

Forgive One Another
Ephesians 4:32

The hospital was unusually quiet that bleak January evening, quiet and still like the air before a storm. A nurse stood at her station on the 7th floor and glanced at the clock. It was 9 p.m. She threw a stethoscope around her neck and headed for room 712, last room on the hall. Room 712 had a new patient, Mr. Williams. He was a man all alone, a man strangely silent about his family.

The nurse entered his room. Mr. Williams looked up eagerly, but dropped his eyes when he saw it was only the nurse. She pressed the stethoscope over his chest and listened. Strong, slow, even beating, just what she wanted to hear. There seemed little indication he had suffered a slight heart attack a few hours earlier.

He looked up from his starched white bed and began to speak – “Nurse, would you...” but hesitated, tears filling his eyes. Once before he had started to ask the nurse a question, but changed his mind. She touched his arm, waiting. He brushed away a tear. He spoke again, this time finishing his question.

“Would you call my daughter? Tell her I’ve had a slight heart attack. You see, I live alone and she is the only family I have.”

His respirations suddenly sped up. She turned up his nasal oxygen. Studying his face she said she would call the daughter. He gripped the sheets and pulled himself forward, his face tense with urgency. “Will you call her right away—as soon as you can?”

He was breathing fast, too fast. Patting his shoulder the nurse said she would call her the very first thing. She flipped off the light. Room 712 was dark except for a faint night light under the sink. Reluctant to leave the nurse moved through the shadowy silence over to the window. She looked out through the cold pane into the parking lot where

a foggy mist curled around the hospital. “Nurse,” he called, “could you get me a pencil and paper?” She dug out a scrap of yellow paper and a pen from her pocket and set it on the bedside table.

She walked back to the nurse’s station and sat in a squeaky swivel chair by the phone. Mr. Williams daughter was listed as next of kin on the chart. Calling information, she got her number and dialed. A soft voice answered. The nurse explained who she was and the reason for her call.

“No!” she screamed into the phone startling the nurse.

“He’s not dying is he?”

The nurse explained that for the moment he was stable, trying hard to be convincing. There was silence.

“You must not let him die!” she said. Her voice was so utterly compelling that the nurse’s hand trembled holding onto the phone. She then told the daughter that he was getting the best care. “But you don’t understand,” she replied, “My daddy and I haven’t spoken in almost a year. We had a terrible argument on my 21st birthday over my boyfriend. I ran out of the house and I haven’t been back. All these months I’ve wanted to go to him for forgiveness. The last thing I said to him was, ‘I hate you.’”

Her voice cracked and the nurse heard great agonizing sobs. She sat listening, tears burning in her own eyes. Here was a father and a daughter, so lost to each other. The nurse then thought of her own father many miles away. It had been a long time since she had told him she loved him.

As the daughter struggled to control her tears, the nurse prayed asking God that this daughter would find forgiveness.

“I’m coming. Now! I’ll be there in 30 minutes,” she said. She hung up. The nurse began to busy herself with paperwork, but couldn’t concentrate. Her mind was on room 712. Nearly in a run she hurried down the hall and opened the door.

Mr. Williams lay unmoving. Reaching for his pulse there was none.

“Code 99. Room 712. Code 99. Stat.”

The alert shot through the hospital within seconds. Mr. Williams had had a cardiac arrest. She immediately began CPR silently praying. The doors burst open and a team of doctors and nurses took over. Nothing. Not a beat. Her own heart was pounding. She prayed again. “God, don’t let it end like this, not in bitterness and hatred. His daughter is coming. Let her find peace.”

They continued to work, but there was nothing. Mr. Williams had died. A nurse reached over and unplugged the oxygen. One by one they all left leaving the place grim and silent. The situation made the outside seem all the more cold and dark. How would she be able to face the daughter? When she finally left the room entering the hallway, there she was, up against the wall. A doctor was just telling her the stark news. Deep hurt was etched on her face.

The nurse took her by the hand and led her to the nurse’s lounge. Nothing was said for a time. The nurse broke the painful silence explaining how deeply sorry she was. The daughter responded. “I never hated him, you know. I loved him,” she said.

The nurse again prayed that God would help her.

Whirling toward the nurse she wanted to see her father. The nurse wasn’t sure she wanted to have this young woman experience any more pain, but wrapped her arm around the daughter and together walked down to room 712. She pushed the door open and together walked over to the bed.

Reaching her father she buried her head in the sheets. It was a sad good-bye. Backing up against the bedside table the nurse’s hand felt the scrap of paper. She picked it up and read the note. Her hands were now trembling as she thrust it toward the daughter to read.

“My dearest Janie, I forgive you. I pray you will forgive me. I know that you love me. I love you, too. Daddy”

Her face grew radiant. Her eyes glistened with peace. She hugged the scrap of paper. The nurse whispered a prayer of thanks to God. A snowflake hit the window and melted away. Life seemed as fragile as a snowflake, but relationships, sometimes as fragile as snowflakes, can be mended together again, but there is not a moment to spare.

The nurse crept from her room and hurried to the phone. She would call her father and tell him, “I love you.”

It may be today that you know all too well the pain of this story. You have felt the sting of harsh words from someone close to you, words filled with hatred, mocking words, abusive words, lying or deceitful words.

Maybe it wasn’t harsh words but rather angry actions that drove a deep rift between you and someone else. They meant it to be intentional, to cause pain, to sever ties. They meant to leave you wounded, hurting, wondering, alone. You are now left with pondering how to respond. The person was a friend, a relative, a spouse, a child, a co-worker, a neighbor. But then, maybe it wasn’t intentional. Maybe it was something done or said that you perceived to be intentional. Regardless, it still left you wounded, even angry. Whether or not it was intentional you begin to dwell on it and seeds of resentment, bitterness, and retaliation emerge. It’s been said that the heaviest thing to carry is a grudge.

Maybe that’s not it at all. Perhaps it was you who caused the hurt. In either case how should you respond? The reality is that in some way every one of us knows all too well somewhere along the way a broken relationship, one that needs mending, forgiveness that needs to be offered or accepted.

Someone has said that there are no harder words to say than these nine words:

“I was wrong.” “I am sorry.” “Please forgive me.”

There are two specific passages which speak to our one another admonition today. They are found in Ephesians 4:32 and Colossians 3:13. Both say that we are to FORGIVE one another.

“And be ye kind, one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another even as God, for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.” Ephesians 4:32

“Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any; even as Christ forgave you so also do ye.” Colossians 3:13

I have both been hurt and I have hurt others. These passages leave no room to justify an unforgiving spirit toward anyone else; no matter what it is they may have done to us or we to them – none. We are commanded to forgive.

Let’s consider these three points today.

The meaning of forgiveness

The means of forgiveness

The measure of forgiveness

I. THE MEANING OF FORGIVENESS

In his Bible dictionary, Merrill Unger states that forgiveness is one of the most widely misunderstood doctrines in the Bible.

Lewis Sperry Chafer in his Systematic Theology adds that to understand the teaching of forgiveness in the Bible will go a long way in clarifying other doctrines found in Scripture. He continues by stating that “Forgiveness on the part of one person toward another is the simplest of duties, whereas forgiveness on the part of God toward man proves the most complicated and costly of undertakings.”

After you hear what he says I think you too, will

agree that human forgiveness while not trivial in itself, is simple compared to the forgiveness God offers us. He makes the distinction between the two in this way: “As seen in the Bible, there is an analogy between forgiveness and debt and, in the case of that forgiveness which God exercises, the debt must be paid – though it is paid by Himself – before forgiveness can be extended. Thus it is learned that while human forgiveness only [forgives] a penalty or charge divine forgiving must require complete satisfaction for the demands of God’s outraged holiness first of all.”

In both the Old and New Testament forgiveness refers to the state or the act of pardon, remission of sin, or restoration of a friendly relationship. Old Testament passages make it clear that forgiveness depends on a just payment of the penalty for sin. The sacrificial system was a picture of the just payment that would be made by Christ when He took our sins on Himself and shed His blood as a covering for those sins. Only in the sacrifice could sin be forgiven.

Wycliffe’s Bible Encyclopedia states “Forgiveness as a relationship between God and man depends upon the divine attributes of righteousness, love, and mercy, and is based upon the work of God in providing a suitable sacrifice.”

When we come to the New Testament there are two Greek words used that translate forgiveness. The first means to send forth or send away and is used in reference to the act of God by which, through Christ, He sends our sins away, to be dismissed or released. That is clearly stated in the Old Testament as well and then in the New Testament.

Psalms 103:1-3a, 12 “Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities...As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.”

When we say that God forgets our sin when they are forgiven does not mean that God has somehow developed amnesia. It means that God no longer holds it against us.

Matthew 9:2 "...Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven."

Luke 23:34 "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Romans 4:7 "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered."

I John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

I John 2:12 "I write to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake."

The other Greek word means to bestow a favor unconditionally. It has the basic meaning to give and its root word is translated grace. When we think of grace we understand it to mean something given that is not deserved or earned. Salvation is by grace.

In the same vein we can then understand that forgiveness is something that is freely given which is not deserved or earned.

This is the word Paul uses in describing the act of our forgiving one another. Paul uses both Greek words in Ephesians 4:32 to speak of how we are to forgive others and how God has forgiven us.

To better understand its meaning we need to consider the means of forgiveness.

II. THE MEANS OF FORGIVENESS

Look again at our verse. "...forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

You might ask how has God forgiven us in Christ?

Acts 13:38-39

How is God able to forgive us?

He does so for Christ's sake. Charles Spurgeon provides some insight on this point. For the sake of the atonement Christ offered on our behalf God is able to forgive.

Because of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, God is able to pass by our sin. His shed blood has covered or cleansed us of sin. "The negative and degrading effects of our sin are removed through the grace of God. Through the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross for us, the sin of everyone who would ever believe in Christ was cancelled. That cancellation is eternal in its consequence, even though sin is still present in the temporal sense. We are delivered from its penalty, but not from its power in the temporal sense." That's why we still sin and still need to confess our sin. When we are forgiven by God because of or for the sake of Christ three important things will happen to the believer.

Justification is the process of being delivered once and for all from the *penalty of sin*. This is a one-time act where the sinner is made holy and righteous in God's eyes. Our sin nature has been exchanged for the righteousness of Christ.

II Corinthians 5:21 "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

Sanctification is the process of being delivered from the *power of sin*. Only through the power of God's Spirit and His Word are we able to resist the power of sin in our daily lives.

"Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his ways? By taking heed thereto according to Thy Word...Thy Word have I hid in my life that I might not sin against You." Psalm 119:9, 11

Glorification is the process of being delivered from the *presence of sin*. One day when we stand forever in God's presence, the presence of sin will once and

for all be absent. It will have no more claim or power over us. It will forever be banished from us. Each of these is made possible through forgiveness and the cancellation of sin because of Christ's shed blood. For the sake of Christ refers to sacrifice.

"For the sake of Christ" also refers to Christ as our representative. We are born in sin because of our representative Adam. But Christ as our representative of righteousness offered Himself as a sacrifice to God as payment for the debt of sin that we owed. Spurgeon writes "God for Christ's sake has accepted us in Him, has forgiven us in Him, and looks upon us with infinite and changeless love in Him... In fact, He treats us as He would treat His Son."

*Him and then the sinner see,
Look through Jesus' wounds on me.*
Christ is our representative.

"For the sake of Christ" also refers to the great love God has for Christ, a love that He has for us because we are in Christ. God's love and forgiveness toward us are a way of honoring the Son for His Sacrifice for our sin.

There is no question about God's forgiveness for Christ's sake.

His forgiveness is *unlimited* in that it will never reach a limit. God will never say "If you do that one more time, I'll not forgive."

His forgiveness is *unconditional*. There is no sin to great that He cannot forgive. But you might ask then about the unpardonable sin to which I would qualify what I just said by saying that God cannot forgive the heart that continually rejects Him. While God is patient and unwilling that anyone should perish, it goes without saying then that there will be those who choose to remain in rebellion against God and refuse to accept His offer of salvation. God cannot forgive the unrepentant heart. They must by virtue of their rejection perish, but for

those who repent and believe there is forgiveness and it is unconditional and unlimited. It is given *unreservedly* without hesitation. And because Christ's sacrifice was accepted as payment for the debt of sin God's forgiveness is given undeniably.

*Because the sinless Savior died,
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the Just, is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon Me.*

Growing up at Camp, Uncle Johnnie would lead us in singing this little chorus:

*My sins are gone
And will not be remembered,
God in mercy tenderly forgives.
He lives within, assuring my salvation
giving confirmation that his Word is true,
Someday heaven I will see, all its joys forever
share,
But until that eternity, I will tell it everywhere
It's real, it's sure, His promise is secure
Since he said it's so, by faith I know...
My sins are gone.*

That's God's forgiveness – 100% guaranteed.

Let me illustrate God's forgiveness this way.

A couple married for 15 years began having more than usual disagreements. They wanted their marriage to work and agreed to an idea the wife had. For one month they would drop a slip in a "fault" box noting all daily irritations. The wife was diligent in her efforts writing things like "leaving the top of the jelly jar off", "leaving wet towels on the bathroom floor", "leaving dirty socks on the floor instead of putting them in the hamper". She did this for a month. The husband also put his slips in the box. After dinner at the end of the 30 days they swapped boxes and began to read the little slips of paper. The husband carefully reflected on each thing he had done wrong that caused his wife irritation. Then the wife opened her box and began reading. Every slip was the same. The

message read “I love you.”

In spite of all we have done God still tells us He loves us, the proof is to point to His Son who died for all those things we have done against God.

God has forgiven us all our sins – for Christ’s sake. God’s demonstration of forgiveness toward us is our example and the means by which we in turn can and must forgive others who offend us.

When we consider all that He has forgiveness us we can never say that what someone has done to us is too great a thing for us to forgive. We need to remember that in Christ, God forgave ALL our sin, every one. If there was even just one sin that He could not forgive then we would be destined to perish for eternity in hell, because just one sin condemns us.

Marghanita Laski was a well-known secular humanist and novelist. Just before she died in 1988 she showed a surprising moment of candor during a television interview stating: “What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me.”

So we come to a command like the one before us. What do we do? How do we obey this admonition to forgive as God forgave us in Christ?

III. THE MEASURE OF FORGIVENESS

Dr. Dan Allendar in his book *The Wounded Heart* says: “Love is essentially a movement of grace to embrace those who have sinned against us.”

The place to begin in order to forgive is to ask whether or not we love others as we should. If we are going to forgive we must begin with love for others. Love is the key ingredient. Remember love is a fruit of the Spirit.

Paul reminds us in I Corinthians 13:5 that love keeps no records of wrongs. Rehashing all the

wrong things someone has done means we really haven’t forgiven the person. Continuing to bring them up and dwelling on them is the breeding ground for bitterness and anger. The more we think about the wrong and the person who did the wrong the more consumed we are with revenge. Just a couple verses earlier Paul told us to get rid of bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander.

If we don’t have love we cannot forgive, we will not forgive and we can come up with all kinds of reasons why we can’t, won’t, or don’t. See if some of these excuses sound familiar.

“It happened a long time ago, I’m sure they must have forgotten about it by now.”

“The person has moved away and I don’t know how to get hold of them.”

“It was such a small offense. It seems so trivial.”

“Things have gotten better between us, there really isn’t a need.”

“No one’s perfect.”

“I shouldn’t have to because they started it.”

“They won’t understand.”

“They hurt me too deeply.”

“They don’t know the pain they put me through.”

“Making it right will involve some financial restitution and I just don’t have it right now.”

“They won’t be forgiving in return” or “I’m just certain they won’t forgive me so why go through the bother.”

“I’ll do it at a more convenient time.”

“The other person was mostly wrong.”

“If I purpose not to do it again, isn’t that enough?”

“They’re not a Christian – what will they think?”

Matthew 5:23-24

Matthew 18:15

At the core is the idea of seeking forgiveness, seeking reconciliation with someone whether it was you or the other person who did the wrong. We cannot worship God properly when we are unforgiving or have not gone to be forgiven.

Peter continues in that passage by asking Jesus how many times a person should be forgiven. Is seven times enough? The Jewish Rabbis taught that a person only needed to forgive someone three times. After that you never had to forgive them even stating that it was ok to hold a grudge. Peter thought by doubling it and adding one more for good measure certainly went beyond reasonable expectation. Jesus then answered Peter's question with a story about a man who owed his master a tremendous debt. It was insanely huge. He could never pay it off even in multiple life times. But the master had pity on him and cancelled the debt.

I posted on my Facebook page a news story about a Benton Harbor man, a black man, who was falsely accused by a police officer of drug dealing. The man spent four years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. The police officer eventually lost his job because of falsification of documentation. They found themselves at the same coffee shop the same day looking for work. They both got hired. The man falsely accused of the crime forgave the ex-cop and they are now good friends. It was made possible because the convicted man found Christ.

There is tremendous freeing power in forgiveness both for the one wronged and the one who did the wrong. Whether the other person accepts your forgiveness or not does not get us off the hook. Whether or not the other person comes asking to be forgiven does not justify our continued ill will toward them. We are to forgive.

But we can only do so through God's help. Phillip Yancey states that forgiveness is unnatural. It's not in our nature. We would rather seek revenge or at the least secretly hope that something bad will happen to the person.

Forgiveness is possible only because we have a new nature in Christ. But remember this: if we refuse to forgive someone, we are defiantly disobedient to

God who has given us this command to forgive one another, the same way God has forgiven us.

Without love there can be no forgiveness.

Without forgiveness there can be no real joy, no peace, no reconciliation, no unity.

Romans 12:20-21 offers us some insight into a step we can take to be forgiving. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Doing good to them demonstrates love and forgiveness toward them.

Of course living the fruit of the Spirit and following the guidelines of love from I Corinthians 13 will go a long way in developing a forgiving spirit toward one another.

"Forgiving a person is "clearing his record" with us and transferring the responsibility for any punishment to God. ("Vengeance is Mine", says the Lord, 'I will repay.'") Forgiveness will make it possible for us to have the same openness toward him after he offends us as we had before he offended us. It is using the hurts of others as the basis of demonstrating Christ's love back to them."

Take some time and ask yourself if you need to forgive someone and then take the necessary steps to seek them out.

Take some time and ask yourself if there is someone who needs to forgive you and then take the necessary steps to seek them out.

Restoring a relationship renews your worship.

If we are really aware of how much God has forgiven us, we will forgive others. We are to forgive because God has forgiven us. So, go and do it before it's too late.