

“Forgive One Another”
Sermon Series on
Becoming the Church That Jesus Longs For #3
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(Col. 3:12-17)

Introduction.

Philip Yancey has written¹ that back in 1990 Nelson Mandela broke a chain of hatred in South Africa when he emerged from prison after 27 years with a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, instead of revenge. It impacted everyone in the racially torn country. F.W. de Klerk, who was elected from the smallest and most Calvinistic of all the South African churches, also felt that God was calling him to help save his country by means of grace, even though he knew it would mean rejection by his own people. Together they modeled out before a watching world what forgiveness looks like.

Black leaders insisted that the president apologize for racial apartheid. De Klerk hesitated, partly because the people who had started the policy included his own father. But Bishop Desmond Tutu believed it was essential that the process of reconciliation in South Africa begin with admission of guilt and forgiveness, and he would not relent. According to Tutu, “One lesson we should be able to teach the world...is that we are ready to forgive.” Eventually, De Klerk did apologize.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was organized in South Africa to help encourage that process. Those who committed atrocities had to admit their crimes and ask for forgiveness before it could be given and before they could receive amnesty. Victims of the atrocities could address their persecutors, and they were encouraged to forgive those who had wronged them. They remembered their past in order to forget it.

The people of South Africa learned that forgiveness is neither easy nor always clear-cut, and it is often difficult and messy. Yet they also learned that those who pursue forgiveness, with all its complexity and pain, at least avoid the consequences of the alternative – unforgiveness, which can exact an even greater toll. That is the subject of the mutuality command we considered today – Forgive one another.

I. The Command to Forgive.

Jerry Sittser writes in his book *Love One Another*² that true forgiveness is very hard to do, especially in the church, for at least two reasons: 1) because we expect more from Christians (after all, they are disciples of Jesus); and 2) because Christians often find it more difficult to admit it when they are wrong. Sometimes believers can be stubborn and self-righteous, especially when they believe God is on their side. And their self-righteousness can actually make them difficult to reach. It’s harder to forgive someone who isn’t willing to admit their guilt, isn’t it?

But the clear teaching of Scripture is for us to forgive, even when people don’t ask for it. In the passage we’ve read this morning, we see an example of the teaching of the Bible on this subject. There we read, “*Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*”

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful” (Col. 3:12-14).

Paul makes it clear in this passage that not all offenses require forgiveness, and that’s why the apostle first encouraged his readers to forbear with one another. Idiosyncrasies in an individual’s personality that may irritate us and thoughtless or immature blunders on the part of a person do not necessarily call for forgiveness. Instead they require forbearance, and last week we talked about the need for us to extend grace toward people who are different from us as we press toward Christian maturity. Not every irritating thing a person does requires forgiveness.

However, there are occasions when forbearance isn’t enough. Forgiveness is required. The Greek word Paul used in this text is translated “grievance,” but it can also be mean “something that causes reproach” or “something that is worthy of blame.” People do things for which they need to be forgiven. Power is abused, harsh words are spoken, trust is violated, immoral things are done, money is mismanaged, someone dies needlessly, and relationships are broken. That’s when forgiveness is needed, and it isn’t just a matter of forbearance.

So Paul encouraged his readers to be ready to forgive and to live a life of love which fosters a sense of unity in the body of Christ. When we do, we’ll experience the peace of the Lord which he says also results in gratitude and a thankful heart.

II. The Example of Forgiveness.

It’s easy to read this laundry list of behaviors and just nod your head. “Compassion—right; kindness—check; patience—of course; forgiveness—sure.” But then Paul does something he doesn’t do with any of the other items in the list. He pauses and pulls out his hi-liter, so to speak, and he puts “forgiveness” in neon yellow. He extends his instruction on forgiveness by way of example, and he says, “*Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*” Notice that he doesn’t elaborate on any of the other words in the list like that. The apostle doesn’t say, “Be compassionate as the Lord was compassionate to you.” But he does say, “*Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*”

Paul explains that Jesus is our model of forgiveness. The Lord not only taught His disciples on the subject on many occasions, He also lived it as He hung on the cross. Do you remember what He said? “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*”

In sign language, the hand motions, or the sign, for the word “forgive” is this one hand wiping the other clean. Do it with me. It means “wiping the slate clean.” God forgives our sin by wiping the slate clean, and we’re encouraged to do the same for others.

Forgiveness is the extravagant gift of God. Ironically, when we realize we’re sinners and comethe Lord, just like a person who owes a debt, sometimes we try to pay God back. We promise to be good...to make God proud of us... to clean up our act. I’ll try harder, be better, do my part, and pay my spiritual bill. But all these efforts are so inadequate compared to the enormity of the spiritual debt we owe God because of our sin. It’s almost laughable.

But God doesn’t laugh. Instead He gives us mercy, and He offers to wipe the slate clean. And when you come to realize just how much God has forgiven you, then you begin to find it easier to imagine releasing the person who wronged you in the past and find a way to forgive them. They don’t deserve it, but neither did you when God extended His grace. What we have received by faith, we give away to others. It’s part of the circle of grace in the kingdom of God.

The cross brings God’s justice and His mercy together in one event. Someone had to die for sin; that’s justice. But Someone did die in place of the guilty party; that’s mercy. And we see it all come together in the cross of Calvary.

III. The Cost of Forgiveness.

Jerry Sittser says³ that either way you cut it, there is always a cost involved whenever forgiveness is needed. Both forgiveness and an unwillingness to forgive will cost you. Forgiveness is costly because it requires you to give up the right to get even. The command to forgive runs against our desire to want to make the offender pay. It forces us to let God be God so that His mercy and His justice prevail, rather than what we think should happen. It leaves the matter in His hands trusting that He will sort everything out one day, if not in this life then in the next.

Sometimes that's really hard to do. God might not deal with people the way we think He should. He might not make them suffer as much as we think they deserve. He might not make them suffer at all. He might even choose to bless them. A former spouse's remarriage might turn out happy. An enemy might win the trial. An incompetent manager might stay in power. It all feels so unfair at times, doesn't it?

Sittser had an experience of this very thing. While driving back with his family from a Native American powwow in Washington State, a drunk driver crossed the center line and crashed into the van Jerry was driving, killing his wife, his youngest daughter, and his mother, all in one tragic blink of an eye. Jerry and his other three children survived, but in one split second his life was changed forever. To add insult to their injury, the drunk driver was never fully punished for his crime, and justice was not served in the way it should have been. For a long time, this ate away at Jerry and made him bitter.

There is cost involved in forgiving someone. But there is also a cost to unforgiveness, and that cost is far greater. Jerry writes that unforgiveness condemns us to live forever in the dungeon of the past. The memory serves only to remind us of what went wrong, of the hurt we experienced, and we hold onto that painful memory. We even find a strange delight in thinking about it, and in the end it poisons our soul. The greatest victim of unforgiveness is me when I refuse to forgive.

I have to admit forgiveness doesn't do everything. It has power, but its power is limited. Forgiveness doesn't release offenders from the need to take personal responsibility for what they've done, and it doesn't absolve people of their guilt. Only God has the power to do that. Forgiveness also doesn't take away the consequences of what a person has done, and it can't erase the past.

However, forgiveness does release us from the effects of another person's behavior which hurt us. It cancels the debt they owe us, and it absorbs the wrong. It uses the past as a lesson to be learned, and like the growth of a tree that envelops a wound in the trunk, what once threatened our life in bitterness and anger can become a place of our greatest strength, because of the transforming work of God's Holy Spirit.

Conclusion.

Of all the "one another" passages, there is no other one that sounds so right, so true, and so appropriate when it applies to other people forgiving us. But it feels so wrong, so unreasonable, and so outrageous when it applies to us forgiving them. "Forgive one another? Wait a minute...you mean you want me to forgive her? You obviously don't understand what happened. You don't know what you're asking. You don't know how I was violated by him. Abused by him. Betrayed by her. Forgive that person? Never! I just can't do it."

In the abstract, it's easy to admit we all should be forgiving people. But in the particular, in the reality of a specific person who betrayed, defamed, sued, divorced, cheated, or molested you, that's when this mutuality command of God becomes real. And it is very difficult. For some people it feels impossible. And I will admit that apart from the power of God's Spirit, it probably is. But it is what God asks us to do.

So how do we do it? I'll offer a suggestion. First, say the words of forgiveness in faith even if you don't feel them. Maybe it starts like this. Close your eyes. Now imagine your offender standing next to you before Jesus. Tell the Lord what that person has done to you; how they hurt you. Be specific. Then say something like, "I don't want to forgive them, Lord. I don't feel like forgiving them. I don't even know how to forgive them, *but I want to be set free*. Jesus, help me to forgive this person as you have forgiven me." Then make the sign of forgiveness with your hands, and wipe the slate clean.

Earlier I talked about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. For 2 ½ years, South Africans listened to reports of atrocities coming out of the TRC meetings. The rules were simple: if a white policeman or an army officer voluntarily faced his accusers, confessed his crime, and fully acknowledged his guilt, he could not be tried and punished for that crime. Hard-liners grumbled about the obvious injustice of letting criminals go free, but Mandela insisted that the country needed healing even more than it needed justice.

Philip Yancey writes that at one TRC meeting, a policeman named van de Broek recounted an incident in which he and other officers shot an 18-year-old boy and burned his body. Eight years later van de Broek returned to the same house and seized the boy's father. The wife was forced to watch as policemen bound her husband on a woodpile, poured gasoline over his body, and set it on fire.

The courtroom grew silent as the elderly woman who had lost first her son and then her husband was given a chance to respond. The judge asked, "What do you want from Mr. van de Broek?" She said she wanted van de Broek to go to the place where they burned her husband's body and gather up the dust so she could give him a decent burial. With his head down, the policeman nodded in agreement.

Then she added a further request, "Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto where I live and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. And I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so he can know my forgiveness is real."

Spontaneously, some in the courtroom began singing "Amazing Grace" as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand. But van de Broek didn't hear the hymn. He had fainted, overwhelmed by grace.⁴

I want to close this service by sharing with you a song and a video which explains these truths in a different way. As you listen to the song and watch the video, think about the person God wants you to forgive, and begin the process of relinquishment, grace, and forgiveness today. Amen.

¹ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p. 136.

² Gerald Sittser, *Love One Another*, p. 65.

³ Sittser, p. 70.

⁴ Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World*, pp. 223-224.