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Forgiveness and prayer are both topics of contemporary social science research, but they are not often considered together. The present study investigates how Christian respondents portray prayer when describing the process of interpersonal forgiveness. Just over half of the respondents mentioned prayer as an important part of forgiveness at their first opportunity in a structured interview protocol. Prayer responses were coded as inward, upward, or outward, with inward prayers being the most common. The narrative descriptions of inward prayer resemble Worthington's (2001, 2003) REACH model of the forgiveness process.

The astounding growth of social science research in forgiveness can be seen in the number of forgiveness-related articles in major psychology journals. In a single recent year, articles pertaining to forgiveness appeared in *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (Makinen & Johnson, 2006; McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006; Reed & Enright, 2006), *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (Orcutt, 2006), *Group Dynamics* (Wade & Goldman, 2006), and *Journal of Applied Psychology* (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006) as well as many other journals in psychology. In the same year Brunner-Routledge published Worthington's latest text on forgiveness (Worthington, 2006), just a year after they published his landmark edited volume, *Handbook of Forgiveness* (Worthington, 2005). Moreover, the impact of forgiveness research has reached beyond the guild publications of psychologists and into popular media outlets, social policy, and trade books. The names of leading forgiveness researchers Enright and Worthington are even listed in the online Wikipedia entry under the topic of forgiveness.

The proliferation and popularizing of forgiveness is an encouraging trend insofar as it has made forgiveness accessible to a wide variety of people of various ideological persuasions. One can now discuss forgiveness without referring to a transcendent being or particular religious dogma. Forgiveness is still discussed in synagogues, confessional booths, churches, and mosques, but now it can also be discussed in the psychotherapy office, in the courtroom, and forums where public policy is determined. But divorcing forgiveness from its religious roots has

a negative side as well—at worst, it may change the very construct of forgiveness (Meek & McMinn, 1997), and at best it has diminished the potential to see how religious processes and motives are part of interpersonal forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Though we applaud efforts to extend principles of forgiveness beyond their religious moorings, there is also a place to investigate forgiveness *within* its religious context. There are many interesting possibilities when studying forgiveness and religion together, one of which is the role of religious activities in the process of forgiveness. The present study considers the role of prayer in forgiveness among Christian participants.

Like forgiveness, prayer has also gained momentum in social science research (Zaleski & Zaleski, 2005). Also like forgiveness, various personal health benefits to prayer and meditation have been demonstrated, including post-operative emotional adjustment (Ai, Bolling, & Peterson, 2000), pain management (Blanchard et al., 1990), lowered blood pressure (Bruning & Frew, 1987), self-reported vitality and mental health (Stavros, 1998), perceived closeness to God (Stavros, 1998), responsiveness to psychotherapy (Finney & Maloney, 1985), social connectedness (Rew, Wong, & Sternglanz, 2004), and perhaps even prolonged life (Alexander, Langer, Newman, Chandler, & Davies, 1989).

As the benefits of praying are becoming increasingly clear, the potential benefits of being prayed for are not as clear. After a series of studies suggesting possible health benefits of receiving intercessory prayer, Benson et al. (2006) reported the most carefully controlled study yet conducted. Two groups of patients recovering from coronary bypass surgery were told that they may or may not be receiving intercessory prayer. Patients in one of these groups actually did receive two weeks of intercessory prayer and

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patients in the other group were not prayed for—at least not as part of the study. A third group of patients also received intercessory prayer and were told that they certainly would be the recipients of prayer. The dependent variable was post-surgery complications within 30 days of surgery. No differences were found among the first two groups, and the third group—those who knew with certainty that they would be prayed for—actually showed heightened complications relative to the other two groups.

When a topic such as forgiveness or prayer becomes the focus of psychological inquiry, the tendency is to consider the personal benefits with regard to health promotion. In the hands of psychologists, many of whom are scientist-practitioners or practitioner-scholars, research questions quite naturally morph into questions about clinical practicalities: “Does forgiveness work?” or “Does prayer work?” These are important questions, of course, but they are not the only questions that might be asked from within a religious worldview. Within a religious worldview, the point of forgiveness may have little to do with whether it helps promote personal health. Instead, forgiveness may be an altruistic gift to another, a response of gratitude to a forgiving and gracious God, or perhaps a duty expected of those who practice the religion (McMinn, Meek, Domínguez, Ryan, & Novotny, 1999). Similarly, prayer—a time-honored practice in every major religious tradition—is a spiritual discipline, and not only a method of health promotion. Rather than asking whether prayer or forgiveness help promote health and well-being, a monotheistic religious perspective might first consider the proper and obedient response to a divine Being, with the assumption that proper living is likely to bring about various sorts of growth and change, both personal and collective. So within a devout religious framework the positive outcomes of forgiveness and prayer, while considerable, might be considered as benefits more than motives.

Still, the benefits of prayer and forgiveness are important even if they are not the sole motive to engage in religious disciplines or activities. Foster (1992) asserts, “To pray is to change. This is a great grace. How good of God to provide a path whereby our lives can be taken over by love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control” (p. 6). The benefits that Foster describes as products of prayer are also qualities that should enhance one’s capacity to forgive,

though existing social science research suggests that religious individuals distinguish themselves from others more in the general endorsement of forgiveness than in specific acts of forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999).

Amidst the growth in social science research on the topics of prayer and forgiveness, there is surprisingly little research bringing the two constructs together. If forgiveness and prayer are both central to religious life, then to what extent do religious individuals implement prayer in the process of forgiving? The present study represents an initial and exploratory attempt to investigate the potential role of prayer among Christians who have forgiven another for an interpersonal offense.

The questions guiding the analyses in this exploratory study were:

1. To what extent do Christians spontaneously mention prayer when describing the process of forgiveness?
2. To what extent can the descriptions of prayer offered by participants be classified according to a contemporary typology of prayer?
3. What narratives are offered that can help enrich our understanding of prayer in relation to interpersonal forgiveness?

Methods

Participants

Employees, graduate students, and non-traditional adult undergraduate students at George Fox University, an evangelical Christian university in the Pacific Northwest were invited via email to participate in an interview study regarding their experiences with forgiveness. We elected not to include traditional undergraduate students in the study in order to recruit those with more life experience. Subsequent to the initial invitation, 135 individuals offered to participate in the study and 100 completed the study (74% completion rate). Reflecting the ethnic homogeneity of the Pacific Northwest, the sample was primarily European-American (87%) with only a few respondents of other ethnic identities and 4 who did not report ethnicity. Most (75%) were female. The age ranged from 20 to 74, with an average of 45 years (standard deviation of 10.4).

Procedures and Interview Instrument

The initial contact was an email announcement to the campus community indicating our desire for research volunteers to participate in

an electronic interview regarding how Christians go about forgiving an interpersonal offense. No mention of prayer was given in the initial email. Those interested in participating were directed to a website where they read a consent form and agreed to be part of the study. A structured interview was conducted through electronic means in order to standardize the questions and give respondents an opportunity to consider their answers. Interviews consisted of two to five emails.

The interview was comprised of 2 phases. In Phase 1, the goal was to see how readily respondents mentioned prayer as a means of forgiving an interpersonal offense. The initial question was, "We are not so interested in what or who you forgave, but in how you forgave. What were the most important parts involved in the process of forgiving your offender?" If the participant mentioned prayer in response to the question, we then moved to Phase 2 of the interview. If not, we proceeded with the second question of Phase 1: "Were there ways that being a Christian influenced how you went about forgiving your offender?" Again, if the participant mentioned prayer, we jumped to Phase 2. If not, we persisted with a third question in Phase 1: "Were there particular spiritual disciplines that you found helpful in the forgiveness process?" If a fourth question was necessary in Phase 1, it was a very direct request about prayer: "To what extent did you find prayer helpful in forgiving your offender?" Phase 2 of the interview consisted of a single question:

In an earlier email you mentioned the role of prayer in forgiveness. We are particularly interested in this. Please describe how prayer was helpful in the process of forgiving. That is, what sort of prayer did you try, and how did it promote forgiveness?

Answers to this Phase 2 question formed the primary basis for our qualitative analysis.

At the conclusion of the study participants were thanked for their participation, given an opportunity to request results of the study, and asked to provide demographic information.

Results

The first two questions—the extent to which Christian respondents spontaneously mention prayer when discussing forgiveness, and the extent to which their descriptions can be reliability categorized—were addressed with quanti-

tative methods. The final question regarding personal narratives was addressed with a qualitative analysis.

Mentioning Prayer in the Forgiveness Process

To what extent does the importance of prayer simply "roll off the tongues" of Christians who have engaged in interpersonal forgiveness? By standardizing our interview process through email questions, we were able to get an initial answer to this question. We did not mention prayer in the initial interview questions in order to see whether respondents would mention prayer without the idea being suggested to them. Each of the Phase 1 questions became increasingly direct, with the final Phase 1 question asking explicitly whether the respondent used prayer in the process of forgiving. Table 1 displays when respondents first mentioned prayer as part of the forgiveness process. A slight majority of respondents mentioned prayer after the first interview question, suggesting that it was a vital part of their forgiveness process. The distribution in Table 1 appears to be bimodal, with just over half of the respondents mentioning prayer spontaneously and another one-third needing some explicit prompting about spiritual disciplines or direct questioning about prayer.

Classification of Prayer

Various typologies of prayer have been offered in past spiritual writings and empirical research efforts. One contemporary typology has roots in both the spirituality literature (Foster, 1992) and the psychology of religion literature (Ladd & Spilka, 2002). This typology classifies prayers as inward, upward, or outward. Inward prayer focuses on personal transformation through conversation with God, upward prayer is designed to promote intimacy between the one praying and God, and outward prayer is focused on ministry, often for the sake of others. Examples of inward prayers are prayers of examen, discussing personal experiences and feelings with God, and requests for personal growth and formation. Examples of upward prayers are prayers of adoration, meditating on God's qualities, contemplative prayer, and sacramental prayers. Outward prayer includes activities such as petitionary and intercessory prayer.

As a research team, we met for several hours to practice coding responses according to this inward, upward, outward typology. After discussing the types of prayer that fit in

Table 1
Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Prayer

Question	Percentage of Respondents Offering Their First Mention of Prayer
Phase 1, Question 1. What were the most important parts involved in the process of forgiving your offender?	54
Phase 1, Question 2. Were there [other] ways that being a Christian influenced how you went about forgiving your offender?	9
Phase 1, Question 3. Were there [other particular] spiritual disciplines that you found helpful in the forgiveness process?	22
Phase 1, Question 4. To what extent did you find prayer helpful in forgiving your offender?	15

each category, we practiced with particular responses offered by participants and then discussed the similarities and disparities in our ratings. We then coded the 100 responses, with each response being coded by two independent raters. In each case, 10 points were distributed among the three prayer categories. For example, if a respondent described only inward prayer, then all 10 points would be coded as internal. But in most cases respondents described multiple sorts of prayer so the 10 points would be distributed among the three categories according to the rater's judgment of the narrative offered. The initial inter-scorer reliability was not adequate, with Pearson product-moment coefficients of .46, .53, and .40 for inward, upward, and outward prayer, respectively.

Upon discussion of the coding challenges, we agreed that some responses were more difficult to code than others. For example, one respondent wrote: "Mostly I prayed that God would help me to be willing to forgive, to show me how to forgive, and to forgive me for not being able to forgive." Because of the brevity of the response, it is difficult to know if this response is mostly inward (asking God for personal transformation), upward (asking for renewed relationship with God), or outward (petitioning God for the skills of forgiveness). This reflects a disadvantage of our electronic interviewing procedure—once a person responds it is difficult to prompt for additional information without violating standardization procedures. Other difficult-to-code responses were lengthier, often

describing all three types of prayer in some detail. Some of these responses were rich and meaningful, but still challenging to code because of difficulty determining which types of prayer were the most prominent in the midst of the lengthy narrative.

Thus, we were not able reliability to classify responses into the inward, outward, and upward typology. This may indicate a need for more precise coding strategies with this typology, or for an alternative typology, or for more precision in the interview process, which produced some difficult-to-code narratives. The latter possibility seems most likely given the challenges we experienced trying to code approximately one-third of the responses. After removing the 34 responses that were the most difficult to code we were left with respectable reliability coefficients for the remaining responses: .83, .87, and .78 for inward, upward, and outward, respectively, but this is not a legitimate measure of inter-rater reliability because one cannot simply remove troubling data in order to enhance consistency of interpretation. Still, it seems likely that these 34 difficult-to-code responses reflect some deficit in the exchange of words—either our interview questions, the respondents' answers, or some combination of both—which rendered quantitative coding efforts quite ineffective. Even after additional training and another attempt to rate the 34 difficult responses we were not able to code these responses reliably: .13, .36, and .43 for inward, upward, and outward, respectively.

Narratives of Inward Prayer and the REACH Model

Among the 100 respondents, the modal form of prayer described was inward prayer, with an average of 5.9 coding points (out of 10 possible) assigned. An average of 2.3 points was assigned to upward prayer and 2.1 points assigned to outward prayer. Thus, it appears that prayer in the forgiveness process is often associated with personal transformation, which coincides well with the goals of psychological research. That is, because psychology is primarily concerned with behavior and mental processes (inward) and not as much with human-divine connection (upward) or ministry (outward), we deemed it especially useful to consider the inward prayer narratives of respondents.

We used grounded theory for the qualitative analysis. In grounded theory, the data are approached with relatively little preconception and the researcher attempts to then distill categories of meaning from the data (Willig, 2001). Using software helps this process by allowing the researcher to create electronic "nodes" (categories of meaning) while reviewing the narratives. These nodes are dynamic—they can be revised as needed while reading the narratives and with each iteration of coding. Moreover, some software (such as QSR N6, which we used) allows for demographic data to be imported so that narratives and categories of meaning can be filtered by respondent characteristics.

Qualitative analyses of inward prayer narratives revealed themes that were remarkably consistent with Worthington's (2001, 2003) REACH model describing the process of interpersonal forgiveness: (R) recall the hurt, (E) empathize with the offending person, recognize the (A) altruistic gift of forgiveness, (C) commit to forgive, and (H) hold on to the commitment to forgive. We did not set out to test or evaluate the REACH model. Rather, we conducted a grounded theory analysis of inward prayer narratives (using QSR N6 software), which resulted in themes that are strikingly consistent with the steps in Worthington's model. These same themes are also quite similar to the four phases described by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000)—uncovering, decision, work, and deepening.

First, respondents emphasized the role of pouring out one's experience to God with candor and openness. This seems closely tied to the idea of uncovering (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) or recalling the hurt, which is mentioned fre-

quently in the forgiveness literature (e.g., Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 2003). Many of our respondents accomplished this open disclosure through prayer, often referring to the Psalms in describing how they prayed to God. The following responses illustrate the theme of disclosing the hurt to God through prayer:

[Prayer] gave me the opportunity to cry out to Him and express my pain and explain the injustice of what had been done to me. This allowed me to release the pain by expressing my hurt and allowed God, through the Holy Spirit to bring me comfort in my distress. (42 year old male)

Prayer was helpful first of all in helping me acknowledge and vent my feelings, largely of anger but also of sadness and frustration. It was helpful in a way similar to the way the Psalms gave the writers opportunity to "be real" before God with what's happening emotionally. (54 year old female)

During my prayer time I would read how the Psalmist prayed so vehemently against his enemy—and the way the enemy was described and how much the Psalmist hated him was how I felt. So I knew it was okay to express such emotion to God. This admittance, this expression of emotion released for that day what was in my heart. Obviously this was not my whole topic during prayer time—but the weeks leading up to a full forgiveness were like this. (38 year old female)

These responses illustrate a theme that was evident in many more interviews.

A second theme observed in respondents' descriptions of inward prayer is similar to what Worthington (2003) has described as empathy in his REACH model. Though Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) do not have a separate phase for empathizing with the offender, they recognize empathy as part of the reframing process that occurs with forgiveness. In the present study, people described how prayer produced in them an awareness of their own faults and need for forgiveness and thus some degree of empathy for their offender. For instance, "I came to the

stark realization of my own sin," a 38 year old female stated. "... The hardness in my heart against my offender was not only softened but fell away. We were on the same ground. I no longer saw myself as superior." A 42 year old male stated, "The Holy Spirit... reminded me that I had been forgiven much and needed to forgive in the same way and that my relationship with God would be hindered by my unforgiveness." Other examples include:

I think it also helped as an appeal to God to give me the emotional wherewithal to get to the place where I could see her as a fallible human being like myself so that I could begin to "cut her some slack" on the road to letting go of my anger and truly forgiving her. (54 year old female)

The most striking result of prayer in that process of forgiveness happened around one specific prayer I prayed. I asked God to let me see my adversary as God saw him. All at once I got this sense of looking at this person as someone who had an incredible inner beauty and worth. All in a flash I saw someone of tremendous value. That vision stayed with me through the process of conflict, through the year and a half of mediation, and still lingers... (46 year old female)

Though the third theme identified in this study is not identical to the third step described by Worthington (2001), there are similarities. We noted that prayer often allowed people—with God's help—to release both their pain and their right to exact vengeance. This resembles Enright and Fitzgibbon's (2000) decision phase and Worthington's (2001) notion of offering forgiveness as an altruistic gift, but with an added dimension of acknowledging that God provides the ability for the person to be altruistic. A 54 year old female noted, "Prayer reminds me of my dependence on God for help, especially when I seem unable to get beyond my own agenda and desire to hurl hurt back at the one who wounded me." Another participant—a 60 year old woman—wrote, "I confess to the Lord that I am not able to forgive under my own power and that I need help to forgive and help to be able to love the person with the love Christ offers." A younger woman (41 years old) wrote, "I pray to release the consequences back into God's hands.

I choose to forgive the person over and over again, until I can live it and not just think it."

Worthington (2001) also noted the importance of committing to forgiveness by stating one's decision to forgive. Prayer can help serve this purpose as well, though it was not observed frequently in these interviews. Perhaps the commitment to forgive is typically disclosed to friends, counselors, or family members rather than to God in prayer. Still, some of those describing their prayer processes referred to a time of decision or commitment when they chose—in prayer—to forgive rather than holding on to bitterness or seeking revenge. For example:

For me, [forgiveness] involves one prayer in which I state that I forgive that person and let him/her be in God's hands. This is a memorable prayer for me, because I refer back to it in future prayers. It is also like an altar to me; a place where I've made a sacrifice and given it up to God. (35 year old female)

Several times in the process it seemed to be in my power to hurt this man, to make sure he lost his job, his reputation, and his ability to minister (all the things he had cost me and in a strict sense of justice things he should lose) but I refused to take advantage of the opportunity for revenge. At one moment I pictured myself holding the very sword that he had used to run me through, knowing I had the opportunity to run him through as well, and deciding not to do it. (46 year old female)

The final stage of Worthington's (2001) model is to hold on to the commitment to forgive over time. Forgiveness is work (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Many of our respondents mentioned similar ideas when describing prayer and forgiveness. Prayer seems to serve as a reminder to forgive and an impetus to keep old wounds from causing resentment. One respondent described, "Prayers in which I am feeling like taking back my forgiveness and then telling God I forgave the person(s) and asking him to help me remember that it is in his hands now." Another described this in a lengthier metaphoric way:

I have found that sometimes, the offense creeps back and causes

resentment to build up. Someone once described it this way: A third grade class was going to paint with watercolors. Each child is given a brush, bowl of water, paper, a plate to mix colors and paints. They were instructed to experiment with the colors, brush strokes etc. They were to use the water to moisten the colors and also to clean their brushes. It wasn't long before the bowl of water became a murky grayish brown. The teacher called this a "shadow color." If they didn't get fresh water, the "shadow color" would darken all of the other colors, taking away the brightness, especially of the lighter paints. So, the teacher went around cleaning out the bowls periodically. Before long, the kids began cleaning out their own bowls, and helping one another. Helping me to exercise forgiveness is having God come and clean out my water bowl. The way I call Him over to my paint station is through prayer. Sometimes this has to occur several times before I learn to more quickly let go of the hurt and move forward. You see – I hope for a beautiful picture (which includes a healthy relationship with others) and in order to do that, I must get rid of the "shadow color." Often times, only God is capable of cleaning out the bowl, I cannot do it on my own. If I don't ask him, through prayer – it won't happen. (37 year old female)

Discussion

This is a preliminary, exploratory study that provides support for the idea of pairing prayer and forgiveness in future studies. Many Christians describe prayer spontaneously in the process of describing forgiveness, and they describe experiences and psychological processes that are similar to those found elsewhere in forgiveness research (e.g., Worthington, 2001, 2003). Through prayer, our respondents were able to recall and express their deep hurts, grow to recognize their own weaknesses and perhaps a sense of empathy for their offenders, release their pain by giving it to God, and engage in the sometimes long journey of forgiveness. The

Christian faith may be especially important in promoting empathy among forgivers because Christians believe that all have transgressed and are offered forgiveness through the work of Jesus (Meek & McMinn, 1997). Many prayers described in the present study resembled the biblical Psalms, where people poured out their emotions and cognitions directly to God, often in an uncensored and spontaneous way. In the process of crying out to God, they recalled their pain and honestly confronted the damage done by their offenders. This process of honest disclosure then led to an awareness of God's presence and care, and sometimes to empathy as the pray-ers remembered how much God has forgiven them, and finally to a recognition that prayer had produced change, greater peace, and interpersonal forgiveness. Despite the numerous positive accounts of prayer we received in this study, we are not presuming that prayer is the only way, or the best way, for Christians to forgive. Indeed, at times prayer may result in formulaic or superficial approaches to forgiveness; but at other times it may provide helpful faith-based perspectives and spiritual support for the difficult work of forgiveness.

As is often true of exploratory qualitative research, there are several ways to follow up and improve the methods used in this study. First, though our sample showed age diversity, and thus represented more experiences across the lifespan than a university student sample would have provided, still it is ethnically homogenous and predominantly female. A more diverse sample would be helpful for subsequent research. Second, there were numerous advantages to an electronic interview method, but this also raises questions about representativeness and contamination of the sample. Response bias is possible—those who avoid electronic communication may be systematically different than those who are recruited and interviewed through electronic methods. And it is possible that respondents spoke with one another through the prolonged email interview process. Third, our efforts to categorize prayer types in a reliable way were not successful. Perhaps a different prayer typology, more extensive and rigorous training in coding methods, or more explicit instructions to participants regarding how they might answer interview questions would be helpful in future investigations. The level of detail offered by respondents—like the prayers they described—varied a great deal in length and detail. Some respondents

described simple prayers, such as "Help me forgive, Lord." Others described the transformation process in surprising detail and nuance. This variability made coding difficult. Fourth, qualitative methods introduce both advantages and disadvantages. Quantitative studies would also be useful in investigating prayer and forgiveness. Ladd and Spilka (2002) have developed a quantitative tool to assess approaches to prayer, and several instruments are available to measure interpersonal forgiveness. Eventually, an intervention study would prove most helpful in assessing the extent to which prayer facilitates forgiveness among religious participants.

Prayer may be an important mechanism of discovery and recovery in the long and complex process of forgiveness, at least among people with devout religious values and practices. We conclude with the words of 48 year woman who experiences prayer as conversation with God throughout the day: "The other thing I learned through this time, perhaps through prayer, is that forgiveness doesn't always come immediately. It can take time. And faith."

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