

traditions, culture, and time. This endeavor requires wisdom, discernment, and guidance from the Holy Spirit. In light of this, I will conclude with a beautiful prayer for illumination from Appendix II of *The Book*:

O Lord God, who has left unto us thy holy word to be a lantern unto our feet and a light unto our steps: Give unto us thy Holy Spirit, that out of that word we may learn what is thy righteous will, and frame our lives in all holy obedience to the same, to thy honor and glory and the increase of our faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen* (p. 691).

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Timothy Keller

Forgive: Why should I and can I?

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Forgiveness is a word that we as Christians use very often. However, it is a practice that sometimes we tend to avoid. Forgiveness is a complicated subject, a complex theme and it is a theme that is at the same time frightening. I say it in this way because the biblical perspective on forgiveness starts with Christ, his forgiveness, and it gets complicated when we start to hold grudges and bitterness against

people who harmed us, not remembering at the same time that we are forgiven by God. This is the last published book by Tim Keller (1950-2023), an alumnus of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (MDiv) and Westminster Theological Seminary (DMin), New York Times bestseller author, and co-founder of The Gospel Coalition and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York. He was called “parson in the neighborhood” (Cospers 2023), he understood the culture and how to be a witness in it. He also understood church life, evangelicalism, and the Bible. As a pastor who preached for many years, he interwoven forgiveness in his sermons quite often. Keller wrote a theological book. It is written in a very clear and sharp style and the author is very direct about many things concerning forgiveness, and a person who reads can get a sense that the author specifically wants Christians to understand what real forgiveness is. The themes of the book are problems of forgiveness, understanding forgiveness, and practicing forgiveness. The main thesis of this book is that we can only forgive if we understand Christ’s work on the cross. If he forgave us, who are we to hold a grudge and not forgive others?

Keller starts his book with the parable of the unforgiving servant, found in Matthew 18:21-35. This is his basic text for the entire book. At the beginning of the book, he has a small introduction “No future without forgiveness” where he explains with the help of Desmond Tutu why we cannot live without forgiveness and how non-forgiveness keeps us in jail. There is also a fading of forgiveness, where secular groups and people take the stance that “forgiveness makes a person superior and if they can’t manage something so simple, the fault lies with them” (pp. xvii-xviii). For many groups forgiveness is not the way. But like a paralyzed man from the Gospel of Mark, his first need recognized by Jesus is forgiveness of sins, not his healing primarily. We need forgiveness - that is the way of a glorious life in Christ. In the first chapter called “A Story of Forgiveness,” Keller explains the story of the unforgiving servant and here we have a New Testament background info, an explanation of the biblical text, and an exegetical analysis of it. The story is about recognizing the debt we owe to God, which is the vertical dimension of Christian forgiveness because only if we get it vertically, we can do it horizontally - meaning, we can give forgiveness to others. Another part of forgiveness is a dimension of internal forgiveness, only then we can start to seek reconciliation and justice. What is forgiveness then?

To forgive, then, is first to name the trespass truthfully as wrong and punishable, rather than merely excusing it. Second, it is to identify with the perpetrator as a fellow sinner rather than thinking how different from you he or she is. It is to will their good. Third, it is to release the wrongdoer from liability by absorbing the debt oneself rather than seeking revenge and paying them back. Finally, it is to aim for reconciliation rather than breaking off the relationship forever. If you omit any one of these four actions, you are not engaging in real forgiveness (pp. 9-10).

The first section of the book “Losing and Finding Forgiveness” has three chapters. “The Fading of Forgiveness” (Chapter 2) is about the problems that culture faces regarding forgiveness. Here Keller lays three approaches to forgiveness that have emerged in our culture: *cheap grace*, *little grace*, and *no grace*. *Cheap grace* is “the unconditional-forgiveness model, in which all the emphasis is on the victim being therapeutically liberated from anger” (p. 28). Then there is *little grace* which is “the transactional-forgiveness model, in which all the emphasis is on the perpetrator meriting forgiveness” (p. 28). And the last is *no grace* model that doesn’t include forgiveness at all. In Keller’s opinion, they all contrast costly grace that is both vertical and horizontal in the Bible (p. 28). Keller names two things concerning the difficulty to forgive: therapeutic culture (inward looking on our identity based on our desires and demanding that society honors our interests) and new shame-honor culture (“cancel culture” that emphasizes honor and moral virtue to people who have been victimized in society, and if their existing social ladder is low, greater honor they receive - Keller calls it “a shame and honor culture of victimhood”) (pp. 31–32). None of these models and obstacles help relationships to be healthier, and therefore we will not have a future if we don’t forgive. Culture should look unto Christ who did not repay with evil or insult with an insult (1 Peter 3:9). In “The History of Forgiveness” (Chapter 3) the author seeks for forgiveness model and finds none similar to the biblical one in Greek culture, instead of finding forgiveness there is only pardoning. Only in coming with Christianity, do we see change - Christ forgives, and so Christians forgive. They have been executed, but they were patient and forgiving. Early church fathers wrote on patience in suffering and forgiving. Honor and shame in ancient culture would lay in proving yourself, but Christians honor was to seek the benefit of others. Where do we then find forgiveness? We find it in the Old Testament and New Testament (Chapter 4 “The Book of Forgiveness”). The Lord is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and forgiving, but does not leave the guilty unpunished (Exodus 34:6-7). We find patterns of forgiveness in the Books of Moses, Psalms, Prophets, and lastly, in the Gospels. Two main words Keller names for forgiveness, *charizomai* (contains *charis*, meaning “grace”) and *aphesis* (“remission”). There is a cost for forgiveness, the debt, and someone needs to pay it or absorb it. Only Jesus can forgive real debt, and empower us to forgive others their debts.

The next section of the book is called, “Understanding Forgiveness.” To understand forgiveness, one must see God who is “The God of Love and Fury” (Chapter 5). Here Keller discusses the wrath of God and love, and how those two are inseparable from understanding God in Christ. Wrath must express love, and love must express wrath. Wrath and love meet each other in the work of Christ who atoned for our sins and absorbed the wrath of God because he loved us, He forgave us our sins and we can only by looking at him be able to extend the forgiveness to others.

(pp. 79–85). In the next chapter “Justice and Love, Honor and Abuse” (Chapter 6) the author discusses how God’s justice and love create a community of reconciliation, beginning with the Old Testament (Leviticus, Proverbs), and Tim’s point is that while we tend to forgive, we should let go our grudge and with humility seek justice, not with revenge. True forgiveness includes both love and justice, and again Keller is pointing to Christ by pointing us to the cross, to the Lamb of God (the Exodus story), and to the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. So, what are then “The Basics of Forgiveness” (Chapter 7)? The author sets forward two texts that at first glance contradict each other. One is from Mark 11:25 and the other from Luke 17:3-4. One calls for forgiveness without repentance of the other party, and the other calls for rebuking the guilty party. How do those two agree? The answer is that sometimes asks for repentance, and sometimes not from the guilty party (p. 106). Keller says that there are two ways of forgiveness, one that is inward, which should always happen, and the second is outward depending on the situation. In Jesus, we see revolution - to love our enemies, to pray for them, but also, we are to confront evil with goodness, and to rebuke those who offended us, but with one principle, and that one is to love our enemies while doing good to them after they wronged us - all to gain them as a brother or sister again.

The last main section, “Practicing Forgiveness,” leads us into the discussion of how we are to give our forgiveness. Again, Keller faces us with guilt and shame in the next chapter “Our Need for Forgiveness” (Chapter 8), where he talks about various psychoanalysis and philosophical ways (Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx) that wanted to diminish the guilt that people feel, and how this led to the new culture of shame and honor that is self-salvation. The author continues with the Genesis problem of nakedness and hiding from God and the problem of fig leaves that humans put on themselves to protect themselves, to hide their shame and guilt. We are to find what are the fig leaves in our lives that hold us from true forgiveness. By looking at Joseph’s story of humility and joy - and seeing Christ as a perfect example who paid the costly price of his love toward us, we can experience humility and joy, and have a personal transformation - “and it is the great key to the work of human forgiveness and reconciliation” (p. 135). Understanding the need for forgiveness, we now look at “Receiving God’s forgiveness” (Chapter 9) where the author helps us to understand that “you will never be able to fully forgive others for their sins against you unless you first experience God’s forgiveness of your sins against him” (p. 138). The problem of self-forgiveness and true guilt needs to come under God’s grace - taking our guilt to God. Here Keller rightly is using Psalm 51 and David’s sin as an example. He names three counterfeits of repentance: blame-shifting, self-pity, and self-flagellation. In every way we “have been failing to love and honor God” (p. 150). We need to learn to turn to God, and as Christians begin to understand the doctrine of substitutionary atonement and

the doctrine of justification. And now we come to chapter 10 “Granting our Forgiveness” where Keller shows us that to cut the “root of bitterness” means to not only cut the tree but to deal with the root also. We are to internally forgive, absorb the debt (pay it), and also be willing the good of the wrongdoer (pp. 162–172). Lastly, the author leads us to the practice of “Extending Forgiveness” (Chapter 11) where the stress is on absorbing the debt oneself, meaning forgiving. But Keller doesn’t leave Christians thinking only about absorbing the debt, instead, he is looking to the restoration of relationship - on reconciliation. We are to love, pray, do good to people who hurt us, and “leave room for God’s wrath” - Keller cites Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones who said that “we must never desire the harm of the person who has offended us – never.” How to do it? Keller points to Christ and his work that transforms us.

The book ends with a small “Epilogue,” together with a few appendixes that give us summaries of the idea of Christian forgiveness together with practical steps to it. My opinion is that it is a helpful resource if someone wants to remind himself of some of the main principles that Keller lays out throughout the book. What Timothy Keller does in this book is that he dares to speak to the evangelical community (Christian community). Starting with the problem of forgiveness, the problem of today’s culture, and leading us to the history of forgiveness, thoroughly referring us to the Holy Scriptures - Keller leaves us with a quality reading that challenges us to renew the community through forgiveness and reconciliation. The book is not a dry guide: do this and that and everything will be fine. Keller is very realistic about the difficulty of forgiveness, difficult cases, long reconciliations, and situations where things may never be fully restored. Be that as it may, Keller does not go beyond the biblical, evangelical concept of forgiveness, which is that forgiveness is indeed possible, but only through Christ, who serves us not only as an example but as the one who empowers us to live that victorious life through him. Although he wrote here in the book on inward and outward forgiveness (two main directives of forgiveness), seems to be that he is maybe a bit idealistic about reconciliations. What I mean by that is that he could have written on the inward forgiveness more and how to live in reconciliation not bringing up everything that we were offended by. I would say here that he could have been more detailed on that. Nevertheless, Keller is an excellent connoisseur of literature and a man who leads to many sources (both Christian and secular) and can use sources from Hanna Arendt and Miroslav Volf to Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (there are 17 pages in notes).

I recommend the book to anyone who deals with anger, rage, bitterness, and unforgiveness, to learn through the biblical message of the gospel to understand what richness is in Christ through his forgiveness of our sins and offering forgiveness to others through him. This book is highly welcoming to the Balkans, where we try to cope with difficult memories, cynicism, and trauma. Christ is the healer,

forgiver, and the only one that brings peace and true restoration. The book is for every Christian (and secular also) reader, especially for the pastors who deal with reconciliation regularly in their churches. In the end, if we are to see the Kingdom of God, we should start with forgiveness, because without it, there is no future.

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