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

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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, makes reference to how Karl Barth captures the Protestant stance on grace thus, “... Scripture teaches that what

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unites man with God is, from God's side, his grace."² Specifically, with respect to salvation, after citing Rom 6:23 and Eph 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."³

This manner of construing this matter, in the Reformed Tradition of *Sola Gracia*, does not seem to be as clear cut in the Gospels (especially Matthew) as it is sometimes appears to be in the Pauline epistles. This study seeks to address the following questions: Is there an apparent 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?

A. The Paradox of Merit and Grace in Matthew

That there is a seeming incongruous existence of the themes of grace and merit in Matthew is undeniable. Examples of grace passages include the parable of the Servants in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1–16), the Father's prerogative to assign positions in heaven (Matt 20:21–23), and a number of the parables of the kingdom in Matt 13 will fit into this group as well, while examples of merit-based teachings include the Sermon on the Mount passages (Matt 6:12, 14; cf. 5:48; 7:1), and the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:15–35). Eduard Schweizer underscores this tension as he cautions with regards to Matt 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)."⁴

One merely states the obvious in saying that these merit passages are hotly debated. One important question 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 and include the understanding of God's non-

² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 164.

³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 959. For a fuller discussion of grace, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1941), 427–431.

⁴ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (Trans. David E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 155.

forgiving of those who would not forgive others as referring to the inhibition of their progress in sanctification and divine denial of blessings to them;⁵ the divine begrudging of forgiveness is limited to fettered fellowship and the want of capacity on the part of the one failing to forgive to receive forgiveness from God;⁶ and the view that God's withholding of forgiveness for the unforgiving is eschatological nature, i.e., it has implication for ultimate destiny, and that the people were not saved in the first instance.⁷ Contrary to Carson, John Nolland does not view the passage in eschatological terms. He comments of 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)."⁸

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 not to charge the all loving God with the unseemly evil of failing to forgive. A similar problem, perhaps a worse one, attends the passage in Matt 18:15–35. Here is a parable set out to address the issue of the 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; Job 33:29 to show that the traditionally accepted limit for forbearing repeated inquiry in Peter's heritage was four times. Yet, in his response to Peter, Jesus points out that setting a limit itself misses the mark.⁹ The reader, therefore, experiences some cognitive dissonance, as he

⁵ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew 1–7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 397.

⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew" in *The New American Commentary*, v.22 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1992), 120.

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

⁸ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 290–91.

⁹ Donald Senior, C.P., "Matthew 18:21–35," *Interpretation* 41:4 (1987): 403–07. 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, descendent of Cain and inheritor of his rage (Gen. 4:24)" (404).

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's tenor represents God) forgives only once but even withdraws the forgiveness due to his servant's failure to forgive. Bernard Brandon Scott correctly links this parable with the forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer when he notes that it is a narrative imitation of the final petition of the Lord's Prayer.¹⁰ 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."¹¹

The efforts at drawing the connecting lines from the story to the kingdom have often been so expended in such minutiae as attempts at enumerating and explicating the repertoire of Matthew and his first readers (and historical critical issues) that insufficient attention gets paid to the more substantive matter addressed in the text.¹² Other approaches barely scratch the surface of the issues involved. A case in point is R. T. France's analysis of the Matt 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."¹³ 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 . . ." Mat 18:35, author's translations). That is to say, the heavenly Father will treat the one that does not forgive the same way the master in the parable treated the unforgiving servant; and the way the unforgiving servant was treated was the withdrawal of already bestowed forgiveness. This then create tensions in Christian

¹⁰ 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 ("Ten Thousand Talents? Matthew's Interpretation and Redaction of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23–35)," CBQ 50 (1988): 221).

¹¹ Scott, "The King's Accounting," 441.

¹² Cf. De Boer, "Ten Thousand Talents?"

¹³ R. T. France, Matthew (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Leicester: IVP, 1985), 278.

(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 compartment 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 injunction 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 Father); 18:10–14 (the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in the Temple).

B. The Grace—Merit Antithesis in the New Testament

The common reactions to the apparent tensions in Scripture, like the one at hand, are either to pitch one section of the canon against another and somehow show one to be superior to the other or to adopt a harmonistic approach. Thomas L. Brodie in trying to unravel the origins of the New Testament, for instance, has attempted to demonstrate Matthean literary dependence on Pauline Romans. In introducing the twentieth chapter of his book, he writes, “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.”¹⁴ Michael D. Goulder likewise argues for some dependence of Matthew on Pauline teaching.¹⁵

Contrary to the last two discussed works, Davd C. Sim sees things differently.¹⁶ In his study of the intertextual connection between Matthew and Romans, 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

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Michael D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), 156–70.

¹⁶ Davd C. Sim, “Matthew and the Pauline Corpus: A Preliminary Intertextual Study,” *JSNT* 31.4 (2009): 401–422 .

than simply non-Pauline; he was in fact anti-Pauline.”¹⁷ His outlined approach to the issue is not to look simply for verbal and thematic ethos of Paul in Matthew on the assumption of Matthean deference to Pauline authoritative doctrinal priority, but to cock one’s ears to hear Matthean responses 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 into whether this seeming paradox is uniquely Matthean.

C. 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–judgment passages in Matthew, Senior draws his readers’ attention to Matthew’s Jewish 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.”¹⁸

Senior, in my view, has got it right on this note. The New Testament authors were Jews of the Second Temple period, and, without prejudice to their inspiration, were also products of their historical moment and as such both held similar presupposition 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 the striving toward holding in tension 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).

¹⁷ Davd C. Sim, “Matthew and the Pauline Corpus: A Preliminary Intertextual Study,” *JSNT* 31.4 (2009): 401–422.

¹⁸ Senior, “Matthew 18:21–35,” 407.

Within the New Testament, the recognition of this pattern in the Epistle of James has long made some to construe it as being anti-Pauline.¹⁹ Notwithstanding, others have also sought to show that James does not contradict Paul because they both use δικαιωω (“justify”) in two different senses.²⁰ Maxwell argues persuasively that δικαιωω 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, “δικαιωω 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.”²¹ Maxwell illustrates these two uses of δικαιωω in a single Apostolic Father, Clement of Rome. His use of δικαιωω 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 38:2.²² 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 employ differing emphases. Seen in this way, then, James, like Matthew, can no longer be viewed as being out to gainsay or even correct Paul, but was concerned, in a typical Second Temple fashion, with the ethical outworking of one’s faith commitments. Ebbie Smith similarly recognizes that James’s 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).”²³ Put

¹⁹ 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).

²⁰ David R. Maxwell, “Justified by Works, not by Faith alone: Reconciling Paul and James” *Concordia Journal* 33:4 (October 2007): 375.

²¹ Maxwell, “Justified by Works,” 376.

²² Maxwell, “Justified by Works,” 378.

²³ Ebbie Smith, “Unraveling the Untangled: Perspectives on the Lingering Debate Concerning Grace and Works in James and Paul,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 43:1 (2000): 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 [Footnote continued on next page ...]

differently, then, the seeming contradiction between James and Paul (on the issue of works and grace) is merely a difference of emphasis that is confusing due to the use of the same terms with different denotations.

This discussion, then, leads us to this same seeming contradiction that is also present in Paul. Paul is known to be the apostle per excellence of justification by faith alone (apart from works). 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.”²⁴ Indeed, Ridderbos is not unaware of the recognition 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 ‘antimomy.’”²⁵

Paul Wernle, well ahead of his time, had correctly perceived this structure of Pauline ethics to be a contradiction. Within this tense complexity,²⁶ 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 lucidly as the abrupt emergence into each

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).

²⁴ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (tr. John Richard DeWitt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 253.

²⁵ Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 253. Here he was making reference to E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (Trans. John Marsh; New York: Macmillan 1955), 181.

²⁶ A term adapted from Walter Brueggemann (David’s Truth in Israel’s Imagination and Memory. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002, xv).

other of “an ethic of miracle and an ethic of will.”²⁷ The doctrinal portions of Paul’s epistles, where he dwells on matters of the believers’ ἐν χριστῷ (“in Christ”) relationship, is where the ethic of sovereign miracle is found, while his ethical demands of right living flowing from the redemptive miracle of the “in Christ” relationship is where he elaborates upon his ethic of the human will.

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.²⁸ Taking his case study from Rom 2, Pregeant shows that vv. 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.”²⁹ 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. Of course, the matter of Law–Gospel antithesis is a derivative of the question of the nature of the relationship of 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

²⁷ 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].

²⁸ Russell Pregeant, “Grace and Recompense: Reflections on a Pauline Paradox,” *JAAR* 47:1 (March 1979): 73–96.

²⁹ Pregeant, “Grace and Recompense,” 77.

cannot be trivialized 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.

Right from Genesis, we are confronted with the paradox of grace and works. As soon as there was a declaration of the coming deluge, a redemptive hint was also dropped—that Noah obtained grace with God (Gen 6:8). Yet, in the very next verse, we are told without mincing words that Noah was a righteous man in his generation, he was blameless, and that he walked with God (Gen 6:9). So, was it that divine favor gave Noah enabling grace to walk with God, or his election was according to divine foreknowledge or even in view of his uprightness? It is hard to say from the text. In the MT, Gen 6:8 is a discourse terminal utterance, and Gen 6:9 is a new discourse as it is prefaced with the primal history discourse initial macro-syntactic marker *אלה תולדות* (“These are the generations of”). The goal here is not necessarily to exegete this passage but to point out that the incongruous existence of grace and work is germane to the entire biblical text.

Abraham’s call and 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 exegete in these sections of the Abraham narrative as is seen in the re-told Bible³⁰). Grace seems to be the only reasonable grounds for it. Yet subsequently, there were demands that YHWH made of him. YHWH’s numerous demands on Abraham are summed up in the words *לפני ויהיה תמים* (“walk before me and be blameless,” Gen 17:1); and it is only then that Abraham would 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 thread of the interweaving of grace and merit runs 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,” v. 2). Rearing children is not a choice that the children make, but they do make the choices of submission and obedience or

³⁰ Cf. *Jub* 11–12; *Ps-J Targum*, Gen 11:28.

rebellion and disobedience (vv. 3–4). Warnings of judgment according their deeds dominate the rest of the chapter (cf. Isa 1:16–20), and, indeed, the rest of the book as well.

D. Perspectives on the Paradox

Our study thus far has shown that there is a palpable tensive comportment of grace and merit in the Matthew. We have also seen that this phenomenon is not uniquely Matthean, but is germane to the Second Temple milieu of Matthew and other New Testament authors (and the biblical cloth from which it was cut). Our suggestions for living with the complexity include:

1. Paradox is inescapable in the biblical frame or mindset. This is reflected in such pivotal Christian theological concepts as the 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, in the world but not of the world, the already-but-not-yet, two-covenants-one-Scripture, and such like. None of these issues can be perfectly resolved or satisfactorily explain beyond all doubts.³¹ 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.³²
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

³¹ This is not to say that plausible attempts cannot be made to address all reasonable doubts.

³² J. Leslie Houlden points out that redaction critics (operating with modernist presuppositions) assume that the biblical authors had 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, which should be attended with greater skepticism than is usually the case. On a general note, 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” (“The Puzzle of Matthew and the Law,” 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).

sense it is inclusive of 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 neighbour (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 product of Second Temple Judaism, in which Torah obedience was very central to life. Thus, for all of them (Paul inclusive), obedience to the ethical demands of the Torah (and all of YHWH's revealed truth) was non-negotiable. Hence, 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. Grace unveils the ethic of miracle, what God does; while the judgment texts urge the ethic of the will, pointing believers in the direction of right choices. The judgment texts, in other words, serve didactic purposes and help 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 Thes 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 Thes 4:3–7).

Conclusion

In addressing the apparent paradox of unmerited redemption and conditional forgiveness, we have come to agree that the paradox does exist in Matthew. We have also seen that it is not a uniquely Matthean

problem, but it is a biblical one as it is found throughout the entire Bible. As to how to resolve it, our conclusion is not to seek 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 choose to be paradoxical in his dealings with his people, as we have seen in many other respects. We are not called to (and will never get to) know God exhaustively. Similarly, it will be 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 hand that extends to appropriate and make it ours is the act of 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 unto others as you would have others do unto you (Matt 7:12; cf. Luke 6:31).

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