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Forgiveness, Chapter 2 of The Science of Virtue: Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church

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..... Forgiveness

Forgiveness is close to the center of everything Christian. It shows up in the heart of the Lord's Prayer, which is in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, which is the centerpiece of how we understand Jesus and his astonishing critical wisdom. "Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us" (Matt. 6:12).

These words seep deeply into my soul. In a day when both the word and the concept of sin are quite out of style, I still ask God for forgiveness, believing that I am a sinner in desperate need of God's grace. Like centuries of saints who have gone before, I often pray a prayer so simple, yet profound, that it has become known as the Jesus Prayer. "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I sometimes shorten it and match it to my breathing: "God [inhale], have mercy [exhale]."

God, have mercy. Forgiveness, mercy, grace—these are what make Christianity Christian.

You may ask, what about love? Well, yes, love is the center of everything Christian too, along with faith and hope. But love flourishes only in the presence of forgiveness. Ask a happy young couple what lies at the heart of their success and you're likely to

hear about love, at least if they are a young couple in a contemporary society influenced by Western thought. And they would be right. Ask a happy old couple the same question, and they will also say love, but will add that enduring love is possible only when alloyed with forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Hope also coexists with forgiveness. Imagine how dreary life might look if every emotional and interpersonal wound remained as fresh as the day it occurred. Cumulative bitterness. Hope emerges amidst the possibility that people and relationships can be restored from even the most painful lesions. And faith presumes this is so with God too.

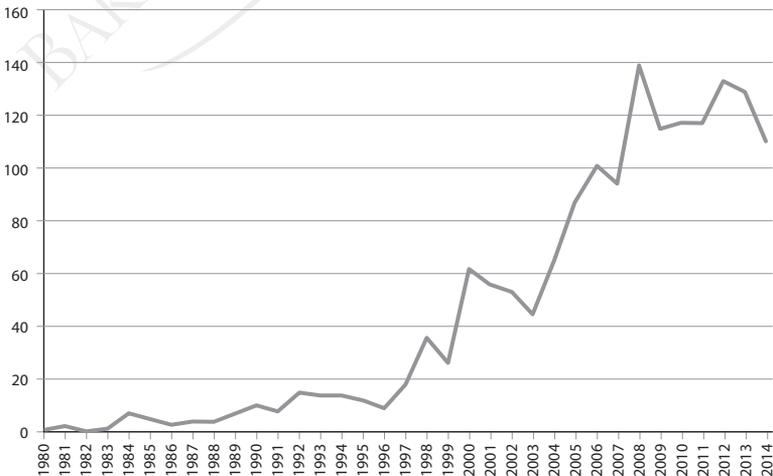
The Science of Forgiveness

If forgiveness is at the center of Christianity, it has not been anywhere close to the center of social science, at least not until the past couple of decades.

In recent talks I have shown the graph in figure 2.1 to audiences and asked whether they could guess the label that belongs on

Figure 2.1

Scientific Articles Published on the Topic of Forgiveness



the y-axis. Most audiences are stymied, though a friend jokingly guessed it to be the price of Apple stock. It's not. The graph shows the number of scientific articles published on the topic of forgiveness over the past several decades. Back in 1980, as I was heading to graduate school and being warned of the evils of psychology by Christians, and the evils of religion by psychology students, no one was publishing about—or even studying—forgiveness. Back then it was common for psychotherapists to dismiss the possibility of forgiveness, arguing that it minimizes the pain experienced by past wrongs. Many psychologists ignored the topic, while others demonized it. Slowly, things started changing. Remember, it was 1998 when positive psychology was emphasized by the then-APA president, Martin Seligman. Around the same time the Templeton Foundation began funding various projects on forgiveness. Since then the topic has exploded. Research on forgiveness permeates social science journals and has found its way into bookstores, primetime television, and yes, psychotherapists' offices.

Imagine yourself as a counselor or psychotherapist working with Janice (a fictional client), a forty-two-year-old Christian woman who has suffered long because of childhood sexual abuse. Not only did her stepfather abuse Janice in her early teenage years but also somehow her mother failed to notice it. When she finally learned of the abuse, and her husband denied it, her first response was not to believe Janice. These wounds go deep and often turn an innocent life into a complicated mess. Somehow Janice has been able to build a career and a family of her own, but the memories still haunt her. How would you help Janice to heal from this tragedy? If you mention forgiveness too early, it might cause her to say the proper Christian words about forgiveness, but in a way that is shallow and superficial. If you give her ample room to explore her pain and never get around to the topic of forgiveness, you may be withholding her greatest hope of healing. Properly done, forgiveness can be an important part of counseling. We'll explore the mechanics of this later, but for now it's important to note that if Janice can successfully forgive her mother and stepfather, she is

likely to lower her blood pressure, have less back pain, experience less muscle tension, and maybe even jump a little higher than she could before.

It turns out that forgiveness is good for us. As soon as the science of forgiveness started churning around the turn of the twenty-first century, we began seeing studies showing how various health markers correlate with forgiveness. Charlotte Witvliet and her colleagues published a groundbreaking study in 2001 after having seventy-one participants recall an interpersonal offense and then alternatively imagine an unforgiving or a forgiving response. Throughout the study participants were connected to psychophysiology-monitoring equipment, tracking their muscle tension, skin conductance (a measure of stress), heart rate, and blood pressure. As respondents imagined an unforgiving, grudge-holding response, the researchers found corresponding increases in all four physiological measurements. As the respondents moved into forgiving thoughts, their bodies became calmer again.¹ It didn't take long for this study to get noticed. Almost 30 percent of American adults have hypertension, and three-quarters of those take medication for their symptoms. What if forgiveness could provide another pathway to lower high blood pressure?

More studies followed. Kathleen Lawler and her colleagues at the University of Tennessee² monitored 108 participants with psychophysiology equipment as they were interviewed regarding hurtful experiences in the past. Those who reported being generally more forgiving people (i.e., trait of forgiveness) showed lower blood pressure than others. Those who reported more forgiveness for the particular event they described (i.e., state forgiveness) showed lower blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and skin conductance than others. Again, forgiveness was linked to health markers that can have profound implications for heart health.

Even if you don't have hypertension, the chances are good that you will have lower-back pain. Between 60 and 80 percent of US adults experience lower back pain at some time in their lives. In 2005, James Carson and his colleagues studied back pain, anger,

psychological distress, and forgiveness among patients from the Pain and Palliative Care Clinic at Duke University Medical Center as well as adults responding to newspaper advertisements in the surrounding area. The more forgiving among their group also reported lower levels of pain, anger, and psychological distress. Through correlational data—data from which one cannot infer cause and effect—the researchers observed that the connections between forgiveness, pain, and psychological distress appear to be mediated by anger, which suggests that reducing anger through forgiveness may also help reduce pain and distress.³

Also in the first decade of the century, Everett Worthington—a committed Christian scholar who is now one of the world's leading experts on the scientific study of forgiveness—made an important distinction between decisional and emotional forgiveness. *Decisional forgiveness* can occur quickly. It's when we decide to do our best to treat the offender the way we treated, or would have treated, the person before the offense occurred. This decision sometimes leads to *emotional forgiveness*, which occurs when our emotions, thoughts, and motivations toward the offender shift from a desire for retribution to wishing the person well. Emotional forgiveness may require months or years of work to be fully accomplished. Worthington and his colleagues published a helpful literature review in 2007 showing the various links between emotional forgiveness and health.⁴ More than forgiving a particular offense (i.e., state forgiveness), being a forgiving person (i.e., the trait of forgiveness) seems especially important when considering health benefits. Put the other way around, those who are chronically unforgiving and angry are susceptible to a number of stress-related problems. Worthington and others also discussed the emerging evidence from medical trials showing that forgiveness interventions helped reduce risk in patients with heart disease and decreased relapse rates among patients with substance abuse problems; the scholars also highlighted some preliminary studies considering forgiveness among cancer patients.

SIDEBAR 2.1

Brief Forgiveness Glossary

As a scientist who studies forgiveness, I throw around some terms in this chapter that need explanation. Here is a brief glossary that may help.

Decisional Forgiveness

You have *decided* to forgive the other, though it is still a work in progress. If you find yourself bitter because a friend has never offered to pay you back the money that she owes, then you could decide to forgive your friend. This happens in a moment in time, though the fullness of forgiveness may not be so instantaneous.

Emotional Forgiveness

This happens when you have released the emotions of bitterness and anger and you wish the best for the one who has offended you. With your friend who owes you money, you have released feelings of ill will and forgiven the emotional debt, and perhaps also the financial debt. Emotional forgiveness is sometimes a long process.

Over the past decade, research has continued to emerge showing that forgiveness—especially trait forgiveness, sometimes called forgivingness—is linked to positive health markers. Compared to others, forgiving people have lower blood pressure and faster blood pressure recovery after feeling angry,⁵ though the benefits of forgiveness go beyond just dissipation of anger.⁶ When one person in a couple acts forgivingly toward the other, it lowers blood pressure for both the one wounded and the offender.⁷ Cumulative stress is associated with poorer physical and mental health, but among those who are forgiving people, the link between stress and mental health problems is weaker than it is among unforgiving people.⁸ Remarkably, people who experience the lightness of forgiveness perceive hills to be less steep and are even able to jump higher than those who continue to carry the burden of unforgiveness.⁹ We also now have ample evidence that forgiveness interventions in psychotherapy are effective in

State Forgiveness

This is what you are experiencing at a particular time in response to a particular situation. On Monday you may feel complete release from bitterness toward your friend who is not paying you back, but then on Wednesday you might have a slight relapse and feel some unforgiveness. On Friday, you could be back to a place of full emotional forgiveness. When scientists measure state forgiveness, they always have a person imagine a particular situation and then have the person rate his or her current level of forgiveness.

Trait Forgiveness

This is also called forgivingness because it is a person's general disposition toward being forgiving. Some people find it easier to forgive than others, and so it is considered a personality trait. A forgiving person will have an easier time with decisional and emotional forgiveness of the person who fails to pay back money than a person who is low on forgivingness.

promoting forgiveness, reducing depression and anxiety, and increasing hope.¹⁰

Moving toward a Christian View of Forgiveness

Before exploring more of the science of forgiveness, let's consider two questions that may be troubling you, as they do me. First, with all the scientific evidence of forgiveness making us healthy, is forgiveness a self-help strategy? Should we forgive because it is a way to move on and become healthier, rather than allowing our offenders to continually rob us of our well-being? Seeing forgiveness as self-help may not be intrinsically wrong, but neither is it fully consistent with a Christian understanding of forgiveness. Second, there seems to be substantial imbalance in the forgiveness universe. We all seem quite fascinated with the science as long as we are forgiving those other people who hurt us, but why aren't we as interested in seeking forgiveness from those we have hurt? With so many who are wounded, and so few offenders, one has

to wonder how the equation balances. Christianity can help us with both questions.

Beyond Self-Help

I once heard a pastor, who is also a theologian, describe Romans 15:7 as the second most important verse of the Bible: “Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.” Only John 3:16 was more important in the pastor’s estimation. That sermon was twenty years ago, but it has lingered in my mind all these years. What would the world look like if we all accepted one another the way Christ accepts us? How might that affect our families, workplaces, churches, and communities?

So why do we forgive others when they hurt us? Is it because it helps us to move on with our lives, lower our blood pressure, and gain a stronger hope for the future? Well, yes. But as important as those outcomes are, the Christian is called to more. We forgive because of how deeply we have been forgiven. “If we reduce forgiveness to pop therapy, we ignore its invitation into the life that really is life.”¹¹

If Janice is to forgive her mother and stepfather for past events, she could focus on the personal benefits forgiveness will bring her, and it would be legitimate to do so. As a Christian, she could also work to immerse herself in a deeper understanding of the love of Jesus. Recall the apostle Paul of the New Testament, a man who experienced all sorts of offenses, including receiving thirty-nine lashes at least five times, being beaten with rods three times, and being stoned as a heretic (see 2 Cor. 11:24). This is the same man who taught that we should accept one another as Christ accepts us. Paul poses a sort of riddle in his New Testament letter to Ephesus: “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17–19 NIV).

Did you find the riddle? Paul invites his readers to understand something we can never understand. God's love is too big to fully comprehend, and yet Paul prays that we might come closer and closer to grasping the love of Jesus. Sometimes as I'm pounding landscaping stakes into the hard ground, I flash to what it must have been like to be driving stakes through the hands and feet of God incarnate, and I get a glimpse of this love that is too big to fully see, love that chooses to hang on a cross despite excruciating agony and proclaims, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Janice might experience lower blood pressure and a slight gain in vertical leap if she forgives those who have hurt her. Even more, she might have the opportunity to experience something of the fullness of Jesus.

Jeremy Taylor, a seventeenth-century Church of England minister, urged, "Call to mind every day some one of your foulest sins, or the most shameful of your disgraces, or your most indiscreet act, or anything that most troubled you, and apply it to the present swelling of your spirit, and it may help allay it."¹² Most of us probably don't do this every day, but if we did, I wonder whether it might help us to reflect on how deeply Jesus has forgiven us of our sins. Instead, our contemporary impulse is to reflect every day on how wonderful and talented we are. I wonder whether this contributes to underestimating or overlooking the depth of forgiveness that has been granted each of us.

Why do we forgive those who have hurt us? Because Jesus has forgiven us beyond what we could ever hope or imagine. Like a person reveling in an abundant fountain bursting forth on a parched summer day, so we are washed clean day after day by the lavish grace of God, which offers forgiveness for our wayward and selfish state as well as for the specific iniquities that taint our histories.

Ideally, Christian forgiveness is the exemplar of self-offering love, motivated by Jesus, who forgives out of immense love for us and at great personal cost. Jesus showed us how to forgive.

Imbalance in the Forgiveness Universe

If others are hurting everyone, where are all the hurters? Or might our self-perception be biased, so that we observe and remember when others hurt us and tend to minimize and overlook the ways we hurt others?

A Christian view reminds us that we are first forgiven, and second forgivers. Sometimes I fear the first half of this is lost on most of us, perhaps especially those immersed in today's popular portrayals of forgiveness. We see ourselves as forgivers more naturally than we see ourselves as sinners in desperate need of forgiveness from God and others.

I just mentioned the apostle Paul and all the forgiving he had to do because of the actions of his oppressors, but remember he was first an oppressor. Before his conversion on the way to Damascus, Paul was greatly feared by Christians because of how terribly he persecuted them. All of us have similar stories, though perhaps less dramatic, in which we give and receive harm. Somehow it's easier for most of us to remember the harm we have received than the harm we have given others.

Among the scientific articles reflected in figure 2.1, I would estimate that 99 percent of them pertain to forgiving others. A few scholars have studied seeking forgiveness, but these are not the studies that end up on CNN or the Huffington Post. When I speak on the topic of forgiveness, I find the same thing. People are fascinated with the idea of forgiving others. They eagerly ask questions and share stories. When we discuss being forgiven, the room goes silent.

We'll consider this more later, but for now let's hold the tentative possibility that (1) we tend to minimize our culpability in the problems of the world, and (2) we are a society of individualists. Rather than thinking about communities, and how we contribute to both the beauty and tragedy of those communities, we tend to see ourselves as individuals who are self-contained and self-determining. In this milieu forgiveness becomes more about me

and the benefits I can gain than a reflection of my network of relationships in a larger collective. This is likely a consequence of science as well as the larger social *Zeitgeist*, and it reminds us how much we need the long historical witness of the church.

Forgiveness's Telos

Recall from the introduction and previous chapter that virtue is difficult for us to comprehend today because we have largely lost an understanding of teleology.¹³ To understand any virtue, including forgiveness, we need to imagine how the fullness of that virtue would look in a person, and how regular people like you and I can move toward the goal of being whole and complete.

The first theological impulse with teleology, and the correct one, is to look to Jesus, the only fully functioning person ever to walk among us. With forgiveness, that appears to be a challenge because we can only see half the picture with Jesus. Yes, Jesus is the premier forgiver of all time. In him we see forgiveness in its human and divine fullness. Jesus “purchased our freedom and forgave our sins” (Col. 1:14). But what about the other half of forgiveness—seeking it when we have done a wrong to someone else? Christians believe that Jesus did no wrong, so never was in a position to confess and seek forgiveness.

If forgiveness is a virtue unto itself, then we have a problem viewing Jesus, who never needed forgiveness, as our exemplar. But if we expand our understanding of forgiveness to include a dimension of reconciliation, then we see the fullness of every virtue in Jesus, including the virtue of forgiveness.

Hold on to this thought for a moment as I describe a conversation I had with a focus group of five doctoral students, all young Christian adults studying to become clinical psychologists. They did not perceive themselves to be experts in forgiveness, though they were interested in the topic. I asked various questions about forgiveness, the church, and clinical practice, and what surprised me the most was

how much they kept coming back to forgiveness and reconciliation. This is complicated because psychologists have historically wanted to separate the two. According to most psychologists I know, one can forgive without ever considering reconciliation. For example, imagine the abused spouse who lands in the hospital for the third time at the hands of a domineering and hostile husband. We might imagine that the abuse survivor could eventually forgive her husband, but it would be foolish for her to go back into that situation where she would likely be abused again. Seeing situations like this over and over throughout a career inclines psychologists to distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation. Also, if reconciliation is part of forgiveness, then how can one forgive an offender who is already dead or who wants no part of reconciliation? There are good reasons psychologists distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation, but this distinction was not so evident among the doctoral students in my focus group. One man pointed out that yearning for reconciliation might even be one of the reasons why people forgive. A young woman in the group agreed, noting how much she longed to make things right when she was at odds with another person. This is not to say that all relationships can be reconciled—as evidenced by the abused spouse in the hospital for the third time—but still, there may be some deep yearning for reconciliation that is, and should be, a part of forgiveness.

When Nathan Frise and I surveyed psychologists and theologians a few years back, we discovered that theologians are more inclined than psychologists to see reconciliation as part of forgiveness.¹⁴ Theologians tend to view reconciliation, when it is possible, as the fullness of forgiveness, perhaps because they are more likely to think of *telos* than we psychologists are.

So now return to Jesus, who, though he never needed to seek forgiveness for doing wrong to another, spared nothing for the sake of reconciliation.

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to

die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God. (Rom. 5:6–11)

It was Jesus who showed up on the shore after his resurrection to cook breakfast for some of his disciples and have a healing conversation with Peter, the man who had denied him three times a few days prior (John 21). Jesus taught in the most famous sermon of all time that if someone has something against us, we should leave our offering at the temple and go reconcile first (Matt. 5:23–24). This Jesus, faultless and pure, the great forgiver, valued reconciliation above determining who is at fault for the rift.

For God in all his fullness
was pleased to live in Christ,
and through him God reconciled
everything to himself.
He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth
by means of Christ's blood on the cross.

This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. (Col. 1:19–22)

I should probably mention that Frise and I have taken some criticism in the psychological community for our views that full forgiveness may involve some degree of reconciliation when such

a thing is feasible, or at least a yearning for it. Our critics are among the leaders of the forgiveness movement in psychology, and people we have utmost respect for. Jichan Kim and Robert Enright responded with an article titled “Why Reconciliation Is Not a Component of Forgiveness,”¹⁵ where they make an important distinction between human and divine forgiveness. They may well be right that our human forms of forgiveness are utterly different from how God forgives us, but it still seems to me that it is helpful to have a telos in mind. Jesus inspires me to yearn for reconciliation with both those I have hurt and those who have hurt me.

Scientific and Christian Forgiveness, Side by Side

Most Christians will agree that offering forgiveness is the right thing to do. We aspire to forgive, as God forgives us. But how do we do it? The practical day-to-day journey of forgiveness is arduous and taxing. Fortunately, we find help from those who have studied the psychology and theology of forgiveness.

Allow me to introduce you to three impressive forgiveness scholars, all of whom have my profound respect. One is a psychologist (and a friend), Everett Worthington Jr., a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University and the former mentor to many of the Christian psychologists studying positive psychology whom I will cite throughout this book. I mentioned Worthington earlier in this chapter because of his scientific work on forgiveness and also noted that he has become one of the world’s foremost experts on the topic. His expertise is demonstrated by his many books, grants, studies, and scientific articles on forgiveness, and because his seventy-six-year-old mother was sexually violated and brutally murdered on New Year’s Day 1996. Worthington’s brother, who was the one to find his dead mother, committed suicide five years later. This personal journey of forgiveness has involved Everett forgiving his mother’s killer and also forgiving himself for not being able to help his brother.¹⁶

The second is a theologian, L. Gregory Jones, who is executive vice president and provost of Baylor University. Jones has written many books, including *Embodying Forgiveness*¹⁷ and *Forgiving as We've Been Forgiven*.¹⁸ He offers great theological wisdom to the study of forgiveness while also being a social critic of how psychotherapists have diluted the construct, reducing it to a pallid, therapeutic shadow of what God intends. In *Forgiving as We've Been Forgiven*, Jones teams up with coauthor Célestin Musekura, a Rwandan scholar and pastor who experienced incredible loss as a result of the genocide in Rwanda. In 1997, three years after establishing African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries (ALARM), Musekura lost five family members and seventy members of his church in revenge killings that were aftershocks of the genocide. His commitment to forgiveness has been costly—including accusations that he is a traitor to fellow Hutus, beatings, and being held in a government torture room for several hours.¹⁹

These three—Worthington, Jones, and Musekura—have important perspectives for us to consider when it comes to how we forgive. Because one is a psychologist and the other two serve in theology and Christian ministry, considering their perspectives allows us to put psychology and Christianity side by side. Specifically, let's consider the step-by-step models of forgiveness they propose and how they compare and contrast.

Honest Exploration of Pain

All three experts agree on how to start the forgiveness journey. In his REACH model, Worthington²⁰ talks about the importance of recalling the hurt. We can't forgive someone by simply ignoring or condoning or disregarding the offense. When we have been hurt, we need to honestly acknowledge it, lean into the pain, feel it deeply, and become familiar with its texture and contours. Our lives are sometimes changed by the hurts we receive, and it does us further harm to deny the damage that has been caused.

SIDEBAR 2.2

Worthington's REACH Model of Forgiveness

Worthington's REACH model has been tested in various scientific studies and found to be a helpful and effective way to forgive.*

Step 1. Recall the Hurt

Be honest about the harm done. It's not helpful to deny the pain or the hurt. Accept it and be honest about it.

Step 2. Empathize

This is tough, but try to understand what the other person might have been thinking and feeling. How would the other person describe what happened?

Step 3. Altruistic Gift

Forgiveness is ultimately a self-offering gift we are giving to the other. Instead of wishing the other person harm, we decide to wish the other well.

Step 4. Commit

Commit to forgiving the other. This may involve telling a pastor or counselor, a partner or a friend. *Whom* we tell isn't as important as *that* we make a commitment to forgive.

Step 5. Hold On

Forgiveness isn't easy. We may readily slip back into unforgiveness, making it important to have ways of holding on to our commitment to forgive.

*Everett L. Worthington, *Forgiving and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003).

If Janice wants to truly forgive her stepfather and mother, it will likely call her into the valley of the shadow of death, where she reflects deeply on the pain the abuse caused her. Sin has profound consequences, and Janice bears those consequences every day in how she understands sexuality and how she relates to people she wants to trust.

Jones and Musekura²¹ speak of the “dance steps” of forgiveness, which is an appealing metaphor in that it reminds us that each individual step is just a part of a larger and more beautiful goal. We learn the steps in order to engage in the amazing dance of forgiveness. Their first two steps, like Worthington’s first, involve an honest leaning into the hurt that has been done. Jones and Musekura describe this as speaking honestly and patiently about the conflicts (step 1), and then acknowledging the anger and bitterness we feel along with a desire to overcome these feelings (step 2).

I recently had lunch with a psychologist who claimed that he could help his clients reach full forgiveness in a single forty-five-minute session, regardless of how intense the offense against them might have been. While I respect this man’s work, I disagree. This first part of the forgiveness process—telling the story, recalling the hurt, acknowledging the full brunt of anger and bitterness caused—can take many weeks or months, or even longer. Jones and Musekura put it simply: “Forgiveness takes time.”²²

Considering the Offender

This is tough. When we are hurt deeply, we tend to view the offender in monstrous terms. “He is nothing but a ____.” “She is such a ____.” We naturally fill in the blanks. But all people are more complex than the labels we use to describe them. Worthington’s second step is experiencing empathy for the offender, and Jones and Musekura’s third step is summoning concern for the other as a child of God.

Forgiveness requires us to move beyond simple categories and labels, and to see complexity in the person who hurt us. As Janice continues in the forgiveness process, she will need to consider what sort of unacceptable urges her stepfather may have been dealing with over many years. This is not to excuse what he did, but to try to understand the complications of his life. Similarly, Janice would do well to consider the situation her mother was in when

SIDEBAR 2.3

Jones and Musekura's "Dance Steps" of Forgiveness

Jones and Musekura offer the following six steps for forgiveness. They use the metaphor of dance steps, reminding us that we need to learn some steps before engaging in the beautiful dance of forgiveness.*

Dance Step 1. Truth Telling

Forgiveness requires that we speak the truth of what happened, even knowing that our view may differ from the perspectives of others. "We must . . . take the time to talk to one another about the things that divide us."† This is not easy and calls for both honesty and patience with one another.

Dance Step 2. Acknowledging Anger

To forgive, we must journey through an awareness of our anger and bitterness. Though hatred can be transformed to love, we first acknowledge the depth of our emotional pain in order for this transformation to occur.

Dance Step 3. Concern for the Other

As difficult as it sounds, forgiveness calls us to see the other as a child of God. Even if we hold the other person in utter disdain, God sees past the sin and loves the other person deeply.

she first learned of the abuse. Why might she have not believed Janice? Could it have anything to do with her mother's own longings for love and connection? Might she have used denial as a way to cope with the awful news she was hearing for the first time?

It is essential that understanding not be confused with condoning. It's not okay what Janice's stepfather did to her, and her mother's first reaction was still the wrong one, but as Janice develops greater understanding of the others involved, she will move forward on her forgiveness journey.

We psychologists tend to make forgiveness an individual and interpersonal endeavor, but Jones and Musekura put the forgiveness act squarely in the context of Christian community. We learn

Dance Step 4. Recognizing, Remembering, Repenting

Though it is important not to discount the power difference between offender and offended, it is also good to recognize that we naturally see the fault in others more quickly than we see our own. We may never have done the sort of thing our offender did to us, but we all are capable of hurting others and then cloaking our offense in denial and self-deception.

Dance Step 5. Commitment to Change

Forgiveness requires that we look forward, not just backward. This will involve personal change, as we move away from bitterness and toward wishing the best for the other. It also involves community change as we strive toward greater justice and wholeness.

Dance Step 6. Hope for the Future

Even if reconciliation is not possible, we move forward to a place where we recognize our yearning for reconciliation. This involves a yearning for reconciliation with our individual offender as well as a larger awareness of how deeply we need reconciliation amidst our faith communities.

*L. Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura, *Forgiving as We've Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).

†*Ibid.*, 47.

the dance steps of forgiveness not so we can dance alone in the living room, but so we can dance with others in celebration of our good and gracious God. And Christian community turns out to be a great way to better understand the other, including those who have offended and hurt us.

A Christian understanding of sin, experienced relationally, is helpful in promoting empathy and concern for the other. In Christian community, sin is not just a list of bad things people do, or good things they fail to do, but rather the fallen state in which we live both individually and collectively. Our perceptions, beliefs, actions, and feelings fall short of the full human experience that God intended us to have. We limp as crooked people and broken communities through the years of our lives, falling

short in various ways, and this applies to every one of us. As we forgive, we can remember that though we may never imagine ourselves doing what our offenders may have done to us, each of us has wounded others in various ways. We are both the offended and the offender. This is the fourth dance step in Jones and Musekura's model, that we recognize our complicity in the problems of the world and the problems in our own communities and families.

Committing to Forgiveness

After exploring the pain and working to understand the other, forgiveness ultimately comes down to a commitment. We decide to forgive, or not to forgive.

Janice has now walked through the valley of the shadow of death. She has wept and shuddered in anguish. She has considered what her stepfather and mother might have been experiencing all those years ago, and what they may have experienced since. Now she faces a decision. Does she hold on to the bitterness, or does she release it and choose to forgive?

Worthington's third step is offering the altruistic gift of forgiveness to the offender. Rather than choosing bitterness, the forgiver chooses to wish the other person well. The fourth step is to make a commitment by talking to a friend, partner, counselor, or pastor about the decision to forgive. This resolution to forgive isn't going to be easy, so committing to another person is an important part of the process. The fifth step is holding on to the decision. Even after one decides to forgive, the emotional fullness of that decision may take many months or years to accomplish, and Janice may be tempted to go back on her decision to forgive many times. Forgiveness requires the tenacity of holding on.

Similarly, Jones and Musekura emphasize the commitment required to forgive. Their fifth step is committing to struggle through the change process. While psychologists tend to emphasize the emotional and relational work this requires, Jones and Musekura

also talk about striving for justice. Forgiveness often involves efforts to make things right with a community.

Yearning for Reconciliation

At this point we see a departure between Worthington's model and the model proposed by Jones and Musekura, and between a psychological view of forgiveness and a theological one. In the REACH model, holding on to forgiveness is the final step, and a clear distinction is made between forgiveness and reconciliation. According to Jones and Musekura, there is one more step to consider, and that is the yearning for reconciliation. Though reconciliation may or may not ever happen, they believe a full process of forgiveness at least calls us to yearn for reconciliation. Janice may not be able to reconcile with her stepfather after all these years. Maybe he is dead, or long vanished from Janice's life, or perhaps her stepfather is unwilling to have a conversation with Janice. But still, she wishes that she could somehow have a healed and safe relationship with the man who hurt her so much. Reconciliation, or at least yearning for it, is the telos of forgiveness.

Redeeming Forgiveness

Let's work to redeem forgiveness using the same four strategies we'll use for each of the virtues considered in this book: learning from positive psychology, seeing what Christian thought can offer, considering how the science of forgiveness can help the church, and pondering how Christian counseling might embrace this virtue.

Learning from Positive Psychology

Perhaps it is wise to start with two questions, and then we'll add a third later. The first question is, why should we forgive? Positive psychology has helpful information to offer, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Forgiving promotes health in the

forgiver. Do you want lower blood pressure, less back pain, less anger, less anxiety, more hope? Forgiveness is likely to help.

Second, how do we forgive? Do you sit in a church service convinced that you want to forgive the person across the room who hurt you two years ago, or twenty, but unsure how to go about doing it? Again, positive psychology provides helpful answers. Worthington's REACH model has been tested repeatedly, and it works. People can learn to forgive and can experience the many benefits associated with forgiveness.

What Can Christian Thought Offer to Forgiveness?

The same two questions should be considered again, but from the perspective of what the church can offer to the science of forgiveness, at least for those who are part of a community of faith. Why should we forgive? Yes, there are plenty of ways forgiveness promotes individual health, but it also promotes community health. Both in a sole-authored book²³ and in his book with Célestin Musekura, L. Gregory Jones speaks wisely to the community benefits of forgiveness and to the dangers of relying too much on the individual therapeutic benefits of forgiveness. We forgive because we have been forgiven, because the church is to mirror the truth and grace of Jesus. In this place of community it is difficult to draw the clean lines between forgiveness and reconciliation that psychologists have often drawn.

How do we forgive? The church hasn't always been clear or helpful in this regard, but let's not forget how Christian teaching can help us forgive. Strangely, though there is now a large psychological literature on forgiveness and a surprisingly large literature on prayer, almost no one in the scientific community has considered how prayer and forgiveness go together. (Everett Worthington is an exception in his remarkable book *Forgiving and Reconciling*.) Yet this has been the essence of the church's teaching for centuries. When some students and I asked one hundred Christians to describe how they forgave a significant offense, half

of them mentioned prayer without us even telling them what we were looking for in the study.²⁴ We were looking for prayer. Later, a dissertation student and I looked at how a prayer intervention promotes forgiveness, and we found that it enhances empathy for the offender.²⁵ This is not news for those steeped in Christian thought.

The Church Can Benefit from the Science of Forgiveness

Once we've considered why and how we forgive, the third question to consider is where we forgive. Those who have been Christians for any significant amount of time recognize how challenging it can be to remain in fellowship with one another—all of us sinners attempting to become better at emulating the grace of Jesus.

A church is a vulnerable place where we learn about one another's foibles and weaknesses and vulnerabilities. And in the process we hurt one another with alarming frequency.

I've often imagined what a body might look like if healing were impossible. Just picture every blemish, abrasion, scab, and wound you have ever experienced all being present in your body right now. It's not a pretty picture. How handicapped and impaired and ugly would the body of Christ, the church, be if forgiveness were not possible?

Where do we forgive? We forgive in lots of places, but perhaps especially inside the community of faith, where we have ample opportunities to wound one another and also to learn about and grow toward the character of Jesus. If the science of positive psychology can help us even a little bit with the mechanics of forgiveness, then the church stands to become a more beautiful reflection of God's presence in this broken world.

Forgiveness in Christian Counseling

I make the case in the introduction that there aren't many good bridges between positive psychology and counseling, and while that is true for most virtues considered in this book, it is not true for forgiveness.

Nathaniel Wade, whom I first met when he was an undergraduate at Wheaton College, where I was teaching at the time, recently published a meta-analysis of all the published and unpublished studies he and his colleagues could find on psychotherapeutic interventions for forgiveness.²⁶ After graduating from Wheaton, Wade went on to get a doctoral degree at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he studied with Worthington. Wade, Worthington, and two other colleagues found fifty-four studies looking at forgiveness in psychotherapy, and sure enough, forgiveness interventions help people to forgive. Forgiveness interventions also help people become less depressed and anxious and become more hopeful.

Christian counselors would do well to become familiar with the work of Worthington and also the pioneering work of Robert Enright,²⁷ both of whom have written and done research on clinical applications of forgiveness. Their work is exemplary and evidence based. Importantly, both Enright and Worthington attend to the long, arduous process involved. Forgiveness takes time, and it is important to allow the wounded person ample time to explore the pain that was caused. Otherwise forgiveness becomes something more like excusing or condoning, but not true forgiveness.

Given that chapter 1 advocates a sort of critical wisdom that invites us to think outside the box, let me suggest three outside-the-box sorts of ideas for Christian counselors. First, most clients will be motivated by the personal gains that forgiveness offers. It helps them move on with their lives, and that is a good thing. Christian counselors can both celebrate this motive, because it is a good one, and remember that other motives are important also. The Christian idea of forgiving as we have been forgiven not only promotes forgiveness of an offender but also deepens faith and awareness of God's profound gift to us. So yes, let's consider the personal benefits of forgiveness with our clients, but at least with Christian clients we do not need to stop there. Considering other reasons to forgive may promote growth in various virtues, including the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Second, though it is not feasible for every forgiver to reconcile with every offender, neither is it essential to shut off conversations about reconciliation in counseling. The person who has been assaulted over and over by a partner would not be wise to reconcile and go back into the relationship, but that does not mean that some yearnings for reconciliation will never show up. As forgiveness progresses, it is quite likely the wounded soul will express some longing for a family to be made whole again, even though it seems impossible for such a thing to happen. The sensitive counselor remains wise, likely reminding the client of how this just can't work given the past record of behavior, but still validating the yearning. This is the telos of forgiveness, to yearn for reconciliation, whether or not it can ever happen. The same is true for a forgiver whose offender is dead. Reconciling can never happen this side of eternity, but the forgiver can yearn for it. And this is a sign of fullness and virtue when it happens.

Finally, we Christian counselors need to remember the other half of the forgiveness equation. Sometimes people come not seeking to forgive as much as seeking forgiveness. Self-forgiveness, which I explore briefly in chapter 6 under the heading "Science and Grace, Side by Side," is part of this, but so is seeking forgiveness from the person the client has hurt. We need ears to hear this. Too often we assume that clients come to us because they have been deeply wounded by others, and that is often true, but sometimes they come because they have been the offender and are looking for a way to move forward in life.

In all these ways, we can seek to keep Christ in the center of Christian counseling. Jesus is the benchmark of virtue, the one who shows us the way when we are confused and self-deceived.

Forgiveness is close to the center of everything Christian, and Jesus, the great forgiver, is the exemplar of our faith. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear Jesus in our churches, our counseling offices, and even in our science.