

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 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.

(Colossians 3:12–13)

Introduction

In early October 2006, Matt, a twenty-year-old American firefighter, was making his way home after a 24-hour shift, during which he had had less than thirty minutes’ sleep. About six kilometres from his home, he was jolted by what he described as “the most God awful sound I’ve ever heard.” He realised that he had fallen asleep at the wheel and collided with the vehicle of a young, pregnant mother, who had her nineteen-month-old daughter, Faith, in the car with her. Tragically, while Faith survived the crash, her mother, June, and her unborn sibling were killed.

June’s husband, Erik, was a pastor, who grieved the death of his wife and unborn child with close friends and family. When one of the teenaged girls in his church commented that she could not imagine how the firefighter must be feeling, Erik realised that she was right and urged the church to pray for the driver. He saw opportunity to practice the forgiveness that he had so long preached. “You forgive as you’ve been forgiven,” he later said. “It wasn’t an option. If you’ve been forgiven, then you need to extend that forgiveness.”

As we continue our consideration of the New Testament one another commands, we come in this study to the command to forgive one another. I want to focus particularly on the command as it is found in Paul’s letter to the Colossians:

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 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.

(Colossians 3:16–17)

Many of the one another commands are warm commands that we want to obey, even if we find it difficult to do so. The command to forgive is one against which we sometimes bristle. We know we should obey it, but we don’t always want to. It’s not, strictly speaking, that we don’t like forgiveness; it is that we don’t like *extending* forgiveness. We want to be forgiven without necessarily forgiving others.

As we consider this command together, I want to just briefly touch on three truths about forgiveness, which, I trust, will shape our understanding of this instruction.

The Explanation and Expression of Forgiveness

This may seem obvious, but the first step to obeying this command is to understand exactly what is required in it. As simple a concept as it may seem, we sometimes grossly misunderstand the biblical picture of forgiveness. It will help for us to consider both what forgiveness is *not* and what it *is*.

Forgiveness is Not ...

We can begin by noting a few things that forgiveness is not.

First, forgiveness is not simply accepting an apology. People today express apologies for all sorts of things. The New Testament doesn't even use the word "apology" (at least not in the sense that we use it today). I am not suggesting that apologies are wrong, but an apology often falls woefully short of what is required for one to extend forgiveness.

Second, forgiveness is not to ignore sin. Christians are people who have experienced and therefore extend grace to others. It can even be commendable to extend grace to those who don't deserve it. But God takes sin seriously, and we do not exemplify Christlike forgiveness if we simply ignore sin. God does not ignore sin—he sent his Son to die for it!—and neither should we.

Third, forgiveness is not just "getting over" something or "letting it go." While there may be times in which we allow love to cover a multitude of sins, forgiveness requires that we deal with the sin in question. Dan Raymond observes, "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."

Fourth, forgiveness is not simply avoiding someone rather than getting back at them. If we forgive as God, in Christ, forgave—as this command instructs us to do—it means that forgiveness will result in relationship. In forgiving us, God does not simply remove the punishment for sin and then steer clear of us. He enters into relationship with us by virtue of the forgiveness he extends.

Fifth, forgiveness is not simply a feeling. It is not as if the passing of time eases the tension and then you have forgiven. Remember what Dan Raymond said? Forgiveness is an *active* process, a *choice* that we make. Christians are called to forgive, whether or not they feel like it.

Forgiveness is ...

It is not sufficient to know what forgiveness is not. To properly obey this command, we must also understand what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is a faith-fuelled decision to pursue a relationship with someone who has wronged you, without constantly reminding them of what they have done. We can say at least two things that will help us to understand forgiveness.

First, forgiveness is a gift. The word translated “forgiving” is derived from the Greek word for “grace.” It speaks of a gift. Forgiveness is not earned; it is given. The basis of our forgiveness is God’s forgiveness in Christ. Yes, forgiveness implies repentance (God grants forgiveness upon repentance), but the standard of forgiveness is what God forgave us in Christ.

Second, forgiveness is a promise. In forgiving sinners, God enters into a *covenant* (a promise) with them. Likewise, when we forgive others, we make a promise to them. In fact, as Ken Sande points out in his book *Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, forgiveness is actually a fourfold promise.

First, says Sande, in forgiving someone, you promise not to dwell in the incident. You will not play it over and over in your mind, allowing it to fester so that you grow in bitterness. Forgiveness means that you let the sin go.

Second, notes Sande, in forgiving someone you promise not to raise the incident again to use it against them. You do not store it in a mental hard drive for easy retrieval later. You do not hold it as a stick with which to beat the wrongdoer when it is convenient to use it against them.

Third, says Sande, in forgiving someone you promise not to talk to others about the incident. You do not seek to spread the wrong far and wide so that as many people as possible know how the wrongdoer offended you. In our social media age, it seems like the most effective way to ensure good service is to publicise poor service all over social media. Customer relations employees will tell you that social media complaints receive the highest priority. It is one thing to complain of poor service on social media; it is another to broadcast someone’s sins against you for all to see and hear.

Fourth, observes Sande, in forgiving someone you promise not to allow the incident to hinder your relationship. This is where the rubber really hits the road. If we forgive as God has forgiven us, we will not allow the sin to sever our relationship. It is possible for forgiveness to restore a strained relationship. If God could so forgive us that we become not only his friends but his sons and daughters, we can forgive others and enjoy a restored relationship with them.

The Extent and Effects of Forgiveness

The question at this point is, to whom do we extend forgiveness? If forgiveness is a gift that we give and a promise that we make, to whom do we give the gift, and to whom do we make the promise?

At the most basic level, Paul instructs us to “forgive each other” (v. 13). “Each other” is defined in this text as those whom the Lord has forgiven. Here, then, the immediate command is to forgive our brothers and sisters in Christ, particularly those in our own local church.

At the same time, however, if we forgive as the Lord has forgiven, we must recognise the need to forgive even our enemies, for we ourselves were enemies of God when we were recipients of his forgiveness (Romans 5:10). If God forgave his enemies, and we are commanded to forgive as God forgave, it means that we must be willing to even forgive our enemies.

As we think about the command to forgive, and the extent to which we should forgive, it may be helpful to recognise two categories.

Trusting Divine Justice

Sometimes, obedience to the spirit of this command means that we trust divine justice. Forgiveness is interested in restored relationship, but there are times when the wrongdoer is not interested in such restoration. In those instances, we trust God to deal with the matter. As Paul wrote,

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Romans 12:17–21)

To trust in divine justice does not mean that you ignore or minimise sin; it does mean that you do not seek to exact vengeance on the one who has wronged you. Unrepentant sinners need to feel the sting of their wrongdoing, but we have no right to seek personal vengeance for what they have done to us. The discipline that God prescribes is sufficient; we need not go beyond what God has prescribed.

When the wrongdoer is unrepentant, a restored relationship may not be possible, but we must always maintain an attitude in which we will quickly and unquestioningly grant forgiveness when forgiveness is sought.

Pursuing Restored Relationship

Our goal, at all times, is to win our brother – to rejoice that a relationship strained through sin is restored through forgiveness. We have no right to withhold forgiveness from those who seek it – regardless of who they are or what they have done to us – and forgiveness necessarily implies a willingness to restore a previous relationship.

As a church, we have been studying Paul’s writings to the Corinthians during our Family Bible Hour on Sunday mornings. We saw in 1 Corinthians that Paul strongly urged the church to root out sin in its midst. The Corinthians were too tolerant of sin, thinking that they were mature enough to handle it. Paul called out their folly and instructed them to deal decisively with the sin in the camp.

In 2 Corinthians, he needed to address another problem. There was a man who had been disciplined by the church but had since repented – but the church had proven unwilling to forgive him (2:5–11). They thought that he had not sufficiently felt the weight of his sin, but Paul urged them to forgive him and to restore him to fellowship. To fail to do so would be to be outwitted by Satan, who would love nothing more than to sow bitterness and unforgiveness in the church. If we do not want to be outwitted by Satan, we must forgive those who, through repentance, seek forgiveness.

The Example and Embrace of Forgiveness

The command is to forgive “as the Lord has forgiven you.” The parallel text in Ephesians instructs us to forgive “even as God in Christ forgave you” (4:32). Here is the point: Our forgiveness must be modelled after God’s forgiveness in Christ. This means at least two things.

First, it means that, as one forgiven by Christ, you *can* (and *must*) forgive those who, having wronged you, ask forgiveness. As a believer in Christ, forgiveness is a conscious choice that you must make to extend to those who ask for it. Forgiveness is not based on feelings. It is not based on a list of things that must be done to earn it. Forgiveness is a gift that God instructs us to give to those who have wronged us, accompanied by the promise to not dwell on the incident, to not rehash it, to not gossip about it, and to not allow it to hinder a relationship that should be restored through forgiveness.

Forgive One Another

Colossians 3:12–13

Doug Van Meter

Second, it means that, as one not forgiven by Christ, you *cannot* obey the spirit of this command. Unbelievers can and do sometimes extend forgiveness to those who have wronged them, but they do not do so as God in Christ has forgiven. Christlike forgiveness can only be extended by those who have been forgiven by Christ.

Perhaps all this talk of forgiveness sounds foreign to you. If that is the case, perhaps it is because you have not experienced God's forgiveness in Christ. If not, hear the promise of the gospel. God sent his Son to die on a cross so that those who are his enemies can receive grace and forgiveness. And he promises that he will grant forgiveness to any and all who, through repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, seek it. Cry to him for forgiveness today, and experience the liberating power that will enable you to forgive those who have wronged you.

The story of Pastor Erik and Firefighter Matt was recorded on the *Today* show website. *Today* is not a Christian media outlet but an American morning news and talk show, which airs across the country. The article highlights the relationship that formed between Pastor Erik and Matt, who began to meet together every couple of weeks. They began to attend church together. Pastor Erik pleaded for a reduced sentence during Matt's trial. It is billed as an incredible story of forgiveness. But Pastor Erik is quoted in the story as follows: "Part of the tug I felt and draw to Matthew was he was a good guy. He wasn't a convict or on drugs. He was just a guy who got off a shift."

I don't want to minimise the kindness that Pastor Erik showed toward Matt, but if the world marvels at that act of forgiveness, how much more should we marvel at the forgiveness God extends in Christ! As God sees us, we are not good people to whom God is drawn. We are dead in sin and fully deserving of eternal wrath. And yet God loves and offers us free pardon and a wonderful relationship with him. How can we say no to that? And having embraced it, how can we say no to those who ask our forgiveness?

AMEN