

BONDS OF PERFECT UNITY

Exegetical and Philosophical Approaches to Love, Mercy and Forgiveness

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Abstract: Christian life centres on the practice of the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Love in turn informs mercy and forgiveness. These virtues are essentially communal, and their fulfilment is withheld until the Second Coming of Jesus. Together, this means that Christian life is a shared life in which the essential practices bind the members together in the presence of Jesus Christ. These claims are developed on the basis of a reading of Chapter 3 of the Letter to the Colossians. The reading is at once exegetical insofar as attention is paid to the Greek text and the author's historical-cultural context, and philosophical insofar as certain key concepts and phenomena are drawn from the theology of the Letter. What exegesis proposes to the life of faith, philosophy is able to disclose in its objective meaning.

Keywords: Colossians, community, faith, forgiveness, hope, love, mercy, way of life.

1. Introduction

When we ask ourselves the question of quite what belongs properly to Christian life, looking for what makes it distinctly what it is and not anything that it may only resemble or overlap with, we may be

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tempted to pursue an answer that rests on a definition only of the individual life of faith. In itself, this would already be a difficult task, since we could not avoid some consideration of claims that even the sincerest elements of such a life are in fact expressions of deeper impulses of which the believer is unaware. Would worship of the divine really be, as modern philosophers since Feuerbach have sometimes claimed, celebration only of an elevated form of what we take to be best in ourselves (Feuerbach 143-146)? If this is so, or to the degree that it is, there can be little doubt that in our search for the perfect joy that is promised to Christian faith, we are motivated by a wish to escape from a more primal insecurity that is an irreducible condition of this life in an uncertain world. This is what Thomas Hobbes has in mind when, early in his *Leviathan*, he refers to “the natural seeds of religion” from which a love of order sprouts (Hobbes 63-64). If Hobbes and Feuerbach are right, then the meaning of everything that believers profess comes down to the projected means to believe that, after all, we will be saved from the worst of things. God, in short, would be a projection of our desire to dispel the anxiety that hangs over our existence. These proposals have long since been familiar and they have lost none of their seriousness, but we may leave them to those who are intent on the apophatic dimension of our thinking, which has always known that the same God who we seek and even recognize is nonetheless beyond our comprehension (Buckley 117-119).

In the meantime, and striking out along another path, we may also object that our original condition is not in fact singular or solitary. Modern European thought has struggled with this notion in large part due to its reception of the philosophy of Descartes, in which the search for founded knowledge claims to discover the unmediated and indubitable experience of one’s own existence. The moment one accepts this claim, one is also obliged to think that the conception of subjectivity that it entails must be the origin and first condition of one’s relation with others. This Cartesian claim makes possible an entire politics. The self-relating individual and its powers come first, and life in common must be built up from there. This has evidently not been the Christian experience, in which each of us is together with the others from beginning to end, and perhaps even when proposing to stand alone before God. What else can St Paul have meant, when in his first letter to the Corinthians he

encouraged them to understand themselves each as members of one body (1 Corinthians 12: 12, 20)? So then let us not fail to ask which actions bind Christians to each other according to the nature of their faith? How is the faith concretized so that it yields a life in common? And how for their part do the actions in which this occurs make up a way of life that is distinctive among others? These few questions are enough to direct us into the very heart of the Christian tradition, as it has been articulated beginning already very early. St Paul has already come to mind in the course of these reflections, and as it happens the letter to the *Colossians*, traditionally attributed to him,¹ sets before us precisely the sort of claims that we now have in view. The letter to the *Colossians* is substantially about the way of life that would be proper to the followers of Jesus, grounded in their faith and intent on what they hope for, and indeed as a matter of communal bonds. For St Paul, the Christian way of life includes possibilities that transcend what we might accomplish strictly on our own, and which bring to light the fact that we belong to one another beyond any claim to live first and last only for oneself.

2. The Community of Love

We find the following exhortation in *Colossians* 3:12-15:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all of these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect unity [*syndesmos tēs teleiōtētos*].² And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

¹For present purposes, the authorship of the Letter matters little, since there is unmistakable agreement between much of its theology and that of letters that are ascribed to Paul with great certainty (Hogan, *New Jerusalem Biblical Commentary* 876-877). What does matter here is that the theology has been formative for the entire tradition.

²In a similar vein, the letter to the Ephesians (4:3) refers to "the bond of peace" (*tō syndesmō tēs eirēnēs*).

If we think that this passage only calls for gentle accommodations within the community, we have become much too comfortable with its language. Our first cue toward a better reading might come from a sense of the difficulty of love and forgiveness that has probably not left us even these many centuries later. There is also the notion of ‘*perfect unity*’ to contend with, or rather to take seriously. Have any of us ever known it in this life? And so, the exhortation is more complicated than it may at first sound. We are helped by re-reading it in the light of specifications made earlier in the same letter. The first of them is already enough to move us into the domain of some important themes: in the previous chapter (2: 6-8), it has already been observed that from *believing*, by which all Christians belong together, in the resurrected Christ must come the *doing* by which everything we might hope to achieve whatever is truly meant by the beliefs. Then second, as if to leave no doubt about the vision that this implies, it has also been made clear to the people of Colossae that this *doing* is not simply a matter of acting in accordance with the laws—for we are already forgiven all our trespasses by a God who has cancelled the very bond that raises legal demands (2:14)—but instead and henceforth faith grounds a way of life intent on habits, practices, and indeed, as the letter in fact makes plain, *virtues*.

It is well known that the former approach to moral action—action in accordance with the laws—will have been familiar to the people of that time and place as a feature of Jewish observance. It is also well known that the Pauline discourse appeals to the notion of grace in order to proclaim the fulfilment of the biblical law. What perhaps receives less consideration is the fact that action in accordance with laws was likewise a central feature of the Roman civic and public life, to which Paul may also be taken to respond throughout his correspondence (Taubes 13-54).³ How are to understand the appearance of this new position? It seems short-

³Paul’s situation is complex, as one finds in, e.g., Acts 18: 23-25. He is understood to contest the Jewish conception of religious law (“words, names, and...and law”), proclaims his own innocence before the Roman law (“I have not offended...against Caesar”), and seemingly, at least as the Lukan author would have it, shifts blame for the turbulence in Rome to the Jewish people.

sighted to make it into a claim only for historical progress, as if a new understanding has now overcome the limitations of earlier ones. Straightforwardly, what Paul places before us is a distinctive conception of our humanity that rests on faith in the promise of a salvation—or, if the philosophers insist, a transcendent good—that remains beyond anything that can be achieved in this life. Part of what one is thus called to believe is that with God's help, accomplished by Jesus Christ, one may nonetheless make some progress toward that good in the form of a life that makes itself ready to receive it. The moment one does believe these things, the world and everything we accomplish in it under our own powers can no longer be either the first or final word on our humanity. And yet, it is always possible that we may nonetheless fall into the habit of thinking and acting as if that this is so. From this perspective, the Jewish and Roman conceptions, whatever their great and important difference, will appear to share the refusal of precisely what for Paul is crucial: we must live always in view of a real opening to salvation from the strife of this world, supported by faith in a God who has already accomplished it.

This approach to Pauline Christianity—more phenomenological than historical—comes into view especially where the Letter to the Colossians, and indeed other Pauline Letters (Ephesians 2:15 and 4:22-24, Romans 6:6, etc.), addresses moral life as a matter of our very selfhood, or nature, which to be sure does include particular practices. In Paul's own context, it is the older experience of self—especially the one familiar to the people of Colossae in the form of Jewish law, but certainly also the one known in Roman life—that must be thrown off in favour of a new one. It belongs to faith in Jesus that one has "taken off the old self [*ton pailaion anthrōpon*] with its practices, and [has] put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:10-11). With regard to our own context, it is likely a matter more immediately of resisting the features of that "old self" that continue to draw one away from what makes up the "new self."

All of this enables us to see the central thrust of Colossians 3. To "put on love" is not merely to improve one's attitude and actions, but to change the entire mode of one's existence. Whatever makes up the love that is found in the world of the old self—and we should not doubt that it is there—on Paul's account the new love

made possible by Jesus Christ goes further. It is a love that is both grounded in a faith in a salvation still to come from beyond this world, and framed in a hope by which the world and everything in it are seen in that light.⁴ Nothing else will satisfy the Pauline exhortation, even though, as we have seen, it exhibits no illusion about the real temptation to withdraw from it entirely. What might belong to the old self never truly attends to the possibility opened in faith, framed in hope and enacted in love—never sees the world as already opened to a transcendent good—because it moves only between laws that function to set limits on how to act in this world and this life, and thus never truly hopes for anything better.

This also gives us a better understanding of what it means to say that love commits us to what Paul calls *syndesmos tēs teleiōtētos* (bonds of perfect unity). This is well enough insofar as it draws attention to the fact that the final unity in question can be reached only at the end of time. Yet the word “perfect” also carries a sense of dynamic completion or fulfillment. *Teleiōtētos* derives from *teleios*, and from *telos*, a word that philosophers know well for its important sense of an inner impulse toward flourishing. Paul presents us with a vision, a way of life, which would have given at least some Greeks a great deal of difficulty: practice of the virtues is directed to a good, a flourishing, that is beyond our own reach. It does not matter which theological term we accept in order to characterize it—beatitude, salvation, or union with God—in each case, finally it is not that we achieve the good but rather it is the good that comes to us, or at any rate to those of us who truly open themselves to it. And so there can be no surprise that each of the virtues that are primarily in question here are fundamentally kenotic in nature. *Faith* accepts a promise, *hope* awaits a second coming, and *love* places the beloved before oneself.

There is more. Elaborating on what this calls for, the letter reminds the Colossians that all are called to this “in the one body

⁴I emphasize the sense in which hope discloses the world in a distinctive way. If faith opens one’s world to God, it is by hope that the world, and indeed everything in it, is discerned in that light (in short, as second to last). Love is the mode of engagement grounded in faith and disclosed in hope. For this construal of the theological virtues, I am inspired by O’Donovan 105-133.

[*en heni sōmati*]." This is an expression used in 1 Corinthians 12, in which Paul writes at some length of a body of Christ to which each member of the community belongs, according to his or her own charism or talent, equally and indispensably. The image is, as has often been observed, remarkably apt. At one and the same time, it suggests that each member of the body is truly itself, their collectivity nonetheless is the body, and they are dependent on one another for the good health of both each part and the whole. Needless to say, the meaning of 'health' would in this context extend to what we have already begun to understand concerning the Pauline sense of virtue, so that the putting on of love would immediately coincide with the flourishing of both the individual and the community.

We may fairly ask who truly belongs to this community. Although Paul's answer has not always been the same, in the Letter to the Colossians we find the position that has been most readily associated with his mature thinking. If, as some contend, the Letter was written during the late 50s or early 60s AD, it represents, together with the Letters to the Ephesians and Philippians, a turning point on precisely this matter (Dunn 540-541). If instead it was written later, it may at least be understood to take the same view as those letters and others that came still later. Whichever the case, Colossians stands apart from certain other Pauline Letters—including some that scholars confidently ascribe to Paul's own hand—that tend mainly address distinct churches, which is to say distinct communities in Salonika or Corinth. The letter to the people of Colossae does address the people there in that city straightforwardly in terms of their own experience and in that sense as members of a particular community, but at the same time it also addresses them as members of a community that is universal. This is not to say that Paul for a time, or perhaps periodically, thought of his various communities as entirely distinct entities, and came eventually to envision a single, universal entity that absorbs them. Instead, as his theology deepens, he increasingly emphasizes the sense in which the community of faith depends ultimately on the Christ who is for everyone (Dunn 541). Notably, Paul's manner of addressing the people as members both of a particular community and yet also one that is universal is consistent with the sense of love that Christians are meant to

cultivate: just as everyone is called to faith in Jesus Christ, so too is everyone my neighbour, beyond social, cultural, or ethnic particularity.

There is at the same time a relaxation of eschatological expectation—that is, it is a coming to terms with the fact that the Second Coming of Jesus was apparently not going to occur imminently, in the lifetimes of those who had known him on earth. It is well known that the earlier Pauline Letters are written under pressure of that simpler understanding. 1 Corinthians 7, for example, can be read as tortured by the question of just what of this life—which to be sure does include many good things—is truly worth serious investment of one's energy and attention if the end of time is nearly at hand (Paul asks, in all seriousness, 'why marry, if already married? how much do the material concerns of home and hearth really matter?'). Now if we look closely at Colossians, we find that in place of a sense of the future that greatly troubles moral life, there is instead a sense of the future that positively informs it. One no longer struggles to understand who or how to love as Christ's second coming draws near, but instead seeks to love everyone fully, in Christ, thus seeking a fulfilment that will be complete only at the end of time. This would be the central teaching of the letter to the Colossians: it is one and the same thing to do everything we can to realize here and now, in the present life, conditions that are set properly beyond us, in a future still to come, and thus to move ever closer to perfect unity in the fulfilment of our natures.

3. On Loving, Showing Mercy, and Forgiving

We have only said very little about what it truly means to love one another in the community of those who are called to Jesus Christ. Let us therefore turn now to some closer consideration of this love, and of two of its prominent derivatives, mercy and forgiveness.

3.1. Christian Love

We ought to begin with what is obvious, though it only introduces the theme: the love promoted in Christian life must not be mistaken for either mere sentimentality or base eroticism, even if we know that these other things are sometimes mixed with it. We also know that other forms of love can be present even when Christian love is

not.⁵ Since it is a matter of love of others, we must first set aside the love of self that would set the conditions for any love of others, or even oppose it. And since we wish to identify the love of others that would rest on faith in the promise of Jesus Christ, we must also set aside the love that mainly seeks pleasure in the beloved, preferring to instead call this 'desire.'

We might also pause here, acknowledging the attempt by existentialist philosophy to oppose desire and love as sadism and masochism, and then interpret both as forms of insistence on one's own attempt to bring the freedom of the other person under control. To desire him or her is to attempt to straightforwardly possess him or her in his or her freedom. To love him or her is to attempt to make oneself the sole object of his or her desire, and in this way ensnare his or her freedom after all (Sartre 474-534). As we will see, Christian love is certainly not this, though what sometimes passes for it may be. Yet there are still two other ways to love another person that are not entirely what Paul has in mind. (i) There is, first, the empathic love (*storge*) that we can have of those who are familiar to us through bonds of family and friendship. When we say that we love people in this way, what we express is only a kind of fondness that is warm and well-intended without needing or wanting anything much in return. This is not out of abundant generosity, but only a basic and unquestioning contentment. And indeed, we do not even require that these other people necessarily possess qualities that are of especially high value. The people we are fond of are not necessarily the most virtuous among us, and sometimes when a family member or casual friend happens to be especially virtuous our relationship nonetheless does not have much to do with that fact. Of these relationships we say things like 'my colleague has his flaws, but he is a nice guy' or 'I know that my sister has remarkable courage, but to me, she's still the girl who went swimming and fishing with me every day.'

(ii) Second, there is also the love we have for another person who does indeed possess attributes that we consider highest (*philia*). This love belongs to what we sometimes call 'true'

⁵In my next few paragraphs, I adopt distinctions worked out Lewis 2002.

friendship or sometimes friendship 'of the good.' Friends of this kind love one another in a bond secured by the fact that each has made great progress toward what is best in being human. Their commitment to truth, beauty and goodness has brought them together, and their presence in each person is what makes him or her most lovable. We must bear in mind that, at least for the Greek philosophers who first prized this friendship, truth, beauty, and goodness in themselves transcend anything within the reach of mortal effort, but we must also recognize that the love one may feel for the friend who has gone far in seeking them still is a particular love—or, more to the point, a love that applies only to such people, and evidently not to those neighbours of lesser achievement.

In contrast with these, Christian love, *agape*, is limited neither by prior familiarity and comfort with a person, nor by a requirement that the other person embody all that the world esteems as best and highest. One loves each person, and every person, fully as who he or she is, and as someone of supreme value entirely in himself or herself. To be sure, this may run against the grain of our nature, by which we readily love those who live good lives and care for us, and struggle mightily to love those who become corrupt and show us only ill will. Overcoming that tendency, or rising above it, is a good deal of what it means to answer the biblical call to be better than the world requires of us. Nowhere is this urged more powerfully than when in the gospels Jesus calls us to love every other person—including, as he specifies, my enemy (Matthew 5:44; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:15). This means, with regard to the other loves that we may experience, that in the end they are subordinated to this highest one—so that in Christian love one no longer is only fond of those with whom one is comfortably familiar, and no longer only befriends those whose qualities one knows to be excellent; one loves those persons, too, among all of those who one loves, or tries to love, including of course oneself.

Now perceiving a lack of discrimination in all of this, Freud has suggested that such a love is unnatural and dangerous, since it undermines care for oneself and exposes one to others who may be intent on violence (Freud 65-71). Of course, as one easily sees, he makes this charge from a conception of human nature that considers all of our actions to be necessarily self-interested. In his view, even a commitment to moral order is driven by a deeper wish

to feel secure about one's access to basic goods. In other words, he thinks that each of us accepts certain universal rules because each of us wishes to be sure that, at least then, violence would be ruled out, and in turn that there will be at least some small portion of satisfaction available to me in this life. Perhaps we can agree with Freud that this might be enough for us to maintain an outwardly peaceful society. The puzzle of *agape* is then a question of whether, as Freud surmises, it continues to obey the worldly interest of maintaining order—but only in the dark form of folding an aggression that would originally strike others instead back onto oneself—or rather involves something that transcends all such interests and worldliness, and has nothing at all to do with aggression for others or for oneself. And of course, this second possibility, extended to the entire community, should remind us of the "perfect union" that we found preached in the Letter to the Colossians. Moreover, what we have learned in the meantime helps us to be quite specific about how this union and the peace it seeks would have to be pursued: one would have to relinquish attachment to every good that is first only for oneself, and free oneself from submission to the economy of their worldly relations, in order to thus move closer to a good that one perceives to be higher than all of the others—a good that would appear from beyond the relations among goods in the world, and would call us toward a happiness that those lesser goods cannot provide.

We should not pass over an important conclusion to be drawn from all of this: if one does not endeavour to love without condition, then there will be only the play of friendship, fondness, and sexual desire in the formation of relationships that do not have a meaning any greater than what one is able to give them in the course only of being in the world until one's mortality is consummated. If this would be the truth of our relations, and if we would say it aloud to one another, our most fervent declarations could rise no higher than something like this: 'I love you, and him, and the others in my life as well as I can, given what has proven to be my lot, *and this is all that there is.*' We have already seen enough to be sure that the love that anticipates a perfect union that is always still to come is precisely not this. It refuses those worldly limits in the mode of transcending them toward something greater. And this holds for both every lover and every beloved. When it is a

matter of Christian love, the beloved is more than any worldly thing, and one who truly loves her is no longer submerged in the goods of the world alone. This elevated condition and the happiness that belongs to it would be some of what is promised in heaven.

3.2. Mercy beyond justice

From Christian love flows a distinctive mercy, which may even be its perfect expression. This becomes evident only as we distinguish mercy with an attitude that is in fact closer to tolerance or leniency—as if it were only a matter of granting something to another person from a position of greater strength, essentially to bring her or him back up to better conditions, whether materially, psychologically, or morally. In that case, we do not put in question our own ascendancy, and indeed do not challenge the limits of a justice that would have us stop only at basic equality (though this is not nothing, and we have often done much worse). In fact, from the perspective of Christian mercy, the presumption of one's own greater strength and the presumption that a prevailing definition of justice must suffice appear to go hand in hand. For they have in common the idea that one is entitled to define and dispense what must be given to another person according to one's own clear understanding and capacity. What then matters most is that the one who acts already knows what will constitute the good, and what then matters only a little is quite what belongs to the other person's particular experience and need. If what constitutes justice stops here, without necessary interest in either the goodness or the unique situation of the one in need of it, then indeed, Christian mercy, which is tributary to Christian love, goes farther.⁶

As it happens, such a mercy is plainly advocated already in gospels. One thinks inevitably of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), whose heart moved him to care for a man left beaten and penniless by the roadside, even though as a matter of

⁶The foregoing conception of Christian mercy is unrecognized by Martha Nussbaum, who appears to remand it to a "monarchical" conception in which the act itself opens from above, and the specific identity and experience of the one who receives it is a matter of indifference. See Nussbaum 206.

law and culture, there was no expectation that he, precisely as a Samaritan, a race excluded and despised by the Jews, should do so—whereas a priest and a Levite who had passed the same man earlier had each refused to come to the man's aid. The Samaritan showed "mercy," as Jesus would have us realize by the conclusion of his story.⁷ Mercy does not stop at the limit of the law, and in some cases does not even pause to take its measure, but instead goes straight to an act that is plainly loving in the terms we reached a few moments ago. The act itself plainly exhibits a conviction that the other person has a value that transcends the law and indeed transcends the goods that circulate with the world that is ordered by the law; and again, as with love, the one who shows mercy likewise transcends the law and the world of the law, by going beyond it, toward what shines forth as greater.

We know from our own experience that not every act of love is therefore an act of mercy, yet we might learn something about every act of love if we look closely at how acts of mercy seem to work. The word itself tells us: mercy is *miseri-cordia* in Latin; to show mercy is to act from a suffering heart (*misere-cordia*); it is to refuse the position from which to prioritize what is for oneself, so as to make room for prioritizing the other person in need. To be clear: morally, acts of mercy give up not only some of what I already have for myself and which the other person might lack, but even give up the very place from which I have what I take to be mine. Existentially, acts of mercy thus involve a reorganization of one's relation to the world and indeed to oneself. The one who shows mercy does not move as if starting from the centre of his or her world and is not guided by a prior understanding of the world (Bloechl 2018). When another human being suffers, mercy must be shown, and is shown, only because this human being, here and now, suffers. This comes first, and efforts to explain or justify it may come afterward.

As austere as all of this may sound, we should not forget that it nonetheless sometimes brings joy. Of course, this is not without ambiguity. To be sure, if the act that is said to be merciful is committed specifically in order to feel joy, it is no longer 'mercy'

⁷The Greek here is *eleos*, which the translations render varyingly as "mercy" and as "compassion."

that we have in view, and probably not what deserves to be called 'joy' either (we might think of something more like 'gratification' of a need to feel good about oneself). Mercy, we have seen, involves a decentring of oneself and a suspension of any privileges for oneself amid the goods of the world. Within the register of needs and goods, this lowering of oneself goes together with a raising up of the other person. But in terms of moral and spiritual value, both the one who receives mercy and the one who shows it are elevated. The former is recognized in her transcendent goodness, and by recognizing her in that way the latter, the one who shows mercy, likewise exhibits a goodness greater than the world alone generally expects from us. In this sense, we can speak of a 'way down' with respect to prestige and comfort, and a 'way up' with respect to the goodness that one chooses and exhibits. The way down *is* the way up.

3.3. The Heart of forgiveness

Forgiveness often resembles mercy inasmuch as the person who forgives someone else goes beyond what the law alone might require. It is also likely to be complicated in a way that mercy is not, inasmuch as the person who would forgive someone else must overcome whatever damage may have been done to his or her moral and emotional condition by the very offense that is to be forgiven. We feel this kind of damage in ourselves along a scale that runs from mild, lingering resentment all the way to incapacitating trauma. Whatever its intensity, it puts the one who would forgive at a disadvantage—or, in another register, it wounds her—in a way that is not generally the case for the one who would show mercy. This wounding, moreover, is the very origin of the relation insofar as it is a problem and a cause for concern, for there is no sense in my offering forgiveness to someone unless she or he has already in some way done something to me (or to others who are so close to me that my own identity is invested in their welfare and dignity). We need take only one more step to arrive at the heart of the problem: the wound by which one person finds forgiveness difficult to offer is the correlate of the defect by which the other person who wounded him or her was capable of the original offense. This means that the work of forgiveness is two-fold, at least if it is a matter of repairing and improving the relation. I must

address the source of the offense by the other—that is, I must see it, understand it, no doubt criticise it righteously, and contribute in some way to the work of eradicating it, but I must also address the wound in myself, guarding against the infection that is resentment. Christian forgiveness places remarkable emphasis on this latter dimension of the work, where it is a matter of the inner disposition of the one who has been wounded. Let us consider this more closely.

As with the phenomenology of mercy, the phenomenology of forgiveness might take its cue from the language of the heart that is sometimes invoked here. Earlier, it was the etymology of the word itself: mercy is *misere-cordia*, a suffering of the heart by which the way up to transcendent goodness proceeds by a way down from personal prestige. With forgiveness, the important expressions are “tenderness of heart” and “hardness of heart” (Ephesians 4:32). Most generally, this suggests openness and closedness, and plainly invokes something to which we ought to be open rather than closed. According to a famous passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, one should be open to hearing the Word that is Jesus Christ (3:15), over against any inclination to refuse or rebel against its demands. We have no difficulty applying this dynamic to the question of forgiveness in human affairs: if my neighbour has offended me—neither of us doubts it—the immediate question, at least for me, is whether I can make my way to a point at which I can again truly see him or her, and not only the offense. This is what is meant by “tender-heartedness”; it is a sort of visceral adjustment of oneself, a conversion from self-concern and self-enclosure, as if wrapped tightly around the wound, into receptivity to a goodness that may still be present in the offender after all. The tender-hearted response to someone who has offended us takes the form of openness, even a searching, for something valuable in her that has not been destroyed by the defect that caused the offense. And this is the very movement of love, which affirms goodness against every force of evil.

If forgiveness begins in tender-heartedness, it therefore is not any number of things that we might otherwise associate with it. To begin with, there can be no question of having to actually forget the offense in order to move beyond it. It is instead a matter of seeing past it or perhaps around it, or better, of seeing it in a richer, more

hopeful context—one that leads to thoughts like ‘yes, he wounded me, and that does say something unsettling about his character, but he is also other, better things.’ Nor are retribution or compensation strictly necessary. If repayment in kind helps us toward forgiveness, this is only because it appeases us in other respects—it improves physical health, eases financial concerns, restores certain kinds of dignity, and so forth—whereupon we can open our hearts more easily because, most simply, we have more energy, physical and mental, available to commit to that work. But these things still are not guarantors of forgiveness, and we may all know of instances in which payment in kind certainly was made in full, without any healing of the original wound.

All of this reminds us that forgiveness is not in fact an act, as we too often seem to assume, but rather a process that requires effort, and thus, once more, a virtue. Perhaps even more so than with love or mercy, we see that in its pure or perfect form it is almost certainly beyond the conditions of this life. We are never free of our own needs and interests, and so their claims are never far from our attempts to lay aside everything that has come between oneself and another person. And by their influence, the pursuit of a goodness that lies beyond an offense done to me is easily reduced, at least in some small part, to pursuit mainly of a goodness that comes down to my own comfort and peace of mind (rather than reaffirming the goodness of the other person and our relationship, I just look for whatever it takes to get on with life). These difficulties are so close to us that when Christian thinkers envision a forgiveness that would lay them all aside, they tend to invoke the language of grace—tend to use expressions like ‘it is given by God,’ ‘God came to her aid,’ and so forth—or else the same thinkers enjoin those who would truly forgive to seek agreement “in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2), which, once again, we may venture to say means ‘not within the limits of this world.’ It is also why the virtue of forgiveness, like the virtues of love and mercy, not only entails an entire way of life in community, but also presupposes and depends on the support of community throughout. Forgiveness cannot be reduced to a question only of what the offended victim, by her own strength and capacities, is able to offer to her offender, but is also a question of what the offended victim can offer, beginning in the conversion of her heart, with the help of those around her.

4. Conclusion: Ordinary and Extraordinary

Both my reading of the Letter to the Colossians, and my philosophical interpretation of the definition and function of some of the virtues that it preaches, suggest that at the heart of Christian life is a turning within the world toward moral and spiritual possibilities that would, if fulfilled, perfect the world and in that sense transcend its initial conditions. I have suggested that the very root of this turning is found in the heart, understood as a spiritual organ, the flesh of a life bound to God and to other human beings and yet also bound to the world of its own interests. The tradition has given us names for this turning, such as *miser cordia* and tenderness of heart. The sense of this turning is grounded in the eschatological vision of the Christian vision. It is grounded, in other words, in the conviction, long established in Christian doctrine, that a proper understanding of what Jesus means by the Second Coming includes hearing a call to strive for more than what we are capable of according to our natural powers alone. We have seen this in a simple clarification of what the Scriptures enjoin in love, mercy, and forgiveness: those who believe in Jesus Christ are bound beyond the limits of their natures. We have also seen a little more from the phenomenological attention we have given to them: in faith, the Christian is convinced that, indeed, those virtues that exceed nature are already within our reach. Remarkably, human nature is more than nature alone. Precisely here, where theology is able to invoke the concept of a 'grace' that is added to our natures, philosophy finds itself only at the threshold between what may be grasped as visible phenomena and certain indications of a dimension that can only be invisible. All of this makes up the philosopher's way to what is meant when it is said, in the everyday language we began with, that 'the bible asks more of us than the world could.' Yet the exercise does also give us some language that may help position Christian life with respect to the secular life and secular thinking that must be distinguished from it. Faith, hope, and love, and all the more vividly the mercy, and forgiveness in which they are enacted, do not fit neatly into the logic of the ordinary world. Nor, however, are they only the outline of an impossibility. They are, in an important sense, *extra-ordinary*. The world, after all, is the site of the ordinary. Anything that appears there can be viewed alongside anything else, or for that matter

distinguished from it. The believer occupies this site no less than does the non-believer, but experiences it differently. A world experienced as given from God is not wholly alien from a world experienced as if it were all that there is. We know this from everyday life, in which members of various faiths *and those who do not have faith* find relatively little difficulty understanding one another about a great deal that appears and occurs in the world. Among those who believe otherwise and those who do not believe, Christians are in the world in a distinctive way that may be deciphered from how they live. The Christian community is the assembly, the kinship, of those who follow that way of life. We have seen that their sense of community is visible in practices by which the flourishing of each member is inseparable from that of the others.

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