

After injustice

We are instructed to love our enemies—not necessarily to forgive them.

by [Nicholas Wolterstorff](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue



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Justice and love are of course connected, as are justice and forgiveness. Forgiveness is a manifestation of the love that scripture attributes to God and that Jesus enjoins on us. Anders Nygren went further and held that we should think of all love on the model of God's forgiveness of the sinner. That goes too far. But there can be no doubt that love manifested in forgiveness is a fundamental component of the Christian vision.

Everyone would agree that forgiveness cannot be dispensed indiscriminately hither and yon. Forgiveness presupposes that someone has wronged someone, deprived the person of something to which the person had a right; it presupposes that an injustice has occurred. It furthermore presupposes that the one doing the forgiving recognizes that someone has been wronged, recognizes that an injustice has occurred.

Let me present my understanding of the nature of forgiveness in two stages. First I will describe the context required if forgiveness is to occur. Then I will say what forgiveness does within that context. Let me introduce a fictional character and call him "Hubert."

The context in which my forgiveness of Hubert can occur has five essential components: (1) Hubert did wrong me, (2) I rightly believe that he was blamable for doing so, (3) I feel resentment or some similar negative emotion at the deed done, (4) I feel anger or some similar negative emotion at Hubert for having done it, and (5) I continue to remember the deed and who did it and continue to condemn it. Only when these conditions are met is it possible for me to forgive Hubert for the wrong he did me.

I said that everyone would agree that the first of these is a necessary condition of my forgiving Hubert. Let me briefly explain why the others are as well.

I can forgive Hubert for his wronging of me only if I rightly believe that he was blamable, culpable, for what he did. If I believe that he was not culpable because he acted under duress, out of inculpable ignorance or out of ineradicable weakness of will, I do not blame him and hence do not forgive him. I excuse him. Excusing resembles forgiving, but it is nonetheless not only distinct from forgiving but also forestalls forgiving. If I excuse you, forgiveness is out of the picture.

Second, it's possible to believe that one has been wronged by someone without experiencing any negative emotion toward either deed or doer. One might dismiss act and agent as beneath one's attention. "I can't be bothered with insults from scum like you." Such emotionless dismissal is not forgiveness; and it too forestalls forgiveness. It does not treat the deed and its doer with moral seriousness. Forgiveness can occur only when the deed and its doer are treated with moral seriousness.

Third, if I am to forgive Hubert for the wrong he did me, I must continue to remember what was done to me, I must continue to remember that it was Hubert who did it, and I must continue to condemn what he did. Forgetting what was done to me, or forgetting that Hubert did it, whether because I actively put the memory out of mind or because it just gradually fades away, resembles forgiveness. But forgetting is not forgiving; it too forestalls forgiving. If one has forgotten what was done to one or forgotten who did it, forgiving the person for what the person did is out of the picture. Forgiveness is not to be identified with letting bygones be bygones.

So what is it to forgive Hubert for the wrong he did me? I suggest that it is to enact the resolution no longer to hold against him what he did to me, no longer to count it

against him. My full enactment of the resolution may take a long time; it may, in fact, never be completed. Forgiveness is often hard work. And the resolution itself may be partial: I may resolve not to hold it against him in some ways and resolve to continue to hold it against him in other ways.

And what is it for me no longer to hold against Hubert what he did to me, no longer to count it against him? He did it, after all; I remember that he did, and I continue to condemn it. I have neither forgotten what he did nor have I excused him for doing it.

To explain what I think it is, let me distinguish between what I will call a person's personal history and what I will call his (or her) moral history. Someone's personal history is the ensemble of all the things he did. His moral history is a subset within his personal history. It consists of that ensemble of things he did that contribute to determining in what respects and to what degree he is a morally good person, and in what respects and to what degree he is morally bad.

The point of introducing the idea of a person's moral history is that we need not, and do not, treat everything a person does as part of his moral history. If Hubert wronged me but it turns out that he's not morally blamable because he acted out of inculpable ignorance, then, rather than thinking worse of him for what he did to me, I excuse him. To excuse him is to declare that the deed is not part of his moral history. It is part of his personal history; he did do it. But it's not part of his moral history; it does not put a blot on his moral condition.

I suggest that for me not to hold against Hubert the wrong he did to me is for me, in my personal engagement with him, to treat him as if that deed did not belong to his moral history. It is in fact part of his moral history, and I don't forget that it is; I both remember what he did and continue to condemn it. But I now act on the resolution to treat him as I would if I did not believe that it was part of his moral history. I treat him as I would if I excused him—except that I continue to believe that he is blamable.

Assuming that this is what forgiveness is, why forgive? Why not continue to hold against Hubert the wrong he did to me? Why not resolve that the dastardly thing he did shall forever determine how I interact with him?

Well, suppose that Hubert has repented of what he did to me. He remains culpable for having done it; nothing can change that. But he has altered his relation to what he did in a morally significant way. Rather than standing behind what he did to me,

he now places himself at a moral distance from it. He now joins me in condemning what he did. His overall moral condition is now significantly different from what it was before. And not only different; in an important respect, it is better. Hubert's repentance, assuming I know about it, is an invitation for me to forgive him.

His repentance is no more than an invitation, however; my forgiveness may not be forthcoming. As we all know, some people reject the invitation that repentance offers. They refuse to forgive the wrongdoer, even if he has repented of what he did and they know he has.

Suppose, however, that I accept the invitation that Hubert's repentance offers me. I forgive him. Presumably I do so because I expect or hope that thereby some good will come about. What might that good be?

Often we forgive the repentant wrongdoer in the hope or expectation that reconciliation will ensue. Reconciliation is the good we expect or hope that forgiveness in response to repentance will bring about.

Perhaps there is something more that we hope for, or should hope for. I have in mind a comment by the philosopher Jean Hampton (in her essay "Forgiveness, Resentment, and Hatred" in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, edited by Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton). After observing that forgiveness "makes possible the benefits that come from a renewed relationship," she goes on to say the following:

It also liberates the victim and the wrongdoer from the effects of the immoral action itself. The forgiver is no longer trapped in the position of the victim defending herself, and the wrongdoer is no longer in the position of the sinner, stained by sin and indebted to his victim. But perhaps the greatest good forgiveness can bring is the liberation of the wrongdoer from the effects of the victim's moral hatred. If the wrongdoer fears that the victim is right to see him as cloaked in evil, or as infected with moral sin, these fears can engender moral hatred of himself.

These seem to me wise and perceptive words.

The explanation of forgiveness that I have offered is an explanation of what the theological and philosophical traditions call forgiveness. In the modern therapeutic tradition, something quite different is called forgiveness.

Forgiveness, as I have described it, is an engagement with the wrongdoer; one engages the person as if what the person did does not belong to his or her moral history. The pair, forgiveness and repentance together, is a two-way engagement. What is called forgiveness in the modern therapeutic tradition is not an engagement with the wrongdoer. It's the process of getting over one's emotions of anger at the wrongdoer and resentment at the deed done so that they no longer "eat away" at one—no longer impair one's well-being. Getting over these emotions is typically recommended on the ground that doing so enables one to "get on with things"; it is also often recommended on the ground that unless one gets over one's anger and resentment, the wrongdoer continues to have emotional control over one. Both one's well-being and one's autonomy are enhanced by getting over one's anger. Forgiveness, so understood, is a purely interior undertaking. It does not aim at reconciliation between wrongdoer and victim; it aims at getting one's own emotional house in order. Sometimes, let me be clear, this is the best one can do; but it's a second best.

Back to what is called forgiveness in the theological and philosophical traditions. I described repentance as an invitation to forgive. A question that Christians often ask is whether they—and perhaps others as well—should forgive even in the absence of repentance. What Jesus said on the cross is commonly cited in support of the claim that we should. Referring to those who were crucifying him, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

As I observed earlier, if someone wrongs somebody but doesn't know that she did (and couldn't be expected to have known), we don't blame her for what she did but excuse her. And if we excuse her rather than blame her, forgiveness is not in the picture. One can forgive someone for what she did only if one thinks she is blamable.

The Greek word that is translated into English as *forgive* in Luke 23:34 is an imperative form of the verb *aphiemi*. My Greek-English lexicon tells me that the root meaning of the term is "let go, send away." In some contexts the term does undoubtedly mean forgive. But given that Jesus says that his crucifiers don't know what they are doing, what he is asking of the Father is not that he forgive them but that he excuse them—not hold it against them.

Luke reports Jesus as saying, on one occasion, "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same

person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (Luke 17:3-4 NRSV).

In Matthew's narrative, Peter seems to have found this quite incredible. To check it out he asks, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus' response is hyperbolic: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Matt. 18:21-22 NRSV).

Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus reported as enjoining his listeners to forgive unrepentant wrongdoers. We are instructed to love our enemies, including those who have wronged us and are unrepentant. We are not instructed to forgive our enemies. Neither do I know of any passage in the New Testament that says that God forgives (justifies) even unrepentant wrongdoers. Here is what the Kairos Document, issued in South Africa in 1986 by theologians opposed to apartheid, says on the matter:

The Biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it quite clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless she or he repents of their sins. Nor are we expected to forgive the unrepentant sinner. When he or she repents we must be willing to forgive seventy times seven times, but before that we are expected to preach repentance to those who sin against us or against anyone. Reconciliation, forgiveness and negotiations will become our Christian duty in South Africa only when the apartheid regime shows signs of genuine repentance.

A further question is whether it is even possible to forgive the unrepentant wrongdoer—and if it is possible, whether it is morally permissible. Suppose that Hubert stands behind what he did to me; he insists that he did me no wrong. Can I nonetheless form and act on the resolution to forgive him, not hold it against him in my future engagements with him? I can certainly be willing to forgive him in case he repents. But can I forgive?

Possibly; I'm not sure. But I question whether I should. Not to hold it against him in the absence of any repentance on his part is to fail to take with full moral seriousness either the wrongness of the deed, my own worth or Hubert's worth as a moral agent.

Consider the situation. Hubert agrees with me that what he did should be counted as belonging to his moral history; but he insists, over my objections, that what he did

was not wrong but was in fact a good thing. Now I say to him, “We agree that you are responsible for what you did to me; but you don’t see anything wrong in it. I do. What you did to me was wrong. But I have resolved not to hold it against you. I forgive you. I have resolved henceforth to treat you as I would if I excused you.”

I submit that this is both to demean myself and to insult Hubert by refusing to treat him and what he did with full moral seriousness. “Keep your forgiveness,” he snaps, “I did nothing wrong.” Better to join with Hubert in counting the deed as part of his moral history and go on to insist, against his protests, that it was wrong.

Richard Swinburne makes the point well. Unless the wrongdoing was trivial, he writes in *Responsibility and Atonement*, it is wrong for the victim “in the absence of some atonement at least in the form of apology to treat the [act] as not having been done.” If I have murdered your wife and you decide to overlook my offense and interact with me as if it had never happened, your attitude “trivializes human life, your love for your wife, and the importance of right action. And it involves your failing to treat me seriously, to take seriously my attitude towards you expressed in my action. Thereby it trivializes human relationships, for it supposes that good human relations can exist when we do not take each other seriously.”

Let me close with some reflections on the relation of forgiveness to punishment. Suppose that Hubert has repented of what he did to me, that I know that he has and that I am working at forgiving him. Though I believe that Hubert has genuinely repented of this particular act, I might also believe that he still has “demons” inside him that make it likely that he will do the same sort of thing again, if not to me, then to someone else.

In that case I might support the imposition of hard treatment on him of a sort that is likely to reform him—treatment that is likely to induce in him a character reformation. I might also think that, until this reformation has taken place, the public needs to be protected from him. And I might think that if our system for deterring such behavior is to work, it has to be imposed impartially; it won’t work effectively and fairly if we allow those who impress us with their penitence to avoid sanctions. In short, I might be convinced that hard treatment of the appropriate sort should be imposed on Hubert for reformation, for protection or for deterrence.

But as I noted earlier, none of these reasons for imposing one or another sort of hard treatment on someone is punishment, strictly speaking. They all point forward to

some good to be achieved in the future, whereas punishment looks back to some wrong that has been done. To punish is to impose hard treatment on someone for the wrong the person did in the past.

So suppose that Hubert is thoroughly penitent and that I forgive him. I act on the resolution not to hold against him what he did to me; I interact with him as if he had not done it. Do I then forego imposing or supporting the imposition of punishment on him—reprobative punishment? In reprobative punishment, the imposition of hard treatment counts as firmly condemning what was done.

If I no longer hold against Hubert what he did to me, if I fully and completely forgive him, then I will not myself impose hard treatment on him as a way of firmly condemning him for what he did, nor will I be in favor of the state or any other institution doing so. To condemn him in this way, or to support his being condemned, amounts to counting against him what he did.

This raises the question, however, whether there may not be some cases in which it would be inappropriate, perhaps even wrong, to forego punishment of the wrongdoer even if he is penitent—inappropriate or wrong to forego firmly expressing condemnation of what he did. Yes, he now joins me in condemning what he did. But may it be that what he did was so bad that verbal condemnation is inadequate? May it be that some stronger form of condemnation is needed?

I think so. In many ways, one will forgive him. But one will not think it right to forego punishing him nor to forego supporting his being punished. One's forgiveness, in that way, does and should remain incomplete.

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