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## God's Forgiveness as Expressed in the Gospels

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GOD'S FORGIVENESS AS EXPRESSED IN THE GOSPELS

by

Rod Womer

A thesis paper presented to the

Faculty of the Department of  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines the twenty-two passages in the Gospels in which God's forgiveness of human sin is explicitly addressed. Using modern textual, literary, form, redaction, and historical criticisms as exegetical tools, the examination maps out the development of these biblical vignettes so as to extract from the process an understanding of what the Gospel writers wanted to convey to Jesus' followers about God's forgiveness. Four distinct forgiveness modes were discovered: repentance leads to forgiveness (e.g. proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations in Lk 24:47), faith acts as a conduit to forgiveness (e.g. sinful woman kissing Jesus' feet in Lk 7:48b-50), one must forgive in order to be forgiven (e.g. the Lord's Prayer in Lk 11:4 and Mt 6:12), and forgiveness is a free gift based solely on God's mercy (e.g. on the cross, "Father, forgive them" in Lk 23:34). None of these views represents a majority Gospel vision of forgiveness, with each of the four viewpoints having four to seven episodes occurring in the Gospel cannon. Seldom are any of these pathways to forgiveness mentioned together. Despite a plethora of information about forgiveness, nowhere do the Gospels present a wholistic explanation of divine forgiveness. The Gospel writers, like their Hebraic ancestors, were comfortable with a multivariant view of God's forgiveness and showed no propensity to develop a wholistic theology of forgiveness. However, underlying this untidy approach was an emphasis on God's mercy and compassion that had roots in the Old Testament understanding of Yahweh as gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love. In addition, the seedling concepts of sin as an unpayable debt or of the importance of faith in Jesus appeared in the background of multiple Scripture passages from each of the four forgiveness themes.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

The Elementary Grade Coordinator for Religious Education posed a question to the one hundred plus children gathered on the carpet in front of her, “Is there any sin you can commit that God will not forgive you for if you are truly sorry?”<sup>1</sup> In spite of the slightly rhetorical nature of the question, the boys and girls clamored to provide the answer because each of them was absolutely sure the correct answer was an emphatic NO! The children were on firm dogmatic footing. The Catechism of the Catholic Church declares:<sup>2</sup>

“There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive. ‘There is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for forgiveness, provided his repentance is honest.’ Christ who died for all men desires that in his Church the gates of forgiveness should always be open to anyone who turns away from sin.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the Coordinator and the Catechism, forgiveness of sins is possible if one is *truly sorry* or, put in a more formal way, if one’s *repentance is honest*. In the post-modern church, this understanding of repentance as the gateway to forgiveness is frequently viewed as foundational and taken for granted.<sup>4</sup> However, do the life and teachings of Jesus, as portrayed in the four canonical Gospels, support this position?

Jesus speaks frequently in the Gospels about forgiveness, using a form of the word forgiveness 48 times in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Nearly half of these instances address God’s forgiveness of human sin. Surprisingly, and creating an apparent discontinuity with the current dogmatic view, Jesus reveals four different views regarding God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Olsen, “Reconciliation” (presentation, elementary grade Faith Formation class at Padre Serra Catholic Church, Camarillo, CA, November 10, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Rod Womer, “Sin, Blasphemy, and Forgiveness, These Three: and the Greatest of These is . . .” (Final paper in Foundations of New Testament Theology, THST 600, Loyola Marymount University, December 10, 2014), 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), para. 982 (Included quote from Roman Catechism I, 11, 5.).

<sup>4</sup> Womer, “Sin, Blasphemy, and Forgiveness,” 13.

forgiveness: one must forgive in order to be forgiven (e.g. the Lord's Prayer in Lk 11:4 and Mt 6:12), faith is required for forgiveness (e.g. sinful woman kissing Jesus' feet in Lk 7:48b-50), repentance is linked to forgiveness (e.g. proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all nations in Lk 24:47), and forgiveness is a free gift based solely on God's mercy (e.g. on the cross, "Father, forgive them" in Lk 23:34). None of these views represents a majority Gospel vision of forgiveness, with each of the four viewpoints having four to seven episodes occurring in the Gospel cannon.<sup>5</sup> Seldom are any of these pathways to forgiveness mentioned together and nowhere in the Gospels is there an all-encompassing treatment of God's forgiveness. In an effort to understand the Gospels' perplexing, multi-faceted approach to forgiveness, this M.A. thesis will examine in depth the twenty-two Gospel passages that mention God's forgiveness of human sin. The purpose of the examination will be to map the development and dependencies of these biblical vignettes in such a way as to extract from the process an understanding of what the Gospel writers wanted to convey to Jesus' followers about God's forgiveness. We will find that the Gospel writers, like their Hebraic ancestors, were comfortable with a multivariant view of God's forgiveness and showed no propensity to develop a wholistic theology of forgiveness. However, underlying this untidy approach was an emphasis on God's mercy and compassion, as well as an introduction to the seedling concepts of human sin as an unpayable debt and of the importance of faith in Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> Womer, "Sin, Blasphemy, and Forgiveness," 14-15.

## **CHAPTER 2: HEBRAIC CONTEXT OF FORGIVENESS IN THE FIRST CENTURY CE**

In order to appreciate and better understand the viewpoint of the Gospel writers, this chapter will examine the Hebraic cultural context of forgiveness that would have been part of the historical and cultural milieu in which Jesus preached and the Gospel authors wrote. This Hebraic context of forgiveness was primarily a result of the mythological and historical relationship the Jewish people had with Yahweh, their God, as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures and rabbinic literature.<sup>6</sup>

### **SECTION 1: YAHWEH-ISRAEL COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP**

Yahweh differed markedly from the Greco-Roman gods, a point emphasized in Jewish and early Christian literature. The God of the Hebrews was completely sovereign and monotheistic, and He desired a personal relationship with His people, the Israelites.<sup>7</sup> A consequence of this personal relationship was that all humans had dignity (albeit not to modern standards), unlike the Greco-Roman aristocratic world where non-elite persons had little dignity or worth.<sup>8</sup> Like the Greco-Roman gods, Yahweh turned against humans when they perpetrated evil or sin. However, for Yahweh, the preferred ultimate state of the relationship following sin was repentance and reconciliation rather than simply punishment.<sup>9</sup> As a result human sin and divine forgiveness were dominant themes in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>10</sup> Human sin was seen as a

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<sup>6</sup> G. W. Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography: Narratives of Retributive Justice* (London: Continuum, 2000), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Trompf, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Michael L. Morgan, "Mercy, Repentance, and Forgiveness in Ancient Judaism," In *Ancient Forgiveness*, ed. Charles L. Griswold and David Konstan. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 142.

disruption of the God-human relationship.<sup>11</sup> The offender, sometimes an individual, sometimes the entire Israelite community, incurred guilt and punishment that could not normally be excused by projecting blame or citing exculpating factors,<sup>12</sup> as was common in the Greco-Roman world of power, status, and pardon for involuntary actions.<sup>13</sup>

One of the defining traits of the Jewish view of sin and forgiveness was that sin (interpersonal and societal) and forgiveness (divine and human) were always viewed in the framework of the Yahweh-Israel covenantal relationship.<sup>14</sup> Another way of expressing this trait is that God was always the ultimate victim, and the crucial relationship was always the divine-human relationship. Interpersonal transgressions were viewed alongside and in relationship to this primary divine-human relationship. The attitude toward forgiveness in these human-on-human offenses was thought about within the context of the primary divine-human relationship, that is harming a fellow human, a loved creation of God, was ultimately seen as an affront to God.<sup>15</sup> This arrangement created some decidedly unique Jewish perspectives. Since God was not a mortal being, He had no need to work through any doubt about the authenticity of promises made by the offending party.<sup>16</sup> The responsibility for the first move toward reconciliation belonged to the wrongdoer.<sup>17</sup> Rabbinic literature interpreted the role of the human victim as

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<sup>11</sup> Zsuzsanna Várhelyi, "To Forgive is Divine: Gods as Models of Forgiveness in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome," In *Ancient Forgiveness*, ed. Charles L. Griswold and David Konstan. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 123-24.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Rod Womer, "Cultural Norms of Forgiveness in the First Century CE: *SUNGNÔMÊ*, *CLEMENTIA*, *APHIÊMI*" (Final paper in Foundations of Historical Theology, THST 6020, Loyola Marymount University, May 1, 2017), 2-11.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan, 144-47.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>16</sup> David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 124.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan, 154.

secondary to the fundamental interests of the wrongdoer and God.<sup>18</sup> Rabbinic literature also contended that if the offender requests forgiveness, the human victim, in a sense, “mediates between the sinner and God,” and was essentially “duty-bound to respond with forgiveness” knowing that, with divine compassion, God would also respond positively to the sinner’s act of repentance.<sup>19</sup>

## **SECTION 2: SLOW TO ANGER AND ABOUNDING IN STEADFAST LOVE**

The God of Hebrew Scripture was a complex Deity who exhibited nuanced tension between sternness and mercy, between punishment and forgiveness. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh made it clear that obedience gained favor, disobedience justified punishment, and repentance was met with mercy.<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 26 is a classic example:

Favor: “If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.” (Lev 26:3-4)

Punishment: “But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances, so that you will not observe my commandments, and you break my covenant, I in turn will do this to you: I will bring terror on you; consumption and fever that wastes the eyes and cause life to pine away.” (Lev 26:14-16)

Mercy: “But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors, in that they committed treachery against me . . . when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, or abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God.” (Lev 26:40, 44)

However, this straightforward approach was occasionally perturbed, as in Exodus when God told Moses about the golden calf the Israelites made and worshiped. The Lord told Moses, “Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 140.

will make a great nation.” (Ex 32:10) Moses implored God to turn from His fierce wrath and to remember His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. In spite of the fact that at this point in the story the Israelites had not repented for their idolatrous action and were actually still worshipping the golden calf, the conversation ended with the observation, “And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” (Ex 32:14) Based on this Mount Sinai periscope, the God of the Hebrews certainly seemed to be disposed to choose mercy if possible, for as Ezekiel reminds us about God’s intentions, “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.” (Ezek 18:32)

However, Hebrew Scripture made it clear that the Jewish people many times left God no choice. The fall of Judah to Babylonia in 597 BCE and the ensuing deportation of thousands of Jews to Babylonia was the cataclysmic event that spurred the Hebrews to recognize their culpability for breaking their covenantal commitments to Yahweh.<sup>21</sup> To explain this devastating event the Hebrews shifted the blame to themselves because as the chosen people of an all-powerful, monotheistic God it was inconceivable that Yahweh could be incapable of protecting them; as a result the Babylonia conquest was seen as punishment for their covenantal failures. This explanation became the pattern according to which the Israelites reevaluated much of their history as cyclic episodes of turning away from God, experiencing punishment (or sometimes the threat of punishment), followed by repentance and an appeal to God for mercy, and finally reconciliation.<sup>22</sup> The keys to successfully negotiating this cycle were for the sinner to seek forgiveness and for God to confer forgiveness.

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<sup>21</sup> Konstan, 103.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

### **SECTION 3: RECONCILIATION**

What was the Hebraic understanding of what the sinner should do in order to be reconciled with Yahweh? David Konstan uses the ancient novelistic text, *The Life of Adam and Eve*, to elucidate the steps involved in this process.<sup>23</sup> The sinner acknowledged their culpability in sinning, usually through some sort of confession. The sinner demonstrated remorse for their sin. In what may be the crucial step, the sinner exhibited a change of heart and desire to behave differently in the future known as repentance. Finally, the sinner made an appeal to God for forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes a prophet or an angel made this appeal on behalf of the Jewish people.<sup>25</sup> So, the formulaic presentation was confession, remorse, repentance, and exhortation. However, the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature did not always present the sinner as walking through each of these four steps in the reconciliation process. An acute example is the conversation between God and Moses on Mount Sinai reviewed earlier where only exhortation, on the behalf of the Israelites by Moses, is needed to obtain God's forgiveness. This inconsistent approach leaves the requirements for forgiveness as delineated in the Hebrew Scripture in somewhat of a murky state. Are some steps more important than others? Are any steps absolutely mandatory? What can be confidently said at this point is that the Hebrew perception of the sinner's responsibility to obtain God's forgiveness usually consisted of some combination of confession, remorse, repentance, and exhortation.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-94.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Tobias Hägerland, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of His Prophetic Mission* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 158.

**SECTION 4: YAHWEH'S FORGIVENESS**

How did the Jewish people understand Yahweh's forgiveness? It was something more robust, complex, and complete than the Greco-Roman concepts of pardon and clemency. The Greek word used in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) for God's forgiveness was *aphiêmi*, which had the basic sense of letting go or dismissing.<sup>26</sup> The Lord's promise in Ezekiel illustrates this sense of letting go: "But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live." (Ezek 18:21-22) In addition to not remembering the people's sins against them, God promised 'they shall live.' This promise could imply eternal salvation, good fortune in their human condition, and certainly restoration of the divine-human relationship. This compassion may or may not result in a reduction or remission of punishment.<sup>27</sup> God's forgiving "is a surplus [beyond pardon] that includes a change of attitude, a sense of goodwill," and an overcoming of anger and rage.<sup>28</sup> In summary, Yahweh was disposed to forgive if a sinner came to Him, and He forgave by dismissing the sin, overcoming His anger, possibly mitigating punishment, and, through a change of attitude, restoring the divine-human relationship.

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<sup>26</sup> Konstan, 116.

<sup>27</sup> Morgan, 142.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3: REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

### SECTION 1: JOHN THE BAPTIST

#### Reading 1: Luke 1:67-79

<sup>67</sup> Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

<sup>68</sup> “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,  
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a mighty savior for us  
in the house of his servant David,

<sup>70</sup> as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

<sup>71</sup> that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate  
us.

<sup>72</sup> Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,  
and has remembered his holy covenant,

<sup>73</sup> the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,  
to grant us <sup>74</sup> that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear, <sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.

<sup>76</sup> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

<sup>77</sup> to give knowledge of salvation to his people  
by the forgiveness of their sins.

<sup>78</sup> By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon\* us,

<sup>79</sup> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

\* Other ancient authorities read *has broken upon*

#### **Setting and Origin**

Zechariah speaks this prophetic oracle known as the Benedictus, a name derived from the beginning word of the canticle in Latin,<sup>29</sup> after Zachariah’s tongue has been loosened in response to him affirming the name of his offspring as John during the circumcision of his child. In a previous encounter with the angel Gabriel, Zachariah had been left mute because of his unbelief. The return of Zachariah’s speech indicates he understands, believes, and is indeed filled with the Holy Spirit, rendering his canticle as the word of God.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 58.

<sup>30</sup> Tannehill, 63.

Scholars believe the Benedictus was not part of the original infancy narrative composed by Luke. It likely came to Luke as an early Jewish-Christian hymn that praised the salvific action of God without any direct affiliation with John the Baptist.<sup>31</sup> The canticle has the earmarks of an addition: the text reads more smoothly without vv. 67-79,<sup>32</sup> Lucan idioms are inconsistently distributed,<sup>33</sup> and the bulk of the material in the canticle is not related to John.<sup>34</sup>

### Structure

The Benedictus resembles an Old Testament hymn of praise<sup>35</sup> and thanksgiving.<sup>36</sup> The text appears to be assembled from borrowed fragments of the Psalms, Isaiah, and several other Old Testament books<sup>37</sup> creating an intricate mosaic<sup>38</sup> whose roots are challenging to trace.<sup>39</sup> Most scholars detect a heavier editing hand by Luke in vv. 76-77<sup>40</sup> for a number of reasons. These verses are the only portion of the prophetic hymn that are about Zechariah's child, John,<sup>41</sup> and as such respond to the question of the people in v. 66, "What then will this child become?"<sup>42</sup> The language used here is more concrete than the hymnic language preceding it.<sup>43</sup> The first-person plural (we, us, our) occurs ten times in the preceding portion of the Benedictus, is

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<sup>31</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, New updated edition (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 349-350.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 378-79.

<sup>33</sup> Francois Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*, Translated by Christina M. Thomas, Edited by Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 68.

<sup>34</sup> David E. Garland, *Luke, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 100.

<sup>35</sup> Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke: 1:1-9:50* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 96.

<sup>36</sup> Garland, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 386-89.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>39</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 69.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Tannehill, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Garland, 101.

<sup>43</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 75.

repeated three times in vv. 78-79 and is completely absent in vv. 76-77. The verb tense changes from aorist in vv. 68-75 to the present in vv. 76-77.<sup>44</sup> A textual issue makes this editing marker ambiguous since the verb tense in the following vv. 78-79 differs in ancient texts. Scholars are divided on which tense should be considered the original in vv. 78-79.

David E. Garland chooses the future tense for vv. 78-79 noting both tenses have strong textual support, but the future tense tends to be more common in early witnesses.<sup>45</sup> However, Brown points out that scribes likely tampered with the verb in vv. 78-79 to either match the tense in the early verses or in the later versus. Since Jesus has not yet *broken upon us* at this point in Luke's narrative, the aorist is the more problematic, and likely original, reading that the scribes felt compelled to change.<sup>46</sup> Brown proposes that vv. 76-77 may not have been part of the Jewish-Christian hymn Luke implanted into his infancy narrative and that vv. 76-77 were authored by Luke as a way of anchoring the canticle to the story of John's circumcision.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the two verses in the Benedictus that deal with our topic of forgiveness were likely inserted, or at least heavily edited, by Luke in order to explain the role John was destined to fulfill in God's new age of salvation.<sup>48</sup>

### **John's Role**

Zechariah proclaims in v. 76 that his child will be "the prophet of the Most High." Most High is the name for God most frequently used by Luke.<sup>49</sup> Echoing the Old Testament (Mal 3:1;

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 381.

<sup>45</sup> Garland, 108.

<sup>46</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 373.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>48</sup> Garland, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 389.

Isa 40:3)<sup>50</sup> and the good news proclaimed by Gabriel (Lk 1:17)<sup>51</sup>, Zechariah testifies in the next line of v. 76 that John will “go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” These words will be used by Luke to describe John’s calling to his ministry of baptism in Lk 3:4 (see Reading 3 below) and by Jesus when He describes to the crowds why they went out in the wilderness to see John in Lk 7:27.<sup>52</sup> John is not only a prophet, but he is also responsible for preparing the coming salvation of God. Therefore, John’s ministry, words, and actions are divinely ordained according to Luke.

In v. 77 Zechariah declares that John will give “knowledge of salvation” to God’s people. While this phrase is not used elsewhere in Scripture, the knowledge of God is a frequent theme in the Old Testament,<sup>53</sup> and God’s salvation is a frequent theme in the New Testament. John’s gift of the “knowledge of salvation” is fitting as he bridges the two Testaments, fulfilling his calling as the last of the Old Testament prophets<sup>54</sup> as he prepares the way for God’s new age of salvation.<sup>55</sup> Knowledge in this instance should be understood in the Semitic sense as practical information or wisdom<sup>56</sup> that incorporates a sense of experience. The people will experience God’s salvation through the “forgiveness of their sins.”<sup>57</sup> (Lk 1:77b) Forgiveness of sins is a key Lucan theme with eight of the eleven occurrences of the phrase in the New Testament appearing in Luke-Acts.<sup>58</sup> In addition to describing the content of salvation,<sup>59</sup> these words also foreshadow

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Garland, 108.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 373.

<sup>54</sup> In Lk 16:16a, Jesus says, “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came.”

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 383.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 100.

John's proclamation at the beginning of his ministry about "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Lk 3:3b, see Reading 3 below).<sup>60</sup> While Zechariah's brief sketch of John's role does not mention baptism or repentance, the obvious foreshadowing of John's ministry as described in Lk:3:1-14 implies baptism and repentance are connected to this experience of salvation by the forgiveness of sins.<sup>61</sup>

### **Reading 2: Mark 1:2-5**

<sup>2</sup>As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”

<sup>4</sup>John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

### **Isaiah Citation**

In spite of the attestation to the prophet Isaiah, Mark conflates verses from Exodus, Malachi, and Isaiah. Mark's v. 2b, comes from Exod 23:20a where God promises to send an angel before the Israelites as they begin their conquest of Canaan. Mark's v. 2c, comes from Mal 3:1a where God promises to send a messenger to prepare the way for God's renewed occupation of the temple in Israel's post-exilic period. The remainder of Mark's citation comes from Isaiah 40:3. The author of Deutero-Isaiah, speaking to the Israelites in Babylonian exile, portrays a voice crying out for the preparation of a path God will use to lead His people from Babylon through the desert to their Judean homeland.<sup>62</sup> While Deutero-Isaiah describes a path "for our

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<sup>60</sup> Garland, 108.

<sup>61</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 75.

<sup>62</sup> C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 49-50.

God" (Isa 40:3d), Mark has in mind the coming of Jesus and so alters the citation to refer to "his paths."<sup>63</sup>

While the ascription to Isaiah is technically incorrect, creating a *mélange* of Old Testament texts is a familiar form found in postbiblical Judaism and elsewhere in the New Testament. Mark likely employs an Isaian context using the principle of analogy<sup>64</sup> because of Isaiah's broad vision of eschatological restoration and renewal.<sup>65</sup> Mark's citational introduction makes three salient points. John, standing in line with Moses and Deutero-Isaiah, is preparing the way for Jesus.<sup>66</sup> This preparation fulfills Scripture and as such is part of God's plan.<sup>67</sup> Those being led in 'the way' are called to radically change the circumstances of their lives.<sup>68</sup>

### **John's Activity**

John's location in the wilderness further cements his identity as the messenger "crying out in the wilderness." The wilderness plays an important image in Israel's history;<sup>69</sup> it is a place where Israel is utterly dependent on God and, in response, Israel is transformed.<sup>70</sup> John's proclamation will echo this dependence and need for transformation. In his proclamation, John calls the people to be baptized. John's baptism takes Jewish ceremonial cleansings as a starting motif,<sup>71</sup> but introduces two aspects that make his baptismal call new and unique. The Jewish

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<sup>63</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 63.

<sup>64</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1 – 8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 145-47.

<sup>65</sup> Straus, 63.

<sup>66</sup> Black, 49-50.

<sup>67</sup> Strauss, 63.

<sup>68</sup> Black, 50.

<sup>69</sup> Strauss, 63-64.

<sup>70</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 39.

<sup>71</sup> Strauss, 64.

ceremonial washings, both those associated with Temple purity<sup>72</sup> and those practiced by the Qumran community,<sup>73</sup> were repeated events that were self-administered. John's baptism was a one-time event and the baptism was administered by John.<sup>74</sup> John's active role in the baptism also makes it stand apart from Jewish proselyte baptism, which likely was not practiced until the second century, since the proselytes immersed themselves during the ceremony.<sup>75</sup> Once again John bridges the two Testaments, using the immersion motif of Jewish ritual washings to develop a new immersion practice that becomes the foundation for Christian baptism.<sup>76</sup>

The foundational phrase in John's proclamation is, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Since this identical phrase is found in Luke's account of John's baptismal activity, we shall examine this phrase after we explore Luke's pericope. Thematically related to this phrase is Mark's description in v. 5, not repeated in Luke, of the people being baptized "confessing their sins." No details about this confession are provided. Based on the scriptural associations with John's activity and the cultural practices of confession in that time period, Adela Yarbro Collins concludes "it is likely that the confession of sins was communal and general and that it signified acceptance of John's prophetic mission."<sup>77</sup>

### **Reading 3: Luke 3:1-14**

<sup>1</sup>In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

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<sup>72</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 142.

<sup>73</sup> Strauss, 64.

<sup>74</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 – 8*, 155.

<sup>75</sup> Strauss, 64.

<sup>76</sup> Black, 54.

<sup>77</sup> Collins, 144.

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
 make his paths straight.  
<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled,  
 and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
 and the crooked shall be made straight,  
 and the rough ways made smooth;  
<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

<sup>7</sup> John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup> He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

### **Synchronism and John's Call**

The sixfold synchronism in vv. 1-2 mimics prophetic introductions in the Old Testament and further enhances the view of John as a prophet.<sup>78</sup> The prophetic tone continues as Luke notes the “word of God” came to John in the “wilderness.”<sup>79</sup> As in Mark, John's wilderness location helps to establish him as the prophet “crying out in the wilderness.”<sup>80</sup> Luke makes clear that God's word is the driving force behind John's work.<sup>81</sup> The discussions about wilderness (place of transformation) and baptism (unique event) are equally applicable to Luke's narrative.

### **Isaiah Citation**

Luke drops the Exodus and Malachi verses from Mark's version and extends Isaiah's

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<sup>78</sup> John Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary, Volume 35a, Luke 1:1-9:20* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 139.

<sup>79</sup> Bovon, *Luke I*, 121.

<sup>80</sup> Garland, 153.

<sup>81</sup> Tannehill, 78.

citation so that in Luke the attestation of the Scripture to Isaiah is accurate, representing Isa 40:3-5.<sup>82</sup> Although deuter-Isaiah, Qumran, and likely John, believed a path was being made straight “for our God” (Isa 40:3d), Luke, following Mark, describes John preparing paths for Jesus and so alters Isaiah to read “his paths” in v. 4.<sup>83</sup> The extended Isaian citation describes a radical transformation of the landscape in order to make the path straight and smooth.<sup>84</sup> In John’s teaching in vv. 7-14, he makes it clear the radical transformation of the landscape is a metaphor for the radical transformation needed in the lives of God’s people.<sup>85</sup>

### **John as Preacher and Teacher**

John warns the crowds in vv. 7-9 that repentance is needed but that only true repentance counts.<sup>86</sup> John’s warning is harsh, calling the crowd a “brood of vipers”<sup>87</sup> and implying God’s wrath is imminent.<sup>88</sup> If the crowd wants to be saved, their repentance must produce “fruits” or deeds that proceed naturally from an authentic change of heart.<sup>89</sup>

The fiery preacher of vv. 7-9 becomes the steady teacher in vv. 10-14 as the fearful crowds ask, “What then should we do?” In responding to their questions in vv. 10-14, which only appear in Luke, John provides guidelines on how authentic repentance would express itself in daily life.<sup>90</sup> He advises the crowds to share elementary goods, such as food and clothing, based on the needs of others. He counsels the tax collectors to perform their duties honestly and

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>83</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 121.

<sup>84</sup> Tannehill, 79.

<sup>85</sup> Nolland, *Luke 1:1-9:20*, 144.

<sup>86</sup> Tannehill, 80.

<sup>87</sup> While this is Luke’s only use of this phrase, Matthew thrice refers to the Pharisees as a brood of vipers (Mt 3:7; 12:34; 23:33).

<sup>88</sup> Nolland, *Luke 1:1-9:20*, 148.

<sup>89</sup> Garland, 156.

<sup>90</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 153.

instructs the soldiers not to misuse their power to gain material wealth.<sup>91</sup>

### **John the Baptist Conclusion**

John's baptism activity receives identical terse descriptions by Mark and Luke: "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Scripture scholars note the description of John's baptism activity is ambiguous<sup>92</sup> for the description does not express the precise relationship among baptism, repentance, and forgiveness.<sup>93</sup> The link between baptism and repentance is interpreted by commentators in a variety of ways: baptism epitomizes repentance;<sup>94</sup> baptism is characterized by repentance;<sup>95</sup> repentance baptism is a repudiation of the old way of life.<sup>96</sup> While these explanations hint that John's baptism is an outward sign of the recipient's inward repentance, several scholars expressly interpret John's baptism in this manner.<sup>97</sup> Luke makes this same distinction between outward appearance and interior resolve in John's preaching about the 'fruits' of repentance.

The relationship between repentance and forgiveness of sins is more difficult to extract from the passage. Since John proclaims the baptism of repentance is "for the forgiveness of sins," he clearly indicates the purpose of repentance baptism is forgiveness.<sup>98</sup> However, is obtaining forgiveness a sure thing or only a possibility? Keeping in mind that repentance is the purview of humans and forgiveness the responsibility of God, some commentators describe the

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<sup>91</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 124-25.

<sup>92</sup> Collins, 140; Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 155.

<sup>93</sup> Black, 54.

<sup>94</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 156.

<sup>95</sup> John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Mark*, Edited by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 62.

<sup>96</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 149.

<sup>97</sup> Strauss, 65; Donahue, 62; Garland, 154; Tannehill, 78.

<sup>98</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 149.

baptism as pointing to a hope of forgiveness.<sup>99</sup> Others read the complete Gospel story back into John's proclamation and point out that John offers genuine forgiveness that is only completed on the cross.<sup>100</sup> Still others make the bold step to see John's repentance baptism as mediating divine forgiveness.<sup>101</sup> This position seems reasonable, considering the painstaking efforts by Mark and Luke to portray John in the line of Old Testament prophets who were known to speak for God. Viewed through this lens, John does not promise something he is not qualified to deliver. John prophetically speaks God's words of salvation to His people: *turn to Me and be forgiven*. The Benedictus also supports this conclusion as Zechariah prophesies that John will actually *give* an experience of salvation to God's people "by the forgiveness of their sins."<sup>102</sup> (Lk 1:77b) It is also important to acknowledge that as discussed in the section on historical context, John's Hebrew culture would have conditioned him to believe that God will respond with divine compassion and forgiveness to a sinner's heart-felt act of repentance. In conclusion, Mark's and Luke's pericopes about John's baptism indicate that authentic repentance leads to forgiveness.

## **SECTION 2: JEWISH REJECTION OF JESUS**

### **Reading 1: Mark 4:10-12**

<sup>10</sup> When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup> And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; <sup>12</sup> in order that  
    'they may indeed look, but not perceive,  
    and may indeed listen, but not understand;  
    so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

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<sup>99</sup> Donahue, 62.

<sup>100</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 150.

<sup>101</sup> Boring, *Mark*, 40.

<sup>102</sup> Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 373.

### Insiders and Outsiders

In this passage Jesus is in a private setting with a small group of His followers shortly after He has presented the Parable of the Sower to a very large crowd. In response to a question about teaching with parables, He explains that the elect who are with Him, which include more than the twelve,<sup>103</sup> have “been given the secret of the kingdom of God.” The Greek word used for “given” is the divine passive indicating the secret has been provided by God.<sup>104</sup> The method of transmitting the secret is not specifically identified, but in a few moments Jesus will provide private instructions to the small group with him, the insiders, about the interpretation of the Parable of the Sower. Private instruction to insiders is a common practice in Mark.<sup>105</sup> Jesus then remarks “for those outside, everything comes in parables.” Outside clearly refers back to the very large crowd He recently taught and also conjures up the scribes from the Beelzebul controversy in the previous chapter (Mk 3:20-35).<sup>106</sup> To describe why the outsiders only receive instruction using parables, He introduces a citation from Isaiah 6:10 with the purpose-laden words, “in order that.” God orders Isaiah to speak these words to the people of Israel as a pronouncement of judgment<sup>107</sup> that solidifies Israel’s intransigence and thwarts its restoration.<sup>108</sup> The people had hardened their heart against God to the point that God decided He will not allow the people to perceive or understand God’s way until His judgment is carried out by the invading Assyrians.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Strauss, 183.

<sup>104</sup> Black, 120.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 119-20.

<sup>106</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 302.

<sup>107</sup> Strauss, 185.

<sup>108</sup> Black, 120.

<sup>109</sup> Strauss, 185.

### **Divine Hardening**

Mark claims the divine plan is to purposely keep the outsiders from perceiving or understanding, specifically so that they will not turn and be forgiven, making this one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament. To the modern ear this plan sounds like divine predestination and a variety of creative attempts have been made to avoid this uncomfortable stance, but all of these attempts are wanting.<sup>110</sup> Both Isaiah and Mark are attempting to explain the failure of the Israelites and the Jews to accept the way of God, Yahweh in Isaiah's time and Jesus in Mark's time.<sup>111</sup> In order to affirm God's sovereignty, or divine control, the rejection of God by both groups must be part of His divine plan.<sup>112</sup> The Hebrew Scripture presents a similar episode in the Exodus story when Pharaoh originally hardens his heart against the Israelites and will not give in to Moses' demands to let God's people go free. Eventually, God, in judgment, further hardens Pharaoh's heart so that God's divine plan for Israel's exodus can be completed.<sup>113</sup> Mark mimics the experience of Moses and Isaiah to explain the rejection of Jesus by the Jews with a description of personal hardening and divine hardening that are intricately intertwined.<sup>114</sup>

### **Turn and Be Forgiven**

The Greek word translated as "turn" literally means "to come back."<sup>115</sup> As used by the prophets in the Old Testament it expressed the thought of turning from one's current course and

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<sup>110</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 299-301; Black, 120-21; Strauss, 184.

<sup>111</sup> Collins, 249.

<sup>112</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 305-6.

<sup>113</sup> Black, 121.

<sup>114</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 512.

<sup>115</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 301.

coming back to reorient one's life toward God.<sup>116</sup> This word can also be translated as "repent."<sup>117</sup> Mark chooses to quote Isaiah from the Aramaic Targum version of the Hebrew Scriptures, which uses the word "forgiven," rather "healed" as found in the Septuagint (LXX) and Masoretic Text (MT).<sup>118</sup> Both Isaiah and Mark express confidence that repentance leads to forgiveness.

### **Reading 2: Matthew 13:10-15**

<sup>10</sup> Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" <sup>11</sup> He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup> For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>13</sup> The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' <sup>14</sup> With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

'You will indeed listen, but never understand,  
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

<sup>15</sup> For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are hard of hearing,  
and they have shut their eyes;  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and understand with their heart and turn—  
and I would heal them.'"

Matthew's source for this passage is the Markan passage just reviewed with two explanatory additions. Matthew's v. 12 is imported from Mark 4:25 and Matthew expands the Isaiah citation to include Isaiah 6:9b-10c that Mark did not include.<sup>119</sup> As in Mark, the Matthean account follows Jesus teaching a great crowd the Parable of the Sower.

### **Insiders and Outsiders**

The comments from Mark's passage about insiders and outsiders apply here also.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Strauss, 184.

<sup>119</sup> Osborne, 501.

### **To Those Who Have, More Will Be Given**

The introductory “for” in v. 12 indicates this verse provides the reason for God’s grace-gift of revealing secrets to the insiders. Matthew stresses personal responsibility since the “have” and “more” refer to discipleship. As for the outsiders, those who have rejected Jesus will be kept from knowledge and removed from the kingdom.<sup>120</sup>

### **Divine Hardening – Matthew’s Softening**

Matthew has reworked Mark’s material to soften the harsh view of divine predestination. When introducing the reason for speaking in parables in v. 13, Matthew changes Mark’s “in order that” to “is that,” changing the meaning from ‘parables hardened the people’ to parables are used “because the people are hardened.”<sup>121</sup> The additional lines in the Isaiah citation presented in Matthew’s v. 15 also implicate the personal responsibility of the people: “this people’s heart has grown dull . . . *so that* they might not . . . understand with their heart and turn.”<sup>122</sup> In Matthew, parables are not always presented with a negative connotation. Later in this chapter Matthew explains that Jesus speaks in parables to the crowds to fulfill what David wrote in Psalm 78: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundations of the world.” (Mt:13:35). For Matthew, Jesus is always looking to heal, and parables have a unique capability to welcome transition from outside to inside.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 509.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 510.

<sup>122</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 247.

<sup>123</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 537.

**Turn and I Would Heal**

The comments from Mark's passage regarding 'turn' apply here also. Matthew's Isaiah citation comes from the LXX so the end result is healing.<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, the first-person pronoun implies Jesus would heal the repentant individual. Matthew, like Mark, appears to be convinced that repentance leads to healing.

**Reading 3: Luke 8:9-10**

<sup>9</sup>Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. <sup>10</sup>He said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.'"

Luke's source for this passage is the Markan passage reviewed earlier with a slightly truncated citation from Isaiah. As in Mark, the Lucan account follows Jesus teaching a great crowd the Parable of the Sower.

**Divine Hardening – Luke's Softening**

Luke, like Matthew, is uncomfortable with Mark's harsh view of divine predestination, but Luke solves this problem differently. Luke maintains the causative introduction to Isaiah's citation using the words 'so that', maintaining the Markan theme that the parables are purposely designed to harden the minds and hearts of the people. Nevertheless, Luke is unwilling to allow this divinely orchestrated obscuration of the meaning of parables to make the people unable to turn and thereby be forgiven. Therefore, Luke omits the final phrase from Mark's passage, "so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." While we cannot directly conclude what Luke thinks about the relationship of repentance and forgiveness, we can conclude that Luke believes that God would not purposely prohibit individuals from seeking repentance and forgiveness.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 535.

**Reading 4: John 12:36b-43**

After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them. <sup>37</sup> Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him. <sup>38</sup> This was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

“Lord, who has believed our message,  
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

<sup>39</sup> And so they could not believe, because Isaiah also said,

<sup>40</sup> “He has blinded their eyes  
and hardened their heart,  
so that they might not look with their eyes,  
and understand with their heart and turn—  
and I would heal them.”

<sup>41</sup> Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke about him. <sup>42</sup> Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; <sup>43</sup> for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God.

**Not Believing**

Just prior to this passage Jesus spoke to the crowds about His coming death and the judgment of this world. As in the other pericopes, He then retires from the crowds but this time He is alone, and the story line is carried out by the narrator. In the Synoptic Gospels the crowds did not understand the parables; in John's account the crowds “did not believe in him [Jesus],” which is tantamount to not believing in God.<sup>125</sup> The narrator drives home this message by citing Isaiah 53:1: the crowd has not believed our message [Jesus' teaching] even though the arm of the Lord [the strength of the Lord] has been revealed through Jesus' deeds.<sup>126</sup> The word ‘belief’ is not mentioned in the Synoptic stories, but crowds that look at Jesus' deeds and do not perceive the significance, and listen to Jesus' teaching and do not understand its meaning, most likely “did not believe in him.” (Jn 12:37b).

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<sup>125</sup> Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 558.

<sup>126</sup> Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *The Gospel of John*, Edited by Daniel Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 367.

### **Divine Hardening – John's Softening**

John explains the Jews' unbelief with a loose citation of Isaiah 6:10<sup>127</sup> that emphatically announces the crowd *could not believe* because God had blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts.<sup>128</sup> John appears to be in lockstep with Mark as John describes God as both causing the Jews unbelief and judging them for their unbelief. However, this theory of divine hardening conflicts with John's story of Jesus up to this point. Francis Moloney points to vv. 42-43 as proof that John felt compelled to leave behind the traditional explanation from Hebrew Scripture for the unbelief of God's people.<sup>129</sup> For in v. 42 John describes that many, even those in authority, did indeed believe in Jesus. But their belief is insufficient for them to confess it publicly for fear of being put out of the synagogue, a condition many members of the Johannine community had to endure.<sup>130</sup> In v. 43 John explains why their belief is not strong enough: they love the esteem, the admiration, the regard, and the approval of human beings so much that they are willing to turn their backs on the revelation of God in Jesus.<sup>131</sup>

### **Turn and I Would Heal**

John, following Matthew and Mark, appears certain that repentance leads to healing.

### **Jewish Rejection of Jesus Conclusion**

#### **Divine Hardening**

Isaiah 6:9-10 is used repeatedly as an apologetic passage by early Christianity to explain the perplexing rejection of the gospel by the Jewish community.<sup>132</sup> Bringing this Hebrew

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Klink, 559-60.

<sup>129</sup> Moloney, 364.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 364-65.

<sup>132</sup> Osborne, 510-11.

Scripture motif into the New Testament portrays the election from Israel to the Gentiles as the divine plan predicted in Scripture.<sup>133</sup> However, this position also carries with it the harsh view of a God who predestines outsiders to unbelief and damnation. For Matthew, Luke, and John this harsh view does not fit the nature of God revealed to them by Jesus, and each of these Gospel writers softens this harshness in a different way. A complete understanding of the divine hardening problem is beyond the scope of this current work. What is important for our investigation is that the Gospel writers were willing to modify and update themes from the Hebrew Scriptures to fit their understanding of Jesus' new covenant.

### **Repent and Be Forgiven**

Mark's concluding phrase is "turn again and be forgiven." Matthew and John conclude with "turn – and I would heal them." As discussed under the Mark section, the word for turn refers to turning from one's current course and coming back to reorient one's life toward God, and can appropriately be translated as repent.<sup>134</sup> Mark uses a Hebrew Scripture translation that uses the word forgive, whereas Matthew and John use a translation with the word heal. However, the context of the pericopes indicates a wholistic sort of healing, with eschatological overtones, that might rightly be called forgiveness. While the theme of forgiveness was not the central point of these passages, a couple important observations can be made. Mark, Matthew, and John each completely endorse the concept from the Hebrew Scripture that repentance leads to forgiveness, without any changes or modifications. Finally, the emphasis on unbelief creating an impervious roadblock to repentance in John illuminates the possibility of interpreting the narratives in Mark and Matthew as also having the concept of unbelief running just below the

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<sup>133</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 247.

<sup>134</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 301.

surface. This realization creates a potential causative connection between belief and repentance to keep in mind as we continue our investigation.

### **SECTION 3: JESUS COMMISSIONS DISCIPLES**

#### **Reading 1: Luke 24:44-47**

<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” <sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, <sup>46</sup> and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup> and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

#### **Source**

While all four Gospels describe a final appearance to the disciples with a commissioning of some sort, each of the narratives contains substantial unique material.<sup>135</sup> Broad consensus among scholars<sup>136</sup> exists that Luke’s final address of the risen Christ to the disciples is drawn from a distinctive pre-Lucan tradition<sup>137</sup> often referred to as L.<sup>138</sup>

#### **Fulfillment of Scripture**

Jesus reminds the disciples of His passion predictions in Luke 9:22 and 18:31-34.<sup>139</sup> He reiterates His proclamation from the eighteenth chapter that Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection fulfill Scripture.<sup>140</sup> Luke uses the Greek word translated in v. 44 as “must”

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<sup>135</sup> John Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary, Volume 35c, Luke 18:35-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 1217-18.

Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 1278-79.

<sup>136</sup> Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1217-18.

<sup>137</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1580.

<sup>138</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 265.

<sup>139</sup> Garland, 967.

<sup>140</sup> Francois Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28-24:53* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 386.

throughout his Gospel to describe divine necessity (Lk 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 19:5; 22:37; 24:7, 26).<sup>141</sup> So, when Jesus says in v. 44 that that everything written about Him in Scripture “must be fulfilled,” He is declaring this fulfillment is part of God’s divine plan.

Luke has Jesus begin His ministry in Nazareth’s synagogue by saying that Isaiah’s passage about proclaiming release to the captives was fulfilled in His reading. Luke uses the fulfillment of Scripture as bookends for Jesus’ ministry<sup>142</sup> to emphasize the importance of Jesus’ death and resurrection being part of the divine plan.<sup>143</sup> As discussed in the previous Section about the Jewish rejection of Jesus, such an outlook was theologically helpful to the early church.

### **Repentance for the Forgiveness of Sins**

Jesus commissions the disciples to proclaim “repentance and forgiveness of sins” in v. 47. Joseph A. Fitzmyer points out that ancient texts differ between “repentance and [καί] forgiveness of sins” and “repentance for [εἰς] the forgiveness of sins.” Fitzmyer denotes “for” as the preferred reading as he deems the “and” variant is a clear copyist’s modification to avoid two uses of the preposition εἰς near each other.<sup>144</sup> Several scholars concur with Fitzmyer’s preference<sup>145</sup> and “repentance *for* the forgiveness of sins” agrees precisely with John the

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<sup>141</sup> Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke: 9:51-24:53* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 1050-51.

<sup>142</sup> Garland, 966-67.

<sup>143</sup> Tannehill, 360.

<sup>144</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1584.

Garland, 967. The use of the preposition εἰς two times in close proximity is not evident in English as the Greek phrase “μετάνοιαν εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη” is translated as “repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all the nations.”

<sup>145</sup> Garland, 964; Nolland 3, 1217.

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina Series, Volume 3* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 40.

Baptist's proclamation at the beginning of his ministry in Lk 3:3.<sup>146</sup> The beginning of Jesus' ministry is likewise echoed in v. 47. The same Greek word translated as "forgiveness" in v. 47, is rendered as "release" in Lk 4:18 when Jesus proclaims "release to the captives" in the synagogue of Nazareth.<sup>147</sup> Not surprisingly, a ministry that begins and ends with forgiveness/release is filled with experiences of forgiveness and release in exorcisms (Lk 4:35), healings (Lk 5:24-25, see page 37 below), resuscitations (Lk 7:15), befriending sinners (Lk 7:47, see page 43 below), prayer (Lk 11:4, see page 57 below), and facing death (Lk 23:34, see page 87 below).<sup>148</sup>

Jesus commands His disciples in v. 47 to continue His mission of preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins "in his name." The best sense for this phrase is *as a representative of me*, as when Moses spoke to Pharaoh in God's name (Exod 5:23).<sup>149</sup> In addition, the *me* being represented in Jesus' instruction is Christ the risen Messiah. Here and in the early chapters of Acts, Luke associates divine power and authority with this name, Jesus Messiah.<sup>150</sup> Speaking in the name of God implies a high degree of validity. The tacit underpinning of this validity is one's belief that Jesus is the Messiah. The implicit conclusion is that belief in Jesus may play a role in motivating the hearer to accept the invitation to repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

### **Commissioning**

The task that has been central to the missions of John the Baptist and Jesus is now being handed over to the disciples,<sup>151</sup> and this commissioning maps out the ministerial tasks for the

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<sup>146</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 395.

<sup>147</sup> Tannehill, 361.

<sup>148</sup> Just, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1051-52.

<sup>149</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 817.

<sup>150</sup> Tannehill, 361.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

disciples in the next part of the story which will be recorded in Acts.<sup>152</sup> Although this current commissioning is more challenging, it builds on the previous missions of the twelve in Lk 9:1-6 and the seventy in Lk 10:1-12.<sup>153</sup>

The broadening of the mission to include “all nations” (Lk 24:47a) seems a significant expansion,<sup>154</sup> in spite of the foreshadowing provided by Luke (Lk 2:32; 3:6; 7:1-10; 14:16-24). However, the Gentile controversy in Acts (e.g. Acts 15:12-20)<sup>155</sup> makes it clear that, similar to Jesus’ passion predictions, the disciples did not immediately understand and act on Jesus’ direction to preach to *all nations*.

Luke’s reference to the proclamation beginning from Jerusalem carries a double meaning. Just as Jesus’ mission has converged on and reached a dramatic conclusion in Jerusalem, the testimony about Jesus will now begin in Jerusalem and go out to all the nations.<sup>156</sup> This command also fulfills scriptural prophecies, an important aspect of Jesus’ farewell discourse, about the word of the Lord going forth from Jerusalem to the nations as expressed in Isa 2:3, Mic 4:2, and Ezek 5:5.<sup>157</sup>

### **Jesus Commissions Disciples Conclusion**

Although the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible translates Jesus’ commission as proclaiming *repentance and forgiveness of sins*, a more authentic translation may be *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. The connective preposition *for* clarifies that repentance *leads to* forgiveness of sins in this Old Testament precept being proclaimed in the

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<sup>152</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 395.

<sup>153</sup> Just, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1052.

<sup>154</sup> Tannehill, 361.

<sup>155</sup> Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1218.

<sup>156</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 396.

<sup>157</sup> Garland, 968.

new covenant. The introductory phrase in v. 46, "Thus it is written" also applies to the Jesus' directive to the disciples to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sins is a fulfillment of Scripture and part of God's divine plan. Forgiveness is a key theme in Luke's description of Jesus' ministry, and now in this final address to the disciples Jesus clearly links repentance as leading to forgiveness. Another important aspect is that the proclamation is to be made *in the Messiah's name*, which implies faith in Jesus may be needed to accept the invitation to repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In this pericope, Luke emphasizes that a key part of God's divine plan is that repentance leads to forgiveness of sins, and that faith in Jesus as the Messiah may facilitate this repentance.

#### **SECTION 4: REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS CONCLUSION**

##### **Summary Information**

The table below provides key information about the Gospel passages that mention repentance in conjunction with divine forgiveness.

	No. Motifs	No. Passages	Gospel				Source				
			Mt	Mk	Lk	Jn	Mk	Q	M	L	Jn
<b>Repentance and Forgiveness</b>											
John the Baptist	1	3		1	2		2 <sup>158</sup>			1	
Rejection of Jesus	1	3	1	1		1	2				1
Disciples' Commission	1	1			1					1	
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>

While the connection of repentance with forgiveness may not be the pervasive testimony in the Gospels regarding forgiveness, the Gospels present a robust endorsement for the link between

<sup>158</sup> Brown, *Introduction*, 235. While Lk 3:1-14 uses Mk, Q, and L as sources, the linkage of repentance with forgiveness in Lk 3:3 uses Mk as its source.

repentance and forgiveness as this linkage is expressed in seven total passages, a majority of sources, and all four Gospels.

### **Repentance Leads to Forgiveness**

*Repentance leads to the forgiveness of sins* constitutes the consistent position in the three vignettes: the Baptist, rejection of Jesus, and the disciples' commissioning. Other consistencies include connections with the Old Testament and divine intent. John the Baptist is painted as a prophet in the Old Testament tradition, citations from Isaiah are used to describe the crowds that rejected Jesus, and Luke emphasizes fulfillment of Scripture in Jesus' farewell address. As a prophet, John the Baptist speaks for God in mediating divine forgiveness through a repentance baptism; the theme of divine involvement in hardening the peoples' hearts is a troublesome issue in the rejection vignette; and in addition to repentance for forgiveness of sins, Jesus' death and resurrection are all part of God's divine plan. In spite of the consistent message about repentance for forgiveness, none of the episodes is primarily about forgiveness and none of the episodes attempts to develop a wholistic explanation of God's forgiveness. While repentance clearly leads to forgiveness of sins, the passages do not imply that repentance is required in order to be forgiven. This position leaves open the door that other avenues may be available that also lead to forgiveness.

In John's Gospel, the crowds did not believe in Jesus. This observation raises the possibility that the crowds in the Synoptic stories that looked at Jesus' deeds and did not perceive the significance and listened to Jesus' teaching and did not understand its meaning, "did not believe in him." (Jn 12:37b) As a result, the motif about the rejection of Jesus presents an addendum to the repentance theme that if there is no faith, then there is no repentance since the unbelieving crowds were incapable of repenting. While this position does not logically

guarantee that faith will result in repentance, it does say that repentance will not occur without faith. In Luke's commissioning vignette, the command to proclaim repentance in the Messiah's name implies that faith is involved in the process of repenting that leads to the forgiveness of sins. Although Luke's portrayal is less emphatic about the need for faith, it is not at odds with the assertion in the rejection passages that faith is required for repentance.

In the seven Scripture passages examined, the Gospel writers whole-heartedly embrace the Hebraic cultural and theological belief that repentance leads to God's forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, God's divine plan is that this repentance and forgiveness shall be the centerpiece of the new covenant Jesus has ushered in. Finally, while repentance does indeed lead to forgiveness, repentance is not necessarily a requirement for forgiveness, and it may be that faith is a requirement for repentance.

## CHAPTER 4: FAITH AND FORGIVENESS

### SECTION 1: PARALYTIC FORGIVEN

#### Reading 1: Mark 2:1-12

<sup>1</sup> When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. <sup>2</sup> So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. <sup>3</sup> Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. <sup>4</sup> And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." <sup>6</sup> Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, <sup>7</sup> "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" <sup>8</sup> At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? <sup>9</sup> Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?" <sup>10</sup> But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— <sup>11</sup> "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." <sup>12</sup> And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

#### **Structure**

This pericope is likely a typical Markan sandwich that inserts a controversy story into the middle of a healing story.<sup>159</sup> The controversy story seems unconnected to the surrounding healing account since the scribes pop up out of nowhere in the middle of the narrative, and at the end of the episode it seems odd that the scribes could be included in the "all" that were "amazed and glorified God" in v. 15. Another marker for the intercalation is the repeated phrases in vv. 5 and 10, "he said to the paralytic," which mark the beginning and the end of the insertion. Such framing is standard practice for Markan redactional insertions.<sup>160</sup> This sandwich is more interconnected than Mark's typical intercalation episode as Jesus makes it clear in v. 9 that the

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<sup>159</sup> Black, 86-87.

<sup>160</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1* - 8, 219.

conclusion of the healing story will settle the dispute in the controversy story. As in other sandwich narratives, Mark uses two different stories to focus on an important theological point. In this case, Mark emphasizes that Jesus has divine authority on earth, which includes forgiving sins and healing lameness.

### **Roof**

Mark's description of the roof fits the typical Palestinian house, which had a flat roof composed of wooden crossbeams covered with thatch and a layer of hardened mud.<sup>161</sup> The roofs were sturdy affairs that permitted the house occupants to sleep on the roof in search of a cooling breeze during warm weather. Access to the roof was normally provided by an external staircase or ladder, which would have been accessible to the paralytic and his friends.<sup>162</sup>

### **Forgiveness, Controversy, and Healing**

Mark's pericope is utilized by both Matthew and Luke. The pertinent aspects concerning forgiveness, controversy, and healing are much the same in the three Gospels. These topics will be discussed in detail after Matthew's and Luke's versions have been introduced.

### **Reading 2: Matthew 9:1-8**

<sup>1</sup> And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town. <sup>2</sup> And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." <sup>3</sup> Then some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." <sup>4</sup> But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? <sup>5</sup> For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? <sup>6</sup> But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Stand up, take your bed and go to your home." <sup>7</sup> And he stood up and went to his home. <sup>8</sup> When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

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<sup>161</sup> Black, 86.

<sup>162</sup> Strauss, 120.

### **Matthew Redactions to Mark**

Matthew abbreviates Mark to create a sharper focus on the person of Jesus<sup>163</sup> and the forgiveness controversy.<sup>164</sup> Matthew's narrative starts as a simple healing story with the details of Jesus teaching in a house with a great crowd gathered and the roof breaching eliminated.<sup>165</sup> While these omissions unearth the controversy with the scribes straightaway, Matthew's paucity of words removes some of the impact present in Mark's version. The faith of the friends in the Markan version seems more dynamic and determined as they boldly dismantle the roof to provide their paralytic friend access to Jesus.

Matthew also makes some redactions to advance his theological point of view. He vilifies the scribes by leaving out their explanation of why they see Jesus' proclamation as blasphemous, making their judgment appear malicious and thus described as evil by Jesus.<sup>166</sup> In Mark, the crowd was amazed because they had "never seen anything like this," (Mk 2:12) but in Matthew, the crowd is awed because God "had given such authority to human beings." (Mt 9:8) Matthew may have altered Mark's words to support the early Church's authority to forgive sins as expressed in Mt 16:19 and 18:18 ("whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven").<sup>167</sup>

### **Reading 3: Luke 5:17-26**

<sup>17</sup> One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. <sup>18</sup> Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; <sup>19</sup> but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let

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<sup>163</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 27.

<sup>164</sup> Osbourne, 324-25.

<sup>165</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 379

<sup>166</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8 - 20*, 27-28.

<sup>167</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Matthew*, Edited by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 122.

him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you."<sup>21</sup> Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"<sup>22</sup> When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?<sup>23</sup> Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?"<sup>24</sup> But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home."<sup>25</sup> Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.<sup>26</sup> Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen strange things today."

### **Luke Redactions to Mark**

Luke highlights the controversy story. The scribes do not just pop up out of nowhere in the middle of the narrative as in Mark; they are given a grand introduction noting that they come from Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem.<sup>168</sup> The scribes are described as "teachers of the law," which gives them an important teaching agenda in addition to their normal transcription services, and they are accompanied by Pharisees.<sup>169</sup> Luke makes clear at the outset that the "power of the Lord" was with Jesus to heal.<sup>170</sup> In one jam-packed sentence in v. 17, Luke has set the scene for Jesus' controversy with the Jewish authorities. In addition, as a city dweller, Luke envisions a Mediterranean house with tile roof, rather than the thatch roof of the typical Capernaum home.<sup>171</sup>

### **Forgiveness, Controversy, and Healing in the Paralytic Narrative**

#### **Faith and Forgiveness**

A crucial turning point in the narrative occurs when Jesus observes "their faith." (Mk 2:5, Mt 9:2. Lk 5:20) While not explicitly mentioned in the narrative, the paralytic is logically

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<sup>168</sup> Tannehill, 104.

<sup>169</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 178.

<sup>170</sup> Garland, 241.

<sup>171</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 179.

included with his friends in the faith ascription.<sup>172</sup> The paralytic was willingly carried by his friends and it is certainly plausible that he asked for their assistance. Jesus recognizes the faith of the group not through an intellectual conviction that produces a confession of belief,<sup>173</sup> but through a demonstration of a persistent faith that overcomes obstacles.<sup>174</sup> The friends believe that God, working through Jesus, can heal their paralytic companion.<sup>175</sup> Their aggressive confidence compels them to tear off a roof<sup>176</sup> to place their friend in the presence of Jesus.<sup>177</sup>

Jesus' first words to the paralytic are, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (Mk 2:5) Son is used here as a term of endearment, not as a designation of youth.<sup>178</sup> This sentiment is more obvious in Luke where Jesus addresses the paralytic as "friend." Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness is unexpected since Jesus has previously healed many infirmities and the paralytic is obviously in need of physical healing.<sup>179</sup> In addition, Mark clarifies that Jesus has noticed the faith of the paralytic and his friends, and faith is frequently connected with physical healing in the Gospels.<sup>180</sup> However, Jesus knows the paralytic's deepest need and pronounces his sins are forgiven.<sup>181</sup> The construction of the Greek passage used by all the Gospel writers is a divine passive, saying in essence, *Your sins are forgiven by God.*<sup>182</sup> A few moments later Jesus claims as the Son of Man to have "authority on earth to forgive sins." (Mk 2:10, Mt 9:6, Lk 5:24) For

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>173</sup> Tannehill, 105-6.

<sup>174</sup> Strauss, 120.

<sup>175</sup> Osbourne, 377.

<sup>176</sup> Black, 90.

<sup>177</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 228.

<sup>178</sup> Black, 86.

<sup>179</sup> Strauss, 121.

<sup>180</sup> Mt 8:5-13 & Lk 7:1-10, Mt 9:20-22 & Mk 5:25-34, Mt 9:27-31 & Mk 10:46-52 & Lk 18:35-43, Mt 15:21-28, Mt 17:14-20 & Mk 9:14-29 & Lk 9:37-43, Lk 17:11-19.

<sup>181</sup> Garland, 242.

<sup>182</sup> Donahue, 11.

the first century audience, Jesus' divinity is implicitly expressed.<sup>183</sup> Essentially, the point of acting on God's behalf is the crux of the narrative and the cause of the controversy with the scribes that will follow.<sup>184</sup> From our modern point of view, we take Jesus' divinity for granted, but we are interested in what this pericope says about the relationship between faith and forgiveness. Faith did not cause the paralytic to be forgiven. Faith caused the paralytic to seek with determination to be in the presence of Jesus. Jesus caused the paralytic's sins to be forgiven when He proclaimed the forgiveness.<sup>185</sup> Faith in this pericope is a conduit to forgiveness.

### **Blasphemy Controversy**

The controversy arises because the scribes are thinking Jesus' proclamation of forgiveness is blasphemy for "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:7)<sup>186</sup> The scribes' thoughts recall the opening words of the *Shema*,<sup>187</sup> from Deut 6:4, which fashioned the center of the synagogue liturgy: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."<sup>188</sup> Mark introduces some heavy irony here. As the scribes mentally denounce Jesus' assertion of divine authority,<sup>189</sup> Jesus reveals His divinity by perceiving what is in their hearts.<sup>190</sup> The accusation of blasphemy here follows the typical New Testament use referring to a misuse of the power or majesty of God<sup>191</sup> rather than the strict Jewish meaning of cursing God or slandering His

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<sup>183</sup> Osbourne, 327.

<sup>184</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 227.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>186</sup> Harrington, 121.

<sup>187</sup> *Shema* means Hear, the unit's initial word, in Hebrew.

<sup>188</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 222.

<sup>189</sup> Strauss, 122.

<sup>190</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 222. Cf. Prov 24:12.

<sup>191</sup> Donahue, 95.

name.<sup>192</sup> Regardless, the charge of blasphemy by the scribes is serious since the penalty for blasphemy in Israel was stoning.<sup>193</sup>

### Physical Healing

Jesus responds to the blasphemy charges of the scribes with a rabbinic style lesser-to-greater argument. Since healing the paralytic requires external proof, this act is seen as the greater, more difficult action.<sup>194</sup> The logic of the argument is that if Jesus can do the more difficult task of healing the paralytic, then He offers this healing as proof He possesses the authority to forgive the sins of the paralytic.<sup>195</sup> Some scholars point out that the proof-challenge is lopsided since forgiving sins requires divine authority, but healing does not.<sup>196</sup> While this argument may be true for some healings, such as healing a broken leg, a miraculous healing of a bed-ridden paralytic certainly implies divine authority.<sup>197</sup> Therefore, Jesus validates His authority to forgive the paralytic's sins by physically healing the paralytic in front of the scribes and the crowd.<sup>198</sup>

While there is strong testimony in the Old Testament and rabbinic tradition that sin causes sickness, there is also ample evidence in both Testaments that denies such a connection.<sup>199</sup> Notable examples of infirmities not caused by sin include Job in the Old Testament and the man blind from birth in Jn 9:1-3.<sup>200</sup> None of the Synoptic narratives imply the

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<sup>192</sup> Black, 87.

<sup>193</sup> Garland, 243.

<sup>194</sup> Strauss, 122.

<sup>195</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 217-18.

<sup>196</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 328.

<sup>197</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 229.

<sup>198</sup> Strauss, 124.

<sup>199</sup> Black, 89.

<sup>200</sup> Osbourne, 327.

man's paralysis was caused by sin.<sup>201</sup> On the contrary, after the paralytic's sins were forgiven, he remained unable to walk. For this pericope, the connection of sin and sickness stands well in the background.<sup>202</sup>

### **Son of Man**

In each Synoptic narrative, Jesus claims, as the Son of Man, to have "authority on earth to forgive sins." (Mk 2:10, Mt 9:6, Lk 5:24) The juxtaposition of the phrases *on earth*, *Son of Man*, and *authority* calls to mind Dan 7:13-14: "I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. . . To him was given dominion and glory and kingship."<sup>203</sup> Son of Man is an ambiguous title,<sup>204</sup> but the allusion to Dan 7 and the nature of the controversy here implies Jesus uses the title to confirm His messianic authority on earth. In other places in the Gospel the title refers to Jesus' mission of service and suffering or to His eventual return in glory for the final judgment. Since the literal meaning of the Son of Man was a *human being*, Jesus' self-use of the title expresses solidarity with the people while alluding to a Danielic messianic status without any preconceived political or military connotations.<sup>205</sup> "Jesus could and did fill it [Son of Man title] with His own meaning."<sup>206</sup> The *on earth* description means that Jesus' authority corresponds to the authority the Father carries out in heaven, not that Jesus' authority is limited to earth,<sup>207</sup> which is yet another endorsement for Jesus' divine authority.

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<sup>201</sup> Strauss, 121.

<sup>202</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 380.

<sup>203</sup> Marcus, *Mark 1 - 8*, 222-23.

<sup>204</sup> Garland, 243.

<sup>205</sup> Strauss, 123-24.

<sup>206</sup> Garland, 243, note 8.

<sup>207</sup> Strauss, 124.

### **Paralytic Forgiven Conclusion**

The controversy in this pericope centers on whether Jesus possesses the divine authority to forgive sins, not whether the faith of the paralytic and his friends could rightly lead God to forgive the paralytic's sins. The step from faith to forgiveness appears to be an unchallenged connection in this narrative that focuses on divine decision making. Jesus' clever argument and stunning healing of the paralytic cements His divine authority to forgive sins. However, while the Hebraic cultural pathway to forgiveness of confession, remorse, repentance, and/or exhortation appears absent in this vignette, new life is breathed into the compassionate Hebrew God who is disposed to choose mercy. Jesus' proclamation makes clear that a determined, persistent faith in a compassionate God can become a conduit to forgiveness in the new covenant.

### **SECTION 2: SINFUL WOMAN FORGIVEN**

#### **Reading 1: Luke 7:36-50**

<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup> And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. <sup>38</sup> She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." <sup>40</sup> Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." <sup>41</sup> "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." <sup>48</sup> Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup> But those who were at the table with him began to say among

themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"<sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

### Source

A similar anointing story is also recorded in the other Gospels. All four versions exhibit some strong similarities in the narrative scene: Jesus is invited to a meal, an uninvited woman enters and anoints Jesus, her actions evoke a negative reaction from others, and Jesus defends the accused woman.<sup>208</sup> However, the Lucan account has several significant differences with the pericopes in Mt 26:6-13, Mk 14:3-9, and Jn 12:1-8. Luke's scene occurs early in Jesus' Galilean ministry, the other episodes occur during Passion Week in Bethany. Luke is the only occurrence in which the dinner host is a Pharisee<sup>209</sup> and the woman is a notorious sinner. In Luke the dispute is about the loving actions of a forgiven sinner. In the Passion Week vignettes, Jesus berates those complaining that expensive perfume is being wasted by explaining that the woman is preparing His body for burial.<sup>210</sup> While scholars disagree on whether these two different narratives arise from distinct original events<sup>211</sup> or a single memory that matured and changed through oral transmission into two different traditions,<sup>212</sup> there is strong consensus that the Lucan story of forgiveness and love comes from Luke's special source, L.<sup>213</sup>

### The Sinful Woman

The woman is not an invited guest since she only came to the house because she "learned" (Lk 7:37) Jesus was eating there. Scholars differ on the inappropriateness of an

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<sup>208</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 291-92.

<sup>209</sup> Donahue, 390.

<sup>210</sup> Strauss, 604.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 603-4.

<sup>212</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 291-92; Donahue, 390.

<sup>213</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 292.

uninvited guest entering a house during a dinner party.<sup>214</sup> However, the narrative takes a neutral stance on the woman's entrance, none of the dinner guests, including Simon, criticize her presence, the focal point of the narrative regarding the woman is that, as a sinner, she interacts intimately with Jesus.

Some translate the Greek of v. 37 as "a woman who was a sinner in the city"<sup>215</sup> and interpret the "in the city" phrase as implying she is a prostitute.<sup>216</sup> Others observe that, like the paralytic in Chapter 5, her sins are not identified.<sup>217</sup> This later position seems more appropriate since the main theme of the narrative, the complete forgiveness of her sins, is neither strengthened nor weakened by her status as a prostitute and actually detracts from the universal sense of the message of forgiveness by identifying her with a particular sin.

The woman's actions are "emotionally charged and bold"<sup>218</sup> but not impulsive since she deliberately brought an alabaster jar of ointment with her.<sup>219</sup> Her behavior is considered bold because it is so unusual and culturally inappropriate.<sup>220</sup> The woman's actions towards Jesus' feet, which are mentioned seven times in the narrative, is significant in a society where feet are considered offensive,<sup>221</sup> especially when she practices the unheard of actions of both kissing and anointing His feet. Unloosing her hair to dry Jesus' feet represents a double dose of impropriety

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<sup>214</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 3-4.

Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 327.

<sup>215</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 289.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>217</sup> Garland, 325.

<sup>218</sup> Tannehill, 135.

<sup>219</sup> Garland, 325.

<sup>220</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 195.

<sup>221</sup> Garland, 325.

as Jewish women rarely let their hair down in public and to use her hair to dry Jesus' feet would have been considered demeaning.<sup>222</sup>

### **Parable of the Two Debtors**

Since Jesus does not admonish the woman for touching him, Simon concludes that Jesus is not a prophet because He appears unaware the woman is a sinner. Aware of Simon's misinterpretation of the scene, Jesus chooses to underscore His authority as teacher with the tension-building phrase in v. 40, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Simon's response, "Teacher, speak," indicates that Simon is at least willing to hear Jesus' position.<sup>223</sup>

Jesus senses the woman's interior disposition and knows her sins have been forgiven.<sup>224</sup> Instead of directly confronting Simon,<sup>225</sup> Jesus uses a simple parable as an imaginative bridge to help Simon judge the situation from a new perspective.<sup>226</sup> The two debtors in the parable are incapable of repaying their debts.<sup>227</sup> The parable is colorless, with little detail, until the shocking conclusion that the moneylender completely erases the debts of his borrowers.<sup>228</sup> Jesus will eventually link the debtor analogy to real life by noting the cancelling of the large debtor's debt is equivalent to the forgiving of the woman's many sins.<sup>229</sup> Still, the simplicity of the analogy belies the significance of the new theological point that is being unveiled here. A strong rabbinic

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<sup>222</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 294-95.

<sup>223</sup> Garland, 324-27.

<sup>224</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 295.

<sup>225</sup> Garland, 327.

<sup>226</sup> Tannehill, 136.

<sup>227</sup> Garland, 327.

<sup>228</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 296.

<sup>229</sup> Johnson, 127.

tradition held that God always exacts punishment for human sin.<sup>230</sup> However, in this simple parable Jesus powerfully brings God's new eschatological act of forgiveness into view.<sup>231</sup>

Jesus contrasts the woman's treatment of Jesus with Simon's failure to provide the basic aspects of hospitality. Simon failed to provide water to bathe Jesus' feet, to greet the teacher with a kiss on the hand, and to anoint Jesus' head with oil.<sup>232</sup> The woman's actions were doubly charged: she not only furnished Simon's errant hospitality, she also significantly exceeded the cultural norms with the extravagance of her actions<sup>233</sup>

In v. 47 Jesus connects the parable to the real-life story unfolding in Simon's house. The Greek in v. 47 is ambiguous about whether the woman's love led to forgiveness or her forgiveness led to the expressed love.<sup>234</sup> The parable and the remainder of the narrative clarifies that forgiveness preceded her love and the NRSV translates out the ambiguity to match this cause and effect relationship.<sup>235</sup> The parable and the woman overtly portray that the forgiveness of a large debt or many sins results in great love. However, the parable and the woman also subtly imply the resultant love is so much more than gratefulness because the debtor and the woman were incapable of repaying the debt or sins of their own accord.<sup>236</sup>

### **Faith and Forgiveness**

The same Greek word for forgiveness, a theological passive, is used in vv. 47 and 48 and clarifies that the woman's sins have been forgiven by God.<sup>237</sup> The perfect tense of this verb (in

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<sup>230</sup> Garland, 327.

<sup>231</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 296.

<sup>232</sup> Garland, 328-29.

<sup>233</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 291.

<sup>234</sup> Tannehill, 136.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> Garland, 372.

<sup>237</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 325.

spite of the NRSV translation using the present tense in v. 48) implies her sins have been forgiven prior to this scene.<sup>238</sup> So, there is a gap in the story as the narrative does not describe the actual moment of forgiveness.<sup>239</sup> Jesus does describe the reason she is forgiven in v. 50, "Your faith has saved you,"<sup>240</sup> but the dynamic involved in her coming to faith and the moment of forgiveness are left to the reader's imagination. The parable, however, makes clear that faith does not have the power to heal her; only God has the power to heal her sinful state.<sup>241</sup>

Forgiveness of sins is the central theological theme in the pericope. The parable stands at the center of the narrative to illustrate this very point<sup>242</sup> and to also highlight the new eschatological position<sup>243</sup> that God offers this salvation freely without exacting the payment of debt which the debtor is incapable of making.<sup>244</sup> The fact that faith is a conduit to this forgiveness is mentioned by Jesus at the very end almost as an afterthought; it is not the main point of the story. The main point of the account is to encourage others, especially Simon, to see themselves in the woman and to follow in her footsteps. However, the confrontation is left unresolved. We are not told whether Simon accepts or rejects Jesus' teaching.<sup>245</sup>

### **Sinful Woman Forgiven Conclusion**

Luke has structured this narrative to focus on God's forgiveness of human sin. It is the first vignette examined where forgiveness stands as the centerpiece of the story. Closely related are the concepts that the woman, like the debtor in the parable, is not capable of paying off her

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<sup>238</sup> Garland, 330.

<sup>239</sup> Tannehill, 135.

<sup>240</sup> Garland, 330.

<sup>241</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 338.

<sup>242</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 328.

<sup>243</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 296.

<sup>244</sup> Garland, 327.

<sup>245</sup> Tannehill, 137.

debt of sin, that God has the power to grant her forgiveness, and that her resultant love for this salvific action is immense and lavish. A new theological view of forgiveness is unveiled here. Standing against the rabbinic tradition that God always exacts punishment for sin, the sinful woman experiences a God who freely offers salvific forgiveness without exacting payment. Jesus announces that the woman's faith has saved her, but the parable makes clear her faith was a conduit to an interaction with a loving God who had the power and desire to forgive her.

### **SECTION 3: FAITH AND FORGIVENESS CONCLUSION**

#### **Summary Information**

The table below provides key information about the Gospel passages that mention repentance or faith in conjunction with divine forgiveness.

	No. Motifs	No. Passages	Gospel				Source				
			Mt	Mk	Lk	Jn	Mk	Q	M	L	Jn
<b>Repentance and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Faith and Forgiveness</b>											
Paralytic Forgiven	1	3	1	1	1		3				
Sinful Woman Forgiven	1	1			1	1				1	
<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>

All the Synoptic Gospels attest to the connection of faith and forgiveness. However, the volume of this testimony is less than the repentance testimony with 3 repentance stories shrinking to 2 faith stories, and 7 repentance passages shrinking to 4 faith passages.

### **Sinful Woman Similarities to the Paralytic**

In addition to the theme of faith leading to forgiveness, Luke's tale of the sinful woman is strikingly similar to the story of the paralytic's healing in the Synoptic Gospels. The table below provides a summary of the similarities.

<b>Paralytic Forgiven</b> (Mk 2:1-12, Mt 9:1-8, Lk 5:17-26)	<b>Sinful Woman Forgiven</b> (Lk 7:36-50)
Paralytic's sins not identified	Woman's sins not identified <sup>246</sup>
Faith is demonstrated in bold actions	Love is demonstrated in bold actions <sup>247</sup>
Jesus knows scribes' thoughts	Jesus knows Simon's thoughts <sup>248</sup>
Paralytic's visible healing demonstrates his invisible forgiveness	Woman's visible actions of love demonstrate her invisible forgiveness <sup>249</sup>
Scribes question, Who can forgive sins but God alone? (not in Mt version)	Table guests question, Who is this who even forgives sins? (question asked without malice) <sup>250</sup>
Faith leads to forgiveness	Faith lead to forgiveness

The similarities are all the more unique considering the paralytic's story comes from Mark and the sinful woman's episode comes from Luke's special source L: two independent sources. Since Luke's redactions to Mark's paralytic narrative are not focused on the similarities mentioned above, a plausible explanation is that Luke modified some of the story elements from L to create powerful links between his two stories about faith leading to forgiveness.

### **Faith Leads to Forgiveness**

The stories of the paralytic and sinful woman espouse the position that faith acts as a conduit to forgiveness of sins. The controversy about whether Jesus possesses the divine authority to forgive sins stands at the center of the paralytic narrative, while God's willingness to forgive a debt that cannot be paid is the focal point of the sinful woman vignette. In spite of the

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<sup>246</sup> Garland, 325.

<sup>247</sup> Tannehill, 137.

<sup>248</sup> Garland, 327.

<sup>249</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 329.

<sup>250</sup> Garland, 330.

consistent message about faith being a conduit to forgiveness, neither episode explores the nature of the connection between faith and forgiveness. The Gospel writers depict faith as naturally leading to forgiveness and none of the players, from the paralytic and the sinful woman to the Pharisees and the crowds, seem surprised by this connection. This portrayal implies that the connection of faith and forgiveness was a foregone conclusion for the first century Jewish-Christian audience, which is remarkable since faith was not part of the traditional Hebraic cultural pathway to forgiveness of confession, remorse, repentance, and/or exhortation.

While both accounts clearly portray faith serving as a conduit to forgiveness, the passages do not imply that faith is required in order to be forgiven. This position leaves open the door that other avenues may be available that also lead to forgiveness. In Chapter 3, John's story (see page 25 above) of the crowd's rejection of Jesus indicates the crowds did not believe in Jesus, indicating that if there is no faith, then there is no repentance since the unbelieving crowds were incapable of repenting. The passages examined in this chapter did not provide any corroborating evidence that faith is a necessary steppingstone to repentance. At the same time, the passages do not preclude the existence of repentance prior to the forgiveness since they provide no details about the actual moment of forgiveness for the paralytic or the woman.

The parable in the sinful woman narrative introduces the New Testament concept that man is not capable of repaying his debt of sin. While the act of God canceling or forgiving these unrepayable sins represents a connection with a compassionate Yahweh who is disposed to choose mercy, the step from a God who exacts punishment for sin to a God who offers salvation freely is a step from the Hebrew Scriptures into the Christian New Testament.

In the four Scripture passages examined, the Gospel writers consistently present faith as a conduit leading to forgiveness of sins, a concept that is strikingly Christian in nature. Luke's

pericope takes a step deeper into the new covenant by describing a God who offers salvific forgiveness freely without exacting payment for a debt which the debtor is incapable of making. Finally, while faith does indeed lead to forgiveness, faith is not necessarily a requirement for forgiveness.

## **CHAPTER 5: FORGIVING OTHERS AND FORGIVENESS**

### **SECTION 1: FORGIVE AND YOU WILL BE FORGIVEN**

#### **Reading 1: Luke 6:36-38**

<sup>36</sup> “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. <sup>37</sup> Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup> give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

#### **Context**

These three verses are spoken by Jesus about two-thirds of the way through the Sermon on the Plain, after the keynote idea of loving one's enemies<sup>251</sup> has been dramatically developed. In Jesus' most significant summary of His teaching during His Galilean ministry,<sup>252</sup> He outlines the characteristic behavior that defines His followers. The discourse contains recurrent polarization: some are blessed and some have woes, those who listen and those who do not, good fruit and bad fruit, etc.<sup>253</sup> This dichotomy is a reverberation of the Old Testament theme of the two ways: the way-of-life and the way-of-death (see Deut 30:15-20, Jer 21:8).<sup>254</sup> This polarization is not evident in the passage under examination since these verses describe prohibitions and commands that define the *new* way-of-life for Jesus' disciples.

#### **Source**

Luke's Sermon on the Plain and Matthew's Sermon on the Mount are a varied tapestry of elements from the sayings source Q, Luke's special source L, Matthew's special source M, and creative redaction by both authors. The resulting sermons portray both remarkable similarities

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<sup>251</sup> Tannehill, 116.

<sup>252</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 283.

<sup>253</sup> Garland, 266-67.

<sup>254</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 284.

and noteworthy differences. For example, both sermons build a corpus around the command for Jesus' disciples to love their enemies, but Luke's emphasis on generosity and forgiveness is not found in Matthew. Our three verse pericope portrays this composition tapestry. Vv. 36-37a (be merciful, do not judge) and v. 38c (for the measure you give) come from Q and are also found in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>255</sup> V. 37b (do not condemn) is redactional.<sup>256</sup> Finally, vv. 37c-38b (forgive, give, a good measure) are from L.<sup>257</sup>

### Mercy

Luke uses v. 36 as a transition from the discussion about loving one's enemies to the next section with succinct and specific commands about everyday attitudes and behavior.<sup>258</sup> The justification for Jesus' disciples to be merciful is that God is merciful,<sup>259</sup> which echoes the Old Testament proscription of Lev 19:2 calling the people of Israel to imitate God. Of the two principal characteristics of the God of Israel, compassion and holiness, Luke identifies compassion as the wellspring of Christian life.<sup>260</sup> For Luke completely grasped Jesus' rediscovery of God's merciful love, mentioned twenty-six times in the Old Testament,<sup>261</sup> as the foundation of the covenantal relationship with Israel, and Luke embraced this loving mercy, both here and poignantly in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32).<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 233.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>261</sup> Gen 19:16; Ex 34:6; Deut 4:31; 2 Sam 24:14; 1 Chr 21:13; 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 9:17, 19, 27, 28, 31; Ps 25:6, 69:16, 86:15, 103:4, 8, 111:4, 116:5, 119:156, 145:8; Isa 63:7; Jer 3:12, 31:20; Lam 3:22; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2. Note the six boldface citations contain the credal description, "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

<sup>262</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 241-42.

### Mercy in Action

Luke describes Jesus composing a compact, rhythmic set of instructions for the disciples in verses 37-38a,<sup>263</sup> two formulas of synonymous parallelism stated in the negative followed by another two formulas of synonymous parallelism stated in the positive. Significantly, the passive verbs used in the second half of each formula are theological passives implying God is the subject, e.g. *you will not be judged by God* or *you will be forgiven by God*. The imitation of God espoused in the previous verse is replicated here in these four practical examples of how to treat others.<sup>264</sup> Seen through the introductory lens of v. 36, v. 37c could be restated as *Forgive, just as your Father forgives*.

The potentially ambiguous word “judge” in v. 37a is clarified by Luke in the redactional v. 37b as “condemn.”<sup>265</sup> Thus, Jesus warns His followers to avoid condemnatory judgment, not to cease evaluating the behavior of others.<sup>266</sup> In v. 37c, Luke uses his special source L to address a key concern of his that is intimately related to mercy: forgiveness.<sup>267</sup> The synonymous v. 38a reinterprets forgiveness as a generous form of giving.<sup>268</sup> While the forgive and give couplet are stated in a reciprocal format,<sup>269</sup> the reason for being merciful is not for eschatological gain.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Tannehill, 120.

<sup>264</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 281, 295.

<sup>265</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 241-42.

<sup>266</sup> Garland, 283.

<sup>267</sup> An electronic search of the NRSV Bible reveals Luke speaks of forgiving and forgiveness more than any other Gospel writer even after adjusting for Gospel length, with mentions of forgiveness per 10,000 words calculated at: Luke 9.8, Mark 8.8, Matthew 8.2, John 1.3.

<sup>268</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 233, 241.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

Rather the disciples follow Jesus' call to portray God's character of mercy and forgiveness in the world<sup>271</sup> because forgiveness has broken into their world through Jesus' message.<sup>272</sup>

### **Measure**

The concept of generosity continues in v. 38b with a metaphorical description of a munificent merchant who fills the measuring cup, presses the contents down, shakes the cup, and finally lets the contents overflow the cup into the recipient's lap. Likewise, in the eschaton implied with the "will be" statement, God will forego a precise payment and will demonstrate the expansiveness<sup>273</sup> of His "steadfast love."<sup>274</sup> The concluding *measure for measure* proverb<sup>275</sup> in v. 38c, reflecting a widespread concept of fairness in the ancient world,<sup>276</sup> takes on a new meaning when viewed through the lens of v. 36 calling on the disciples to imitate God's compassion.<sup>277</sup> If the disciples are generous to others, God will treat them likewise.<sup>278</sup>

### **Forgive and You Will Be Forgiven Conclusion**

In this small portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain Luke mentions forgiveness, but forgiveness is not the main theme. Along with judging and giving, forgiveness is one of the building blocks Luke uses to develop a multifaceted view of the Father's divine generosity: a generosity that culminates in the metaphorical merchant overflowing the cup of the sinner without exacting full payment. Luke artfully describes Jesus as breathing new life into the traditional understanding of Yahweh as 'gracious and merciful'. Jesus counsels His disciples to

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<sup>271</sup> Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 295.

<sup>272</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 242.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 241-242.

<sup>274</sup> Ex 34:6; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2.

<sup>275</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 231.

<sup>276</sup> Garland, 283.

<sup>277</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 231.

<sup>278</sup> Tannehill, 121.

be merciful as their Father is merciful and in v. 37c to “forgive, and you will be forgiven” with the theological passive implying you will be forgiven *by God*. Thus, imitating the Father's forgiveness becomes yet another conduit to eschatological forgiveness.

## **SECTION 2: LORD'S PRAYER**

### **Reading 1: Matthew 6:9-15**

<sup>9</sup>“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

<sup>11</sup> Give us this day our daily bread.

<sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

<sup>13</sup> And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.

<sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

### **Reading 2: Luke 11:1-4**

<sup>1</sup> He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” <sup>2</sup> He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

<sup>3</sup> Give us each day our daily bread.

<sup>4</sup> And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

## **Context and Source**

Matthew places his version of the Lord's Prayer in the structural center of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Many also consider it the theological center of the Sermon because of its emphasis on humans' total dependence on God.<sup>279</sup> Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer

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<sup>279</sup> Osborne, 222.

quickly became an often-used liturgical prayer in the incipient Christian community.<sup>280</sup> Luke portrays Jesus teaching His disciples the Lord's Prayer later in His Galilean ministry long after the Sermon on the Plain. The disciples observe that Jesus' life is fortified by prayer,<sup>281</sup> so one of the disciples asks Jesus to teach them to pray.

Most scholars agree that Matthew and Luke relied on a common source, Q.<sup>282</sup> The differences between their two prayer versions are likely due to variations in oral transmission,<sup>283</sup> redactional inclinations, and ritual traditions in their respective communities.<sup>284</sup> Based on this theory, Matthew's extra elements are likely elaborations of a shorter and more original prayer form that Luke more closely followed.<sup>285</sup> The lack of any overt Christology in the Lord's Prayer suggests the prayer is authentic,<sup>286</sup> and there is strong consensus among commentators that the prayer originated with Jesus.<sup>287</sup>

### **Prayer Themes**

While a measured reflection on the Lord's Prayer is beyond the scope of the present study, there are a few themes that tie the prayer together and influence the forgiveness passages we are about to examine. In spite of the fact that the Lord's Prayer has become a dogmatically centered rote prayer common to all of Christianity, most scholars agree that Jesus intended the

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>281</sup> Garland, 459-60. See Lk 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; 10:21-22; 22:31-32, 40-42; 23:34, 46.

<sup>282</sup> Osborne, 224.

<sup>283</sup> Garland, 460.

<sup>284</sup> Francois Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51-19:27* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 82.

<sup>285</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 283.

<sup>286</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2*, 83.

<sup>287</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, Translated by James E. Crouch, Edited by Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 311.

prayer to be used as a prototype for all prayer<sup>288</sup> that would also serve as model for Christian living.<sup>289</sup>

In the petitions on hallowing God's name and doing His will, both divine and human responses are prominent. The Greek aorist passive verb implies that God will make His holiness palpable and that His people will honor His name in everything they do.<sup>290</sup> Likewise, God will prevail on earth as He already does in heaven and the people pray for the capacity to freely follow God's will, much as Jesus does in Gethsemane when He prays, "your will be done." (Mt 26:42c)<sup>291</sup>

The petition about the kingdom clearly has the strongest eschatological tone of the prayer,<sup>292</sup> but all the petitions sense that Jesus' ministry represents the present stirring of the coming kingdom where God's name will be hallowed, and His will be done.<sup>293</sup> Even the daily bread petition carries this now and coming theme. The meaning of the Greek word translated as daily refers to both bread for today, with a connotation of nourishment in the present, and bread for a coming day, with a more eschatological bent.<sup>294</sup>

Bread is used in the prayer as a metaphor for a person's daily subsistence needs<sup>295</sup> in a society where many did not have enough food for the following day.<sup>296</sup> Bread here does not

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<sup>288</sup> Just, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 461.

<sup>289</sup> Osborne, 222.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>291</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 318-19.

<sup>292</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 287.

<sup>293</sup> Osborne, 228.

<sup>294</sup> Just, *Luke 9:51-24*, 462.

<sup>295</sup> Garland, 463.

<sup>296</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 321.

reflect the toil of human hands; like the manna in the desert, it is gift from the Creator<sup>297</sup> and reflects the people's total dependence on God.<sup>298</sup>

### **Reading 3: Mark 11:20-25**

<sup>20</sup> In the morning as they passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. <sup>21</sup> Then Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. <sup>23</sup> Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. <sup>24</sup> So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

<sup>25</sup> "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

### **Context and Source**

Clearly, Mark intended the fig tree's fate to serve as a metaphor for the impending destruction of the temple. However, Mark also chose to append to this vignette a cluster of previously independent sayings<sup>299</sup> assembled together using the catchword technique common in the oral tradition: "cursing/faith; faith/prayer; prayer/forgiveness."<sup>300</sup> Mark's rationale may have been to portray the developing community of disciples, who pray together and forgive one another, as a suitable replacement for the "house of prayer"<sup>301</sup> that was expected to reside in the temple.<sup>302</sup>

Verse 25 contains some strong similarities to Mt 6:14 in Reading 1 above: the expression 'Father in heaven' and the reference to 'trespasses.' This similarity, coupled with the fact that

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<sup>297</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2*, 88-90.

<sup>298</sup> Osborne, 229.

<sup>299</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 447-48.

<sup>300</sup> Boring, *Mark*, 324.

<sup>301</sup> Jesus words during the cleansing of the temple in Mk 11:17, "Is it not written, My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?"

<sup>302</sup> France, 448.

Matthew leaves v. 25 out of his fig tree narrative (see Mt 21:18-22), invites the suspicion that v. 25 is a scribal gloss and was not part of the original Markan composition.<sup>303</sup> The counterarguments to this suspicion are substantial. Not a single extant manuscript of Mark's gospel omits v. 25, and the verse contains important elements that are foreign to Mt 6:14 such as 'whenever you stand praying' and 'if you have anything against anyone.'<sup>304</sup> While the image of our 'Father in heaven' is used frequently by Matthew, the expression did not originate with Matthew.<sup>305</sup> The phrase is an early memory of Jesus' teaching on prayer and likely came to Mark as an independent saying via oral transmission.<sup>306</sup> On the other hand, the word 'trespasses' belongs no more to Matthew than to Mark; it is *hapax legomenon*<sup>307</sup> in both Gospels.<sup>308</sup>

The absence of v. 25 in Matthew's fig tree episode is not surprising since he does not slavishly follow Mark's pericope,<sup>309</sup> evidenced by Mark's comment that "it was not the season for figs" (Mk 11:13e) not finding its way into Matthew's composition. Matthew may have revised v. 25, appended the logical inverse statement for clarity, and put them at the end of the Lord's Prayer where forgiveness was an important theme since the position of forgiveness seemed out of place to him in the context of cursing a fig tree.<sup>310</sup> In the end, the majority opinion

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<sup>303</sup> I. Howard Marshall, "Faith and Discipleship," Chapter in *Faith as a Theme in Mark's Narrative*, 134-76, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 173.

<sup>304</sup> Sharyn Echols Dowd, *Prayer, Power, and the Problem of Suffering: Mark 11:22-25 in the Context of Markan Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 40-41.

<sup>305</sup> Marshall, "Faith and Discipleship," 174.

<sup>306</sup> Dowd, 42.

<sup>307</sup> A word or form occurring only once in a document or corpus.

<sup>308</sup> Dowd, 42.

<sup>309</sup> Marshall, "Faith and Discipleship," 173.

<sup>310</sup> Dowd, 42-43.

is that v. 25 was part of the independent cluster of sayings coming to Mark through oral tradition and was not the result of a scribal gloss emanating from Mt 6:14.<sup>311</sup>

### **Forgiveness Verses**

<sup>12</sup> “And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.” (Mt 6:12)

<sup>14</sup> “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Mt 6:14-15)

<sup>4</sup> “And forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” (Lk 11:4)

<sup>25</sup> “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.” (Mk 11:25)

### **Eschatological Tone**

All three evangelists present the forgiving by humans and God as occurring over and over again as God's people interact with each other in positive and negative ways during everyday life.<sup>312</sup> However, the mere mention of God's forgiveness always carries with it a subtle reminder of the eschatological forgiveness we all yearn for. So, in keeping with the rest of the Lord's Prayer, the realization of forgiveness is partially achieved in the present time, but we are reminded of how this personal practice of forgiveness is preparing us for the final judgment day.

### **Human Forgiveness as a Condition for Divine Forgiveness**

The conjunction 'as' in Mt 6:12 leaves the connection between human forgiveness and divine forgiveness somewhat ambiguous.<sup>313</sup> However, three verses later Matthew makes the conditional sense explicit, 'if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive you.'<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Collins, 537.

<sup>312</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 290-91; Garland, 464.

<sup>313</sup> Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 322.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

Luke's conjunction 'for' in Lk 11:4 and Mark's conjunctive phrase 'so that' in Mk 11:25 also clearly support the conditional nature of human and divine forgiveness: forgiving others is a precondition for forgiveness from God.<sup>315</sup> While the Scripture verses we are examining state that forgiving others is a necessary condition for receiving God's forgiveness, the case that forgiving others is sufficient to guarantee God's forgiveness is not strongly supported.

Only Mt 6:14 seems to imply human forgiveness may be a sufficient cause, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." On the other hand, Mark chooses a sentence structure in Mk 11:25c to make clear that human forgiveness of others is not a sufficient cause, "so that your Father in heaven *may* [emphasis added] also forgive you your trespasses." The remainder of the verses present a predominately neutral position on the issue of sufficient cause. The combined verses speak strongly to the aspect of human forgiveness of others as being a requirement for God's forgiveness, but all three evangelists are content to let the verses speak ambiguously about the aspect of human forgiveness of others as being a sufficient cause for the Father's forgiveness. In addition, no other Scriptural passages support the sufficient cause aspect, while both Testaments contain support for the conditional aspect.<sup>316</sup> Therefore, the scholarly consensus is that human forgiveness of others does not automatically garner forgiveness from God.<sup>317</sup>

The linked relationship of human forgiveness and God's forgiveness expressed here harkens back to the Jewish perspective that sin and forgiveness were always viewed in the framework of the Yahweh-Israel covenantal relationship.<sup>318</sup> God was always viewed as the

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<sup>315</sup> Strauss, 499.

<sup>316</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 291. Mentions Mt 7:1-2; 18:23-35; Sir 28:1-4; Tannehill, 188. Mentions Lk 6:37-38.

<sup>317</sup> Osborne, 230; Nolland, *Matthew*, 293-95; Garland, 464.

<sup>318</sup> Morgan, 154.

ultimate victim, and the crucial issue was to restore the Divine-human relationship.<sup>319</sup> Rooted in and expanding on this view of covenantal relationship, Jesus commanded His disciples in Lk 6:36, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (see page 53 above) These scriptures passages on prayer and forgiveness are a natural outgrowth of these background impulses, highlighting the spiritual axiom that forgiving relationships among God’s people are foundational to following God,<sup>320</sup> and reinforcing the interconnectedness of divine and human responses espoused in the prayer. While the idea that God’s forgiveness is intimately connected to the sinner’s willingness to forgive others is rooted in Jewish tradition, Jesus presents this tenet in a bold new manner by making the requirement for human action a foundational element of a central prayer text.<sup>321</sup>

### **Lord’s Prayer Conclusion**

The main theme in this vignette is not forgiveness, but how to pray. The prototype prayer presented by Jesus can be used as a model of Christian living and as a reminder of the total dependence of the human community on the Father. The verses on forgiveness support both of these subthemes of the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus calls on His disciples to imitate Yahweh by forgiving others and to remind them that final eschatological forgiveness is dependent on the generosity of the Father. The startling new position expressed in these forgiveness pericopes is that human forgiveness of others is more than a conduit to God’s forgiveness, it is a prerequisite for forgiveness from the Father. However, this conditional element falls short of being a sufficient cause for obtaining God’s forgiveness, thus leaving open the possibility of other conduits, such as repentance and faith, playing a part in eschatological forgiveness. Finally, in

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>320</sup> Osborne, 231.

<sup>321</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 322.

these vignettes we see a common theme repeated: Jesus takes a concept firmly rooted in Jewish tradition and presents it in refreshing new way. In this case, He makes the conditional nature of human forgiveness a foundational element of a central prayer text, something with no parallel in first century Judaism.

### **SECTION 3: UNFORGIVING SERVANT**

#### **Reading 1: Matthew 18:23-35**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

#### **Source**

The discussion about how many times to forgive another in vv 21-22 has a matching parallel in Lk 17:4 and likely comes from the sayings source Q.<sup>322</sup> The ensuing parable, however, is unique to Matthew, is very Matthean in construction,<sup>323</sup> and appears to be traditional

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<sup>322</sup> Osborne, 692.

<sup>323</sup> Luz, *Matthew* 8-20, 469.

material from Matthew's special source M.<sup>324</sup> Scholars believe that the parable did indeed originate with Jesus.<sup>325</sup>

### **Peter's Question**

Peter asks Jesus how many times Peter should forgive another and, in the process, boldly expands the rabbinic limits of forgiveness from three to seven times.<sup>326</sup> Jesus responds that one must forgive his brother seventy-seven times, a response that speaks not of an actual number but of the boundless nature forgiveness should embrace.<sup>327</sup> This response contrasts with Lamech's seventy-sevenfold vengeful spirit in Gen 4:24<sup>328</sup> and sets the stage for Jesus to counter the traditional Hebrew concept of unlimited vengeance with a new kingdom concept of unlimited forgiveness.<sup>329</sup> Jesus then explains why forgiveness is so important with a parable.<sup>330</sup>

### **Lord and First Slave Meet**

The main characters in the parable are a king and two slaves. After the introduction of the king, he is referred to throughout the rest of the account as lord. Both titles were common metaphors for God with the Jewish people.<sup>331</sup> The slaves he deals with are likely officials in his court.<sup>332</sup> The lifeblood of this parable is contrasts, so the references to his officials as slaves is likely designed to emphasize the contrast in authority between the king and his slave officials. The debt of the first slave is an astronomical sum.<sup>333</sup> A talent of silver was worth 6,000

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<sup>324</sup> Osborne, 692.

<sup>325</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 470.

<sup>326</sup> Osborne, 693.

<sup>327</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 755.

<sup>328</sup> Osborne, 693.

<sup>329</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 754-55.

<sup>330</sup> Osborne, 694.

<sup>331</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 757.

<sup>332</sup> Harrington, 270.

<sup>333</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 472.

denarii,<sup>334</sup> and a denarius was the daily wage for a common laborer, so 10,000 talents would have been equal to the wages of 200,000 years of work!<sup>335</sup> In the current U.S. economy this debt would represent about \$3.5 billion.<sup>336</sup> As the size of the debt makes it impossible to repay, the lord decides to sell the slave, his family, and his possessions. The slave begs for patience and makes an unrealistic promise to repay the debt.<sup>337</sup> The lord is moved by the slave's plea and, deciding to act in the best interest of the slave rather than himself,<sup>338</sup> the lord completely forgives the slave's enormous debt.

### **First Slave and Second Slave Meet**

From the reader's perspective the first slave should feel as if his life had been completely transformed.<sup>339</sup> Yet, when he comes across a second slave who owes him one hundred denarii, the first slave resorts to violence, choking the second slave and demanding repayment. The second slave echoes the first slave's petition for patience back to the first slave.<sup>340</sup> However, unlike their lord, the first slave acts in his own selfish interest and has the second slave thrown into debtor's prison. The contrast between the first and second meeting is shockingly stark in multiple ways: the first slave's debt is so exceedingly large it could not be repaid while the second slave's debt is paltry by comparison and certainly capable of being repaid,<sup>341</sup> the lord acts

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<sup>334</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 756.

<sup>335</sup> Osborne, 694.

<sup>336</sup> (Federal minimum wage of \$7.25/hour) x (8 hours work/day) x (6,000 denarii in a talent) x (10,000 talents) = \$3,480,000,000.

<sup>337</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 472.

<sup>338</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 758.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> Osborne, 696.

<sup>341</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 758.

in the interest of the debtor whereas the first slave acts in his own interest, and the first slave receives mercy but doles out violence and cruel justice.<sup>342</sup>

### **Lord and First Slave Meet Again**

The fellow slaves observe this second meeting and make a detailed report to their lord. The lord summons the first slave and makes it clear that he has passed judgement on the slave by addressing him as “You wicked slave!”<sup>343</sup> Matthew will use also the ‘wicked slave’ term in the parable of the talents in Mt 25:14-30.<sup>344</sup> In both cases the term is used to describe those who reject God’s values and choose instead to follow their own beliefs.<sup>345</sup>

In v 33 the repetition of the word ‘mercy’<sup>346</sup> and the use of the word ‘should’ makes clear the bottom line of the parable is that showing mercy to others is a necessity, not an option.<sup>347</sup> That verse is also a resounding echo of Jesus’ command from the Sermon on the Plain, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”<sup>348</sup> (Lk 6:36, see page 53 above) For his folly, the first slave receives a harsher punishment than that which he inflicted on the second slave, as torture is added to his incarceration.<sup>349</sup> Since his debt is so great, the first slave appears to be doomed to a lifetime of torture.<sup>350</sup> The eschatological implications are evident: God will punish those who are not merciful.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Harrington, 270.

<sup>343</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 473.

<sup>344</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 759.

<sup>345</sup> Osborne, 697.

<sup>346</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 473.

<sup>347</sup> Osborne, 697.

<sup>348</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 474.

<sup>349</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 260.

<sup>350</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 474.

<sup>351</sup> Osborne. 697.

### **Closing Frame of Parable**

Jesus' words in v 35 unmask the thinly veiled allegorical elements of the parable; the lord is God and debt is sin.<sup>352</sup> The lesson to be learned is frankly stated, 'your Father will not forgive you if you do not forgive others,' the same sentiment expressed in the explanatory comments on the Lord's Prayer in Mt 6:15 with one noticeable addition, the words 'from your heart.' This phrase indicates that true forgiveness is not a pretense; it is not done merely as part of a bargain to gain God's forgiveness. Such forgiveness comes from the core identity of the person<sup>353</sup> and involves both outward and inward reconciliation.<sup>354</sup> This 'from the heart' forgiveness is aligned with the reason for imitating God's mercy expressed in Lk 6:36-38 (see page 53 above); it is not for eschatological gain, but as a response to forgiveness breaking into the world through Jesus' message.

### **Unforgiving Servant Conclusion**

Jesus tells this parable to illuminate why unlimited forgiveness is so important. It is only the second episode examined where forgiveness is the primary focus of the story. The parable is rooted in the Jewish understanding of Yahweh as 'gracious and merciful'.<sup>355</sup> However, the allusion to Lamech's unlimited vengeful spirit in Genesis as a backdrop for Jesus' proclamation that unlimited mercy and forgiveness is required in the new kingdom marks another vignette where Jesus presents traditional Jewish beliefs in new and refreshing ways.

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<sup>352</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 475.

<sup>353</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 762.

<sup>354</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 476.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

The challenging question lurking at the heart of the parable is: Why does the first slave not forgive the second slave? The contrasts<sup>356</sup> in the parable evoke a visceral experience for the audience that says the first slave was scandalously brutal.<sup>357</sup> The purposely hyperbolic contrasts create a vivid dramatization of the glaring differences between God's desire to be merciful to the 'other' as compared to the human tendency to seek self-preservation, and it breathes vivid life into the theological imperative to imitate the Father's mercy. When the human response of the first slave is seen in contrast to the forgiving nature of the king, it becomes perfectly understandable why we must be willing to forgive others in order for God to forgive us.<sup>358</sup> So, forgiveness is, once again, both a conduit and a prerequisite for divine forgiveness.

#### **SECTION 4: FORGIVING OTHERS AND FORGIVENESS CONCLUSION**

##### **Summary Information**

The table below provides key information about the Gospel passages that mention repentance, faith, or forgiving others in conjunction with divine forgiveness.

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<sup>356</sup> Huge debt that cannot be repaid contrasted with small payable debt; acting in the interest of the other contrasted with acting selfishly; and exhibiting mercy contrasted with acting violently.

<sup>357</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 473.

<sup>358</sup> Harrington, 270.

	No. Motifs	No. Passages	Gospel				Source				
			Mt	Mk	Lk	Jn	Mk	Q	M	L	Jn
<b>Repentance and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Faith and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Forgiving Others and Forgiveness</b>											
Forgive and You Will Be Forgiven	1	1			1					1	
Lord's Prayer	1	3	1	1	1		1	2			
Unforgiving Servant	1	1	1						1		
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>

Similar to the chapters on repentance and faith, all the Synoptic Gospels attest to the connection of forgiving others and divine forgiveness. The breadth of the source material asserting this connection is impressive, with four of the five biblical sources speaking about the importance of forgiving others. The volume of the forgiving others testimony, with 3 stories and 5 passages, is slightly more than the faith testimony and slightly less than the repentance testimony.

### **Forgiving Others a Prerequisite for Divine Forgiveness**

The three stories in this chapter create a building block approach to develop the theological point that the disciples of Jesus must freely forgive one another in order to obtain divine forgiveness. The first vignette from the Sermon on the Plain establishes the foundational principle that Yahweh's followers are called to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." (Lk 6:36) In the second set of pericopes, related primarily to the Lord's Prayer, Jesus makes it clear that forgiving others is more than just a conduit to divine forgiveness, it is a prerequisite to attaining divine forgiveness. Measured against the backdrop of everyday life, this prerequisite appears very difficult to fulfill. However, in the third motif the unforgiving servant parable

dramatizes the great disparity between God's mercy and human selfishness so that the hearers understand why each of us must be willing to forgive others in order for God to forgive us.

Although these accounts plainly state that forgiving others is a requirement in order to receive divine forgiveness, forgiving others is not a sufficient cause to guarantee divine forgiveness, thus leaving open the door that other conduits to God's forgiveness may also play a part.

Although forgiveness is mentioned in each passage, only the unforgiving servant parable has forgiveness as the central theme of the story, and none of the episodes attempts to develop a wholistic explanation of God's forgiveness. While repentance or faith is not mentioned in these accounts, the portrait of a debtor who is unable to repay his debt is a connective thread running through the parable of the two debtors in the Faith Chapter (see page 43 above) and the unforgiving servant parable in this chapter (see page 65 above). Both parables emphasize that Yahweh's gracious mercy is offered to sinners who are incapable of expiating their sins of their own accord. Interestingly, these two narratives are the only ones examined thus far where forgiveness is the primary theme of the narrative.

Once again, Jesus starts with traditional Jewish themes and presents them in new and refreshing ways that herald the coming of the new covenant. Jewish traditions such as a God who is gracious and merciful and Hebrew biblical actors who espouse unlimited vengeance give way to holding up God's unlimited forgiveness as a model to follow in order to attain divine forgiveness.

In the five Scripture passages examined, the Gospel writers plainly espouse the position that being willing to forgive others is a prerequisite for obtaining divine forgiveness. This position is founded on strong Hebraic roots such as Lev 19:2 calling the people of Israel to imitate God, a God whose merciful love is mentioned twenty-six times in the Old Testament.

Finally, while forgiving others is a requirement, it is not a sufficient cause to guarantee divine forgiveness, which leaves open the possibility that other traits may play a role along the path to divine forgiveness.

## CHAPTER 6: FORGIVENESS AS A GRACIOUS GIFT

### SECTION 1: UNFORGIVABLE BLASPHEMY

#### Readings: Mark 3:28-29, Luke 12:10, Matthew 12:31-32

<sup>28</sup> “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” – for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.” (Mk 3:28-30)

<sup>10</sup> “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.” (Lk 12:10)

<sup>31</sup> “Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup> Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come.” (Mt 12:31-32)

#### **Source and Context**

Most scholars agree that there was a Markan form and a Q form of the blasphemy logion that developed independently from an original Aramaic saying.<sup>359</sup> Luke chose to follow the Q form of the saying and Matthew conflated the Markan and Q forms.<sup>360</sup> The Markan form begins with the introductory phrase “Truly [Amen,] I tell you.” In the Old Testament an introductory Amen confirms what proceeds it, but in the New Testament “Amen I tell you” is a distinctive element of the Gospel tradition that prefaces an earnest admonition.<sup>361</sup> Mark uses this introductory phrase more than a dozen times.<sup>362</sup> The absence of this phrase in the Q form is one indication of the independence of the two forms. Another indication of independent

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<sup>359</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2*, 184.

M. Eugene Boring, “The Unforgivable Sin Logion Mark III 28-29/Matt XII 31-32/Luke XII 10: Formal Analysis and History of the Tradition,” *Novum Testamentum* 18 (January 1, 1976), 270.

<sup>360</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 199.

<sup>361</sup> Collins, 234.

<sup>362</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to MARK* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 122.

development is the presence of strict, but different, form patterns in the two sayings. The Markan saying displays a chiasmic pattern: people forgiven, whatever blasphemies, whoever blasphemes, not forgiven (A B B A); while the Q form exhibits antithetic parallelism: speaks against, forgiven, blasphemes HS, not forgiven (A B A' B').<sup>363</sup> The most significant difference between the two forms is that forgiveness is granted for every sin and blasphemy against humanity in the Markan form while in the Q form this forgiveness is granted for speaking against the Son of Man.<sup>364</sup> Sinning against 'humanity' and the 'Son of Man' are both possible translations of the same underlying Aramaic expression<sup>365</sup> and the two different forms are seen as the result of divergent translations of an ambiguous Aramaic original saying.<sup>366</sup>

### **Historic Primacy of Markan and Q Traditions**

Since the differences between the Markan and Q traditions may affect the interpretation of the blasphemy logion it may be important to establish the historic primacy between the two traditions. The question of primacy does not necessarily imply that one form was derived from the other. The Markan and Q forms are likely the result of completely separate development threads emanating from the original Aramaic memory and as such neither form can be identified as a preliminary form of the other.<sup>367</sup> However, such an independent development track does not discount the question of historical primacy since one track could more faithfully preserve the original wording, form and meaning.<sup>368</sup>

Proponents for the primacy of Q point out that since the Son of Man tension in the Q

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<sup>363</sup> Boring, "Unforgivable Sin Logion," 266-69.

<sup>364</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2*, 184.

<sup>365</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 185.

<sup>366</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2*, 184.

<sup>367</sup> Boring, "Unforgivable Sin Logion," 269.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

form is clearly the *lectio difficilior*, or more difficult reading, textual criticism would suggest that it is the earlier copy since versions usually get cleaned up as changes are made.<sup>369</sup> The Markan advocates convincingly counter that the earliest form of the saying likely referred to the son of man in the generic human sense and the transition to the Son of Man was a later development<sup>370</sup> because the New Testament tendency is to add Son of Man to inherited motifs as opposed to reducing the phrase Son of Man to one that represents a mere human.<sup>371</sup> Finally, proponents of Markan primacy note that the introductory clause, 'Truly [Amen,] I say to you,' which only appears in the Markan form, likely belongs to the original form of the saying.<sup>372</sup> While far from a consensus opinion, the analysis finds more convincing support for the Markan form as the "heir of the oldest form" of the saying.<sup>373</sup>

### **Can the Logion be Placed on the Lips of Jesus?**

The analysis of the logion may be affected by whether the sayings can be traced back to the historical Jesus. As noted earlier, the introductory 'Amen' is characteristic of the speech of Jesus and may indicate an authentic saying of Jesus.<sup>374</sup> Some scholars consider Jesus' radical position in the first half of the logion that all sins are forgiven humans however much they blaspheme at odds with His other teachings about the seriousness of sinful actions, such as Mt 5:21-22 where Jesus says if you are angry with a brother you will be liable to the hell of fire.<sup>375</sup> However, as we have seen in this study, He also frequently speaks of forgiveness, repentance,

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<sup>369</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 201.

<sup>370</sup> Collins, 234.

<sup>371</sup> Boring, "Unforgivable Sin Logion," 270.

<sup>372</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 516.

<sup>373</sup> Boring, "Unforgivable Sin Logion," 279.

<sup>374</sup> Collins, 234.

<sup>375</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 202.

and grace. The forgiveness theme is also aligned with the times when Jesus announces forgiveness to those considered blasphemous by Pharisaic standards (see Lk 7:47-49, Lk 15:32, and Jn 7:53-8:11).<sup>376</sup>

Most scholars agree that the second half of the logion about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit being unforgivable contains concepts that are alien to the biblical Jesus, such as “exaltation of the spirit, denial of forgiveness on theological grounds, and use of the form ‘sentences of holy law’”<sup>377</sup> Early Christian prophets frequently formulated oracles in the form of ‘sentences of holy law’ typically using a chiasmic form. The Markan form of the logion fits this description of a prophetic oracle very well.<sup>378</sup> The early Christian community may have created the logion out of the certainty that the Spirit of God is in them and in response to claims that Jewish Christianity was blasphemous. The presence of the Spirit invokes an authority that is not merely human. As a result, the early Christian prophets and their message become unassailable.<sup>379</sup>

Early Christian prophets rarely fashioned oracles *ex nihilo*; they usually transformed and elaborated traditional material to apply to their current situation.<sup>380</sup> Therefore, the first half of the Markan form, expressing the universal forgiveness of God, likely originated with the historical Jesus. In the first decade or two after Jesus’ death, a prophet in the Palestinian church probably added the second half of the logion in an attempt to bolster the church’s unassailable authority to preach the Christian message.

### **What is the Meaning of Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit?**

Since it is called an unforgivable sin, it is important to understand what is meant by

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<sup>376</sup> Boring, “Unforgivable Sin Logion,” 277.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 271-72.

<sup>379</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 208.

<sup>380</sup> Boring, “Unforgivable Sin Logion,” 277.

blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. In later Jewish usage blasphemy came to mean an inappropriate use of the name of God. However, the New Testament represents a less strict earlier tradition that saw blasphemy as a rejection of the saving power of God. John the Baptist foretold of one “more powerful than I” who will baptize “with the Holy Spirit.” (Mk 1:7-8) After John baptized Jesus, the Spirit descended upon Jesus “like a dove.” (Mk 1:10c) Thus, Mark presents Jesus’ ministry as being authorized by the Spirit from the beginning onward.<sup>381</sup> When the scribes accuse Jesus of using Beelzebul to cast out demons, Mark sees this allegation as an appropriate spot to insert the hitherto independent blasphemy logion. In Mark’s view the scribe’s claim was an offense against the Holy Spirit since that was the power used by Jesus to cast out demons.<sup>382</sup>

If one acknowledges that humans are capable of rejecting the saving power of God, and there is much biblical testimony to this end,<sup>383</sup> then such rejection insulates us from God’s love and forgiveness.<sup>384</sup> Put another way, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit involves a rejection of the Spirit’s work, and repentance and forgiveness require acceptance of the Spirit’s work.<sup>385</sup> By definition then, the blasphemer is not capable of being forgiven. What is not entirely clear is whether cessation of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit opens up the possibility of repentance and forgiveness.

### **Is Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit Truly Unforgivable?**

Some have interpreted the second half of the logion quite literally emphasizing the

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<sup>381</sup> Edwards, 123.

<sup>382</sup> Collins, 234-35.

<sup>383</sup> Marshall, *Luke*, 517.

<sup>384</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume IX: Luke, John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 254.

<sup>385</sup> Stein, 187.

unforgivable sin can *never* be forgiven. This interpretation particularly emphasizes Matthew's words: there will be no forgiveness "in this age or in the age to come." (Mt 12:32c) As a result, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has eternal consequences.<sup>386</sup>

Conversely, others emphasize the contradiction between a literally unforgivable sin and Jesus' testimony elsewhere about repentance, forgiveness, faith, grace, the love of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>387</sup> Scholars point out that the unforgivable sin portion of the logion contradicts the boundless love of God that stands at the center of Jesus' proclamation.<sup>388</sup>

In the end, the contradiction analysis falls short of rebutting the literal interpretation since sometimes Jesus speaks of repentance, faith and forgiveness, and sometimes He speaks about judgement and the fire of hell. Nevertheless, a biblical example does exist that demonstrates blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can be forgiven. Saul of Tarsus "persecuted the Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison." (Acts 22:4) Since Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the disciples on Pentecost to breathe life into spreading the Gospel, interfering with this ministry would be rejecting the saving power of God, as described in the Meaning of Blasphemy section above, and hence blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. However, Saul certainly received God's forgiveness once his blasphemy ceased. Therefore, cessation of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can result in forgiveness and the literal interpretation loses its legitimacy. The point of the second half of the logion, then, is to emphasize that rejecting the Spirit's work has dire consequences because acceptance of the Spirit's work is needed for repentance and forgiveness.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>387</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 1: The Christbook Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 568.

<sup>388</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 206.

<sup>389</sup> Stein, 187.

### **Forgiveness as a Gracious Gift**

In the first half of the Markan form of the saying, Jesus utters a sweeping description of the universal nature of forgiveness, that every sin will be forgiven for every human being.<sup>390</sup> Commentators appear eager to domesticate this message, taking dogmatic positions without offering any supporting evidence. For example, Frederick Dale Bruner contends, "Of course, this wide forgiveness does not mean that everything Jesus previously taught of repentance he now jettisons. The meaning is that *all* sin, with one exception, *can* be forgiven."<sup>391</sup>

A search for substantiating evidence for this position reveals that the Gospel testimony regarding forgiveness portrays a multi-faceted picture of divine forgiveness, sometimes involving repentance, sometimes involving faith, sometimes involving forgiveness of others, and sometimes given as gracious gift.<sup>392</sup> So the Gospel testimony does not support the position that the first half of the unforgiveable blasphemy logion must mean there can be forgiveness only if there is repentance. Clearly, the literal words of the logion describe forgiveness without mentioning any enabling factor, and the context of the story and the remaining portion of the logion give no clues as to which conduit, if any, Jesus might have intended to associate with the universal forgiveness. Is it possible this logion is His first biblical foray into suggesting unconditional grace may be the essential feature of God's forgiveness? Some evidence suggests this may be the case. We have previously mentioned (see page 54 above) that God's merciful love is mentioned twenty-six times in the Old Testament. This Old Testament tradition underscores Jesus' command to His disciples to "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

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<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>391</sup> Bruner, 566.

<sup>392</sup> Womer, "Sin, Blasphemy, and Forgiveness," 14-15. This discovery ultimately spawned this thesis project.

(Lk 6:36) The portrait of a debtor who is unable to repay his debt in the parable of the two debtors in the Faith Chapter (see page 43 above) and the unforgiving servant parable in the Forgiving Others Chapter (see page 65 above) both emphasize that Yahweh's gracious mercy is offered to sinners who are incapable of expiating their sins of their own accord. Given the plurality of the Gospels' representations of forgiveness it appears logical to conclude that the first half of the Markan form of the saying likely represents an example of God's gracious gift of unconditional grace in the form of forgiveness to humans.

### **Unforgivable Blasphemy Conclusion**

The Markan and Q form of the logion developed separately from an original Aramaic saying. The Markan form is closest to the original saying. The first half of the Markan form, expressing the universal forgiveness of God, probably originated with the historical Jesus and likely represents an example of God's gracious gift of forgiveness to humans. The second half of the saying concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was probably added by a Christian prophet during the oral development phase of the Gospel. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit means rejecting the Spirit's work which has dire consequences since repentance and forgiveness require acceptance of the Spirit's work. However, cessation of the blasphemy opens the door to forgiveness.

While the first half of the logion describes forgiveness being freely granted to humans, its primary task in this story is to hold tension against the unforgivable sin of blasphemy in the second half of the story. Nevertheless, the striking contrast is intensified by the subtle introduction of Jesus' first mention of God freely granting forgiveness to humans through His gift of unconditional grace. This concept is rooted in the gracious and merciful Yahweh of the Old Testament but presented in a strikingly new way that leaves confession, remorse, repentance,

exhortation, faith, and forgiving others unmentioned and maybe even unneeded when measured against God's unconditional grace.

## **SECTION 2: LAST SUPPER**

### **Reading 1: Matthew 26:26-29**

<sup>26</sup> While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." <sup>27</sup> Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; <sup>28</sup> for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup> I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

### **Source and Context**

Matthew follows his written source, Mark, closely with minor changes that reflect Matthew's writing style and theological positions.<sup>393</sup> Scholars are confident the words of institution reflected here go back to the historical Jesus.<sup>394</sup> Prior to this scene Jesus directed His disciples to go into Jerusalem to find a place and to prepare the Passover meal (vv. 17-19). That evening, Jesus took His place with the twelve to eat the Passover meal (v. 20). During the meal, a short verbal exchange between Jesus and Judas concludes with Jesus revealing that Judas will betray Him (vv. 21-25). At this point the reading above begins as Jesus takes up the loaf of bread to bless and break it, a seemingly typical Passover meal ritual.

### **Passover Meal**

The first precise information about the conduct of the Passover meal appears in the Mishnah, circa 70 CE.<sup>395</sup> In the Mishnah's description of the meal, two cups of wine were offered before the unleavened bread was blessed and broken, which was followed by the meal of

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<sup>393</sup> Osborne, 960.

<sup>394</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 1072.

<sup>395</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, Translated by James E. Crouch, Edited by Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 372.

roasted lamb. Following the meal was a third cup, signing of the Hallel hymn from Psalms 113-118, and the fourth concluding cup of wine.<sup>396</sup> The format of the Passover celebration in Jesus' time is unknown and Matthew reveals little about the Passover meal Jesus shares with His disciples. The bitter herbs, multiple cups of wine, and even the Passover lamb are not mentioned.<sup>397</sup> Jesus uses the framework of the Passover meal to introduce and interpret a completely new ritual that parallels and transcends the meaning of the Passover. Unlike the Passover, the new ritual was celebrated daily or weekly rather than annually.<sup>398</sup> To capture the significance of Jesus' innovation, Matthew emphasizes the words of Jesus, while the reaction of the disciples and the details of the Passover meal recede into the background.<sup>399</sup>

### **The Loaf of Bread**

In the Passover meal the head of the household normally blessed, broke, and distributed the unleavened bread, called the bread of affliction in Deut 16:3.<sup>400</sup> Jesus follows this pattern, but makes a startling break with tradition with His words, "this is my body."<sup>401</sup> Jesus' self-identification with the bread that is broken, and identified with affliction, points to Golgotha, where His body will be afflicted and broken.<sup>402</sup> Jesus commands His disciples to take and eat the bread, which represents His soon-to-be afflicted body, so that they can share in the redemptive effects of His passion.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Osborne, 964.

<sup>397</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 372.

<sup>398</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 1075.

<sup>399</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 383.

<sup>400</sup> Osborne, 966.

<sup>401</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 1075.

<sup>402</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 379.

<sup>403</sup> Osborne, 966-67.

## The Cup of Wine

The words over the cup are connected to the words over the bread temporally and with intentional parallelism. However, the words of institution concerning the cup are more complex and contain more numerous innovations by Jesus. He blesses the bread, a typical Old Testament gesture, but in “giving thanks” over the cup, He creates an early Christian diction not found in the Old Testament and frequently used in the New Testament letters.<sup>404</sup> Sharing Jesus’ one cup with the gathered disciples is also unique since at typical Jewish meals each guest would drink from his own personal cup.<sup>405</sup> Jesus parallels the startling proclamation about the bread with His words about the cup, “this is my blood.” He interprets the significance of this self-identification by describing the wine as the “blood of the covenant, which is poured out.” Blood that is poured out refers to the shedding of blood and Jesus’ imminent violent death.<sup>406</sup> The blood of the covenant alludes to the Sinai covenant of Exod 24:8 where Moses sprinkled the sacrificial blood on the altar and the people.<sup>407</sup> Jesus uses the covenant allusion to make clear that His death will usher in the new and everlasting covenant described in Ezek 16:60-63.<sup>408</sup> Jesus’ command to His disciples, “Drink from it, all of you,” infers that the communal sharing of the one cup conveys the salvific properties of Jesus’ death to His followers.<sup>409</sup>

## The Forgiveness of Sins

In v. 28 Matthew adds the final phrase, “for the forgiveness of sins,” to his Markan source.<sup>410</sup> From the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew has seen the forgiveness of sins as the

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<sup>404</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 1077.

<sup>405</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 379-80.

<sup>406</sup> Osborne, 967.

<sup>407</sup> Harrington, 368.

<sup>408</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 1080.

<sup>409</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 380.

<sup>410</sup> Harrington, 368.

cornerstone of Jesus' ministry. In 1:21 an angel of the Lord told Joseph to name his son Jesus "for he will save his people from their sins."<sup>411</sup> At the Last Supper, in a complex interpretation that connects with the past and future, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus' impending death will indeed save His people from their sins.<sup>412</sup> Looking to the past, the Passover focus of deliverance from slavery is echoed in Jesus' words about forgiveness,<sup>413</sup> and the cup alludes to the covenantal blood that was poured out at Sinai to cover over, or atone, the people's sins.<sup>414</sup> However, Jesus' theme here is primarily forward-looking with its strong reference to the fruit of God's new, everlasting covenant when in Ezekiel the Lord God says, "I forgive you all that you have done," (Ezek 16:63) and in Jeremiah when the Lord says, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."<sup>415</sup> (Jer 31:34)

### **Drink Anew in My Father's Kingdom**

Jesus' statement about not drinking of the fruit of the vine does not mean that He intends to abstain from wine, but that His death is so close that He will not have another chance to drink wine in this life.<sup>416</sup> The 'new' covenant language of the previous verse is replaced in v. 29 with Jesus' frequently used kingdom language.<sup>417</sup> Jesus confidently predicts His disciples will drink with Him at the eschatological banquet in the coming kingdom of God,<sup>418</sup> a banquet Jesus has alluded to throughout Matthew's Gospel (5:6; 8:11-12; 14:20; 15:37; 20:20-23; 22:2, 11-12; 25:10-12).<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 381.

<sup>412</sup> Osborne, 968.

<sup>413</sup> Harrington, 371.

<sup>414</sup> Osborne, 968.

<sup>415</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 1081.

<sup>416</sup> Harrington, 368.

<sup>417</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 1080; Osborne, 968.

<sup>418</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 382.

<sup>419</sup> Osborne, 969; Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, 382.

### **Last Supper Conclusion**

In this short vignette, Jesus uses the framework of the Passover meal to take the foundational Passover themes of affliction, community, and deliverance and turn them into a new ritual that becomes the foundational liturgical experience for the early Christian community. The affliction of the Israelite slaves reflected in the unleavened bread is translated by Jesus into His impending death on the cross; the community of the Israelites sharing in the affliction of slavery now becomes the community of His disciples sharing in the one cup that represents Jesus' atoning acceptance of the cross; and the deliverance from slavery turns into the realization that Jesus' death enables the new covenant and the forgiveness of sins. The significance of the new covenant is that it emphasizes the forward-looking stance of the new ritual. While the Passover looks back to the saving work of God as He brought His people out of slavery, Jesus' words of institution look forward to the assurance of participating in the eschatological meal in God's kingdom.<sup>420</sup>

While Matthew's source, Mark, speaks of the eschatological banquet in the kingdom of God, Matthew helps interpret the significance of this banquet by noting in v. 28 that Jesus' blood is poured out "for the forgiveness of sins," essentially equating this forgiveness with being present at the kingdom banquet.<sup>421</sup> What does Jesus say the disciples must do to gain this forgiveness and a place at God's banquet? They must eat the broken bread; they must drink from His one cup; they must be in community with Jesus. Repentance, faith, or forgiving others is not mentioned. This position harmonizes with the Hebrew Bible's prophetic anticipation of the new, everlasting covenant in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The turning point from judgement to

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<sup>420</sup> Harrington, 371.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

forgiveness is described by the prophets as “you shall know that I am the Lord” (Ezek 16:62) and “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jer 31:33) In each of these cases, the forgiveness is a gracious gift to those who are in heartfelt community with the Lord.

### **SECTION 3: FATHER FORGIVE THEM**

#### **Reading 1: Luke 23:32-34**

<sup>32</sup> Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. <sup>33</sup> When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[<sup>34</sup> Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”]]\* And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

\* Other ancient authorities lack the sentence *Then Jesus . . . what they are doing*

#### **Source**

The majority view among scholars is that Mark's Passion Narrative (PN) is the oldest and was written independently of the other PNs.<sup>422</sup> Luke intertwines Marcan material with Lucan independent material. In the above pericope, the uniquely Lucan v. 34a is sandwiched between the Marcan material about being crucified with two criminals and casting lots for Jesus' clothing.<sup>423</sup> The source of Luke's forgiveness prayer is likely an oral tradition known only to Luke.<sup>424</sup>

#### **Authenticity of Luke 23:34a**

Jesus' prayer is omitted in Luke's Gospel in some important textual witnesses.<sup>425</sup> In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, some copies of Luke's Gospel had the prayer while others did not. The consensus of

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<sup>422</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah, Volume 1* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 40.

<sup>423</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 1*, 74.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-75.

<sup>425</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*, 1503.

scholars is that the external evidence for and against inclusion of the prayer is essentially equal.<sup>426</sup> In cases where strong manuscript support exists for different versions, one must look at internal evidence to assess which version best fits the style and themes of the larger document. Based on this evidence, is it easier to explain v34a as a copyist insertion or omission?<sup>427</sup>

The style used in v34a is distinctively Lucan. In the synoptic Gospels, praying to God using the Greek word for Father without any modifiers or Semitic translation is unique to Luke.<sup>428</sup> In addition, the rhetorical format “forgive . . . for” is found in both v34a and Luke’s form of the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>429</sup>

The themes expressed in v34a are also very Lucan in character. The content of Jesus’ prayer is closely aligned with His Sermon on the Plain where He exhorts His followers to love their enemies and to do good to those who hate them.<sup>430</sup> It is widely acknowledged that Luke is also the author of Acts of the Apostles. Luke describes the death scene of Stephen, Christianity’s first martyr, in Acts with Stephen praying, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60b). The function and setting of Jesus’ and Stephen’s death scenes are similar. Some scholars suggest that a copyist created a prayer for Jesus in Luke’s PN based on Stephen’s prayer in Acts. However, a copyist would likely have used the same words for the look-alike prayer. Luke, on the other hand, purposely varies expressions in his writings. Thus, it is more likely that Jesus’ prayer in Luke provides a model for Stephen to emulate.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah, Volume 2* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 975.

<sup>427</sup> Tannehill, 340.

<sup>428</sup> See Lk 10:21; 11:2; 22:42; 23:46.

<sup>429</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 976.

<sup>430</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 307.

<sup>431</sup> Tannehill, 341.

The concept that the Jewish people and leaders acted in ignorance in the death of Jesus is expressed by Peter in Acts 3:17 and by Paul in Acts 13:27. The link to the theme of ignorance in Jesus' prayer in Luke 23:34a is obvious. While some suggest a copyist may have reflected the ignorance theme of Acts back into Luke's PN, a more convincing argument is that since Luke wrote Acts, he formulated the PN prayer himself.<sup>432</sup> Jesus' prayer also confirms the "saintliness" that Luke applies to Jesus during His passion.<sup>433</sup>

Some scholars contend that v34a is intrusive and breaks up the two sentences in vv. 33 and 34b where the subject is they. If Luke originally penned the prayer from a non-Markan oral source, he would have had to insert it amid the Marcan PN material. The stark contrast of placing Jesus' forgiveness prayer in the very midst of the hostile actions against Him makes the prayer all the more effective,<sup>434</sup> and that placement is no more disruptive to the narrative than the statement in v33c about the criminals, one on His right and one on His left.<sup>435</sup>

These arguments lead to a dominant view by scholars that the prayer in v34a is so perfectly aligned with Luke's view of Jesus' ministry and passion experience that it should be considered an authentic part of Luke.<sup>436</sup>

### **Reasons for Copyist Omission of Luke 23:34a**

Most scholars agree Luke composed his Gospel after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE.<sup>437</sup> Estimates of the specific years of composition vary from the last decades

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<sup>432</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 976-77.

<sup>433</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 307.

<sup>434</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 975-76.

<sup>435</sup> Garland, 922.

<sup>436</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 307; Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 980; Garland, 922.

<sup>437</sup> Tannehill, 26.

of the 1<sup>st</sup> century<sup>438</sup> to between 80 and 85 CE.<sup>439</sup> The schism between Jews, who did not believe in Jesus, and Christians began about 70 CE and spread haphazardly over the next 100 plus years until the lines of demarcation were sharply drawn between the two groups throughout the Roman world in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>440</sup> Therefore, the original author of the Gospel of Luke was likely aware of Jewish animosity for Christians occurring in some locations, but the copyists involved in the creation of the form of the Gospel known today likely lived through this turbulent time of Jewish-Christian separation and animosity. As a result, some copyists likely removed the prayer because it was seen as too favorable to the Jews whom many considered to be relentless persecutors of Christians.<sup>441</sup>

### **Ignorance Theme**

The literal translation of the Greek word *gar* in Jesus' prayer is 'for' or 'because,' implying a causative connection between forgiveness and the ignorance of the actor. Is it likely that the point of Luke including this prayer is to establish ignorance as an accepted pathway to forgiveness? A close investigation of Luke's treatment of ignorance suggests the literal, causal connection between forgiveness and ignorance may not be the intended interpretation. Although Luke pens forgiveness prayers of Jesus and Stephen that are very similar, the concept of ignorance is not mentioned in Stephen's prayer. Conversely, Luke presents Jesus, Peter, and Paul portraying the individuals responsible for crucifying Jesus' as ignorant of their sin, but Peter and Paul do not mention forgiveness. Finally, in Luke 12:48 ignorance is mentioned as a factor

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<sup>438</sup> Robert L. Brawley, "Luke," In *The Gospels and Acts: Fortress Commentary on the Bible Study Edition*, eds. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David A. Sanchez (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2016), 218.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b3t6xx>.

<sup>439</sup> Johnson, 2.

<sup>440</sup> Brown, *Introduction*, 82.

<sup>441</sup> Idem., *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 979.

in mitigating punishment for a slave from a severe beating to a light beating, but the ignorance does not absolve the slave from all punishment. It seems unlikely that Luke was attempting to lay down ignorance as a specific path that leads to forgiveness, since in multiple opportunities, he chose not to take that position. Therefore, a more non-literal interpretation of Jesus' forgiveness prayer, such as "Father, forgive these ignorant actors" may be more theologically consistent with the whole of Luke's work.

### **Forgiveness Theme**

In spite of the ambiguous antecedent for the 'they' in Jesus' prayer, the overall context of the prayer in the narrative indicates forgiveness is being asked for the Romans, the Jewish leaders, and the Jewish people.<sup>442</sup> The prayer should be seen as completely in keeping with Jesus' teachings and ministry with special highlights on His teaching to pray for one's enemies.<sup>443</sup> The poignancy and graciousness of the prayer are highlighted because Jesus utters the prayer in the midst of the very act of violence perpetrated against Him.<sup>444</sup> The prayer also has a "notable boldness,"<sup>445</sup> because it fails to mention repentance, faith, or forgiving others.

### **Father Forgive Them Conclusion**

Using an oral tradition known only to him, Luke places a petitionary prayer of forgiveness on the lips of Jesus in the midst of the crucifixion. The prayer is abruptly inserted into Luke's PN with no explanation or rationale. Nevertheless, the connective tissue to Jesus' teachings about praying for one's enemies and imitating our merciful Father is obvious. However, the subtle morphing of Old Testament themes into refreshing new positions by Jesus is

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 973.

<sup>443</sup> Garland, 922-23.

<sup>444</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 1*, 72.

<sup>445</sup> Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1144.

missing in this pericope. Luke vividly portrays Jesus as boldly living out His teachings by praying to His Father who may forgive the sinner even before repentance is expressed. The end is near, and Luke wants to be sure the audience does not miss the crucial lesson that our God is gracious and merciful. While ignorance is mentioned in the prayer, it should not be seen as diminishing or limiting the generous gift of grace and forgiveness that Jesus is confident the Father will provide.

#### **SECTION 4: WITH ME IN PARADISE**

##### **Reading 1: Luke 23:39-43**

<sup>39</sup> One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" <sup>40</sup> But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" <sup>41</sup> And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." <sup>42</sup> Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." <sup>43</sup> He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

##### **Source**

Only Luke has the criminals speak as he draws on his special source for this theologically important episode.<sup>446</sup> The historical veracity of a criminal speaking out on Jesus' behalf is questionable, especially since it is not attested to in the other Gospels.<sup>447</sup> Luke may have reworked an "Amen" pronouncement of Jesus from his special source promising a sinner a future blessing that mentioned Paradise.<sup>448</sup> Luke's hand is evident as the contrast between the criminals fits Luke's practice of comparing different characters such as Martha and Mary, the rich man and

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<sup>446</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 294-95.

<sup>447</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1028.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 1008.

Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the tax collector.<sup>449</sup> In addition, the Greek words for rebuked (v. 40) and remember (v. 42) occur more times in Luke's Gospel than in any of the other Gospels.<sup>450</sup>

### **The Criminals Speak**

The Synoptic Gospels record three mockeries of Jesus, with the third derision coming from one or both criminals.<sup>451</sup> Mark and Matthew record that the bandits crucified with Jesus taunted Him, but Luke limits the derision to one of the criminals and gives voice to his mocking in v. 39 as he mimics the Jewish rulers.<sup>452</sup> Like the other mockers, he expects the Messiah to use brute power to save Himself and others from suffering.<sup>453</sup>

No answer is provided to the mocking taunts in Mark and Matthew, but Luke has the other criminal chide his companion indignantly in v. 40, "Do you not fear God?"<sup>454</sup> This rebuke expresses the conviction that Jesus is someone intimately connected with Yahweh and reviling Him will result in divine retribution.<sup>455</sup> The criminal's rebuke of his companion also makes it clear they were justly convicted of some reprehensible act, but that Jesus is innocent.<sup>456</sup> While some scholars postulate naturalistic explanations for the second criminal's belief in Jesus' innocence, such as he may have met Jesus during His ministry, others recognize the theological point Luke is making here by inserting an independent 'Amen' saying. The criminal, like the centurion in v. 47, stands in stark contrast to other participants who are blinded by their ignorance, for to the second criminal, Jesus' innocence is transparent.<sup>457</sup> While the second

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid., 1002 (see 10:38-42; 16:19-31; 18:9-14).

<sup>450</sup> Ibid., 1003, 1005.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 985.

<sup>452</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 310.

<sup>453</sup> Garland, 924.

<sup>454</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1002.

<sup>455</sup> Garland, 925.

<sup>456</sup> Tannehill, 343.

<sup>457</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1004.

criminal acknowledges his guilt, notably the first step in repentance,<sup>458</sup> he shows no sign of remorse or a change of heart, so this recognition should not be considered equivalent to repentance.<sup>459</sup>

The other criminal addresses Jesus with uncharacteristic familiarity. In all the Gospels, no one else ever addresses Jesus using only His name without a stipulating or reverent attribute. The intimacy of the address reveals the sincerity of his petition.<sup>460</sup> The criminal's words disclose he does not seek corporal relief like his comrade, but salvation in the afterlife,<sup>461</sup> and he is convinced that Jesus has the kingly power to grant his request.<sup>462</sup> His petition echoes the Hebraic belief in a gracious God (Ps 31:9, "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress") and Jesus' ministry to sinners (Lk 18:13, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!").<sup>463</sup> The second criminal clearly believes that Jesus can grant his request,<sup>464</sup> and many argue this belief is akin to faith in Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>465</sup>

### Jesus Speaks

Jesus responds with an 'Amen' saying, translated in the NRSV as 'Truly, I tell you,' which is a New Testament motif to alert the audience that what comes next has great significance.<sup>466</sup> Jesus' sixth 'Amen' saying under Luke's pen<sup>467</sup> speaks poignantly to the recurring theme of the merciful God whom Jesus makes known through His ministry.<sup>468</sup> Much

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<sup>458</sup> Tannehill, 343.

<sup>459</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1004.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*, 1005.

<sup>461</sup> Garland, 925.

<sup>462</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1005.

<sup>463</sup> Garland, 925-26.

<sup>464</sup> Tannehill, 343.

<sup>465</sup> Just, *Luke 9:51-24*, 938.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 939.

<sup>467</sup> Garland, 926 (see also 4:24; 12:37; 18:17, 29; 21:32).

<sup>468</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1009.

has been written about the meaning of 'Paradise.' While Luke pens words that impart a vision of lasting bliss since the criminal will be 'with' Jesus,<sup>469</sup> Luke's intent is not to present a geographical or chronological description of 'Paradise.' Luke has Jesus speak kerygmatic words of promise and commitment as He assures the second criminal, and by extension all believers, that he will be with Jesus beyond death.<sup>470</sup>

Reminiscent of Jesus' encounter with the paralytic, (see page 37 above) He confidently wields the power of judgment normally reserved for Yahweh.<sup>471</sup> His calm reply to the second criminal is astonishingly gracious.<sup>472</sup> The qualifier 'with me' reveals that Jesus' graciousness moves beyond forgiveness to intimacy with Jesus, a hallmark of full reconciliation.<sup>473</sup> What makes this forgiveness and reconciliation so surprising is that this forgiven criminal represents "the worst, the least, and the last"<sup>474</sup> and his path, which includes acknowledging his guilt, believing in Jesus' power to save, and asking to be remembered, falls short of repentance.<sup>475</sup> This account deliberately echoes the theme in the v. 34 petition for God to forgive Jesus' executioners as Luke double underlines the idea that God's forgiveness is a gracious gift that we are unable to earn.<sup>476</sup> However, the graciousness at the root of this forgiveness is not something novel, it is in tune with Jesus' public ministry to the outcast in Luke, where He acquitted sinners (5:20, see page 37 above; 7:48, see page 43 above) and brought salvation (19:9).<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Garland, 926.

<sup>470</sup> Bovon, *Luke 3*, 313.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>472</sup> Tannehill, 344.

<sup>473</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1009.

<sup>474</sup> Just, *Luke 9:51-24*, 938.

<sup>475</sup> Garland, 926.

<sup>476</sup> Just, *Luke 9:51-24*, 938.

<sup>477</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1012.

### **With Me In Paradise Conclusion**

Luke taps into his special source to place an 'Amen' saying on the lips of Jesus to make an important theological statement about forgiveness. The second criminal's request to 'remember me' recalls the gracious God portrayed in Hebrew Scripture and Jesus' association with and ministry to sinners. The second criminal acknowledges his guilt, expresses confidence in Jesus' power, and makes a plea to be remembered. While this conduct comes close to professing faith in Jesus, the criminal does not express any remorse or change-of-heart and so his plea falls short of repentance. In spite of this lack of repentance, Jesus bestows forgiveness that includes reconciliation with Jesus in the kingdom of God upon the second criminal. What part does the criminal's faith play in the unexpected reconciliation? Likely, a small part since the word faith is not mentioned in this account and Luke emphatically mentioned faith as the determining factor in the forgiveness of the paralytic (see page 37 above) and the sinful woman (see page 43 above). In addition, as Luke has Jesus speak for the second time from the cross, His words here are clear echoes of His earnest prayer for His Father to forgive His executioners in v. 34.

However, Jesus' second words from the cross exhibit a subtle difference from His first words, Jesus forgives and welcomes the second criminal to Paradise while speaking no words of consolation to the first criminal, who could hardly be seen as more deserving of divine punishment than Jesus' executioners. What differentiates the two criminals? The NRSV describes the first criminal as 'deriding' Jesus, but others translate this word as 'blaspheming' Jesus.<sup>478</sup> One reasonable explanation for treating the criminals differently is that Luke takes this

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid, 983.

Just, *Luke 9:51-24*, 923.

opportunity to make a couple important theological points: as with the unforgivable blasphemy logion (see page 74 above), blasphemy involves rejecting God's work and forgiveness requires accepting God's work; and Jesus' ministry was meant to reveal God's gracious mercy. Jesus' first public words were heard in Nazareth's synagogue as He testified that He was sent "to proclaim release to the captives . . . and to let the oppressed go free." (4:18d, 18f) Appropriately, in this pericope as Jesus speaks His last words to another human, He fulfills that promise by inviting the second criminal to enter Paradise with Him.<sup>479</sup>

## **SECTION 5: FORGIVENESS AS A GRACIOUS GIFT CONCLUSION**

### **Summary Information**

The table below provides key information about the Gospel passages that mention repentance, faith, forgiving others, or receipt of a gracious gift in conjunction with divine forgiveness.

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<sup>479</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah, Vol 2*, 1002.

	No. Motifs	No. Passages	Gospel				Source				
			Mt	Mk	Lk	Jn	Mk	Q	M	L	Jn
<b>Repentance and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Faith and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Forgiving Others and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Forgiveness as a Gracious Gift</b>											
Unforgivable Blasphemy <sup>480</sup>	1	3	1	1	1		2	2			
Last Supper	1	1	1				1				
Father Forgive Them	1	1			1					1	
With Me in Paradise	1	1			1					1	
<b>Summary</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>

Viewing forgiveness as gracious gift from God is widely attested to in the Gospels. Stories about this form of forgiveness appear in all the Synoptic Gospels with foundational roots emanating from three of the four Synoptic Gospels sources. It is found in more motifs than any other forgiveness medium, and it is the second most popular forgiveness channel based on the number of passages that mention God's forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness Offered as a Gracious Gift**

The consistent message in these four stories is that God is willing to bestow forgiveness on humans as a gracious gift. Each story presents that message nuanced in a different way. In the unforgivable blasphemy logion, forgiveness as a gracious gift stands in the background creating tension with the unforgivable nature of blasphemy that indicates rejection of the Spirit's

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<sup>480</sup> Matthew conflates Mk and Q in his narrative, so both of those sources are reflected for Matthew's passage.

work. At the Last Supper Jesus clarifies that he will shed His blood for the forgiveness of sins of those in community with Him. While hanging in agony on the cross, Jesus implores His Father to forgive His executioners as they do not understand what they are doing. Finally, Jesus invites the second criminal, who has expressed a faith of sorts, into intimate fellowship with Jesus in Paradise, while ignoring his blaspheming companion. While rejection, community, ignorance, and faith are mentioned in these four stories, none of them is presented as a pathway to forgiveness, and the crucial message proclaimed by the evangelists is that God is gracious and merciful.

This message of gracious forgiveness is rooted in the Hebrew Scripture's depiction of God's merciful love, and the prophetic portrayal of God's new and everlasting covenant.<sup>481</sup> Jesus expands and personalizes these foundational Jewish ideals through His ministry to sinners, His teachings about praying for one's enemies, and counseling His disciples to be merciful as their Father is merciful. In doing so, Jesus' message is forward looking, anticipating the new kingdom, which is both present now and yet to come. As in previous chapters, Jesus has mined His Jewish heritage to revitalize essential Hebraic beliefs into strikingly new and life-giving attitudes for the Jewish-Christian audience of the first century.

Only the last pericope discussed has forgiveness as the central theme as Luke masterfully constructs a conversation between Jesus and a sinner, who is completely incapable of atoning for his sins, which makes Jesus' promise of Paradise all the more merciful. Nothing in these four narratives implies that repentance, faith, or forgiving others cannot be part of the pathway that leads to forgiveness. Luke's subtle connection of Jesus's first public words in Nazareth, where

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<sup>481</sup> "I forgive you all that you have done," (Ezek 16:63); "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."<sup>481</sup> (Jer 31:34).

He proclaims He has come to let the oppressed go free, and His last words on the cross to a human, where He promises Paradise to a condemned criminal, effectively highlights that a core tenet of Jesus' ministry is to reveal God's gracious mercy.

**CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION ABOUT GOD'S FORGIVENESS AS EXPRESSED IN  
THE GOSPELS**

**SECTION 1: SUMMARY DATA**

What can we learn by reviewing the summary information?

	No. Motifs	No. Passages	Gospel				Source				
			Mt	Mk	Lk	Jn	Mk	Q	M	L	Jn
<b>Repentance and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Faith and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Forgiving Others and Forgiveness</b>											
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Forgiveness as a Gracious Gift</b>											
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Forgiveness in the Gospels</b>											
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>

**Distribution**

The number of different motifs and the number of passages for each forgiveness mode are slightly different from mode to mode, but no mode can claim a preponderance of motifs or passages. The forgiveness mode distribution for each of the Synoptic Gospels is as evenly distributed as possible, based on the number of passages in each Gospel, considering the distribution has to be done with whole numbers.<sup>482</sup>

Analyzing the distribution of forgiveness modes across the four Synoptic sources is more complex. Based on the estimated number of verses in the Synoptics from each source, if the

<sup>482</sup> Brown, *Introduction*, 111. 661 vv. in Mark; 1,068 vv. in Matthew; 1,149 vv. in Luke.

twenty-two forgiveness passages were uniformly distributed, the Mk source would contain 12 accounts, Q would contain 4 accounts, M would contain 2 accounts, and L would contain 4 accounts. In the actual texts, Mk and M are slightly under-represented (11 vs. 12 and 1 vs. 2), while L is slightly over-represented (6 vs. 4).<sup>483</sup> The most significant observation is that every forgiveness mode is testified to by multiple independent sources, which adds to the veracity of each forgiveness mode being seen by the early Christian community as important.

### **John's Gospel**

John's Gospel is an obvious outlier, only recording one passage discussing God's forgiveness of human sin, while the average number of passages reported by the other evangelists is seven. John's Gospel is widely recognized as having different perspectives from the Synoptic Gospels, while at the same time sharing some important common ground. How is it that John and the Synoptics are so alike and so different? While many solutions have been hypothesized, many theologians agree that, although John did not have access to a final form of any of the Synoptics, he shared common pre-Gospel oral and written traditions with Mark and likely with some of Luke's special material.<sup>484</sup> The common traditions explain the likenesses, and the differences are attributed to distinctive priorities and experiences in the communities developing and passing on the traditions as well as to the narrative style and theological perspective of the individual evangelists. This cursory overview provides little insight into why the Synoptics speak frequently of God's forgiveness and John pens only one pericope about divine forgiveness. An in-depth analysis of why John, save one exception, ignores the forgiveness theme is beyond the scope of the present study. The end result is that while John's

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid. Mk: 661 vv.; Mt: 1070 vv. from Mk, 230 vv. from Q [remainder assumed from M]; Lk: 1150 vv. from Mk, 230 vv. from Q [remainder assumed from L].

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 365-65.

solitary forgiveness pericope will be included in the analysis, the conclusions we draw will primarily be about what the Synoptic Gospels say about God's forgiveness.

## **SECTION 2: DEVELOPED THEMES**

### **Forgiveness Modes**

The consistent message in the repentance passages is that repentance leads to forgiveness. The faith pericopes espouse the position that faith acts as a conduit to forgiveness. In the forgiving others episodes, the Gospel writers stipulate that being willing to forgive others is a prerequisite for obtaining divine forgiveness. The repeated meaning in the gracious gift readings is that God is willing to bestow forgiveness on humans as a gracious gift.

While the repentance and faith accounts describe these modes as pathways to forgiveness, the accounts do not imply that repentance or faith is a requirement to obtain divine forgiveness. On the other hand, the forgiving other stories emphatically state that in order to obtain divine forgiveness the sinner *must* be willing to forgive others. Nothing in the gracious gift narratives specifically expresses the position that divine forgiveness can only be obtained through a gracious gift.

Being a pathway to forgiveness or a prerequisite for forgiveness are not the equivalent of a guarantee of forgiveness. The Gospels do not present any testimony that divine forgiveness can be guaranteed via any of the forgiveness modes. In addition, the Gospel passages do not portray the described forgiveness mode as the only path to forgiveness. Therefore, a particular experience of forgiveness could possibly involve more than one forgiveness mode.

### God's Mercy

Over and over again the Gospels' understanding of forgiveness is rooted in God's merciful love, mentioned twenty-six times in the Old Testament.<sup>485</sup> On multiple occasions Jesus calls His followers to be merciful as Yahweh is merciful, echoing the Old Testament proscription of Lev 19:2 calling the people of Israel to imitate God. Nearly two-thirds of the forgiveness vignettes are permeated with one or both of these Old Testament themes.<sup>486</sup> The three passages that feature forgiveness as the central theme are good examples of how the Gospels transform these Old Testament themes into vibrant new tenets for Jesus' followers.

In the sinful woman forgiven vignette (see page 43 above), while Jesus notes that the woman's many sins have been forgiven because of her faith, the most surprising aspect of the parable shared with Simon is that the creditor canceled the debt of a very large debtor, indicative of the integral part God's mercy places in humans receiving forgiveness. While the parable in the unforgiving servant story (see page 65 above) creates a visceral dramatization of why we must be willing to forgive others, one of the key features of the parable is a king who is so gracious as to forgive a debt equal to 200,000 years of work, an even more emphatic demonstration of the importance that mercy plays when God forgives human sin. Finally, Luke crafts a scene at Calvary (see page 92 above) where Jesus bestows forgiveness on a criminal hanging next to Him to dramatically underscore, at this crucial last moment, that Jesus' ministry was meant to reveal God's gracious mercy.

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<sup>485</sup> Gen 19:16; **Ex 34:6**; Deut 4:31; 2 Sam 24:14; 1 Chr 21:13; 2 Chr 30:9; **Neh 9:17**, 19, 27, 28, 31; **Ps 25:6**, 69:16, **86:15**, 103:4, 8, 111:4, 116:5, 119:156, **145:8**; Isa 63:7; Jer 3:12, 31:20; Lam 3:22; **Joel 2:13**; **Jon 4:2**. Note the six boldface citations contain the credal description, "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

<sup>486</sup> All of the faith passages, all of the forgiving others passages, and all the gracious gift passages except the Last Supper.

### **Faithfulness Underpins Faith**

The Old Testament speaks frequently of faithfulness,<sup>487</sup> usually in reference to the covenant between God and Abraham. The Scriptures boast of God's faithfulness, admonish the people to be faithful, and lament over the circumstances of faithless generations. The starting point for the people of Israel is one of faith in Yahweh, and when they fail, their faithlessness appears to be more a case of disobedience than actually losing faith in Yahweh. So the Jewish people had a rich history and understanding of what it meant to be faithful to God. When Jesus recognizes the faith of the paralytic and his friends (see page 35 above) and when Jesus tells the sinful woman (see page 43 above) her faith has saved her, His observation certainly stands on the foundation of faithfulness that permeates the Hebrew Scriptures, but the narratives primarily proclaim the importance of the paralytic and the woman expressing their faith that Jesus is a divine representative of Yahweh. Both are stories of controversy that include scribes, Pharisees, astonished crowds, and dinner guests. Interestingly, none of the controversy or astonishment centers around faith leading to forgiveness of sins, a concept absent in the Old Testament. The step from faith to forgiveness appears to be an accepted connection for the first century Jewish-Christian audience as no one in the stories takes issue with or seems surprised at this novel connection.

### **SECTION 3: EMBRYONIC THEMES**

#### **Faith Underpins Other Forgiveness Modes**

In the Jewish rejection of Jesus episode in John (see page 25 above) the crowds observe Jesus perform many signs, yet they do not believe in Him and this unbelief creates an impervious

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<sup>487</sup> Some form of the word faith occurs 197 times in the Old Testament: faithfulness, 70 times; faithful, 58 times; faithless, 27 times; faith, 17 times; faithfully, 15 times; faithlessness, 6 times; and faithlessly, 4 times.

roadblock to repentance for them. This reaction illuminates the Synoptic accounts (see pages 19, 22, 24 above); the crowds that look at Jesus' deeds and do not perceive the significance and listen to Jesus teaching and do not understand its meaning, most likely do not believe in Him. So, these readings imply that faith may be a precursor to repentance. In Luke's narrative of the disciples' commissioning (see page 28 above), Jesus tells them that it is God's plan that repentance for the forgiveness of sins be proclaimed in the Messiah's name to all nations. While the inference in this passage is less direct, making the proclamation in the Messiah's name implies faith in Jesus may be needed to accept the invitation to repentance.

Similar testimony is found in the gracious gift accounts. In the unforgivable blasphemy episodes (see page 74 above), the blasphemer rejects the Spirit's work and therefore cannot be forgiven. However, this condition is not permanent because as we saw in our case study of Saul of Tarsus who came to faith in Jesus in a blinding light on the road to Damascus, he had his "sins washed away" (Acts 22:16d) through his faith in Jesus. Matthew pens Jesus' words of institution regarding the cup at the Last Supper (see page 82 above), "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (26:27c-28) The requirements for the disciples to share in this covenant and forgiveness was to drink from the cup, in essence to be in community with Jesus. While the word faith is not mentioned, this narrative suggests that faith in Jesus may be important in receiving the gracious gift offered by Jesus on the cross. While hanging on the cross in agony (see page 92 above), Luke describes Jesus inviting a condemned criminal to meet Him in Paradise. This story echoes the gracious gift readings just described. The forgiven criminal chastises his fellow criminal for blaspheming Jesus, expresses his confidence in Jesus' power, and makes a plea to be remembered. While faith is not mentioned, the forgiven criminal's behavior suggests a faith of sorts in Jesus that

helps the criminal find forgiveness and enter Paradise. Meanwhile, the blaspheming criminal, who rejects the Spirit's work, implying a lack of faith, is left in his sinful state to face judgement alone.

### **New Covenant**

The idea that Jesus is ushering in the new covenant proclaimed in the Hebrew Scriptures and that this new covenant is intimately connected with forgiveness is conveyed in three of the four forgiveness modes found in the Gospels. In the paralytic forgiven narrative (see page 35 above), Jesus dramatically claims, as the Son of Man, to have divine authority on earth to forgive the sins of the paralytic. The juxtaposition of the phrases *on earth*, *Son of Man*, and *authority* calls to mind Dan 7. Son of Man is an ambiguous title, but the allusion to Dan 7 and the nature of the controversy here implies Jesus uses the title to confirm His messianic authority on earth, which in this case includes forgiving sins.

Ezekiel and Jeremiah prophesy a new, everlasting covenant with words such as "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jer 31:33) At the Last Supper (see page 82 above), while sharing the cup with His disciples, Jesus proclaims that His death will enable the new covenant and the forgiveness of sins. Similar to Jeremiah, the people are called to a new covenant not through repentance, but through community, the community of having God on their hearts and the community of sharing in Jesus' one cup for all, which leads to the forgiveness of sins.

In Jesus' final post-resurrection appearance to the disciples recorded by Luke (see page 28 above), Jesus commissions the disciples to proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins in the Messiah's name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. Jesus introduces this directive with

the idiom "Thus it is written," (24:46b) indicating the continuation of Jesus' ministry as the new covenant is a fulfillment of Scripture and part of God's divine plan.

### **Sin as an Unpayable Debt**

In about one fourth of the forgiveness episodes human inability to pay for sins is an underlying theme. The parables used to illuminate the sinful woman (see page 43 above) and unforgiving servant (see page 65 above) accounts clearly portray that the debtor and slave were incapable of repaying their debts/sins. In the Sermon on the Plain (see page 53 above) the metaphorical description of a merchant who fills the measuring cup and then lets the contents overflow the cup into the buyer's lap implies God freely gives more than he receives. In the Lord's Prayer (see page 57 above), bread is used as a metaphor for a person's daily subsistence. However, this bread does not reflect the toil of human hands; like the manna in the desert, it is gift from the Creator and reflects the people's total dependence on God, just as a sinner unable to repay his sins is totally dependent on God's mercy. When one of the criminals hanging next to Jesus (see page 92 above) asks Jesus to "remember me when you come into your kingdom," (Lk 23:42c) Jesus' reply that they will be together in Paradise is primarily meant to reveal God's gracious mercy. However, the underlying theme about debt comes into view when one realizes that God's mercy appears so astonishing here because this unrepentant, rightly condemned criminal is totally unable to expiate his sinful condition of his own accord.

### **SECTION 4: CONCLUSION**

The Gospels describe repentance, faith, and God's mercy as being pathways to forgiveness. In contrast, forgiving others is expressly depicted by the evangelists as a requirement in order to obtain divine forgiveness. The Gospels do not present any testimony that divine forgiveness can be guaranteed via any of the forgiveness modes, nor do they portray any

forgiveness made as the only path to forgiveness. Using the traditional Jewish understanding of a gracious and merciful God as a backdrop, Jesus challenges His followers to be merciful as Yahweh is merciful, while He emphasizes in story after story the transformative part God's mercy plays in reconciling sinful humans with their Creator. Jesus creates an important steppingstone for the early Christian community from the traditional concept of faithfulness to Abraham's covenant, to the faith needed for the community to recognize Jesus as the Messiah who is capable of forgiving their sins.

In a majority of the repentance and faith pericopes the evangelists include a subtle message that this faith in Jesus may play a precursor role along the pathway to forgiveness. The Gospels portray Jesus' ministry as birthing the new covenant anticipated in the Hebrew Scriptures and forgiveness of sins is embraced as an essential tenet of the covenant. While the understanding of sin as an unpayable debt is not overtly established as an independent theme and the Gospel testimony never implies this understanding would apply to all sin, the unpayable debt theme occurs in the background of stories in all the Synoptic Gospels often enough to be recognized as an influential interpretation for the first century Jewish Christian community.

The Synoptic Gospels contain a plethora of information about forgiveness, but nowhere do they present a wholistic explanation of divine forgiveness. Can the building blocks supplied in the Synoptics be used to craft a wholistic expression about divine forgiveness of human sin? Such a construction is certainly possible, and it might resemble the following:

The starting point is faith, faith in a loving and merciful God, a faith that inspires us to follow in the footsteps of our God, to be merciful as God is merciful. The natural fallout of this faith is that we are sorry and repentant when we have strayed, and we are open to forgiving others when we have been wronged. However, as mortal creatures living in a fallen world, we

fail again and again. In the end, no matter how hard we try, we fall short. Fortunately for us, our loving and merciful God, like the metaphorical merchant, accepts what each is able to pay and overflows our cup with love, mercy, and forgiveness so that we can sit at the heavenly banquet in His loving presence. In this construction, all four forgiveness modes are required, and God's forgiveness is virtually guaranteed if we proceed forward each day with an honest and authentic faith.

The problem with this neat and tidy construction is that it is not faithful to the intentions of the evangelists writing in the first century. Jesus, the evangelists, and the Jewish community that birthed Christianity were comfortable with non-tidy, multivariant ideas that were frequently ambiguous and occasionally in conflict. The Hebraic steps leading from sin to forgiveness as discerned in Chapter 2 were confession, remorse, repentance, and exhortation. Nevertheless, as we observed, the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature did not always present the sinner as walking through each of these four steps in the reconciliation process. The evangelists were comfortable with this multi-faceted view of God's forgiveness and showed no tendency to present a tidier, wholistic picture in their writings.

In our opening scene the elementary school children were clamoring to answer the question, Is there any sin you can commit that God will not forgive you for if you are truly sorry? Each of them was absolutely sure the correct answer was an emphatic NO! Our study certainly supports the children's answer. However, what of the follow-on question, Does the life and teachings of Jesus, as portrayed in the canonical Gospels support the understanding of repentance as the gateway to forgiveness? Our examination suggests that the road to forgiveness is more multivariant and complex than simply relying on repentance. While the young children in the opening story might naturally associate repentance with forgiveness, it is likely they actually

have a more multivariant view of forgiveness. If asked if they believed Jesus was God and loved them, their answer would be an emphatic YES! Likely they would acknowledge that God wants them to be kind and forgiving to each other. Even in their simple, somewhat concrete stage of theological understanding, many children would probably answer the question why God keeps forgiving them over and over again, with something akin to: Because I am really sorry, and God loves me very much. So in the end, the Gospel writers and the children are not far apart in their understanding of forgiveness!

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