

# Luke's Theology of Forgiveness vs. the Ethic of Atonement

## 1. Luke's Radical Moral Departure

Among the four canonical Gospels, Luke stands alone in presenting a theology in which forgiveness precedes punishment and love supersedes law. Luke's Jesus forgives sins personally and unconditionally—without the machinery of priest, temple, or blood. The paralytic is forgiven before healing (Luke 5:20); the sinful woman's tears are enough (Luke 7:47–48); the prodigal son is restored without repayment (Luke 15:11–32); and even the executioners are included in divine mercy: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Here, forgiveness is not a transaction but a revelation of character. The God of Luke does not require satisfaction or blood; He simply loves beyond injury.

This was a moral revolution: a movement from the tribal justice of Leviticus—where sin demanded a sacrificial payment—to a universal ethic of restorative grace.

In Luke's narrative, divine justice is not retributive but creative: it heals, it reconciles, it transforms. It makes the world new rather than balancing cosmic ledgers.

## 2. The Ethical Superiority of Forgiveness over Sacrifice

Ethically, the idea that God must punish before forgiving is primitive. It imagines justice as a kind of cosmic bookkeeping—wrongdoing creates a debt that must be paid, even by an innocent victim. Luke dismantles that logic. His Jesus enacts what every enlightened parent already knows: love need not defer to punishment.

The parent who forgives a child directly—restoring trust through empathy rather than retribution—embodies a higher moral intelligence than the parent who insists on suffering as the precondition for reconciliation.

In moral philosophy, this evolution parallels the shift from legalistic ethics (duty, penalty, restitution) to relational ethics (empathy, growth, restoration).

Forgiveness without blood does not trivialize wrongdoing; it transcends it. It declares that love is stronger than justice because it creates harmony where justice merely balances accounts.

## 3. Joseph Smith's Failure to Grasp Luke's Revolution

Joseph Smith's so-called "Inspired Translation" of the Bible reveals no awareness of this ethical transformation. His revisions to the Gospel of Luke are largely cosmetic—stylistic clarifications or doctrinal insertions—but he leaves untouched the moral core that defines Luke's uniqueness.

Worse, in other revisions he reinforces the very atonement logic Luke rejects: a God who demands satisfaction, a Christ whose blood must appease wrath, and an institutional Church positioned as the sole distributor of that mercy.

This blindness is telling. Smith could recast scripture to serve organizational control, but he could not perceive that Luke's ethic of unconditional forgiveness undermines any system claiming monopoly over grace.

A God who forgives directly—without temple, priesthood, or ordinance—renders the mediating institution unnecessary. Thus, to preserve ecclesiastical authority, Smith instinctively maintained the older sacrificial framework.

His "translation" functions not as revelation but as re-entrenchment of the pre-Christian logic of atonement.

## 4. The Institutional Function of Atonement Theology

Historically, the doctrine of atonement has served institutional power more than moral truth.

It makes salvation conditional, placing the Church as the authorized broker of divine pardon.

It converts grace into a currency, administered through rites, sacraments, or temple ordinances.

It justifies hierarchical control, since only the ordained possess keys to the means of reconciliation.

Luke's theology destroys this arrangement. His Christ teaches that forgiveness flows from within the divine nature itself—accessible through repentance, compassion, and the Spirit.

There is no tollgate on mercy. Such theology decentralizes power: every conscience becomes a temple, every act of forgiveness a sacrament.

For a prophet like Joseph Smith—ambitious to build a theocratic order—this was untenable. The ethic of grace had to be replaced by an ethic of obedience, repentance by proxy, and forgiveness mediated by authority.

In so doing, the Mormon system, like the medieval Church before it, reverted to an archaic moral economy where salvation is earned, purchased, or performed rather than received through love.

## 5. Conclusion: The Moral Horizon Luke Reveals

Luke's Gospel stands as an ethical summit in the history of religion. It teaches that the highest expression of justice is not recompense but restoration.

The Hebrew priest sought blood on the altar; the Christian institution sought submission to doctrine; but the Lukan Jesus seeks the transformation of the heart.

Where the theology of atonement binds God to law, Luke frees God to love.

Where the Church builds its power upon conditional mercy, Luke dissolves that power by offering mercy unconditionally.

This is not only a theological difference—it is a moral revolution.

It asks whether we believe in a God of balance sheets or a God of parents who forgive their children not because justice is satisfied, but because love is.

## References and Notes

1. Luke 5:20; 7:47–48; 15:11–32; 23:34.
2. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
3. Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (New York: HarperOne, 1994).
4. Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo* (1098).
5. Compare Joseph Smith's "Inspired Translation" (JST) with Luke's original Greek text; see Thomas Wayment, *The New Testament: A Translation for Latter-day Saints* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 2019).

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