Forgiveness and the Witness of God's People in an Age of Collapse

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Introduction: Forgiveness After 2020

I have been thinking a lot about forgiveness since 2020. That year marked a global reckoning with the enduring legacy of racism. Protests erupted across the United States and around the world in response to police violence, systemic injustice, and the accumulated weight of Black pain and resistance. In the midst of these protests, conversations about forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace inevitably arose.

But too often, they were not asked in good faith — not as questions about how forgiveness fits into the long labor of truth-telling and justice, but as a subtle demand to end the protests, silence the grief, and move on. In many cases, forgiveness was weaponized — not offered, but expected; not practiced, but imposed. It became a way to avoid discomfort rather than engage repentance. This misuse of forgiveness is not new. It has long been deployed to shield power from accountability and rush reconciliation before there has been any real reckoning. But just because forgiveness is misunderstood and misused does not mean it should be avoided — or worse, minimized. Forgiveness remains one of the most powerful and radical practices of the Christian tradition. It should not be severed from justice, but woven into it, so that healing does not come at the expense of truth.

And yet, some of the most unforgiving voices in our public discourse are Christians — often Christian leaders. I want you to sit with that for a moment. The very people entrusted with the gospel of grace frequently model public contempt, resentment, and moral inflexibility. This is not just an ethical failure; it is a theological contradiction and a spiritual crisis. If the church cannot embody forgiveness in the public square, then it forfeits its moral credibility and distorts the very gospel it proclaims.

The Delicate Balance: Avoiding Two Extremes

Forgiveness is not a simple matter, and any honest discussion about it must avoid two common but dangerous extremes. On one side, forgiveness is too often weaponized — used to silence victims, shield abusers, or excuse systems of harm. In this view, forgiveness becomes a spiritual license for injustice to persist unchecked. Let us be clear: forgiving someone does not negate the need for accountability, consequences, or boundaries. In fact, true forgiveness may require firm boundaries so that harm does not continue. On the other side, however, are those who, sometimes for understandable reasons, refuse to consider forgiveness at all. We can invent

clever theological and emotional strategies to justify why we are the exception — why we don't have to forgive. In the process, we risk disguising self-righteousness as discernment. We make space for anger, but not transformation. This is why any serious approach to forgiveness must be grounded in humility and honesty. It must hold space for both trauma and obedience, both truth-telling and grace.

Unnatural and Divine: The Spiritual Power of Forgiveness

Forgiveness, in this light, is not only difficult — it is, in a sense, impossible. It is unnatural. To forgive someone — whether the harm is personal or rooted in larger social and systemic injustice — is to do something that defies the moral logic of the world. And that is precisely the point. Forgiveness is a spiritual practice that gives witness to a power that is not of this world. In an age when belief in the transcendent is often seen as naïve or irrelevant, forgiveness stands as a stubborn sign that there is a divine force at work in the human heart — a power strong enough to interrupt cycles of vengeance and open the door to healing.

Why believe in an all-powerful God if that belief does not produce something extraordinary in the life of the believer? Forgiveness is one of the clearest signs that the gospel is not just a theory we affirm, but a reality we live into —however imperfectly, however painfully.

Forgiveness in the Gospels: A Relational and Social Command

Before diving deeper into its complexities, it's important to remember what Jesus actually taught about forgiveness. Matthew 6:12, part of the Lord's Prayer, reads: *"καὶ ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν"* translated literally as "And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors." Most modern translations such as the ESV, NIV, and NRSV retain the word "debts," reflecting the literal sense of *ὀφειλήματα* but inviting a metaphorical understanding of sin as moral indebtedness. The NLT makes this metaphor explicit, translating "sins" and "those who sin against us." The key theological and moral point in this verse is clear across versions: in prayer and in Christian practice, divine forgiveness is inextricably linked to our willingness to forgive others. This suggests that forgiveness is not merely a spiritual aspiration but a relational and social ethic — we receive mercy as we extend mercy, embodying the character of the God we claim to worship.

In the gospel writings, forgiveness is not about personal healing or transactional salvation alone — it is relational, radical, and commanded. Tying our forgiveness from God directly to our willingness to forgive others stands in contrast to other New Testament texts like *Acts 2:38* and *Hebrews 9:22*, which frame forgiveness primarily in salvific terms — being saved from sin by the mercy of God. In Jesus' teaching, especially in the Lord's Prayer, forgiveness functions as a moral and spiritual ethic: the forgiven are expected to become forgivers in both their private and public lives. This reciprocity lies at the heart of Christian discipleship.

Consider the following examples:

- Matthew 18:21–22 – Peter asks how many times he must forgive someone. Jesus responds not with a number, but with a principle: "seventy times seven." Forgiveness is to be limitless.
- Mark 11:25 – "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." Forgiveness is a prerequisite to communion with God.
- Luke 6:37 – "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Here, forgiveness is portrayed as a reciprocal act of grace and obedience.
- Luke 23:34 – From the cross, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Even in death, Jesus models a forgiveness that transcends vengeance.

Taken together, these passages show that forgiveness is not peripheral to the gospel — it is at its heart. It is a divine command, a relational practice, and a public witness of the kingdom of God breaking into human lives.

Who Are the "Others"? Forgiving Systems and Structures

The gospels teach us to forgive others when asking God to forgive us. But who, exactly, are the "others"? We typically assume this means people — individuals who have wronged us through words, actions, or betrayal. And often, that is precisely the case. But what if the harm done to us comes not only from individuals but from the systems they inhabit, benefit from, or represent? What if the violence we experience flows from structures — racist policies, exploitative economies, unjust laws, or even toxic religious institutions? These systems do not have souls in the way people do, but they are not morally neutral. They are shaped and sustained by human decisions, cultural assumptions, and institutional patterns. And because of this, they are also capable of causing real, enduring harm. If that is true, should our theology — and our practice of forgiveness — account for that reality?

To be clear, forgiving a system is not the same as excusing it. Nor is it a substitute for dismantling, reforming, or resisting unjust structures. But perhaps there is a spiritual necessity in naming and releasing our anger toward systems that have shaped our pain. Forgiveness in this context may be less about absolving and more about unburdening —refusing to let a corrupt system define our identity or dictate the future. It may also be an act of prophetic clarity: by naming a system as culpable, we affirm that harm was done, and we choose not to carry its moral weight in our own souls. Could such an act of forgiveness move us closer to justice rather than away from it? Could it open the door for collective healing, institutional repentance, or even new systems to be born?

Forgiveness as Communal and Public Work

A common mistake is to individualize forgiveness, but scripture and Christian tradition point to its communal dimensions. In Luke 11, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our sins," using collective language. A 2020 published sermon "Temptation and Group Evil" in *Christian Ethics Today* explores how group dynamics — racism, injustice, political tribalism — require collective repentance and forgiveness. Reinhold Niebuhr observed that while individuals may be capable of moral reasoning and self-transcendence, groups tend to act more selfishly and with less restraint. To ask God to forgive "us" requires a profound recognition not just of what *I* did, but of what *we* did — a shared acknowledgment of our collective sin.

We form identities around pain and grievance. Sometimes, loyalty to a group becomes a theological barrier to grace: "We owe it to our people not to forgive." But this posture can become idolatrous. Forgiveness among groups requires us to tell the truth about history, grieve injustice, and dare to build something new. We may need to forgive a person, and also the system that person participated in, benefited from, or was constrained by.

Forgiveness is not about excusing evil — it is about liberating ourselves from its grasp and bearing witness to its reality. By naming systems as moral actors, we expand our moral vision and open ourselves to the possibility of healing that is not just personal, but structural and communal.

Forgiveness in a Fractured Society

But such a narrow view overlooks its vital communal and systemic dimensions, which are just as critical for the healing of society. In a deeply fragmented and contested nation, forgiveness must be seen as a public virtue, not merely a private feeling. We are rarely taught to consider forgiveness as a social practice — a form of moral repair that can help rebuild trust, restore relationships, and hold communities together. In my work *Christian Witness in an Age*

of Change and Collapse, I argue that we are living through an era marked by conflict and change, rupture and restlessness, extreme weather, and profound social fragmentation. These forces don't just produce political headlines; they generate real harm in our neighborhoods, churches, and families. Divisions over race, gender, economics, and ideology have become relational wounds. Mass shootings, political extremism, online shaming, and generational trauma all point to a country that is relationally and socially sick. And yet, we lack the moral vocabulary — and spiritual formation — to understand forgiveness as something that might help heal the soul of the nation.

Beneath our social fragmentation lies something deeper: a national crisis of unforgiveness. The contempt, animosity, insults, and violence that characterize our public life are not only political or ideological — they are spiritual. **Unforgiveness has become one of the defining features of American culture**, eroding our capacity to trust, to repair, and to hope. We do not just disagree; we despise. We do not just debate; we dehumanize. In such an environment, forgiveness is not merely countercultural — it is revolutionary. It holds open the possibility of a different way to live together, rooted not in vengeance but in grace.

The privatization of forgiveness is part of the reason we are spiritually and socially adrift. When forgiveness is only seen as something between two individuals, we ignore its power to shape how institutions respond to harm, how communities practice accountability, how nations pursue reconciliation and how we live at peace with one another.

Forgiveness, rightly understood, does not negate justice or truth-telling. It offers a way to respond to moral injury without becoming captive to bitterness or cycles of vengeance. Living in this era of upheaval makes forgiveness more difficult, yes — but also more essential. If we do not find ways to practice forgiveness — personally, communally, and publicly — we will continue to deepen the fractures that are already tearing at the fabric of our shared life. The Christian witness must help reintroduce forgiveness to the public square — not as naïve sentimentality, but as a spiritual and social necessity.

God's Sovereign Forgiveness and Our Struggle With It

Isaiah 55:8-9 reminds us that God's ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. Paul echoes this in Romans 11:34: "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" These scriptures confront us with a theological truth that has deep ethical implications: God is sovereign, and that sovereignty includes God's freedom to forgive. God forgives whom He wants, how He wants, when He wants — and commands us to do the same.

Forgiveness is not a natural human impulse; it is a divine gift. In Exodus 34:6–7, God is described as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," yet not ignoring sin. This tension between justice and mercy is never resolved by human logic — only by the wisdom of God. Miroslav Volf reminds us that forgiveness does not eliminate justice, but makes it possible to pursue justice without becoming what we oppose.

Consider Jonah, who resents God's forgiveness of the Ninevites. Or the elder brother in Luke 15, who is scandalized by his father's joyful welcome of a repentant sibling. In both cases, the human characters are offended that God is more merciful than they are. They are religious, yet resistant to grace. These stories reflect a deep discomfort with divine generosity — especially when it violates our sense of who deserves mercy.

Loving Enemies: Jesus, King, and the Challenge of Mercy

Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). This is one of the most difficult teachings in the Sermon

on the Mount — a series of "you have heard it said… but I say" statements that radically reframe righteousness. Jesus doesn't offer us checklist ethics. Loving enemies isn't something we can just check off our to-do list; it's a lifelong discipleship practice requiring constant unlearning, re-learning, and grace.

In a sermon I preached years ago called "Because God Loves Your Enemies," I argued that Jesus grounds this radical call not in human goodness but in divine character. God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good. Therefore, to love like God is to transcend social, political, and moral tribalism. The goal is not to defeat enemies but to become mature children of a loving God — those who reflect divine mercy, even when it offends cultural logic.
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his classic *Strength to Love* (1963), returned to Jesus' command to love one's enemies — one of the most radical and demanding teachings in the Gospels. In doing so, King connected forgiveness with the moral heart of Christian discipleship. He asked two crucial questions: **how do we love our enemies, and why should we love our enemies?** His answers offered not sentimentality, but a serious theological and ethical vision rooted in Jesus' words and a courageous public witness.

King argued that:

- We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive.
- We must recognize that the evil deed of the enemy never fully defines the person.
- We must not seek to defeat or humiliate the enemy, but to win their friendship and understanding.
- Returning hate for hate only multiplies hate.
- Hate scars the soul and distorts the personality.
- Only love has the power to transform enemies into friends.

Forgiveness, for King, was inseparable from love. He understood it not as weakness or naivety, but as a powerful and prophetic act — the refusal to mirror the hatred and violence one has received. In loving one's enemies, one obeys not only the command of Jesus, but bears witness to a higher moral logic that makes justice and healing possible. King did not excuse oppression; he exposed it — while insisting that forgiveness is the force that keeps justice from becoming vengeance, and protest from becoming bitterness. It is, as he lived it, the labor of love in public.

Resistance to Moral Change: Luke 15 Revisited
In Luke 15, Jesus tells parables about lost things — a sheep, a coin, and a son. Each time, the lost is found, and heaven rejoices. But the chapter ends with a scandal: the elder brother refuses to join the celebration. My sermon on this text explored a sobering truth: people can change, but we often refuse to let them. In today's world, public figures and private citizens alike are permanently labeled by their worst moment. Redemption is suspect. Growth is dismissed.

This mindset is not just personal; it's cultural. We imprison others in their past and ourselves in bitterness. Social groups are cast as permanent enemies, locked in cycles of estrangement and presumed incapable of transformation. There is almost no expectation that people can or will change — no matter how fervently we pray or labor for it. Worse than not believing change is possible is not wanting it to occur. We've grown so accustomed to division that reconciliation feels like betrayal. This posture is not only morally cynical — it is theologically bankrupt. It denies the transforming power of the gospel and reflects how reprobate Christian witness has become in our cultural moment. What are churches teaching and modeling in America today?

But Luke 15 teaches us that God celebrates every sincere return, and we are called to do the same. As I noted in my sermon on change, we have become a society that desires moral transformation in theory but rejects it in practice.

This is an obstacle not just to grace, but to justice. If the church cannot model a different way — if it cannot believe in and make room for real change — then it loses its capacity to be salt and light in a world unraveling around it.

Forgiveness in an Age of Collapse
In my recent essay "Christian Witness in an Age of Change and Collapse," I describe our era as one marked by cascading crises: climate disruption, economic instability, political polarization, and spiritual confusion. In such a time, forgiveness is not sentimental. It is a strategic spiritual act. It resists the forces that divide us and calls us into God's redemptive work. Forgiveness interrupts the cycles of revenge that dominate our politics, public discourse, and even church life. It says no to the culture of shaming and yes to the possibility of return, healing, and hope. In a society unraveling from the inside out, forgiveness becomes a form of spiritual resistance — a refusal to let bitterness and cynicism have the final word.

The Transformative Power of Forgiveness
In a theological paper I wrote during seminary for a course titled *Practicing Our Faith*, I began exploring forgiveness not just as a moral obligation, but as a practice rooted in the character of God. That class marked a turning point for me. Reading theologians and pastoral thinkers like Everett Worthington, L. Gregory Jones, Grace Ketterman, and David Hazard helped me see forgiveness in a broader, more spiritually formative light. It wasn't merely about letting go of offense; it was about participating in God's redemptive work.

Ketterman and Hazard, in *When I Can't Say I Forgive You*, describe forgiveness as a new impulse—one that resists the soul-trapping cycle of revenge and instead leads toward spiritual freedom. They write, "Developing a spirit of forgiveness starts when we know that forgiveness is in our own best interest," and eventually, that practice can awaken "a genuine desire to see the offending person change and set out on a relationally, spiritually healthy new path" (51–52). That idea resonated deeply with me: forgiveness is not passivity, but a choice to live differently in a broken world.

Dr. Everett Worthington describes forgiveness as a shift in emotion — from bitterness and avoidance to non-possessive love and compassion that, when safe and possible, opens the door to reconciliation. L. Gregory Jones frames forgiveness as a practice of moral and spiritual innovation, where we give up old claims, speak with truth, and commit to relationships not bound by past harm. Forgiveness, in his view, is not merely a decision but a vocation — a new way of life made possible by grace.

These insights began to shape how I understood and practiced forgiveness. They taught me that it is not about forgetting or excusing harm. Nor is it about enabling injustice. Forgiveness is about releasing ourselves and others from the bondage of bitterness, and opening space — where safe and possible — for newness, accountability, and restored communion. It's about truth, transformation, and the courage to live in a different register than the world expects. Theologically, forgiveness requires that we see ourselves as forgiven people, entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, we are ambassadors of a message we must also embody. Personal healing flows from forgiveness. So does community transformation. From Joseph forgiving his brothers in Genesis to Jesus forgiving his executioners, scripture presents forgiveness as the engine of God's redemptive movement in history.

What Forgiveness Requires of the Church
I return here to themes I explored in my 2016 book *Can Anybody Stop the Pain*, where I reflected on how unforgiveness and shame trap people in cycles of moral and spiritual defeat. What I argued there remains urgent now: the church should be a place that witnesses to the possibility of change — not merely as a theological idea, but as a lived reality. Yet in

today's world, this witness is under threat from two powerful cultural forces: cancel culture and political tribalism. Ironically, both of these impulses, though often born from genuine moral concern, can end up sabotaging the very moral and social progress they claim to promote.

When people are written off permanently, when one moral failing or unpopular opinion leads to total exile, we entrench the belief that transformation is impossible. And when moral belonging is only granted within rigid ideological camps, we replace repentance with performance and growth with partisanship. The result is a society where people are afraid to change — not because they don't want to, but because they know they won't be believed if they do. Just as God does not abandon us to our worst moments, the church must refuse to define others by theirs. Forgiveness, then, is not only a spiritual necessity — it is a cultural disruption. It breaks open space for newness, and it empowers people to move beyond shame, defensiveness, and fear. The church must offer this alternative path — not by dismissing wrongs, but by refusing to let failure be the final word. This is the radical, countercultural witness the gospel calls us to embody.

If the church is to be a credible witness in this fractured world, it must embody forgiveness. This means resisting cancel culture, welcoming repentant people back into community, and practicing what we preach. We must tell the truth about harm, create space for repentance, and offer paths toward restoration. Forgiveness should shape our preaching, pastoral care, and public witness. Congregations can create truth-telling circles, offer training in restorative practices, and model reconciliation after conflict. The church must be a place where wrong is named, justice is sought, and grace is offered. As Miroslav Volf puts it, there can be no justice without embrace. Forgiveness is not the enemy of justice; it is its foundation.

Dr. King understood this. He lived it. And the church must recover it. A church that cannot forgive is a church that has lost sight of the cross.

Conclusion: Prophetic Forgiveness and Kingdom Witness

Forgiveness is not soft. It is not simplistic. It is not for cowards. It is for those with the courage to love in a world that prefers hate. It is for those who believe in the power of the resurrection — that what is dead can live again. In this age of collapse, may we choose to be those who forgive. Not because it is easy, but because it is holy. Not because it is popular, but because it is possible. And not because it is our idea, but because it is God's command and God's way.

Questions for Reflection and Further Thought

1. **What does it mean to forgive in a society that rewards outrage but not reconciliation?**
   How can we practice forgiveness without excusing injustice or enabling harm?
2. **What are Christian leaders modeling to the world about forgiveness as a public virtue?**
   Are they encouraging moral transformation and reconciliation, or reinforcing cycles of contempt, resentment, and division?
3. **Do we truly believe that people — and even systems — can change?**
   Or have we adopted a form of cultural fatalism that denies the very power of the gospel?
4. **How is our theology of forgiveness reflected (or not reflected) in the life of our congregations?**
   Are we creating communities where people are free to repent, grow, and be restored?
5. **What are we modeling to the world about grace, transformation, and the love of enemies?**
   Is the church a place where heaven rejoices when the lost are found — or where elder brothers sulk outside?

6. **How might practicing forgiveness become a prophetic act in our polarized and collapsing world?** In what ways does forgiveness disrupt cycles of bitterness, vengeance, and despair?
7. **What is one concrete way you can embody forgiveness—in your relationships, your church, or your community—in the week ahead?** *How might your actions bear witness to the transforming power of grace in a world desperate for healing?*

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