

# Just Grace: Perspectives from Research

*Kimberly Sawers looks at the research into forgiveness, its benefits and processes, and concludes that justice and grace are not mutually exclusive.*

## Introduction

This article is a summary of the talk I gave at the Faith in Business Retreat in April 2025. There has been a lot of theological work around forgiveness, but my assignment was to examine what other types of research had to say about the topic. After compiling and reading psychology and organisational behaviour research on forgiveness, I was left with the conviction that Forgiveness is indeed Divine. The research affirms that it is both important and is not easy. Ultimately, I wanted to know how the research sheds light on the topic of forgiveness and how does it help us to practise Just Grace as Christians in our personal life, at work, as leaders, and even in organisational practices.

## Forgiveness is Difficult

We shouldn't be surprised that forgiveness is difficult. After all, In Matthew 6:21 Peter asked how many times we have to forgive another. From a cognitive perspective it is difficult to hold two seemingly opposing concepts at the same time: justice and grace. We may assume that they are mutually exclusive. Forgiveness is needed when an injustice occurs – where there has been injury of some kind. Our natural response to injustice is fight or flight – revenge or avoidance. Thus, how do we both seek justice for wrong, and forgive?

Studies also show that forgiveness can be misapplied. Forcing individuals to forgive can lead to harm. Unfortunately, we have seen examples where forgiveness has been used to let offenders off the hook while doing

little to heal those who are hurt. It has also been used to silence people.<sup>1</sup> In addition, forgiveness can be costly. The forgiver takes on the debt of the offender. This is easy to understand in a tangible example, for instance when a loan is forgiven. The one who forgives gives up the right to those funds – they can't lend, invest, or spend them in the future. This concept is not as easily understood with non-tangible injustices. However, when we forgive an injustice, we give up the right to anger or to seek revenge. This too can be costly in terms of emotional energy.

## Definitions of Forgiveness from Literature

Here is another area of difficulty. Stop for a moment and try to define forgiveness. Collectively, we may come up with a wide variety of responses. However, precise definitions matter in research. Empirical research requires that we have well-defined variables so that we can measure and test our hypotheses. That said, what I found is that there is a variety of forgiveness definitions in literature as well. Here are a few definitions which are not mutually exclusive:

*Forgiveness is an individual response to injury.* It is not dependent on any interaction with the transgressor. It is unlikely to occur in a single moment, but likely to take time.

*Forgiveness is letting go of negative responses.* It is a willingness to abandon one's right to anger, resentment, condemnation, and desire for revenge in our emotions, thoughts and behaviour.

*Forgiveness is a complex process* which may rely on contextual factors that influence a person's willingness and/or ability to forgive another – factors like severity of wrongdoing, intention attributed to the offender (e.g. did they mean it, was it an accident?).<sup>2</sup>

*Forgiveness is a cognitive shift* where an individual decides to commit to apply energy and effort to regulate negative emotions, thoughts, and behaviours.<sup>3</sup>

While there may have been variation in what forgiveness is, the literature was clear on what it is not. It is important to note that granting forgiveness still allows for holding the offender responsible for the transgression, and *does not involve* denying, ignoring, minimising, tolerating, condoning, excusing or forgetting the offence. Forgiveness does not give up on justice or accountability.

Another important distinction in the literature is that while forgiveness may lead to reconciliation, forgiveness and reconciliation are two separate constructs. Forgiveness is a necessary step in the process of reconciliation, but it does not guarantee reconciliation. This may add to our feelings that forgiveness is difficult. Forgiving an injustice when reconciliation is not assured can feel risky.

## Research Findings

Now that we have some definitions, what has the research found? In this next section I look at two streams of research – individual/personal, and organisational. On the individual level, forgiveness has been shown to contribute to greater well-being



Rembrandt  
The Return of the Prodigal Son  
circa 1668  
Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

by mitigating the effects of stress and negative emotions. It has been shown to decrease anxiety, depression, anger, and tension as well as induce feelings of ease and peace.<sup>4</sup> Some research concludes that it is central to the healing process. Conversely, unforgiveness has been shown to contribute to psychological tension and eroding of physical health. Unforgiving responses (e.g. rehearsing the hurt, harbouring a grudge) are considered health-eroding, particularly in relation to coronary heart disease.<sup>5</sup>

The individual benefits also transfer to organisations, with some nuances. But first let's talk about conflict or injustice at work. Conflicts at work, just like personal conflict, require coping strategies (e.g. avoidance, revenge, forgiveness). We may feel, however, that our ability to use those strategies at work is different from in our personal lives. Using additional resources (notably energy) to cope with conflict at work can lead to exhaustion and burnout. Burnout is associated with poor performance and poor health. Conflict in the workplace can impact peer-to-peer relations, employee-to-supervisor relations

as well as employee-organisation relationships, thus depleting an individual's organisation-related outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Forgiveness at work has been shown to mitigate these effects of conflict. For example, it can enhance physical and psychological health and decrease burnout. It can increase job satisfaction and organisational commitment, decrease staff turnover and increase productivity.

### Practising Forgiveness

So far, we have acknowledged that forgiveness is hard, it's important, and it comes with warnings. So, what do we do with all this information? How do these studies help us to practise Just Grace? A number of studies have examined forgiveness interventions (how to forgive) on the individual/personal level in counselling settings. These studies have shown that forgiveness interventions have been effective in helping individuals to forgive and to experience the benefits of forgiving.<sup>7</sup> Most of them advocate educating what forgiveness is and is not, enhancing an understanding that forgiveness is a viable and important option, and developing realistic expectations (e.g. it's a process, can

be difficult, and takes time). Many of them go on to outline and test a process of forgiveness. While the word *process* sounds like a linear progression of activities, as I read through the different models I wondered if they are more iterative than linear in nature. What follows is my synthesis of the types of activities found in the different models. They include examination, cognition, activation, and realisation.<sup>8</sup> In *examination activities* the individual confronts and develops insight into the incident(s) in question and calls out the injustice. In *cognition activities* they think about their willingness to consider and commit to forgive. In *activation activities* they work to reframe, develop empathy, and accept/absorb pain. In *realisation activities* they realise their own need for forgiveness and build awareness of affective (i.e. emotional) change from forgiving.

While the individual interventions found in counselling may not be easily transferable to organisations, there are some lessons to be learned. Organisational behaviour research makes suggestions on how to enhance willingness to forgive at work, and there were a few studies that tested

some of the suggestions, with positive results. Three primary suggestions include creating a forgiveness climate, establishing organisational practices and processes, and developing leader attributes.<sup>9</sup> Creating a forgiveness climate requires establishing shared perspectives and values of empathy, benevolence, restorative justice, compassion, temperance, patience, self-control, and humility. This is akin to setting the stage in counselling (e.g. educating that forgiveness is a viable option). Establishing organisational practices requires setting practices, policies, and procedures that are linked to culture and climate. Three key practices outlined include restorative dispute resolution, employee support programmes, and mindfulness training and appraisal. In particular, restorative dispute resolution includes focusing on the victim's wellbeing, is clear on the offence, and facilitates community healing. These practices are akin to the process activities in counselling. Finally, developing leader attributes includes three key attributes: restorative justice orientation, servant leadership, and self-control. Studies found that perceived levels of procedural justice were positively correlated with employee willingness to forgive, when measured as an

element of organisational climate as well as a leader attribute. Employees needed to be assured that the process and procedures were fair before they felt safe enough to engage in forgiveness activities. Additionally, the leader attribute of humility was found to be a positive factor in employees' willingness to participate in forgiveness activities.


The practical application of the research is to acknowledge that, individually, it takes a lot of work to forgive; and organisationally, it takes intentional action to create a climate of forgiveness and develop practices that support forgiveness. The process of forgiveness helps us to let go of negative feelings and thoughts, but it does not give up on the holding of offenders to account. In fact, accountability is a key part of those organisational practices that support a forgiving climate.

## Summary

So far, we have drawn on secular research. There are certainly things for us to learn as Christians and maybe things we might add from a Christian perspective. First, we have Christ as a model of forgiveness. Our forgiveness of others is based on and

empowered by God's forgiveness of us. Therefore, it is slightly different from contemporary forgiveness models – it is not simply to enhance our own therapeutic wellbeing. Timothy Keller, in his book *Forgive*, suggests a process to forgive: name the wrong truthfully in love, identify with the wrongdoer as a fellow sinner, absorb the debt – release the wrongdoer from liability for personal payback, and aim for reconciliation and restoration.<sup>10</sup> This process shares similar ideas to the counselling interventions.

Keller also argues that Christians have additional resources to draw upon in the process of forgiving. First, poverty of spirit – the humility that comes from knowing our salvation is sheer grace. We need forgiveness, and we have been forgiven. Second, generosity of spirit – the assurance of love, we are rich in the experience of God's love in Christ, and therefore we can be generous to others. Because nothing can separate us from the love of God or change our identity in Christ, we can have courage to forgive even when reconciliation is not assured.

In conclusion, justice and grace are not mutually exclusive. Justice is an integral part of the process of forgiving both individually and organisationally. 

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