

1. 'THERAPEUTICAL' AND 'TRANSACTIONAL' FORGIVENESS:  
ARE THEY COMPATIBLE WITH CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS?

"Healing The Wounds of The Heart: How To Really Forgive"

**Thursdays Online Lent Conversations** with Fr Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*<sup>1</sup>,  
on the book by Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?*<sup>2</sup>

*According to Timothy Keller our secular understanding of forgiveness is deeply flawed because when we try to forgive all we want is (1) either not to feel hurt internally without any consideration for the person who has hurt us (therapeutic), or (2) we might be willing to forgive only if the person who hurt us shows repentance, change, and pays for it (transactional). Christian forgiveness should not be focussed on me, but also care for the person who hurts me (the 'enemy').*

**Main argument of Keller's book**

1. Modern secular culture
  - 1.1. Promotes a purely individualistic approach to forgiveness ("I should forgive because it is good for me")
  - 1.2. Has lost the sense of the inseparability of forgiveness and justice: justice needs forgiveness, forgiveness ushers in the highest form of justice.
  - 1.3. It suspects forgiveness of enabling systemic forms of injustice and promotes anger and outrage as the best way to fight against them.
2. Forgiveness is a Christian concept but in secular culture it has lost its basis, namely that we should/can forgive because God forgave us.
  - 2.1. Keller rightly points out that forgiving others is not a condition for being forgiven by God – rather we *are enabled* to forgive thanks to the forgiveness we receive from God
  - 2.2. And yet sometimes he muddles this message as when he says that we "owe" to God to forgive others.

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<sup>1</sup> The **Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia** is the *Theologian in Residence* at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, New York City, and Research Associate at the *Von Hügel Institute* at the University of Cambridge (UK). He is the author of several books including *Say It To God. In Search of Prayer. The Archbishop of Canterbury Lent Book 2018* (Bloomsbury 2017), and *The Wisdom of St Benedict. Monastic Spirituality And The Life Of The Church* (Canterbury Press 2021). His books have been translated in six languages

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller (1950-2023) was the one of the most influential evangelical thinkers of our time and the long time pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. A gifted and influential communicator, he also was a prolific writer, and his book *The Reason For God* reached No. 7 on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller. Although a conservative evangelical notably opposed to LGBTQ inclusion, he rejected culture-war antagonism, was committed to social justice, and was widely admired even by those who disagreed with him for his graciousness and his genuine effort to listen to others. You can watch this YouTube video on the book <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qsl3hwGkCk>.

## THURSDAY ONLINE LENT CONVERSATIONS ON FORGIVENESS

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3. In his exposition of the basis of forgiveness he focuses on two passages from the NT:  
Mark 11:25 “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”  
Luke 17:3–4 “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”
4. Some have called
  - i. The former “attitudinal forgiveness”
  - ii. The latter “reconciled forgiveness.”
5. This means that in the NT forgiveness can have two meanings that overlap.
  - 5.1. “Sometimes the forgiveness of which the New Testament speaks presupposes repentance on the part of the offender
  - 5.2. and sometimes not.”
6. These are not two kinds of forgiveness but two aspects or stages of it.
  - 6.1. One could say that the first must always happen, and the second may happen but is not always possible.
  - 6.2. Attitudinal forgiveness can occur without reconciliation,
  - 6.3. but reconciliation cannot happen unless attitudinal forgiveness has already occurred. (107)
7. This means that
  - 7.1. Christian forgiveness is never simply individualistic
  - 7.2. Christian forgiveness never undermines the pursuit of justice but promotes it.
8. As a result, one of the key aspects of forgiveness is that its goal is
  - 8.1. neither inner healing
  - 8.2. nor payback to the offender.
  - 8.3. Certainly forgiveness can bring inner healing and can be part of the pursuit of justice.
  - 8.4. But the ultimate purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of community. (105)
9. **Granting forgiveness** requires from us that we
  - 9.1. identify with the wrongdoer,
  - 9.2. inwardly pay the debt, and then
  - 9.3. will good for the wrongdoer.
10. **Receiving forgiveness** requires true repentance – that is the overcoming of
  - 10.1. whitewashing (“Nothing really happened”)
  - 10.2. blame shifting (“It wasn’t really my fault”)
  - 10.3. self-pity (“I’m sorry because of what it has cost me”)
  - 10.4. self-flagellation (“I will feel so terrible no one will be able to criticize me”).

11. As to the way in which God forgave our sins, Keller believes in what is called “substitutionary atonement”
  - 11.1. For forgiveness to be compatible with justice someone had to be punished.
  - 11.2. We should have been punished by Jesus took on himself the full penalty for our sins.

### Some initial critical observations on Keller’s argument

12. The first problem with Keller’s account lays in the almost exclusive identification of sin or wrongdoing with the image of *debt*.
  - 12.1. It is true that one of the notions used by the NT to talk about forgiveness is built on the words *aphiemi* and *aphesis* which mean which means “remission”—“to release someone from a legal obligation or debt.”
  - 12.2. Also, one of the main parables on forgiveness, Matthew 18:23–35, on the “Unforgiving servant” uses the metaphor of remission of debt – and so does the Lord’s Prayer.
  - 12.3. This however leads Keller unwittingly to attribute to God the transactional approach to forgiveness he denounces in modern secular culture: one can be forgiven only if the debt is paid, the punishment is inflicted – and it does not matter whether it is inflicted on Jesus or on us.
13. The second problem in Keller’s account depends on the first.
  - 13.1. He says that when you are wronged, the perpetrator owes you a debt.
  - 13.2. Therefore forgiving means “to inwardly pay the debt of the wrongdoer yourself rather than make him pay it.
  - 13.3. And he recurs to his key idea that the very word forgive used in the NT —*aphiemi*— means to cancel or to “remit” a debt.
  - 13.4. Undoubtedly forgiving can be painful, and we can say that there is a ‘cost’ to be paid. But this ‘cost’ does not have anything to do with what is ‘owed’ by the wrongdoer.
14. We will examine these critical observations in more depth during the course of our Lenten Conversations.

### Secular approaches to forgiveness

15. In this first conversation and in the next we will focus on the modern secular approaches to forgiveness, namely”
  - 15.1. The purely individualistic or ‘therapeutic’ approach to forgiveness (“I should forgive because it is good for me”)
  - 15.2. The purely ‘transactional’ or ‘conditional’ approach to forgiveness (“I can forgive you only if the wrongdoer fulfils certain conditions”)
  - 15.3. The suspicion that forgiveness undermines the necessary fight against systemic forms of injustice (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, clerical abuse of minors and the like)
16. This first conversation will be devoted to the first two and the second conversation to the third approach.

## Therapeutic forgiveness

17. Ancient cultures, even the most admirable and sophisticated, did not value forgiveness. (40)
18. This does not mean that the Greeks did not sometimes recognize the virtue of pity—but this falls far short of our modern understanding of forgiveness. (40)
  - 18.1. However, this Greek term *eleison* (pity) and another—*sungnome*, to be lenient in judgment—denote only a less severe punishment or judgment out of compassion or fellow feeling.
  - 18.2. *Sungnome* (pardon) for the Greeks is not forgiving but excusing. It is saying not “This is wrongdoing and I forgive it” but “This couldn’t have been avoided.” (41)
  - 18.3. To excuse is to tie an action “to a fault with which one can sympathize and whose expression is unintentional.”
  - 18.4. This is “making allowances” rather than forgiveness.
  - 18.5. By contrast, the key biblical term for forgiveness is *aphiemi*, which means to legally acquit or to cancel a debt, not just to lessen the penalty. (41)
19. Two reasons for this absence in Greek thought
  - 19.1. To begin with, virtuous persons will not themselves be in need of forgiveness because they are people of moral excellence. (42)
    - i. Aristotle argues that persons of excellence should respond to those who wrong them not with forgiveness (which assigns perpetrators too much importance) but instead with contempt.
    - ii. What is obviously missing here is the Christian idea that even morally good persons are flawed, imperfect sinners needing forgiveness. (42)
    - iii. “forgiveness is not a virtue because the perfected [moral] soul is almost immune from receiving injury or from doing injury.” (43)
  - 19.2. They believed that the universe was fundamentally impersonal.
    - i. While the common people understood the world as governed simply by fate, philosophers argued that behind the universe was the logos—a rational (but still impersonal) transcendent principle that ordered the universe and history.
    - ii. In either case the cosmos was unyielding and certainly unforgiving. (43)
20. The therapeutic culture
  - 20.1. All the emphasis is on the individual extricating him- or herself from the bonds of tradition, duty, and obligation to community in order to pursue his or her personal aspirations and desires. (29)
  - 20.2. The resources for healing relationships and strengthening community are being eliminated by therapeutic culture. (31)
21. *There is a sense in which the therapeutic approach to forgiveness resembles the Greek attitude: you should reach such an inner ‘balance’ or perfection that no wrong can have an effect on you.*

22. The cheap-grace model of forgiveness focuses strictly on inner emotional healing for the victim, on “getting past it and moving on,” but then ends up letting the perpetrator off the hook. (33)
23. The main ideas of self-forgiveness therapy include:
- 23.1. (a) asking for forgiveness from anyone you’ve wronged,
  - 23.2. (b) taking responsibility for what you have done wrong, but then
  - 23.3. (c) learning lessons from the event,
  - 23.4. (d) being as compassionate to yourself as you would be to others, and finally
  - 23.5. (e) then moving on with life, accepting yourself. (138)
24. The Bible reveals the core of this problem: “If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts” (1 John 3:20). (139)
- 24.1. If [God] says we are forgiven, then we are, and we can tell our hearts to quiet themselves.
  - 24.2. The secular framework, however, has nothing to give the wounded conscience to heal it.
  - 24.3. It has nothing to say to the self who feels it is unworthy of love and forgiveness.
  - 24.4. Anyone who has seen the depths of their sin and what they are capable of will never be mollified by the bromide of “Be nice to yourself—you deserve it.” (139)

### Transactional or ‘conditional’ forgiveness

25. First the victim does the confrontation.
- 25.1. If the perpetrator responds with confession and apology,
  - 25.2. then the wronged person “works through” her feelings,
  - 25.3. and finally “the wronged person emerges triumphant, unburdened by angry emotion, her claims fully acknowledged, ready to bestow the grace of her non-anger.” (25)
26. Nietzsche saw conditional forgiveness as punitive. He argued that Christians, who had not achieved success or power in terms set by pagan cultures, invented a new way to feel superior, that is, by being more kind and forgiving. (25)
27. Martha Nussbaum<sup>3</sup>
- 27.1. What I call “transactional forgiveness” exacts a performance of contrition and abasement, which can itself function as a type of payback.
  - 27.2. Transactional forgiveness involves the idea of “cosmic balance” or fittingness: the victim’s pain somehow atones for pain inflicted.
  - 27.3. The apparatus of abasement, confession, contrition, and eventual forgiveness often impedes reconciliation
    - i. by producing humiliation rather than mutual respect,
    - ii. and it frequently acts as a covert form of punishment, discharging a hidden (or, often, not so hidden) resentment.

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<sup>3</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*.

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- 27.4. There is a sense in which the ways forgiveness has been practices in Christianity has become 'transactional' of 'conditional' in this way: the Catholic sacrament of penance requires
- i. verbal *confession*,
  - ii. then *contrition* (defined by the sixteenth-century Council of Trent as "sorrow of heart and detestation for sin committed, with the resolve to sin no more"). Thus, penance is void if the transgressor is simply going through the motions. Following contrition and confession—if the priest is satisfied that these are complete enough—is
  - iii. *absolution*, accompanied by
  - iv. the assignment of a *penance*.