L. Gregory Jones on Forgiveness

NOTE: The notes here are direct quotes or paraphrases from:


They document some of the insights of Jones on forgiveness. They are not intended to be a complete summary of Jones’ arguments. I have also have tended to focus more on what Jones says forgiveness means and the ‘how’ of forgiveness.

Influences on L. Gregory Jones’ model of forgiveness:

“My exposition in this book has been particularly influenced (albeit in diverse ways) by Jewish theology, by Aristotelian moral philosophy, and by contemporary social and political theories.” [EF, p.209]

What does forgiveness mean?

- Forgiveness is not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt as it is an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with the Triune God and others. As such, a Christian account of forgiveness ought not simply or even primarily be focused on the absolution of guilt; rather, it ought to be focused on the reconciliation of brokenness, the restoration of communion – with God, with one another, and with the whole of Creation. [EF, p.xii]
- Forgiveness enacts and reflects a quality of character. It cannot be confined to isolated acts that people do. [EF, p.37]
- Forgiveness must be embodied in a way of life, a life marked by specific practices that enable us to unlearn patterns of sin, to repent for specific sins, and to foster habits of holy living. [EF, p.49]
- The danger is that we internalize and privatise forgiveness by make it primarily an activity that goes on within individuals hearts and minds. [EF, p.49]
- *ie. We ignore the need to embody this forgiveness in repentance in relationship to the other and the need to…*
- … struggle together to overcome brokenness. [EF, p.50]
- Forgiveness cannot merely refer backward, as if only to the cancellation of some past action. It also points forward, to a refusal to be trapped in cycles of violence and thus also to be trapped by the conviction that we are all ultimately condemned to death and destruction. [EF, p.88]
- Forgiveness is not simply an action, an emotional judgement, or declarative utterance – though Christian forgiveness includes all those elements. Forgiveness is a habit that must be practiced over time within the disciplines of Christian community. This is so because, as I have been suggesting, in the face of sin and evil God’s love moves toward reconciliation by means of forgiveness. Forgiveness aims to restore communion on the part of humans with God, with one another, and with the whole of creation. This forgiveness is costly, since it involves acknowledging and experiencing the painful truth of human sin and evil at it worst. In the midst of such brokenness, God’s forgiveness aims at healing people’s lives and re-creating communion in God’s eschatological Kingdom [EF, p.163]
• Several features are conjoined in the craft of forgiveness: truthful judgement about what has happened or is happening, a willingness to acknowledge both the propriety of anger, resentment, or bitterness and a desire to overcome and be freed from it, a concern for the well-being of the other(s) as children of God, recognition of the ways in which we have all needed to be forgiven (thus suggesting close links between forgiveness and other virtues such as humility, generosity, and compassion), an acknowledgement that truthful judgement requires accountability directed towards the grace of new life (which thus may require occasions where the fullness of forgiveness is ‘withheld’), and the hope for reconciliation (though in extreme cases this may be a matter of ‘hoping against hope’). These are not the inevitable ‘stages’ of forgiveness; they are diverse though, interrelated themes that interact in different ways in the craft of forgiveness. How they are conjoined in particular circumstances, situations and lives cannot be determined in advance; they are the focus of ongoing discernment within the craft, led by exemplars who excel in the craft (and hence are gifted at wise discernment), and pre-eminently guided and judged by the work of the Holy Spirit. [EF, p.231-232]

• How these features play out in particular circumstances may differ eg. one person may struggle to give expression to anger and bitterness, another person’s ability to recognize a truthful judgement may come quickly but they find it harder to become accountable through repentance. [EF, p.232]

• Declarations of forgiveness (“I forgive you”) should not be assumed as necessary or sufficient means for identifying when forgiveness has occurred. The discovery of forgiveness requires the convergence of our language with our feelings and our actions. [EF, p.237]

Discerning the need for forgiveness

• There are the difficult tasks of discerning whether forgiveness is relevant to this or that situation, whether or not specific words of forgiveness are appropriate in a specific moment (and if so, who is authorized to speak them), and what it would mean to suggest that authentic forgiveness has occurred. For example, not all situations of brokenness call for specific words of forgiveness or requests for forgiveness. In the face of inexplicable tragedy, Christian might be called on to endure (eg. Job), we might well lament the destructive consequences of an unfortunate accident, or we might issue a plaintive cry for deliverance from specific oppressive circumstances (eg. the psalms). [EF, p.230]

• In situations where the are persons or groups of people who are clearly responsible, Christians must discern how to embody the craft of forgiveness in diverse ways. Again we might lament our situation, we might issue a prophetic indictment and call to repentance, or we might be called to rejoice in the face of suffering brought on by fidelity to Christ. [EF, p.231]

Learning forgiveness

• There is an urgent need for people … to learn to become more forgiving in their relations with one another. But for Christians this can only happen when we simultaneously learn to embody what is means to be forgiven – by God and by one another. At the centre of Christian forgiveness is the proclamation of God’s Kingdom and the call to repentance so that we can live as forgiven and reconciled people with God and with one another. We learn to become more forgiving as an integral feature
of our life in God’s kingdom, precisely as we are also unlearning our deeply entrenched habits of sin – whether that sin is manifest in prideful self-assertion or in shame self-diffusion, or perhaps elements of both. [EF, p.47] ie. we learn to forgive others as we learn to be forgiven for the depth of our sin and brokenness as humanity.

- The practice of forgiveness entails unlearning all those things that divide and destroy communion and learning to see and live as forgiven and forgiving people … the practice of forgiveness calls us to develop habits that enable this unlearning and learning to occur. [EF, p.164]

- The practice of forgiveness is closely related to, and partially learned in the context of, other practices. That is forgiveness both describes a practice of Christian life (bound up with such notions as confession, repentance and reconciliation) and involves the sustenance of a set of practices (which have purposes that include, but are not limited to, forgiveness). [EF, p.165]

- Learning the craft of forgiveness is a life long process. [EF, p.226-227] NOTE: For Jones there seems to be no idea that forgiveness is something that can happen spontaneously or easily. There always seems to have to be a wrestle in his model.

- We learn about forgiveness from others – from the traditions, successes and failures those who’ve gone before us AND from those among us today (our own time and situation) who excel at the craft of forgiveness. [EF, p.228]

- How we handle a particularly difficult ‘crisis’ concerning forgiveness is likely to have already been heavily determined by the habits and practices we have developed leading up to that crisis. So for example, people just beginning to learn the craft of forgiveness might have a much greater difficulty in avoiding ‘cheap grace’ or ‘vengeance’ in a particular situation, whereas those who are more skilled at the craft will likely fit it much easier to discern and embody appropriate forgiveness. It will have become second nature to them. Learning a craft particularly a craft as complex, difficult and (at times) comprehensive as forgiveness takes (and also make) time. [EF, p.234-235]

- How long forgiveness takes depends on a variety of factors in the particular situation eg. how intimate the relationship is, how long term the relationship is, culpability of the person (deliberate or negligent), the magnitude of the injury, whether the issue of forgiveness is new or an ongoing problem. [EF, p.235]

- **Learning Forgiveness and Baptism:**
  - Baptist is sacrament that signifies our forgiveness of sin by God. It symbolises our transition from the world of sin (destruction) to God’s kingdom (forgiveness and love). It symbolises new birth. There are two foci of baptism: the sacramental action of the church + the ongoing living into your baptism through forgiveness, repentance and discipleship. The baptised are defined by the forgiveness that Christ announced and enacted. There is a death of the old self and creation of new – being set free from patterns of sin and evil, of cycles of being caught as victimizers and victims. This enables us to bear to remember the past in hope for the future because we are given a new perspective on the past – the perspective of forgiveness. [EF, p.166-167]
  - As we learn to see our lives in the context of God’s forgiving and reconciling love, we can help others renarrate theirs, we are unlearning the destructiveness, violence and depression – indeed, any and all ways in which we diminish and destroy one another and ourselves – so that we can learn the forgiving and reconciling love of mutual edification. [EF, p.168]
  - Baptism symbolises our initiation into God’s kingdom, the forgiveness of our sin and the need to seek to become holy people. [EF, p.173]
Forgiveness is a gift from the Spirit particular to the narratives of our pasts and we are called into communion. In that communion we are invited and required to learn to tell the story of our pasts, not ultimately in terms of diminutions, of betrayals and being betrayed, of violence committed or suffered, but in terms of the new life that induces us to repent and invites us to become holy in the future. [EF, p.173]

Baptism emphasizes both the centrality of receiving a new self and the need for other people to help us understand the dynamics of unlearning the old self and learning to appropriate the new one. [EF, p.173]

Baptism stresses the priority of forgiven-ness to our forgiving-ness. If we tell stories in ways which invite descriptions of innocence that is violated by evil others, then cycles of victimizers and victims will continue to persist and intensify. i.e. we need to recognise that we are not innocent victims but we are in need of forgiveness as well. [EF, p.174]

Baptism initiates us on the journey of living in communion / friendship with God, that calls us to unlearn patterns of destructiveness and to learn to become holy people. We can be sustained on that journey through liturgies of baptismal remembrance and renewal. [EF, p.175]

**Learning Forgiveness and the Eucharist:**

- The Eucharist recalls the past, anticipates the future, and sustains us in the present. It recalls Jesus’ table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. It anticipates the messianic banquet in God’s kingdom. It recalls desertions and betrayals (Maundy Thursday and Good Friday). It recalls the saving sacrifice of Christ’s death and resurrection. [EF, p.175]
- Christ’s sacrifice relocates our lives as forgiven betrayers, as reconciled sinners, in communities of broken yet restored communion. [EF, p.176]
- Communion calls us to ‘discern the body’ and the repentance of divisions (communion and reconciliation) [EF, p.178-180]

**Learning forgiveness and confession:**

- Confession is a discipline of community that, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit makes possible and contributes to our transformation into holy people. It does so as we learn to accept responsibility for our own lives, pasts, and actions rather than always holding others responsible. [EF, p.184-185]
- Confession involves the continual remaking of ourselves so that we are capable of engaging in practices of forgiveness that foster holiness and recreate relationships – with God (in response to God’s prior forgiveness), with one another, and with the whole of creation. [EF, p.185]

**The cost of forgiveness**

- Christian forgiveness requires our death, understood in the specific form and shape of Jesus Christ’s dying and rising. For as we participate in Christ’s dying and rising, we die to our old selves and find a future that his not bound by the past. [EF, p.4]
- Forgiveness is at once an expression of a commitment to a way of life, the cruciform life of holiness in which people cast of their ‘old’ selves and learn to live in communion with God and with one another, and a means of seeking reconciliation in the midst of particular sins, specific instances of brokenness. In its broadest context, forgiveness is the way in which God’s love moves to reconciliation in the face of sin. This priority of forgiveness is a sign of the peace of God’s original creation as well as
the promised eschatological consummation of that Creation in the Kingdom, and also a sign of the costliness by which such forgiveness is achieved. [EF, p.5]

Forgiveness from an eschatological perspective

- We also need an eschatological understanding of Christian forgiveness. Christian forgiveness is not simply a word of acquittal; nor is it something that merely refers backward. Rather, Christian forgiveness – and more specifically, forgiven-ness – is a way of life, a fidelity to a relationship of friendship, that must be learned and relearned on our journey towards holiness in God’s eschatological Kingdom. It is a way of life that requires the ever-deepening and ever-widening sense of what friendship with God and God’s creatures entails. It is ever-deepening and ever-widening precisely because we must continually find ways – in communion with God, one another, and the whole of Creation – to unmask our deceptions of our selves, of other, and of the whole world through lives of forgiven-ness. [EF, p.66-67]
- God’s Spirit is at work forgiving, healing and re-creating us in the likeness of Christ for life in God’s Kingdom. Further that Spirit is at work in the ways we are learning to forgive and be forgiven, to heal and be healed, to re-create and be re-created, in our lives with others. In this light it becomes apparent that Christian forgiveness is not so much a word to be spoken as a life to be lived in fidelity to the eschatological salvation of the Triune God. [EF, p.67]

Critique of therapeutic ideas of forgiveness

- Smede’s ‘four steps’ of forgiveness (note the use of handy technique) suggest that we must ‘heal ourselves’ – the 3rd step – before we ‘come together’. But forgiveness, at least as Christians ought to understand and embody it, is not about ‘healing ourselves’; it is about being healed by God and by others in and through specific practices of forgiveness. Smede’s description only makes sense within an internalized and privatized conception of forgiveness beholden to a therapeutic culture. [EF, p.50]
- Underlying Smede’s internalization and privatization of forgiveness is its preoccupation with individual feelings and through at the expense of analyses of culpability, responsibility and repentance. The unrelenting focus on isolated individuals suggests that forgiveness is important because of its effects on my feelings, not because of a need to discern whether there are tragic misunderstandings or culpable wrongdoing and brokenness that need to be dealt with through practices of forgiveness and repentance. Smedes does not attend to whether there is anything to be forgiven or whether it is clear that another person ought either to forgive or to be forgiven. [EF, p.50]
- Even worse, Smedes virtually ignores any prior sense in which any of us need to be forgiven (except as we forgive ourselves) and thus need to repent. There is little sense in his discussion that sin is a complex reality that requires us to recognize that we are not only those on whom hurts are inflicted; we are also people capable of horrifying sin and evil, including the violence that nailed, and nails, Jesus Christ to the cross. Unless we are able to acknowledge our own complicity in various dimensions of sin and recognize when issues involve tragic misunderstandings or simply accidents (and thus require responses other than acts of forgiveness), forgiveness becomes a catchall for making myself feel better about life’s hurts and unfairness. [EF, p.52]
- Marie Fortune … thinks of forgiveness as a ‘last step’ that requires justice as a prerequisite. Her perspective is certainly understandable as a protest against ‘cheap
grace’ … There has been a tendency to make forgiveness so easy as to deny the reality of suffering of those who have been sinned against. Even so, to turn forgiveness into a ‘final step’ is to concede that it is ultimately a psychological category for coping, whereas what we really need are more forceful mechanisms designed to produce justice. [EF, p.89]

- For Christians, forgiveness is not a first or even a final ‘step’; rather it is an embodied way of life. [EF, p.89]
- We are tempted either to trivialize forgiveness by individualizing it so that it leaves our relations with others essentially untouched, or to despair of forgiveness, secretly believing that violence is primary and peace a folly for the naïve. [EF, p.113]

Human Nature
- There is no stable self that can be presumed to be fundamentally good or fundamentally evil; rather, ourselves are battlefields in which we can never claim complete control. Either we are constrained by the forces of sin and evil, the habits of death, or we learn to be constrained by the very practices of forgiveness and reconciliation through which God’s peace is communicated. [EF, p.76]
- Identifying oneself exclusively as a victim masks the ways in which each of us victimizes others. In the complex webs that constitute human relations, it is inevitable that we human beings find ourselves as both oppressors and victims — though obviously, once again, to different degrees in different situations. We cannot let ourselves or others off the hook for patterns of victimizing others; nor ought we or others blame the victims as if they were somehow perversely responsible for their own suffering. [EF, p.116]
- Adam and Eve provide an archetype for our tendency to justify ourselves, to play the role of judge by identifying others as those in need of repentance and ourselves as either righteous ones or helpless victims (which carries with it its own tendency towards self-righteousness). [EF, p.122]

Forgiveness and Repentance
- Jesus both claimed divine authority to forgive sins and offered forgiveness without necessarily presuming prior repentance. According to Luke’s account, Jesus offers forgiveness early in his ministry to a paralytic (Luke 5:17-26); yet the immediate response from scribes and Pharisees is ‘Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who but God can forgive sins?’ In response, Jesus heals the paralytic to show that ‘the son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ Later in his ministry Jesus tells the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son in response to charges that he welcomes sinners and eats with them without requiring repentance (Luke 15:1-32). He also calls Zacchaeus down from his tree, offering him forgiveness and new life by going to stay and eat with him at his house (19:1-10). [EF, p.102]
- On the cross Luke 23:34 forgiveness is offered even though the people are ‘ignorant’ of what they are doing, though no less culpable for it. [EF, p.102]
- Luke’s account suggests that, through Jesus, God’s Kingdom has been inaugurated and forgiveness enacted in ways that are both continuous and discontinuous with Israel’s understandings and practices. A crucial discontinuity is provided by the Christian claim that Jesus’ inauguration of God’s Kingdom is the determinative context that reflects the fullness of God’s triune communion. … it should already be apparent that though Jews and Christians hold in common the
view *that* God forgives, they have diverse and sometimes overlapping conceptions of the specific character of the God who forgives. Hence, though both traditions also hold that people are called to forgive as God forgives, they have diverse and sometimes overlapping conceptions of the shape of the call to imitate God’s forgiveness. [*EF, p.103*]

- It would be clear to most 1st century Jews that God forgives. It would also be clear that this forgiveness is open to anyone who returns to the way of the Lord (Ezekiel 18:25-32). Such returning would require repentance and restitution for wrongs committed against other human beings (Leviticus 6:1-7; Numbers 5:5-7). Individuals must go to the person they have wronged and seek forgiveness; such forgiveness ought to involve a willingness to rectify the wrong. God forgives the person only after such interhuman forgiveness has taken place. Or, more precisely; seeking forgiveness from the offended person is also, at the same time, a first step in seeking forgiveness from God, which would be enacted in a sacrificial atonement. Hence the importance of being reconciled with those whom you have offended and doing so before, and in anticipation of the service of Yom Kippur. [*EF, p.108-109*]

- It seems clear that Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom transforms the relationship between repentance and forgiveness by stressing the gracious priority of forgiveness … this doesn’t mean that Jesus’ message abandoned repentance though. [*EF, p.110*]

- For Jesus, forgiveness cannot be earned, whether through repentance or by any other means. But our repentance is the only adequate response to God’s forgiveness. This shifts the emphasis from Judaism’s assumption that repentance precedes human forgiveness to an assumption that repentance will become an indispensable component of the habit of forgiveness. Indeed, Jesus tells the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35) as a warning and judgement for those who would presume to receive God’s forgiveness without thereby embodying that forgiveness in new life. Such people exclude themselves from communion by their refusal to acknowledge forgiveness as the way of life for Jesus’ disciples. [*EF, p.121*]

- Jesus’ pardon is all-powerful precisely because it calls us – as those who have been forgiven – to seek forgiveness from those we have sinned against and to offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. Such forgiveness does not abandon the importance of reparation for the former or justice for the latter, but it does transform the context in which they are to be understood and embodied. [*EF, p.127*]

- While there are no conditions for God forgiving us, we must engage in practices of repentance in order to appropriate that forgiveness. That is to say, God’s forgiveness becomes available to us as we learn to see both the reality of the world under judgement and our participation in that fallenness. [*EF, p.146*]

- We need to add what seems virtually unthinkable – namely, to find unrepentant Christians, who assume that God’s forgiveness can be received without any cost – has happened and continues to happen all too frequently. In one sense, the notion of ‘unrepentant Christians’ is an oxymoron – as is its correlative ‘cheap grace’. [*EF, p.160*]

- Our holiness is to be a reflection of our gratitude for God’s forgiving love for us and friendship with us. We are not required to change *in order to be forgiven* by God: … there is nothing we can do to earn that forgiveness. Instead, we are enabled by God to become holy *because we have been forgiven*. [*EF, p.184*]
Forgiveness and judgement

- God’s forgiveness does not come apart from an acknowledgement of, and confrontation with, human sin and evil. God does not ‘overlook’ or ‘ignore’ our destructiveness. If that were the case, Christ’s journey would not have taken the shape that it inevitably did. Rather, God confronts sin and evil in all its awfulness. In so doing, God exposes our wounds, both those that have been inflicted on us and those we have inflicted on others and ourselves. However, God’s confrontation with sin and evil is not for the purpose of condemning us. Indeed, it is for the explicit purpose of forgiving us and healing our – and the world’s – wounds (See John 3:16-21). It is a judgement of grace. [EF, p.146]

Forgiven and forgiving

- The fundamental orientation of Christian life is that we are forgiven. As Stanley Hauerwas has suggested, more important than our learning to forgive is our learning to be forgiven. For in many situations, the possibility of reconciliation has been eliminated because both parties (or all parties) have come prepared to forgive and are completely unprepared to be forgiven … we must have an ironic relationship to our acts of forgiving, recognising the prior need for us always to examine the ways in which we need to be forgiven for either our self-righteousness or our self-degradation (or both). [EF, p.148]

The process of forgiveness

- That the process of learning to appropriate and embody Christ’s forgiveness is slow, painful, and laborious is a reminder that we live in a time between the first and second advents of Christ. It is a time when suffering and death still exist, a time when a regrettably large number of people refuse – or suffer from others’ refusal – embody God’s forgiveness and so remain trapped in histories and habits of sin and evil. [EF, p.128]
- When the resurrected Christ returns to his frightened and bewildered disciples, he again says ‘peace be with you.’ Then he breaths on them and says ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you retain anyone’s sins they are retained. (John 20:21-23). There is thus an inextricable relation between receiving the Holy Spirit and engaging in the practices of forgiveness. [EF, p.129]
- It is the work of the Holy Spirit to guide people in learning how to embody Christ’s forgiveness in relation to the diverse, irreducibly particular histories, habits and situations of specific people’s lives. It this time between the times of Christ’s first and second advents, it is often not clear what Christ’s forgiveness entails in those specific situations – especially in instances, or perhaps long-standing trajectories, of horrifying evil and destructiveness. The Spirit listens, judges, and guides believers as we deliberate about the new life of Christ’s forgiveness and seek to embody it through specific practices in irreducibly diverse circumstances. [EF, p.131]
- One of the most offensive things Christians all too often do is proclaim a general and abstract forgiveness without any regard for the complexities of a specific situation or a particular person’s life. Such proclamations often misfire because they have failed even to diagnose the relevant issues; even worse, however, is their tendency to
trivialize the suffering endured (and, worse, to trivialize the sufferer). [EF, p.228-229]

Loving Enemies

- The struggles that people feel in relation to their anger, hatred and desires for revenge not only are real; they seem morally significant attitudes. In this sense, those who defend the significances of revenge and those who oppose Christian forgiveness are often tapping into legitimate concerns that sin and evil be taken with appropriate seriousness. [EF, p.242]

- Even if Christians reject an ontology of violence, and posit the central significance of forgiveness as the costly means by which God’s love moves toward reconciliation in the face of sin and evil, we cannot ignore the importance of people’s feelings of hostility and hatred and desires for vengeance or retributive punishment. Thus we are presented with the question of whether there are, or at least ought to be, some limits to the craft of forgiveness. That is, are there not some people whom it is better to hate and desire vengeance against, particularly in the absence of repentance (or of the redistribution of power)? [EF, p.242]

- Are there not some people whom God will bring vengeance against, at the very least will eternally punish? Does not the understanding of the final judgement in Matthew 25:31-45 or the overall context of the book of Revelation suggest that some people will be saved and some will be damned to eternal punishment?… “If hatred and vengeance are permissible by God, then there must be a sense in which these responses are in principle permissible. Not also that the passage from Rom. 12:19, for from being an argument against desire for vengeance, is a promise of vengeance.” [EF, p.243]

- Christian forgiveness should not be a refusal of strength, but rather ought to manifest an alternative power; Christian love, whether of neighbours or enemies, should be a sign not of repressed anger and hatred but of anger and hatred confronted and, eventually, overcome and transcended; it should not be an internalized guilt that further diminishes and destroys but a truthful engagement with the causes and motivations underlying the situation of brokenness. [EF, p.246]

- The question, then is not whether anger is legitimate or important; it certainly can be. Rather the question is what we become angry about and more specifically, toward what ends our anger is directed. The letter to the Ephesians indicates the need for discriminating judgment (Eph. 4:26) – here there is acknowledgement that people will be angry and presumably also an injunction that there are things about which people should be angry. The question is not whether or not we should have anger; it will be there. Hence, though we may try to repress or ignore it, we cannot evade its reality. But we are enjoined to ensure that our anger, whatever its cause, is transformed into the service of God’s inbreaking Kingdom rather than as an occasion for sin (and hence the perpetuation of diminution and destruction.). [EF, p.247]

- We are called to love those who are enemies. That is we are not permitted to allow our anger at those enemies to ossify into hatred, into a persistent desire for their diminishment or destruction. To do so would be to return to complicity in sin. That feelings of hatred and vengeance might surface and might be real is undeniable; but they need to be struggled against. For the habit of hatred and the
desire for vengeance not only perpetuate the cycles of violence; they also constrict and thereby distort the vision of the hater. [EF, p.263]

- We learn to love them by giving up our desire for vengeance and by learning to wish them well. Such a wish might well include a recognition that one’s survival may require not being able, or desiring to be in their presence any more. We also learn to love them by engaging in lament, by prophetically calling them to account, by showing them an alternative way of life. [EF, p.265]

- **Limits to forgiveness? The argument of hell**
  - The doctrine of hell points to both the reality of God’s judgement and the centrality of human accountability. If we do not respond to God’s judgement of grace through lives of forgiven-ness in pursuit of holiness, then we become susceptible to a judgement without grace. (James 2:13a)… if we refuse God we are cast – or better we cast ourselves – into the outer darkness (Matthew 18:23-35; 22:1-14) God’s grace is costly, not cheap; it requires from us an accountability for our lives through forgiveness, a forgiveness that sets us free from the past (by allowing us to ‘own’ the past responsibly) to become holy people in the present and in the future. If we fail to accept that forgiveness through repentance and the pursuit of holiness, then we must confront the possibility that God will hold us accountable to judgement and consign us to eternal punishment. [EF, p.253]

  - There are also the passages that seem to suggest a universal redemption eg. Romans 11:32; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; John 12:32; Colossians 1:20; Titus 2:11; Ephesians 1:10; 2 Peter 3:9; James 2:13b cf. James 2:13a [EF, p.253]

  - The passages about hell need to be placed in the context of the larger theological horizon of God’s intention to restore friendship with the entirety of God’s creation. That intention is manifested in the costly, self-giving love of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, suggesting that we may not know the depths to which God’s grace may go to reach anyone with even the slightest possibility of response. [EF, p.254]

  - The teachings of eternal punishment, whether on the lips of Jesus or of others, are consistently cast as warnings, polemically urging people to repent … that some may refuse to repent is certainly a possibility; but we should not confuse polemical, prophetic warnings with certain knowledge of God’s ways. For we cannot know with any certainty what anyone’s fate is in the hands of God. [EF, p.254-55]

  - Regardless of God’s ultimate judgement we as humans are forbidden to repudiate anyone ultimately and are enjoined to pray, love and live for the correction and salvation of others, even, perhaps especially, our enemies. Jesus’ injunction to treat such people as Gentiles and tax collectors suggests both their self-exclusion from the community and the requirement to reach out continually and draw them back in. [EF, p.255]

- **Limits to forgiveness? Romans 12:9**

  - Jesus says love your enemies in the sermon on the mount. Romans 12:9 says that same kind of thing. On one had it is clear that Christians are forbidden from taking vengeance into their own hands and are enjoined to overcome evil with good. On the other hand they are to leave room for God’s wrath on the presumption that God will repay vengeance on God’s enemies; even more, by feeding and providing drink to enemies, Christian will pile burning coals on their heads. [EF, p.255-256]
Some say this passage is all about love, aimed at conversion and reconciliation. Putting burning coals on head = shaming into repentance OR a resolve to pursue reconciliation. BUT This tends to downplay the call to leave room for God’s wrath (God’s sovereignty / God’s educative wrath that leads to repentance) [EF, p.256]

Some say this passage has an apocalyptic background. Should be interpreted in context of persecution – good deeds are a tactical response to those who cannot be defeated, however God will bring vengeance on their enemies at the eschatological judgement. Some say we are being invited to desire vengeance. BUT view downplays the call to do works of mercy to those who are evil (overcome evil with good) [EF, p.256-257]

A better interpretation is a combination of both views: God will provide an eschatological judgment giving comfort to those who suffer and nonetheless we are called to do good to enemies. Putting burning coals = love may shame them and if they still fail to repent the compassion increases their culpability on the day of judgement.

We are called, in imitation of the Triune God, whose defining character is love and whose intention is for all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-6) to hope that all will be saved, and to pray and love others accordingly. [EF, p.259]

Limits to forgiveness? The texts which plead for or rejoice in the destruction of enemies

eg. Psalms of Lament – Psalmist pleads not for enemies salvation but destruction. (Psalms 137). Revelation 9:6a, 9:18. In each of these passages the plea for or promise of retribution and vengeance looks far more like hatred than love – even love of one’s enemies. [EF, p.259]

We need to differentiate an understanding of the situations, experiences, and lives that would produce such hatred from a normative judgement about its goodness. That is to say we might acknowledge that such hatred is understandable in situations of oppression, as both these texts reflect, while nonetheless not suggesting that hatred – even ‘moral’ hatred – ultimately an adequate or final response to any situation, experience, or life. [EF, p.260]

Hosea 11 describes God’s struggle with Israel. Even though God is fiercely angry at Israel’s betrayal, God’s compassion grows warm and tender; indeed God indicates that what separates God from mortals is precisely the ability not to execute fierce anger, not to come in wrath but to forgive and make anew. [EF, p.260]

We need to learn not to just pray the imprecatory laments (those that call down harm on others) but also those that end with the prospect of reconciliation (eg. Psalm 25 cf. Psalm 137) [EF, p.261]

I am arguing that even if God may eternally punish some or many of us, and even if God may wreak a decisive vengeance against wrongdoers, we are not allowed to endorse hatred, moral or otherwise as a normatively good response to sin or wrongdoing. This is even true if the sinner or wrongdoer remains persistently impenitent. [EF, p.262]

Loving our enemies means allowing them to repent. Too often we have difficulty in loving our enemies because we are afraid they might repent eg. Jonah. God reconciles with the Ninevites and this make Jonah angry. He was afraid they would repent. He is unable to cope with the loss of his enemies. He
Forgiveness and punishment

- In situations where punishment may be necessary and unavoidable, we must seek to minimise its exercise and the spheres of its operation. Its purposes should never be to create, perpetuate or exacerbate disparities of power and domination; the goal must remain the hope of reconciliation and new life. [EF, p.273]

- A Christian stance toward punishment must occur within the larger horizons of the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the injunction to love our enemies. This requires that we take seriously that both the offenders and the victims are human beings created in the image of God. So they cannot be unalterably condemned or abandoned; on the view developed here capital punishment is unjustifiable and unjustified. [EF, p.273]

- Rehabilitation is not the only purpose served by punishment. There is an element of retribution. As there is responsibility in the offenses that have been committed, so punishment for the offenders requires that they accept responsibility. The community must determine what responsibility is involved and hence what punishment is appropriate. Such retribution is (in principle) separable from any feelings of hatred or desires for vengeance. [EF, p.274]

- Retribution and deterrence theories of punishment assume that punishment is in and of itself sufficient. They fail to recognize the tragic risks involved because they deal primarily with offenses as such and do not adequately attend to the situation of either the offended or the offender. Neither theory adequately attends to the necessity of healing the brokenness what has been created or exacerbated by the offenses. Retribution sometimes lapses into a desire to see the offender ‘get theirs’. Deterrence sometimes lapses into ‘making and example of’ this or that particular offender. [EF, p.274]

- A Christian understanding of punishment ought to include elements of retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation theories. More strongly though, however, Christian understandings and practices ought to challenge the adequacy of even thinking in terms of such theories; the aim ought to be the reform of actual practices of punishment within the context of a Christian vision of forgiveness and reconciliation. [EF, p.275]

- As a manifestation of our repentance we may want to willingly accept the justice of some sort of punishment (for the sake of retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation) [EF, p.288]

On the need to have a Trinitarian theological foundation to our model of forgiveness see [EF, p.210-224]

On Matthew 18:15-20 see [EF, p.192-195]

On confession and healing (James 5) see [EF, p.197-99]