

# The Relationship of Forgiveness and Mercy to Justice and Reconciliation

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by Charisse Rubio

## Introduction

The primary text of catechesis in apostolic times was Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which contains the teaching: "If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions" (Matt 6: 14-16).<sup>[1]</sup> This sermon is a "summary of Jesus' teaching on justice and the moral precepts appropriate for his disciples."<sup>[2]</sup> A key component of his teaching is *The Lord's Prayer*, which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* identifies as "the most perfect of prayers...[that] not only teaches us to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them."<sup>[3]</sup>



One of the petitions of *The Lord's Prayer* is forgiveness for our sins – an act of mercy.<sup>[4]</sup> We have hope in God's mercy because of His unconditional love for us. However, there is an important and daunting prerequisite: Jesus teaches that "this outpouring of mercy cannot penetrate our hearts as long as we have not forgiven those who have trespassed against us."<sup>[5]</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to discover both the meaning of God's teaching on the necessity of unconditional forgiveness (mercy) and how there can be justice in forgiving even someone who isn't sorry for the harm or evil he has done. It will also address the fact that being open to forgiveness is an act of mercy that involves a choice by the offended person; while reconciliation is an act of justice involving both the offender and the offended.

## Unconditional Forgiveness Isn't Optional

Throughout His public ministry, Jesus Christ teaches the necessity of forgiveness, "which is so much of the essence of the Gospel."<sup>[6]</sup> According to Pope St. John Paul II, Jesus teaches us about the mystery of mercy, to "forgive always," which St. Paul expressed in his exhortation to "forbear one another in love."<sup>[7]</sup> The perfect model of this forgiveness is Jesus Christ, Our Redeemer, who prayed on the Cross: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23: 34).<sup>[8]</sup>

In his "Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy," Pope Francis also reminds us that forgiveness is not optional:

*“Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. At times, how hard it seems to forgive! And yet pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully. Let us therefore heed the Apostle’s exhortation: ‘Do not let the sun go down on your anger’ (Eph 4:26). Above all, let us listen to the words of Jesus who made mercy an ideal of life and a criterion for the credibility of our faith: ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy’ (Mt 5:7).”*[\[9\]](#)

Jesus insists on forgiveness as much for the sake of the one offended as for that of the offender. Pope Benedict XVI affirms this: “Forgiveness is not a denial of wrongdoing, but a participation in the healing and transforming love of God which reconciles and restores.”[\[10\]](#)

St. John Paul was convinced, by experience and by what God has revealed, that order can be fully restored to wounded mankind only through a “response that combines justice with forgiveness.”[\[11\]](#) While both the granting and accepting of forgiveness may make us appear weak or feel devalued, in reality it “leads us to a fuller and richer humanity, more radiant with the splendor of the Creator.”[\[12\]](#)

### Forgiveness and Mercy Are Compatible with Justice

We have all been hurt, sometimes by malicious acts or words, other times by conflict or rejection, and often by unintentional insensitivity. There are so many interactions and situations that result in deep pain and suffering or in the loss of something or someone dear. In these instances, forgiveness can be very difficult. Most objections to unconditional forgiveness fall under one of the following two reasons, and leads to resentment: “First, it fails to take the wrong sufficiently seriously. Second, it may show a lack of self-respect or self-esteem.”[\[13\]](#)

Regardless of the reason, forgiveness is not dependent upon the remorse felt and/or expressed by the offender; nor is it a prerequisite for the offender to apologize and make restitution. The true spirit of forgiveness is not a feeling but a choice to offer unconditional mercy while desiring justice that does not seek retribution but instead balances the need for correcting wrong with the desire for the good of all involved.

The idea of showing mercy (forgiving a wrong) and letting go of the desire for retribution (perceived as justice) can seem irrational and impossible. St. John Paul points out that this difficulty often comes from thinking that justice and forgiveness are incompatible:

*“But forgiveness is the opposite of resentment and revenge, not of justice... because human justice is always fragile and imperfect, subject as it is to the limitations and egoism of individuals and groups, it must include and, as it were, be completed by the forgiveness which heals and rebuilds troubled human relations from their foundations... Forgiveness is in no way opposed to justice, as if to forgive meant to*

*overlook the need to right the wrong done. It is rather the fullness of justice... involving as it does the deepest healing of the wounds which fester in human hearts.”[14]*

A prominent convert and professor, J. Budziszewski, with a special interest in virtue ethics, points out that one needs an understanding of both justice and mercy to comprehend how to forgive when it appears impossible:

*“But to most people today it is not easy to see how justice, which involves punishment, and mercy, which involves remission or forgiveness of punishment, can both be virtues. Contemporary culture swings between an excessively softhearted interpretation of mercy which leaves no room for justice, and an excessively hardhearted interpretation of justice which leaves no room for mercy.”[15]*

St. John Paul in his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* tells us that God’s mercy “corrects in order to lead to conversion.”[16] Even when God chastises, His “punishments were meant not for the ruin but for the correction... [and are] in fact, a sign of great kindness...Therefore He never withdraws His mercy from us” (2 Macc 6:12-13, 16).

### Forgiveness versus Reconciliation

Forgiveness, according to St. John Paul, is primarily a personal choice that has a “divine source and criterion” urging us “to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil.”[17]

St. Thomas Aquinas helps us understand the impact of this personal choice to offer forgiveness: “the interior act of virtue *is* a choice, the exterior act of virtue *proceeds* from the choice, and the disposition of virtue *causes* the choice.”[18] Therefore, being open to forgiveness is a necessary disposition prior to our interior act of forgiving, which is the decision to forgive. We may need to make the choice to forgive repeatedly when the temptation to ill-feelings and retaliation reoccurs. However, the offender is not a participant in this choice because our disposition, interior act, and subsequent virtuous action of forgiving occur in the private realm of the offended person’s interior.

Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling, and requires God’s grace to overlook faults, to seek healing for hurts, and to love our enemies. Forgiveness “does not involve demanding a return or remorse from the other person: neither is it tolerating, exonerating, or condoning that person’s actions.”[19] Another benefit is that it prevents giving the offender control over our decision to forgive, especially when the offender denies responsibility for what he has done or refuses to express any remorse.[20] The offender, however, does maintain control over participating in reconciliation.

Forgiveness “is to offer mercy to someone who has acted unjustly” [21] but “not to condone, excuse, forget, or even to reconcile.”[22] By making the personal choice to forgive, however, we open the door to reconciliation – an act of justice that

restores balance in a damaged relationship through restitution as opposed to a demand for retribution. Acknowledging “the profound truth that reconciliation is not simply an end in itself,” the USCCB Subcommittee on the Third Millennium teaches that “reconciliation is for the sake of communion... There can be no forgiveness and reconciliation without unity and communion with God and with one another.” [23] In 2011, Pope Benedict XVI delivered an apostolic exhortation which provided an extensive description of reconciliation:

*“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you’, says the Lord, and he adds ‘not as the world gives do I give to you’ (Jn 14:27). Human peace obtained without justice is illusory and ephemeral. Human justice which is not the fruit of reconciliation in the ‘truth of love’ (Eph 4:15) remains incomplete; it is not authentic justice. Love of truth – ‘the whole truth,’ to which the Spirit alone can lead us (cf. Jn 16:13) – is what marks out the path that all human justice must follow if it is to succeed in restoring the bonds of fraternity...Reconciliation, then, is not limited to God’s plan to draw estranged and sinful humanity to himself in Christ through the forgiveness of sins and out of love. It is also the restoration of relationships between people through the settlement of differences and the removal of obstacles to their relationships in their experience of God’s love... In the wake of a conflict, reconciliation...restores a union of hearts and serene coexistence... Victims have a right to truth and justice.” [24]*

Reconciliation is an act of justice, which is a virtue “directed toward the common good... [and] is essentially directed toward what is right (fair and equal) in our relationships with others.” [25] According to St. Aquinas: “Unlike other virtues, justice is always ‘other’-regarding.” [26] Falling under “commutative justice,” reconciliation “preserves an equality between persons by rendering what is due to each [person]... in situations in which the suffering or loss of one is balanced by the suffering or loss of another.” [27] While “restitution is an act of commutative justice,” [28] “a person establishes the equality of justice by doing good... and preserves the already established equality of justice by declining from evil.” [29] This means that we “do good by... respecting the just claims of other persons, and we avoid evil by avoiding harm... to other individual persons.” [30]

Therefore, reconciliation requires participation of both the offended and the offender:

*“Jesus called for replacing ‘an eye for an eye’ with love for one’s enemies (Mt. 5:38-43). Following this call, Pope John Paul II argued that forgiveness must often accompany justice if reconciliation is to be obtained; otherwise retributive justice may lock people into a repetitive cycle of violence and counterviolence rather than leading to reconciliation.” [31]*

## Summary

This paper discussed Jesus’ teaching that God’s forgiveness and mercy are contingent upon our first forgiving others. Unconditional mercy by forgiving trespasses is

required, even when the offender does not have remorse. Forgiveness is a personal choice to show mercy to the offender and, accordingly, requires an act of mercy on the part of the offended person. In addition, forgiveness shows an openness to reconciliation, which is an act of justice requiring collaboration and participation by both the offender and the offended to restore the relationship.

In *The Lord's Prayer*, Jesus teaches us to maintain a disposition of forgiveness and openness to reconciliation as a condition for God's forgiveness. St. Aquinas explains that "whoever is so disposed that he is prepared to give pardon to anyone who asks, he will not lose the fruit of this prayer as long as in general he does not have hatred for anyone."<sup>[32]</sup> Therefore, a person who has chosen forgiveness and who is open and ready for reconciliation indicates the reality of a decision that is not dependent upon a request from the offender, but on the mercy and love within his interior.

The words of St. John Paul, in his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, summarize the thesis of this paper wonderfully:

*"My reasoned conviction, confirmed in turn by biblical revelation, is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true peace are justice and that form of love which is forgiveness... The followers of Christ, baptized into his redeeming Death and Resurrection, must always be men and women of mercy and forgiveness."*<sup>[33]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> All biblical citations in this paper are taken from the New American Bible, Revised ed. (Charlotte, NC: Saint Benedict Press, 2010), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>[2]</sup> Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, Translated from the 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. By Mary Thomas Noble. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 164.

<sup>[3]</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), § 2763.

<sup>[4]</sup> Ibid., § 2838.

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid., § 2840.

<sup>[6]</sup> John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, Vatican Website, Nov. 30, 1980, § 14, accessed Apr. 3, 2018, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30111980\\_dives-in-misericordia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html).

<sup>[7]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[8]</sup> Ibid., § 15.

<sup>[9]</sup> Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Vatican Website, Apr. 11, 2015, § 9, accessed Apr. 4, 2018, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_bolla\\_20150411\\_misericordiae-vultus.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html).

<sup>[10]</sup> Benedict XVI, "Message on the Occasion of the 18th Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences," Vatican Website, Apr. 27, 2012, accessed Apr. 4, 2018, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20120427\\_social-sciences.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20120427_social-sciences.pdf).

<sup>[11]</sup> John Paul II, "No Peace without Justice, No Justice without Forgiveness," Vatican Website, January 1, 2002, § 10, accessed April 3, 2018, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20011211\\_xxxv-world-day-for-peace.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011211_xxxv-world-day-for-peace.pdf).

<sup>[12]</sup> Ibid., § 9.

<sup>[13]</sup> Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, "In Defense of Unconditional Forgiveness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 103, no. 1 (September 2002): 40, accessed April 6, 2018, <http://at.opal->

libraries.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=9859752&site=e-ehost-live

[14] John Paul II, "No Peace without Justice, No Justice without Forgiveness," § 3.

[15] J. Budziszewski, *Commentary on Thomas Aquinas's Virtue Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 160.

[16] John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* [Christian Meaning of Suffering], Vatican Website, February 11, 1984, § 12, accessed April 3, 2018, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1984/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_11021984\\_salvifici-doloris.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.pdf).

[17] John Paul II, "No Peace without Justice, No Justice without Forgiveness," § 8.

[18] Budziszewski, *Aquinas's Virtue Ethics*, 160.

[19] George F.R. Ellis, "Afterword: Exploring the Unique Role of Forgiveness." In *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Public Policy & Conflict Transformation*, (Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001), 405.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Robert D. Enright and Chad M. Magnuson, "The Church as Forgiving Community: An Initial Model," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 36, no. 2, (June 2008): 114, accessed April 12, 2018, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/009164710803600204>.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Subcommittee on the Third Millennium, *Jubilee 2000: A Year of the Lord's Favor – A Reflection on Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998), 13.

[24] Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace], Vatican Website, November 19, 2011, accessed April 16, 2018, § 18, 20-21, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_exh\\_20111119\\_africae-munus.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.pdf).

[25] Christopher Kaczor and Thomas Sherman, *Thomas Aquinas on The Cardinal Virtues: Edited and Explained for Everyone* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009), 60.

[26] Ibid., 59.

[27] Ibid., 61.

[28] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurene Shapcote, vol. 17 (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), IIa-IIae, q. 62, a. 1.

[29] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 79, a. 1, quoted in Kaczor and Sherman, *Aquinas on Cardinal Virtues*, 62.

[30] Kaczor and Sherman, *Aquinas on Cardinal Virtues*, 62.

[31] David Hollenbach, "Reconciliation and Justice: Ethical Guidance for a Broken World," *Promotio Justitiae* 103, no. 3, (Rome: 2009): 2, accessed March 15, 2018, <http://sjweb.info/sjs/pjnnew/PJShow.cfm?pubTextID=8469>

[32] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Aquinas Institute, Inc., version: 18.0323.1929, 2018, chap 6, lec 3, § 957, accessed April 3, 2018, <https://aquinas.cc/180/182/~1698>.

[33] John Paul II, "Celebration of the World Day of Peace," § 2, 7.