

GIVING UP THE ANGER YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO:
FORGIVENESS IN CHRIST'S FIRST ANTITHESIS
(AN EXPOSITION OF MATTHEW 5:21-26)

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C.S. Lewis once said that everyone likes the idea of forgiveness; until, that is, they have someone to forgive. This difficulty with forgiveness—of a person's offering it, of a pastor's speaking about it—is amplified by a lack of clarity about what forgiveness is and what it entails. Is forgiveness an emotional state? Is it a decision? Does forgiveness always entail the gift of trust? Is forgiveness indistinguishable from a reconciled relationship? Should the Christian really always forgive? And if so, for what reason? Ought they forgive to heal themselves? To provide a pathway of healing for the other? Do it for God alone? The following examination of Matthew 5:21–26 will seek to find clarity on these and related questions to help the pastor and parishioner navigate these very complicated waters.

Known in Sermon on the Mount studies as the first of Jesus' "six antitheses,"² the overarching message of Matthew 5:21–26 is typically understood in terms of loving one's neighbour. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law erroneously believe that they fulfill the requirements of the Law merely by not murdering their neighbour, as indicated in the sixth commandment (Exo 20:13). Jesus teaches that the true intent of the Law, and therefore true righteousness, is not mere restraint of vice but promotion of virtue: love of one's neighbour that seeks their restoration through reconciliation. Forgiveness is not explicitly mentioned in this first antithesis. This is likely why most commentaries offer zero to scant reflection on the topic.³ The present paper will argue, however, that this first antithesis of Jesus can legitimately be seen to offer a potent contribution to a Christian understanding of forgiveness. Specifically, I will argue that, looked at on the backdrop of the Gospel of Matthew more broadly, this first antithesis of Jesus offers us resources to understand: (i) what forgiveness is, (ii) why we ought to forgive, and (iii) how we can become equipped to do it.

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² Or, maybe, five; see Evans (2012), 120.

³ Cf., Hendriksen (1973); Barclay (1975); Davies and Allison (1988); Hagner (1993); Hare (1993); Gundry (1993); Glasscock (1997); Bruner (2004); Evans (2012).

I. WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

It is critical at the outset to establish that the overarching question Jesus is answering in his first antithesis concerns how the righteous person should respond when they have been a victim of personal injury or caused personal injury to another. Establishing this context will enable us to see that, although the term is not used in this text, Jesus nonetheless exposes the substance of what forgiveness is in vv. 21–22.

That the concept of personal injury lies at the heart of this first antithesis is clear in vv. 23–24 and vv. 25–26 respectively, as the former section deals explicitly with what to do when you are the offender (i.e., have caused injury), and the latter section deals explicitly with what to do when injury incites litigious action. The concept of personal injury may seem less clear in the first section of the text, vv. 21–22, but is nonetheless present. This becomes evident when it is remembered, as commentators on the sixth commandment make clear, that there is a difference in the Law between murdering someone and killing them. Individuals are forbidden to murder, precisely because it is an action whereby the individual, usually in anger, leapfrogs over due judicial process to respond on their own to the perception or reality of personal injury. This is forbidden. If a capital crime has been committed, it is the duty of the state to take the life of (i.e., to kill, not murder) the offender.⁴ Jesus recognizes this duty of the State (in principle, at least)⁵ in v. 21: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’” The prescribed judgment for murder, of course, was being killed by the state.

So, how should one respond when injured, or even when one simply feels injured? Jesus does not as a matter of first principle encourage injured parties to go to court. As vv. 23–26 make clear, he encourages them in a spirit of true righteousness—a following after the will and example of God⁶—to seek reconciliation, to repair the broken relationship. But what makes reconciliation possible? According to the logic of vv. 21–22, the *first step* toward making reconciliation possible is the injured person’s choice not only not to retaliate by engaging in actions such as murder—and thereby seek to harm the offender for harm done (v. 21). It is also to give up the anger that fuels the desire to retaliate in the first place. To wit: those who refuse to give up their righteous anger but instead nurture it, and inevitably begin acting on it to harm those who have hurt them, even by doing things as seemingly harmless as hurling childish epithets—*ῥακά* = “You blockhead!”⁷, *μωρέ* = “You fool!”—will themselves, says Jesus, be

⁴ See Waltke (2007), 427–8.

⁵ I.e., there is no intention in this remark to say anything, one way or the other, on Jesus’ views on capital punishment.

⁶ Righteousness in Matthew’s Gospel is essentially unpacked as doing the will of God; cf., 3:15; 5:20; 6:10.

⁷ “Blockhead,” “numbskull,” “buffoon” are all sufficient modern day equivalents of the Aramaic “raca,” which literally means “empty,” but was used as a term of reproach in the

subject to/liable to/caught in/held fast⁸ in various forms of judgement (v. 22).⁹ It is important to stress here that it is not righteous anger itself, or righteous anger alone, that must be given up (to do so, would be to become less than human: see below). It is righteous anger that combines with, or is inclined to combine with, the desire or action to wound the offender in return. This meaning is evident in the word ὀργίζω, which connotes an angry emotion, perhaps righteously constituted,¹⁰ combined with the desire or intent to harm. Thus, ὀργίζω-anger is perhaps best translated as wrath or malice.¹¹ That wrath or malice is specifically in view here is also evident in Jesus' apparently relativized prohibition against name-calling. Tellingly, although Jesus here forbids calling anyone a blockhead (ῥακά) or a fool (μωρό), Jesus himself calls the religious leaders a bunch of fools (μωροί) in Matthew 23:17.¹² Given we can be safe in assuming that Matthew in no wise believes Jesus is a hypocrite, this suggests that name-calling in and of itself is not the issue. The issue is name-calling maliciously intended. When Jesus calls the Pharisees fools in Matthew 23:17, therefore, we are being invited via the echo-chamber created by Matthew 5:22 to see that he is not doing so with a desire to injure but to restore. If righteous anger in humans remains righteous—i.e., does not become intermingled with the urge to wound—it can remain. But when our righteous anger transmogrifies into, or even becomes intermingled with, the desire and/or action to harm—into ὀργίζω-anger—Jesus calls us to give it up.

To give up this sort of anger, I am arguing, is the substance of forgiveness in Jesus' view, at least in Matthew. It is the giving up of the righteous anger in humans that so quickly, and often inescapably, combines with the festering desire, fantasy, and/or action to harm.¹³

days of Jesus.

⁸ On this range of meanings, see Friberg's *Analytical Greek Lexicon*, #9746. Suffice it to note here that this range of meanings allows one to consider whether the consequence of holding on to one's anger will bring about external ("subject to") or naturally occurring/internal ("caught in/held fast in") forms of judgment. More about this will be said below.

⁹ Namely, as we will argue below, judgment from God, (22a), society in the courts (22b), and one's self (22c). It is not clear whether the katabasis is intentional, but if the succeeding judgments funnel down in turn from God, society, and the self, the katabasis is nonetheless present.

¹⁰ In Romans 1, for example, the term is used to describe God's righteous anger at human suppression of him and decision, in his righteous anger (rightly, his wrath), to allow human beings to suffer the consequences of their decisions—which is, in essence, to become like the idols they worship: morally blind, deaf, dumb, and dead.

¹¹ See Moulton-Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek NT*, entry 3259.

¹² "You blind fools [μωροί]! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?" (Matthew 23:17, NIV)

¹³ I first heard forgiveness described in this manner in a talk at a Classis meeting of the Christian Reformed Church given by Cornelius Plantinga Jr. Plantinga did not, however, describe it thusly with reference to Matthew 5. It is admitted that there is tension here in this description with reference to righteous anger: righteous anger is good; it is a signal of the imago Dei in the human being. Nonetheless, since righteous anger can so quickly due to our fallen nature morph into a desire to harm (i.e., into wrath), there must be a decision to relinquish it. We are not called to relinquish the truth ("what she did to me was wrong")

Forgiveness defined in this way, it should be understood, is not reconciliation itself but a necessary *precursor* to reconciliation. If unforgiveness may be pictured in the image of a person who has crossed their arms in front of them, in a gesture of being closed off in anger to the offender and nurturing a desire to harm him or her, even by alienation; and if reconciliation may be pictured in the image of the embrace of the other in restored relationship; then forgiveness may be pictured as the midpoint, whereupon the one who has given up their anger stands with arms open in a gesture of the *possibility of* embrace. The one who embodies the choice to forgive, therefore, in circumstances of genuine injury, says: 'I have a right to my anger because what you did to me was wrong. But I am choosing to put the heat and flames of my anger away so that we might one day, by God's grace, be reconciled. I no longer seek your harm or nurture a desire in myself for you to be harmed. Instead, I forgive: I give up my desire to make you pay for what you did along with the anger that fuels that desire. I do this in order to pave the pathway toward reconciled relationship with you.'

Granted this definition, it might be observed that, from an emotional or psychological perspective, Jesus' call to forgive is the call to do what is most unnatural for the human being in the case of being (or feeling) victimized. For what is the natural human response when harmed? As Matthew's Jesus acknowledges, either directly or tangentially in his fifth and sixth antitheses, the reflexive human response to injury (whether real or perceived) is anger and, usually, some form of retaliation.¹⁴ The anger, it should be stressed again, all other considerations aside, is righteous: the true victim has a right to it. Her birthright as a sacred creature under God is violated and rightly flares up as anger—because a human being should not be violated in any way by another human being. To fail to be angry at the violation of the image is, in fact, to fail to be fully human. The desire to pay back harm for harm is also entirely natural. What is unnatural, in fact, as the OT and Jesus recognize, is to bind oneself to the law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) and therefore not engage in forms of justice that exact more than measure for measure: eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Typically, the human response is: "You take my eye, I take your eye *and* your arm; you take my arm, I take your arm *and* your leg; you take my leg, I take your leg *and* I take out your whole tribe." But Jesus will have none of it. Retaliation must be given up, as well as the anger that gives rise to it.

but the emotion that repeatedly certifies it (the righteous anger). I relinquish the anger not because it is not right; I relinquish the anger because, in my currently imperfect and fragile state, it does not lead me to righteousness. A burning coal may be a good thing; but if a burning coal in my hand impels me to cast it in another's face against Jesus' instructions to me, I best choose not to hold that burning coal anymore.

¹⁴ The fact that the Law sought to restrain unequal retaliation, and Jesus addresses this standard in his fourth antithesis, witnesses to the element of human passion assumed to be operating here, which in the form of ire is regularly inclined to exact high interest on offense. Violence in history is a playbook of how retaliations invariably escalate on the wings of anger due to injury. Gang warfare is but an aggravated microcosm of this all too common human phenomena.

As further substantiation of the interpretation we are offering, it is certainly inconclusive but not beyond the realm of possibility that Jesus' words here in Matthew 5:21–22 are to evoke memories of Cain. Matthew's ordering of Jesus' antitheses roughly mimics the ordering of the second table of the Law (murder; adultery [and theft?]; false testimony). The early stories in Genesis likewise roughly mimic the ordering of the second table of the Law (murder = Cain/Lamech; adultery = Lamech; stealing = "sons of God"). Memories of Cain are also captured elsewhere in Matthew and the NT,¹⁵ and so seem to have been alive and well in the cultural encyclopedia of antiquity.¹⁶ More significantly, Genesis 4 makes it clear that Cain's homicidal behavior arises from psychological realities that are mirrored in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:21–22. Abel, who offers a better gift at the altar than Cain, receives the favour of God that Cain feels he, too, is due. Abel then, by his ongoing existence, becomes the cause of Cain's sense of injury: as long as Abel is around, Cain is made painfully aware of his inadequacy. This "injustice" for Cain—this "victimization" by Abel's glorious existence—leads to הָרָחַק: a hot and kindled, burning anger, or wrath, otherwise translated in the Greek OT as ὀργή.¹⁷ Cain's failure to check his burning anger, and rule over it, despite the divine encouragement to do so, results in Cain's taking "justice" into his own hands. Abel, the source of Cain's injury, is murdered.¹⁸ If only Cain—false victim though he was—would have embraced the call to embody forgiveness by choosing, as Jesus puts it in Matthew 5, to put away his anger (ἀργίζω). The Keeper would have kept his brother instead of his anger. Reconciliation would have become a possibility.

II. WHY SHOULD WE FORGIVE?

A. GOD HAS FORGIVEN US

The preeminent reason why we should give up our anger and forgive in this way, as mentioned in Matthew 6:12–15, and likely implied in 5:22a, is because we ourselves are in need of forgiveness from our Heavenly Father. He is willing to give up his righteous anger and does. If we fail to forgive others for their sins, therefore, we ourselves will not be forgiven but subject to "[God's] judgement" (cf., 6:15; 5:22a). Later in Matthew's Gospel, Peter wonders how many times a Christian should give up his

¹⁵ Matt. 23:35; Lk. 11:51; Heb. 11:4; 12:24; 1 Jn. 3:12; Jude 1:11.

¹⁶ Cain is mentioned some 97x in Philo, and another 22x in the Pseudepigrapha.

¹⁷ TWOT on הָרָחַק: "This word is related to a rare Aramaic root meaning 'to cause fire to burn,' and to an Arabic root meaning 'burning sensation,' in the throat, etc. The Hebrew verb is always used in reference to anger. The meaning of the root ... emphasizes the 'kindling' of anger, like the kindling of a fire, or the heat of the anger, once started. The verb and its derivatives are used a total of 139 times."

¹⁸ The Apocalypse of Moses is noteworthy in this regard when it links Cain's action directly to his wrath: "Going, [Adam and Eve] both found Abel murdered from the hand of Cain his brother. And God says to Michael the archangel: 'Say to Adam: 'Do not reveal the secret that you know to Cain your son, for he is a son of wrath [ἔτι ὀργῆς υἱὸς ἐστίν]'" (3:1–2 OPE).

anger toward the one who sins against him. Jesus tells him that he should, in effect, be Lamech's—Cain's descendant's—antipode: if Lamech sought vengeance in sevenfold fashion, Peter should forgive in sevenfold fashion (cf. Gen 4:23–24; Matt 18:21–22). The rationale Jesus gives in parabolic form in Matthew 18:23–35—which evinces intratextual connections with 5:21–26¹⁹—concerns the forgiveness of God, forthrightly construed as the restraint of anger (*ὀργίζω*, 18:34). God has been to us like the merciful master, putting away his anger, forgiving his servant a debt of astronomical proportions. The forgiven servant's subsequent behavior, then, of angrily grabbing and choking his own servant for a pittance of a debt, refusing to forgive him, is unacceptable (vv. 28–30). The anger he refused to put away for others thus boomerangs back to him. The Master, once restrained, restokes his righteous anger—his wrath (*ὀργίζω*)—and lets the unmerciful servant have it (18:31–34). The lesson, says Jesus, is that we must learn to forgive “from the heart” (*ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν*). As the seat of the emotions, Jesus' injunction here is doubtlessly the call not only not to retaliate but also to put away the anger that gives rise to it. God has done it for us; we must therefore do it for others.

The rationale that we must forgive because God has forgiven us is not explicitly provided in Jesus' first antithesis. Nonetheless, if intratextual connections with this portion of Matthew are granted, this substructure of thought can certainly be seen to underpin Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5.²⁰ Whatever the case, Jesus provides plenty of additional rationale to forgive in Matthew 5:21–26 itself. In a word, Jesus seems to teach that we should give up our anger and forgive, not only to make reconciliation possible, but in order to avoid spreading around the experience of hell—and doing so on a multiplicity of levels.

B. AVOID HELL

It may seem an overreach or inadvisable editorial flourish to summarize Jesus' rationale in this fashion, especially given that the term hell is used but once. Even still, there is a fairly straightforward connection between the concept of *ὀργίζω*—anger and the concept of hell. *ὀργίζω*—anger, as we have said, is an anger, potentially righteous, that is fused with a desire to harm another. It is an anger that—in phenomenological terms, and as explicitly captured in the Hebrew term *הָרָה* (see n.17 above)—smolders and burns into a bonfire of wrath; and wrath in Scripture, either passively or actively, always bends toward the harm of its targets.²¹ This idea of *ὀργίζω*—anger

¹⁹ Besides the obvious thematic overlap, note especially the emphasis in each text on how the refusal to deal with anger will lead to exacting justice: “paying the last paying” (5:26), “paying back all that is owed” (18:34).

²⁰ Note well the resurfacing of themes from Matthew 5–6 in Matthew 18–19, and in the same order.

²¹ The dragon in Revelation 12, for example, once bounced from heaven is filled with wrath (*ὀργίζω*), and thus goes off to wage war against “those who obey God's commands” (12:17). The wrath of God himself, in Romans 1, is defined as God's giving human beings over to the degrading and dehumanizing consequences of their idolatrous self-abuse. For a more active example of God's wrath in Matthew's Gospel, see the parable of the wedding

as an ever-present smoldering and damaging emotion links well with the concept of hell—or, the “Gehenna of fire” (τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός), as Matthew 5:22 puts it. In literal terms, Gehenna was a garbage dump, just outside Jerusalem, of continual smoking and burning. Eschatologically, the “Gehenna of fire” or “fire of hell” was a place of fiery pain and punishment. Metaphorically, there is no reason to imagine that the term could not have been used to describe present experiences and would not have been used this way by Jesus.²²

A question that might profitably be asked of our text, then, in light of this link between a smoldering anger and smoldering hell, is: “And what kind of hell does the anger of unforgiveness create or bring down on us as individuals and societies?” An everlasting hell is not out of the question, to be sure, and there is no intent in this paper to eclipse the fearful possibility of eternal consequences. But there seems also to be some more immediate and immediately identifiable application to the three clauses of Matthew 5:22 when examined in context.

1. Hell toward the Other: Anger Goes toward the Offender (v. 22a)

In the first place, we ought to forgive, Jesus seems to teach in v. 22a, precisely because our ὀργίζω-anger, even if initially righteous, will create hell for others. Unless in our hurting state our righteous anger is put aside, we will inevitably foster a desire to hurt those who have hurt us. As we burn in anger, we will inescapably begin to desire for our perpetrators to burn in other ways. Instead of establishing the conditions that might lead to restoration, therefore, we will end up harbouring malice. For in the nature of the case, as fallen human beings, although our righteous anger is good, it so easily goes wrong, leading us to give up the fight for the redemption of the sinner. Besides earning us judgment—and, probably, “the judgement”

feast in Matthew 22, where the dishonored and injured king, who is overcome with wrath, calls in his army to deal with those who have dishonored him. William Barclay is helpful in this regard when he distinguishes between thumos and *orge* anger: “There is *thumos*, which was described as being like the flame which comes from dried straw ... It is an anger which rises speedily and which just as speedily passes. There is *orge*, which was described as anger become inveterate. It is the long-lived anger; it is the anger of the man who nurses his wrath to keep it warm; it is the anger over which a person broods, and which he will not allow to die.”

²² Jesus seems to use the concept of hell in this way, in fact, in Matthew 5:27–32, in his second antithesis. Lust may bring a person to an eternal hell at the end of time, if not repented of. Yet, one need not wait for the end of time to experience the hell of lust. For lust is, as experience evinces, a burning, insatiable fire within the “soma” of the one lusting. Is there any reason (whatever other meanings may reside or accrue) not to hear Jesus addressing his audience in the mode of wisdom? “Don’t lust!” he says, “For, among other things, it’s a profound form of self-abuse! It’s to throw your body into hell, right here, right now.” How many of those addicted to pornography in our churches right now wouldn’t agree with this assessment of our Lord? Or again, how many of those in our churches who are holding on to their anger, and nurturing it, wouldn’t agree with the idea that unforgiveness, too, is a type of internal burning and, as such, a form of self-abuse?

(τῆς κρίσει) of God himself (for reasons already established)²³— this will create hellish conditions for the objects of our ire. Thus, we must put aside our righteous anger in order to avoid creating hellish conditions for others.

2. Hell in Society: Anger Gone Viral (v. 22b)

Another reason we must forgive is because holding on to our anger and acting on it, even in trivial ways, will inevitably let loose hellish conditions on society at large. As v. 22b in conjunction with vv. 25–26 seem to suggest, the one who angrily says “Raca” in response to injury might ignite anger in the recipient that provokes them to report to the Sanhedrin (τῷ συνεδρίῳ), who will then arbitrate the anger and alleged injury in court. Or, again, as Jesus warns in vv. 25–26, if matters are not settled on the road on the way to court, the judge will be called, a verdict rendered, enforcement enacted, and the perpetrator will not get out until the last “penny” is paid.²⁴

What is Jesus’ point here? Although finally indefinite, Jesus’ emphasis on the gritty litigious process and especially “not getting out until the last penny is paid” seems to put the stress on the desire of the wounded party for “justice”: “As I have been wounded, so must you be wounded *with punishing accuracy* (the last penny), even if by the courts.” Jesus’ additional emphasis on the fact that a personal dispute—at least in theory resolvable between the parties immediately involved (v. 25a)—spills over into society at large suggests a corporate emphasis. In this way, it seems possible that Jesus’ point here is not merely to protect individuals from exacting court cases. He intends in a bigger way for us to imagine a society that fails to operate on the principles of forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation. Imagine a society instead where everyone who has been injured by another holds on to their “righteous anger” (that has become wrath) and demands justice—which is to say, demands that all perpetrators pay. Given that everyone has been or will be injured by others, and given that everyone, therefore, has a “right” to punish others for wrongs done, such a society would indeed become a litigious hellhole. Everyone would burn with rage at everyone else and seek their demise. Instead of reconciliation, you would have a society of perpetual litigious warfare.²⁵

²³ See above. It may be observed that Matthew has a well-developed sense of the eschatological judgment of God that will occur on the last day: see, e.g., 5:21f; 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36, 41f; 23:33.

²⁴ κοδράντης, the smallest Roman coin.

²⁵ A microcosm of this hell on earth can exist in families, where everyone who has been hurt by other family members harbors anger toward them and secretly, or perhaps not so secretly, wishes their ill. Such families become microcosmic prolepeses of hell, where bitterness, resentment, backbiting, and infighting reign; places where scarcely can a person say a kind word to another, if they haven’t already alienated themselves from each other completely.

3. *Hell in the Self: Anger Gone Inward* (v. 22c)

A final reason we should forgive, Jesus seems to teach in v. 22c, is because unforgiveness is a quick way to light an inferno within one's own soul, to make *oneself* "liable"—or, literally, to cause oneself to become *held fast in, caught in*²⁶—the "fire of hell."

Scarcely could there be a better description of what happens to the human heart caught in the trap of unforgiveness. As the injury is replayed in the mind, righteous anger burns ever hotter, and resentment grows. The desire for payback is kindled and rages hot. The harm experienced by others, while wrath is left to crackle and burn, is endlessly recycled as self-harm. The glowering ash-pit outside Jerusalem becomes the glowering ash-pit in one's chest. Even if the other is made to pay, what has been done cannot be undone, and thus anger—and the self-harm it brings—can remain. Proponents of therapeutic models of forgiveness frequently cite these facts as potent reasons to forgive. Do yourself a favour: forgive.²⁷ Although it is not the primary or exclusive reason to forgive, and should not be treated as such, Jesus seems to agree with this motive. Why keep the fires of hell alive in yourself? Be wiser. Give up your anger. Forgive.

The somewhat strange conditional conjunction ("therefore") that opens v. 23 should be observed before moving on, because it adds breadth and depth to the argument I am trying to make here.

In verses 21–22, Jesus addresses his listeners as victims, assumes an experience of the reception of harm, and instructs them on how to respond to it. But then in vv. 23–25, he pivots and addresses his listeners solely as perpetrators, the cause of harm, and thus (at least perceptually) in the position of needing to be forgiven. To address human beings as both victims and perpetrators is straightforward enough and carries an obvious pastoral punch when it comes to calling people to forgive. What is not as straightforward, however, is the causal conjunction that joins the listener as victim to the listener as offender. In essence, we hear Jesus saying, "You must forgive, lest hell be unleashed in you, toward others, and in society as a whole"; and our natural expectation, then, is to hear Jesus continue, "Therefore, forgive!" or "learn to forgive!" What he says instead, though, is: "Since you are called to forgive others in order to avoid proliferating experiences of hell, seek out the forgiveness of others whom you have wounded and/or offended." What's the logic here?

Besides some pastoral implications that we will discuss below, one of the inferences we might make is this: unforgiveness, as we have been arguing, is a festering anger that boils and bursts out to harm others, fostering conditions of hell on earth—in you, for others, for society as a whole; therefore, if you have been the source of causing another to burn inwardly in this damaging way, to be filled with a wrath that will consume them and potentially you or others, go to that person and seek to put out

²⁶ See again fn.8 above.

²⁷ "When you forgive someone for hurting you, you perform spiritual surgery inside your soul" (Smedes, 1984, 45).

the flames! Do whatever you can, in other words, so that they will not be consumed by the anger that you have caused, and thus become subject to the judgement of God, or the courts, or their own affective crematorium.²⁸

Provided there is something of an echo or allusion to the Cain and Abel story here, as argued above, there may be evocative significance in Jesus' imagining a scene by the altar in vv. 23–24:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift (*δῶρον*) at the altar and there remember that your brother (*ἀδελφός*) has something against you, leave your gift (*δῶρόν*) there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come offer your gift.

With the story of Cain and Abel in mind, perhaps we are being invited to imagine: What if Abel had left his gift (*δῶρόν*) at the altar and ministered to his brother's (*ἀδελφός*) point of need? What if Abel, in other words, discovering that his brother Cain had something against him, went to Cain and apologized for the hurt caused, even though inadvertent, and pleaded with his brother Cain, as it were, to open his arms to make possible reconciliation? There is no indication in the text of Genesis that Abel was culpable for wrongdoing. Tellingly, Jesus' words here in v. 23 and v. 25 are, in this regard, ambiguous: "if . . . you remember that your brother has something against you (*ἔχει τι κατὰ σου*)," "when your adversary is taking you to court." The focus is not on the presence of guilt, but on the presence of injury, first (v. 23), and the presence of acting on it, second (v. 25), whether justified or not. This in no way implies that the victim is always correct; neither does it imply that one should never defend one's actions. It implies, instead, that Jesus' followers who, either rightly or wrongly, are simply perceived as perpetrators, and come to know this, should be overcome with such compassion, concern, and love for the well-being of others that they seek to do what is best for them. And in the case of anger that might become wrath, followers of Jesus are called to do what they can to extinguish the burning and backdraft at once.

III. HOW CAN WE LEARN TO DO IT?

Read on the backdrop of Matthew's Gospel as a whole, and Scripture as a whole, Jesus' words in Matthew 5:21–26 can be seen to contain at least eight gems of practical and pastoral wisdom that can help those who have been injured to forgive.

²⁸ Frequently, authors on forgiveness (like Smedes) include "reconstruction of the offender" as instrumental in forgiveness, whereby the victim intentionally takes to mind empathic considerations of the offender (e.g., that they were abused as children, abandoned, etc). These considerations "soften the heart" of the victim and thus aid in the forgiveness process. Here in Matthew, however, Jesus appears to commend a "reconstruction of the offended," whereby the one who has done the offending is so moved by considerations of the victim—and the damaging fires of anger that may be lit within them—that they ardently seek to be forgiven by those they've victimized.

A. REMEMBER HOW MUCH GOD HAS FORGIVEN YOU

As mentioned above, elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus explicitly establishes that we human beings ought to forgive one another because God has forgiven us. If we fail to forgive others, God will not forgive us. As Matthew 5:21a seems to imply, the one who holds on to their anger in this way, instead of giving it up as God does, will face the judgment of God. Part of the rhetorical impact of the story of the unmerciful servant in this regard is that Jesus encourages his listeners to apprehend both the *fact* of God's mercy as well as its *extent*. That God has forgiven us our debts is rationale enough to forgive others. That God has forgiven us our debts when they far outdistance other's debts to us constitutes an argument from the greater to the lesser. If God has forgiven us our gargantuan debt, who are we not to forgive others the trifles they owe us? Indeed, the one who insists on holding on to their anger despite God's relinquishing his anger rightly faces the judgment of God. Thus, in our battle to forgive, we do well to remember God's forgiveness of us.

B. TRUST THE JUSTICE OF GOD

To say that one must forgive, however, and do so by giving up the anger one has a right to, does not mean that one must give up on the concept of justice altogether. It is rather to shift the burden of righteous anger back on to the One who can act on it with perfect justice, and who, one day, promises to do so. The concept of judgment lurks strong in Jesus' first antithesis, and the entirety of Scripture is clear. "It is mine to avenge," says the Lord, and one day, God will judge the world. We in the West today may not like this teaching, most likely because we have not suffered atrocities in equal measure to other parts of the world. Our collective existence has been sheltered and plush. Yet, Scripture is clear: one day, the dead will rise and there will be a judgment. This doctrine should strike fear in the hearts of unrepentant offenders. And this doctrine should strike peace in the hearts of those who have been victimized but have seen little justice here on earth. More often than not, offenders get away. Justice is not meted out. Or, human justice is meted out, but it neither satisfies nor changes the past. Neither does it prevent offenders from perpetually punishing their victims by denying the truth and hiding in the shadows. But one day, Scripture assures, God will shine his light and none will escape from it. The truth will out. To trust this teaching of Scripture is to receive power today to forgive. I need not hold on to my righteous anger and act on it to bring balance back to the universe. God will hold it for me and act on it in his own way, in his own timing, with his own infinite wisdom. The scales of justice may appear broken in the present. But the Christian can abide within the homeostasis of hope.

C. DO NOT GIVE UP

It is nonetheless true, however, that, even with the hope of eschatological justice, victims of crimes will, at times, and certainly in the immediate

aftermath of violation, be overcome with paroxysms of anger. Another piece of wisdom implied in Jesus' definition of forgiveness, then, is to refuse to give up. For, if to forgive is to put away anger, then to forgive is not the presence or absence of emotion per se but the decision to take responsibility for one's emotional life. Forgiveness is a choice. One may not be able to prevent the flames of anger from arising within, and they may arise with exhausting frequency; but one can choose what to do with that anger once it has surfaced. One can choose to put it away. And one can choose to do so every single time it arises. Jesus' instruction to Peter in Matthew 18 insists on exactly this practice. How much should one choose to forgive, and put away their anger? Seventy-seven times; i.e., as often as necessary. The psychology behind this decision accords with, and will doubtlessly have the same effects of, Paul's instruction for attaining a peaceful disposition in trying times; viz., to train one's mind to focus on objects that are worthy of focus: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil 4:8). We cannot control the circumstances of our lives, or what others do to us; and, frustratingly, we cannot change the past. But we can choose how to respond to these things. To hold on to the righteous anger that has become wrath within us, and threatens to stay with us even as the day passes into night, is to give the devil a foothold.²⁹ Thus, Jesus teaches, when we are wounded and rightly angry, we need to make the decision, as often as necessary, as hard as it feels, to give it up. And do not give up giving it up. God will not condemn us for failing—for we will fail—but he will condemn us for not trying.

D. HOLD THY TONGUE

Another thing we can do if we're struggling to forgive is to learn to hold our tongue. Shut it. Don't rehearse the pain by giving malicious voice to it. Indeed, there is the intimation in Matthew 5:22, especially when listened to with other Scripture in mind, that if we add words to our anger, if we give voice to it, we might also give fuel to it. We're angry and thus say "You blockhead!" or "You fool!" or more likely we utter and mutter these sorts of things behind people's backs in order to soil their reputation and satisfy a sense of justice. But, so often, rehashing wounds and lashing out in response to them proves not to vent anger but oxygenate it. Experience bears this out. Who among us, in relaying a painful episode, and giving voice to it, has not managed to resurrect his or her wrath? This is not to say that there are not places and times to share traumatic experiences. It is to say that once we have come to grips with what has happened to us, once we have processed it with others, and once the decision to forgive has

²⁹ Eph 4:26–27: "In your anger [ὀργιζέσθε] do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry [παροργισμῶ], and do not give the devil a foothold" (NIV).

been taken, then, to aid this decision, wisdom says: “Now hold thy tongue. Speak about it no longer. Let sleeping dogs lie.”³⁰

A qualification is in order here. Suggesting, as we have, that one should never give up the fight to forgive and decide in wisdom to hold one’s tongue may give the impression that forgiveness is simply an issue of “mind over matter.” “Just try harder,” it might sound like we are saying. The qualification that is to be made, therefore, involves the Psalms encouragement to us to present our laments and complaints before the Lord. We may refuse to give up giving up our anger; but part of what will help us give it up is to give it up before the face of our Lord. We may decide that the time has come to hold our tongue and speak no more before others or in the murmurings of our own hearts; and yet, we may also decide in purity of heart, to continue to give voice to our pain and anger before the Lord.³¹

E. REPENT—REFLEXIVELY, QUICKLY

We noted above Jesus’ somewhat strange transition from addressing the victim in vv. 21–22 and then, with a causal conjunction, the offender in vv. 23–26. The logic, we noted, might be: since anger can have hellish consequences for individuals and whole societies if not dealt with properly, if you know that you have done something—or even been perceived to do something—to ignite the fires of anger in another, to incite the emergence of hell, go to that person and do what you can to put those fires out, to be a balm, to repent and seek for them to open the door toward reconciliation with you. For in this way you might save people from waves of judgment. In addition to this logic, another idea may be present within Jesus’ strange transition. Namely, the call to forgive by giving up one’s anger is not easy but mandatory. One of the actions that will aid us in our bid to embody forgiveness toward others, then, is to embody repentance toward others. For we who know ourselves to be offenders and recognize how frequently and easily we can hurt others, and we who thus engage in the habit of humbling ourselves before those whom we have wounded (and thus open ourselves to witnessing the pain that we have caused) will be much more inclined to forgive the pain others have caused us. Therefore, when we discover our offense, we ought to be the sort of people who reflexively and quickly repent.

³⁰ The idea that holding one’s tongue is wise and can reduce ill effects is pervasive in the book of Proverbs. “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (10:19, ESV). “Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent” (11:12, ESV). “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent” (17:28, ESV). “Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble” (21:23, ESV).

³¹ I am grateful to my friend, Professor Iain Provan of Regent College in Vancouver for the suggestion to include this important qualification.

F. CONTEMPLATE THE PASSION OF CHRIST

Matthew's passion narrative makes clear that we have suffered no harm that Christ has not suffered more intensely. This is the case not because Christ has suffered every kind of violation but because the violation he has suffered has been as one who is perfectly innocent (27:19). If anyone has a right to their anger, in other words, and would be completely justified in allowing his or her anger to burn hot and effectively in wrath, that someone is Jesus. Even still, in fulfillment of his own teaching in Matthew 5, Jesus does not act on his anger, but puts it away. When Judas betrays him; when Peter denies him; when the soldiers arrest him; when the witnesses lie about him; when his captors abuse him; when Pilate fails him; when the brigands on either side of him heap insults on him; when his life ebbs away; Jesus refuses to give anger a foothold and act on it. But instead, he forgives. This is his supreme gesture, of course, of trust in God the Father—that the Father will vindicate him, and not finally allow him to be put to shame. That Jesus was fully justified in his trust becomes manifest as the Father raises him up. Matthew does not, of course, explicitly urge his readers in Jesus' first antithesis to meditate on Jesus' passion and the Father's vindication of him. Nonetheless, as the ultimate expression of one who neither acts on their righteous anger nor holds on to it, and who comes out very well in spite of it, such a reading is certainly justified. Further, it is hard to imagine a greater source of inspiration. In Christ, not only do we find the beauty of forgiveness, we also find its end: God the Father will vindicate us; and he will also usher in the sort of wondrous reality that promises to utterly overcome and wash away all that once wounded us.

G. BE CLEAR ON WHAT FORGIVENESS IS AND IS NOT

If forgiveness, as we've been arguing, is defined by Jesus as a giving up the anger we have a right to in order to open the door toward reconciliation, then this clears up some common misconceptions that can bedevil Christians who, in obedience to Christ, are seeking to forgive.

For example, Christians can sometimes speak as though forgiveness is a feeling; thus, one can know that they have forgiven when their feelings of hurt and anger are gone. Forgiveness, in this way of thinking, puts pressure on the individual to change their feelings. And, if their feelings are not transformed, the anger itself will soon be accompanied by additional feelings of guilt and, possibly, fear of the judgment of God (for unforgiveness). To define forgiveness in terms of how one feels, therefore, is a bedeviling enterprise, indeed. Forgiveness as Jesus defines it, however, allows one to acknowledge one's feelings while focusing not on the feelings themselves but on one's behavior with reference to one's feelings. This can empower victims to focus on what they can do, therefore, and not on what they cannot do. This is true, of course, because forgiveness as Jesus defines it is not determined by how one presently feels but by what one is *doing* with how they feel. Anger is natural, and it arises naturally, and is typically uninvited. And the feeling of anger may never completely go away, just as surely as the

harm caused by another's offense may never fully go away. The question is, however: what am I doing with my anger? If I am seeking to put it away, redirecting my thoughts, putting my anger to God via godly lament, and thus opening the door to the possibility of reconciliation, then I can know that I am embodying forgiveness as Jesus calls me.

Does forgiveness require repentance? Christians can think that forgiveness should only be offered to those who demonstrate remorse and/or repent. The lever of forgiveness, in this construal, is put in the hands of offenders rather than victims. In Jesus' view, however, injured parties can and must act prior to any remedial gestures or actions on the part of offenders.³² They can and must work to give up their anger, along with desires to retaliate, regardless of the remorse and/or repentance of those who have hurt them. Remorse, within this paradigm, signals to the one who has already decided to forgive and is embodying that forgiveness toward offenders via the posture of open arms that an offender has come to the place of accepting responsibility for their action. To the posture of forgiveness, in other words, is now added the presence of truth, and thus the greater possibility of embrace, of reconciliation. Trust, however, is still an issue. Full reconciliation, ensuing in the embrace of the other in the arms of true community, requires not only truth but sufficient evidence that former perpetrators will not repeat their crimes. Although never fireproof, the evidence that former perpetrators may be trusted rests not in declarations of repentance or signs of remorse—such as tears—but lives which express an authentic “about-face,” a turn-around: i.e., true Christian repentance.³³ Articulating and grasping this truth is important for protecting victims from misconceptions about forgiveness that will lock them into endless cycles of abuse.

Once again, it must be stressed that forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. In the former, one opens their arms wide and says, “It *can* be right between us again: I am not holding on to the anger I have a right to and I will not seek to punish you and exclude you for what you did to me.” In the latter, once the offender has expressed remorse and embodied repentance, and to the degree they can be sufficiently trusted, embrace can be enacted. To put a finer point on it: in this fallen world, the Christian need not believe that dutifully embodying forgiveness toward and with reference toward others will always entail restored relationship.

³² There might be an argument to be made that Jesus calls Christians to embrace an ethic of premediated forgiveness. Even before an offense has been committed, we commit ourselves not to act on our anger and, in fact, give up the anger itself.

³³ Paul is unequivocal. Remorse and repentance are not identical. If godly, remorse will lead to repentance; if worldly (self-pitying, superficial), it will only lead to death. “Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death (2 Cor 7:8–10, NIV).

Sometimes, forgiveness will open the door to a relationship that will not be properly restored until the world-to-come comes in its fullness.