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The Paradox of the New Testament Concept of Unmerited Divine Grace and Conditional Forgiveness in Matthew's Gospel

by Cephas T. A. Tushima

Introduction

Since the Reformation, the doctrine of unmerited divine grace has been central in Protestant soteriology. Millard J. Erickson, in highlighting the importance of this concept in the divine–human relationship in general, describes how Karl Barth captures the Protestant stance on grace: “*Scripture teaches that what unites man with God is, from God’s side, his grace.*”¹ Specifically, with respect to salvation, after citing Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8–9, Erickson insists, “*Justification is something completely undeserved. It is not an achievement. It is an obtainment, not an attainment. Even faith is not some good work which God must reward with salvation. It is God’s gift. It is not the cause of our salvation, but the means by which we receive it.*”²

This manner of construing salvation, in the Reformed Tradition of *Sola Gracia*, does not seem to be as clear cut in the Gospels (especially Matthew) as it sometimes appears to be in the Pauline epistles. This study seeks to address the following questions: Is there an antithesis between grace and merit (works) in Matthew? Is this seeming paradox uniquely Matthean in the biblical context? How are we to deal with it?

The Paradox of Merit and Grace in Matthew

There is an incongruous co-existence of the themes of grace and merit in Matthew. Examples of grace passages include the parable of the Servants in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–16), and the Father’s prerogative to assign positions in heaven (Matt 20:21–23). A number of the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13 fit into this group as well. Examples of merit-based teachings include the Sermon on the Mount passages (Matt 6:12, 14–15; cf. 5:48; 7:1), and the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:15–35). Eduard Schweizer underscores the tension between these groups as he cautions with regard to Matthew 6:12, “*Any misunderstanding that God’s forgiveness can be earned by our actions is exploded by the parable of the workers paid the same for unequal work (20:1–16).*”³

The merit passages in Matthew are hotly debated. One important question

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 164.

² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 959. For a fuller discussion of grace, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1941), 427–431.

³ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Trans. David E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 155.

associated with them relates to whether their implications are temporal or eschatological in nature. The scholarly responses to the first passage (Matt 6:12, 14–15) are much more varied than the responses to the other passages.

1) When God refuses to forgive those who would not forgive others, he refers to the inhibition of their progress in sanctification and the divine denial of blessings to them.⁴ 2) The divine begrudging of forgiveness is limited to fettered fellowship and the lack of capacity on the part of the one failing to forgive to receive forgiveness from God.⁵ 3) God's withholding of forgiveness for the unforgiving is eschatological in nature, i.e., it has implications for ultimate destiny in that the people God refuses to forgive were not saved in the first instance.⁶ 4) John Nolland sees the passage in temporal, not eschatological, terms. He comments on Matt 6:12 thus, "*The aorist tense in the correlated clause ('as we have released') relates better with a day-to-day 'clearing of debts' with God than with the prospect of a once-for-all, final eschatological forgiveness (a present tense would suit that better).*"⁷

Prominent amongst the challenges these texts pose to commentators is the possible ascription of non-forgiveness to God. How can God not forgive? A careful reading of many commentators betrays a desire to avoid charging the all-loving God with the unseemly evil of failing to forgive.

A similar problem, perhaps a worse one, attends the passage in Matthew 18:15–35. Here is a parable set out to address the issue of an unforgiving attitude, namely, to show that one needs to forgive without limit. In Peter's question as to whether he should forgive up to the seventh time, he raised the bar beyond that which was conventional. Donald Senior cites Amos 2:4, 6 and Job 33:29 to show that the traditionally accepted limit for forbearing repeated injury in Peter's heritage was four times. Yet, in his response to Peter, Jesus points out that setting a limit itself misses the mark.⁸ The reader, therefore, experiences some cognitive dissonance, as he expects to see repeated forgiveness in the parable being used to demonstrate the Lord's teaching but instead finds that the master (who in the parable represents God) forgives only

⁴ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1–7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 397.

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew" in *The New American Commentary*, Vol.22 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992), 120-121.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 69–70.

⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 290–291. For more on eschatological forgiveness, see also Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 116-117.

⁸ Donald Senior, C.P., "Matthew 18:21–35," *Interpretation* 41:4 (1987): 403–407. Senior further observes with regards to Peter's question, "*Yet even posing the question about limits for forgiveness is to miss the mark ... Jesus' reply expands the limits beyond any horizon. It seems to reverse the pledge of blood vengeance 'seventy-seven fold' made by Lamech, descendant of Cain and inheritor of his rage (Gen. 4:24)'*" (404).

once but even withdraws the forgiveness due to his servant's failure to forgive. Bernard Scott correctly links this parable with the forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer when he notes that it is a narrative imitation of the forgiveness petition of the Lord's Prayer.⁹ Indeed, he keenly observes,

*The reader's expectations about the kingdom conflict with those of the story. The conflict between expectations and story blocks the normal transference of metaphor, that is, in this parable the transference is not on the basis of similarity but dissimilarity of juxtaposition. There is then a 'gap' between story and kingdom.*¹⁰

The efforts at drawing the connecting lines from the story to the kingdom have often been so focused on such minutiae as attempting to enumerate and explicate the repertoire of Matthew and his first readers, and historical critical issues, that insufficient attention is paid to the more substantive matter addressed in the text.¹¹ Other approaches barely scratch the surface of the issues involved. A case in point is R.T. France's analysis of the Matthew 18 parable. Commenting on verse 35, he writes, "*Jesus' application picks up specifically the last scene of the parable, but it is based on the parable as a whole. Those who will not forgive cannot expect to be forgiven.*"¹²

The parable addresses not just those who expect to be forgiven, but even much more so those who have been forgiven but fail to forgive others. At the end of the parable, Matthew quotes Jesus as saying "οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν" ("Even thus shall my heavenly Father do to you . . ." Matt 18:35, author's translation). That is to say, the heavenly Father will treat the one that does not forgive in the same way the master in the parable treated the unforgiving servant - by withdrawing the already bestowed forgiveness. This then creates tension in Christian (especially Reformed) soteriology, which teaches irrevocable redemption (once saved, saved forever - with no prospect of losing one's salvation). Suffice it to say that this tension in Matthew, namely, the uneasy relationship between grace and merit, is found in the other Gospel traditions as well. In Luke, for example, merit seems to be upheld in passages such as 6:31-38, which consists of a series of injunctions that make up the concluding part of the Luke's Sermon on the Plain, while grace is taught in 15:11-32, the Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Loving

⁹ Bernard Brandon Scott, "The King's Accounting: Matthew 18:23-34," *JBL* 104:3 (1985): 429-42. Martinus C. De Boer likewise recognizes the link between the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:12, 14-15) and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:35) and goes further to point out that the former adumbrates the latter in his "Ten Thousand Talents? Matthew's Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35)," *CBQ* 50 (1988): 221.

¹⁰ Scott, "The King's Accounting", 441.

¹¹ Cf. De Boer, "Ten Thousand Talents?"

¹² R.T. France, *Matthew* (TNTC, Leicester: IVP, 1985), 278.

Father and in 18:10–14, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in the Temple.

Grace Versus Merit in the New Testament

The common reactions to the apparent tensions in Scripture, like the one at hand, usually either pit one section of the canon against another and somehow show one to be superior to the other or adopt a harmonistic approach. For example, Thomas Brodie, in trying to unravel the origins of the New Testament, has attempted to demonstrate Matthean literary dependence on Paul's teaching in Romans. He writes at the beginning of chapter 20:

*In the entire New Testament, there are only two books which begin by speaking of Jesus as a descendant of David: Romans and Matthew The purpose of this chapter is to indicate that this Davidic detail is the tip of an iceberg: Romans is one of Matthew's sources. Matthew has taken the difficult text of Romans and in varying ways has rendered it into a form that is vivid, positive and practical.*¹³

Michael Goulder likewise argues for some dependence of Matthew on Pauline teaching.¹⁴

Contrary to the last two works, in his study of the intertextual connection between Matthew and Romans, David Sim comes to the conclusion that Matthew did not only contradict Paul, but was actively anti-Pauline. Specifically, he writes, "As I indicated at the beginning of this study, there is a good deal of evidence in the Gospel that Matthew was more than simply non-Pauline; he was in fact anti-Pauline."¹⁵ His outlined approach to the issue is not to look simply for verbal and thematic echoes of Paul in Matthew on the assumption of Matthean deference to Pauline authoritative doctrinal priority, but to listen for Matthean responses to or corrections of Paul. What Sim fails to tell the reader is that his suggested approach is based on the *assumption* of conflict between Matthew and Paul, for there is no *a priori* demonstration of such opposition between the evangelist and the apostle in Sim's work. At this point, it becomes important to inquire whether this seeming paradox is uniquely Matthean.

Towards a Biblical Understanding of the Grace–Merit Paradox

In discussing the Bible, we must always keep in perspective its Hebrew (and later, Jewish) roots. In his treatment of these mercy and judgment passages in Matthew, Senior draws his readers' attention to Matthew's Jewish

¹³ Thomas L. Brodie, *The Birthing of the New Testament: The Intertextual Development of the New Testament Writings* (New Testament Monographs 1: Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004), 206.

¹⁴ Michael Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), 156-170.

¹⁵ David C. Sim, "Matthew and the Pauline Corpus: A Preliminary Intertextual Study," *JSNT* 31.4 (2009): 410.

heritage. He writes,

*Matthew insists, therefore, on responsible action. Christian life is not a matter of mere aspiration or good intentions; faith must be translated into just and compassionate acts. This emphasis on responsibility may reflect Matthew's strong Jewish heritage in which obedience to the Torah was always the touchstone of authentic faith. His concern with judgment is the corollary of the concern for responsible action.*¹⁶

Senior, in my view, has got it right in this quote. The New Testament authors were Jews of the Second Temple period, and, without prejudice to their inspiration, were also products of their historical moment. As such they held similar presuppositions and employed similar exegetical approaches as their Second Temple contemporaries. Thus, they were no armchair doctrinaires, but men who brought into sharp focus the ethical implications of their pedagogy for daily life. In other words, germane to Second Temple theology was striving to hold in tension both divine grace and human responsibility. This pattern is evident in other Second Temple literature as well (cf. Sir 28:1–5; 51:29–30; *m. Yoma* 8.6).

1. Justification in Tension in Paul and James

Within the New Testament, the recognition of this pattern in the Epistle of James has long caused some to construe it as being anti-Pauline.¹⁷ Others have sought to show that James does not contradict Paul because they use *δικαιω* (“justify”) in two different senses.¹⁸ Maxwell argues persuasively that *δικαιω* in Paul has a forensic sense (i.e., “imputed righteousness”), while in James it is used in demonstrative reference (i.e., “to show to be righteous”). He explains further, “*δικαιω carries its forensic meaning when the contrast is between works and faith, while it carries its demonstrative meaning when the contrast is between works and words.*”¹⁹ Maxwell illustrates these two uses of *δικαιω* in a single Apostolic Father, Clement of Rome. Clement’s use of *δικαιω* in the illustrative manner is found in 1 Clement 30:3, while his use of it in the forensic sense is found in 1 Clement 38:2.²⁰ That these two streams of thought could flow seamlessly within the writing of one author, who was most likely influenced by both Paul and James (i.e., informed by the biblical mindset) at points where he was placing differing accents, demonstrates how feasible it is for two different authors with these two divergent concerns to

¹⁶ Senior, “Matthew 18:21–35,” 407.

¹⁷ In this view, Sim observes, “The epistle of James, with its emphasis on justification by works as well as by faith, has long been considered a corrective on Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone” (“Matthew and the Pauline Corpus,” 411).

¹⁸ David R. Maxwell, “Justified by Works, not by Faith alone: Reconciling Paul and James”, *Concordia Journal* 33:4 (October 2007): 375.

¹⁹ Maxwell, “Justified by Works,” 376.

²⁰ Maxwell, “Justified by Works,” 378.

employ differing emphases. Seen in this way, then, James, like Matthew, should not be viewed as gainsaying or even correcting Paul, but as concerned, in a typical Second Temple fashion, with the ethical outworking of one's faith commitments. Ebbie Smith similarly recognizes that James' teaching stresses the need for genuine faith to flow into responsible action. On this, he comments, "*For James, faith and works are simply inseparable. Genuine faith is no empty claim (2:14-17), not mere acceptance of a creed or body of teaching (2:18-20), but that which produces obedient life (2:21-26).*"²¹ Put differently, then, the seeming contradiction between James and Paul (on the issue of works and grace) is merely a difference of emphasis that can be confusing due to the use of the same terms with different denotations.

2. Justification in Tension in Pauline Thinking

This discussion, then, leads us to this same seeming contradiction that is also present in Paul. Paul is known to be the apostle of justification by faith alone (apart from works) per excellence. Yet, his writings are not without a stringent requirement of works. Rather than construe these differing emphases in Paul in the same dialectic of grace and works, contemporary scholarship has chosen to talk about them using the grammatical category of the "indicative and imperative." Herman Ridderbos furnishes a succinct definition of this dialectic thus,

*"What is meant is that the new life in its moral manifestation is at one time proclaimed and posited as the fruit of the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit—the indicative; elsewhere, however, it is put with no less force as a categorical demand—the imperative."*²²

Ridderbos is aware of the apparent tension in Pauline thought in this regard. In reference to the frequency of occurrence of the indicative and the imperative in Pauline discourse, he observes, "[T]he one as well as the other occurs with such force and consistency that some have indeed spoken of a 'dialectical paradox' and of an 'antinomy.'"²³

Paul Wernle, well ahead of his time, had correctly perceived this structure

²¹ Ebbie Smith, "Unraveling the Untangled: Perspectives on the Lingering Debate Concerning Grace and Works in James and Paul," *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 52. Indeed, in terms very similar to those of Maxwell, Smith explains the apparent divergences between Paul and James thus, "*Paul begins with the Christian life at its commencement and declares salvation comes by faith alone with no reliance on works of the law (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16). James, on the other hand, begins from the standpoint of one professing the faith who needs to be reminded that genuine faith must issue in good works (James 2:14-26). James does not declare faith unnecessary but only teaches that the alternative of faith without works is unthinkable*" (p. 53).

²² Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (tr. John Richard DeWitt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 253.

²³ Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 253. Here with reference to E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (Trans. John Marsh. New York: Macmillan 1955), 181.

of Pauline ethics to be a contradiction. Within this tensive complexity,²⁴ Wernle understood the indicative in terms of the Holy Spirit as the dynamic that translates the believer to a higher world, and the imperative in terms of the Holy Spirit as the potentiality resident in the believer empowering him for transformation. This is what Wernle describes as the abrupt merging of “*an ethic of miracle and an ethic of will.*”²⁵ The ethic of sovereign miracle is found in the doctrinal portions of Paul’s epistles, where he dwells on matters of the believers’ ἐν Χριστῷ (“in Christ”) relationship. The ethic of the human will is found in the ethical portions of the epistles where right living flows from the redemptive miracle of the “in Christ” relationship.

While this structure of Pauline ethics is found in all his epistles (especially those written to churches), Russell Pregeant demonstrates how it is even more accentuated in the book of Romans.²⁶ Taking his case study from Romans 2, Pregeant shows that verses 6, 13 stand on the logic of recompense, which is in an apparent antithesis with the more commonly appreciated Pauline logic of grace (cf. Rom 3:21–28). After a careful discussion of these passages, Pregeant concludes,

*Thus when Paul speaks of recompense he shows that his justification theory cannot be abstracted from the background within which it arises: to forfeit the moral nature of God or human responsibility for ethical actions would be to undercut the whole point of grace itself.*²⁷

Passages suffused with warnings of judgment based on earthly life patterns (the very kind that if coming from the pen of another biblical author would have been viewed by Christian theologians as being Law or work-oriented) are strewn across the terrain of the Pauline corpus (cf. Rom 8:12–17; 1 Cor 3:8–15; 4:3–5; 6:9; 9:24–27; 2 Cor 5:10; Gal 6:7, 8).

All this goes to demonstrate that the paradoxical juxtaposition of grace and merit within the same canonical space is not uniquely Matthean; it is present throughout the New Testament (including the Pauline corpus). Indeed, it can be said to be a biblical pattern. The matter of Law–Gospel antithesis is derived from the question of the nature of the relationship between the Old and the New Covenants: whether there is continuity or discontinuity, i.e., whether there is works in the former and grace in the latter. Our foregoing discussion evinces that even within the New Testament, the matter cannot be

²⁴ A term adapted from Walter Brueggemann, *David’s Truth in Israel’s Imagination and Memory*. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), xv.

²⁵ Paul Wernle, *Der Christ und die Sünde bei Paulus* (Freiburg i. B. und Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsbuchhandlung von J. C. B. Mohr, 1897), 89; as quoted in William D. Dennison, “Indicative and Imperative: The Basic Structure of Pauline Ethics,” *CTJ* 14:1 (1979): 55–78 [57].

²⁶ Russell Pregeant, “Grace and Recompense: Reflections on a Pauline Paradox,” *JAAR* 47:1 (March 1979): 73–96.

²⁷ Pregeant, “Grace and Recompense,” 77.

reduced to an “either/or” approach but has to be taken in a “both/and” way. The same can be said to be true of the Old Testament as well. A few examples will serve to illustrate the point.

3. Grace and Works in Tension in the Old Testament

Early in Genesis we are confronted with the paradox of grace and works. At the declaration of the coming deluge, a redemptive hint is also dropped - that Noah had obtained grace with God (Gen 6:8). Yet, in the very next verse, we are told clearly that Noah was a righteous man in his generation; he was blameless; and that he walked with God (Gen 6:9). But in the MT, Genesis 6:8 is the end of one section, and the phrase *אלה תולדה* (“These are the generations of”) in Genesis 6:9 marks the beginning of a new section. So, was it that divine favor gave Noah enabling grace to walk with God, or is his election due to divine foreknowledge, or is he selected in view of his uprightness? It is hard to say from the text. The goal here is not to exegete this passage but to point out that the incongruous co-existence of grace and work is germane to the entire biblical text.

Abraham’s call by God and his walk with God is another example. There is nothing in his call narrative (Gen 12:1–3) that would suggest the basis of God’s dealings with him, hence the intense interpretative activity of Second Temple exegetes in these sections of the Abraham narrative as is seen in the re-told Bible.²⁸ Grace seems to be the only reasonable grounds for it. Yet subsequently, YHWH laid demands on Abraham. YHWH’s numerous demands on Abraham are summed up in the words *התהלך לפני והיה תמים* (“walk before me and be blameless,” Gen 17:1). It is only by this faithful walk that Abraham could receive the full benefits of his covenant relationship with YHWH (Gen 17:2).

This pattern can be extended to other parts of the Old Testament as well. The election of the Davidic house (2 Sam 7:5-16) did not remove the requirement of an ethical walk with YHWH (cf. 1 Kgs 2:1-4). The same interweaving of grace and merit runs like a thread through the prophets. In Isaiah (1:2–4), YHWH presents his act of grace as he says, *בנים גדלתי ורוממתי* (“children have I raised and brought up,” 1:2). Rearing children is not a choice that the children make, but they do make the choice between submission and obedience or rebellion and disobedience (1:3–4). Warnings of judgment according to deeds dominate the rest of the chapter (cf. Isa 1:16–20), and, indeed, the rest of the book as well.

Perspectives on the Paradox

Our study thus far has shown that there is a palpable tensive relationship of grace and merit in Matthew. We have also seen that this phenomenon is not

²⁸ Cf. *Jub* 11–12; *Ps-J Targum* Gen 11:28.

uniquely Matthean, but is germane to the Second Temple milieu of Matthew and other New Testament authors (and the OT cloth from which it was cut). We can make four suggestions for living with the complexity.

1. Paradox is inescapable in the biblical frame or mindset. This is reflected in such pivotal Christian theological concepts as Trinitarianism (the question of the one-and-the-many), the incarnation (Christ as the God-Man), divine sovereignty and human freewill, election and faith in Christ, being seated hidden in Christ in the heavenlies but living on earth, being in the world but not of the world, the already-but-not-yet *eschaton*, the two-covenants-one-Scripture, and such like. None of these issues can be perfectly resolved or satisfactorily explained beyond all doubt.²⁹ We simply have to live with them, as faith communities have done through millennia. The search for perfect non-contradictory theological systems in the biblical text is a modernist enlightenment development that has no roots in biblical faith.³⁰

2. The foregoing notwithstanding, it has to be kept in mind that biblical faith operates in the mode of action informed by knowledge. It is not just affirmations of a set of doctrines; neither is it purely about doing things (important as both of these are). It is an outflow of life - it is about being. In this sense it includes cognition (orthodoxy) and practice (orthopraxy), both of which stream from the transformative encounter with the living Saviour. Encountering the Son of God brings liberating knowledge of the truth; and the truth frees us to love and serve God and neighbor (John 8:32; 15:3; 17:17; Rom 6:14, 18–22; 8:1–6; Gal 5:6). As pointed out above, the New Testament authors were products of Second Temple Judaism, in which Torah obedience was central to life. Thus, for all of them (Paul included), obedience to the ethical demands of the Torah (and all of YHWH's revealed truth) was non-negotiable. While they affirmed salvation by grace through faith, nevertheless, they neither discounted obedience to revealed truth nor sacrificed moral integrity on the altar of faith.

3. Not infrequently, grace and judgment are juxtaposed in biblical literature.

²⁹ This is not to say that plausible attempts cannot be made to address all reasonable doubts.

³⁰ J. Leslie Houlden points out that redaction critics (operating with modernist presuppositions) assume that the biblical authors had a high capacity for achieving intellectual consistency and lived through life situations that made it possible for them to sustain such consistency. He however calls such assumptions reckless and suggests they should be attended with greater skepticism than is usually the case. In general, Houlden states, "*It is possible, indeed more common than not, for a person to hold views that are formally inconsistent or at least tend in different directions, and to be either ignorant of the fact or unconcerned about it, or else incapable, because of practical pressures, of remedying it. Nevertheless, he functions as a unity: he is, in that sense, all of a piece.*" See "The Puzzle of Matthew and the Law," in Stanley E. Porter, Paul Joyce, and David E. Orton (eds.), *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994, 117.

Grace unveils the ethic of miracle which is what God does, while the judgment texts urge the ethic of the will, pointing believers towards right choices. The judgment texts, in other words, serve didactic purposes and furnish a basis for ethical motivation, and should be understood in this way.

4. Paradox is God's default way of acting. True to the nature of the divine-human interactions, all of the dialogue partners involved in the communication event have divinely sanctioned roles to play. Often the one side of the paradox relates to God's gracious provision, while the other has provisions for human appropriation of the divine bestowal. In salvation, for instance, we are saved by the sovereign gracious redemptive act in the Christ-event, but faith is the hand that receives this offered grace (Eph 2:8; 2 Thess 2:13). Similarly, sanctification is the gracious work of the divine Spirit in the believer's life, but human obedience is the hand that extends to appropriate it (Rom 6:11–13, 19; Phil 2:12–16; 1 Thess 4:3–7).

Conclusion

In addressing the apparent paradox of unmerited redemption and conditional forgiveness, we agree that the paradox does exist in Matthew. We have also seen that it not a uniquely Matthean perspective, but one found throughout the Bible. Our conclusion is not to resolve it but to live with it as communities of faith have historically done. The hymn writer says, "God works in a mysterious way." Part of that mystery is that God chooses to be paradoxical in his dealings with his people, as we have seen in many other respects. We are not called to know God exhaustively, and we never will. Similarly, it is an exercise in futility to attempt to resolve his divine paradoxes; we need to learn to live with them. Thus, even with regard to forgiveness, God forgives us unconditionally, but the way to appropriate and make it ours is by forgiving others unconditionally as well, (Eph 4:32; 1 Pet 2:21; 3:8–9). This is in perfect agreement with the Matthean golden rule: Do to others what you would have them do to you (Matt 7:12; cf. Luke 6:31).

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