliation and mercy? No matter what their religious preference, I believe that people aren't generally forgiving by nature because they are imperfect.

The Oxford Dictionary recognizes the act of forgiving as “ceasing to harbor feelings of anger and resentment towards another who has wronged oneself.” The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “to give up resentment of or claim to requital for”. Neither includes excusing, condoning, or even forgetting the wrongdoing, and in all of my research, I find it interesting that many religions follow this same path in defining forgiveness as well. There is a disconnect here though, because so often people fail to recognize or follow this and instead seem capable only to forgive minor, nearly insignificant offenses. For some this may be another's lazy or irresponsible driving habits, for others it could someone be not returning a phone call or email. People seem able to forgive the human tendency to make errors when the offenses are minor and relatable. However when the need for forgiveness is great, such as when the offense is infidelity, stealing, or murder, many people fail to practice what they profess to believe. When the need for forgiveness is greatest is also when forgiveness is most often absent.

Some people believe that forgiveness comes instantaneously when, in fact, forgiveness is more of a process. They may also believe forgiveness means on-the-spot understanding or the condoning of the action when actually, forgiveness should be an ongoing part of a person's life and his/her relationships, as necessary as human beings are flawed and prone to mistakes and failure throughout life. Most Americans identify themselves as religious, if not actually part of a specific religion, though it seems that they pick and choose which religious beliefs, values and practices they wish to identify with. (Pewforum.org) This has led, over time, to an imperfect American culture which on the one hand declares itself to be religious, while on the other hand has become fixated with revenge and resentment towards their enemies and neighbors alike.

Forgiveness in the Christian tradition is defined as reconciliation, restoring harmony between the affronted and the offender, so that the offense no longer conditions the relationship between the two. Freedom from sin and the mercy of God are central to the teachings of Jesus Christ and Confession, so that God may forgive one's sin, is a part of nearly every church service, in nearly every denomination of Christianity. The reason for this is because forgiveness gives the forgiven a sense of liberation, as their sins shall not burden their souls anymore. Christian teachings recognize human beings as sinners, who require reconciliation with God and with one another. The Bible contains countless passages about sinners and the need to forgive because of the human tendency toward imperfection. For example, the eighth book of John begins with a story of a woman who committed adultery brought to Jesus for punishment by the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses. They order that she be stoned to death, but Jesus said “If any of you have never sinned, then go ahead and through the first stone at her!” No one throws a single stone, and eventually Jesus is left with the woman. This parable teaches Christians that no one is without sin and therefore they cannot judge another for their sin. This is reaffirmed with a



verse in 1 John 10, which says “If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and his message is not in our hearts.” Additionally, the book of Deuteronomy is a book of laws, many of which direct Christians to treat their neighbors justly, and more importantly, with compassion. These instructions are found throughout the biblical scriptures, such as in the fifth chapter of the book of Matthew, which tells us to make peace with those we have angered, to give to those who ask, to never take revenge on those who have wronged us, and to love our enemies as well as our neighbors – all divine acts of forgiveness. Also, the next chapter of Matthew contains the Lord’s Prayer, the seventh and eighth lines being (though the exact text varies throughout the Christian tradition) “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” (Bible) Truly, in Christianity, hardheartedness towards God and their neighbors violates God’s will.

Clearly, throughout the Bible, the idea that sin necessitates forgiveness is continually reaffirmed. The theme of both divine and human forgiveness is found throughout scripture because of the extreme importance of forgiveness. As human beings are perpetually imperfect and thus perpetually sinners, Christianity teaches that as God forgives you, you must forgive your fellow sinner – that is, forgiveness is a necessary part of a relationship with God. Christians still fail be forgiving to one another, though, because of this tendency toward imperfection. If more Christians realized this, became aware of this, I believe that they would become less imperfect and more forgiving.

In the oldest means of the Jewish tradition, the concept of forgiveness sees sin as a destructive force that adheres to the sinner and that forgiveness is the divine means for removing it. Jews believe the most prominent epithet of God in His role of forgiver is He who “lifts off sin”. (Skolnik, Berenbaum) Judaism teaches that no one can sink so low that they cannot find their way back to God. Because of mankind’s imperfection, repentance is regarded as one of the most important of the teachings of Judaism. The Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur is centralized around atonement and repentance. The atonement prayers of the Jewish tradition articulate the ideals of human brotherhood and the need for mutual forgiveness. The purpose of these prayers is to make the worshiper completely aware of human frailty, and to remind him/her that there is no one who is absolutely free of sin and error. (Birnbaum) In the Torah, Ecclesiastes 7:20 says “There is none on earth who is all good and has done no wrong.” With empathy – refraining from judging and instead taking a more human approach to the person who acted and seeing them as a whole, complex, imperfect being – and having compassion for those who have wronged you, forgiveness comes easier. Often, unwillingness to forgive comes from a misunderstanding of what forgiveness really is. Solomon Schimmel explores the essence of forgiveness in his book “Wounds not Healed by Time”, arguing that it needs to be differentiated from related concepts including to forget, to condone, to excuse, or to justify. Forgiveness is not a substitute for justice. Forgiveness does not imply condoning or approval of the offense. Forgiveness is not forgetting; in fact, it is an essential element in order to remember and find a way to move forward. Forgiveness can be understood as an act of mercy for both the forgiver and for the forgiven. It is an act of strength, not weakness, and choosing to live in a better place. (Adler-Rephan)

Jewish philosopher Philo states, “If you ask for pardon for your sins, do you also forgive those who have trespassed against you? For remission is granted remission.” (Skolnik, Berenbaum) This ideal is also affirmed by the Talmud, which states that “All who act mercifully (i.e., forgivingly) towards their fellow creatures will be treated mercifully by Heaven, and all who do not act mercifully toward their fellow creatures will not be treated mercifully by Heaven.” It is the duty of the Jewish people to forgive those imperfect humans who have sinned against them. Jewish tradition states that if the injured party refuses to forgive even when the sinner has come before him three times in the presence of others and asked for forgiveness, then he is in turn deemed to have sinned. R. Nahman summarizes the concept of the necessity of forgiveness towards one another in the Jewish religion by stating that one should “Imitate

God by being compassionate and forgiving. He will in turn have compassion on you, and pardon your offenses” (Skolnik, Berenbaum).

The Qur’an contains many indications as to the importance of forgiveness in the Islamic religion. In verses 35-38 of chapter 42 of the Qur’an, as well as across numerous other references, restraining one’s anger and offering forgiveness when one has the power to take revenge supersedes prayer and almsgiving – two pillars of Islam. This is undoubtedly because it is man’s tendency to be imperfect and not offer forgiveness when it is most needed. The Islamic tradition views forgiveness and reconciliation of conflicts as the prerequisite of prayer, thus to forgive and to seek forgiveness must be an essential Muslim practice. (Leaman) Repeatedly the Qur’an implies mankind’s imperfection and need for forgiveness, and God’s forgiving and compassionate nature towards them, such as in verse 4:43 of chapter 46: “God is All-pardoning, All-forgiving.” (Kassis) Like Jews and Christians, Muslims believe that to forgive is to overcome resentments toward those who have committed a moral injury. The act of forgiveness is not to deny of the injury, nor is it refuting the sense of resentment it may have created, though it does recognize both. Forgiveness instead suggests going beyond them and is therefore distinguishable from justification and excuse (Leaman).

Some believe forgiveness is an act of weakness, when in fact, the ability to forgive is a strength, which religions around the world recognize. (New World Encyclopedia) The ability to forgive and the act of forgiving both have a profound impact on human wellness. Psychological and physiological studies have shown repeatedly that ‘unforgiving living’ affects both the emotional and physical wellbeing of a person. In a Time magazine essay, Lance Moorow wrote: “The psychological case for forgiveness is overwhelmingly persuasive. Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past, by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business... Those who do not forgive are...least capable of changing the circumstances of their lives” (Time, from Adler-Rephan).

Whether or not one chooses to forgive can either mend a relationship or leave it in ruins. Unfortunately, in a society fixated on revenge, the concept of forgiveness seems to be for the weak. People choose not to forgive those who have wronged them but instead harbor their resentments and not fix the relationship, which is often viewed as the ‘easy way out’. They don’t understand that by going against their imperfect human being tendencies and choosing instead an act of strength in letting go of their anger, no matter whether they are Christian, Jewish or Muslim, they can become just a bit closer to Godliness.

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### *Corrupted Good Intentions*

*Abby Kalina, Perham, MN*

Backed into a corner, a trapped black bear trembles. In front of it stands a white wolf. The wolf's yellow eyes plead with, yet threaten, the bear, its brown eyes reflecting its fear. The two creatures share no genetic link, yet they have a common enemy: the hunter. Many times had the bear and wolf run together to escape the hunter's thundering voice; one that meant, and means, certain death. Now, however, the situation changes. Behind the wolf looms the hunter, his empty hands extended and beseeching. The bear tries to flee, but the wolf blocks its path. A low growl emerges from the wolf's throat. The bear glances at the hunter and sees, in its mind's eye, a gun materialize in the hunter's hands. Memories of horror stricken nights and fearful days flood the bear's mind. Then, unexpectedly, its terror turns to hatred. The bear fiercely roars and barrels past the wolf, towards the unarmed hunter.

Though sounding uncommon, the above situation occurs frequently and pains countless people. The bear and the wolf represent those who have jointly suffered from another person's cruelty – the hunter's. The wolf decides to forgive the hunter's past transgressions. The bear refuses to comply. When the wolf tries to force the bear to forgive the hunter, the result is disastrous. Forgiveness cannot be given on behalf of another, nor can it be a forced action. Instead, it must be given individually and with complete willingness, a standpoint agreed upon psychologically and theologically. In order to concede to this belief, one must first understand the requirements for forgiveness.

According to private counselor Marianne Glaeser, forgiveness is a process with a fluctuating duration period which depends on the severity of a transgression. A minimal wrong can produce immediate forgiveness while a major crime can take a lifetime to pardon. Progress can also be prohibited by the offender's unrepentant stature (341). The process requires a want and willingness to forgive. Without this important step, all others are meaningless. Clemency entails a “conscious” decision to withdraw, eventually abandon, the hatred felt towards a person (340). One cannot want forgiveness and revenge concurrently. He or she must choose which path to follow or risk a lasting emotional stalemate. The second step is to thoroughly examine the dispute (341). This involves gaining a complete knowledge of the incident and discovering one's feelings towards it and the person involved. One can then sort through troubling emotions, such as anger and sorrow, and accept what transpired. Part of this phase may contain justification for withholding clemency or seeking vengeance (341). Although these are negative feelings, they help one gain situational control. When he or she gains enough self confidence, forgiveness ensues because one no longer feels incapable of facing the offender. Upon completion of the full process, the victim feels less burdened and less belligerent towards the oppressor. Throughout this course, the oppressed must feel stable and free to decide; otherwise, healing and change cannot occur.

Forced forgiveness results in the construction of barriers in the victim's mind. According to the textbook *Psychology Applied to Modern Life*, these “defense mechanisms” safeguard one from “unpleasant emotions such as anxiety and guilt” (Weiten et al 111-2). They materialize more often when one's intrapersonal perception of him or herself diminishes and causes insecurity (51). In uncertain times, one needs support – an acceptance of his or her desires – not others' contradictory obligations. Whether one tries to force the victim to forgive or forgives in place of him or her, the underlying message is the victim is wrong in harboring hatred towards the offender. Any accusation makes a person feel affronted or in need of a defensive barrier. Judgment often causes people to “ignore, deny, and twist reality to protect their self-concept” (51). Meaning, people begin to justify their hatred. Any who oppose their viewpoints are considered enemies. Accusations corrupt relationships and often end them, a costly consequence. Due

to barrier construction being an “unconscious” reaction, it is difficult to stop it from occurring (111). Without pressure, one can gradually move forward instead of stepping back to block blows.

A negative repercussion from not completing the forgiving process is “fake forgiveness” (Glaeser 341). This occurs when one cannot fully eliminate his or her disdain towards the perpetrator and make further progress in the procedure. The consequences of halfway pardons are indignation and “a loss of self respect” (341). They also lead to excessive hatred from the accumulation of inner tension (341). Often, false clemency occurs when one believes he or she must forgive immediately. In a communal setting, people often motion for an instantaneous pardon, due to the overall view that forgiveness is beneficial (342). This standpoint is accepted mostly by the Christian community. Throughout the Bible, people ask for God's forgiveness and their plea is answered with His love and mercy. This automatic grace teaches Christians to believe harboring any transgression against another is unacceptable. However, the above information shows otherwise; an unforgiving stature, for a time, benefits victims who are not ready to forgive (341). Christians are too often “[aware] of [forgiveness'] healing power, [but] lack knowledge about its inherent psychological requirements” (344). Although the Bible establishes forgiveness as important, this does not mean it must be given immediately.

In the Bible, God calls for all to “forgive each other; just as the Lord... forgive[s]” (Colossians 3:13, NRSV). The text indicates one must always pardon foes because Christ forgives everyone's sins. Other verses provide direct details of how God wants believers to provide clemency. In the parable of the rich lord and the indebted slave, found in Matthew 18: 23-35, the lord pardons the slave of his debt. That same day, the pardoned slave demands payment from another who owes him. When the lord hears of this, he states, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I have had mercy on you?” (Matthew 18: 33, NRSV) Jesus’ parable is one of forgiveness. However, in verse 35, one understands the need to be thorough in this action. Jesus proclaims one must excuse another “from [the] heart” because God does not want partial forgiveness (Matthew 18:35, NRSV). Instead, He calls for a complete transition to occur. One cannot accomplish forgiveness unless all transgressions, both intra- and interpersonal, are accepted and released. God, Himself, forgives all sins in time: “He does not remain angry forever” (Micah 7:18, NRSV). Even God follows a forgiving process. In the Old Testament, the Israelites perform sacrifices and plead for mercy in order to regain favor with God. In the New Testament, Jesus states one must confess his or her sins and follow Him (Mark 1: 15, NRSV). In both settings, one must first turn to God for forgiveness to occur. The repentance period provides God with time to diminish His anger, allowing one to return to Him.

In Matthew 5: 39, Jesus reprimands those who wish revenge. He dictates everyone must release his or her anger and cling to clemency, even if it brings future pain. This obligation only pertains to self decisions. Jesus does not ask one to bear the hurts of others, nor does He suggest that others must intercede and forgive in one's place. According to theologian professor Eva Fleischner, the text commands one to forgive on behalf of oneself. “The call is addressed to *me*, to forgive evil done to *me*” (140). No matter how similar experiences may be, one only accounts for personal feelings. Emotions play a key role in determining how a person reacts to a situation, to the people involved in it, and to its lasting effects.

Fleischner's expression relates to Simon Wiesenthal's experience, recollected in his book, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. After he refuses to forgive a deteriorating SS man, Karl, Simon retells his story to his fellow inmates at a Polish concentration camp (63). While Simon wallows in uncertainty of his decision, the other prisoners applaud his action; some of them envy him for his experience (64). Had Simon forgiven the SS man, the prisoners, based on their initial reactions, would have become angry, perhaps violent, towards Simon. Josek, Simon's religious friend, supports Simon's decision stating, “what [Karl] has done to other people you are in no position to forgive” (65). Any absolution supplied by Simon insults all who had been ruthlessly murdered by Karl and his comrades. This situation causes Simon unnecessary grief as he attempts to discover what it means to forgive one

who has wronged countless others. Simon later releases his anger through understanding what it means to forgive for oneself, not for others (98). One possesses the power to eliminate his or her own pains. Others cannot remove the hurts for him or her.

One also discerns the individual requirement of forgiveness through the change in the confession or repentance process over the years. According to Dr. Kathleen Chesto, a Doctor of Ministry, before the Reformation, the Roman Catholics provided clemency by using a penitential, “a book listing all possible sins one could commit” (*Sacrament*). In a second row, the sinner's punishment, his or her required act of penance, was listed (*Sacrament*). When one accomplished his or her act of penance, he or she was forgiven by the Church and God. Depending on the severity of the transgression, the completion time could fluctuate between a couple days to several years. Chesto describes how one could vouch for commutation, which allowed one to shorten his or her sentence or change it. One could even perform “substitution,” allowing another to perform penance on behalf of the actual sinner (*Sacrament*). The Church later discarded commutation due to its inability to change people's ways. Later, the repenting process changed to confession through a priest. The priests obtained the authority to forgive sins through the Church, which became ordained through Jesus giving the apostles the power to provide clemency on behalf of God (*Sacrament*). However, this development was not accepted by all.

Martin Luther, through his writings in the Large Catechism, expressed that forgiveness could only be found through the Gospel and through Christ's sacrifice (Luther 405). Luther, himself, rewrote the Gospel so all could read God's message and feel confident about His grace. Luther proclaimed one should recite the Lord's Prayer not to gain forgiveness, but to “recognize and receive [it]” (419). Jesus sacrificed Himself so humans could gain direct forgiveness from God; all one has to do is ask and believe. A personal relationship allows one free access to God and expels intermediate roles of priests and religious leaders. Luther's lesson was later expressed further by Phillip Melancthon, during the Augsburg Confession and Apology, to include the apostles' clemency rights. Melancthon professed praying to the saints to be unacceptable. Although “living saints pray for others,” nowhere in scripture does it support praying to dead saints to obtain forgiveness (Melancthon 202-3). When one sins against God, he or she does no wrong towards the saints. Thus, no penitential act should go towards them. God deserves to hear the wrongs performed against Him and decide His judgment, just as any victim deserves to give or withhold forgiveness. For clemency to be dealt directly one must confess to the wronged, otherwise peace eludes both sides.

Forgiveness cannot be given on behalf of another, nor can it be a forced action. Instead, based off psychological and theological studies, it must be given individually and willingly. Should the forgiving process be disrupted, the results turn disastrous. Clemency requires completion. Throughout the progression, one needs support, not skepticism from those he or she trusts. Good intentions provide no justification for force; even a gentle nudge can send one careening into a wall. Acceptance of the victim's decision, whether or not he or she chooses to forgive, allows him or her to heal more quickly than if opposition is shown. Forgiveness is a gift to be given and a privilege to be earned because not all receive it. Even God's grace is gained: through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Without clemency, bitterness and guilt damage relationships and ruin lives. The importance of correct forgiveness cannot be stressed further. If resentment is not eliminated, it remains as a dark poison in its host, seeking to destroy it.

The black bear feels the cool stone face at its back. In front of it stands the white face of its betrayer and the tall figure of its enemy. Escape is not an option, only offensive action. The bear grunts a warning and takes a small step forward. The wolf gives a slight whine in distress then bares its teeth and growls. An unexpected noise sounds: a whistle. The wolf's ears perk and it turns its head slightly to peer at the hunter, who motions for the wolf to come to him. For a moment, the wolf turns back to the bear, yellow eyes meeting brown for, perhaps, the last time. With a sigh, the wolf breaks eye contact and retreats towards



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the hunter. The bear stands unsure; it cautiously looks between man and canine. Slowly, the hunter nods his head in farewell and apology. The bear nods slightly in return, a sign of hope for the future. Then, it bolts towards the tree line and quickly disappears into the forest.

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*Forgiveness and Reconciliation in International Conflicts*

*Hannah McLean, Milwaukee, WI*

Matthew 5:44-45 reads, “But I say, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike” (NLV). There are things as human beings that we feel we can only strive to do. For instance, how many of us can say we have always been able to live according to these verses? We instinctively build boundaries and claim “our way is the right way” when someone is different than us. Our lack of love, understanding and forgiveness of one another leads to our diffident behavior. The way I see it, our differences and uniqueness should help us learn from one another and grow together. Unfortunately, our world is not a perfect place and in spite of our differences, conflict arises. In Northern Ireland’s case, civil unrest has existed for centuries. The most prominent question is how do we begin to move forward and progress in a society such as Northern Ireland’s? Ultimately, the most viable and long term solution to end conflict is forgiveness.

It is easy to write down a solution to solve years of violence and unjust behavior but the difficulty begins with putting it to the test in the real world. The conflict in Northern Ireland, which has killed thousands, has political and religious roots that are centuries old. In modern times the conflict is centered on opposing views of the area's status. “Catholic” designates one who is of the indigenous Irish population (Kronenwetter, 38). In Northern Ireland, Catholic refers to a member of a large minority once discriminated against in housing, employment, and opportunity. Catholic means wishing to preserve the ancient Irish heritage and to unite Ireland outside the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, Protestant refers to those who, though their families may have lived in Ireland for centuries, are labeled foreigners, loyal to their British roots. Protestant refers to a member of the former ruling class, fearful of what the loss of their majority might mean. Protestants are also those who seek to preserve their culture by keeping Northern Ireland a part of the United Kingdom (Kronenwetter 84).

Since the 12th Century, constant revolts challenged the often brutal British rule of Ireland climaxing in the 1916 Easter Uprising in Dublin. It sparked a chain of events leading to civil war and partition of the island between the Catholic and Protestant citizens. In the south 26 counties formed a separate state, while six counties in the north stayed within the UK (Infoplease 3). Over successive decades the Catholic minority there, suffered discrimination over housing and jobs, which fuelled bitter resentment. In 1969 Catholic civil rights marches and counter-protests by Protestant loyalists spiraled into violent unrest. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s paramilitary groups waged violent campaigns to pursue their goals. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) carried out deadly bomb and gun attacks in Britain and Northern Ireland that targeted police, soldiers, politicians and civilians. Police and British forces tried to keep order, sometimes amid controversy, such as the alleged co-operation of some undercover units with loyalist groups (Infoplease 2). In the early 1990s negotiations took place between political parties and the British and Irish governments. After several years of talk, IRA and loyalist ceasefires held, and in 1998 the “Good Friday” agreement was signed. The Catholic Protestant line is still such a barrier that cross community contacts are quite limited (McCarthy 76). Despite the hopes raised by the 1998 agreement, there is no real political agreement, and tensions remain high. Violence is still regarded as a political tool on both sides. Acceptance of diversity and real peace have yet to come to Ireland. The power sharing government that came out of the 1998 agreement barely continues now, and could fail at any time (Gallagher 2).



With a fragile peace finally at hand, what will make it possible for victims and aggressors to pass each other on the streets each day? Professor Ed Cairns says, “To move on, we must deal with the past because sleeping dogs never lie.” Many people refuse to forgive, feeling that forgiveness is essentially giving up or letting the enemy get away with their actions (Jasper 102). Revenge or punishment can delay or even prohibit the resolution of a conflict, as fear of retaliation can keep an opponent from accepting guilt or apologizing. Forgiveness is not giving up, but rather an acknowledgement of the past and a willingness to move forward. Revenge can only continue the conflict and pain on both sides.

Forgiveness isn’t something that’s commonly talked about with reconciliation, but it is needed to bring closure to the pain and suffering experienced in Northern Ireland. You cannot contemplate hope unless you address the pain and despair of what has passed. Each time we witness an act of forgiveness we marvel at its power to heal, to break a seemingly unending cycle of pain, yet forgiveness is something we struggle with on a daily basis. Perhaps it is because we do not fully understand it. Instead, we either associate forgiveness with weakness or view forgiveness as an almost saint-like quality that cannot be learned. Where instead, the opposite is true; forgiveness is a sign of strength.

The need for forgiveness and understanding extends to those who have not necessarily been victims of violence, but instead those who have simply learned prejudice from their divided communities. It is from this need the Ulster Project was formed. Under the sponsorship of the various U.S. city Ulster Projects, teens (an equal mix of Catholic and Protestant boys and girls) from their paired Irish communities come to the United States to live in private homes for a month. Accompanied by adult counselors, the Northern Irish participants range in age from fourteen to sixteen years old, having been evaluated by their teachers and clergy for their leadership potential. At this age, the youth have not committed to any underground militant group and are old enough to profit from this experience. During the month long program, the entire group of Northern Irish and American teens meet almost daily for activities, including encounter sessions, social activities, community service projects and worship. The goal and purpose of the Ulster Project is to promote reconciliation between Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants by fostering tolerance, understanding, and friendship among teenage future leaders and to present a program that brings Northern Irish teens of differing Christian faiths together in a strife free atmosphere that emphasizes acceptance of all people (O’Keefe).

The positive changes are easy to see. Parents of the youth in the project have crossed sectarian lines in safety to work cooperatively on behalf of the project. The youth themselves have been able to maintain their friendships with the support of the churches and neighborhood communities. Kate Ray was one of the Northern Irish Catholic teens that participated in the Ulster Project in 2006. She writes about her friendship with another Northern Irish, Protestant teen participant. “I could write a detailed essay describing some of my most important characteristics... however, a more compelling way for me to describe myself is through the story of an unlikely friendship. One full of love and laughter, compassion and understanding. One that will last a lifetime. Most importantly, through the experiences of others and the united family that we created against the injustice in Northern Ireland, we learned about ourselves. We learned never to doubt the power of change, and how much of that change can come from within ourselves. I realized how much of who I am today is because of Jennie. She has encouraged me to be myself and to love all that life has to offer” (O’Keefe-Boettcher 2011).

Kate’s words are a testament to the idea that forgiveness and understanding are key to healing. To heal the wounds of Northern Ireland I believe you have to see humanity in the face of your enemy. The Ulster Project is a perfect example of the promotion of this concept among teens and a new generation. The same idea is relevant among those who have lived through seemingly unforgivable acts of violence and through years of strife. However, forgiveness is a difficult journey that you can only take at your own pace. “Today you can forgive and tomorrow you can feel the pain all over again.” says Anne

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Gallagher. Along with the healing of individuals, work would need to happen as a community where the goal would be to raise the consciousness of the leaders involved, and those leaders in turn could help to raise the consciousness of their own people. The leaders would need to stop preaching condemnation and violence and instead teach forgiveness and unconditional love. As people would begin to move from fear towards unconditional love, they would reduce and then eliminate violence, stop competing and start cooperating, shift from scarcity to abundance, stop worrying and start contributing to the goal. The goal being the type of peace that forgiveness brings and helps you go on with life.

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*Beyond the Limits to Forgiveness*

Natasha Gindorff, St. Paul, MN

At some point in our lives each one of us needs to forgive or be forgiven. The pain of a hurtful act can affect and change our life forever. Without forgiveness, feelings of hurt and bitterness can overtake our normal feelings, and we become someone different. A number of barriers can stand in the way of forgiveness. Sometimes the offense is so ugly that the victim cannot forgive, afraid that all will be forgotten. Sometimes the offender is thought to not deserve forgiveness. If we withhold forgiveness, we think we hold the power that will make the offender feel awful and suffer with guilt. Although we all face limits to our ability to forgive, we can strive to grow in our capacity to forgive by observing the example of Jesus and those around us.

Limits, or barriers, to forgiveness may sometimes be helpful. Simon Wiesenthal wrote a book called *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Simon writes as the main character who survived treacherous years in numerous concentration camps during World War Two. A Nazi soldier, who is haunted by his participation in horrendous crimes in which thousands died, asks him for forgiveness. The soldier lies dying on his hospital bed as he tells his horrifying story to Simon. Simon walks away, not having said a word, and the soldier dies unforgiven. The story ends and the author asks what the reader's choice would have been (Wiesenthal 98). In the second part of *The Sunflower*, many religious leaders have responded to his question. The answers are all different, and many people disagree about Simon's choice. One writer, Rabbi Heschel, states, "No one can forgive crimes committed against other people. It is therefore preposterous to assume that anybody alive can extend forgiveness for the suffering of any one of the six million people who perished" (Wiesenthal 171). This is to say that it is better to not forgive on behalf of other victims, in order to keep their memory alive.

Another recent news story (Simons 2011) tells of Michael Swanson, a seventeen-year-old boy, who shot two convenience store clerks in Carroll, Iowa. Following his trial, Michael laughed and smiled as the judge read his sentence. Can we forgive someone like that, after such a ghastly crime has been done? If someone doesn't show any signs of remorse, is forgiveness deserved? Forgiveness will mean not a thing to them. Does the act of forgiveness ease the offended's pain, if the offender is not sorry? Although we may have hateful thoughts toward an offender, we can only hope that they let God into their life and become a different person. Most of us find limits that challenge our ability to forgive, and sometimes they help us to not forget.

There are those who seem to model forgiveness despite the challenges they have gone through, however. Dr. R. Brasch, in *A Book of Forgiveness*, tells the story of a little girl in the midst of a war caused by racism (Brasch 50). Her frightful days were spent merely trying to survive and to protect her brother. One day her nightmare unfolded in a dark alleyway between her, a bloodthirsty soldier and her brother. The soldier pursued her brother, caught him and killed him. The girl would have been killed also, had she not escaped. Years later, while working as a nurse, the girl encountered a strangely familiar wounded man. At the first sight of him, she knew unmistakably that this was her brother's killer. The soldier would not survive without her care. She helped him recover. When he survived, he learned that the nurse was the victim of his crime, and he questioned why she had cared for him. She answered that, "her religion taught her to forgive those who are her enemies and who try to harm her" (Brasch 50). How can one do that? This girl was merely a child when she saw her brother getting murdered. Years later she forgave the murderer. The fact that she was a nurse, and the fact that she had some years to delve deeper into her faith and understanding of forgiveness, may have helped her get over the barrier of losing a loved one. The memory was still there, but the young woman could finally forgive because of her maturity. This may be a learning opportunity for all of us. Forgiveness doesn't always come naturally at first. Sometimes it takes time for our faith and self to mature. We may need to give ourselves time to forgive. In Colossians

3:13, Jesus says, “Bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Tuneth 1233). Sometimes there are people like this woman, in our midst, who can teach us that forgiveness is possible when we bear with each other and practice patience.

The Amish have another story that tells of forgiveness in the face of a tragic event (Holusha). On October 2, 2006 a gunman went on a shooting rampage in an Amish community, killing five young girls. The gunman held the girls hostage and made the boys leave the schoolroom. After shooting ten children, he then took his own life. Shock ran through the small Amish community as parents tried to piece together what had happened. Immediately, they turned to prayer and the comfort of their community. Then the Amish went to the home of the murderer, and spoke of forgiveness to his family. “Fred Luskin, the director of the Forgiveness Project at Stanford University.... told the *Deseret Morning News* a few days after the tragedy that he saw the Amish behavior as ‘laudatory’ but questioned the ‘inner quality of that forgiveness’ that came so quickly. ‘I don’t know how you can do that without feeling some of the pain and struggling with your own loss and woundedness.’” (Briggs 11). It was clear that the Amish did have pain, but there seem to be some factors that made them stronger people, more able to forgive. The Amish have the advantage of having simplicity in their lives. They wear simple clothing with hardly any color in it to create humility. They steer away from any technology that could cause controversy among their community. They focus on their relationship with God and each other. They pray each morning and night as a community. Because of their different lifestyle, the Amish don’t have distractions like the horrible shows we see on TV that lead us to thinking that revenge is the only choice to someone who has been hurt. The Amish also have the support of their community to get through hard times.

If we can learn to share our struggles to forgive, with others, we might be able to forgive more easily. One final factor that helps the Amish is that they are enveloped in a rock-strong faith that tells them that forgiveness is the right and only thing to do. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus says “... forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors...” (Tuneth 994). This shows us that God forgives our mistakes, so we need to forgive others. We need to stop and reflect on the amount of love and forgiveness each one of us has received from God. This can make it easier to forgive, because we want others to feel the same comfort we do when we are forgiven. The story of both the nurse and the Amish teach us important ways we can strive to grow in our capacity to forgive.

Forgiveness is hard. When we think that forgiveness is impossible, we can learn from our neighbors. Simon Wiesenthal teaches us that sometimes forgiveness is not ours to give. We can learn from the Amish that we need to back away from the constant distractions in today’s society that are catching our attention, gather our neighbors in community when we need it most, and rely on the support of others. We can learn from the nurse that sometimes it takes time and maturity before we can forgive. Most importantly, Jesus has shown us that forgiveness is possible. Watching those around us gives us inspiration to make every effort to understand and build our faith, so we can become stronger forgivers. Along with Jesus, there are many more models in our lives. So, if we reach beyond our limits, learn from others and forgive ourselves, I believe that we will nurture our spirit and, with this, we can become more like those who have overcome the hardest limits of all.

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## *Everyone is Deserving of God's Forgiveness*

*Bella Nordahl, Anoka, MN*

“Let’s say we’re sorry, before it’s too late, give forgiveness a chance.” Many people know what forgiveness is, but do not understand every aspect to it. Ronnie Dunn’s song, “Bleed Red” is a present day example of how Lutherans can see that God’s forgiveness is meant for everyone.

Forgiveness between two people can be complicated at times, but understanding God’s forgiveness can help us learn how to forgive others. It also helps us better understand God’s love for us. We receive God’s forgiveness because Jesus died on the cross. 1 Peter 3:18 says, “[f]or Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God” (NRSV). In order to get this forgiveness of sins for the rest of our lives, we must believe that Jesus was crucified on the cross for our sake. “All the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name” (Acts 10:43, NRSV). However, we must confess our sins to God. He will then forgive us for the wrong we have done.

One thing a person must know about in order to better understand forgiveness is the grace of God. His grace is never ending. It does not matter if you do good things or bad things. You will receive His grace. An anonymous person wisely said this, “[y]our worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God’s grace. And your best days are never so good that you’re beyond the need of God’s grace.” Grace is the free and unmerited favor or beneficence of God. This Grace is an undeserved free gift, undeserved favor, and undeserved love. God will give us this grace no matter what, because it is free, but for reassurance we can ask for this grace through praying. However, we are not worthy of this grace, God is doing this purely out of His love for us. God’s grace works to forgive our sins. It changes our souls by infusing divine life to heal the wounds of sin. It also moves our hearts to conversion and repentance.

Another part of forgiveness is mercy. This is the action of forgiving. A famous quote by Winston Churchill says, “[w]e shall show mercy, but we shall not ask for it.” When talking about forgiveness, one could take this as meaning, “forgive the people who have done you wrong, but if you have done something wrong to another, let them forgive you in their own time.” Agatha Christie had a different opinion on mercy. “Too much mercy...often resulted in further crimes which were fatal to innocent victims who need not have been victims if justice had been put first and mercy second.” This statement can be true because if you forgive someone for something they did, and they then may think it’ll be okay to do again. Proverbs 26:11 explains this, “[l]ike a dog that returns to its vomit, is a fool who reverts to his folly” (NRSV). Although, one can forgive someone and it could have the opposite effect. Rev. Walter H. Everett’s son was shot by Mike Carlucci. Walter said, “...on the first anniversary of Scott’s death, I wrote to Mike. I told him about my anger, how it impacted my life, and asked some pointed questions. Then I wrote, “Having said all that, I want to thank you for what you said in court, and as hard as these words are for me to write, I forgive you.” I wrote of God’s love in Christ and invited Mike to write me if he wished.” Mike was really sorry for what he had done. They then became close friends. Even if Walter had not forgiven Mike, God still would have.

The third thing people should know about forgiveness, is leaving the past alone, and not letting it get to one’s head. Many people know the saying “forgive and forget.” Most people just put things in the back of their minds and leave it there, never forgiving what others have done to them. They just forget about it, which makes them believe that they have forgiven. Or, people believe that in order to forgive they must act as if they have never been wronged. This could also lead to where people keep doing bad things to another because the other person keeps forgiving them, so they feel they can just do it over and over again. This is not what God intends to happen to us when he tells us to forgive each other. However,



forgiveness does not mean that you should pretend the event never happened. When one forgives another, they should know what occurred between them so they do not have to repeat what they have already been through. There is a quote by Paul Boese that states, “[f]orgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.” Going back to Walter Everett, if he had not forgiven Mike he would not have the same opportunities he has today. Forgiving has enlarged his future, and has lifted a huge burden off both him and Mike. God forgives our sins, letting us move on with our lives, and helping us realize not to make that mistake again. Also, when God forgives us, He acts as though the sin never occurred. In Hebrews 8:12, it says, “[f]or I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (NRSV). When God forgives us, he lets our past sins be freed so we aren’t defined by what we have done. Because of poor choices, we have to deal with those consequences, but when God forgives us, He lets our future be much larger than it would be if people held our wrong doings against us. Ephesians 4:32 states, “and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (NRSV). In this verse, it is telling us to forgive like God forgives; treat people as we did before they sinned, and do not hold their sin against them.

“Bleed Red” is a complex song if one really pays attention to it. It mostly talks about how everyone is equal and if a person on one side of a conflict feels hurt, the other person feels that way too. Even though the song does not mention God specifically, the three parts of forgiveness mentioned above do appear.

The second line of the song, “[t]urn the anger into water; let it slip through our hands” is an example of God’s grace. This is because God lets His grace pour out, just like the water would. Here, the anger would be the action that led up to receiving the grace. Again, it does not matter to God what a person has done. He will always give them grace.

Mercy shows up a little in “Bleed Red,” in both the first and second lines. These lines are saying, “let us try doing this, and see how it works out,” which fits the definition of mercy- compassion. This suggests mercy because changing bad things to good is what mercy is. The part where it says “give forgiveness a chance” is the main part where mercy shows up, because it is specifically asking to make the peace.

“If we’re fighting, we’re both losing; we’re just wasting our time, because my scars, they are your scars...” One can think of this as letting go of the past. It is saying: *Let us figure out our problems. We will both have this experience behind us so we can move on.* It is true that if two people are fighting, they are both losing. They just may not think of it that way, which leads to the wasting of time. The argument or issue that happened will be the scars and they truly are both people’s scars. In Walter and Mike’s situation, they both have a story behind what happened, each a little different because of their perspectives. But, they were kind of fighting before Walter forgave. This was wasting time, because Walter was sick of being angry all the time, so he decided to forgive, even though it was one of the hardest things he had to do. They both have the scars. Walter had to deal with the fact that he no longer had his son, and Mike’s is that he has to face that he killed a human being. Together, they are the same incident, they are sharing the scars.

The rest of this song explains that we all do the same things, and everyone goes through hard times in life. Most importantly, the message of this song is that we can relate to one another. We know what others are going through and we maybe went through something similar, so we will be able to help them. The main point of this song is that we must see beyond each other’s differences and learn to forgive one another. One day, a person may wake up and hear that the person they haven’t forgiven for doing, or not doing, the smallest thing has passed away, and they realize they can no longer personally forgive them, which can cause a burden. Another thing that can cause a burden is just plain not forgiving someone. This burden produces anger, and this can affect the relationship they have with everyone, even the people close to them.

Some people may feel guilty about this burden, even though they know they have God's forgiveness. If this happens, it means the Devil has found this weakness and has made the person feel that way. By doing this, he knows that it keeps people separated from God, which is what he wants. An example of the Devil trying to separate us from God is in Genesis when the serpent convinces Eve to eat fruit from the tree God said not to. Eve shares this fruit with Adam, and it opens their eyes, so to speak, and makes them realize they have no clothes on. This angers God because He specifically said not to eat from that tree. He then punishes Adam, Eve, and the serpent, sending them out into the world, no longer being secured by the garden (Genesis 3:1-19, NSRV).

When the Devil tempts us, we must go to the Bible and realize God is on our side. We have to view the wisdom that the Bible offers us. This is where we have to put our faith and not let the Devil change our ways. So if we feel this guilt, we have to remember that Jesus died for us, and that God loves us all the time. When Adam and Eve were sent out of the garden, God still watched over them, loved them, and forgave them. After a while, He sent Jesus to do the same for us. God had Jesus come here so nothing else could separate us from Him, this includes all of the wrongs we have done, and the wrongs we have trouble forgiving others for.

God's forgiveness is an amazing thing and works in wondrous ways. Although, these days, people seem to not pay attention to Him as much as they used to in the past. "Bleed Red" helps us remember what forgiveness is, and, even though it does not mention God's name, or how God helps us with forgiving, it does show us that everyone needs it, no matter what.

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*Forgiving Before Repentance*

*Joe Kempf, Mazeppa, MN*

While mankind as a whole holds a view of forgiveness that requires the offender to feel guilty and repent from the offense, some Christians believe that forgiveness is offered regardless of repentance for all believers in Christ because they have Christ in their heart. Many Christians cite Luke 23:34, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Even on the cross, Jesus was forgiving the very people who crucified him, even though they were mostly unrepentant. The topic of forgiveness when repentance is not offered is easily thrown aside by many people with the simple fact that it is against human nature. Retaliation is often wanted to pay for the sin. But what about situations where the offender or offenders are dead? Is forgiveness possible in this situation? If a person doesn’t forgive others, will God forgive them? To truly understand the concept and these questions, one must dive straight into scripture and beyond to see the complex nature of God and his ways. To see the whole picture one must look through scripture, analyze situations that outline the concept, understand how society views forgiveness, and see what kind of forgiveness there may be.

The idea of forgiveness without repentance has some justification in Scripture. Numerous times in the Bible, it lists that Christians should forgive others. In Matthew 5:39 it says, “But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” Constant forgiveness is brightly shining in this verse. Again, forgiveness is highlighted in Matthew 6:14, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Matthew 6:14 seems to pose a high risk situation for Christians. If a Christian refuses to forgive another person (for not repenting), then God will not forgive that Christian (for not repenting about holding a stubborn heart). This verse is stating that if a person doesn’t forgive another, that person is committing a sin by not forgiving others. There are many consequences that this verse raises. The first being that by not forgiving others, a person is damning themselves. The second is that, unless Christians forgive others, they may never be pure in the sight of God. A good verse to organize this idea is Colossians 3:13, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”. Because God is just and forgives Christians of their sins, Christians should do the same to other people.

While forgiveness is specifically mentioned in these verses, there are many Bible passages that deal with this concept as a whole. The Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is found in Luke 15, is a great story on forgiveness. The question that is raised after reading the parable is whether or not the prodigal son ever repented. A small group of Christians argue that the son only returned to the father because he ran out of money. But the story never actually says that the son repented. Whether or not the son repented does have strong consequences. The Father was patiently waiting to his son to return. He watched for him everyday, offering forgiveness so that the son would be welcomed back.

The story of Jacob and Esau also deals with the issue of forgiveness. Throughout the book of Genesis, Jacob is described as deceiving his father, Isaac, and his brother. Jacob caused his brother to lose all of his inheritance and he even tricked Esau out of his own birthright. After all of the deception is over, Jacob and Esau meet. In Genesis 33:4, Esau embraces Jacob, and forgives him of all his sins. Jacob never formally repents. He submits to Esau, but he expects hard feelings. Esau simply offers his forgiveness before repentance has ever happened. The forgiveness that Esau offered healed the harsh relationship between the two brothers, and was quite powerful in that sense.

The issue of death and forgiveness has raged throughout the ages. In the Middle Ages, forgiveness would happen a few moments prior to death, and the penitence would happen in Purgatory. The sins that were not confessed would be slowly shed by the person in Purgatory. Of course, the view of forgiveness has changed dramatically since the Middle Ages. God still forgives sins after death. In Matthew 12:31, it says, “Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.” According to Jesus, the only unpardonable sin by God is not recognizing what holiness is, which all genuine Christians will never commit. God wants to forgive us of all sins, but if a person doesn’t even accept that God exists and is holy, God can never change that person. Because of this, God forgives a person’s sins after death if they are a believer.

Another argument raised is that Christians have all ready died on the cross with Jesus for our sins. In Hebrews 10:10, it states, “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Christ died for the sins of all believers. Since Christ forgave all of humanities sins, Christians are urged to seek it further and to repent because they have been reconciled. God’s forgiveness changes the forgiven into a new people, a people that is seeking God’s love and holiness. (Hebrews 10:19- 25) This ultimate forgiveness that Christ has given Christians extends past death and unrepentance. The forgiveness that Christians receive is there for the whole persons’ life and they are given full and complete forgiveness.

A logical argument for the forgiveness of sins after death and repentance are the ones that a person is unaware of. During the liturgy, the pastor proclaims the forgiveness of all the congregations’ sins. Even the sins that people were unaware of are forgiven during the liturgy.

Another complex face of forgiveness is when death creates a veil between the offender and the victim. It is very hard to forgive a person after they have died, but it is possible. The fact that death prevents the person from repenting creates a situation where forgiveness without repentance is fully necessary. The story of Joseph and his brothers is close to this situation. All of Jacob’s sons thought Joseph was dead after they sold him to slave owners. But even when they thought they would die themselves, they forgave Joseph for all that he had done. Joseph forgave his brothers before they even repented. Forgiveness is a very powerful force in this story and in modern life. Forgiveness changes people in many ways.

Another example when a person was thought to be dead was forgiven. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Father waited for his lost son that went off to live a life of sin. When the son returned he states, “But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was* lost and has been found.” (Luke 15:32) The son could have been disowned by the Father with his careless living. The son was dead in sin and could have been dead physically as well, but the Father forgave him nonetheless.

The face of death did not prevent Jesus from forgiving others. While he was on the cross, Jesus still forgave the criminal that was next to him. Even though the criminal repented, the overall concept that death prevents a person from forgiving another is again pushed aside with a powerful, and full forgiving force that changes peoples’ lives.

Another thought that is often raised is whether a person that refuses to forgive others is forgiven for their sins by God. In Matthew 6:15, it states, “But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” This verse carries a heavy warning against Christians. But to what extent does this verse talk about? It is clear that the Christian probably does not repent from not forgiving. This concept is often overlooked and deals heavily on what God does in the situation where repentance is not present. According to renowned Bible speaker John MacArthur, this verse is stating the following,

“This is not to suggest that God will withdraw justification from those who have already received the free pardon He extends to all believers. Forgiveness in that sense- a permanent and complete acquittal from the guilt and ultimate penalty of sin- belongs to all who are in Christ... Believers are to confess their sins in order to obtain a day-to- day cleansing... It is like washing of the feet rather than a bath... Forgiveness in this latter sense is what God threatens to withhold from Christians who refuse to forgive others.” (Page 1371)

But this does not mean that the Christian doesn't receive punishment for his lack of forgiveness to others. In Hebrews 12 the issue of God's discipline to His children is discussed. “If you are not disciplined... then you are not true daughters and sons at all.” (verse 8) God does not withdraw His love to His children, he simply treats them as a true child. Punishment in some form can still be expected for the people who do not forgive others.

The fact that God is punishing us when we don't forgive is a huge reminder to believers. Christians are not to forget that they are and were sinners and were lost in the sin that they were in. Ephesians 4:32 states, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” Forgiveness is a difficult thing to do in many situations but God helps Christians forgive others because Christ forgave so much on the cross.

God repeatedly forgives people in the Old Testament. In Genesis, Abraham bargains with God to spare the city of Sodom. Abraham constantly lowers the number of people, who if found righteous, would save the city from the wrath of God. This passage shows that God has forgiven groups of people when only a small number of them repent. The story of Jonah also deals with the forgiveness of thousands of unrepentant souls. It is highly unlikely that all of the people of Ninevah, a large trading city at the time, would repent in the face of a prophet from God. Once again, God forgave the whole city on the behalf of few. Repentance was only needed for the small group of people, not the whole city. Once again, God tried to save the city of Sodom. “The LORD said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.” (Genesis 18:26) Even though there weren't fifty righteous people in the city, the thought is still the same. God wanted to forgive everyone. God doesn't want the righteous to die because of the unrighteous people.

While the Bible gives a good overall picture of how God views forgiveness, society in general can exhibit a completely different view on the subject. Society is a powerful force that affects everyone that lives in it. Competing views can be found everywhere: music, cinema, and celebrities all play a role in shaping how everyone thinks, including Christians. Do these views hold Biblical truths? Many times, yes.

Music is a modern phenomenon that is a multi- billion dollar industry. Lyrics of songs often deal with the complicated issue of forgiveness and repentance. The song, *Arlandria* by *Foo Fighters* is a great example. In the lyrics he asks a woman for his forgiveness and pardon. Even though a pardon is asked, the whole theme is that forgiveness is necessary for life to continue. *Back to December* by *Taylor Swift* also articulates the dealings of a bitter end to a relationship. Taylor Swift admits her wrong in the lyrics and says that she repents. *Prodigal Son* by *The Rolling Stones* is a song restating the Prodigal Son story found in the Bible. The song is a great example of a time when repentance is not necessary for forgiveness. While the two previous songs deal with repentance and pardon before the forgiveness happens, the overall picture of forgiveness is presented and cannot be ignored.

A huge influencing force on the world today is cinema. The theme of forgiveness can be seen throughout many films throughout the decades. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is a great example of forgiveness. In the story, Edmund betrays his brothers and sisters and joins the evil White Witch. His family forgives him even though he almost killed them. In fact, they forgive him before he even asks for forgiveness. Aslan, who represents Christ, leads the family to forgive him. The movie, *The Pursuit of*

*Happyness*, comes to mind as well. Chris Gardner deals with forgiveness many times during the storyline. His wife leaves him, he is homeless, and he gets tricked by selling bone density scanners. Another great movie about forgiveness is *To Save a Life*. Jake Taylor has everything he could ever want. But he has left his best friend behind to wallow in depression. When his friend takes a gun to school and takes his own life, Jake is shattered. How could he have done this? Jake had deep feelings of guilt and he had to learn to forgive himself during the movie, along with his friend. This movie is a great example of forgiveness after death. Overall, many of these situations require forgiveness that does not have repentance. Forgiveness is a very strong force in both of these movies and it often changes the characters that are affected by it.

Celebrities are the last major force in society. Many times celebrities are in the spotlight with their personal lives displayed. But many times celebrities can have a positive force on the people who admire them. An example of when forgiveness is shown is Shania Twain. She went through a painful divorce that brought her mentally down. She struggled with her life until she forgave. Often times these are the cases in which forgiveness is never asked for, but forgiveness is needed in order to continue. A lack of forgiveness hurts the victim and only leads to more complications. Another example of modern forgiveness is Stacy Ferguson, better known as Fergie. Before her stardom, she was addicted to crystal meth and was in a very bad situation. Eventually the Black Eyed Peas brought her out of her troubles and propelled her to turn her life around. Now she is a huge pop singer and has been clean for many years. The forgiveness that was offered to her changed her life in a profound way. The forgiveness has probably saved her life. Once again, forgiveness is very powerful.

Because all genuine Christians have Christ in their heart, many believe Christians do not need to repent to receive full forgiveness from God. The examples from the Bible, music, cinema, and modern life in general have all outlined a view that repentance is not always necessary to receive forgiveness. God encourages us to find him, and to be reconciled in Christ. Since Christ died for the sins of many, we can be assured that as believers, we are forgiven with his sacrifice. Forgiveness is such a powerful thing to both God and to Christians. Death, un-repentance, and bad situations cannot stop forgiveness from reaching everyone in the situation. So let us, as the forgiven people of Christ, go out into the world and praise God for his love and forgiveness.

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*Is Hollywood All Bad?*

*Tyler Newman, Eagan, MN*

Many Hollywood films portray revenge as the preferred choice to forgiveness, however with this there are a few paragons of moral integrity among directors in Hollywood. One example of such a person is Clint Eastwood. The many films he has directed often focus strongly on the concept the revenge for many reasons doesn't bring the closure that popular films portray it to do. They also show the healing power that forgiveness can offer. There are two particular samples from his body of works that best present this idea: Million Dollar Baby and Gran Torino. Through these productions one can see that there are films in the industry that do not uphold the mindless be-all, end-all idea that revenge has come to take on.

One of the more recent films that Eastwood has used to communicate this message is Million Dollar Baby. It shows a clear example of how someone that isn't forgiven when they were apologetic, is given an intense burden on their soul. It makes it clear that while forgiving someone is a choice, there can be serious repercussions to the life of a person not given the forgiveness they need and may cause a person to slip into a life where despite their best efforts they cannot move on.

Million Dollar Baby centers around Frankie Dunn, a talented gym owner and boxing coach. His daughter, Katie has completely cut him out of her life despite his constant attempts to reconnect with her and his receive forgiveness. Frankie 's latest trainee quits because Frankie is afraid to schedule him for a title fight, with this, Frankie's attention turns to a female boxer that has attended his gym and he previously refused to train because he "doesn't train girls". Gradually she makes her way up the ranks and becomes an established name as "Mo Cuishle". During this time the letters that Frankie has been sending his daughter continue to be marked "Return to Sender." As the title offers start pouring in, Frankie blindly rejects them because as it is revealed Scrap his janitor for his gym used to be a fighter but injured his eye at a fight, when Frankie was his cutman. To this day, Frankie still blames himself despite the fact that he had no say in whether the fight would continue to that point. Eventually, Scrap convinces Frankie that he needs to give her a chance, warning him that that's what went wrong with his last fighter. Frankie takes the chance and lets her fight in a million dollar title fight. Her opponent fights aggressively and dirty and after several rounds Margaret begins to fight back with the same dirty means. The match becomes close and at the end of that round her opponent sucker punches her causing her to fall onto her corner stool hitting her neck. She comes to in the hospital where we learn that she is now a quadriplegic. Her family soon after comes to visit but as it turns out that have just come to attempt to have her assets transferred to them. She kicks them out and forces them to never come back. As time passes Margaret's condition deteriorates and she has to have her leg amputated. Soon after, she loses her will to live. She asks Frankie to end her life, He is horrified at the idea, and immediately refuses. With this, Maggie attempts to bite her tongue to kill herself but the hospital staff stops her. After much contemplation, Frankie talks to his priest, who explains that it is clear that he has a guilty conscience and helping in this would only make things worse. Frankie eventually is persuaded and sneaks into the hospital to go through with her wishes. After this Frankie leaves his gym and goes to live in isolation.

While Million Dollar Baby does not speak specifically toward the theme of revenge, it does incorporate into its plot the importance of forgiveness. The story is centered on the plight of a man that made mistakes in his past, and his struggle with forgiving himself for the past events that separated him from his daughter. This causes him to be in the state he is in for the rest of the film. The problems Frankie faces are brought on by the fact that his daughter won't forgive him. He pushes Margaret away during the film because he doesn't want anyone close to him that he might hurt. Obvious benefits can be seen in Frankie being forgiven because he sees everything negative that happens to those around him as his own doing. He doesn't want to let what has happened around him go because being left unforgiven in the past makes him believe that he is the origin of the problems in the lives of his loved ones. During the film when



Margaret lost her will to live it seemed to Frankie to be something that he had inflicted on her because he simply allowed himself to train her. This can also be seen with his relationship with the janitor Scrap. Frankie can't forgive himself for Scrap losing his vision in his eye even though he had no choice in whether he would continue on with his boxing match. All of these things come back to the fact that Frankie made a mistake in his past and sought forgiveness but when he was denied that chance he was forced to live on with his guilt.

It all comes back to the forgiveness Frankie was never given. The Bible shows the importance of forgiveness not just between the person who did wrong and god, but between them and the person that was wronged. "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed"(James 5:16). This passage tells us that forgiveness is an important healing process for both parties. It gives closure on something without condoning what they did, and allows us to accept a person for their faults and for what makes us human. God made us in his image and being that he is a merciful and forgiving God, in effort to emulate him we need to be willing to strive for his ability to forgive. The Bible makes this point several times for example in Colossians 3:13:"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Frankie was simply a man that sought forgiveness, without receiving it he was never given a chance to be healed. That caused him to spend the rest of his life in torment unable to forgive himself, a burden that he bore for the remainder of his life.

Gran Torino , another of Eastwood's films takes a different approach at approaching the dualistic nature of revenge and forgiveness. Rather than portray the need for forgiveness and the effect it can have on a person, it exposes revenge for the cycle that it is. It shows that we all have a chance to end that cycle and by doing so end any pain that could be put in our way in the future. In essence it shows that while revenge to us appears to be the best course of action, it is by stepping back that we see that it will do nothing for us but continue that circle of retaliation and bring us nothing but torment.

Gran Torino follows the story of Walt, a widower who fought in the Korean war. When his neighborhood becomes predominantly Hmong, Walt becomes uneasy with his home being populated with people of the same race he once fought and still holds a prejudice against. He becomes close with a teenage boy, Thao, after his cousins put him through a gang initiation in which he is to steal Walt's prized Gran Torino. After being caught, Thao's mother forces him to work off this debt of honor with Walt doing chores around his house. During this time Walt and Thao bond, and Walt teaches Thao how to be a man. The gang constantly attempts to him get to join again however Thao refuses, now too proud to be associated with their criminal activities. Walt begins to come very closely tied to his new neighbors as Thao, and his sister Sue along with the rest of their family. The gang seeing he will never become one of them seeks revenge on Thao and his family by shooting up his house and raping Sue. Walt sees this horrible act of retaliation committed against his close friends. Thao believe they should avenge his sister by killing all of the people responsible. Thao assumes Walt has the same opinion and the next day arrives at his house ready to attack. Walt sends him away as he goes out to put all his affairs in order. When Thao returns later that day Walt locks him in his basement and explains to him the truth of what it is like to kill someone and elaborates on his experiences in Korea that he still carries the guilt because of the grievous acts that he had to commit. Walt goes to the house and faces the gang leading them to believe that he is armed he reaches into his pocket and when he does the gang opens fire, and as Walt falls to the ground his hand falls out of his pocket grasping his lighter. With all the witnesses that see this standoff occur the gang is taken to jail. In the end Walt brings an end to the conflict, stops the cycle of revenge from causing any more trouble from the neighborhood.

The story of Gran Torino is a representation of the fact that sometimes we just need to walk away from a non-repentant opposition. Revenge is a cycle that sustains animosity between people that can simply be



left alone and walked away from. Walt, in this story, is a man that has been through life and is nearing his own end. He has seen things that have made it apparent to him that revenge is not the route that should be pursued. In the end Thao saw revenge as the course of action he wished to take because to him it seemed right. Walt knew that this in the end would just cause Thao more pain because he would have to live with the pain of knowing that he took those lives, but also that in taking their lives Thao could stir up the wrath of another group that would want to do Thao and his family further harm.

There are many concurrent teachings of this same idea. Many are familiar with the passages of the bible that speak out against retaliation or getting even. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:18) Thao wanted to take revenge against these people that had done him harm but Walt steps in realizing this, hoping to teach Thao this lesson. In the teachings of the church, we are taught not to strike back. "We could not find one instance where Jesus waffles on nonviolence. He never says, "However, if your enemies are particularly vile, kill them all." (John Dear)

In conclusion it can be seen the mainstream film is not entirely oriented toward the negative messages of revenge. Often they can teach themes of forgiveness as well as the futility of revenge. Clint Eastwood, a mainstream director, often makes these themes a main part of his films and based upon their reception have communicated this very well. Through Gran Torino, and Million Dollar Baby you can see how Eastwood portrays these themes as something that need to be learned lest we all suffer the consequences.

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## *Finding Forgiveness in the Lord of the Rings*

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*Note: Although much of this essay will be about The Lord of the Rings, I will expect that as the reader you are familiar with the plot. I will provide some detail to explain my point, but I will not be giving a summary of the book. Thus if there is a reference to a scene that I haven't described, it will not detract from the essay, but understanding the reference could aid you in your understanding.*

In a world so heavily corrupted by sin, it is very challenging to figure out how to move past what has been done and move into the future. Leading a Christian life, many people expect that they have taken out “fire insurance” for after they die and are able to continue doing whatever they had done previously (Stearns 17). They are using the Christian faith as a way to make the afterlife a better place, instead of using it to make life on Earth as good as it can be.

According to Rabbi Addler of Mount Zion Temple in St. Paul, MN, the Jewish faith is more about making life on Earth as good as possible and worrying less about the afterlife (Rabbi). This is one thing that Christians’ don’t seem to get. Christian living is not about making sure you go to Heaven, although it is an appealing benefit. Instead it is about making life as good as possible for everybody. The reason that we aren’t able to make this world better is because society has taught us not to forgive. Our world wants us to push back when we are shoved, and to always get revenge. Jesus teaches that if someone hits our right cheek, we should turn the left cheek to them as well. Life on Earth would be so much more livable if we learn to forgive each other instead of getting revenge. Looking at Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) we are able to see three relationships that show how forgiveness can completely turn our lives around for the better: Frodo and Saruman, Aragorn and Boromir, and Gimli and Legolas. Through these relationships, we can see many practical examples of how to incorporate forgiveness into our lives to make the world a better place.

One of the most foul characters in LOTR is that of Saruman, yet, when given the opportunity, Frodo spared his life at the end of *The Return of the King*. Saruman had escaped from his prison in Isengard and went to the Shire to get his revenge on Frodo. This is one of the most complex moments in LOTR, because Frodo has no insight that Frodo has that Saruman wishes to be forgiven. In fact, after Frodo spares Saruman, Saruman tries to stab Frodo. And yet again, Frodo will not seek revenge on Saruman. Frodo most likely pities Saruman the same way that Bilbo had pitied Sméagol.

Earlier in the book, Frodo said, “What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature [Sméagol] when he had a chance!” Gandalf replied, “Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo.” Frodo realized that had Sméagol not survived, the Ring would have never been destroyed and evil would still be controlling the world. He may have been thinking that Saruman might have the same kind of positive effect if he had the chance to live. Thus he forgave Saruman, because he thought it might do Saruman some good. Yet, Saruman sees this pity as cruelty and hates Frodo for it. Jesus teaches that we should “bless them that curse [us]” (Luke 6:28, NIV) Frodo has also come into his own wisdom throughout his journeys, sparing Saruman because he’s realized that, “It is useless to meet revenge with revenge: it will heal nothing” (*Return* 325).

This is how Jesus has called us to act. He wants us to heal the hurt and forgive those who have wronged us. Yet in some cases, such as Saruman, it might not heal them because they will believe that, “you have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy” (*Return* 325). All we can do to those who do not seek forgiveness is to offer it to them, but we cannot force them to accept it. If they do not freely take what has been given to them, they will get exactly what it is they wanted: misery and despair. Yet, by offering the forgiveness to them, they may come to accept it in time,

even if they do not realize it. In the story of the Prodigal Son, when the father saw his lost son “[he] was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20, NIV). The father was *filled* with compassion, he didn’t previously have it. He was given the compassion from God so he could forgive his son. He may have wanted to hate his son for squandering his inheritance, but because of God’s compassion, he was able to forgive the son. Compassion is able to be given to all people freely, but it does not have to be accepted by them, such as the case with Saruman. God wants us to show compassion to all people, and that will enable us to forgive them as well.

Although they had never met before the Council of Elrond, Boromir is destined to dislike Aragorn, not because of what he has done, but because of what he will do. Boromir is heir to the seat of Steward of Gondor, and once Aragorn reveals himself to Gondor, he will inherit the seat of King of Gondor, stripping the Steward of much of his power. Thus we have come to the first issue that needs to be resolved through forgiveness: a struggle for power. Although in everyday life we don’t have someone arrive to usurp us from our throne, we do have people arrive who are better than us at a sport or get a job offer over us, but this is not a cause to despise them. Instead it is a chance to rejoice with them for what they have accomplished. When Aragorn first reveals his lineage to Boromir, he responds by doubting all that Aragorn says. Shortly after, Aragorn forgives Boromir for his doubts (*Fellowship* 278). Yet even then Boromir does not fully trust Aragorn.

Through his travels with Aragorn, Boromir never admits to his friendship with Aragorn until the time of his demise. Aragorn is the only one he admits to about trying to take the Ring of Power from Frodo. He says, “I tried to take the Ring from Frodo. I am Sorry. I have paid...Go to Minas Tirith and save my people. I have failed.” Aragorn then said to him, “No! You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace! Minas Tirith will not fall!” (*Two* 4) This exchange between the two comrades has twofold strength: it reveals that Boromir has accepted his destiny and has forgiven Aragorn, becoming his friend; it also shows that Aragorn forgave Boromir for trying to take the Ring from Frodo. Had Aragorn not forgiven Boromir, it would have showed that although Boromir forgave Aragorn, Aragorn was not able to get past how Boromir viewed him. Now when Boromir commits an act of treachery against Frodo, Aragorn is able to see past his hardship with Boromir and see the struggle that Boromir has faced, not only trying to resist the temptation of the Ring, but trying to live up to the expectations that his father has placed upon him and seeing how the Ring could have fulfilled those expectations. He then sees that Boromir has truly repented for what he has done, and hopes to gain reconciliation for his misdeed. This is key for forgiveness because if one is not able to see a situation from the other’s perspective, one cannot truly understand why they did what they did, and in a difficult situation, you might deny them the forgiveness that they desired.

The final act of forgiveness in LOTR is that of racial ignorance and intolerance. In all societies, people are turned away because of the color of their skin, their sexual orientation, or their religion. Yet they live the same lives as the rest of us, so why do we treat them so differently? This same occurrence appears in LOTR as well. The elves and the dwarves had distrusted each other for many years for many reasons (too many to depict in this essay) with blame on both parts, yet even after many hundreds of years, the two species still would not trust each other. Yet, in LOTR Legolas (an elf) and Gimli (a dwarf) become the best of friends. Their friendship revolves centrally around forgiveness. They first began their friendship when Legolas declared that if Gimli had to enter Lothlórien (a beautiful elven village) blindfolded, then he would as well. From that point on Legolas and Gimli were inseparable. That was the key to their forgiveness: being treated as equals. How can one person try to end years of wrongdoing if he still views himself as superior to the other party? It’s impossible; both parties need to be in equal standing in order to solve the problem.

Through these three relationships in *The Lord of the Rings* we are able to better understand how forgiveness is able to improve our lives. Through Frodo’s forgiveness of Saruman, we’ve discovered that

not everyone wants forgiveness, but the most we are able to do for them is to offer forgiveness. Through the relationship of Aragorn and Boromir, we've discovered that in order to forgive someone who has wronged you, you must first see the world through their eyes. Finally, through the relationship of Legolas and Gimli, we are able to see that although we are all different, we are able to get along if we put aside our differences and could even become the best of friends. If we take these three fundamental elements of forgiveness, and apply them into our everyday lives, the world just may start turning away from its sinful nature, and may become a more forgiving society embracing the compassion that the father had for the Prodigal Son.

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