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Forgiveness and Joy

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I write and speak about many topics: about God and God's relation to the world, about Christ and the Holy Spirit, about Christian life, about joy and suffering, about flourishing life, about Christian hope; about religion and politics, religion and economics, religion and identity, religion and violence, about interfaith relations. I also write and speak about forgiveness. No other topic that I engage as a writer and speaker comes close to generating as much consistent interest as does forgiveness. In my experience, limited as it is, forgiveness is as alive a topic today as it ever was, as pressing in Brazil, China, Croatia, and Australia as it is in the United States.

In this text I draw on the three-year study "Joy and the Good Life" at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture (funded by the John Templeton Foundation) and on the ideas in my writings on forgiveness, reconciliation, and memory, including *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019); *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); and *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

Our interest in forgiveness stems from a need like that of removing a stone from our shoe. It is about relieving the pain of having wronged someone or of having been wronged by someone. Not surprisingly,

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then, forgiveness has its joys. “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered,” sings King David, according to Psalm 32. The Apostle Paul referred to these very words when, in Romans, he noted that

“David speaks” of “the blessedness” of those whose iniquities are forgiven and to whom God therefore “reckons righteousness apart from works” (Rom. 4:6). “Happiness” and “blessedness” in David’s and Paul’s sense are not exactly the same as joy, but joy is an integral part of them. The NRSV translators of the Hebrew Bible thought so; they titled Psalm 32 “The Joy of Forgiveness.”

My theme in this essay is forgiveness and the kind of joy that is peculiar to forgiveness. What is forgiveness, and why does it matter so much? What is joy, and how is it experienced (or not) in forgiveness? When I write here about forgiveness and joy, I have in mind primarily personal forgiveness and personal joy. There is group forgiveness, when one social group forgives another, and there is also political forgiveness, when people forgive agents of a state. Similarly there is communal joy—when whole communities celebrate and in celebrating create something like a space of joy. I leave these social and political kinds of forgiveness and these communal and “territorial” kinds of joy aside in this text. My interest is in more personal forgiveness and joy.

The book in which this essay appears is about forgiveness and joy in adolescence. We rejoice and we forgive differently at different life stages. Compare the joy of a child with the joy of a person at the sunset of their life—both genuine, both beautiful, and each different. The first is immediate, like the sound of many bells ringing all at once, and unencumbered by memories and hopes; the second is subdued and rich, with traces of sorrow and fear that linger in it and give it depth, like the bouquet of a good and aged wine. The forgiveness of a child and the

forgiveness of an elderly person are different in similar ways. Somebody else, better qualified than I, would need to write about the specific character of forgiveness and joy in a life that is no longer that of a child but isn't yet that of an adult. This essay, even though it appears in a book about adolescent joy, is about what is common in forgiveness and joy as most of us experience them, including adolescents.

Even after I have limited my topic to transgenerational human and personal forgiveness and joy, it remains vast. My text, on the other hand, is short. What I offer is a brief sketch.

Forgiveness

Why Forgiveness Matters

To see why forgiveness matters, we need to identify situations in which forgiveness is needed. It is the frequent occurrence of one individual wronging another individual. (It is possible also to wrong oneself and to forgive oneself, but self-forgiveness, though both crucial and difficult, is a special case of forgiveness, deserving distinct treatment.) Crucial to the sense of the need for forgiveness is the fact that a wrongdoing isn't just an event that happens and is then over, swallowed by time. As a rule it continues to live in the memories of both parties, especially the victim.¹

First, wrongdoing qualifies the continued relation of the wronged person to him- or herself as well as to the perpetrator, whether that relation happens in mutual exchanges in real life or only in imagination. Second, wrongdoing can make it hard for victims to live with themselves, as they may be plagued by a sense of shame and resentment. For both of these reasons, wrongdoing often makes it impossible for the victim and perpetrator to live together. Victims cry for some sort

1 Increasingly it also shapes the public perception of the parties involved, as it often lives not just in their memories but in electronic databases of social media and surveillance networks.

of punishment, and perpetrators seek to justify themselves and sometimes even counter-accuse victims. Both stances reinforce enmity: the perpetrator sees the victim's cry for punishment as aggression, and the victim takes the perpetrator's self-justifications as a threat of new violations.

Forgiveness is designed to start building a bridge between victim and perpetrator. As I will explain shortly, for the bridge to be completed, more than forgiveness, such as apology, restitution, and trust-building, will be needed. What makes the need for forgiveness pressing is, first, the simple "metaphysical" fact that, once committed, a wrong cannot be undone; we cannot change the direction of the arrow of time. Though the passage of time may heal some wounds, it doesn't rectify any wrongdoings. Second, payback is not a workable alternative to forgiveness. It is intended to even the score, but it almost always starts a cycle of wrongdoing: what a victim considers just retribution, a perpetrator often considers excessive vengeance; what a perpetrator may agree to as proper restitution, a victim dismisses as an insulting flight from responsibility.

From a Christian perspective, forgiveness is a moral obligation; it is always the right thing to do (though there are wrong ways of doing it, and some of them are related to the readiness for forgiveness). In cases when both victim and perpetrator can each go their own way, they may not experience forgiveness as pressing. Often, though, separation is either not possible or is too costly, and sometimes neither party wants it: they are siblings, spouses, business partners, or members of the same club, for example, and each has a stake in continuing the relationship. In such circumstances forgiveness is not just morally required; it is also the only workable option.

What Forgiveness Is and Isn't

Forgiveness isn't the name of the work a victim may need to do to overcome resentment the wrongdoing may have caused. Such therapeutic work may be necessary so that a person can cast off the freight

of the troubling past and walk into the future unburdened. But that therapeutic work is not forgiveness, though forgiveness will likely *help* in overcoming resentment. Inversely, too, overcoming at least a degree of resentment may be necessary for the process of forgiveness to begin. Overcoming resentment and forgiveness are both important and related, but they are not identical.

Second, forgiveness isn't just shrugging the wrongdoing off, implicitly declaring that it doesn't really matter. True, some minor transgressions deserve no more than disregard. Sometimes that's what we do with wrongs we suffer. But to disregard is not to forgive; it is to recognize that in the lives of humans minor transgressions occur all the time and to decide that a given transgression isn't significant enough to merit forgiveness. Certain kinds of minor transgressions are systemic—what we call today microaggressions—and they therefore require not so much apology and forgiveness as change in cultural perception and culturally acceptable patterns of behavior. Only when microaggressions are deliberate and culpable do they require forgiveness.

Properly understood, forgiveness happens *between* a victim and a perpetrator, not just in the interiority of the victim, just as the wrongdoing that calls for forgiveness has happened between them even as it was done to the victim. (Overcoming resentment and disregard are both processes internal to the victim.) Forgiveness happens between victim and perpetrator even when the perpetrator doesn't want to be forgiven or isn't around to be forgiven. Forgiveness has the structure of a gift: somebody gives something to somebody else. I never just forgive; I always forgive *someone*. If that other person is not present in flesh, they will be present in my imagination as the intended recipient of the gift of forgiveness. And if an actual perpetrator facing the victim refuses the gift of forgiveness, the refusal, just as the gift itself, will have happened between the two of them.

The gift of forgiveness has two key elements. The first is *naming* the wrongdoing that was done *as wrong*. Even when I simply say to you, "I forgive you," I imply that you have somehow wronged me; it makes sense for me to use that phrase only when I know that you know—or

when I think that you ought to know—that you have wronged me in a specific way. But most often I say, “I forgive you for . . .” and then name the wrong, because I want to be sure that we agree on the matter. I cannot just forgive; I must forgive *something*, some case of wrongdoing. The second element of forgiveness is not counting the wrong against the one who committed it (as when the psalmist writes: “Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin” [Ps. 32:1–2; Rom. 4:6–8;]). This not counting of the wrongdoing is the gift that forgiveness is, the heart of forgiveness: In forgiving I declare myself ready—though not necessarily fully able—not to hold against the wrongdoer the wrong they have committed.

Not counting or holding wrongdoing against the wrongdoer is not the same as treating the wrongdoer as if they had not committed the wrong. It is easy to see the difference if one considers the relation between forgiveness and punishment. If I treat the wrongdoer as if they have not committed the wrong, I cannot legitimately punish them. It is different if I don’t count the wrong against them. Forgiveness is then, of course, incompatible with retribution; if I don’t count the wrong a person has committed against them, I cannot pay them back for having committed it. But forgiveness as not counting against is compatible with other goals of punishment—the rehabilitation and incarceration of wrongdoers, for instance. When I seek to rehabilitate the wrongdoer, I treat them as a wrongdoer but as a wrongdoer forgiven.

Goals of Forgiveness

I already noted what is *not* the main goal of forgiveness: it is not to help the victim overcome resentment. The overcoming of resentment is one possible consequence of forgiveness; it can therefore be one of its subsidiary goals. When we give a gift to others, we do so mainly for their sake—if the gift is a genuine gift—even if it is true that we ourselves benefit from having given them a gift. The same is true of forgiveness: we forgive mainly for the sake of the wrongdoer and as a step

toward restoring the relationship damaged by wrongdoing. Overcoming resentment that we experience as a result is a welcome additional benefit of forgiveness. In the sermon “Two Kinds of Righteousness” (1519), Martin Luther expressed the gift character of forgiveness better than anyone I know. Those who follow Christ, he wrote,

grieve more over the sin of their offenders than over the loss or offense to themselves. And they do this that they may recall those offenders from their sin rather than avenge the wrongs they themselves have suffered. Therefore, they put off the form of their own righteousness and put on the form of those others, praying for their persecutors, blessing those who curse, doing good to the evil-doers, preparing to pay the penalty and make satisfaction for their very enemies that they may be saved.

He concludes the passage, “This is the Gospel and the example of Christ.”²

Once the perpetrators are restored to the good from which they had fallen in committing the wrong, the possibility of reconciliation is opened. *Possibility*, I write, because forgiveness takes care of the burden of the past, preventing the dead hand of transgression from reaching into the future. For reconciliation to happen and life together to result, trust needs to be restored and commitment to the relationship renewed. Forgiveness doesn’t restore trust or renew commitment, but it prepares the way for restoration and renewal of commitment.

Forgiveness, Repentance, Restitution

Forgiveness is a gift, and most gifts need to be received for them to be properly given. That’s the case with forgiveness as well. When a victim gives a gift of forgiveness to a perpetrator, the perpetrator needs to receive it by repenting. What does it mean to repent, to apologize? It

² Martin Luther, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), 306.

means to say to the person we have wronged that we are sorry—sorry not that we have been caught, sorry not merely that the other person has been wronged, but sorry also that we committed the wrong; and sorry not so much for our guilt and shame as for the suffering we have caused. We pull down the veil of silence behind which we often hide wrongdoing, and we bring the moral stain of our misdeed into light.

If it is to be rightly done, apology must be sincere. In the Christian sacrament of confession, for instance, *contrition of the heart* must accompany confession of the mouth. To repent we must mean what we say; our mouth cannot tell a lie about the state of our heart. Finally, in saying and meaning that we are sorry, we commit ourselves to act otherwise in the future. We state to the victim and the wider public that the wrongdoing isn't a true expression of who we aspire to be and therefore how we intend to act in the future but a culpable aberration in our moral history we are determined not to repeat.

For the apology as a whole not to be a sham—and for it to prepare the way for reconciliation—wrongdoers must make a good-faith effort to remove as much as is reasonably possible of the damage their wrong has caused. They show the genuineness of their repentance by reparation. True, sincere apology already removes some of the damage: in disavowing the deed, the wrongdoer removes from the victim the harm of having disrespected them. As a rule, however, a wrong involves more than mere disrespect; some further damage occurs—to the person, family, community, or the possessions of the victim. That damage ought to be repaired as well, to the extent that this is possible. Without willingness to repair that damage, the wrongdoer's apology remains hollow, mere words and empty sentiments, hovering over a damaged relationship rather than altering it and inviting a suspicion that the purpose of the apology was not to acknowledge the wrongdoing but to repair the wrongdoer's reputation on the cheap and to allow them to continue benefiting from wrongdoing.

Why Forgiveness Is Hard

While I was working on *Free of Charge*, a book about giving and forgiving, a woman wrote me a letter. “Let him burn in hell forever!” she wrote. “Him” was Josip Broz, or Marshal Tito, the authoritarian ruler of socialist Yugoslavia. The woman who wrote was from Croatia, and in the political turmoil following World War II, she had lost everything she and her family possessed. They had suffered the fate of many of Tito’s “enemies of the people” (and the terrible fate that even some of Tito’s sympathizers, like my father, suffered as well). When she wrote to me, she had just seen a TV special on my work, done by the PBS program *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. In it reconciliation and forgiveness—the main themes of my book *Exclusion and Embrace*—had featured prominently. She liked none of what she had seen and heard me say. Not forgiveness but vengeance was what she was after, even fifty years after the crime. Tito had ruined her life; she had had to rebuild it from scratch in the New World; Tito’s life ought to be ruined, she felt—irredeemably and forever.

It is not hard to empathize with her. The wrongs she suffered continued to live in memory and in its effects on her life, and the victim found herself longing for revenge. Foregoing revenge or any form of payback is the hard work a forgiver is required to do. But it seems unfair for the one upon whom wrongdoing was inflicted to have to do the labor of repairing the damage. They first suffer the injustice of the violation, and then they suffer the injustice of forgiveness and repair.

It may be that forgiveness is the strategy of the weak, and those thinking in the trail of Friedrich Nietzsche like to say this. But the strategy also requires power and is empowering. For in forgiving I am not surrendering or submitting. I exercise moral agency and thereby reaffirm myself as more than a mere victim: I am an agent who, despite having suffered wrong, acts with moral integrity and moral excellence, whereas the wrongdoer has morally debased themselves. In the act of forgiveness, the wrongdoer appears publicly—or at least in the interchange between the two—as what they are, a condemnable wrongdoer. The

victim, on the other hand, is not merely acknowledged as having been wronged and as being magnanimous; forgiveness is a power act to release from condemnation the one who deserves punishment. That's why in many cases it seems easier to forgive than to repent.

Why We Should Forgive

Those who think that forgiveness is primarily about managing victims' resentment believe that we should forgive because forgiving is good for us. By forgiving we give ourselves a gift of freedom; by withholding forgiveness we sink into the bog of bitterness, rage, and malice. Though it is true that resentment is bad for us psychologically, according to the Christian faith we forgive for a more noble reason. In forgiving we enact our true humanity; resentment, and its stronger sibling, hate, is a "sickness of the soul," as Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman living in Amsterdam under Nazi occupation, wrote.³

But why is forgiveness an enactment of our true humanity? The Christian answer is this: human beings are the image of the God of unconditional love. That is a statement of fact about God and humans, articulated and affirmed in faith and hope. We cannot just observe the world and draw this conclusion; we confess this to be true. God is love, and out of love God created the world. God's aim in creating the world was to make the world God's and humans' home in one. A key element in the world's becoming God's home is for human beings, all our diversity notwithstanding, to come to echo God's character in becoming both givers and recipients of unconditional love.

Unconditional love does not get us to forgiveness by itself, though. The ultimate object of Christian hope is that when the world truly becomes God's home, unconditional love will be universally enacted in a world without wrongdoing. The world to come will be a world without forgiveness. The world in which forgiveness is needed is this present world, a world in which wrongdoing, sometimes of the most

3 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westbrook*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Holt, 1996), 11.

egregious kind, is a daily occurrence. When unconditional love encounters wrongdoing, forgiveness is born—not just forgiveness, of course, but the entire movement of returning wrongdoers to the good from which they had fallen and transforming broken relationships into exchanges of gifts freely given and gladly received. But forgiveness is an indispensable part of that movement. Forgiveness is a fruit of unconditional love turned toward the wrongdoer, an aspect of the practice of true humanity in a world of sin.⁴

Why No Forgiveness Is Perfect

The need for forgiveness arises in a world in which wrongdoing happens. The world's imperfection makes forgiveness necessary. But the world's imperfection also makes forgiveness *necessarily imperfect*—or at least this is what Christians, especially those who follow in the footsteps of Martin Luther, will tend to think.

The imperfections of forgiveness all stem from a combination of finitude, fragility, and self-centeredness that qualifies being human in the present age of the world. To forgive perfectly, we would need to know and agree on the exact nature of wrongdoing, for instance, but as finite beings we cannot know exactly and are highly unlikely to truly agree. To forgive perfectly, we would need to be free from the worry that a forgiven perpetrator would repeat the wrongdoing, against us or against someone else, but unless we are blindly naive about human self-centeredness and propensity to evil, the worry will persist. To forgive perfectly, we would need to impart the gift of forgiveness without a sense of moral superiority and without humiliating the forgiven wrongdoer and keeping them in our debt, but that would be to expect too much from most victims, all fragile humans wounded by wrongdoing.

Those who insist on forgiving perfectly will never forgive; those who expect to receive perfect forgiveness will never be forgiven. Those who insist on perfect repentance or wait for perfect restitution will

⁴ See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 356–67.

always remain disappointed and will likely withdraw the gift of forgiveness from those who want to receive it with impure hands. As Christians we ought to strive to improve the ways we forgive and receive forgiveness but not let the imperfection of our forgiveness and our reception of it deter us from forgiving. All human acts of forgiveness in the course of history are an echo of God's reconciling of human beings with God and with one another through the death of Christ on the cross. They are best understood as anticipation of the final Day of Judgment, which will also be the Day of Reconciliation,⁵ when God will complete the work of reconciliation and all humans will be brought into harmony with one another and with God.

Forgiveness and Its Joy

What Joy Is and Isn't

Forgiveness is complicated, but joy should be simple, we may be tempted to think. Joy is three little girls running through sprinklers on a sweltering summer day and squealing with delight. Joy is those same girls picking half a bucket of crab apples, setting up a stand on the curb of a street, charging two cents per apple, and having a driver, who hasn't forgotten what it means to be a child, stop and purchase two crab apples for a dollar. Joy is their uncle observing these scenes with a twinkle and a smile of quiet delight and exclaiming to their aunt, "Isn't this splendid?"

If you pick apart these experiences of joy—and the experience of analyzing these experiences as well, provided you enjoy certain kinds of intellectual puzzles—you can identify some key elements of joy. First, joy involves a positive feeling, often expressed bodily in laughter, clapping of hands, or dancing. Second, joy is feeling good about something

5 On the idea of eschatological reconciliation, see Miroslav Volf, "The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on a Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition," *Modern Theology* 16 (2000): 91–113.

good. Though it is possible to just feel good, we never just rejoice; we always rejoice *over* something: when we find a valuable lost coin or when our lost child returns home (see Luke 15). Third, we rejoice over good things that happen either to us or to those for whom we care. More precisely we rejoice over things we deem to be good, for we will rejoice over something that in fact is bad, even evil, if we believe that it is good. (If a fish could experience joy, it would rejoice seeing and biting a worm hanging from a hook, but it wouldn't take it long to realize that its joy, though genuine, was misplaced.)⁶ Fourth, we tend to like better rejoicing with others than alone; when we feel joy, we like to call a friend or a relative and say, explicitly or implicitly, "Rejoice with me!" (Luke 15:6–9). Finally, for the most part, we rejoice when we experience the good things coming to us as gratuitous and surprising rather than as a matter of course, for instance, when we fall in love or when we fear that we have done badly on a test but get a good grade.

It would seem that forgiveness would be a prime occasion for rejoicing, at least for the wrongdoer. A wronged person gives the wrongdoer the gift of not counting their wrongdoing against them. A gift has been given, a gift that removes the stain from the wrongdoer's character and opens a way to a restored relationship. Forgiveness should elicit joy. Yet often the predominant emotions associated with forgiveness are negative.

Forgiveness and Negative Emotions

Forgiveness is always imperfect, I wrote earlier. There are many ways in which forgiveness is not just imperfect but gets morally twisted and becomes injurious, a wrong of sorts in its own right. Some negative emotions accompany and follow most forgiving, but they abound when forgiveness goes wrong. Positive emotions, including joy, are often present as well, as we would expect; the better the forgiveness,

6 The second and third features of joy are consequences of joy being an emotion that involves judgment rather than a mere affective reaction to a stimulus.

the more joy will accompany it. But that's forgiveness done right. Let's examine first the emotional tonality of forgiveness gone wrong.

To forgive and to receive forgiveness is to remember, and if we remember well a wrong suffered and committed, we may remember not just the fact of it but also the emotions that accompanied it. A victim might remember their own pain, shame, and anger as well as the perpetrator's pride, sense of power over them, and self-satisfied gloating. A perpetrator may remember those same triumphant emotions that the victim had recognized in them; but they may also remember shame and self-loathing that followed the wrong. The memory of emotions experienced during the violation and in its aftermath will hover over the process of forgiveness, because we cannot forgive a wrong without remembering it. Little joy is likely to be found among these emotions, unless we count *schadenfreude* as joy.

Negative emotions swirl around other dimensions of forgiving as well. Consider, first, emotions associated with the receiving end of forgiveness, with repentance. In forgiving, the forgiver separates the wrongful deed from the doer, removes the perpetrator's stain. That is an exceptional gift that should elicit joy. But the very act of forgiving names and highlights the contrasting moral standings of the two parties. The perpetrator is guilty, and the victim is innocent, and innocent precisely to the degree that forgiveness is appropriate. In granting forgiveness the victim may show contempt for the perpetrator and flaunt their moral superiority, injecting their gift with the poison of derisive and aggressive innocence. In response the perpetrator will likely feel abased by having been an object of such insufferably self-righteous forgiveness. In fact, the more genuine the repentance, "the more deeply [he] feels his wrong and in that way also his defeat, the more he must feel repelled" from the one forgives, wrote Søren Kierkegaard in *Works of Love*.⁷ Kierkegaard wrote these words about the reaction to forgiveness done well, to the forgiver who "lovingly deals" the wrongdoer

7 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 339.

the “merciful blow” of forgiveness. How much more do they apply to forgiveness done wrongly! Forgiveness may be a gift that makes the wrongdoer retreat in shame rather than dance with joy.

In repenting the wrongdoer acknowledges and condemns the wrong they have committed and underscores that the deed was not a true expression of the kind of human being they aspire to be. If forgiveness precedes apology, in repenting the wrongdoer affirms in their own right their separation of from the deed that the forgiving enacts. Guilt, shame, and remorse are emotions appropriate to repentance. As we will see, joy will be present as well, but in a way, guilt, shame, and remorse are conditions of that joy.

Negative emotions will slither into forgiveness through the memory of wrongdoing and through the way the gift of forgiveness is both given and received. They can also infest forgiveness through uncertainty about its results, uncertainty being fundamental to forgiveness as a free act of grace. Repenting and forgiving both involve risk. Apologizing, the perpetrator is unsure whether the apology will remove shame and guilt or publicly display and therefore enhance them. The victim, on the other hand, may fear that the apology may not come or that it may be false: the perpetrator is repenting not so much to acknowledge the wrong but to evade the responsibility; their apology is a fresh wrong rather than a repair of the original one. The process of forgiveness often generates fear in both victim and perpetrator. And fear keeps joy at bay.

Joy of Forgiveness

With many negative emotions churning in such close proximity of forgiveness and accompanying its very exercise, is there any room for joy? If we are after pure joy, we won’t find it in forgiveness; in fact we won’t find it anywhere this side of the transition into the world to come. Except in the moments of a self-forgetting and world-forgetting ecstasy, no self-aware joy will be pure. Since all forgiveness is imperfect as well, as I have noted earlier, and is, moreover, tied to wrongdoing, negative emotion will complicate all joy brought about by forgiveness. But it would

be a mistake to let negative emotion occlude the brightness of the joy of forgiveness. Let's revisit victim, perpetrator, and their future made possible by forgiveness, focusing this time around on forgiveness done right rather than forgiveness gone wrong. We will find joy in each of these moments of forgiveness. In fact I propose that the presence of genuine joy is one of the signs of forgiveness done right.

Consider, first, a repentant perpetrator receiving the gift of forgiveness. The dominant emotion will be remorse, sorrow for the injury he or she caused and sorrow for having betrayed God's law of love and therefore also his or her own humanity. But this will be a "bright sorrow," to borrow the phrase from Alexander Schmemmann.⁸ He used the phrase to describe joy more generally, because joy ought always also to "honor" the pain of the world. But the image of bright sorrow does not sufficiently honor joy's joyfulness; perhaps it is better to call all joy, more clumsily, "sorrowful brightness."

But the phrase "bright sorrow" describes well the kind of joy that accompanies genuine repentance. Joy, subtle and quiet, is an integral part of repentance and not just a result of genuine repentance. For repentance is not a mere neutral zone between evil and good through which those who have committed wrong must pass in order to return to the good. In repenting I am differentiating myself from my wrongdoing; I am embracing the good in renouncing my wrongdoing. That act is therefore properly an object of joy. Jesus implies as much when, in the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin (Luke 15:1–10), he speaks of the joy in Heaven not simply over the sinner who has repented, but, more precisely, over a "repenting sinner" (vv. 7 and 10). As God rejoices over the act of repentance, so should humans, both forgiving victims and repentant perpetrators. Though the emotion attending repentance is mainly sorrow—"godly grief" is the phrase the Apostle Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 7:9–11—true repentance already includes in itself joy. And leads to joy, of course, the joy of freedom from condemnation and guilt.

8 *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973–1983*, trans. Juliana Schmemmann (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 137.

Consider, second, the victim imparting the gift of forgiveness rightly. In forgiving I relinquish the counting of the offense against the offender and the claim to a payback; I give something up to which I have a right. Forgiveness is therefore sacrifice. Can I rejoice in a sacrifice, and if so, in what kind? Yes, I can and I should—when sacrificing would enact my humanity and when failing to sacrifice would diminish my humanity. When I stay with my rightful resentment and insist on payback, I diminish myself. When, out of love, I forgive the wrongdoer without condoning the wrong and when I seek to return them to the good from which they had fallen, I enact my humanity. For I act then a bit like the God who makes the “sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45). Obeying the law of love, which is the law of my humanity, I can rejoice. In fact if I do not rejoice in obeying the law of love—if I don’t serve “the Lord my God joyfully and with gladness of heart” (Deut. 28:47)—I haven’t returned yet fully to myself as a creature made in God’s image.

God’s rain and God’s sun are not withheld from the evil and the unrighteous until they have mended their ways; they are not given to the good and righteous only as long as they remain good and righteous. God does not give to pay for service rendered or to manipulate into rendering God service. It is similar with good forgiveness (taking into account the fact that as forgivers we are not holy gods but sinful humans). Givers of forgiveness do not elevate themselves above the receivers as morally superior, and they do not seek to control the receivers by forgiving. Those who forgive well rejoice not in their superior moral excellence but in the beauty of giving and in the good they are generating. That’s why those who know how to receive forgiveness well are able to rejoice in the gift.

Finally forgiveness well given enacts and reaffirms the forgivers’ comfort with themselves as God’s image; similarly forgiveness well received brings the repentant back home to themselves as God’s image. Both return to their common home, and both rejoice together.

The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) illustrates the process well. In leaving home the younger son intended to “un-son” himself,

“un-father” the father, “un-brother” his older brother, and “un-home” the home for all of them. His journey home starts with him “coming to himself” (v. 17), realizing who he was and what he had failed to live up to. In receiving the son back, the father, too, came to himself, though in a different way: the inner split of having stayed at home while at the same time following with longing the son into the far country was finally overcome. The two of them rejoiced together, and, organizing a feast in the reconstituted home, shared their joy with others. And what of the older brother?

Forgiveness, Dues-Paying Morality, and Joy

From the perspective of the older brother, the common joy of his brother’s repentance and his father’s forgiveness was false, because the father’s forgiveness was false. That’s why he excluded himself from the celebration and therefore also from having a common home with the other two. His objection to forgiveness seems to have been principled. Forgiveness was a vice and not a virtue. It disrupted the proper order of things according to which one reaps what one sows and one pays the debt one has incurred. One celebrates when duties are faithfully and excellently discharged and when successes come as a result. One does not celebrate blowing half an inheritance in desolate living and returning home looking like a scarecrow. He was angry at the irresponsible young man who squandered and at the sentimental old fool who forgave. For those who believe that it is morally wrong not to count the wrongdoing against the one who committed it, there is no joy and mustn’t be any joy in forgiveness and repentance.

Prior to forgiveness is unconditional love. Those who rejoice in such love will rejoice in forgiveness done well.

