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**Lord's Prayer and Conditional Forgiveness:
Abuse of women and forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer**

Tiny van der Schaaf,
University of Pretoria, South Africa

1. The Problem

Although there has been more openness in the faith community about sexual abuse lately, it still remains a difficult issue to deal with. If both victim and perpetrator are members of the same faith community a number of practical problems arise and providing adequate pastoral care becomes complicated. What is the best way to counsel the victim?¹

Women who have fallen victim to abuse and who approach pastors for help, often return to the person who abuses them even though there is no improvement in their situation (Adams 1994:5; cf Neuger 2001:96). The study done some years ago by Imbens & Jonker (1991:170, 253-254) indicated that some pastors did not believe the women, whereas others sent the women back to the abusive situations with arguments such as the sanctity of marriage and forgiveness. Women who seek help after having been sexually abused, are often told to forgive and forget. A woman who forgives is considered a good Christian and a holy person (Neuger 2001:101). It is “unchristian” not to forgive (Lk 17.3; Col 3.13). Such women are often reminded by clergy that God forgives all sins (cf Ganzevoort & Veerman 1999:87-89). If God is so accepting of the people who hurt

¹ This article is a reworked version of an article published in HTS Theological Studies (2007). In this version I follow the perspective of the victim. I do realize that perpetrators may also need pastoral care.

and abused them, it is difficult for many such women to believe in and be part of the church (Ganzevoort & Veerman 1999:85).

A Bible text that can be especially problematic in this regard is the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6.9-13) which quite clearly requires people to forgive "those who have trespassed against us". This text could create the impression that people are required to forgive everyone for everything done to them, otherwise they themselves would not receive God's forgiveness. This means that victims are forced to forgive perpetrators. If they find this difficult or impossible, they fear that God will not forgive them (cf Ganzevoort 2003:25; Imbens & Jonker 1991:153).

This article presents an evaluation of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer from the perspective of female victims of sexual abuse. Firstly, the focus is on the understanding of forgiveness in the Bible. The role of ethics will be discussed, and the effect that interpretations of the text and of ethics has on victims, will be explored. The context of the Lord's Prayer, namely the Sermon on the Mount, the Gospel of Matthew and the Bible as a whole will be taken into consideration. This analysis will be concluded with some observations and remarks.

2. Biblical Evidence

2.1. Old Testament: Condition for Reconciliation

The Hebrew word that comes closest to the English "forgiveness" is סלח (salach) which literally means "to send away". Another verb which often occurs in the priestly tradition and that can also take on the meaning of forgiveness, is כפר which literally means "to cover up". This word expresses the ideas of reconciliation and penance (Buttrick 1962:315). Most Old Testament authors agree that the God of Israel has a personal relationship with his people. Forgiveness in the Old Testament is a term that expresses the religious relationship between God and people, God's covenant with them. All people are creatures of God, but through their sins they separate themselves from God. Forgiveness is necessary to bridge this gap between God and people. If God forgives, reconciliation is possible (Buttrick 1962:315; cf Hastings 1913:73). Therefore, in the Old Testament, forgiveness is a condition for reconciliation.

In time the meaning of the term "sin" changed. In earlier times breaking the covenant with God was seen as sin. Sacrifices then had to be made in order to undo the sin and achieve reconciliation

between God and people. The blood rite was an important part of sacrifice (see De Vaux 1962:379, 383). Later, when laws were introduced, sin acquired a different meaning. Laws indicate that God is the guardian of the rights of *all* members of the community, and in particular the weak, widows, orphans and strangers. Here an ethical dimension comes to the fore. Laws reflect the rules and customs which function as a code of conduct (De Kruijf 1999:20). Breaking the covenant with God now acquired a new meaning. This is illustrated by the texts in which the pre-exile prophets speak negatively about the common practice of sacrifice (Is 1.11-17, Jr 6.20, 7.21-22, Hs 6.6, Am 5.21-27, Mi 6.6-8) because the people's hearts are not in it, especially not as long as they hurt one another (De Vaux 1962:384-385). Hurting one another not only constitutes sinning against people, but is also sinning against God. The question of forgiveness becomes then more complicated (Hastings 1913:73-74). In this new definition, the sin committed is not only committed against God but also against the people who are hurt. How should forgiveness in the Old Testament be understood? The prophets were clear that sacrifice was not what was needed in order to obtain forgiveness: "...for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings..." (Hos 6.4-6, see Am 5.22-24, Mi 6). In order to obtain forgiveness only one thing is needed: to truly follow God (Zach 1.3, Mi 3.7). God wants to forgive (Is 40.1, 43.25, 44.22, Jr 31.31-34, Mi 7.18). God calls on people to bring an end to evil and do good (Is 1.16-17).

All the above-mentioned texts deal with God's forgiveness of people. Therefore people can commit sins against people and against God, but the Old Testament only focuses on God forgiving people. When God forgives, the covenant between God and people is restored and people are able to live in peace again. This means that the perpetrator receives new life. Thus the Old Testament says nothing of people forgiving other people. However, it does state clearly that the damage caused to people has to be compensated, but only as regards material value (cf Ex 21.33-36, 22.12-14, Lv. 6.4-7, 24.18).

2.2 New Testament: A Matter of Ethics

The Greek word closest to the English "forgiveness" is the word ἀφεσις from the verb ἀφίημι, meaning: to dismiss, to release from

captivity (e.g. Lk 4.18) or to discharge from an obligation, debt or punishment (Bauer 1988:250). Another expression which frequently occurs, is ἀφεσιν αμαρτιων (see Mt 26.28, Mk 1:4, Lk 1.77, 3:3, 24.47, Ac 2.38, 5.31), which can be translated with: release of debt or forgiveness of sins. Generally forgiveness of sins means that God is the one who forgives the sins that people have committed. However, this is not always the case. A closer look at the letter to the Hebrews shows a different dimension to the meaning of forgiveness. The emphasis here is more on cultic purification by means of blood than on the forgiveness of sins (Heb 9.22, 10.18; cf Lv 4.20, 19.22).

Having explored the possible meanings ἀφεσις, I will now turn to the verb ἀφιημι. Bauer (1988:251-252) distinguishes four groups of meaning. The first is “to send away, to let go”. “... Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house ...” (Mt 13.36; cf Mk 4.36, 8.13; see Mt 27.50, Mk 15.37). The second meaning is “to let off”. This can be found in the Gospel according to Matthew, where Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven with a king who holds his slaves accountable (Mt 18:21-35). A man who owes the king ten thousand talents, is brought to the king. He begs the king not to sell him and his wife and children. “...Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt ...” (Mt 18.27; cf Mt 18.32, Lk 7.42). Here the Dutch translation uses the concept of a debt being cancelled rather than the term “forgiveness”.

According to Bauer (1988:251-252) both the Old and New Testament focus mainly on forgiveness in the religious sense, in other words the divine forgiveness of sin. This is also evident in the Lord’s Prayer, but there it is taken further: “...And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors ... For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither your Father forgive your trespasses...” (Mt 6.12, 14-15; cf Lk 11.4, 1 Jn 1.9, Mk 11.25-26).

Here it is no longer only about God’s forgiveness of people, but also about mutual forgiveness among people. This, however, is not only typical of the New Testament, but can also be found in Jewish tradition where it is impossible to ignore any one point of the triangle: human beings, fellow human beings and God. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas points out that Christianity generally restricts the

terms mercy and forgiveness to the relationship between God and people (Poorthuis 1992:9). The triangle people, others and God, which is rooted in the Jewish tradition, brings an ethical perspective to social reality (Van Rhijn & Meulink-Korf 1998:342). I will return to this point later.

The third meaning, according to Bauer (1988:251-252) is “to leave, to leave behind”: “... and they left their father Zeb'edee in the ship with the hired servants, and went after him ...” (Mk 1.20; cf Mt 4.11, 8.15, 26.44, Mk 1.31, 12.12, Lk 4.39). The fourth meaning Bauer attributes to the word ἀφήμι is “to let unhindered, to let someone have his own way”: “... And they said unto them even as Jesus had commanded: and they let them go ...” (Mk 11.6, cf Mt 15.14, Mk 5.19, 14.6, Lk 13.8, Ac 5.38).

From this section on the possible meanings of the terms ἀφήμι and ἀφεσις in the New Testament, I now turn to a discussion of the ethics underlying forgiveness and the damage a wrong interpretation of these biblical terms might cause.

3. Levinas' Contribution

Both Old and in the New Testament ethics play a central role in the understanding of the concept of forgiveness. In both instances ethics is about the interpretation of the rules and customs according to which people should live. The God of the Old and New Testament by legislation protects the weak, widows, orphans and strangers in particular. Forgiveness is not exclusively a matter between God and people but also among people themselves. This indicates that forgiveness is inextricably bound to ethics. In the Old Testament ethics reflects the rules and customs which function as a code of conduct (De Kruijf 1999:20). Forgiveness concerns the contact between God and people and that among the people themselves. Therefore forgiveness is part of these rules and customs which function as a code of conduct.

Ethics can be defined as a practical philosophy which is concerned with good and evil (Van Sterkenburg 1994:276). In the context of the Bible the search for good has to do with the relationship between people and the divine. This relationship manifests in people's relationships among themselves, which again coincides with the social justice. The pertinent question is: what is “good”? Levinas (1978:46) states provocatively: “A world in which forgiveness is

almighty, becomes inhuman.” Duijndam and Poorthuis (2003:124) concur with Levinas’ criticism: “Christianity sees forgiveness as a magical sacramental event which exempts the perpetrator of all responsibility and negates the victim ... The Christian view on the sacrament of reconciliation would mean that repentance by the perpetrator and restitution towards the victim would not be prerequisites for God’s forgiveness.”

Levinas speaks from a rabbinical point of view when he states that no one, not even God, can replace the victim (Levinas 1978:45-46). “Almighty forgiveness” should not rob the victim of her or his autonomy (Van Rhijn & Meulink - korf 1998:344). Levinas exposes how Protestant churches have been putting the term forgiveness into practice. I am especially concerned with how this impacts on women who have fallen victim to sexual violence. The Jewish-mystic movement of the classical Kabbala, which appeared round about the end of the twelfth, beginning of the thirteenth century, reflects on the limits and conditions concerning forgiveness (Laenen 1998:48). In the system of the ten *sefirot*, the two *sefirot* “chesed” (mercy) and “din” (justice) constitute direct opposites. These two *sefirot* balance each other. The *sefira* “din” is necessary because it has to prevent the divine “chesed” from becoming almighty. In order to preserve space for creation, the *sefira* “din” limits the *sefira* “chesed” (Laenen 1998:52). On the one hand a world in which forgiveness is almighty, becomes inhuman. On the other hand people cannot exist without mercy. That is why the “din” has to be balanced by “chesed”.

These insights shed new light on the Lord’s Prayer and what it says about forgiveness. From the rabbinical point of view this text can be criticized as protecting victims. According to this perspective God will not forgive the perpetrator unless he tries to restore what he has broken (cf Mt 5:23-24). This means that forgiveness is not only a matter between God and the perpetrator without the victim coming into play. Unfortunately, in the pastoral practice of the Protestant churches, this text has too often been used to force victims to forgive perpetrators (Ganzevoort & Veerman 1999:102, cf Imbens & Jonker 1991:153-154). If the victim cannot do the consequence will be that God will not forgive her. The victim is doubly burdened: firstly the burden of the abuse itself, and secondly, the burden of having to forgive, which victims often find extremely difficult, if not

impossible, to do. This practice in the Christian tradition of demanding forgiveness has in effect caused the perpetrator to feel supported by the church and God, whereas the victim is left out in the cold (Ganzevoort 2003:23; cf Imbens & Jonker 1991:154).

The only way in which forgiveness can have a truly healing effect, is when it is given voluntarily by the victim. Does the fact that forgiveness has this healing potential, make it mandatory for the victim? According to Ganzevoort (2003:17) forgiveness is definitely necessary, but it is important how the matter is approached. The emphasis should not be on the *content* of the term forgiveness, but rather on what *happens* when one forgives (Ganzevoort 2003:21). Forgiveness is an inner change of attitude (Ganzevoort 2003:27). On the one hand it is imperative that the debt of the perpetrator is acknowledged. On the other hand the objective is that the bond between victim and perpetrator is to be broken in order for the victim to be healed. If this bond is broken, there is nothing left to links the perpetrator to the victim. How this is done: the victim first has to fully acknowledges that she has been made a victim by another person, and only then is can she able to leave her victim hood behind and move on with her life. If this happens, the power of the perpetrator has finally been broken (Ganzevoort 2003:28-29).

The necessity of forgiveness is therefore not *religious* or *moral*. This emphasis has served only other interests, such as restoring harmony in the community or rehabilitating the perpetrator (Ganzevoort 2003:32). It has not served the victim at all well. Forgiveness is rather an *existential* necessity for the victim. This idea is poignantly put in a song by the Dutch cabaret artist and songwriter, Herman van Veen (2001):

**IF JESUS CHRIST SAYS “FORGIVE YOUR ENEMIES”,
THEN HE SAYS IT NOT FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE ENEMIES
BUT FOR OUR OWN BENEFIT,
BECAUSE LOVE IS MUCH MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN HATRED.
THAT IS NOT TOO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND!**

If the victim wants to break the chains shackling her to the perpetrator, both her victim status and the urge to take revenge should be transcended. The role of the Lord's Prayer is important since the prayer is so central to Christian life and liturgy. This prayer can torture unforgiving victims with never-ending guilt. In order for the Lord's Prayer not to play the role of chastising the victim, it is necessary to understand the Prayer in its context. The triangle of people, others and God will again become relevant.

4. The Lord's Prayer

The author of the Gospel of Matthew uses certain key terms which provide clues for understanding of the message of the gospel. The author is fond of repetition, parallelism and chiasmic ring compositions. The Sermon on the Mount is an example of this. It is a ring composition with the Lord's Prayer in the centre. The structure of the Sermon on the Mount is as follows (Luz 1985:185-186):

| | | | |
|---|---|-----------|-----------|
| A | Situation | 5:1-2 | |
| B | Introduction | 5:3-16 | |
| C | Introduction to main section | | 5:17-20 |
| D | Main section/antitheses | | 5:21-48 |
| E | Righteousness before God | | 6:1-6 |
| F | Centre: Lord's Prayer | | 6:7-15 |
| E | Righteousness before God | | 6:16-18 |
| D | Main section/possessions, judging, prayer | | 6:19-7:11 |
| C | Conclusion of main section | | 7:12 |
| B | Conclusion | 7:13-27 | |
| A | Reaction of hearers | 7:28-8:1a | |

Jesus' emphasis on the importance of the law and the prophets constitutes the main part of the Sermon on the Mount. Another central theme is that of the kingdom of God. These two themes are connected. The kingdom of God does not belong to the next world, but should become a reality in this world by means of people who live their lives according to the law and the prophets.

The context of the Lord's Prayer is important. The author of Matthew made extensive use of what we now call the Old Testament. The theology of the Old Testament was part and parcel of the theology of Matthew. Against this background it is possible to

scrutinize some of the themes represented in Matthew more closely. These themes can be found in the relationships among the various characters or groups in the gospel, such as, for instance, the relationships between Jesus and the crowds, between Jesus and the disciples, between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, between the Jewish leaders and the crowds, between the Jewish leaders and the disciples, between the disciples and the crowds (Van Aarde 1994:41-42).

The Sermon on the Mount shows what the relationship between Jesus and the disciples is all about. Jesus speaks mainly to them (Mt 5.1-2). They receive instruction from him (Minear 1982:87-88). He teaches them the rules of the kingdom of God. They should be more righteous than the Pharisees (Mt 5:20). Jesus gives them the power to exorcise unclean spirits and to heal people. The disciples are instructed to look after the crowds (Mt 10.6-8). The disciples are privileged because they may know the secrets of the kingdom of God. They see and hear what others do not (Mt 13.10-17). Later in the gospel Matthew states that they are the ones to receive the keys to the kingdom (Mt 16.6-20).

These texts also give an indication of what the relationship between the disciples and the crowds was like. The disciples are to bring God's righteousness to the crowds – more so than the Pharisees. The Pharisees' acts are superficial and self-serving. They lack true love (Van Aarde 1994:42). The disciples, on the other hand, are instructed to care for the people and to feed them (Minear 1982:89). The context of the Lord's Prayer, therefore, is Jesus teaching the disciples this prayer. The focal point of the prayer is verse 12. The forgiveness of debts is shown to be an important injunction, because Jesus repeats it directly after the prayer (Mt. 6:14-15) and again later in chapter 18.

Now that the important themes in Matthew have been clarified, the pronouns "we" and "us" can be reinterpreted. In order to do so, I first want to focus on the parable Matthew 18:21-35. The story is about a king who writes off an impossibly large debt of a slave. The slave, however, mercilessly demands of another slave who owes him a fairly small amount, that it must be paid back. When the king hears about this, he sends the first slave to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount. Herman Waetjen (1999:89-90) equates the debt of the first slave with the debt that human beings have before God, who has given human beings precious life and the

possibility for come to self-actualization. This privilege calls for responsibility. The responsibility of the people is emphasized in Jewish faith by the reminder that they had been freed from slavery in Egypt and that they have a covenant with God. In Deuteronomy this ideology of mutuality is clearly visible (Dt 5.2-16, 6.0-15; 8.1-15; 10.2-22; 24.7-22). The king in the parable writes off this debt which is impossible to repay anyway and gives the slave his freedom without any obligation. That is the grace of the new covenant. The question arises, however, whether this really constitutes freedom from obligation as Waetjen puts it. When the slave refused to return the favour to another slave, the mercy which he had received was revoked. This means that he, in effect, was obligated to forgive the other slave. Is this humane? Does this mean that a victim of sexual violence is also obligated to forgive her perpetrator?

Reinterpretation is necessary. In Matthew the first slave represents the leaders of Israel, the Pharisees. They had received love and forgiveness, but they were not able to appreciate it (Mt 13.10-15) or to pass this mercy on to other victims, to the marginalized. Quite the opposite. They judged the victims. When the king hears about this, he revokes his mercy. A similar event takes place later in the Gospel when Jesus speaks against the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. Here Jesus chooses sides for the victims of society. This is the story of the second slave who represents the victims and marginalised of society. The first slave did not exempt the second slave, but the king (God) intervened on his behalf.

When we relate this parable to the Lord's Prayer, the "we" and "us" should not be seen as referring to the victims and marginalized, but to the disciples. They have received the forgiveness of God and should pass this mercy on to the victims in society. Jesus teaches the prayer to the disciples. They have received forgiveness. They are the ones who can see. Now they should heal those who cannot see. Those who have been healed should then carry God's mercy to others who are still in darkness.

In summary: the Gospel of Matthew is a polemic between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were supposed to care for the lost sheep, the marginalized, as they are characterized by Matthew. The position of the Pharisees was between God and people. However, they did not do what was expected of them. They did not practice what

they preached. They emphasized righteousness to such an extent that there was no mercy left. The marginalized, rather than being cared for by them, became the victims of their actions and their proclamation. Jesus opposes this. He takes the part of the victims. The Lord's Prayer should be understood against this background. Those who have received God's love and forgiveness are the ones who are able to show goodness and mercy to others who need God's love. This remains true to the rabbinical triangular bond between God, people and others.

5. An Existential Must

Returning to the question whether there is a condition attached to God's forgiveness, it has been shown not to be the case. In light of the rabbinic tradition the prayer about forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer is meant as protection for victims. The perpetrator cannot sneak in the backdoor to ask directly for God's forgiveness without taking the victim into account. The triangular relationship of God, people and others, makes it impossible for the victim to be ignored in this process. Quite the opposite: the victim is central. When reinterpreting the pronouns "we" and "us" in the Lord's Prayer, they were shown to refer not to the marginalized but to the disciples. They were the ones who had received God's forgiveness and were now to pass it on to victims. Healing can take place on account of God's forgiveness and victim hood can be left behind. Then the healed can pass on God's forgiveness and mercy to others again. Forgiveness is an injunction for the victim, but it is an *existential*, rather a moral or religious condition, for:

**IF JESUS CHRIST SAYS, FOR EXAMPLE,
"FORGIVE YOUR ENEMIES",
THEN HE SAYS IT NOT FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE ENEMIES
BUT FOR OUR OWN BENEFIT,
BECAUSE LOVE IS SO MUCH MORE
BEAUTIFUL THAN HATRED.
THAT IS NOT TOO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND!**

(Van Veen 2001)

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