

Forgiveness

Key Passage

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:31-32).

Introduction

It doesn't take us long to realize that, although the church is God's beloved bride, she's far from perfect. In conversion, God resurrects us from dead sinners to living saints (Eph. 2:1-4). But that's only the start of this renovation project. We are new creatures, yes, and he has prepared good works for us to walk in (2:10), but we still have to *learn* to walk in them. We've been given a brand-new closet full of clothes, but we've got to actually put them on. We've got to learn, now, to renew our minds with truth, to put off what once corrupted us, and to put on these new qualities we've been given in Christ (4:21-24).

But, if our change is progressive, that means sin still lingers in the church. You and I bring our own sin into it when we become members. As much as I wish it weren't the case, every new member that we bring into our congregation, each new person we're so excited to have join, every single one of them has sin baggage. Each of them has areas of struggle. And guess what? The other members of the church do, too! We all still have sin baggage.

This stark reality sometimes gets presented in a casual and almost harmless kind of way: “You're sinful, I'm sinful—everyone has problems! Let's just be open and honest and transparent. Our church is a hospital for sinners. We're real, etc.” Yes, I get the sentiment. Transparency and honesty are graces, and the church is definitely where sinners come and find life-giving truth! But it's not merely that I have a non-contagious disease, like cancer, that only affects me. It's more like I'm wrapped with explosives. If my sin detonates, not only will it blow off my leg, but the shrapnel will hit yours, too.

And no doubt, you've likely experienced this in the church. If you haven't, then you're likely not in any meaningful relationships with others. The fact that we are growing together means there will be growing pains. There will be offenses, hurts, misunderstandings, annoyances, differences, and even betrayals. We will sin against each other.

Now, up to this point, you're probably in agreement, at least in theory. But it's amazing to me how so many people have the opposite expectations in practice. We expect to go to church, to enter into deep relationships with others, and not feel the effects of sin. We think no one should say anything that hurts us. No one should do anything that offends us. No one should act unkindly or inconsiderately. We readily admit to struggling with sin, but the moment someone else's sin affects us, we don't know what to do. We think something is really wrong. We take

offense. So, we'll leave a church without trying to work through anything. We'll panic and request a different roommate rather than learning to handle it God's way. Or, like we see in the passage before us, we harbor the offense and begin resenting and gossiping and slandering, or even fighting and quarreling about it.

So, is our sin a threat? Yes. But God wants us to realize something else in this study. Do you realize that when you're sinned against, God is providing you the greatest opportunity to imitate him? Get this: we are never more like God than when we respond to sin with his kindness, with lavish forgiveness, with proactive reconciliation. And in this way, the sin that threatens our unity is hijacked by the Lord and used to actually promote our unity. How? As we learn to respond to sin with lavish forgiveness.

This is exactly where Paul goes in our text. It's how he's going to equip us. In this passage, Paul continues to spell out for us the kind of qualities that will promote healthy life within the body, strong unity in the church and in our families. And he knows there's nothing that does this like forgiveness. If our sin causes broken bones, forgiveness is the cast that mends it and causes it to grow back even stronger. So, it's vital we understand Paul's brief instructions and apply them when we're sinned against. Paul wants us to learn to forgive like God forgives, so he provides two vital instructions about forgiveness.

Paul knows that when we're sinned against, we're tempted to respond wrongly, in a way that detracts from God's glory and causes much more harm. So, his first instruction to us has to do with identifying and putting away those wrong and sinful responses. Paul says we must abandon bitterness that has injurious effects.

1. Abandon Bitterness that Injures (4:31).

"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice" (Eph. 4:31).

Paul lists a cluster of sins that are all connected by the thread of anger. He seems to start internally, with bitterness and ends with it coming out of our mouths in clamor (lit. 'shouting') and slander. And what's important to note is that all these sinful qualities are typically a *response* to being sinned against. It's how our old selves chose to *respond* when we were wronged (either a perceived wrong or an actual wrong).

What sins specifically does Paul tell us to abandon?

- a. "Bitterness" – This is resentment or hatred in our hearts. When someone sins against us, and we don't deal with it biblically, resentment and bitterness take root in our hearts. It's like a pair of sunglasses that casts an embittered shadow on everything else we see. And you can be sure it will spill out of your heart. This spill over often looks like various forms of wrath and anger.

- b. “Wrath and anger” – Whether it’s a quick, explosive outburst or an internal and slow-burn type of seething, resentment feeds wrath and anger in our lives. Then Paul gives some very specific displays of this anger.
- c. “Clamor” – This is literally the shouting and fighting that happens over interpersonal conflict: the sharp comments, the biting sarcasm, the interpersonal jabs, the manipulative arguments. You want to injure another person with your words as a form of punishment. Sadly, we’ve all done this and experienced the resulting devastation at some level. When our words give vent to the anger in our hearts, we incite more anger, more destruction, more injury. And not only does it impact the person you’re angry at, but it will also spill out more widely to those around you as you slander that person.
- d. “Slander” is simply any kind of speech that injures the reputation of another person. It flows out of being resentfully angry. You want others to share your low view of that person because of the offense they caused you, so you tear them down in slander with injurious speech. Yet, sadly, it doesn’t end with speech.
- e. “All malice” – This refers to the inner attitude or outward action that intends to harm another person. It’s calculated, and, I think, the ultimate expression of the embittered heart, where Paul started at the beginning of this list. It has murderous intentions if left unchecked and allowed to flow out, unrestrained.

All of these sinful responses are themselves responses to sin, responses to being sinned against. It’s how our old natures, our corrupted selves, were used to dealing with others who sinned against us. But Paul says this all has to go: “Let *all* bitterness...be put away from you...along with *all* malice.” Notice how comprehensive he is. None of it can stay.

But why are we tempted toward these kinds of responses?

- a. **Sin is legitimately wrong and incurs a very real debt.** This is a reality that the Bible doesn’t minimize. It expresses it clearly and we can’t just pretend like sin doesn’t happen or that there aren’t consequences for wrong. We feel this acutely when we’re sinned against and our hearts cry out for justice. And it’s at this point, where we are acutely tempted to *believe a lie*.
- b. **We believe we are the impartial judge, jury and executioner.** We are tempted to pursue vengeance and justice ourselves, as the offended party. We forget that God is the only perfect judge and that he has appointed means to dealing with offenses against us.
- c. **We have an over-inflated (proud) view of ourselves.** When someone sins against almighty me, I want to bring down my wrath on the perpetrator. How dare you sin against ME? That’s the attitude of a proud heart. We are often easily

offended even by things that aren't sinful, like differences of opinion. If we are easily offended, it's because we have a high view of ourselves. We're often quick to judge and slow to show mercy because we forget how sinful we are, how in need of mercy we are, how much we've sinned against others, and how great God's kindness has been to us. But more on this below.

These are just a few reasons among many we trend this way in our old selves, even though we know better. In our moments of temptation, we succumb to lies. So, Paul says we must abandon this old way of responding to offenses. We must learn a new way, God's way. Next, he says we must learn to cultivate an attitude of kindness that flows out in lavish forgiveness.

2. Cultivate Kindness that Forgives (4:32).

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32).

Now, you might be surprised at how much is packed into this little verse about how we should deal with offenses. It's incredible. Notice initially that Paul tells us the kind of twin attitudes we should be cultivating.

a. The Attitudes: Kindness & Affection (4:32a)

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32).

Paul is encouraging us here to *become* kind/affectionate, to cultivate this attitude among ourselves as the church. But what exactly is kindness? Kindness is the disposition that desires to do good, that desires to bless, that desires to be gracious. It has the idea of being good or pleasant. Kindness is warm, it smiles, it is welcoming and inviting. Back in chapter two, Paul says that this kind of kindness characterizes God himself. All of eternity will be one giant display of his kindness toward us (2:7).

And Paul pairs another word alongside kindness: affection. We are to become affectionate toward each other. This has the idea of tender-heartedness and compassion. It's talking about the inner emotions we feel, motivated by genuine love and care, genuine concern for the wellbeing of others. (Think of Jesus' compassion for the people of Israel who were like sheep without a shepherd [Matt. 9:36] and for the leper who wanted to be healed [Mark 1:41]).

Now, think about both of these qualities in the context of sin and conflict in the church, against you. God wants you to learn to respond like him. To respond with kindness instead of resentment. To respond with tenderhearted compassion

instead of malice. This is incredible. Do you see how other-worldly this is? How divine this is? How unlike fallen humanity this is?

As incredible as this is, Paul doesn't keep it at the attitude level. This attitude needs to be displayed, especially in the face of sin and conflict. How does this kindness and tenderness show up in our lives? Paul tells us one of the primary ways this kind and affectionate attitude will be expressed in our church: in lavish forgiveness.

b. The Expression: Lavish Forgiveness (4:32b)

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, **forgiving one another**, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).

We are to be kind and affectionate by practicing forgiveness. That's the idea of the participle, “forgiving.” It continues to elaborate what this kindness looks like in real time—it looks like forgiving others.

Now, Paul assumed his readers understood biblical forgiveness, so he didn't elaborate. But let's take a moment and really try to get at what biblical forgiveness is (and what it's not). Here are a few statements, pulled from other areas of Scripture.

i. Forgiveness is the costly cancelation of a debt (Luke 11:4).

When our Lord was teaching his disciples how to pray, he taught them to appeal for forgiveness on the basis that they were actively forgiving those who were “indebted” to them. This term implies that when someone sins against you, they incur spiritual debt. And forgiveness is the cancelation of a debt. This means it's costly. The one who forgives has to absorb the debt. They release their right to judge and get their pound of flesh.

ii. Forgiveness is fundamentally a promise (cf. Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12; Ps. 103:12).

In the passages listed, when God forgives he promises to not remember our sins anymore and to remove them as far as the east is from the west. This doesn't teach that God has amnesia. It means that, on the final day, God won't count our sins against us. It's essentially a promise God makes to us. So, when we extend forgiveness, we're essentially making the same promise not to hold the sins of others against them.

This means I won't dwell on the offense against me and continue to nurse the hurt. That's me continuing to count their sins against them. It also

means I won't use their past sins as ammo against them in the future, and I won't gossip about them to others. That would be continuing to count their sins against them.

iii. Forgiveness is an act of the will—not of the emotions (Luke 17:4).

We are commanded to forgive the offender, even if it's a repeat offender! Shockingly, Jesus tells his disciples that if someone sins against us seven times in one day, but after each time, they repent, we must forgive them (Luke 17:4). I think after about the third time they sinned against me that day, I wouldn't *feel* like forgiving them. But when the Lord calls us to obey his commands, he calls us to obey from faith as an act of the will, even if we don't necessarily feel like it. When we've been sinned against, we rarely initially *feel* like forgiving the other person.

This helps us tremendously, especially if we're tempted in the future to bring up their offenses. We've *chosen* to forgive, and that is independent of how we feel. We may (and often will) still feel the sting of sin days and months after, depending on the severity of the sin. The sting of deep betrayal may last for years, or even a lifetime. But when forgiveness is a choice, an act of the will, we can extend it by faith and arrange our lives accordingly.

iv. By implication, forgiveness is not the same as trust.

Just because we forgive someone, this doesn't mean that complete trust is immediately restored. In fact, in some instances, it may be incredibly unwise to restore the trust lost by the offense. Imagine the family member who molests a child while babysitting. It would be incredibly unwise to give that person the same amount of trust after the incident, even if they are completely crushed and repentant. We *must* forgive, as hard as that is. But we don't have to immediately reinstate the level of trust they had before the offense. Forgiveness and trust are two separate things.

At this point, it's obvious that forgiveness is anything but easy. In fact, without God enabling us, it's impossible. So, all this begs the question: how in the world do we cultivate a kind, and tenderhearted disposition, that flows out in forgiveness when we're sinned against? Well, Paul ends this verse with an incredible stimulus to forgive.

c. The Stimulus: Our Experience of God's Forgiveness (4:32c)

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, **as God in Christ forgave you**” (Eph. 4:32).

Paul says we’re to forgive *just as* God in Christ forgave us. This means our own understanding and experience of God’s forgiveness is incredibly important as we attempt to forgive. Without the experience of radical forgiveness from God, we don’t have anything to draw from in forgiving others. But, if you’re a Christian, you have an endless supply to draw from in forgiving the worst offenses against you.

When Paul tells us here to forgive just as we’ve been forgiven, he’s essentially saying two things. He’s saying that God’s forgiveness of us a template or a pattern for us to follow. He’s set the pattern and wants us to follow in it. But he’s also saying that God’s forgiveness is our very motivation to forgive others. When we’ve tasted God’s mercy, we’re enabled and equipped to give it out. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

i. **God’s Forgiveness as a Template**

How has God forgiven you? Well, let’s think about it. You were infinitely in his debt. You were incapable of repaying him and making amends. You didn’t even want to. Your very nature was fundamentally in rebellion against him. That’s what it means to be dead in sin, to be following the prince of the power of the air (cf. 2:1-3). So you didn’t *deserve* his forgiveness and there wasn’t anything in you that compelled him to forgive you. He did it freely, in spite of you.

He also absorbed the infinite cost himself. He demonstrated his great love for you, his extravagant mercy, by pouring his own wrath out on his Son, so that he could lavish you with forgiveness. Christ willingly experienced one of the most gruesome deaths known at that time, not to mention enduring the Father’s wrath, to secure your forgiveness. It was at a great cost to himself.

And he amazingly promises that it is complete, sufficient, never to be brought back up again. You are fully forgiven, no strings attached. God won’t bring them up at the day of judgment and condemn you for them. His justice is fully satisfied, and he forgives completely. He promises to not count your sins against you.

“So,” Paul says, “forgive like *that*, as God in Christ forgave you.” God is our template, our pattern. Forgive freely. Forgive at cost to yourself, without getting your pound of flesh. Forgive lavishly and fully. Don’t hold anything back.

Not only is he our example, but our very experience of his forgiveness is the bedrock motivation for us to do the impossible, for us to forgive!

ii. **God's Forgiveness as A Motivation**

When I think about how God has forgiven me, a number of things happen. For starters, I am humbled, and I see myself in the proper light. I see that the sins of others against me pale in comparison to my sin against God. God has graciously and lavishly forgiven my national debt worth of sin, and I'm bent out of shape about five bucks (Matt. 18:21-35)? Before, I maximized the offenses of others against me. But now I see them more clearly in humility.

Next, I begin to see this offense against me as an opportunity to mimic God, instead of some worst-case scenario. It is an honor to be given the privilege to forgive like God. This totally changes my paradigm and provides me with some incredible motivation to forgive. As I learn to freely forgive, I am bearing fruit and producing the good works God intends. I am strengthening his bride. I am contributing to the unity of the church and his glory in the world. All this happens as I remember how he's forgiven me.

We can also work backwards from this truth. What do I mean by that? Well, if I am really struggling to forgive, this shows something about what I believe about these things, at least in the moment. It shows me that I'm forgetting what I once was in my sin. I'm forgetting how much debt was cancelled for me. I envision my sin against God as small, and other's sins against me as big. I need to reverse them to see things rightly and truly (again, see Matt. 18:21-35).

This is the better way—kindness displayed in forgiveness. That's how Paul is equipping us to handle sin in the church. We've got to put off handling it in the old way and put on this kind of God-like attitude.

Conclusion

As we wrap up this study on forgiveness, let me leave you with one more thought. Do you realize that, in this experience where God calls you to forgive, he is actually calling you to deeper fellowship with him? As hard as it can be to imagine, the sins others commit against you are actually ordained by a good God for your ultimate good. Like Joseph said of his brothers' sin against him: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). God brings these circumstances to us, in his mysterious wisdom, because he wants to reveal himself to us more fully. He wants to increase our intimate dependence upon him, and the

experience of surpassing peace and joy as we truly rest in him by faith. When we are betrayed, we begin (and only begin) to realize what Christ must've felt when his closest friends betrayed him, and when even we betray him at times in our lives today. When we forgive the betrayer, we begin (and only begin) to realize something of the lengths God went to forgive us. When we struggle to love the betrayer, we are humbled by the fervency of God's love for us, when we've wronged him far more than anyone has wronged us. When we feel the sting of sin, betrayal and hurt, and yet we release the guilty party of their debt against us, we begin (and only begin) to understand something of what God has done for us. So, as you're working to forgive, don't forget that God loves you, is with you, and intends this experience to enhance the intimacy of your communion with him.