

Forgive One Another
Colossians 3:13

We read in Luke 23, *“When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals- one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’”*

Much of what we have seen so far in our study of the New Testament’s one another principles, has been fairly easy to swallow. Ideas like loving one another, accepting one another, greeting one another, and teaching one another seem so nice. They make us feel warm and fuzzy. Most people will readily agree that those are pretty good ideas.

But this morning we look at a one another passage that puts the warm and fuzzy to the test.

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)

Now here’s the thing. It’s not that we don’t like the idea of forgiveness. In fact, we all want to be forgiven. When it comes to our own failures and shortcomings, we think that forgiveness is a mighty fine idea. However, when someone else has hurt us, betrayed us, talked behind our backs, then we’re not so keen on forgiveness. When we’re the injured party, we want revenge, not mercy. We tend to see our own wrongs as little faux pas, but the sins of others are great injustices that must be accounted for.

Though forgiving one another may not be easy. It is necessary. You see, none of the other one anothers will work without this one. It is only through forgiving one another that we will ever be able to accept one another, encourage one another, greet one another, or serve one another.

With all of these calls to love, acceptance, harmony, and encouragement you might think that Paul has a naïve or idealistic view of the church. No, Paul’s view of the church is not unrealistic, nor is he ignorant about human nature. The church is not a fairytale utopia, where we never hurt each other, and live happily ever after. In calling us to forgive Paul acknowledges our failures and shortcomings. He recognizes there will be times when we are not loving, not accepting, and not encouraging. In fact, sometimes we are hateful, judgmental and disheartening. That is why we must learn to forgive.

There is one thing I can guarantee if you are a part of the church. You will get hurt. That doesn’t sound like a very nice thing for a pastor to say, but it’s true. If you are a part of the church, you will get hurt. Let me be more specific. If you are a part of this church, you will get hurt. If you know me long enough, I will hurt you.

Why do I say such things? Is it because I’m cold hearted, or we’re a mean bunch of people? No. I say that because we are all sinners. Where there’s sin, people get hurt. We may all be forgiven, but we

are still struggling with sin. We're still growing. We're on our way to where God wants us to be, but we're not there yet. The church is full of imperfect people. As Jeff Walling says, "We're all messed up people. That's why we need a *Mess-iah*."

If you're looking for the perfect church, you can give up the search now. You won't find it. It doesn't exist. And if you do find it, don't join it, because after you join it won't be perfect anymore. You might as well join us here. We're already a bunch of imperfect sinners. It's popular today to say, "I love Jesus, but I hate the church. It's full of hypocrites. Yep. Come on in. One more won't hurt."

Ken Sande in his book, *Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, observes, "Christians are the most forgiven people in the world. Therefore we should be the most forgiving people in the world." You might think so, but we're usually not. Christians are a most divided people. One group will have nothing to do with the other. Christians say hateful and hurtful things. Disgruntled and bitter members hop from one church to another. There are many people who have been wounded deeply in the church. There are some of you here this morning that are carrying some deep scars that were left there by other Christians.

Forgiveness may not be easy. In fact, sometimes forgiveness may be the most difficult thing we can do, but we desperately need to do it. We can never be a one another church unless we learn to forgive one another. But how can we learn to forgive?

One lady wrote in a letter after being cheated on by her husband. Two years later she was still hurting deeply and she struggled with anger. She writes, "I am told that forgiveness is the answer, that I need to forgive him, but I don't know how. I am not even sure that I want to forgive him, but even if I did, I'm not sure what to do."

What Forgiveness is Not

To understand what forgiveness really is and how to do it, it may be helpful to look at a few things that forgiveness is not. There is a lot of misunderstanding about forgiveness.

1. Forgiveness isn't just accepting someone's apology.

First of all, forgiveness is not just accepting someone's apology. People will hurt you then they will say, "I'm sorry." There may or may not be any real sorrow in their words. It could just be a polite gesture. They may have no intention of changing how they treat you. True forgiveness may involve accepting someone else's apology, but it's so much bigger. In everything the Bible says about forgiveness, the word apology is never used. In fact, it never appears in the entire Bible.

2. Forgiveness isn't to minimize or excuse sin

Secondly, forgiveness isn't to minimize or excuse sin. Sometimes when someone wrongs us and they apologize we act like it wasn't a really big deal. We play it down, even if inside we were really hurt. "That's okay, you really didn't mean it." "You couldn't help it. It could happen to anyone."

I'm not saying that we shouldn't be sympathetic or understanding. We are all sinners, and Jesus does warn us to remove the log from our own eye. However, forgiveness goes beyond this. It includes sins that are deliberate and malicious. The very fact that forgiveness is needed shows that what someone did was wrong and that you were hurt.

When God forgives our sin, he doesn't say, "That's okay. You're only human. Everyone does it. I understand. It wasn't really that big of a deal. After all, I'm God, I can take it." No. God says that our sin is affront to his holiness. It is an act of rebellion. It's something so grievous that it required the death of his Son on the cross to pay its price. God doesn't minimize our sin in any way. In forgiveness there is an acknowledgement that what was done was hurtful, but we are choosing to pursue relationship and reconciliation instead.

3. Forgiveness isn't just the lessening of pain with the passing of time.

Forgiveness isn't just the lessening of pain with the passing of time. We have a saying, "Time heals all wounds." It is true that the pain of many hurts does diminish with the passing of time. One day we swear we will never talk to that person again, but then a few months later we don't feel quite as hurt. We think we may have overreacted a bit and we decide to let it be water under the bridge.

However, there are some hurts that do not diminish with time. There are some wounds that feel just as painful years later. Forgiveness is not a passive process where time heals our wounds. No, forgiveness is an active process. It is a conscious choice that we make. We decide to forgive someone.

4. Forgiveness isn't just agreeing to not get even, and then steering clear of them.

The fourth thing that forgiveness is not is just agreeing not to get even, and then steering clear of them. Many people think that forgiveness is promising not to punish someone for some wrong they have done, but the relationship will never be the same again. We've all said it before, "I forgive you, but I'm through with you." "I forgive you, but I'm afraid I'll never be able to be close to you again." "I'll forgive you this time, but you better be careful." For many, when they say, "I forgive you," there is an implied, "but you better watch out because I'll be watching," tagged on at the end.

5. Forgiveness isn't a feeling.

Finally, forgiveness is not a feeling. Some people see forgiveness as an emotional state. They think it's something you do when you feel like it. However, forgiveness is not based on feelings. It's not

deciding to be friends again, just because you no longer feel like being mad at them. And others don't think they can forgive, because they don't feel forgiving.

Forgiveness can't wait for feelings to lead the way. Many times forgiving will feel like the last thing we want to do. If we wait until we feel like it, too much damage can be done. The relationship can be destroyed beyond repair. We must choose to forgive because it is the right thing to do. It's what our Lord calls us to do. We decide to forgive because it is what is most needed and because it leads to the best possible outcome.

Here is the secret, though. Although we may not feel like forgiving when called upon to forgive, nothing will heal our hearts like forgiveness. Without forgiveness, bitter and angry emotions will poison our hearts. They will rob us of joy and blessing. They will damn up the flow of love through our hearts. Nothing opens the door to emotional healing like forgiving someone.

What Forgiveness Is

In understanding what forgiveness is not, we begin to understand what it is. It is a decision, an active choice we make. It is an act of faith. We won't want to or feel like forgiving, but we trust that Jesus can not only heal our relationship, but he can heal our hearts.

To forgive is to pursue a relationship. It is to love someone anyway. It is to go on with someone as though it never happened.

A Gift

The very root of the word that Paul uses for *forgive* here is "gift." It is the same word that is at the heart of the word grace. Forgiveness is not earned or deserved by whoever wronged you. It is a gift. We don't dispense it base on their worthiness, but its based on the fact that God forgave us. Did you hear what Paul said here, "*Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*" The basis of forgiveness is how much God forgave you. No hear me on this. You will never forgive anyone else more than God forgave you.

Paul asks us to forgive as God forgives, but in the Lord's prayer, Jesus actually tells us that will forgive us the way we forgive others. You know the words, "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" Are those words we can really pray with honest? Imagine if God forgave us the way we forgive others? Imagine that he withheld his blessing. Imagine that he would always keep his presence from us. Imagine that he would have nothing to do with us. Imagine if he constantly reminded us of every time we hurt him. Imagine you just got done with a prayer in which you confessed some sin, and God said, "I forgive you, but I can never be close to you again." No, if God forgave us the way we often forgive others, we would have no hope.

Four Promises of Forgiveness

Paul is pointing us to something higher, something better, something more. He is pointing the way to a forgiveness that brings healing and hope. Author Ken Sande has written a book called *Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. In this book, he points out that biblical forgiveness is making four practical promises. If you want to forgive someone, these are four things you need to do.

1. I will not dwell on this incident.

The first promise is that I will not dwell on this incident. I won't replay it again and again in my mind. I won't allow it to fester and grow and eat away at me. Yet, that is so often what we do isn't it. We hold on to that pain. Forgiveness begins when we let it go.

We saw how one biblical word for forgiveness means gift. Another word that's used in the N.T. that is translated as *forgive*, means to *let go or release*. And that's what we've got to do with wrongs done to us. We've got to let them go. If you hold on to them, they will grab hold of you. Feelings of resentment and bitterness entwine you in their tentacles until you can't let them go. Forgiving someone begins with letting it go, not dwelling in the past, and moving on with your life.

Remember in 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, it says, "*Love keeps no record of wrongs* (1 Cor. 13:5)". Too often we keep our wounds fresh. If you want to forgive the first thing you've got to do, is say, "I'm not going to keep thinking about this again and again."

2. I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you.

The second promise of forgiveness is, "I will not bring up this incident again and use it against you." I'm not going to file this away in a mental filing cabinet for easy access later. I'm not going to keep this in my pocket as ammunition. We're good at that aren't we?

A woman went to her pastor desperate for some marital advice. When the pastor asked what the problem was, she replied, "Every time we get into a fight, my husband gets historical." Her pastor said, "You must mean *hysterical*." She responded, "No, I mean exactly what I said; He keeps a mental record of everything I've done wrong, and whenever he's mad, I get a history lesson"

This promise doesn't mean we'll never talk about it or bring it up in any way. It means you will never bring it up to use against them. You might discuss it as an issue of spiritual growth. It might come up in a way that is useful and beneficial, but it won't be used to win an argument, to manipulate them into doing what you want, to make them feel guilty or to put them down. You will never use it in an unloving way.

3. I will not talk to others about this incident.

The third promise of forgiveness is *“I will not talk to others about this incident.”* There are many times when we are hurt that if we can’t get back at the offending party directly, we will get at them by proxy. We will let as many people as we can know what dastardly thing was done to us. In this way, not only will we be angry at them, so will a bunch of other people.

We had a situation last year where we found out a local auto shop was charging us for work they didn’t do. This caused us to have to pay for some work more than once. It led to more expensive repairs, and it led to blowing out our head gaskets on our Ford Taurus. This cost us a lot of money, and eventually it forced us to buy another car.

I was ticked off. I was bitter. I was angry. I tried to think of any way I could to get back at this unscrupulous garage, and make them pay. When I couldn’t I wanted everyone I talked to know who it was and what a bad thing they had done. I wasn’t just motivated by concern for my friends, you know, not wanting them to get taken by the same place. I was driven by revenge. I wanted to get back at them in some way. I wanted to punish them.

So often we do that in our personal relationships. We use gossip and rumor to make someone pay for what they have done. “Not only am I angry at you, but I’m going to get everyone else angry to. You’re going to feel real bad for what you did.”

In forgiveness, not only do we let go of our right to get even, we also don’t bring others into the picture. We don’t try to spread our resentment and anger to others. We don’t try to harm that person’s relationships with others. Not only do we not bring up that incident with them, we don’t bring it up with others to use against them either.

4. I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.

The final stage of forgiveness is a promise that says, *“I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship.”* In forgiveness there is reconciliation. In forgiveness, we pursue a continued relationship. If there remains a split, a division, a severed relationship, then full, biblical forgiveness has not taken place. When God forgives us, it’s because God wants to restore a full, ongoing, active, intimate relationship with us. He doesn’t forgive us, and then we go our separate ways. But that’s what happens too often in our relationships here. *“I forgive you, but you go your way, and I’ll go mine.”*

I need to add one thing here as a parenthetical remark. There are two levels of forgiveness. The first and most basic level is simply what I call trusting in God’s justice. This involves having an attitude of forgiveness toward all people, whether they want your forgiveness or not. Some people don’t want a continued relationship with you. Some people don’t care if they’ve wronged you or not.

How do you deal with wrongs done to you by people you don't know? What about those who never repent, nor want your forgiveness? What about those who want to hurt you and keep on hurting you? Obviously, you're never going to have reconciliation or a relationship with them.

In cases like this, it is still unhealthy to hang on to bitterness and anger. You still need to have an attitude of forgiveness and let those things go. You may not have reconciliation with them, but you can still have peace, because you trust God's justice.

Rom 12:17-21

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

In this level of forgiveness, you will be able to fulfill the first three promises, but not the fourth. This fourth level is only possible when the other person confesses their wrong and repents. Without repentance full reconciliation and relationship is not possible. Though God made forgiveness possible for all people through Jesus on the cross, we don't experience that forgiveness and have a relationship with God unless we confess our sin and repent. The same is true on a human level.

It's the first day of school for Ruby. It full of nervous anticipation, but these aren't the usual first day jitters. The eyes of the entire nation are watching this six-year-old girl go to school. She walks in her pretty white dress accompanied by seventy-five federal marshals.

The year Ruby was born the Supreme Court ruled that separate education for whites and blacks was not equal. School segregation was ordered to end. Ruby's family moved to New Orleans. Her family was the first black family in the neighborhood, and Ruby was the first black student to enroll in the school district. The school board refused to admit her. A federal judge intervened and ordered that she be admitted to school. In protest, all the students stayed home from school, and the teachers refused to work. Ruby's father was fired from his custodian job when it was learned that he was Ruby's father. The federal judge was burned in effigy, and burning crosses were left in his front yard.

Ruby's teacher, one year away from retirement, was threatened with the loss of her pension in order to compel her to work. The day that Ruby finally came to school, the entire community showed up. Hundreds of people lined the front walk in loud vocal protest. As Ruby passed, they spewed vile, hateful slurs. This continued day after day. Every day Ruby came to school she had to pass through this sea of hate and bigotry. Day after day Ruby was one of the only students to come to school. Imagine having to go through this every day as a six-year-old. A therapist was assigned to look after Ruby and her family.

One day, in a panic, the teacher called the therapist. Something had happened. From her classroom window the teacher saw Ruby stop and talk to the angry crowd. Their angry reaction seemed to make Ruby cower in fear. Was she finally breaking under the pressure?

Later that evening, the therapist talked to Ruby at her home. Ruby insisted that she did not talk to the people. The therapist said, "But your teacher saw you." But Ruby held her ground, "I did not talk to them." "Did you stop in front of them?" "Yes, but I did not talk to them, I prayed for them," Ruby answered.

"You prayed for them. Why did you pray for them?" asked the therapist. Ruby answered with a question of her own, "Don't you think they need praying for?" "I suppose," he answered, "but why were you praying for them?" "Because I am the one who hears what they are saying," was the reply.

"What did you pray?" the counselor asked. "I prayed, "Dear God, please forgive them; they don't know what they are doing."

The therapist went on to teach psychology at Harvard, and later recalled the incident, "Her words were strangely familiar to me, as if I'd heard them somewhere before."