



# TRUE FORGIVENESS

## The Importance of Repentance and Punishment in Reconciliation

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On the Fourth of July, 2022, families in Chicago's Highland Park neighborhood gathered to celebrate Independence Day at the Highland Park parade.<sup>1</sup> Trucks and floats started to drive around 9:30 AM while kids grabbed candy and waved flags. Soon after, tragedy struck the otherwise joyful celebration. Just after 10:00 AM, a shooter opened fire from a rooftop above the parade, raining down over seventy rounds of ammunition. The gunman killed seven people and injured dozens more before fleeing the scene.<sup>2</sup> Men and women from all ages and backgrounds were killed; an eight-year-old boy was severely wounded by the gunfire. Two of the victims were parents of a two-year-old child, who was taken to safety by a stranger.

According to orthodox doctrine, Christians are called to love and forgive the criminal without hesitation, but what does it mean to love and forgive? Is forgiveness antithetical to punishment? How can one love and forgive someone who killed seven innocent people and severely

wounded dozens more? It is unimaginable. The shooter committed an egregious, cold-blooded act with apparently no remorse; how could forgiving him be an act of love? The Christian ethic of forgiveness seems unreasonable, even cruel. How can we forgive something so horrible?

These concerns are significant, but Christianity offers a wealth of ethical resources to answer this question. Christian doctrine teaches that forgiveness is a two-way street, requiring as much from the forgiven as it does from the forgiver. Hence, forgiveness is an act of true love only when it is shown

## Is forgiveness antithetical to punishment?

in conjunction with repentance. Forgiveness without repentance will lead the sinner to sin again, damaging their relationship with the person sinned against and with God. Without repentance, forgiveness is not a true act of love.

### WHY CARE ABOUT FORGIVENESS?

Before I address the meaning of forgiveness, I will discuss why one should care about forgiveness at all. To

some, it may seem obvious that forgiveness is a crucial aspect of the human experience; one needs to forgive oneself, as well as others, to remove the weights of grudge and anger. Forgiveness, however, is not solely a way to reconcile with ourselves and our brothers and sisters; it is also the way to reconcile ourselves with God. We have nothing tangible to offer to any higher power; our forgiveness is all we are able to give. In Christianity, however, Jesus teaches that God wills people to forgive.<sup>3</sup> If there is a God or some sort of meaningful higher power, and if forgiveness, when utilized properly, is a net-positive for all parties involved, then we should attempt to understand better what it means to forgive.

### HOW DO WE DEFINE LOVE?

In both secular and religious circles, love and forgiveness are often confusing, unclear ideas. Before exploring what it means to forgive, I will investigate what it means to love. Forgiveness is an expression of love—a specific application of the general principle. Throughout the Old Testament, God often forgives while punishing his people. In Exodus 32, God sends a plague on his chosen people after they start worshipping a statue of a

# Forgiveness is an act of true love only when it is shown in conjunction with repentance.

golden calf.<sup>4</sup> How can these ideas of punishment and forgiveness be reconciled when thinking about love? Unlike some Christians who believe love is antithetical to conflict, God shows throughout the Bible that conflict is often a necessary part of real, biblical love. This is because love leads people away from darkness. It must enter into darkness in order to lead the loved to light. Forgiveness without repentance tells the sinner that injustice can be forgiven without any need to atone for the sin. This leads people closer to darkness than light. Therefore, whatever draws someone farther away from God is an act of hate, and whatever brings someone closer to God is an act of love.

God calls his people to love their neighbors, which strengthens neighborly relationships, and through them, relationships with God. In Leviticus 19, God commands his people to “love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>5</sup> Throughout the Old Testament, God shows respect and



appreciation to people by raising them up; in this way God brings his people closer to him. Since humans are made in God's image, humans must uphold themselves in accordance with that divine image. In doing so, they show respect to God and themselves. Because God commands to "love your neighbor as yourself," to love is to uphold a neighbor, to raise that person away from darkness and into light. This is not easy; psychologists have found that "the tendency to retaliate or seek retribution after being insulted or victimized is deeply in-grained in the biological, psychological, and cultural levels of human nature."<sup>6</sup> It is against human nature to seek forgiveness, but this is what God calls humans to do. Resisting this instinct to retaliate and instead seeking to bring one's neighbor closer to God is love.

### ACKNOWLEDGING THE SIN

In this way, forgiveness in conjunction with repentance is a true display of love. To forgive is to mend a tear in a relationship, and to repent is to understand that you created a tear that needs mending. Mending a relationship through repentance enables forgiveness to be an act of love. Without repentance, a relational tear goes unattended. As the Boston University professor of moral philosophy Charles Griswold writes, "Forgiveness requires a reciprocity between the injurer and the injured."<sup>7</sup> This reciprocity requires repentance. To repent is to say, "I know I messed up; I reject what I did, and I vow to do better." As C.S. Lewis explains in *The Weight of Glory*:

"There is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says: 'Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before.' But excusing says, "I see that you couldn't help it or didn't mean it; you weren't really to blame." If one was not really to blame, then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites."<sup>8</sup>

This dichotomy between forgiving and excusing is often blurred by Christians and non-Christians alike, but it is the difference here instituted by repentance that one must attempt to understand, to truly forgive.

Repentance is not a self-deprecation but rather a sin-deprecation. The sin is what is cast away, not the sinner. To acknowledge the tear that one's sin has caused in the relationship (whether with God or another person), requires true humility. As Jesus says in Luke's Gospel, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those

who humble themselves will be exalted."<sup>9</sup> Jesus identifies that restoration requires humility. In the same way that repentance requires the sinner to acknowledge the tear caused by the sin, forgiveness requires this same awareness and acceptance. As C.S. Lewis elucidates further:

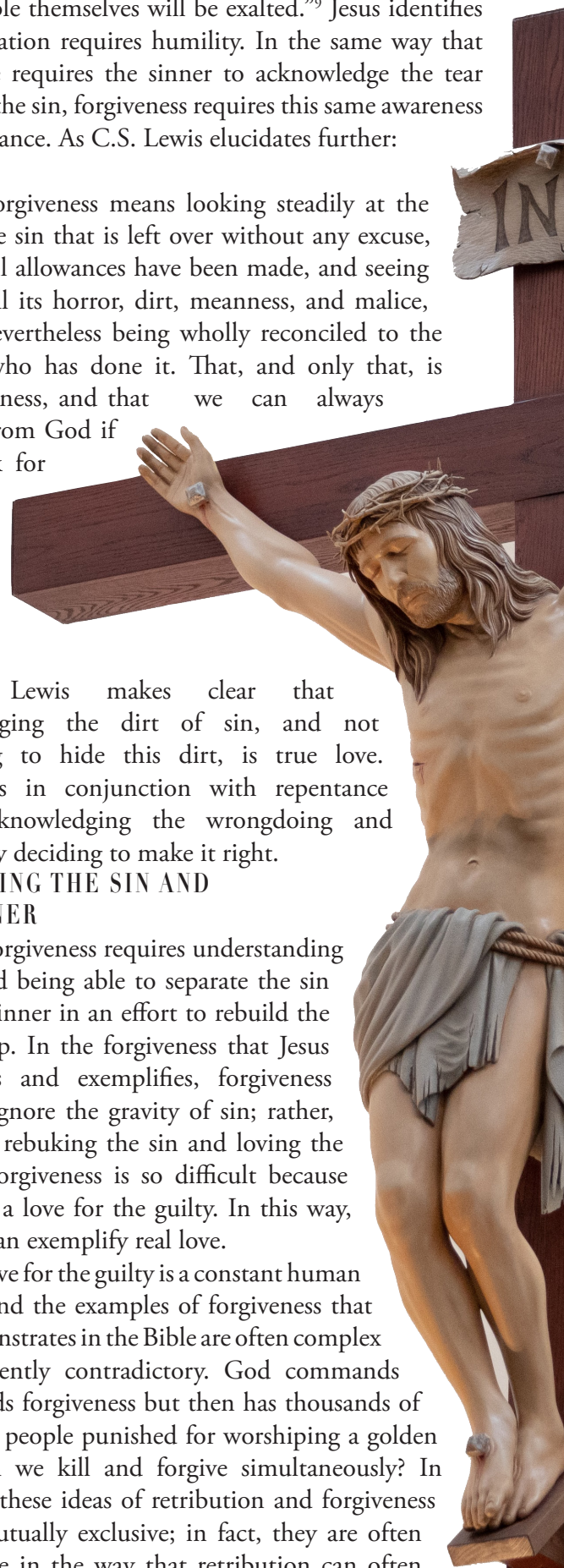
Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it.<sup>10</sup>

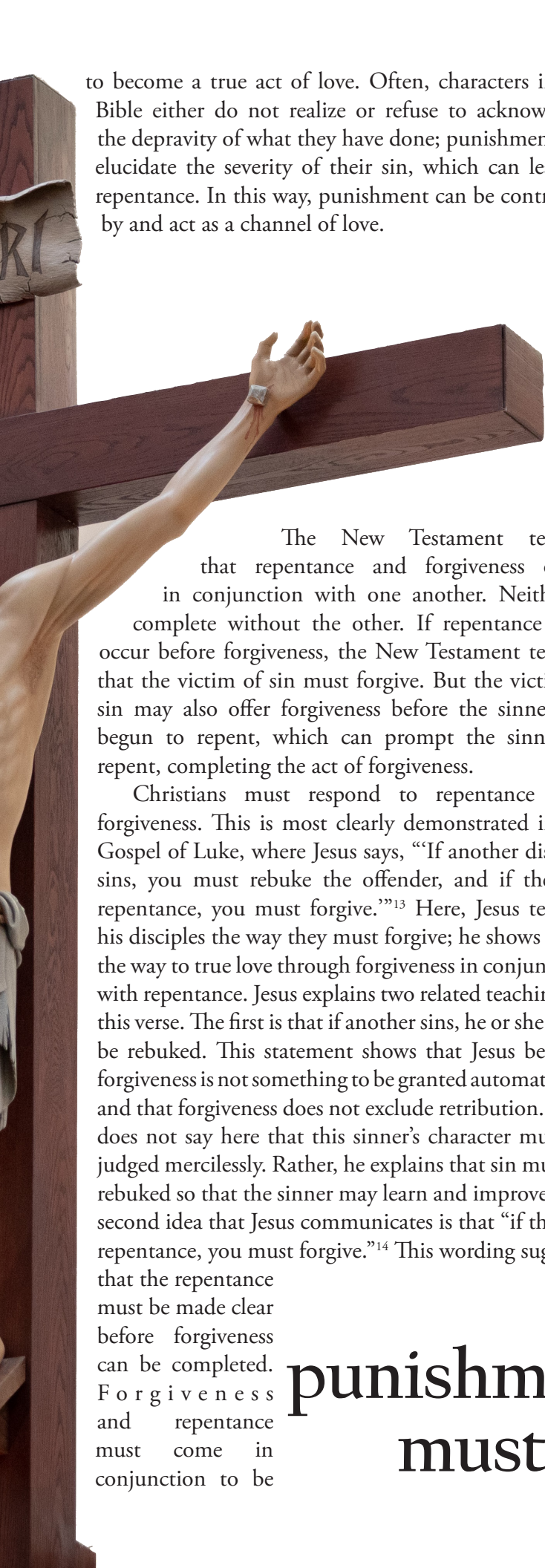
C.S. Lewis makes clear that acknowledging the dirt of sin, and not attempting to hide this dirt, is true love. Forgiveness in conjunction with repentance means acknowledging the wrongdoing and consciously deciding to make it right.

### SEPARATING THE SIN AND THE SINNER

True forgiveness requires understanding the sin and being able to separate the sin from the sinner in an effort to rebuild the relationship. In the forgiveness that Jesus commands and exemplifies, forgiveness does not ignore the gravity of sin; rather, it requires rebuking the sin and loving the sinner.<sup>11</sup> Forgiveness is so difficult because it requires a love for the guilty. In this way, criticism can exemplify real love.

This love for the guilty is a constant human struggle, and the examples of forgiveness that God demonstrates in the Bible are often complex and apparently contradictory. God commands and rewards forgiveness but then has thousands of his chosen people punished for worshipping a golden calf.<sup>12</sup> Can we kill and forgive simultaneously? In the Bible, these ideas of retribution and forgiveness are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are often conjunctive in the way that retribution can often lead to repentance, which allows for forgiveness





to become a true act of love. Often, characters in the Bible either do not realize or refuse to acknowledge the depravity of what they have done; punishment can elucidate the severity of their sin, which can lead to repentance. In this way, punishment can be controlled by and act as a channel of love.

The New Testament teaches that repentance and forgiveness occur in conjunction with one another. Neither is complete without the other. If repentance does occur before forgiveness, the New Testament teaches that the victim of sin must forgive. But the victim of sin may also offer forgiveness before the sinner has begun to repent, which can prompt the sinner to repent, completing the act of forgiveness.

Christians must respond to repentance with forgiveness. This is most clearly demonstrated in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus says, “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.”<sup>13</sup> Here, Jesus teaches his disciples the way they must forgive; he shows them the way to true love through forgiveness in conjunction with repentance. Jesus explains two related teachings in this verse. The first is that if another sins, he or she must be rebuked. This statement shows that Jesus believes forgiveness is not something to be granted automatically and that forgiveness does not exclude retribution. Jesus does not say here that this sinner’s character must be judged mercilessly. Rather, he explains that sin must be rebuked so that the sinner may learn and improve. The second idea that Jesus communicates is that “if there is repentance, you must forgive.”<sup>14</sup> This wording suggests that the repentance must be made clear before forgiveness can be completed. F o r g i v e n e s s and repentance must come in conjunction to be

an act of the neighborly.

Offerings of forgiveness, however, can precede repentance. In Luke’s Gospel, when Jesus is dying on the cross before his executioners, he says, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>15</sup> Jesus calls for forgiveness when his abusers have not repented, “for they know not what they do.” In this case, the offer of forgiveness triggers repentance as the sinner does not know that they are sinning. In this instance, this powerful communication of love draws at least one of the sinners to repentance. Later in the narrative, the centurion implicitly repents of his participation in the innocent Jesus’s murder. He “praised God and said, ‘Surely this was a righteous man.’”<sup>16</sup> Prompted by Jesus’s forgiveness of his murderers, the Roman centurion comes later to repent of his crime. Even as the victim of an abomination of justice, Jesus shows that he is not a tyrant God but rather a God of love who seeks to show his love through forgiveness.

#### HEALING WITH FORGIVENESS

The Bible teaches that forgiveness is an act of true love when it is shown in conjunction with repentance. According to Christian teaching, the atrocity committed on July 4, 2022 in Highland Park, Illinois, should not be forgiven without first reckoning with the atrocity. What the shooter did on that day was unfathomable and atrocious, but if he were to express true repentance for his actions, Christians would be called to forgive. This would not imply, however, that the shooter is free from punishment, and it does not mean that the families impacted by his evil actions need to forget what occurred. Love can involve punishment, and forgiveness must involve repentance. Today, forgiveness is often synonymous with simple kindness and affection; throughout both the New and Old Testaments, this idea is shown to be inconsistent with the Christian tradition. To truly follow Jesus’s teachings, one must realize his or her own sin, acknowledge that only Jesus offers atonement for the sin, and turn to him for forgiveness. This is offered to all people, even the perpetrators of the most heinous crimes, even to the Highland Park shooter. The sinner must then turn to the victims of their sin, repent, move towards reconciliation that may include punishment, and seek forgiveness. In

Love can involve punishment, and forgiveness must involve repentance.

the case of the Highland Park tragedy, true forgiveness in conjunction with repentance can justly offer peace to the perpetrator and the victims. †

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1. James Murphy, "Writing 5: Sex and Violence in the Bible," (lecture, Dartmouth Class, Silsby, September 2021).
2. Chicago Tribune staff, "These Are the Victims of the Fourth of July Parade Shooting in Highland Park," Chicago Tribune, August 3, 2022, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-highland-park-victims-20220705-tgcgdx5bqbfzrakhzf6ji-an634-list.html>.
3. Luke 17:3 (NIV).
4. Exodus 31:1-35 (NIV).
5. Leviticus 19:18 (NIV).
6. Michael E. McCullough and Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, "The Psychology of Forgiveness," in *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, ed. C. R. Snyder and Jane R. Lopez (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 446.
7. Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Explanation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xv.
8. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1941), 178-179.
9. Luke 14:11 (NIV).
10. Lewis, 181.
11. Luke 7:36-50 (NIV).
12. Ephesians 4:32; Exodus 32:1-35 (NIV).
13. Luke 17:3 (NIV).
14. Luke 17:3 (NIV).
15. Luke 23:34 (NIV).
16. Luke 23:47 (NIV).