

Helping Others with Forgiveness

Colossians 3:12-15

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[I am grateful for two books in the preparation of thoughts for this message: *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, by John MacArthur, and *Pursuing Peace*, by Robert Jones.]

Dirty Harry takes aim at the perpetrator and, begging him to flee, states, “Go ahead. Make my day.” This is the moment that defines dirty Harry to us at the cinema. He is a man’s man. He is a law man. He takes things into his own hands. He gets the job done. He will achieve personal fulfillment if he can kill this criminal.

That is the attitude that our society has in response to the behavior of one another. Disgruntled employees buy illegal weapons to storm their former employer and randomly gun down those around them. Road rage is evident where even the smallest of irritation brings on screaming drivers, horns honking, and digits flying in a pseudo-sign language we all understand. Gangs maintain their superiority through drive-by shootings. And society seems to be plagued with guilt, depression, and anger.

I spent some time a few weeks ago thinking through old cases of the people that I have formally counseled here at Clearcreek Chapel. In the past three years alone, I have counseled over 600 hours and in looking back I discovered that almost all issues for which people came for help, were in some way related to the issue of forgiveness.

As you come alongside others with help, the gospel, and Scripture, you need to understand that most people have no idea what the Bible teaches about repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

To think we could cover everything we need to cover in the next 30 minutes would be pie-in-the-sky thinking. But I hope this evening we can look at Scripture that helps us get a great handle on what it looks like to forgive one another.

Why is this so important? It is important because the gospel itself is a message about God’s forgiveness.

God has set an incredibly high standard for us in his forgiveness of us. God is the supreme forgiver. And we depend every day on his ongoing forgiveness for our sins. The very least we can do is imitate his forgiveness in our dealings with one another.

What does that Christlike forgiveness look like? Listen to Luke 23:33-34, “And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

One author wrote,

If anyone ever had good reason not to forgive, it was the Lord Jesus. He was the ultimate and the only true victim; totally innocent of any wrongdoing. He never wronged another individual, never spoke a lie, never committed an unkind or unloving act, never broke the

law of God, never had an impure thought. He never yielded to any evil temptation whatsoever.

Scripture says he committed no sin nor was any deceit found in his mouth. He had been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. He is holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners.

No one was less worthy of death than he...

Forgiveness was what filled his heart, not condemnation or revenge.¹

And so, our model is to mimic Christ in our forgiveness to others, “just as Christ has forgiven us.”

What does this look like?

The Bible talks about two different categories of forgiveness: God’s forgiveness of us (vertical) and our forgiveness of others (horizontal).

But as important, if not more important than different categories of forgiveness, is our attitude toward forgiveness.

Turn with me to Colossians 3:12-15. Read it with me.

There are very few things in life that I truly dislike. One of those however is getting dressed in the morning. It’s not that I would rather walk around in gym shorts and a T-shirt all day. It’s not that I see getting dressed in the morning as a waste of precious moments I could spend somewhere else. In fact, it’s probably not the idea of getting dressed at all.

What I really dislike about getting dressed is picking out which clothes to wear. To help with that stressful decision, I intentionally have very few of them. I also have something great going for me and her name is Jayne. On important occasions when I need to look just right, she selects the right clothing for me.

When it comes to forgiveness, in Colossians 3, God has laid out for us what we need to wear. And what I find interesting, and many of you women may not like this, is that the clothing God has chosen for me to wear in Colossians 3 is old. It is not trendy. It is the clothing that Jesus himself wore that God now hands down to us.

Look again with me at verse 12-14. Now look at verse 15.

The peace that Paul has in mind in verse 15 flows from the attitudes he describes in verses 12 – 14.

Dick Lucas summarizes it this way,

This exhortation is sometimes misunderstood as a subjective guide to decision-making. Paul is not speaking here of an inner sense of peace as God’s gift to those who are in his will: this would make little sense of the second half of the sentence which must control the interpretation, especially if this interpretation is to be kept in line with the context.

¹ John Macarthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, page 31.

It is inconceivable that those who share with one another the benefits of that great peace – making work on the cross should live with any hatred or contempt for each other in their hearts. The Christian congregation should be a realm of peace just because every Christian is totally committed to the rule of peace. When Christ rules in the heart, his peace will rule in the Fellowship.²

Our text gives us a number of godly attitudes that are foundational to forgiveness.

Before we look at those, we need to make sure we understand them in the context in which they are written.

Look with me at Colossians 3:1-11.

In the first four verses of this chapter Paul reminds us of our new spiritual position in Christ. We died with him, we were raised with him, and we will gloriously appear with him when he returns. In verses one and two we see that because we are united to Jesus, we fix our hearts and minds on him. Then in verses five through 11, we put off all remnants of our remaining sin.

The list of sins isn't a comprehensive list of all sins but does reflect the attitudes and practices of our old nature. In contrast, Paul commands us to live out our new life patterned after the image of Christ.

That leads us to our original text this evening beginning in verse 12, where Paul cites three descriptions of our identity that are foundational to the qualities required to make peace and forgive. They are God's chosen people, they are holy and they are greatly loved.

Why do these three things matter to us when it comes to forgiveness?

It should encourage us greatly that God chose us before the foundation of the world. It should also humble us when we realize that this was not based on anything good in us, but solely because of God's sheer pleasure and unconditional grace. And so:

- Who cares if your teacher doesn't like you or your coworkers criticize you? God has chosen you.
- Why are you jealous that your friends are married and you are not, or your marriage isn't everything you think it should be? Jesus Christ is your life.
- Why does it matter so much that your boss ignores you? God has promoted you from death to life.
- What about the bitterness you feel after your church bypassed you or didn't take the idea that you had for certain ministry? You are headed for spectacular glory eternally.³

Next, you are holy. In this context holy simply means that you are set apart for God's specific use. You are bought with a price and because of that high price paid for you God sets you apart for his specific use in the world.

² Dick Lucas, *Fullness and Freedom: The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, Pages 153-154.

³ These bullets all come from Page 109 in Robert Jones book, *Pursuing Peace*.

Thirdly, God loves you. We are dearly loved through Jesus death. Because of Christ's work on the cross we know the everlasting love of God in a way that no other human being can. God loves us even though he knows the very worst about us. He doesn't love us because we are good people or because we are loving or lovely. God loves us because he wants to love us, for reasons known only to him. The cross is the ultimate result of that love.

What additional attitudes does Paul set forth here in this text? In keeping with my clothing illustration, the first thing we see in verse 12 is:

We are to clothe ourselves with compassion. How do we define compassion? I once read it defined by three ingredients:

- First, compassion sees the suffering person
- Number two compassion feels tender pity in response to the suffering of that person
- Thirdly compassion asks to alleviate that suffering when possible.

And so, as antithetical as this may sound to some of you, godly compassion feels the needs of others and seeks to help - even if it is the one sinning against you.

We are to clothe ourselves with kindness. By showing kindness we show mercy and do good, even to people who don't deserve it. Sometimes even to people who deserve the opposite. Often our hearts and initial response is:

- Enough is enough
- That's the last time I'll do anything for him
- It's time to set up boundaries. No one will ever take advantage of me like that again.

Love is patient. Love is kind.

We are to clothe ourselves with humility. Human beings are selfish and arrogant people. Humility is a difficult trait. In order to be humble, the Christian must recognize that all we have comes from God and that I am absolutely dependent on him both as my creator and my redeemer.

What does this look like when it comes to forgiveness? It means that we completely trust in a God that allows others to be honored above ourselves. It is how Philippians 2:3 plays out, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

One author writing on humility states, "It means taking the last seat as a guest at someone's dinner table, letting another car switch lanes in front of you, and waiting for others to go to the line first at a church potluck meal. Since God is in complete control, I don't have to be first. I can lower myself, let others have the top spot, and know he will provide for me in his way, in his time."

We are to clothe ourselves with meekness. In this context meekness simply means gentleness. It doesn't mean weak but goes hand-in-hand with humility. Remember in Matthew 11 where Jesus states about himself, "I am gentle and humble in heart." (Matthew 11:28-29)

Jesus is describing his character. It is the character of Christ that we must imitate.

We are to clothe ourselves with patience. The word Paul uses here translated patience means to be long-suffering and long tempered toward those who irritate us. It is the idea of bearing with people and not growing angry, bitter, irritated, or annoyed with them even when they are acting like fools.

We might describe this in our modern vernacular as taking people as they are or accepting them as they are.

How well do you show self-restraint toward people who provoke you?

We are to clothe ourselves with forbearance. This is what we see at the beginning of verse 13 when we read, "bearing with one another".

It simply means relational patience. Paul is being very honest here as he assumes that people will annoy us and that relationships will become tense. When we teach about conflict we begin with the truths that conflict is inevitable. Paul knows, and Jesus knows, that until Christ returns there will be problems in his church.

Jesus knows that parents and teens will frustrate one another in their communication. Jesus knows that husbands will leave their dirty socks on the floor. Jesus knows that there will be times that wives or husbands will want to talk about something, and the other spouse will not be ready.

Jesus knows that sometimes church leaders will want to do things differently than others in the church or even other leaders that used to lead certain ministries. And so, in order to be forgiving we must learn how to bear with one another in our daily lives.

We are to clothe ourselves with Christlike forgiveness. Not only will people irritate us; they will sin against us. And so, Paul commands us in verse 13 to forgive each other as the Lord Jesus has forgiven us.

We are to forgive at the horizontal level in the exact same way that Christ for gives in the vertical level. What might this look like?

- God's forgiveness was decisive. It was based on his decision more than his emotion.
- God declared his forgiveness. It was spoken and open, and God made it clear in his Word.
- And God promises not ever to hold our sins against us, but to graciously hold them against Jesus as our substitute.

Turn back a page or two and look with me at Colossians 1:13 – 14.
Now turn to chapter 2 and read with me verses 13 to 14.

You see, forgiveness is a major theme in the book of Colossians. He forgave us all our sins; therefore, we should forgive others their sins.

Finally, we are to clothe ourselves with Love. Paul concludes his list in verses 14 and 15. There is a priority in love. There is a priority in our self-sacrificial giving for another person's best. It is the supreme relational grace in our lives. Maybe we could even call it the belt that holds all the other clothing together.

Conclusion

The qualities we have read this evening are not just in our character qualities or individual virtues. They are examples of God's incredible grace to us that enable us to live in relationship with others. They are not just internal qualities we may possess but are made to be displayed toward others.

Reflect and Respond

How can we cultivate these attitudes?

- Study passages in the Bible that picture the quality with which you are struggling. Each of these eight attitudes is perfectly and supremely demonstrated in God, especially in the Gospels. What does God's compassion look like in Exodus chapter 2 or Nehemiah 9?
- Pray. Given the high profile that God assigns to these qualities we can certainly be assured that as we pray for wisdom, he will grant it.
- Identify, confess, and repent of any opposite attitudes you display. For example, in terms of cultivating compassion, where do you see yourself looking down upon, ignoring, or distancing yourself from those who suffer, especially those who suffer the consequences of their own sins? Where do you find yourself judging those who oppose you?
- Enlist prayer, counsel, and accountability from fellow believers. Admit to them your need for greater compassion. Invite them to pray for you. Ask their personal advice.
- Let God's grace propel you. Continually remember you are chosen, a holy, loved, and forgiven.