

**Citation for published version:**

John Lippitt, 'Forgiveness', in Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart, eds., *Kierkegaard's Concepts*, Volume 15, Tome III: Envy to Incognito (London and New York: Routledge, 2014)

**Link to book in publisher's website:**

<https://www.routledge.com/Volume-15-Tome-III-Kierkegaards-Concepts-Envy-to-Incognito/Emmanuel-McDonald/p/book/9781472434326>

**Document Version:**

This is the Accepted Manuscript version.

The version in the University of Hertfordshire Research Archive may differ from the final published version.

**Copyright and Reuse:**

Copyright © 2014 Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, Jon Stewart and the contributors.

Content in the UH Research Archive is made available for personal research, educational, and non-commercial purposes only. Unless otherwise stated, all content is protected by copyright, and in the absence of an open license, permissions for further re-use should be sought from the publisher, the author, or other copyright holder.

**Enquiries**

If you believe this document infringes copyright, please contact the Research & Scholarly Communications Team at [rsc@herts.ac.uk](mailto:rsc@herts.ac.uk)

Forthcoming in Steven Emmanuel, William McDonald and Jon Stewart (eds), *Kierkegaard*

*Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, Volume 15: Kierkegaard's Concepts*

(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014). Please cite only the published version.

## FORGIVENESS

John Lippitt

Forgiveness [*Tilgivelse, Forladelse*—nouns; *tilgive, forlade*—verbs]

*Tilgivelse* and *Forladelse* are derivatives of the verbs *tilgive* and *forlade*. The Danish verb *tilgive* corresponds to the English *forgive* and German *vergeben*.<sup>1</sup> Middle Danish also had the form *forgive*, which in modern Danish, however, is not used in the same sense as *tilgive*.<sup>2</sup> The verb *forlade* can be used as a synonym to *tilgive*.<sup>3</sup> It corresponds to the German *verlassen* (“*einem etwas verlassen*”) and the obsolete English verb *forlet* (Middle English *forleten*). *Forladelse* has a far more liturgical resonance than *Tilgivelse*, which has a much broader usage. Kierkegaard uses *Tilgivelse* approximately twice as often as *Forladelse*.<sup>4</sup>

Although there are brief mentions in *Stages on Life's Way* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the most substantial discussions of forgiveness occur in *Works of Love*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Christian Discourses*, the two discourses on “The Woman Who Was a Sinner” (in *Without Authority*) and *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*. There are also significant references in other discourses: *Three Discourses on*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, vols. 1-28, published by the Society for Danish Language and Literature, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1918-56, vol. 23, columns 1282-3, definition 3.

<sup>2</sup> The principal meaning of *forgive* in modern Danish is “to poison,” *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, vol. 5, columns 488-9. Chr. Molbech, when treating the Danish *forgive* in his lexicon, does not mention the meaning *tilgive*, see *Dansk Ordbog*, vols. 1-2, Copenhagen: Den Gyldendalske Boghandlings Forlag 1833, vol. 1, p. 274.

<sup>3</sup> *Ordbog over det danske Sprog*, vol. 5, columns 600-1, definition 5.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Jon Stewart and Niels Jørgen Cappelørn for insights into the etymology of these terms.

*Imagined Occasions*, the *Upbuilding Discourses* of 1843 and 1844 and *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, as well as in a number of journal entries.

The primary lens through which Kierkegaard views forgiveness is the forgiveness of sins [*Syndernes Forladelse*]. His discussion makes several inter-connected claims:

1) It is apparently impossible - and yet true - that our sins can be forgiven. This consciousness of the forgiveness of our sins (through which the human “becomes spirit”<sup>5</sup>) is that which provides the tortured soul with rest.

2) Only God (or Christ) can forgive sins, and so this forgiveness is a “chasmal qualitative abyss”<sup>6</sup> between God and humanity.

3) Despair of the forgiveness of sins is itself a sin (offense), but this can be transcended in faith.

4) Consciousness of the forgiveness of sins turns a heavy burden into a light one. Crucial to understanding this is the relation between forgiving and forgetting; what it means to “forget in forgiveness”; and how this differs from straightforward forgetting.

These discussions of the forgiveness of sins have important implications for both 5) inter-personal forgiveness and 6) self-forgiveness.

1) Kierkegaard remarks that it is extraordinary that our sins can be forgiven, and yet it is not marvelled over.<sup>7</sup> While the invitation of the Gospel contains a requirement, it also

---

<sup>5</sup>SKS 27, 487-8, Papir 409.1 / JP 1, 67.

<sup>6</sup>SKS 11, 233 / SUD, 122.

promises the soul rest.<sup>8</sup> The consciousness of sin is a great burden from which only God (in the person of Christ) can relieve us.<sup>9</sup> The rest the soul seeks is found precisely in the consciousness and acceptance of the fact that one's sins have been forgiven ("the one and only thought in which there is rest for a penitent".<sup>10</sup>) That finding forgiveness is what is "unconditionally important"<sup>11</sup> is the first key thing we can learn from "the woman who was a sinner" in Luke 7:37ff. Moreover, God grants not only the forgiveness itself, but the conditions that enable the person of faith to believe in it.<sup>12</sup> In an important 1848 journal entry, Kierkegaard describes the belief in the forgiveness of sins as "the decisive crisis whereby a human being becomes spirit; he who does not believe this is not spirit".<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the consciousness of one's sin is not about "particulars" – *this particular* sin - but about recognising one's whole self as sinful and corrupting. Through belief in the forgiveness of this sinful self, one can become a new person.<sup>14</sup> Kierkegaard here describes the belief that sin is about "particulars" as "childish", echoing similar remarks by Frater Taciturnus in *Stages* about this as a merely "immediate" view of the forgiveness of sins.<sup>15</sup> The Frater goes on to say that the difficulty with the forgiveness of sins – an issue "beyond both my understanding and my capacities"<sup>16</sup> – is becoming *transparent* to oneself in such a way as to get beyond immediacy.<sup>17</sup> (Otherwise, one's view of the forgiveness of sin gets no further than the point of view of a humorist such as Frater Taciturnus himself: "the unity of the comic and the tragic".<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard's humorists, liminally religious figures, seem to struggle with the idea

---

<sup>7</sup>SKS 10, 118 / CD, 107; cf. *Pap.* VI B 163 / JP 2, 1341.

<sup>8</sup>SKS 10, 281 / CD, 265.

<sup>9</sup>SKS 10, 282 / CD, 266.

<sup>10</sup>SKS 10, 281 / CD, 265; cf. SKS 11, 280 / WA, 144.

<sup>11</sup>SKS 12, 264 / WA, 150.

<sup>12</sup>SKS 9, 372-3 / WL, 379-80.

<sup>13</sup>SKS 27, 487-8, Papir 409.1 / JP 1, 67.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>SKS 6, 443 / SLW, 481.

<sup>16</sup>SKS 6, 446 / SLW, 484.

<sup>17</sup>SKS 6, 444 / SLW, 483.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

of the forgiveness of sins: Johannes Climacus describes it as “the paradoxical satisfaction by virtue of the absurd”.<sup>19)</sup>

2) Crucial to Kierkegaard’s use of the concept of forgiveness of sins is that only God/Christ *qua* God<sup>20</sup> can forgive sin. Both sin itself and the ability to forgive sin is a “chasmal qualitative abyss”<sup>21</sup> between God and humanity. This should be borne in mind, as discussed below, when talking of inter-personal forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

3) In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus claims that one can sin precisely by despairing that one’s sins cannot be forgiven.<sup>22</sup> The refusal to accept such forgiveness is described thus: “When the sinner despairs of the forgiveness of sins, it is almost as if he walked right up to God and said, ‘No, there is no forgiveness of sins, it is impossible’”.<sup>23</sup> From the perspective of a purely “human understanding”, such a reaction makes perfect sense: only “spiritlessness” would fail to be offended by the idea that sins can be forgiven.<sup>24</sup> And yet Anti-Climacus stresses the importance of accepting that God *can* forgive one’s sin: this “offensive” claim “*shall* be believed”.<sup>25</sup> In other words, beyond this offense lies the possibility of faith.<sup>26</sup> To refuse, in offense, to accept it is to intensify one’s sin.<sup>27</sup> In this context, Anti-Climacus claims that the forgiveness of sins is the crucial difference between Christianity and paganism.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>SKS 7, 489n / CUP1, 538n.

<sup>20</sup>On occasion Kierkegaard hesitates to say that Christ forgives sins: see SKS 24, 80-1, NB21: 129 / JP 2, 1223.

<sup>21</sup>SKS 11, 233 / SUD, 122.

<sup>22</sup>SKS 11, 225-36 / SUD, 113-24.

<sup>23</sup>SKS 11, 226 / SUD, 114.

<sup>24</sup>SKS 11, 227-8 / SUD, 116.

<sup>25</sup>SKS 11, 228 / SUD, 116.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. SKS 10, 313 / CD, 291.

<sup>27</sup>SKS 11, 236 / SUD, 124. Cf. SKS 21, 205, NB9: 12 / KJN 5, 213. A perhaps more subtle version of this problem is that one can sorrow over one’s sins in such a way that one creates a new sin, such as impatience. See SKS 21, 103, NB7: 56 / KJN5, 107.

<sup>28</sup>SKS 11, 228 / SUD, 117.

4) So does the consciousness of the forgiveness of sins, and the acceptance of that forgiveness, remove our burden? No, not entirely. In “The Gospel of Sufferings” part of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, Kierkegaard describes how Christ lays it upon his followers “to carry human burdens lightly”<sup>29</sup> and yet adds a new, albeit light, burden. The consciousness of sin is the heaviest burden, while that light burden is the consciousness of forgiveness. The latter is a burden precisely because of our proclivity to take offense:<sup>30</sup> because the forgiveness of sins cannot be *earned*, it reminds us of our absolute dependence upon God. Here Kierkegaard contrasts the person of faith with a “light-minded” person, who equates being forgiven with having one’s transgressions *forgotten*.<sup>31</sup> This introduces an important aspect to Kierkegaard’s analysis of forgiveness, namely its complex relation to forgetting. Faith differs from light-mindedness in its view that although everything is forgotten, we must *remember that it is forgiven*, so that strictly speaking, “It is not forgotten but is forgotten in forgiveness”:<sup>32</sup>

“Forgiveness through Christ is the gentle disciplinarian who does not have the heart to remind us of what has been forgotten but still reminds us of it to the extent of saying: Just remember that it is forgiven”.<sup>33</sup>

Faith is thus a crucial middle ground between light-mindedness (which forgets, or assumes that the slate has been wiped clean) and heavy-mindedness (which wants to dwell on one’s guilt).

The relationship between forgiving and forgetting is an important aspect of Kierkegaard’s analysis, in *Works of Love*, of forgiveness as the most notable way in which love “hides a multitude of sins”. Initially he seems to say that forgiveness *wipes out* the

---

<sup>29</sup>SKS 8, 345 / UD, 246.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>SKS 8, 346 / UD, 247.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>SKS 8, 346 / UD, 247.

relevant sin,<sup>34</sup> so that the person who “loves by forgiveness *believes away* what is seen”.<sup>35</sup> But he later returns to the association between forgiving and forgetting, drawing on the Old Testament image of sin as being hidden behind God’s back.<sup>36</sup> The loving person who forgives does so by *forgetting, blotting out* the sin. And in turning towards the person he forgives, he “cannot see what is lying behind his back”.<sup>37</sup> The overall impression here is that the loving person *wilfully refuses* to see the sin. (Similarly, Kierkegaard later compares Christ hiding or covering our sins to a mother hen hiding her chicks from danger under her wings.<sup>38</sup>) The possible objection that “hidden” or “forgotten” sins are still *there* - and so are not really taken away – can perhaps be addressed by endorsing the Lutheran idea that the Christian is *simul justus et peccator*: “*at the same time* justified and a sinner”.<sup>39</sup> Divine forgiveness takes away sin in the sense that God totally forgives sin. But this does *not* mean that the slate is entirely “wiped clean”, since the consequences of sin remain. An 1846 journal entry, focusing on guilt, sheds light on this position:

“Forgiveness of sins cannot be such that God by a single stroke, as it were, erases all guilt [*Skylt*], abrogates all its consequences. Such a craving is only a worldly desire which does not really know what guilt is. It is only the guilt which is *forgiven*; more than this the forgiveness of sins is not. It does not mean to become another person in more fortunate circumstances, but it does mean to become another person in the reassuring consciousness that the guilt is forgiven *even if the consequences of guilt remain*”.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup>SKS 9, 292 / WL, 294.

<sup>35</sup>SKS 9, 292 / WL, 295, Kierkegaard’s emphases.

<sup>36</sup>SKS 9, 293 / WL, 295; cf. Isaiah 38:17.

<sup>37</sup>SKS 9, 293 / WL, 296.

<sup>38</sup>SKS 12, 299-300 / WA, 185-6.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Andrew J. Burgess, ‘Kierkegaard’s concept of redoubling and Luther’s *Simul Justus*’, in *International Kierkegaard Commentary. Works of Love*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1999.

<sup>40</sup>SKS 27, 355 / JP 2, 1205, my emphasis.

As we shall see, this idea – that even the total forgiveness of my sins by God does not wipe out the consequences – has an important implication for how we are to think about self-forgiveness. We turn now to the question of what implications Kierkegaard’s account of the forgiveness of our sins has for our forgiveness of others and of ourselves.

5) The most basic answer to the first issue is that Kierkegaard endorses the New Testament idea that our having been forgiven by God means that we must forgive others. A “like for like” operates here, in which “the forgiveness you give is the forgiveness you receive ... God forgives you neither more nor less nor otherwise than **as** you forgive those who have sinned against you”.<sup>41</sup> Having double standards on this - failing to see that accepting myself as forgiven means that I should forgive others - is an example of “double-mindedness”.<sup>42</sup>

This “like for like” is an important aspect of the 1851 discourse on Luke 7:47, “One who is forgiven little loves little”. Here Kierkegaard reasons that since love forgives everything – but you are forgiven *as* you yourself forgive – then if you are “forgiven little”, then it must be because you love only little.<sup>43</sup> Here we have a wound that is “self-inflicted”.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, Kierkegaard emphasises that the many sins of “the woman who was a sinner” were forgiven “because she loved much”.<sup>45</sup>

The “how” of inter-personal forgiveness is very important to Kierkegaard.<sup>46</sup> He notes that the capacity to forgive is a weapon that can be wielded in pride or conceit.<sup>47</sup> And

---

<sup>41</sup>SKS 9, 37 / WL, 380. Cf. Matthew 6: 14-15; 18: 21-35.

<sup>42</sup>SKS 8, 178 / UD, 70-1.

<sup>43</sup>SKS 12, 287-8 / WA, 172.

<sup>44</sup>SKS 12, 289 / WA, 173.

<sup>45</sup>Luke 7:47; SKS 11, 273ff. / WA, 137ff.

<sup>46</sup>SKS 8, 344 / UD, 245; Pap. VIII 2 B 50:6 / WL, Supplement, 448-9.

yet, handled properly, it is a wonderfully powerful gift one can bestow, more valuable to those who need it than all the riches of Croesus.<sup>48</sup> But the danger of potential misuse is why forgiveness must be offered in love: “only love has sufficient dexterity to take away the sin by means of forgiveness”, such that “what is seen is, by being forgiven, not seen”.<sup>49</sup> Overall, Kierkegaard’s view of inter-personal forgiveness seems to be that it is more of a gift one bestows than a case of “wiping the slate clean” in recognition that the other has repaid his debts. However, such gift-giving operates against the background of a recognition that we have done (and could have done) nothing to *earn* the divine forgiveness we have received. This is another key lesson we can learn from “the woman who was a sinner”.<sup>50</sup> The gift of forgiveness to others is thus given in gratitude to God. This comes out in Kierkegaard’s discussion of the role of the “conciliatory spirit” in love. There he argues that such a spirit, which always aims at reconciliation, needs to forgive even – indeed, especially - when it has never occurred to the wrongdoer to seek forgiveness, but it must be done with a certain lightness of touch such that the potential threat of perceived power-games never arises.<sup>51</sup>

6) Finally, what does our sins having been forgiven imply about *self*-forgiveness? In some places, Kierkegaard makes a harsh distinction between the forgiveness we should offer others and that which we should offer ourselves: “when it is a matter of your own accounting, then you certainly would do wrong to forgive yourself the least little thing, because one’s own righteousness is even worse than one’s own blackest private guilt”.<sup>52</sup> Kierkegaard remains acutely aware of the dangers of letting ourselves off the hook too easily, and importantly recognises that self-forgiveness can and should be of a form that leaves room for

---

<sup>47</sup>SKS 5, 395-6 / TDIO, 14-15; cf. SKS 9, 292-3 / WL, 295.

<sup>48</sup>SKS 5, 394 / TDIO, 13.

<sup>49</sup>SKS 9, 293 / WL, 295.

<sup>50</sup>SKS 12, 268-71 / WA, 155-8.

<sup>51</sup>SKS 9, 331-2 / WL, 336; SKS 9, 337-8 / WL, 342-4.

<sup>52</sup>SKS 5, 394 / TDIO, 12.

continued self-reproach, provided it is not utterly debilitating or crippling.<sup>53</sup> But his overall position seems to be the less harsh view that precisely *because* we have been forgiven, we should *accept* this forgiveness (difficult though many of us will find this).<sup>54</sup> Consider the following 1847 journal entry:

“A man rests in the forgiveness of sins when the thought of God does not remind him of the sin but that it is forgiven, when the past is not a memory of how much he trespassed but of how much he has been forgiven”.<sup>55</sup>

It might be objected that this is not really *self*-forgiveness, but simply the acceptance of God’s forgiveness of us (as discussed in section 4). And strictly speaking, we might think that self-forgiveness is impossible, since as we have seen, for Kierkegaard only God can forgive sins. And yet it is important to note that Kierkegaard *does* speak of self-forgiveness. For example, *The Sickness Unto Death* gives very short shrift to those who would say “I will never forgive myself”. Far from this showing the speaker’s “deep nature”, Anti-Climacus claims that “if God would forgive him this, well, he certainly could have the goodness to forgive himself. No, his despair over the sin is a far cry from being a qualification of the good, is a more intensive qualification of sin, the intensity of which is absorption in sin”.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the refusal to forgive oneself is a manifestation of the offense discussed in section 3 above. The assertion that “I will never forgive myself” is “exactly the opposite of the brokenhearted contrition that prays to God to forgive”.<sup>57</sup> And in an 1850 journal entry, discussing a Catholic convert to Lutheranism who became convinced that he had committed

---

<sup>53</sup>For an autobiographical recognition of this, see *SKS* 20, 359-60, NB4: 155/ *KJN* 4, 359-60. Kierkegaard also claims that taking one’s sin lightly is a new sin: *SKS* 21, 317, NB10: 116 / *KJN* 5, 328. For a more detailed discussion, see John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Self-Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, chapter 8.

<sup>54</sup>On the difficulty of such acceptance, see for example *SKS* 12, 286; 290-1; 298-9 / *WA* 170; 172-3; 184.

<sup>55</sup>*SKS* 20, 187, NB2:116 / *KJN* 4, 185.

<sup>56</sup>*SKS* 11, 223 / *SUD*, 111, my emphasis.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*

the “unforgivable” sin against the Holy Spirit and was therefore beyond the reach of divine mercy, Kierkegaard connects this with sinful pride, observing: “Perhaps the sin against the Holy Spirit was rather the pride with which he *would not forgive himself*. There is also a severity in condemning oneself and not wanting to hear about grace which is nothing but sin”.<sup>58</sup> There is yet another important lesson to be learned here from “the woman who was a sinner”. In a recognition that there is such a thing as proper self-love (echoing discussions in *Works of Love* and elsewhere), Kierkegaard acknowledges in the first of his 1849 discussions of this woman that there was something self-loving in her love, since “in her need she still basically loved herself”.<sup>59</sup> To such an objection, Kierkegaard says he would reply:

“Naturally ... there is no other way ... God forbid that I would ever presume to want to love my God or my Savior in any other way, because if there were literally no self-love in my love, then I would no doubt be only imagining that I could love them without standing in need of them – and from this blasphemy may God preserve me!”<sup>60</sup>

Ultimately, the refusal to forgive ourselves, like the refusal to recognise that loving ourselves properly includes owning our creaturely needs, is condemned. So with regard to accepting God’s forgiveness and thus forgiving ourselves, Kierkegaard takes great comfort from the words of 1 John 3:20: “Even if our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts.”<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup>SKS 23, 66, NB15: 94 / JP4, 4029; my emphasis. On Kierkegaard’s own difficulty in accepting forgiveness / forgiving himself, see the moving autobiographical note at SKS 20, 194-6, NB2: 136 / KJN 4, 193-4.

<sup>59</sup>SKS 11, 278 / WA, 142.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>SKS 10, 311-7 / CD, 289-95.