

“Forbear With One Another”
Sermon Series on
Becoming the Church That Jesus Longs For #7
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(Eph. 4:1-6)

Introduction.

If you’ve ever had a roommate with whom you’re still friends, or you have siblings you still love after growing up together, or you have grown children and you still have a good relationship with them, then you know something about what it means to forbear with a person.

I had an experience of forbearance back in December. Around 6:45 pm on a Wednesday night, as I was preparing to leave home to come back to the church I received a text message from Steve Lineberger. It read, “Full professors only get 15 minutes.” A sinking feeling came over me when I realized that I was late for the New Officer Training class...which I was supposed to lead! I had it in my head that the class didn’t start until 7 o’clock, but all the elders-elect had been waiting there since 6:30 pm. I texted Steve as fast as I could and said I was on my way.

When I arrived a little after 7 o’clock, I was so embarrassed and apologetic. I felt terrible that I had made them wait all that time. Everyone was very kind and full of grace, and they tried to put me at ease and told me not to worry. I think I said something like, “Well, at least now you know without a doubt that your senior pastor isn’t perfect, and he needs a whole lot of grace.”

We all need forbearance from time to time, don’t we? And we also need to extend forbearance to other people whenever they disappoint or fail us. That is the subject of the next mutuality command we’re going to study this morning in our sermon series as we strive to become the church that Jesus longs for.

I. The Forbearance of God.

The word “forbearance” basically means “to hold oneself back, to restrain, or to refrain from the enforcement of something.” Nowadays the word is actually used in a variety of ways. For example, a *forbearance* allows you to temporarily postpone making payments on a federal student loan or to temporarily reduce the amount you have to pay. In the context of a mortgage process, a *forbearance* is a special agreement between the lender and the borrower to delay a foreclosure. But when it comes to spiritual matters and our relationships with God and other people,

the word forbearance takes on a whole new meaning. And we read about it in many of the apostle Paul's letters.

Let me give you an example. As Jerry Sittser points out in his book *Love One Another*,¹ the pivotal argument Paul uses to make a point about the character and plan of God in Romans 3:21-26 is built on God's forbearance. The apostle writes that God sent Jesus to die for our sins, and Christ made the supreme sacrifice in order to reconcile us to God. Paul argues that in His *divine forbearance* God passed over former sins in anticipation of Christ's death on the cross, and He looked ahead to what one day would happen. One might say that God put up with the sinfulness of humanity because He knew one day Jesus would pay the penalty.

Psalm 78 is a great example of the forbearance and patience and of God toward the people of Israel.

*Their heart was not steadfast toward Him;
they were not true to His covenant.
Yet He, being compassionate,
forgave their iniquity,
and did not destroy them;
Often He restrained His anger,
and did not stir up all His wrath.
He remembered that they were but flesh,
a wind that passes and does not come again (37-39).*

God was forbearing then, and He still is now. God suspended His final judgment back then because Jesus was coming, and He suspends His judgment now because Jesus has already come. In both cases God looks to Jesus, whose victory on the cross enables the Lord to forbear. Because of Christ, God bears with us and He loves us despite all our bad moods, obnoxious personalities, and sour attitudes, as well as the dark sins of our lives. You and I have benefited from the forbearance of God far more than we realize.

It's because of God's forbearance that you and I as the followers of Jesus should now reflect the character and grace of our heavenly Father toward other people. Forbearing with one another is part of what it means to walk in a manner worthy of our calling in Christ as Paul writes in Ephesians. Since we bear the name of Jesus, we should be forbearing toward others just as God has been forbearing with us.

II. Our Forbearance with One Another.

The word "forbear" is an important biblical word. It requires more than politeness, and it implies more than tolerance. Tolerance sometimes smacks of compromise and relativism, and that's not what the word suggests. The Greek word which is translated "forbear" is the word *anecho*. It means "to bear with, to

endure; to put up with, or to restrain.” On commentator said that to forbear is to give slack to someone the way we might let up on a tightly pulled rope. Forbearance steps toward another person, and it loosens the tension. It’s patience in action.

In his commentary on the letter to the church in Ephesus,² the late John Stott points out that for three chapters in the book of Ephesians the apostle Paul unfolds for his readers the eternal purpose of God being worked out in history. He says that through Jesus Christ God is creating something entirely new – not just a new life for individuals but a new society, a new community which God wants to use to impact the world. He sees an alienated humanity being reconciled to God and a fractured people being united together. And the church of Jesus Christ is to be an expression of the reconciliation of God. It’s a powerful vision.

But here in this passage in chapter 4 the apostle moves on from the new *society* God is creating to the new *standards* by which the people in this new community should live. He turns from exposition to exhortation, and from what God has done to what we should do and the people we should become. Humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, and love are the five foundation stones for Christian unity which Paul mentions in this passage, and they’re all tied to what it means to live a life that is worthy of our calling in Christ.

Jerry Sittser writes that forbearance builds trust, and trust makes people more willing to let a relationship grow, even when it’s painful. The long-term vulnerability, openness and strength of our relationships depend on faithful obedience to this command. He says that forbearance requires that we give people room to be themselves, and that we accept them without expressing a spirit of disapproval or judgment, and that we rejoice in them as God’s special creation.

In his book Jerry offers two suggestions, which are disciplines, for how to become a more forbearing person. *First*, he says it involves our view of God. If we believe that God is sovereign, then we will become ever more confident that the Lord who began a good work in our brother or sister will bring it to completion when Christ returns (Phil. 1:6). God is not finished writing the story yet, and we are all a work in progress.

The *second* discipline he suggests has to do with how we see ourselves. Patience comes more easily to us when we remind ourselves of what we used to be, and what we perhaps still are. Every so often we need to remember the kind of person we used to be and how far we’ve come, and that can help us extend more grace to other people when they need our forbearance.

Jesus was a master of forbearance. Just look at His relationship with the disciples. For example, one day Jesus was teaching, and there was a large crowd. It was late in the day, and the disciples were getting nervous because it was almost dinner time and nobody had any food. You probably know the rest of the story.

Jesus asked the disciples how much food they had, and then, with the disciples help, Jesus fed 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two fish.

A little while later, again there was another large crowd. The people were hungry, and there was no food to feed them. Sound familiar? Jesus saw the crowd and had compassion on them, and He wanted to feed them. The disciples replied, “How can we feed these people?” You’ve gotta be kidding me! You would think that feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish might stick with a person! You would think that by now the disciples might have a pretty good idea of how they’re going to feed them. It’s Jesus, guys!

Instead of getting frustrated or reprimanding His disciples, Jesus said once more, “How many loaves do you have?” Jesus bears with the disciples in their forgetfulness. He puts up with their short-sightedness and their lack of understanding, and Christ continued to teach and give them room to grow into the disciples He was forming them to be. It’s an example we should follow.

III. The Fruit of Forbearance.

I think my biggest lessons in forbearance have come from being married and being a father. My family has been the most important School of Discipleship in teaching me about forbearance. Lorie and I have learned to forbear with one another over the 37 years of our marriage, and it hasn’t always been easy. We drive each other crazy sometimes, and our patience with one another wears thin. I’m reminded of something Ruth Bell Graham once said when a young bride as her if she had ever considered divorce in her marriage to Billy. Ruth replied, “Divorce never. Murder often!”

As a father I learned that I needed to take the long view when my kids were growing up, and I had to give them room to experiment, to make mistakes, and even to be obnoxious and messy in order to grow into young men who eventually would learn how to be mature and responsible. Forbearance, takes the long view. We don’t let dirty dishes, or immaturity, or being messy be the determining factors in the relationship.

Forbearance means we stick with people in spite of their annoying habits, stupid mistakes, personality quirks, and differences in opinion. And when we do, the rewards can be so wonderful. Just this weekend, Lorie and I talked to all three of our sons, and we had some of the most meaningful conversations with them we’ve ever had. That’s the fruit of forbearance.

Earlier I said that one of the keys to learning the discipline of forbearance is to look at people from God’s point of view and through the lens of Christ. When you look at a person from a divine perspective, you see that they are made in the image of God and they are precious in His sight. Looking at people through the eyes of Christ makes a difference in how you see them and in how you treat them as well.

In his famous speech “The Weight of Glory” C.S. Lewis talked about this, and he said the following about looking at people from God’s perspective who are made in His image:

“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”

Conclusion.

How far do we forbear? Is there a limit to forbearance? Do we forbear departures from biblical truth or orthodox theology? Should we forbear violations of biblical morality? To what degree should we put up with blind spots in a person’s character? These are important questions, and the answers aren’t always easy to come by. Certainly there are limits to forbearance, and sometimes we need to say, “No, that is unacceptable. I cannot tolerate this behavior.” Patience has a limit, and even God one day will call us all to account.

But if I am going to err, I want to err on the side of grace. I want to be forbearing with others the way God has been forbearing with me. Christian discipleship takes a lifetime, and it’s important that we don’t give up on people too soon.

I close with this. One of my spiritual heroes is a man named Gordon MacDonald, and he and his wife Gail have been mentors to Lorie and me over the years. Gordon was a legendary pastor in Boston and New York for many years, and he has authored more than 20 books. Several years ago he wrote an article for *Leadership Journal* which told the story of a young man named Tom. It’s a story of forbearance.

The article begins, “Let me tell you about a person I have not always liked. He is 20-years-old, reasonably bright, friendly, and – when he wants – capable of influencing people. His name is Tom.”

Over the course of the article Gordon writes about the way in which Tom's character is defective, his work habits are poor, and he just lives day to day. Tom is undisciplined and disorganized, and recently he was put on academic probation by the university he's attending. Tom is a people pleaser who often makes promises he doesn't keep, and the result is that people tend to be disappointed in him.

Nevertheless, there are a few people in Tom's life who continue to invest in him, and they show him forbearance. There's a young couple who are on staff with a para-church organization, and, for reasons unexplained, they are fond of him. And they regularly welcome Tom into their lives.

There is also an associate pastor in a small church who has taken an interest in the young man. Because his apartment has some extra space, he invited Tom to live there and only pay a token rent. When Tom moved in with Keith, it was instantly clear that Tom's personal living habits were a disaster. The two roommates have had many candid conversations that range from the importance of putting the lid down on the toilet to putting food away after eating. One's bed needs to be made – every day. Dishes should be washed – every day. This was a news flash to Tom.

Another couple who lived just a few houses down from Keith's apartment, also took an interest in the young man. Over time, this couple invited Tom to come to their home for dinner, and he began to see in them a model of marriage he had never witnessed with his own parents before.

Gordon writes that Tom hasn't quite put it into words yet, but he is feeling the first stirrings for the larger idea of community: a commitment to a group of people where there is mutual nourishment of hearts and mutual accountability. It's a community that is built on forbearance, and Tom has been amazed at the way these five people have cut him a lot of slack, and they have been there for him.

Gordon concludes his article by writing, "Tom, of course, is not a fictional person. His 20th-year experiences actually happened a long time ago. Tom is me – Thomas Gordon MacDonald. Two of the five people in this story are now with Jesus. Three continue to live full, productive lives. And when I go about doing the things I do each day, I remember each of them with gratitude. Their forbearance changed my life."³

That's what can happen when you and I are forbearing with one another. The transformation of a person's life by the power of the Holy Spirit can be the result. Let's strive to become more of the kind of church that Jesus longs for. Let's be forbearing with one another for the sake of Christ and the building of His kingdom. Amen.

¹ Gerald Sittser, *Love One Another*, p. 50.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, p. 146.

³ Gordon MacDonald, *Leadership Journal*, July 2007.