

*Rediscovering
the Power of Repentance
& Forgiveness*

FINDING HEALING AND JUSTICE
FOR RECONCILABLE
AND IRRECONCILABLE
WRONGS

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Foreword

This is a book about forgiveness being “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10); a book that has its root in the ineffable source of the All-Powerful to forgive, but which points to the inescapable responsibility of our power when we repent. Decades of pastoral ministry have taught me the need for what is contained in these pages.

Fifty years of pastoring—of shepherding souls unto life, healing, God’s wisdom, and heaven’s hope—have involved innumerable conversations with good people seeking counsel. I have personally witnessed thousands who have stepped into the light of understanding the difference between “religious ideas” about God and a “relational revelation” from Him. These have verified God’s grace to forgive and His power to transform any one of us, once our heart becomes touched as our mind is taught by His Spirit. And it is then—when heart and mind understand and receive the dynamic that flows from the cross of Christ, that the Spirit of God begets true repentance—that is, the turning of my mind toward alignment with God’s, and the turning over of my will to yield to His. It is within this decisive encounter of any created being with the Creator of all, that human souls suddenly experience the magnanimity and majesty of forgiveness—of an unchaining from past guilt, folly, and self-centeredness, now replaced by a peace of mind and rest of the soul that only God can give.

Those foundational realities I have just summarized are the essential beginning place for all redemption—all forgiveness, all restoration of relationships, all recovering from brokenness—as the shame caused us either by ourselves or by others who violated us is removed. But from that foundational point, you will find this book crowding you forward—nudging, goading you as it has me, with the inescapable implications of God’s forgiveness lavished upon us. This “crowding forward” is not pushy, but you will

find it purposeful. The writer is more interested in our well-being than she is in her thesis. You will find yourself caught up in the flow of clear thinking, driven by a purely motivated care and a sensitively-edged passion for a complete embrace of all the implications of God's forgiveness offers to and calls from us.

I have an acquaintance with Leah Coulter that spans over fifteen years. I'm familiar with the fruit of her life and the faithfulness of her and her husband's ministry. She has been sharpened by experience and mellowed by time, and you will sense something of her gentle graciousness as you read; a demeanor that enables our receptivity to what she presents as an unquestionably demanding issue. Matching her graciousness, however, you will find she is also patiently persistent as she points beyond the wonder of God's grace in forgiving us, to the workings of that grace that complete a cycle—so that all heavenside has achieved for us in Christ is not short-circuited by our failure to make the earthside connection through Christ.

One can hardly say enough about how practical and clear these pages are, so I welcome you to a profoundly human book, yet still one that is quite without the limits of mere humanism. You will also find it is a profoundly godly book, but without any of the trappings of pretentious piety. In all, *Rediscovering the Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* is something of a court summons intended to rectify injustices—perhaps ones that have been dealt to you. And since this court convenes in the presence of the universe's Judge, we will not be surprised to find perfect justice and equity, while discovering it is always administrated with loving kindness and gentle mercies. Only God as He is revealed in the Holy Bible is characterized by this incredible balance of unrelenting integrity to apply His law and overflowing fidelity to administer His love.

He wants to work that balance in each of us, not to enforce a law, but to release a grace. And as you read you, as I

have, may find something deeper in His grace—something that will increase understanding, stir the wellsprings of your soul, and enrich your relationship with others. With that, it might well be that you will find this book personally therapeutic. But whether that is the case or not, I assure you of this—it will certainly increase your capacity to be a healing instrument of God’s love in the midst of a very broken world.

Jack W. Hayford

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Introduction

WHY ANOTHER BOOK ON REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS?

Sitting with people in the ashes of their lives, struggling to find a way out of the pain and hurt in the aftermath of wrongs that have been done to them, gives you a unique perspective from within the world of a person who has been deeply wounded. From that vantage point, you quickly understand what it means to have been “sinned against” by other believers, family members, friends, neighbors, or strangers. Their voices have been muted, and they wonder if anyone hears their internal cries for justice. As you listen, you not only hear their voices, you begin to echo them—crying out to God with them, and asking Him to release them from the captivity and pain of those irreconcilable wrongs.

“How do I get out of here?” they want to know. “What does God want me to do?”

I realize forgiveness is a critical path that needs to be considered, but how often do we feel as though we must “sell” somebody on the idea of forgiving an unrepentant person for their own good, while reminding them that God won’t forgive them if they don’t forgive? Moreover, how do we deal with the unrepentant people who have hurt us—those who leave scars too deep for words?

From an all too common Christian view, why must the weight and responsibility of forgiveness be placed on the sinned-against instead of the sinner’s repentance? During my years of study, I’ve heard two contradictory voices in Scripture regarding forgiveness. One admonishes us: “Forgive . . . anything against anyone” (Mark 11:25), while the other instructs us: “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke . . . and if there is repentance, you must forgive” (Luke 17:3).

I remember a time when I cried out to God for His wisdom to understand how forgiveness could bring justice. I also asked Him to provide a way out of the ashes for those trapped by the brokenness of life. “What is forgiveness all about, Lord? How do I reconcile the seemingly contradictory commands and the cries that I hear for justice?” This is when I realized God was answering my prayer. It was as if He had placed an answer within my heart, “It’s in loving God and loving your neighbor.”

As I started to recall the forgiveness Scripture passages that I had been studying, I began to see that some addressed forgiveness in our relationship with God, others addressed forgiveness in our relationships with other people, while still others talked about how we cannot separate these two dimensions. I began to rediscover forgiveness, seeing it from this whole new perspective—as a believer who lives in two relational dimensions, not one. My horizon or scope of knowledge regarding forgiveness had been expanded, and I began to understand the two differing voices regarding forgiveness. They are not contradictory at all, but indeed complementary, especially when understood from this two-dimensional worldview—providing clear paths for both the sinner and the sinned-against.

As you read these words, you may wonder, *Why another book on forgiveness?* The primary reason is because I believe biblical forgiveness and repentance must be linked and taught from this two-dimensional worldview. In *Rediscovering the Power of Repentance and Forgiveness*, I will freshly address this topic from a Judeo-Christian worldview, understanding that Jesus’ teachings are rooted in Israel’s Law. It lays the biblical foundation which teaches us that, in order to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we must love God and our neighbor the way Christ loves us. This love is expressed in how we keep clean slates before God and other believers, non-believers, friends, coworkers, and even enemies.

Relational wounds can cut deeply and hinder our desire or abil-

ity to trust others and even God. Whether you're facing a broken relationship because of a sin you committed against another or are crying out for justice as the one sinned against, Scripture provides clear instructions in both dimensions of relationship. It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will strengthen and encourage us to live our lives in true repentance and forgiveness—the kind of repentance and forgiveness that reconciles broken relationships, giving grace for the process of transformation, or provides a way to release those irreconcilable wrongs to our justice-making God—who will hold our offenders responsible. May the Holy Spirit continue to enlighten our hearts as we rediscover the power of biblical repentance and forgiveness together.

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The Missing Link in Forgiveness

When you think about forgiveness, what comes to mind? Do you find yourself remembering those times when you felt the heaviness of your heart lift because someone forgave you? Do you think back to a time when you felt pressed to forgive someone who never even repented or acknowledged the hurt and pain they caused you? However, you were told that forgiveness was what God wanted you to do for your own good. Or do you find yourself getting mad when you think about forgiveness because you have unresolved issues toward others you have hurt or who have hurt you? Are you afraid to ask God to forgive you because you have put off facing these issues? Are there situations in which your heart cries, “It’s not fair to forgive them—they never said they were sorry or admitted their sin”? Or is there a time when the thought of forgiveness made you feel powerless against overwhelming pain and suffering?

I was teaching on the subject of forgiveness for the sinned-against—specifically men and women who had been sexually abused as children—when a Master of Divinity student kept raising his hand at the beginning of the lecture and making comments such as, “The Bible says they must forgive or they won’t be

forgiven.” Every couple of minutes his hand would go up and he would ask another question or make another comment. I asked him to ride out the lecture with me, and to hold his questions until the end. Then I would explain why I believe Scripture teaches what it does regarding the subject of forgiveness, especially for irreconcilable wrongs.

This student was filtering what I was saying through his present and personal grid of understanding forgiveness. This is a natural thing to do. Whenever we receive new information, we process it through what we currently know. He agreed to hold his questions, and immediately after class, came up to me and said, “This was the best class I have had.” At first, I didn’t know if he was serious or what he meant.

The next week, he arrived early and asked if he could share something with the class. Cautiously, I asked, “What would you like to say?”

He said, “I went home after class and searched Scripture regarding forgiveness, and it does teach as you have taught in class.” He continued by saying that he also tried to share his new understanding of forgiveness with his pastor. However, the pastor was in the exact spot he had been the week prior and contended, “No. People just have to forgive.”

Not discouraged by his pastor’s words, the student said, “I will win him over.”

More importantly than this, he said, “I’m on staff at my church, and I’ve been counseling two different women who are working through sinned-against issues. Prior to this class, I told them they had to forgive their unrepentant offenders because God required it, and it would make them feel better. However, each of them was resistant because they felt this counsel was unfair and that God was unjust. I put into practice over the weekend what I learned last week. Both women not only understood this biblical model of forgiveness, but also embraced it willingly. They began

to believe that God did truly care about their pain and losses, and were very willing to release their rights and the debts owed them by their offenders to our justice-making God.”

He said he wanted to tell the class about his new understanding of forgiveness, and how it helped these two women experience a true release and freedom. He told his story to the class and said, “This information not only expanded my knowledge of forgiveness, but will also change the way I teach and counsel others regarding forgiveness issues.” He had rediscovered the link between repentance and forgiveness and realized that they operate within two relational dimensions.

This student, like so many of us, previously understood forgiveness from a unilateral or one-dimensional viewpoint. In other words, he believed that forgiveness was something we did only in our relationship with God to make us feel better. “Just let it go. Forgive and you will feel better if you do.”

However, Jesus taught that we must love God and love our neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40), thereby living in two relational dimensions: our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal or interpersonal relationships with others. Furthermore, these two dimensions are inseparable. How I live in relationship with other believers, nonbelievers, and even my enemies will affect my relationship with God. Conversely, my relationship with God must affect how I live in relationship with others.

Two voices are indeed heard in Scripture regarding repentance and forgiveness. One voice tells us: “Forgive . . . anything against anyone” (Mark 11:25), and another tells us: “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive” (Luke 17:3). Trying to follow these commands from a unilateral viewpoint seems contradictory and confusing: “Do I let the offense go? Or do I go?” However, when understood from a two-dimensional viewpoint, these two Scripture verses give clear instructions for those who have been sinned

against by others. Mark 11:25 prepares our hearts in our relationship with God, and Luke 17:3 moves our feet toward interpersonal reconciliation when and if the offender repents.

When we've sinned against others, Scripture is equally clear regarding our two dimensions of relationship: "Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). We are commanded to repent and seek forgiveness from the one we've sinned against before asking God to forgive that sin. My willingness to go and be reconciled with the one I've offended is the first step in asking God to forgive me for that sin. In other words, the horizontal or interpersonal step towards reconciliation must take place, or at least be attempted, before I can be forgiven in my vertical relationship with God.

When we've been sinned against by others, Scripture is equally clear regarding our two dimensions of relationship: "Forgive . . . anything against anyone" (Mark 11:25), and then: "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive" (Luke 17:3). As we pray, we must have a willing heart to forgive our offenders whether we go and rebuke them for the sake of their repentance, or they are repenting to us—seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. Either way, our hearts must be willing to forgive.

We have been taught for years that we must forgive as the Lord forgives (Colossians 3:13). From a unilateral perspective, we have mistakenly believed that we must forgive people who have never repented to us and without ever confronting them. We have also

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*How can we forgive and be
reconciled with someone who
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been taught that when we've sinned against others, we only need to unilaterally ask God to forgive our sins without repenting to the ones we've sinned against. However, God does not forgive unrepentant sin. When we pray, repent, and seek His forgiveness, He graciously forgives, but not without requiring our repentance.

To "forgive as the Lord forgives" means that our love must be extended to those who have sinned against us, inviting repentance. Repentance must be linked with forgiveness. How can we forgive and be reconciled with someone who has sinned against us and has never repented? Maybe, he or she even refuses to repent. God doesn't even do that! Unless that person repents, there can be no forgiveness or reconciliation in the horizontal dimension. Instead, there is only a brokenness that deepens with time. Furthermore, unless we repent to those we have sinned against before asking God to forgive us for that sin, our prayers may not only be hindered, but we may also be confronted several times for the sake of our repentance.

In Matthew 18:15-20, we learn the steps to confronting another believer, and what to do if that person refuses to repent. First, the believer must be confronted privately. If he refuses to admit that what he has done is wrong, then we are to go to him again, but this time take two others with us. Finally, if that person continues to deny that what he has done needs to be forgiven, then he should be brought before the church. This is an extreme measure and is only used in situations where the person remains very stubborn in his or her attitude. God's Word does tell us that if there is no repentance, then that person is to be set outside the church community until there is repentance. If repentance was not necessary before forgiveness could be granted, then the discipline for unrepentant sin would not be so severe, and the sinned-against would be instructed to "just forgive anyway."

What then should the sinned-against do when their offenders are dead, unknown, unwilling to repent, or unsafe to confront?

For those irreconcilable wrongs done with no chance of repentance from the offender, I suggest a “Revoking Revenge” prayer and counseling model that will help the sinned-against understand that they are owed a debt because of the wrongs committed against them, and will provide a means to release that debt.

When someone sins against another, a debt is incurred. The offender is indebted to the offended. That is one of the reasons God commands the sinner: “Go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come” (Matthew 5:24). Only the sinned-against can release the sinner’s debt horizontally. God values the debt and loss of the sinned-against, so much so that He will not clear the debt vertically unless the sinner repents first horizontally. Still, the sinned-against cannot horizontally forgive an unrepentant offender. For these irreconcilable wrongs, there are three phases for the sinned-against: 1) to remember and mourn their pain and losses with others; 2) to hold the offender responsible for the sin(s) committed against them; and 3) to transfer the debts out of their internal courts to the heavenly court by relinquishing their rights to the debt over to God, who will ultimately bring justice on their behalf. God says: “Vengeance is mine” (Romans 12:19), and He will: “by no means clear the guilty” (Exodus 34:7, KJV).

Just as my student, you’ll process what you are reading through your current understanding. I would encourage you to ride out the points in each chapter to the end. You will be tempted to put your past personal and interpersonal experiences into this new framework and judge your previous actions by the new information. Please try to avoid that. You also may realize that the Holy Spirit is prompting you to do something about a particular situation. I would encourage you to be open to His leading.

The Pitfalls of Religious Individualism

The student mentioned in the first chapter rediscovered forgiveness in a way that gave him a new understanding of Scripture. When our eyes are opened to something we may not have seen—or you saw it, but you didn’t quite see everything the first time, you rediscover its truth afresh. It changes your perspective. My student’s world of knowledge regarding forgiveness opened up before him. He no longer viewed Scripture from a unilateral or religious individualist’s perspective, but rather from a two-dimensional perspective. This truth not only tilted his world or shifted his understanding regarding repentance and forgiveness, it brought this same horizon tilt or rediscovery to others.

Religious individualism is a unilateral expression of faith that believes in a one-way or one-sided approach to forgiveness. Often, we will interpret Scripture regarding forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation from this religious individualist’s worldview. We will quote those Scripture verses that teach: “Forgive . . . anything against anyone” (Mark 11:25), or “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive” (1 John 1:9, KJV).

These verses would fit well within religious individualism because they appear to teach a unilateral or one-way approach to

forgiveness that says, “It is just between me and God. There is no need for me to go to you and ask for forgiveness. I can just ask God to forgive me and that should be enough. If you have sinned against me, there’s no need to confront you, either. I will just ask God to forgive you, and that should be enough too. Being reconciled to you is nice, but not necessary. Everything is okay between us because I have forgiven you. And if I still feel a wall is up between us when we are together, then I must continue to forgive you.”

What contributes to our unilateral understanding of forgiveness and repentance? First, it is natural for our worldviews to become a lens through which we interpret Scripture and understand theology. A worldview is just that—the way we see and interpret our world through our own personal and cultural lenses. Usually, it is shaped by where and when we live, our experiences, teachings, upbringing, religious experiences, etc.

When we read the Word, we are aware that a wide chasm exists between our worldview and the biblical worldview. Different cultures and practices, different historical time periods, different languages, and different authors and audiences contribute to the chasm that exists between the original text and us. Our challenge is to step into the world of the Bible and understand it from within its context before we can apply it to ours.

The biblical worldview and two-thirds of the contemporary world are socio-centric in identity.¹ It is in communally based living that people find their true human existence in solidarity with others. Relationships give life and foster a place to belong. Self-denial and self-sacrifice are characteristic of those in community.

The biblical worldview reflects this *individual-in-community image*—specifically a covenantal community—whereas the Western worldview is more individualistic, with little ties or sense of responsibility to community. From a Western worldview, it is far easier to read Scripture and practice faith from a unilateral,

just-between-me-and-God-alone perspective; rather than to think about how faith is expressed or lived out in interpersonal relationships with other believers, families, communities, workplaces, or those in need of mercy because of such an individualistic mindset.

WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM

An individualistic worldview tends to subjectively view life through the lens of self-benefit and self-fulfillment. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah discusses how the American struggle for individual freedom has evolved into individualism. Bellah believes the core of what it means to be an American is individualism—the inherent belief in the dignity of the individual, whose rights take priority over the community and society.² Julie Gorman, in *Community That Is Christian*, labels this individualism as “me-ism,”³ and also believes it causes us to look at relationships from a self-benefit approach, rather than one that addresses the needs of others. Many Americans seem to believe they are responsible only to themselves. Freedom, to many Americans, means the individual has the right to choose to do whatever is right in his/her own eyes apart from moral absolutes or values.

Doing good is replaced with feeling good

These individualistic desires are rooted deeply in the soil of American hearts and minds. They have penetrated every social dimension of life in which our needs to feel good and to be happy are elevated above our relational commitment to one another—especially in our marriages, families, friendships, communities, church, and working relationships. In *Helping People Forgive*, Dr. David Augsburger writes that the Western world is a therapeutic society in which “therapeutic values are becoming cultural values.”⁴ In this type of culture, he believes that objectified moral

goodness turns into subjective goodness. In other words, doing what is right concerning another person can become little more than a reason to feel good, and this feeling becomes the plumb line for decisions in life and relationships.

Sadly, this is so true in our society today. Spouses become disposable, families can easily be broken apart, and friendships are discarded for no other reason than one's desire to be happy and fulfilled. Likewise, there is an unwritten sense that no one can judge the actions of another person, because one should not impose one's morality on others. The greater good is established in the belief that a person is being "therapeutically authentic" in his or her relationships. A person acts on the basis of individual needs, feelings, and desires. Furthermore, individualism teaches that a person's identity is not in his relationships, but in his success, performance, and sense of well-being.

According to Julie Gorman, this "me-ism" has created a relationship famine in America. The fallacy of individualism is that it emphasizes only one side of our humanity. It denies our need for each other. It assumes that we are self-sufficient, and we forge our own identities without anyone else. Consequently, it forces us to live in denial of our real need for others. It creates lonely, isolated, disconnected individuals who long for meaningful relationships, but who have no time to invest in them because they are too busy trying to become self-satisfied.

RELIGIOUS INDIVIDUALISM

American individualism has also taken root within our religious communities in the form of religious individualism—affecting how people live in relationship with God and others. It causes people to see their faith as a private and personal matter with little sense of community responsibility. Religious individualists

tend to believe they can be in relationship with God without living out their faith in relationship with others or on behalf of others.

Consequently, it affects what they believe Scripture teaches about repentance and forgiveness, and how they live out Scripture in their everyday lives. It also teaches that forgiveness is between them and God alone so that they will no longer have feelings of

bitterness or anger, nor experience the emotional problems these create. It is very appealing because many people prefer not to engage in interpersonal relationships or deep relational communities.

“MY faith and MY relationship with God”

Religious individualists view religion as an individual, unilateral experience for which they are accountable only to God and themselves. Faith has increasingly turned inward and become a more personal and private matter—“my faith is MY faith.” In other words, how I live out my faith in obedience to Scripture is just between me and Jesus; how I interpret Scripture is equally subjective. Contributing to unilateral faith is the shifting of the confession of sins from a communal practice (James 5:16) to a private confession, “just between me and God.”⁵ While maintaining a personal relationship with God is key to spiritual growth, religious individualists are less likely to be vulnerable to others, admit their faults, share their personal struggles, or especially ask for help.

Religious individualism keeps the focus on the individual whose faith and practice is more concerned with what my sin does to my relationship with God. There is little interpersonal responsibility taken, especially when it comes to how my sin affects the person I sinned against. A religious individualist is even less likely to think through the results of his actions when it comes to the corporate community or the church. When problems arise, the person who is caught up in the idea of individualism will think more about

himself than others. When he sins against others, he is less likely to say the simple but meaningful words, “Please forgive me for hurting you.” He is more apt to simply ask God to forgive him without ever attempting reconciliation.

This religious individualistic perspective may even keep a person from getting involved in the lives of others. A young woman shared with our class that when she came into relationship with Jesus, she struggled with drug addiction. So she asked several people to hold her accountable and walk alongside her so she could overcome the life-dominating sin. However, she was greatly disappointed because she could not find anyone who wanted to get involved in her life. They all had their reasons. Some didn’t have the time. Others were afraid because they didn’t know what was expected or didn’t know how to be a support. She had to face the challenge of overcoming this sin alone. She knew the Holy Spirit would be there, but she needed a friend whom she could call and hang out with when the temptation was too great. She did it—but it was very difficult.

Lastly, religious individualists often see churches through the eyes of a consumer. “Did worship move me today?” “Did the pastor make me feel good today?” Church relationships are not seen as something someone invests in as part of a covenantal community, but rather what they can do “to enhance my life.” If there are any difficulties or disputes, religious individualists will just go to another church, rather than stay and work it out.

Through the lens of religious individualism, it is only natural that we practice repentance and forgiveness through that same filter: one-sided, for my self-benefit.

“Forgiveness is just between God and me”

Though they had worked together for years, something happened between Jill and Anne that tore their relationship apart. After several months, one of the young women, Jill, sensed God tugging

at her heart to go to Anne and find out what had happened. It was obvious that something had taken place, but what? Finally, Jill gained enough courage to call her friend. At first, there was a coolness in Anne's voice that felt more like an icy rebuke, but Jill persisted and went on to explain how much she had been thinking about her. To Jill's surprise, the conversation began to warm, and Anne admitted that she, too, had been thinking of Jill.

After a several minutes of general conversation, Jill got up the nerve to ask what she had done to cause such a rift in their relationship. After all, they had been friends for years, and she did not want anything to come between them. Anne's answer sounded glib, "Oh, I don't know. I've forgotten about it. I prayed about it, and it is gone. I don't even remember what happened."

Jill knew that her friend was not going to acknowledge what had happened. Maybe Anne had "settled it" with God, but Jill's heart was still breaking over the months of silence without even an e-mail saying hello.

In this situation, Jill's friend did not want to acknowledge that anything was even wrong. Anne's silence, though, did not support this. In fact, her silence confirmed that something was wrong—that she was offended by something—but was unwilling to bring it up to Jill. Instead, she unilaterally "had forgotten it." Jill, who never knew what she had done, never had a chance to repent. When Jill called to reconcile, Anne acted as if everything was just fine, even though both of them knew otherwise. Now, Jill is caught in a dilemma: Does she believe her friend that, "It was nothing," and, "It's gone," and reestablish their relationship? Will she continually wonder what the "it" was, and have it always hinder their relationship? After all, she could do "it" again. Was there really even an issue at all? Did she really sin against Anne, or was it something taken the wrong way because her friend has a habit of taking things the wrong way (from her previous woundings) and controlling people by her passive aggressive behavior? Was

Anne testing Jill to see if she would call?

This situation is not uncommon in our relationships with each other. Many of us have probably been in similar situations in which people have come up to us and said, “I have forgiven you,” and we have no clue as to what we did. Other times, we may not want to be vulnerable and let that person know we’ve been hurt, so we “let it go,” or so we think—only to find it’s really not gone. It’s equally frustrating to be in situations when you want to work things out because you know something is wrong, but the other person continues to deny it or doesn’t want to talk about it. Unilateral forgiveness does nothing to transform relationships because reconciliation is not a one-sided transaction, even though we believe we’ve been taught to “just let it go.”

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***“Unilateral forgiveness
makes me feel better”***

Religious individualism also leans more toward the therapeutic benefits of forgiveness—that is, what forgiveness will do for me. It becomes a more internalized process that ignores any issues of culpability, repentance, or restitution. Forgiveness for religious individualists is a private transaction, grounded in self-love, for psychological well-being, rather than the goal of reconciliation and peace within relationships and community. It moves inward and creates a passive intolerance of “judge not,” and causes a withdrawal from injuries or betrayals (Dr. Augsburger). Phrases like “forgive and forget” describe the journey in one’s heart and mind without having to engage in the transformation of relation-

ships. This is demonstrated in the story above, and to this day, there remains a strain between Jill and Anne. One was willing to engage in a transformation of the relationship, but the other stood firm—refusing to interact in a way that would bring restoration to the friendship.

INDIVIDUAL IN COMMUNITY

The basic idea of an autonomous individual is not biblical. God created us as individuals, but we were created in and for relationship

*As believers, we are
called into relationship
with God and with
one another in our
church communities.*

with God and others. It is in relationship that we reflect the image of God—our Triune God who Himself exists in community of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God created us as individuals, uniquely different and distinct. Yet, we find our true identity and freedom as individuals-in-community, a covenantal community. Scripture warns against self-centered and self-sufficient individualism, but not against individual-

ity.⁶

The church is a diverse community in which each member is unique. Jesus was concerned with the individual, and He related to people according to their individual needs. The individual is not lost or engulfed by his or her solidarity with the group; rather it is preserved in the midst of the group. The uniqueness and individuality of that person is recognized within the community. The apostle Paul uses the metaphor of the body and its individual parts as necessary to make a whole body (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). Each part is distinctive, yet when working together, function as one.

As believers, we are called into relationship with God and with one another in our church communities. We are bound together, not because we like one another, though this is a good idea, but because we belong to something bigger than ourselves—the kingdom of God. We also are bound by love to Someone greater than ourselves—our loving, relational God. Therefore, we must live as two-dimensional believers, who find our uniqueness and individuality not in isolation, but in a covenantal, *committed-to-one-another-and-to-God* community. And we must be willing to keep clean slates before God and others.

It is easy to understand why American believers tend to understand Scripture unilaterally, and how religious individualism filters one's understanding of biblical repentance and forgiveness. However, if we are willing to no longer live as one-dimensional believers who express our faith only to God, but rather embrace a two-dimensional relational model of discipleship, we will rediscover forgiveness and begin to understand repentance and forgiveness from within the biblical worldview. Our lives and our relationships will change. And when there is no hope or possibility of reconciliation, our releasing the debts owed us to our justice-making God will bring freedom within our hearts.

"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins [that's need #1]; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit [that's need #2]." Let's take these one at a time and think about them. The Need for Forgiveness from God. First, there is the need to be forgiven by God. Relativism Maximizes the Absoluteness of Self.Â Baptism, then, is the outward expression of this repentance and faith. Before he left the earth, Jesus commanded us to make disciples by calling for a public act of faithâ€”an open identification with Jesus in his death and burial and resurrection. And so in the New Testament believing in Christ and being baptized are very closely related.