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**The Paradox of the N. T. Concept of
Unmerited Divine Grace and
Conditional Forgiveness in Matthew’s Gospel**

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Introduction.....	1
Matthew 6:12-15.....	3
Matthew 9:1-8.....	10
Matthew 18:21-35.....	12
Matthew 26:28.....	17
Conclusion	20

Introduction

In Matthew’s Gospel, forgiveness of sins appears to be both a result of a gracious offer or declaration on the part of Jesus (9:2-8; 26:28); as well as conditional upon the forgiveness that the disciple must offer to others (6:12-15; 18:21-35). This study will focus on Matthew’s unique contribution to the theological implications of God’s forgiveness as compared to other Synoptic Gospels, the Old Testament background, and intertestamental and rabbinic teaching on the subject.

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The question about divine forgiveness either has its ground or cause in the gracious offer of God due to a substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of the follower of Jesus (26:28); or has its ground or cause in the actual offer of forgiveness of the follower toward other people (6:12-15; 18:21-35).

According to Hultgren's rhetorical solution; "Many interpretations of the Lord's Prayer assume a conditional relation between God's forgiveness and ours.² A better alternative is to hear the prayer's reference to our forgiveness as 'performance utterance' by which forgiveness is actually accomplished."³ Thus, there is no condition, but simply a confidence that we are forgiven, while our forgiveness is a result of divine forgiveness.

Others argue that Jesus' teaching about prayer must be interpreted within the context of the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).⁴ Forgiveness of others is not a condition for divine forgiveness but a ceremonial declaration of forgiveness of others of those who celebrate the festival.

Other common solutions to this paradox may include (1) the theological difference between ultimate forgiveness from condemnation, on one hand, versus daily forgiveness to maintain communion with God; (2) the theological difference between forgiveness from ultimate condemnation versus the loss of eternal rewards for the disciple who does not forgive others; (3) the responsibility of the follower of Jesus to maintain a relationship with God by means of works (if they fail to forgive they lose ultimate forgiveness from God and receive condemnation); or (4) the position that truly forgiven people reveal their forgiveness by means of forgiving others.

We would maintain that a solution is needed that is consistent with the Jewish Christian context of the author rather than later popular theological systems. The contribution of this article is to compare other similar Jewish and rabbinical statements that include

² W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 611; and Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 121.

³ Arland J. Hultgren, "Forgive Us, As We Forgive (Matthew 6:12)," *Word and World* 16 (1999), 284.

⁴ Pierre Bonnard, *Evangelio según San Mateo*, tr. P. R. Santidrian (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1976), 138.

conditional statements as a basis for divine forgiveness. We will finally conclude the Matthew uses “forgiveness” in distinctive contexts as either (1) final eschatological or ultimate forgiveness; or (2) daily forgiveness necessary to maintain a daily walk of discipleship. While the first is not conditioned upon a disciple’s forgiveness of others, the latter certainly is.

Matthew 6:12-15

The issue of forgiveness in Matthew 6:12-15 plagues interpreters when they hold that the petition for forgiveness from God in the model prayer of Jesus is the ultimate or eschatological forgiveness that will determine the outcome of final judgment.

. . . if our act of forgiveness constitutes a claim, on the basis of which we have established a right to ask God for forgiveness, this would constitute the kind of “synergism,” or “works righteousness,” that most theologians, at least those in the Reformation tradition, would repudiate.⁵

However, such a struggle forces Matthew to think of only one kind of forgiveness as predetermined by Pauline theology. But, if this context is not about ultimate eternal forgiveness, but rather daily temporal release from punishment for sin, then such daily forgiveness can be conditional upon the forgiveness of other people as a requirement that must be accomplished prior to the practice of the model prayer.

The model prayer of Jesus is a daily prayer in the context of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. The Sermon teaches the ethical standards for true disciples living in the inaugurated kingdom of Jesus. It describes true disciples in contrast to false ones. Thus, true disciples pray daily according to the pattern of Jesus’ model prayer. The phrase, “our daily bread give us today (6:11),” teaches the disciples to pray that their basic necessities of life be provided for each day in which they are determined by God to remain.⁶ Matthew’s version highlights that it is for “today,” while Luke 11:3 asks for the same daily bread, “daily.” Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4 are distinct in their request for forgiveness. Matthew has “and forgive us our debts

⁵ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Y. Collins (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 404.

⁶ ἐπιούσιος is a substantivization of the phrase ἐπί τῆν οὐσαν (ἡμέραν) (determined) for the day in question. F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), §123[1].

as we also forgave our debtors,”⁷ while Luke has “and forgive us our sins because we also forgive all who owe us.” In Matthew, the disciple has already forgiven debtors before there is a request to God for forgiveness.⁸ Later scribes (also *Did.* 8:2) altered the original past aorist tense of “we forgave” to the present tense, “just as we forgive,” in order to make human forgiveness of other humans a consequence rather than a condition for God’s forgiveness.⁹ But, the precondition of forgiveness is similar to Matthew’s unique teaching that it is necessary to be reconciled to those who have something against the disciples before they offer sacrifice to God (Matthew 5:23-24).

Only Matthew borrows from Mark to substantiate the requirement of forgiveness of others as the basis of forgiveness from God. When Mark tells the story of the fig tree that Jesus curses and then withers, he adds several phrases of teaching about prayer (Mark 11:22-25). Mark 11:25 states, “and when you stand praying, forgive, if you have something against someone so that your Heavenly Father also will forgive your trespasses.” In Mark, the context (and the use of a purpose ἵνα clause)¹⁰ suggests that forgiveness of others is for the purpose of receiving forgiveness and thereby assuring the disciples that their prayer requests will be answered (Mark 11:23-24). Therefore, in Mark, chapter eleven, faith alone does not assure that God will answer prayer unless the petitioner also forgives others. Matthew takes this teaching and adds it to the reason why forgiveness of others is required for divine forgiveness in 6:14-15. Matthew’s version is expanded and put into two third class conditional clauses of both forgiveness and lack of forgiveness. The clauses make the

⁷ Referring to sins as debts to God is very Jewish. The Targum of Genesis 20:9 uses debt for sin.

⁸ ἀφήκαμεν, we forgave, is aorist and grammatically it is action that has taken place before the petitioner asks for forgiveness from God.

⁹ Admitting that the Greek was originally an aorist led Jeremias to argue that the original was an Aramaic perfect with the translation, “as herewith we forgive our debtors.” Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, tr. John Bowden (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1971), 201. However, this does not explain why Matthew adds the further conditional sentences of 6:14-15 in order to make the prior condition of human forgiveness logically prior to God’s forgiveness. It also would have made Matthew unintelligible to his first readers who would have read this is Greek rather than Aramaic.

¹⁰ In syntax, purpose and result depends upon the intention of the action. Therefore, since in this context, the disciple intends to forgive for the purpose of being forgiven, it is not possible to state that human forgiveness of others is a result of God’s prior forgiveness or that God’s posterior forgiveness is a result of inter-human forgiveness. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond The Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 592.

forgiveness of God clearly conditional upon the disciples' forgiveness of others. "Because, if you forgive people their trespasses, then your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. And, if you do not forgive people, then neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

In the context of Matthew, it is clear that as disciples follow the daily model prayer of Jesus, that they should daily ask God for forgiveness of trespassing against God. Their trespasses against God are debts that require that God punish them. Their request that God does not punish them is contingent upon their forgiveness of other people who have trespassed against them. This implies that human forgiveness requires that disciples release others from any punishment or negative consequence that may be deserved but that the disciples will no longer apply. This is the same forgiveness that the disciples ask of God, that they be released from his judgment or punishment for their trespass against the divine will.

It is not, as Gundry proposes, that God is expected to follow the example of human forgiveness (forgive us in the way that we forgive others),¹¹ but rather that God requires humans to forgive each other was a precondition of his forgiveness in a context of releasing humans of the daily consequences of their sins against God.

Many scholars wish to argue that human forgiveness of others logically follows divine forgiveness.¹²

one's forgiving does not form the prerequisite for experiencing God's forgiveness Rather the genuine experience of God's accepting forgiveness of one's immense "debt" (18:24-27) is to condition one's ability to forgive others¹³

the privilege of praying for the Father's forgiveness—the meaning of the first part of this fifth petition—is placed by Jesus before the rider of our forgiveness of others. This means that Jesus reminds us of our standing privilege of access to the Father before he reminds us of our standing responsibility to be forgiving with our neighbor. This order, this sequence, makes me prefer the expression

¹¹ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 108.

¹² R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 137

¹³ Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 298.

“consequence” to “condition” for the clause “as we, too, have forgiven our debtors”¹⁴

Davies and Allison offer the solution that God’s forgiveness is not merited but can only be received by those who are willing to forgive others.¹⁵ Carballosa argues that, although human forgiveness occurs grammatically before divine forgiveness, it was done as a sign that the grace of God had already been firmly established in the heart of the disciple.¹⁶

However, such arguments violate the conditional nature of the conditional clauses in 6:14-15 that explicitly give a logical order that forgiveness of others must come before God forgives us.¹⁷ Also, it is a continuation of the necessity to be reconciled to those a disciple has offended before taking an offering to the altar (Matt 5:23-24). In 6:14-15, forgiveness from God is clearly conditional upon the disciples’ forgiveness of others. It is clearly intended by Jesus and Matthew that forgiveness be based upon the merit of the disciples. There is a clear condition stated both positively and negatively with a strong emphasis upon the prior condition of forgiving others as a basis for forgiveness in this passage.¹⁸

However, this conditional forgiveness is in a context of daily seeking God’s release of punishment within the everyday life of a true disciple of Jesus. It is not necessary that forgiveness in this context be equivalent to final, eschatological,¹⁹ once for all,²⁰ or eternal forgiveness as a basis for entrance into Heaven or, in Matthew’s theology, the literal earthly messianic rule. This forgiveness in context

¹⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary by Frederick Dale Bruner: Volume 1, The Christbook: Matthew 1–12* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987), 253.

¹⁵ Davies and Allison, 611.

¹⁶ Evis L. Carballosa, *Mateo: La revelación de la realeza de Cristo*, Mateo 1–14 (Grand Rapids, MI: Portavoz, 2007), 244.

¹⁷ So also Gundry, 109-110.

¹⁸ Contrary to many scholars who argue that no prior condition is implied in the text: Hultgren, “Forgive Us.”; and Samuel Pérez Millos, *Mateo* (Barcelona: CLIE, 2009), 407-408;

¹⁹ Contrary to Best, 416-417; Guelich, 294; and Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard, et al., vol. 33A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 150.

²⁰ Contrary to Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, tr. David E. Green (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1975), 155.

refers to something that disciples are given daily to release them from the temporal consequences of their sin.²¹

Many incorrectly argue that “forgiveness” in this passage is equivalent to the Pauline concept of an ultimate freedom from all condemnation (Rom 8:1).²² However, it is incorrect to interpret the Sermon on the Mount using other authors in the New Testament, but it is valid to observe that “forgiveness” can be used by other authors for a declaration of divine justification that no longer has any condemnation for all sin of a true believer in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Romans). It is also valid to observe that this model prayer is not assuming the same use of “forgiveness,” but rather a daily release of the consequences of sin in the life of the disciple of Jesus.²³ However, it is also invalid to force Matthew to have a previous understanding of how 1 John 1:9 would apply to this teaching of Jesus.²⁴ Rather than make an explicit use of 1 John 1:9, other scholars speak of this daily forgiveness in terms of the restoration of fellowship with God.²⁵ Such language is still foreign to the theology of the text of Matthew and therefore it is preferred to call this type of forgiveness a daily release from God’s punishment from the daily consequences of sin. It is also within a community setting where members sin against one another and continue to be in need of continual forgiveness.²⁶

The forgiveness in this passage as conditional upon the human forgiveness of the disciple has clear Jewish parallels.²⁷

²¹ So also Cyprian and Chrysostom in Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 1–13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Thomas C. Oden, New Testament 1A (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 136.

²² This confusion is explicitly avoided but then often practiced by Bruner, 1:251, 254.

²³ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 291; and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids, MI: 2002), 68.

²⁴ Many scholars make an invalid attempt to explain this distinct daily forgiveness by forcing an interpretation of 1 John 1:9 upon the text of the Sermon on the Mount assuming that the author already made these same distinctions between ultimate divine justification and the restoration of daily communion with God. Such eisegesis is practiced by Pérez Millos, 407; and Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1981), 111.

²⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN, 1992), 120.

²⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, tr. Wilhelm C. Linss, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 384.

²⁷ The “Eighteen Benedictions” are not included since the sixth benediction has no condition besides the earlier repentance and simply asking based upon the mercy of God: “Forgive us our Father, [Footnote continued on next page ...]

The vengeful person will find vengeance from the Lord and her/his sins she/he will surely treasure up.²⁸ Forgive the wrong of your neighbor and then when you pray your sins will be released. Can a person keep wrath against a person and then seek healing from the Lord? Can someone not have mercy on someone like herself/himself and pray for their own sins? For a person, being made of flesh, who retains wrath, who will atone²⁹ for that person's sins? Remember your last days and stop hating, (remember) decay and death and keep the commandments (Sirach 28:1-6).³⁰

This passage claims that there is no atonement for the sins of the unforgiving person in language much stronger than the teachings of Jesus.

And now, my children, I teach you to keep the Lord's commands and to do mercy to your neighbor and to have compassion on all, not only human beings but also to unreasoning animals. For these reasons the Lord blessed me, and when all my brothers were ill, I continued without sickness, for the Lord knows the commitment (choices) of each person. Have mercy in your inner being (heart), my children, because whatever anyone does to his neighbor, likewise also the Lord will do to her/him. For also the sons of my brothers became sick and died because of Joseph, because they did not do mercy out of their inner compassion, but my sons were protected without sickness as you know (*Test. Zeb.* 5:1-5).³¹

This is very close to the teaching of Jesus that it is necessary to forgive in order to avoid temporal punishment for sin from God. Without forgiveness, mercy, and compassion there is punishment; however, the punishment in this passage is not eternal condemnation for sins. In contrast, *The Testament of Zebulon* does continue in 8:1-4 to make eschatological judgment conditional upon compassion and mercy: "In the last days God will send his compassion on the earth, and where he finds compassionate mercy, in that person he will reside."

for we have sinned against you. Blot out and remove our transgressions from before your eyes, for your compassion is great. Blessed are you Lord, who abundantly forgives." Davies and Allison, 610; and David Instone-Brewer, "The Eighteen Benedictions and the Minim before 70 CE," *Journal of Theological Studies* 54 (2003), 30.

²⁸ διατηρῶν διατηρήσει is literally "treasuring up she/he will treasure up" with the implication that vengeful persons who seek to punish other people are treasuring up the retribution of God against their sins.

²⁹ ἐξιλάσεται "will propitiate" or "will atone."

³⁰ This author's translation of Rahlfs' LXX.

³¹ Translation by this author from Albert-Marie Denis, ed., *Concordance Grecque des Pseudépigraphes d'Ancien Testament* (Louvain: Université catholique de Louvain, 1987).

Another good example of forgiveness of others is found in the *Testament of Abraham* fourteen where Abraham repents from having cursed others in his anger who were now dead. He intercedes for those who he had cursed out of sadness that their death ended in eternal punishment. In answer to his prayer, God assures Abraham that Abraham's curse only resulted in death for a time but not eternal death. Thus, God fulfills his promise to Abraham to curse those who Abraham curses, but since Abraham sinfully misused his curse, Abraham needed to find forgiveness, which is granted to Abraham when he repents, confesses, and shows compassion on those he earlier had shown anger.

In the Mishnah, transgressions between two people receives divine forgiveness on the Day of Atonement only on the precondition of reconciliation. Once again, this teaching is very close to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

For transgression between man and man, the Day of Atonement atones, only if the man will regain the good will of his friend. This exegesis did R. Eleazar b. Azariah state: "From all your sins shall you be clean before the Lord (Lev. 16:30)—for transgressions between man and the Omnipresent does the Day of Atonement atone. For transgressions between man and his fellow, the Day of Atonement atones, only if man will regain the good will of his friend (*m. Yoma* 8.9)."³²

By the time of the Babylonian Talmud, it was possible to teach about mercy to others in a temporal context as a condition of receiving God's mercy. This is again very close to Jesus' condition of showing forgiveness as a precondition of God's forgiveness in a temporal setting.

R. Hiyya said to his wife: When a poor man comes, be quick to offer him bread, so that others may be quick to offer it to your children. You curse them! she exclaimed. A verse is written, he replied: 'because that for [bi-gelal] this thing,' whereon the School of R. Ishmael taught: It is a wheel that revolves in the world. It was taught R. Gamaliel Beribbi said: And he shall give thee mercy, and have compassion upon thee, and multiply thee: he Who is merciful to others, mercy is shown to him by Heaven, while he who is not merciful to others, mercy is not shown to him by Heaven (*b. Sabb.* 151b).³³

³² Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1988), 279.

³³ H. Freedman, tr., "Shabbath," http://halakhah.com/shabbath/shabbath_151.html#PARTb (accessed June 13, 2012).

In a similar way, the Babylonian Talmud in tractate *Megilah* 28a discusses the long lives of rabbis because of their mercy and forgiveness of others. They are both given long lives but also divine forgiveness: “. . . as Raba said: ‘He who waives his right to retribution is forgiven all his sins, as it says, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by transgression (Micah 7:18). Whose iniquity is forgiven? The iniquity of him who passes by transgression.’”³⁴

Thus, in a first century Jewish-Christian community, such as the community who first read Matthew, setting the prior condition of forgiveness of others for God’s forgiveness within daily prayers for forgiveness would be expected. Such a condition does not violate other first century Christian writers of the New Testament such as Paul as long as the forgiveness offered for such prayers is not equivalent to ultimate, eschatological, or final forgiveness.

Matthew 9:1-8

Matthew 9:1-8 follows fairly closely Mark’s story in 2:1-12. Matthew does not state that the man was carried by four others who let him down through the roof (Mark 2:3-4). He does repeat exactly that Jesus saw the faith of those who carried the paralyzed man. The participle “ἰδών” (Matt 9:2; Mk 2:5), is likely causal, with the translation, “and because Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, be encouraged, son, your sins are forgiven.” This makes Jesus’ proclamation of forgiveness of sins a direct result of faith in him.³⁵ Here is fulfilled the prophecy about Jesus that he would save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Matthew 9:3 reduces Mark 2:6-7 to a simple observation that some of the scribes accuse Jesus of blasphemy.

Most significant is Matthew’s omission of the question in Mark; “Who can forgive sins except the One God?” Mark implies that the group of scribes were thinking this and that Jesus knew their thoughts

³⁴ I. Epstein, ed., *Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, <http://halakhah.com/pdf/moed/Megilah.pdf> (accessed June 13, 2012).

³⁵ Matthew does not require any statements of faith on the part of the man himself or his friends. They all are expressing faith by their actions and the paralytic is certainly consenting with this action of faith. “. . . in this case the sick man too had part in the faith; for he would not have suffered himself to be let down, unless he had believed.” John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, 29.1, in Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf110.iii.XXIX.html> (accessed on August 2, 2012).

supernaturally even though he quotes indirectly what they were thinking (or were they talking to each other?). Rather than have a group of people who were simultaneously thinking the same indirect discourse, Luke simply states that they were talking among themselves. Matthew reduces this to only one thought, “this one blasphemes,”³⁶ and that Jesus perceived their evil thoughts.

The rest of Matthew 9:4-6 is very close to Mark 2:8-11. Jesus makes the good rabbinic argument from the inferior to the superior,³⁷ “‘What is easier to say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, rise and walk? But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on the earth to forgive sins,’ then he said to the paralytic, ‘rise, take your bed, and go to your house.’” Jesus makes both statements to prove that, based upon faith in him, he has the authority to make both statements with similar results.

It would have been expected within Judaism that since sickness came from sin, the complete absolute forgiveness of sins would result in healing (Ps. 103:3). “R. Alexandri said in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba: A sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven him, as it is written, Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases.”³⁸ Jesus does not equate sin and sickness, since he consistently heals without making statements about sin and forgiveness.³⁹ However, in this context, the healing will be obvious to the Jewish audience that forgiveness has taken place as well.⁴⁰ Since the more difficult statement is realized physically on the earth in their observation (Matthew uses the verb ὀράω more than Mark), then the easier statement (but of greater importance) of divine forgiveness is also realized.

³⁶ According to the *Mishnah*, this would be blasphemy only if Jesus had pronounced the divine Name, *M. Sanh.* 7:5. However, this text is probably not a legal requirement in the first century and this charge of blasphemy was likely due, as Mark 2:7 states, that Jesus was making a direct proclamation in a way that only God himself can proclaim. For details on relevant Jewish texts see Darrel L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism: The Charge against Jesus in Mark 14:53-65*, Biblical Studies Library, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998); and idem., “Blasphemy and the Jewish Examination of Jesus,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 17 (2007): 53-114.

³⁷ From light to heavy. “The argument runs like a traditional Jewish *qal wahomer* argument . . .” Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 290.

³⁸ *b. Ned.* 41a from *Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein, http://halakhah.com/nedarim/nedarim_41.html (accessed on August 2, 2012).

³⁹ Keener, 289.

⁴⁰ “only a cure could confirm the pronouncement of forgiveness.” Gundry, 163.

Matthew 9:7-8 simplifies Mark 2:12 with some very typical Matthean themes and phrases; “And he arose and went to his house. And the multitude⁴¹ saw, were afraid, and glorified God who gave such authority to men.” Matthew emphasizes the authority that Jesus has, in his role as Messiah, to forgive upon the basis of faith in his authority (also, Matt 7:29; 8:9; 10:1; 21:23, 24, 27; 28:18). The authority to forgive is part of the authority of Jesus as the divine Messiah.

Thus, in a context of the daily prayers of the true disciples of Jesus, forgiveness is conditional upon the forgiveness of others (Matt 6). However, in a context of proclaiming the authority of Jesus as the Messiah who will save his people from their sins, then forgiveness is conditional upon faith in him as the Messiah (Matt 9).

Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew chapter eighteen is a masterful composite of Jesus’ teaching on proper relationships among his disciples. Within the chapter, only Matthew 18:1-9 has been borrowed from Mark 9:33-50. The context in both Gospels remains a debate among the disciples as to who was the greatest (Matt 18:1; Mk 9:34). It is very significant that Matthew sets this chapter in the context of the inaugurated messianic kingdom of Jesus both in 18:1 as well as the teaching about entering into the kingdom as a child (18:3-4). Thus, for Matthew, the present inaugurated kingdom is the church and entrance into the church has high expectations for the resultant relationships of those who are true disciples.

Matthew 18:6-9 follows Mark 9:42-47 fairly closely except for the insertion of the Q saying in 18:7 (Luke 17:1). The setting is about the nature of true disciples as little children and the avoidance of offence and sin, especially the sin of asserting ones greatness over others. Matthew 18:10-14 is very unique. True disciples must not be mistreated because they are like children with special angels, like sheep who go astray (using a Q saying parallel to Luke 15:4), and protected by the will of God.

⁴¹ Mark’s “all” (2:12) seems to include the scribes in this observation and praise to God, but Matthew seems to resolve this by not including them in the “multitude.” So, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, tr. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 28.

Although there are similar phrases found in Luke 17:3-4 (slightly parallel to Matt 18:15, 21-22), the vast majority all of Matthew 18:15-35 is unique to Matthew. Jesus teaches the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness in the context of the assembly of the disciples. In contrast to the current disciples who discuss who is greatest, true disciples must speak in private to those who sin against them.⁴² When private reconciliation is not possible then increasing circles of other disciples are involved in the reconciliation process. The church is equivalent to the kingdom since it has Heaven's authority⁴³ and the authority of Jesus in the process to intervene in cases of offenses and forgiveness (Matt 18:18-20).

Since entrance into the kingdom depends upon the fact that true disciples become as little children, now exclusion from the church and the kingdom comes as a result of the offensive person who is not a true disciple.⁴⁴ Thus, forgiveness and reconciliation become a basis and condition of defining true disciples within the kingdom. Those people who offend true disciples, the little children, but refuse to repent and be reconciled, are not true disciples and not a part of the kingdom.

Matthew 18:21-35 is introduced by Peter's gracious offer to forgive seven times another disciple in the same day. Apparently, the Jewish practice was three total offers to forgive (Job 33:29; Amos 2:4, 6).⁴⁵ Peter's offer is extremely gracious especially since he is willing to forgive a fellow disciples seven times in the same day. Jesus responds by adding another seventy to Peter's seven.⁴⁶ Jesus expands Peter's graciousness much beyond that of rabbinic tradition.

R. Zutra b. Tobiah in the name of R. Nahman said:

Here we speak of sins committed by a man against his fellow, there of sins committed by man against the Omnipresent. It was taught: R. Jose b. Judah said:

⁴² For the same teaching about reconciliation within the community, see *The Testament of Gad* 6.

⁴³ "Heaven" in place of God.

⁴⁴ The person expelled from the community is not a true disciple rather than a "little child" who has sinned and needs further pastoral care. Senior proposes the unique interpretation that Matthew intends for further pastoral care of Gentiles and tax-collectors after these errant little children have been expelled from the community. Donald Senior, "Matthew 18:21-35," *Interpretation* 41 (1987), 404. However, this violates the context of their expulsion also being bound in Heaven and also confuses the identity of who receives the offense.

⁴⁵ Senior states that there were four. Senior, 404.

⁴⁶ "It seems to reverse the pledge of blood vengeance 'seventy-seven fold' made by Lamech, descendent of Cain and inheritor of his rage (Gen 4:24)." Senior, 404. See also, Gundry, 371.

If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not forgiven, as it is said: Thus saith the Lord.' For three transgressions of Israel, Yea for four, I will not reverse it (Amos 2:6); and furthermore it says: Lo, all these things does God work, twice, yea, thrice, with a man (Job 33:29).⁴⁷

The parable of Matthew 18:23-35 certainly reflects Matthew's view of the church as the kingdom of Jesus Christ. It can certainly be defended as an authentic parable of Jesus,⁴⁸ although told by Matthew's use of terminology and theology.⁴⁹ The kingdom has become (also Matt 13:24; 22:2; 25:1) like a king who will keep close accounts with his servants.⁵⁰ A servant with an extremely large debt that he is unable to pay is ordered to receive the punishment that he deserves. However, forgiveness is granted graciously upon the prayer of the servant. The Jewish emphasis of God's mercy (Matt 18:26-27) is evident as the basis for the forgiveness offered to the servant. Although the servant offered to pay the debt in his pleading upon the patience of the king, the king forgave the large debt. Matthew's use of "moved with compassion" (σπλαγγνισθείς) also describes Jesus' compassion (Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34).⁵¹ In these contexts, the expression of emotion (inward parts, love, affection) has been replaced with God's mercy or choice to forgive in the person of Jesus.⁵²

The story emphasizes the great contrast between the gracious, patient, and forgiving king and the unforgiving servant. The forgiven servant who is forgiven a large sum is unwilling to forgive a fellow servant of a small amount,⁵³ even when the fellow servant gives the

⁴⁷ *b. Yoma* 86b. *Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, ed. I. Epstein.

⁴⁸ "Its use of hyperbole, its imagery of a king as symbolic of God, and its radical emphasis on the need to forgive are characteristic of the proclamation of Jesus." Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 29.

⁴⁹ Gundry, 371-372.

⁵⁰ Gundry correctly observes that the aorist ὡμοιωθη (literally, the kingdom became like) requires that the parable refers to forgiveness within the present inaugurated kingdom (church) rather than a parable about eschatological judgment. Gundry, 371.

⁵¹ Senior, 405.

⁵² Hultgren, 26.

⁵³ The large sum by all measurements is an extremely exaggerated amount in contrast to the very manageable amount owed by the fellow servant. "In 18:24, at 6,000 drachmas or denarii to the Tyrian talent, a day laborer would need to work 60,000,000 days to pay off the debt. Even assuming an extraordinary payback rate of 10 talents per year, the staggering amount would ensure imprisonment for at least 1,000 years." BDAG, 989. At about \$80 a day for a common laborer in the U.S. in the 21st. [Footnote continued on next page ...]

same petition (Matt 18:26, 29). The second slave who owes the small amount makes the same plea as the first with the only exception that the first proclaims more emphatically⁵⁴ that he will repay the king, “everything,” whereas the second promises to make repayment.⁵⁵

Matthew 18:31 explains the previous teaching of Jesus to the assembly of disciples at Matthew 18:15-20. Matthew 18:31 should be interpreted in light of Jesus’ instructions about discipline in the church rather than as an eschatological judgment.⁵⁶ An offended true disciple informs the church who then collectively cast out the offending false disciple and their decision is binding in the kingdom of Jesus where he rules. The point of the parable is that true disciples, the true little children, will have mercy and forgiveness on others, just as they have been given mercy from the Father. Those who do not have mercy and forgiveness of others are not the true children and disciples, but rather they are the offenders of the children.

Various scholars argue that the first servant represents a genuine disciple who has been forgiven and that the point of the parable is that true genuine disciples are to forgive others as they have been forgiven.⁵⁷ The King tells the evil servant that he should have shown the same mercy that he was shown, since the King forgave him a massive debt, he should have forgiven his fellow servant’s small debt (Matt 18:32-33). But, such a point misses the severe punishment that such a false disciple receives at the end of the parable. Simply pleading for mercy for forgiveness does not result in eschatological forgiveness for a false disciple. The end of this wicked slave has parallels in Matthew to the final eschatological punishment of other wicked servants (Matt 22:13; 25:30). Actually, the point of the parable is that people who refuse to forgive will be punished rather

century, the large sum would be \$4.8 billion. The small amount would be equivalent to approximately three months wages, or \$4,800. According to Josephus, the Romans demanded 10,000 talents from the Jews after Pompey conquered the land of Israel in 63 B.C. Josephus *Ant.* 14.78.

⁵⁴ Grammatically, “everything” is in an emphatic position. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard, et al., vol. 33B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), 538.

⁵⁵ Hultgren, *Parables*, 27.

⁵⁶ Gundry mistakenly puts this verse into the context of an eschatological judgment, but the context of the chapter means that the fellow servants are the fellow members of the church putting into practice Jesus’ teaching at Matt 18:15-20. Gundry, 374-375.

⁵⁷ Hagner is inconsistent stating that the first disciple is forgiven in the soteriological sense of the NT as a true disciple, but then that he was not a true disciple. His solution is that the original forgiveness was reversed. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 539-540. See also Hultgren, *Parables*, 31.

than forgiven, and therefore, they are not true disciples. The King calls them “evil” (πονηρε) at Matthew 18:32. Matthew uses the term often for those who are not his disciples (Matt 5:45; 7:17-18; 9:4; 12:34-35, 39, 45; 13:49; 16:4; 22:10; 25:26).

The explicit application of the parable (Matt 18:35) uses a third class conditional sentence that logically states that, “if each of you do not forgive your brother from your hearts,” then, “likewise also my Heavenly Father will do to you.” What will be done to such unforgiving servants is the punishment they deserve rather than forgiveness.

This parable is not in the same context as the daily prayer of disciples (Matt 6) but rather in a context that distinguishes between true disciples (little children) and false disciples (those who offend).⁵⁸ Thus, it does not explicitly state the condition that God’s forgiveness is conditional upon the forgiveness of disciples, but rather that God’s punishment will be given to those who offend others without repentance and reconciliation. Such people, in the full context of Matthew 18, who offend true disciples, refuse to repent, and refuse to forgive, are not true disciples and therefore not forgiven.

In the study of conditional sentences, the converse of conditions is not convertible unless allowed in the context.⁵⁹ In other words, Jesus states the negative form, “if you do not forgive others from your heart, then God will punish you for your sins.” However, he does not state in this context the condition, “if you forgive others, then God will forgive you.”⁶⁰ The forgiveness in this context is offered upon the condition of being true disciples, “like little children,” and dependence upon the mercy of God. In fact, just asking for mercy alone does not guarantee eschatological forgiveness unless the person is a true disciple of Jesus and truly “in the kingdom” by becoming “like little children.” The condition of non-forgiveness stated negatively is a condition to describe false disciples who are not truly in the kingdom of Jesus and are therefore subject to punishment.

In a context of daily prayer, the true disciple can expect forgiveness based upon forgiveness of others (Matt 6). In the context

⁵⁸ Hultgren correctly observes that the parable is about discipleship. “All who claim to be members of the kingdom are expected to heed the story that follows.” Hultgren, *Parables*, 23.

⁵⁹ Wallace, 685-686.

⁶⁰ This is misunderstood by many including Gundry, 374; and Hultgren, *Parables*, 29.

of the proclamation of the salvation of the Messiah from sin, a person is proclaimed forgiven based upon the condition of faith (Matt 9). But, in the context of describing true and false disciples in the kingdom, those who do not forgive are not true disciples (Matt 18).

Matthew 26:28

In Mark 14:22-25, Jesus institutes for his disciples a new use and meaning for the Passover supper. Matthew 26:26-29 is substantially the same story as found in Mark. In Matthew 26:26, Matthew adds that the bread was given to the disciples of Jesus. His group of disciples are now a new family celebrating the Passover with Jesus in the role of the Jewish father. In Mark 14:24, Jesus states that the third cup of the Passover, the cup of redemption, now will be known as the blood of the covenant, “this is my blood of the covenant poured out on behalf of (ὑπέρ) many.” It is very significant that Matthew 26:28 adds a unique phrase, “for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for (περί) many for (εἰς) the forgiveness of sins.”

The prepositional phrases, “for the benefit of (περί) many” and “for the purpose of (εἰς) forgiveness of sins” are extremely significant. Matthew changes Mark’s ὑπέρ to περί likely under the influence of the Greek text of Isaiah 53:4 (cf. Mark 14:24).⁶¹ The use of περί to imply a substitutionary sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins is explicit in Isaiah 53 as well as frequently in New Testament passages.⁶² The substitutionary nature of the death of Jesus is also stated in Mark 10:45 and repeated in Matthew 20:28 where Jesus states that he came to give his life as a ransom “in the place of” all humanity using the preposition ἀντί.⁶³ In Matthew 26:28, the benefit for all humanity is that the death establishes a universal new covenant (Jer. 31) in the sacrificial language of Isaiah 53, that will offer the

⁶¹ Schweizer, 491, correctly observes that the Greek περί has been assimilated from Isaiah 53:4 where the Servant of God suffers for sin. The Hebrew text states about the Suffering Servant, “Surely he takes up our sicknesses and bears our suffering.” While there is no corresponding preposition in the Hebrew text, the LXX translates the phrase as “οὗτος τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνᾷται” (He bears our sins and suffers for our benefit).

⁶² Gundry correctly observes that under the influence of the sacrificial language of the LXX, sacrifice in the NT uses περί “for” often for the sacrifice and forgiveness of sins (Rom 8:3; Gal 1:4; Heb 5:3; 10:8, 18; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). Gundry, 528.

⁶³ BDAG, 88.

forgiveness of sins as the purpose of the death, “so that sins might be forgiven.”⁶⁴

The breaking of bread occurs before eating the Passover lamb, while the third cup of redemption occurs afterwards (*m. Pes.* 10). Following the meal, the third cup was taken corresponding to the promise: “I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments” (Exod 6:6c; *m. Pes.* 10:6). Jesus, in the role of the father, takes the cup. He gives thanks to God for the meal, the wine, and the redemption of his people, and gives it to his disciples. He gives new meaning for the third cup for his disciples stating that it represented his blood of the New Covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Mathew is unique in adding that the death will have the purpose of forgiveness of sins. The sacrificial language of the pouring out of the blood for the forgiveness of sins is from the Old Testament (Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34).⁶⁵ That Jesus’ death is the “blood of the covenant” alludes to Exodus 24:8 where blood established the Old Covenant with Israel.⁶⁶ Whereas Moses sprinkled the Israelites with blood established the Old Covenant, Jesus is clear that the unleavened bread and the cup of redemption for the disciples represented his upcoming death that will establish the New Covenant for many people and provide forgiveness for their sins (Isa 53:12; Jer 31:31-34).

The statement explicitly links the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 with the new covenant of Jeremiah 31.⁶⁷ This new understanding of

⁶⁴ BDAG, 290.

⁶⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 773. See also the reference to the substitutionary death of Jewish martyrs for the forgiveness of later generations in 4 Macc 6:28-29: “Be merciful to your people, and let our punishment suffice for them; make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs.” Also in 4 Macc 17:20-22: “These, then, who have been consecrated for the sake of God, are honored, not only with this honor, but also by the fact that because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified -- they having become, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an expiation, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been afflicted.” (RSV). Nolland, 1078.

⁶⁶ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary by Frederick Dale Bruner, Volume 2, The Churchbook: Matthew 13–28* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 966; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 1, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 368; and Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Thorndale Commentaries (Reprint Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982 from Robert Scott, Roxburghe House, and Paternoster Row, 1915), 364.

⁶⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 773; and Joachim Jeremias, “This is my body,” *Expository Times*, 83 (1972): 196-203. However, Davies and Allison prefer to hold that the covenant concept in Mark and [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Passover that represents the New Covenant replaces the first Passover commanded by Moses that established the Old Covenant (Exod 24:8). Jesus will be the ultimate sacrifice for the sins for all people, just as the Passover Lamb was sacrificed for the sins of the people of Israel.

There is no condition for how the many will be forgiven except for the previous statement about the third cup, “drink from it all of you” (Matt 26:27).⁶⁸ In the context of the crucifixion, the death of Jesus becomes a substitutionary sacrifice to establish a new covenant (Luke identifies this specifically as the new covenant at 22:20). True disciples who by faith believe that his death is represented by bread and wine are those who receive forgiveness for their sins. Gundry incorrectly states that this forgiveness is conditional upon the obedience of the disciples to partake in the continual practice of Lord’s table.⁶⁹ Nothing in the text links a logical condition between the actual physical drinking and the forgiveness of sins, but rather that the disciples are asked to believe that their continual practice will carry the significance that the cup will represent the death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

The linking of Isaiah 53 and Jeremiah 31 highlights that this forgiveness is unconditional for those who enter into forgiveness and covenant by faith as well as universal in that the death and resurrection allow for all to benefit by faith of what was previously offered to only the redeemed remnant of Israel. The true basis of this forgiveness is not the actual drinking of the cup, but rather the substitutionary death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.⁷⁰ The condition is met by Jesus and his true followers receive that forgiveness not by the action of drinking but by the faith that the bread and wine represent the substitutionary death.

It is common in certain traditions to emphasize the sacramental nature of the Eucharist as requiring an actual or transubstantiated presence of the body of Christ. In those traditions, the ultimate forgiveness from the death and resurrection would have the continual

Matthew came from Isaiah 42:6; 49:8-10; and 55:3. Jeremiah 31 remains possible only because it was very popular in primitive Christianity. Davies and Allison, vol. 3, 465, 473, 474.

⁶⁸ Schweizer, 491, incorrectly juxtaposes Matt 18:35 at this point to state that the condition of forgiving others still applies to receiving this forgiveness. However, no such precondition of forgiving others is stated in this context. See also a similar juxtaposition by Nolland, 1083.

⁶⁹ Gundry, 528.

⁷⁰ Pérez Millos, 1851.

condition of participating in the sacrament; and thus, forgiveness becomes conditional upon the obedience of continual reception of the sacrament of Eucharist.⁷¹ However, it is improbable that the original disciples, nor early church, actually thought that the Passover bread and wine was the actual literal body and blood of Jesus who is talking to them while holding these elements apart from himself. Jewish literature often ascribed symbolic meanings to the elements of the Passover meal without confusing the actual literal elements with those symbolic meanings.⁷² From Deuteronomy 16:3, the Israelites were to yearly state the following about the unleavened bread: “This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate when they came from the land of Egypt.” Keener observes: “By no stretch of the imagination did anyone suppose that they were re-eating the very bread the Israelites had eaten in the wilderness.”⁷³

Thus, the Lord’s supper is a symbolic and representative ceremony that requires faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Matthew then, the forgiveness offered in the sacrificial death of Jesus for sins is conditional only upon the faith of the disciples that Jesus’s death established a new covenant of forgiveness.

Conclusion

In a context of daily prayer, the true disciple can expect forgiveness based upon forgiveness of others (Matt 6). In the context of the proclamation of the salvation of the Messiah from sin, a person is proclaimed forgiven based upon the condition of faith (Matt 9). In the context of describing true and false disciples in the kingdom, those who do not forgive are not true disciples (Matt 18). Finally, in the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice to establish a new covenant, forgiveness is proclaimed based upon the condition of faith (Matt 26).

⁷¹ “If we drink in this cup with faith, we drink in salvation We believe that Jesus gives us his blood in a sacramental, therefore real but uncarnal way. We receive Jesus’ true blood, but we receive it miraculously.” Bruner, 2:965.

⁷² See, for example, the broken off piece of bread called *afikoman* (*m. Pes.* 10.8; *t. Pes.* 10.11; *Mek. Pes.* on Exod 13:14; *b. Pes.* 119b). Deborah Bleicher Carmichael, “David Daube on the Eucharist and the Passover Seder,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42 (June 1991), 52; and Daniel S. Steffen, “The Messianic Banquet as a Paradigm for Israel-Gentile Salvation in Matthew,” (Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001), 178-179.

⁷³ Keener, 631.

Thus, in Matthew, to be saved from sin (Matt 1:21) is based upon the condition of faith in Jesus and entering into the kingdom of Jesus. To be saved from sin does not have the condition of forgiving other people in the contexts of the offer of such salvation.

Those who enter the kingdom as little children are taught to pray daily for a forgiveness designed to avoid the daily consequences of God bringing punishment upon them. That daily forgiveness is conditional upon their forgiveness of others. Also, those who are true disciples of Jesus (the true little children), have the characteristic of forgiving others, since those who refuse to forgive are not true disciples and are not saved from their sins.



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