

“The Case for Forgiveness” Colossians 3:13 Steve Harden 1/24/21

So, if you will, turn with me to Colossians 3. We’ll pick up in the book of Colossians where we were last. Shane sends his love and his greetings. He longs to be here. He is so excited to be among us and it is just the nature of the time that we live in. They’re fine, but they need to be careful and protect us as well. So, keep them in your prayers and send him a text and tell him you missed them. I know he’d be encouraged. So, Colossians 3, and we’re just going to look at one verse, verse 13. “¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Perhaps nothing sets apart a follower of Christ from his fellow men more than his willingness to forgive a wrong suffered. True forgiveness seldom comes easily. It’s hard. It’s difficult. It certainly doesn’t come naturally. But if you’re like me, even diagnosing that I am not forgiving is difficult at times. Generally, to diagnose myself and to help others diagnose themselves, there are two conditions that exist to show me if I’m harboring ill in my heart toward another.

On one extreme, I can just be really angry. They’ve wronged me. They’ve hurt me in some way. Maybe they’ve hurt one I love, and I’m angry and I want them to pay. They should pay. Anyone feel that way sometimes? They’ve wronged me. They’ve wronged one I love, which is even worse, and they should pay the piper for it. But then the second and kind of on the opposite end of the spectrum is when I feel that someone has harmed me or one I love, then there comes that self-pity, that feeling sorry for myself. Perhaps rehearsing over and over the wrong suffered, continually dwelling on the offense. Oftentimes, that, rather than the anger, is a dead giveaway that I haven’t forgiven as I should. Throwing a pity party in your own honor, whether it’s just inside your head or when you start to tell someone else and it becomes gossip, both are indicators that I need to do some business with God in terms of forgiveness.

Yet I find, in the pages of Scripture, that nothing so characterizes a follower of Jesus than a willingness to forgive another a wrong suffered. We recognize that God, through Christ, forgives us, and we long to follow Him and do what He does. You know, I don’t know of any of Christ’s words that hit me so strongly and so powerfully as when I read that toward the end of His experience on the cross, He says, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Now, here He is, He’s been betrayed by a friend, He’s been abandoned by His disciples, He’s been charged in a kangaroo court of crimes He did not commit, and convicted to death, tortured ruthlessly, and yet He held no hatred toward His tormentors and He says, “Father, forgive them.” I daresay that that is not natural, and I’m honest enough to know that that probably would not have been my response. But you know, we can say, ‘Well Steve, He was God and He doesn’t have a nature like you and me and you know, what was good for Him can’t be good for me.’ And yet, I look at Steven in Acts 7. He had gone before a court having committed no crime save preaching the gospel, and they condemned him to death by stoning. And do you remember what Steven said right before it says that he went to sleep? As the rocks hit his body, he was not filled with anger, resentment, or bitterness, even toward those who were throwing the rocks, but he sought their forgiveness. That’s not natural! That’s not normal. I don’t know that there is a higher, more noble, human virtue than forgiveness, because it so clearly reflects the character and the heart of God, Himself.

So today, I want to spend our time just laying some fundamentals, some groundwork for your understanding of forgiveness by giving you three ‘forgiveness is’ statements, okay? We can’t go very deep. There’s so much more I want to say, but before I do, I must emphasize that we must always base our thinking upon how we are to forgive on the way God has forgiven us.

God's forgiveness is the plum line on which we can test our thinking about forgiveness. Again, our text today, "forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." The question we must always put to ourselves is, 'What is God's forgiveness like?' and to define forgiveness in the way that God defines forgiveness, okay?

So, first of all, forgiveness is a choice. Forgiveness is a choice. Forgiveness is not a feeling or an emotion. I don't have to feel a certain way to forgive. God doesn't sit in heaven emoting forgiveness. It's a choice. He makes a choice to forgive. I love the story about Martin Luther, who was once asked whether he felt that his sins were forgiven. To that, Luther responded, "No! I don't feel like they're forgiven! But I know they're forgiven because God says so in His word." It's not about the emotion, and it's not about the feeling; it's about choosing to forgive. Forgiveness is an act of the will, a course of action, a choice! God chooses to remember our sins no more. It is a matter of His will. Isaiah 43 says, "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and I will not remember your sins." Now, this does not mean, when He says, "I will not remember your sins," it does not mean that He forgets them as if they never existed, that would not be accurate, right? God is omniscient and He knows all. He doesn't forget. There's no part of His creation that He doesn't know. There's never a time that God cannot remember anything about His creation. He knows. He never forgets, but He chooses not to hold it against you. One of the words that is translated 'forgiveness' in our English Bible communicates the idea of letting go or releasing. If you go to a dock and a boat is on a lake, if you'll untie it from the dock and the boat floats away, it means that you released it on to the lake. If somebody owes you a debt and you forgive that debt it means that it is no longer held to their account, you have released them from paying. See, forgiveness is an act of the will, a choice to release a debt. That is what God has done for us, therefore, that's what we do to those who have wronged us. Forgiveness is a choice.

But the second thing forgiveness is, forgiveness is a promise. Forgiveness is always future-oriented. It's looking forward. It is a promise not to hold onto a wrong committed against you. We see this again and again in the way that God forgives us. God promises that He will never hold our sin against us in the future. That's His promise. So, when I say, 'I forgive you,' I am making three promises. The first of which is I promise in the future that I am not going to bring this offense up again. I'm not going to bring it up to you to hold it against you. I promise that in the future, I will not discuss this offense with anyone else. I'm not going to go behind your back and gossip, and I promise I won't do that. When I say, 'I forgive you,' I promise that in the future I will seek not even to dwell on it myself. Those are powerful promises. Let me recommend a book by Ken Sande called "The Peacemaker." These are a part of how he expresses and how he says, this is forgiveness, and I think it is truly what the Bible teaches us. These three things, these three promises are what forgiveness is. When forgiveness is offered, you are foregoing any perceived right that you have to bring up and hold something in the past against another person.

That's why an apology is not forgiveness. Now, is there a reason to apologize sometimes? Sure. You step on my toe and you say, "Oh, sorry Steve." That wasn't sin, right? It may feel like it for a time, right, but it's not a sin. So, apologies sometimes are okay. But an apology and forgiveness are not the same. When I sin against someone and ask for forgiveness, I am seeking from that person a promise that they are not going to hold it against me. An apology doesn't ask for anything! It's just an expression of feelings. The matter has not been put to rest. Nothing has been solved. When I say, 'I have sinned against God, I have sinned against you, will you forgive me?' I am being very clear as to what I want. I am asking you, 'Please don't bring it

up against me again. Don't tell others. And don't dwell on it yourself to the best of your ability.' That's what I'm asking for. It's a big ask! God does not hold our sins against us anymore. He forgives us and He cleanses us of our unrighteousness.

But the third point forgiveness is, forgiveness is conditional. Forgiveness is conditional. Now that may sound strange to your ears; please listen. Again, Ken Sande in his book, "The Peacemaker," outlines the conditions whereby you can overlook an offense. There are two conditions that must be met for me to forgive my brother. The first one is 'May I overlook this offense?' There are times when you just overlook a wrong suffered, right? In Proverbs 19:11 it says, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense." Four conditions that you can ask yourself to determine if you may overlook an offense. First of all, if I ask myself, does this dishonor God? By letting this offense go, can I truly say that this doesn't harm God's reputation? If the answer is no, then perhaps I can overlook it. The second question I ask myself, 'Is this going to damage my relationship with my offender in the future?' If the answer is no, perhaps I can overlook it. If I overlook it, is it going to hurt others? Are others going to be hurt because I've overlooked this offense? If the answer is no, perhaps I can overlook it. Is it hurting my offender? Is it going to hurt him in the future? These four questions, if I can answer to is it dishonoring God, is it damaging our relationship, is it hurting others, or is it hurting my offender, if I can answer no to all of those, then I am free to overlook that offense. Forgive and go on. If I can honestly say no, then I am free to overlook the offense.

But the second condition where forgiveness is conditional is where there is no repentance. Let me ask you, is God's forgiveness unconditional? The answer is no. What is the condition of God's forgiveness? Well, we know it is repentance and faith. His forgiveness is reserved for those who repent. Right standing with God requires repentance and faith, so, in like manner, I must seek my brother's repentance. Luke 17:3 says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." We are called to always be and have an attitude of forgiveness, always standing ready to forgive our neighbor, always seeking to have that merciful attitude. Ready to forgive. But, granting forgiveness is a little different. It is conditional on the repentance of your offender. Remember that forgiveness is a promise not to bring it up again. Can you make that promise and forgive where there is no repentance? Not if you love your brother!

In the church, we have what is called "church discipline," and I know many of you are familiar with that term, it comes from Matthew 18, and there are steps laid out there in Matthew 18 that we do if a brother is going down the wrong path. I always say, church discipline is saying to my brother, 'I love you too much to allow you to go down that path,' right? Let me ask you, in terms of this conditional nature of forgiveness, the first step, if a brother wrongs me is, I go to him, right? And I say, 'You have wronged me.' The Bible calls it rebuke. You have wronged me in this way and if there is no repentance from my brother, what must I do then? Well, you know, from Matthew 18, if you're familiar with the text, you take two or three others. Let me ask you a question: if that forgiveness was unconditional and not conditional on repentance, you would go, you would rebuke, and regardless of what they do, you'd have to say, 'Okay, I forgive you,' and leave the man in his sin. You see, the reason why I say forgiveness is conditional, is I believe it is Biblical, but the reason is because I love my brother and I want him to be right with God. I always stand in an attitude and with an attitude to forgive, ready to forgive. I stand ready to forgive you, but there are times without repentance that we have to say, 'I stand ready to forgive you. I want to forgive you. Please repent.'

Three truths regarding forgiveness. Forgiveness is a choice. Forgiveness is a promise. Forgiveness is conditional. Now, I am not going to stand before you and say, 'Yeah, this is a no-

brainer. It's easy, just go and do your thing.' Because I know it's not that way. I know it's hard. And the more you've been offended, and the more deeply you've been offended, the harder these things are. Sometimes it's even hard to understand what I should do. Sometimes forgiveness is pretty straightforward and easy to understand. I know what I should do to obey. And other times it's just hard to comprehend. It's complicated. Relationships are difficult. And I also know that there is a great struggle inside when someone has hurt you deeply. I'm not making light of that. Please understand the pastor and shepherd within me. I know, and I've walked, and I've wept with you. Sometimes it's even hard to understand what is required of you. Situations are messy! Sometimes it takes me awhile to figure out what the right response is going to be and what it should be. How to have an attitude of repentance if I've wronged someone and the attitude of forgiveness if they've wronged me.

But the place to start is always the cross of Jesus Christ. The place to start to understand and to comprehend and to work through the complicated issues around this forgiveness is how God in Jesus has forgiven me and as His son, as His daughter, I'm to follow in His steps. I think we must acknowledge to our Father when there are times when we just really don't know what to do, how to approach the situation. Ask Him for clarity. Ask Him to grant you His desires for the situation and sometimes just grant you the ability to forgive, to choose to forgive your offender.

One of my favorite stories about forgiveness comes from Corrie Ten Boom. Many of you know who she is. She was imprisoned with her family by the Nazis for giving aid to the Jews during World War 2. Her elderly father and her beloved sister, Betsy, died in the camps. They were brutally treated. Corrie survived and after the war she traveled throughout the world speaking about God's love and forgiveness. In one of her books she writes of God's power to grant grace to her to forgive. She was speaking in Germany and I will read her account. She said: "It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former SS man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbrück. He was the first of our actual jailors who I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there: the room full of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsy's pain-blanching face. He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fräulein!" he said. "To think that as you say, He has washed my sins away!" And his hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people of Bloomindale about the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man. Was I going to ask for more? 'Lord Jesus,' I prayed, 'Forgive me and help me to forgive Him!' I tried to smile, and I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing. Not the slightest spark of warmth or charity, and so, again, I breathed a silent prayer: 'Jesus, I cannot forgive Him! Give me your forgiveness!' And as I took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while unto my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. So, I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than it is on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on Him. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love, Himself."

When we struggle to forgive, when things are hard and we don't know how to forgive, it is at that moment we call upon the name of Jesus and ask Him to forgive through us and to bring the power and the ability to forgive to us. Oh, may God grant to you the grace to forgive your debtors, even as your Father has forgiven you. Let's pray.