

# Forgiveness and Life in Community

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The church must respond to the crisis of domestic violence with a renewed vision of forgiveness. As suggested in a parable of Jesus, forgiveness is viable when it is exercised within a community of mutual confession and accountability.

**T**he problem of forgiveness quickly surfaces when we encounter victims of domestic violence in the church.<sup>1</sup> And, indeed, as many in the church are coming slowly to realize, victims of domestic violence are present in congregations of every denomination, just as they are represented in every other social category—whether divisions are made according to income, education, race, or ethnicity—in equal proportions.<sup>2</sup> Forgiveness is found to be a “problem” in relation to domestic violence because it has proven counterproductive. Although the point of forgiveness is the healing of broken relationships and the righting of wrongs, neither of these results appears in our current practice of forgiving domestic violence. In fact, forgiveness exacerbates the trauma of victims by causing many to believe that they must always return to their violent partner.

Forgiveness could, in this case, be disregarded on a purely utilitarian analysis. However, the biblical sayings about forgiveness remain and continue to influence many who come in

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<sup>1</sup>In this essay, I use the term “domestic violence” to refer to abuse between partners in an intimate relationship, whether married or unmarried. I will use the term “family violence” to refer more broadly to child abuse, elder abuse, and partner abuse. Regarding domestic violence, I will use female pronouns in referring to the victim and male pronouns in referring to the batterer in recognition of the fact that 95% of victims are females with a male perpetrator. This is not meant to negate or diminish violence in gay and lesbian relationships or female on male violence.

<sup>2</sup>M. M. Fortune, *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991).

contact with violence, whether as victims, batterers, or helpers. For example, the passage in which the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant appears (Matt 18:21–35) has been problematic for many readers because it seems to offer no relief from the prospect of forgiving an unrepentant sinner over and over. One reaction to this problem has been to abandon this text in favor of other passages that avoid the same dilemma. However, I will argue that this parable has an important message, especially for our current approach to domestic violence. In this essay, I offer an alternative reading of the parable. Drawing from the battered women's movement and from philosophical discussions of forgiveness, I will first show why our current practices of forgiveness often fail victims of domestic violence. Turning to Matthew 18, I conclude that a better conception of forgiveness is one that involves the entire faith community. This reading sees forgiveness not only as the responsibility of the one who has been wronged, but also as the responsibility of the community, which takes seriously the wrong committed and seeks to be involved in the process of accountability, repentance, and forgiveness. If practiced, this kind of forgiveness would help prevent domestic violence from occurring—both in relationships where violence is already present and in those where it is not. Participation in forgiveness will draw us into the complexities of the parable itself and perhaps will enable faith communities to respond to the sins of a complex world.

## LESSONS FROM THE BATTERED WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Marcia, 36 years old, was beaten on her arms and back and kicked in the stomach by her husband. This was the worst of the violent episodes that had been building for over a year. Not knowing what to do, she went to her pastor for advice about how to save her marriage. Her pastor told Marcia that a good marriage requires forgiveness. She returned home and forgave her husband. The violence in their marriage continued to escalate, and when she did leave her marriage two years later, she left her church as well.

Peter decided to look for help after a neighbor called the police and Peter was nearly arrested for attacking his girlfriend. He went to his minister and disclosed how he had “pushed her around” the night before. The minister reminded Peter that God forgives all human sin. After praying together, Peter felt better and went home. A week later he was arrested after his girlfriend went to the emergency room with a broken arm.<sup>3</sup>

These stories are familiar to those who work with victims and survivors of domestic violence. They are reminders of how the church has failed to recognize and understand violence against women. More specifically, the stories point out how doctrines of forgiveness have influenced the church's response to violence between partners.

In the first story, the minister's response reveals a clear misunderstanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. By telling the woman that forgiveness will help her marriage, the pastor implies that she is somehow at fault; if she changes her behavior (to

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<sup>3</sup>The stories of Marcia and Peter are composite stories taken from the examples of many women and men whose lives have been affected by violent relationships.

become more forgiving), the violence should stop. In reality, changes in the victim's behavior will not alter patterns of abuse. Domestic violence arises from the need or desire of one partner to maintain control in the relationship. The victim's behavior—whether the excuse is that she has not cleaned the house properly, that dinner is cold, or that she is a bad mother—is never really the issue because the violence continues regardless of her attempts to change her behavior. The batterer searches until he finds some “reason” to assert his dominance over her. Clearly, her forgiveness of him does nothing to relieve the abuse.

Nor does Peter's forgiveness by his minister have any transforming effect on his violence. In using the words “forgiveness” and “sin,” the minister implies that Peter has done something wrong, but stops short of holding Peter accountable for his actions or requiring change; in fact, there is not a hint that Peter should attempt to change, or that change is possible.

In both scenarios, forgiveness has the effect of perpetuating violence. The practice of

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forgiveness does not help either the victim or the batterer stop the abuse, understand their situation, or press for accountability. In fact, forgiveness, as seen here, works against deeper understanding and an end to violence by reconfirming the victim's

responsibility and by denying the abuser's accountability. When forgiveness is the response to repeated violent behavior, the practice of forgiveness has the effect of condoning abuse.

When confronted with violence, many people of faith have responded similarly to Marcia and Peter, not necessarily because they have been directed by church leaders to do so, but because they have already gleaned this lesson from what they know about forgiveness. The reality of forgiveness in the lives of church-goers should lead us to reconsider how we preach and teach about forgiveness. The concept of forgiveness loses its power when it is seen as condoning, rather than limiting or healing, sin.

Marie Fortune and others have begun to address the problem of forgiveness perpetuating and condoning violence.<sup>4</sup> Repentance, as Fortune argues, is a strong theme in the teachings of Jesus, and we should remind ourselves and victims of violence that a real turning from sin and change of heart are required of the perpetrator.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Fortune argues that to “forgive and forget” is both unbiblical and unhelpful. Such injunctions have allowed the church to forget and ignore that the violence is still occurring.

Fortune's contributions to our understanding of forgiveness are important. They cut to the heart of the problem—that the church has contributed to continuing violence by send-

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<sup>4</sup>M. M. Fortune, *Keeping the Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987) 46–51. See also Fortune's articles in *Family Violence and Religion* (Volcano, Cal.: Volcano Press, 1995) and in *Violence in the Family*. From a more evangelical perspective, see J. and P. Alsdurf, *Battered Into Submission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989) 97–110.

<sup>5</sup>Fortune, *Keeping the Faith*, 50.

ing women home to forgive their partners. Fortune's guidelines for forgiveness can help us decrease incidents of domestic violence by encouraging women who are in violent relationships to seek safety and freedom. What this understanding of forgiveness will not do, however, is to bring the church any closer to preventing violent relationships from occurring in the first place. Nor will it address the concerns of those who want to make sense of passages like Matthew 18. Grappling with Matthew 18 may both increase our understanding of the text and help prevent violent relationships.

## LESSONS FROM PHILOSOPHERS

The philosophical discussion undertaken by writers such as Aurel Kolnai, Cheshire Calhoun, and Jeffrie Murphy sheds light on the discussion of forgiveness regarding domestic violence.<sup>6</sup> Stemming from a logical analysis of the conditions under which forgiveness is possible and desirable, Kolnai sets up a two-pronged dilemma:

Either the wrong is still flourishing, the offense still subsisting: then by "forgiving" you accept it and thus confirm it and make it worse; or the wrongdoer has suitably annulled and eliminated his offense, and then by harping on it further you would set up a new evil and by "forgiving" you would only *acknowledge* the fact that you are no longer its victim. Briefly, forgiveness is either unjustified or pointless.<sup>7</sup>

The writings of Kolnai and others attempt to "salvage the concept of forgiveness from logical havoc."<sup>8</sup> These arguments are less helpful, however, for those whose starting point is not philosophical analysis but biblical teaching. The point for many Christians is not to determine the most logically consistent definition of forgiveness, but to discern one that aligns itself with the biblical texts and the church's experience of forgiveness. But these philosophers do highlight one aspect that is helpful for the consideration of Christian forgiveness within the context of domestic violence, namely, the problem that forgiveness may be seen to *condone* the offense that is forgiven.

Condoning violence is, of course, the main problem with forgiveness that Fortune has addressed. The philosopher Cheshire Calhoun, however, argues that, in most instances, forgiveness does *not* result in condoning the forgiven activity.

If I catch a neighborhood adolescent bashing my mailbox and forgive him, he might think me exceptionally nice or wimpish. He surely would not infer that bashing mailboxes is morally permissible, or will not be penalized, or that I am not his moral equal. Nor do I necessarily worsen his behavior, since by forgiving him, he may come to see that he is harming real people, people he might like.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>A. Kolnai, *Ethics, Value, and Reality: Selected Papers of Aurel Kolnai* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978); C. Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," *Ethics* 103 (1992) 76–96; J. G. Murphy and J. Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup>Kolnai, *Ethics, Value, and Reality*, 217.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," 85.

The difference between Calhoun's example and that of an abusive relationship is great, and Calhoun herself is quick to point out the conditions under which, as in the mailbox example, forgiveness does not condone an offense. "In social contexts where 'everyone knows' what the wrong acts and who the moral equals are, and where wrongdoing frequently though not invariably meets with protest or penalties, the average person would not likely interpret failure to protest as condonation."<sup>10</sup> These conditions are the very conditions that are absent in the social context of domestic violence.

Domestic violence is so common in this society precisely because not everyone agrees that this behavior is wrong. Experts indicate that men batter women because we let them,<sup>11</sup> and the reality is that society has not sent a message to men that violence against women is unacceptable. We teach boys from a young age that to be manly means to be in control and, at the same time, we teach girls that docility and deference are valued in them.<sup>12</sup> It should come as no surprise that many men act out their need to be in control in the violence they commit against their intimate partners. As a society, we have told men that such violence is not acceptable in other contexts when something goes wrong (at work, at school, at church), but these messages do not extend to the home, which remains his "castle," or, at least, his private affair. Until very recently, the primary response of the mainstream church was either to look the other way or to encourage the use of violence to maintain male dominance at home.<sup>13</sup> Even today, I have encountered clergy, judges, police officers, and others who reinforce the idea that women who "misbehave" are "deserving" of abuse, implying that men have a right to their way at home, apparently by whatever means necessary.

Nor is Calhoun's second condition met, for women who are abused by their partners are not viewed as moral equals of the men who abuse them. For the victim to be considered

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a "moral equal," both parties would have to consider her capable of making moral judgments, such as a judgment that she has been wronged.

This is not the case with the victim and abuser. In a battering relationship, both the victim and the batterer blame her for the violence. (One common method is by saying that if

she had not done "X," he would not "have to" respond to keep her in line.) The woman does not have the right to make decisions about her life—even her physical well-being. Instead, the batterer makes moral and practical decisions for both parties. The victim and

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Men learn from experience that there is no adverse consequence to battering, and that it is very effective. The same man who abuses his wife would not try the same tactic with his boss at work, because he understands that this behavior will meet with punishment. See Fortune, *Violence in the Family*, 73–74.

<sup>12</sup>P. Orenstein, *Schoolgirls* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 5–17.

<sup>13</sup>R. R. Ruether, "The Western Religious Tradition and Violence Against Women in the Home," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, J. C. Brown and C. R. Bohn, ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1989) 31–41. See also P. Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 46–59.

batterer might still be described as moral equals if this were the common perception of their community. Yet those outside the abusive relationship also blame the victim for the situation. In my experience, people (even those who seem to recognize and care about the occurrence of domestic violence) are most concerned with the problem of “what is wrong with her for staying” rather than addressing the issue of his violent behavior. The dynamics of domestic violence in abusive relationships and in society make it difficult for the victim to act as a moral equal in offering forgiveness.<sup>14</sup>

Not everyone knows “what the wrong acts and who the moral equals are,” and therefore wrongdoing frequently does *not* meet with protest or penalties. Although women’s advocates are working with lawmakers to uphold the rights of abused women, these laws are frequently only as effective as the people who enforce them. Indeed, such laws frequently do not help women because they allow abusers to go unpunished.<sup>15</sup>

The philosophical discussion can help us identify situations in which forgiveness becomes counterproductive. In order not to condone sin, forgiveness must coincide with public agreement on the sin itself, and must place the one harmed and the sinner on equal footing. While this seems impossible with regard to our current practice of forgiveness in the context of domestic violence, I will argue that biblical forgiveness, practiced rightly, bears with it the very conditions that make forgiveness a meaningful, healing activity.

## A READING OF MATTHEW 18

Of the many passages that describe or mandate forgiveness, Matt 18:21–35 is perhaps the one most relevant to forgiving domestic violence. Unlike the parallel instruction in Luke 17:4 to forgive seven times when the sinner repents, Peter is told by Jesus to forgive, unconditionally, seventy times seven times—in essence, always to forgive. This is the very forgiveness to which the church has called women with violent partners, a forgiveness that in practice has encouraged submission to male violence and abdication of responsibility. Yet, for many Christians, curbing this interpretation of forgiveness would be like curbing the very grace of God.

A new interpretation of forgiveness should respond to the domestic violence movement and to the concerns raised by philosophers, but it is also a response to the text. A fresh reading of Matthew 18 may call us back to our responsibility as a community to recognize sin, to speak the truth about that sin, and (again as a community) to forgive. Forgiveness in the parable is *corporate* forgiveness. Given our modern Western social context, we read the story as one of individual responsibility and forgiveness. But it would be wrong to assume that this is the only or best reading of the text.

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<sup>14</sup>This is not to say that battered women never offer true forgiveness. Often, women who forgive do so after a period of time and healing, when they are able to name the wrong done and to claim moral agency.

<sup>15</sup>While a detailed list of examples is beyond the scope of this essay, many are available. A recent resource is M. S. Miller, *No Visible Wounds* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1995) chaps. 9–10.

In the context of Matthew's community, it is likely that the author and readers would assume that forgiveness is a communal practice. Many Old Testament texts that describe forgiveness assume that the community is part of the process of forgiveness. For example, the Leviticus texts that use the language of atonement place an emphasis on restitution and include the community, offender, and priest in the process of God's forgiveness.<sup>16</sup> The Jewish-Christian readers in Matthew's intended audience<sup>17</sup> would have come to the text with assumptions that the community participated in forgiveness.

Even from a modern, individualistic framework, we should still be able to recognize Matthew's communal emphasis. Indeed, scholars have long concurred that chapter 18 consists of instructions to the Matthean community.<sup>18</sup> The discourse of chapter 18 begins with a discussion of the disciples' concern about "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (v. 1). After Jesus identifies a child as one likely to enter the kingdom, the discourse moves to a warning against placing a stumbling block before "one of these little ones" (v. 6). The parable of vv. 12–14 focuses on the necessity of keeping the whole flock together (if possible), and a procedure for doing so is outlined in vv. 15–17. The community as a whole is then given the power to "bind and loose" (v. 18).

It is significant that the parable of the unforgiving servant follows directly after these instructions about what to do "if a brother or sister sins against you" (v. 15). That the content of vv. 21–35 relates directly to vv. 15–17 is emphasized by the repetition of the words "if a brother or sister sins against" in v. 21. Verses 15–17 carry important and little-used advice: if another sins, point it out while you are alone; if the person does not listen, take one or two others, and, finally, bring the issue before the whole church. This is a guide for discipline that takes seriously both the value of the one who has sinned and the need to tell the truth about that sin in the body of believers.

On the heels of these instructions, the parable of the unforgiving servant serves to set the tone in which these instructions are to be carried out. How many times should the community follow the procedure of vv. 15–17? Having granted the community an extraordinary amount of power in "binding and loosing," Matthew leaves us with the reminder that this responsibility is to be carried out in a spirit of forgiveness.

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<sup>16</sup>D. J. Weaver discusses these texts in her article on forgiveness: "On Imitating God and Outwitting Satan: Biblical Perspectives on Forgiveness and the Community of Faith," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (1994) 151–69.

<sup>17</sup>Kingsbury notes that Matthew's readers were of Jewish and Gentile origin; J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew As Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 148–52. D. J. Harrington argues that Matthew's audience was "largely (though not exclusively) Jewish Christian" (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991] 1). The predisposition for a communal emphasis could also be assumed of Matthew's non-Jewish readers, for whom our modern notion of the individual did not exist. See D. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 3–37; B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 63–73.

<sup>18</sup>Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 267. See also D. Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 244–60; and E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975) 358–79.

## LITERARY FRAMEWORK

At first glance, the immediate framework into which Matthew places the parable (vv. 21–22, 35) does not seem to suit the parable itself, for the story Jesus tells is not an example of repeated forgiveness, as v. 22 suggests it will be. However, the framework does fit the story into the rest of chapter 18 as an important addendum to the disciplinary policy outlined above. Peter's question to Jesus breaks the continuity of the discourse, but not its subject, which follows directly from the preceding paragraph. Forgiveness is presented as the mind-set with which to approach a member of the church who sins.

The closing statement (v. 35), also added by the author, again points the reader back to consider the chapter as a whole. The sentence is difficult to translate into English because of the combination of the singular "each/every" (*hekastos*) and "his/her" (*autou*) with a second person plural subject and verb: "Thus also my father in heaven will do to you (plural), if you (plural) do not forgive, each [of you], his/her brother or sister from your (plural) hearts."<sup>19</sup> Each member of the community is implicated by this command; however, it is you plural, you as a body of believers, who are told to forgive. The presence of both singular and plural forms rules out a strictly individualistic interpretation of v. 35.<sup>20</sup>

## THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT(S)

The parable interacts with the rest of chapter 18. The words of Jesus in v. 22 and the consequences of non-forgiveness in the parable imply that there should be no limits to forgiveness. However, the parable also expresses that "there *are* limits to forgiveness. The servant by his unmerciful and unforgiving attitude toward his fellow servant demonstrates that he is not worthy of receiving forgiveness."<sup>21</sup> This dual focus allows the reader to make sense of the previous instruction to "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector" (v. 17). The forgiveness described here does not entail always maintaining the same relationship with one who "does not listen" (v. 16). The parable holds in tension the necessity of offering grace and the conditions under which forgiveness becomes limited.

Yet the main thrust of the parable commends to the reader the practice of forgiveness. The parable certainly compels modern readers to forgiveness. Although the retraction of forgiveness by the king implies that forgiveness is not an endless, unconditional process, many interpreters have been left with exactly the opposite impression. Harrington states that the parable "reveals the foolishness of placing any limits on forgiveness within the

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<sup>19</sup>Author's translation.

<sup>20</sup>Matthew uses the word *hekastos* only four times (16:27; 18:35; 25:15; 26:22) and never in quite the same context. The use in 16:27 comes closest to that of 18:35. At the end of chapter 16, Jesus is also addressing the disciples, but the instructions all occur in the singular. Clearly, Matthew could have written in a manner that would individualize these instructions.

<sup>21</sup>Patte, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 256, emphasis added.



community,” and Schweizer seems to agree.<sup>22</sup> The beauty of the parable seems to be its power to assert that forgiveness can be conditional, while at the same time compelling the reader to forgive. This, in view of the rest of the chapter, seems to be the effect Matthew intended.

Somehow the parable both requires forgiveness and asserts that forgiveness is not always possible. I draw upon the reader response criticism of Bernard Scott to supply an analysis of how the parable works to accomplish this complex purpose.<sup>23</sup> Scott draws attention to the role of the fellow-servants in the parable. The fellow-servants (*syndouloi*), who appear in v. 31 as onlookers, are peers of the forgiven servant. They have witnessed his harsh treatment of another fellow-servant who owes him money. The reader, like the group of fellow-servants, is indignant at the behavior of the forgiven servant who fails to show his fellow-servant the mercy that was shown to him. Scott argues that the fellow-servants are the first characters to share the reader’s perspective.<sup>24</sup>

Because of their shared indignation, the reader identifies with the group of fellow-servants, who return to the king seeking justice. What commonly goes unnoticed is that the fellow-servants themselves do not forgive, nor do they follow the instructions given in 18:15–17. By seeking justice with the fellow-servants, the reader becomes entangled in the story and implicated in a non-forgiving attitude that ultimately becomes problematic.

The second step in this entanglement comes when the reader identifies with the viewpoint of the king. The king’s statement to the slave—“Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” (v. 33)—reiterates the perspective of the fellow-slaves and reader, so that the three now share one perspective. But the reader is then implicated in what happens next: the king revokes forgiveness by re-instituting the servant’s debt and demanding punishment. While the king’s decision is justified, the tragic outcome compels the reader to believe that forgiveness would have been the best option.

By identifying with the fellow-servants in reporting the servant, the reader bears with them responsibility for unleashing the king’s wrath. By bringing vengeance on the servant, the fellow-servants (and the reader) have left their own situation in jeopardy. The demand for “like for like,” for apparent justice, has placed them in fear. If the king can take back his forgiveness, who is safe? . . . In the end the fellow-servants have behaved the same way as [the servant] did; they failed to forgive and demanded punishment.<sup>25</sup>

The reader has experienced an incident in which the attitude of the servant made forgiveness difficult or impossible. Yet the prospect of the king’s unforgiveness also leads the reader to hope that forgiveness will be achievable in all cases. With the parable, Matthew accomplishes a twofold purpose. He allows for the possibility that the sinner will not

<sup>22</sup>Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 271; Schweizer, *Good News According to Matthew*, 377–79.

<sup>23</sup>B. B. Scott, “The King’s Accounting: Matthew 18:23–34” *JBL* 104 (1985) 429–42.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 436–37. In part because of semantic distancing—the reference to the servant as “that” servant—and in part because of the Greek setting of the story.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 440.

remain in fellowship with the community. At the same time, the community is enjoined to embody grace.

The parable emphasizes the role of the community. As fellow-servants, the readers experience the breakdown of forgiveness, not because of the failure of one servant to forgive, but because of the failure of the whole community. The fellow-servants are crucial actors in this story, although readers today tend to focus solely on the actions of the first unforgiving servant.<sup>26</sup> Yet the action of the king at the request of the fellow-servants hints at the importance of the community by reminding the reader of the power granted to the community: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (18:18). The authority of the community to confront the sin of its members and the method by which they do so are not to be taken lightly. Through the story, the reader feels the discomfort both of accepting the sinner and of being unforgiving. The parable compels the reader to understand the necessity of confronting a brother or sister with their sin, and also of assuming that forgiveness is possible. While it may be possible that the offender, by "not listening" to those who point out the sin, will effectively exclude himself or herself from the community, this is not to be the intended or hoped-for goal.<sup>27</sup>

A more subtle lesson of the parable is to implicate the fellow-servants and readers in the sin of the unforgiving servant; for, as noted above, their sin is identical to his. "The narrative leads to a parabolic experience of evil, not intentional evil but implicit, unanticipated, systemic evil. The ability to acknowledge one's entanglement in evil is part of the experience of the kingdom."<sup>28</sup> The ultimate effect of the parable is not only to call the community to recognize sin in others and to seek forgiveness, but to recognize similar sin in ourselves and seek change.

## CONCLUSION

Our response to victims of domestic violence has been like our reading of Matt 18:21–35. We are horrified by the situation and counsel *them* to forgive, just as we would counsel the unforgiving servant, but we do not notice ourselves (the fellow-servants) in the story. One of the primary tasks of the Christian community in confronting domestic violence is to understand *our* need to repent of violence. Becoming aware of domestic violence requires that we recognize the many ways the church has encouraged this violence and the ways we personally have accepted or minimized the many forms of violence against women in our culture.

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<sup>26</sup>Some may focus on the actions of the king. However, Scott's article is the only one I have seen in which the fellow-servants are mentioned as actors. Other interpreters point out only that they are the agents by which the king gets his information.

<sup>27</sup>See the similar point made by D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995 [1959]) 290–92.

<sup>28</sup>B. B. Scott, "The King's Accounting," 442.

Becoming able to forgive domestic violence would entail addressing our own individual participation in violence and our culture's systemic participation. Forgiveness would challenge us to identify the various means of violence against women—from those which seem insignificant to those which are brutal and obvious—and the ways in which our sexism and racism interact to make justice difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.<sup>29</sup> It would require that we prepare ourselves to carry out the confrontation described in Matt 18:15–17.

Undoubtedly, church life would look very different if we took seriously this responsibility for forgiveness coupled with calling the sinner to account.

**Through the practice of forgiveness, the church participates in the reign of God, for we recognize both the grace that is given to us and our calling as agents of God's grace to others.**

Confrontation of abusers would send a strong message that their behavior is considered unacceptable by the other members of the community. Presently, given the broad cultural acceptance of such behavior, it seems unlikely that an abuser would be capable of hearing criticism

of his behavior. His acceptance of such criticism would be made more likely by the community's explanation of its own participation in the same sin. If the abuser does "listen," this would indicate that he is on the road to full repentance. With an abuser, this listening could be likened to an alcoholic who finally recognizes the need for help. The habits of abuse, learned over many years, are difficult to change, but his ability to hear that violence constitutes a problem is a step in the right direction. Follow-up and treatment would become necessary parts of the process of accountability. Healing from our sin of violence will be a long process for the victim, the offender, and the community.

The initial confrontation of the batterer would also need to be guided first and foremost by a concern for the victim's safety. If she is still in contact with the abuser, confrontation by others could cause retaliation against her. Thus the process of forgiveness should recognize the necessity of separation for the couple, at least temporarily, so that the abuse does not continue and escalate.

I anticipate understandable doubts and wariness toward the idea of this practice, grounded primarily in the potential for this power to be abused: for example, a small group of church members could begin excommunicating others. Many of these concerns are addressed by the text itself. And, in the end, we must seriously question whether the church can do any worse than it already has in its response to domestic violence.

Abuse of the power to bind and loose is exactly what chapter 18 as a whole is designed

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<sup>29</sup>For one discussion of this dilemma, see E. M. Townes and M. M. Fortune, "The Simpson Trial and Verdict," *Working Together* 16, 3 (1996) 1–5. (*Working Together* is a publication of The Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, Seattle, Wash.)

to prevent. First, the group to which this power is granted is the community as a whole, not an individual or a small group within the church. In fact, there is no mention of roles or hierarchy among the members. As Schweizer argues, “responsibility can no longer be evaded by being delegated to a holder of some particular office.”<sup>30</sup> Calling a member back into fellowship by telling the truth about sin is a task for all who consider themselves part of that faith community.

Another precaution is seen in the attitude toward the one who has sinned. Because they follow the parable of the lost sheep, the instructions in vv. 15–17 illustrate the activity of the community as it searches for one who “has gone astray” (v. 12). This sheep is valuable to the flock as a whole and to the shepherd. Schweizer has argued that the emphasis in chapter 18 is not on the purity of the community, but on the value of the repentant sinner. “The real goal is the winning over of the sinners, so that all disciplinary measures taken amount in fact to the offer of salvation.”<sup>31</sup> The motivation for approaching a brother or sister under these guidelines is to “regain” that one (v. 15), and it is undertaken for the benefit of the group, which longs to include all its members, rather than wield power over the one who has sinned. The example to follow is the king’s forgiveness when he had compassion on the servant, showing that the servant was valued and understood, not condemned. In contrast, the last scene of the parable begins with the king labeling the servant as “evil” (v. 32). This kind of labeling is common practice in our current approaches to sin, and clearly inhibits our ability to consider the sinner as one of “the little ones” loved by the shepherd. Inherent to forgiveness is the valuing of the other as a human being. The ability to retain our view of the sinner as a person—especially as one who is similar to us in our own sin—is crucial to our ability as a community to grant forgiveness and to seek the changes that will bring life to all.

Domestic violence will only begin to decrease when our society recognizes it as a problem and communicates that it is wrong. An understanding of corporate forgiveness coincides with the goal of preventing violence because both involve not only the repentance of the sinner, but the accountability of the community and the need to face our own sin. When the church can recognize its own complicity in the sin of domestic violence and when members hold one another accountable for the changes that will be necessary to live as Jesus’ disciples, the church can offer forgiveness to others with greater depth of understanding and become a witness to those outside its bounds who struggle against violence. Through the practice of forgiveness, the church participates in the reign of God, for we recognize both the grace that is given to us and our calling as agents of God’s grace to others. Matthew 18 reminds us of our call to recognize sin, to tell the truth about that sin, and yet not to return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good.

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<sup>30</sup>Schweizer, *Good News According to Matthew*, 367.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 371.



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