

ONE ANOTHER

Cultivating Christ-Centered Community

LESSON NINE



THE FRUIT OF FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER

- Forgiving ourselves for mistakes and limits as God has forgiven us
- Attaching our heart to God's forgiving heart and extending God's forgiveness when we can't extend our own
- Freedom from cycles of hatred, revenge, and bitterness
- Asking for the grace to see the wrongdoer apart from their actions
- Mercy, compassion, and a heart like Jesus'
- Inner healing and mending
- Sharing in Christ's suffering
- Understanding the gift of Jesus' death for our sins and extending that gift of forgiveness to others

FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER

"It's so crucial to see our forgiving not simply as our own act, but as participation in God's forgiving. Our forgiving is faulty; God's forgiving is faultless. Our forgiving is provisional; God's is final....The only way we dare to forgive is by making our forgiving transparent to God's and always open to revision. After all, our forgiveness is only possible as an echo of God's."

— Miroslav Volf

Malice, gossip, lies, broken promises, unkindness, partiality, neglect, selfishness — even in the church, we frequently sin against one another as we live and worship together. And so, amid the commands to welcome, serve, encourage, and love one another, we receive a command for when our Christian brothers and sisters fail us in those very things. Our one-another responsibilities in the church do not cease if others break the rules. Paul directs us to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Eph 4:32)

True forgiveness is more than a high ideal. It is a costly, heartrending process that refuses to ignore or minimize the wrongdoing. It condemns the wrong, but it also gives the wrongdoer a gift. Forgiveness separates wrongdoers from their wrong by refusing to label them as *all bad*. It refuses to add this one injustice to the injustice done to them.

A person who forgives joins his or her heart to Jesus' heart for sinners and risks that love can lead a wrongdoer to repentance and into the arms of God. The Spirit of Jesus inhabits every Christian. The forgiver is alive in you and me. Part of taking up our cross is following Jesus into the depths of forgiving. It is allowing the Spirit of Jesus to forgive through us.

It's a serious and sobering thing to stand before "Our Father in heaven" and pray "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." To say these words is to look at the state of our heart and ask for our love to never fail. It is a prayer to become like Jesus, who for love of us didn't hold on to his rights or his hurt. Jesus "loved his own to the end." And he has scars in his hands and feet to prove it. Scars that heal us and give us a fresh start over and over again.

When wrongdoing interrupts our life, we find places in our soul that didn't exist before. And God comes into these spaces with compassion, forgiveness, perseverance, and long-suffering love.

— Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, p. 213

FORGIVE ONE ANOTHER

“Forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” Colossians 3:13

Being a People of Forgiveness

- **Forgiveness is difficult, sometimes even scary, because we don't always know what it will ask of us or where it might take us.** But forgiveness has the power to renew, re-create, heal, and restore relationships and communities that otherwise remain broken or dead. Nevertheless, as Paul Wadell observes, we are often “more skilled at nursing hurts than offering forgiveness, more skilled at plotting revenge than risking reconciliation. And many of us believe when we have been hurt by another that the only way to restore the balance is by hurting them in return. But where does it stop? And where does it take us?”

- **On the other hand, let's consider where might forgiveness take us. Wadell goes on to explain the link between peace, forgiveness, and the story of Jesus:**

Peace grows from the the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation because peace is only possible when people decide not to hold the sins and failures of others against them any more than God holds our sins and failures against us. Peace is impossible without forgiveness, and Christians risk forgiving one another because in the crucified Christ God risked forgiving us. Through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt 9:13), and so in imitation of God Christians choose mercy and forgiveness over bitterness and revenge.

Forgiveness is an essential practice for living in and from the peace of Christ because it enables us to redeem the past in hope and, therefore, move unburdened into the future. Put differently, nothing jeopardizes growing together in the happiness of God more than anger, resentment, and retaliation, and nothing safeguards it more than forgiveness. (Happiness and the Christian Moral Life, pp. 96-97)

- **This is why all who tell the story of Jesus today must see themselves as having been entrusted with the mission of carrying on God's ministry of reconciliation in the world:**

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)

- This is a clear explanation of the finality of the cross. As Paul says, God in Christ is not counting our sins against us, and God has given us all a message of reconciliation—that God, in Christ, has reconciled the world to himself. Only when we know we have been forgiven will we find healing and become able to forgive.

A Brief Word On What Forgiveness Is Not

- Forgiveness is essential in a community of hurt and hurtful persons. In experiencing forgiveness it is important to understand what it is not. Richard Foster reminds us of three things that are often mistaken for forgiveness. **(1) Pretending that it doesn't matter:** “Oh, that's all right; it really didn't hurt me any way!” That is not forgiveness. The truth is that these things matter a great deal and it does not help to avoid the issue. **(2) A ceasing to hurt.** Some think that if they continue to hurt that they have not forgiven. That is just not true. Hurting is not evil. You may hurt for a very long time to come. Forgiveness does not mean that you will stop hurting. **(3) Forgetting.** Many would make us believe that in order to forgive we must forget. But this is not the case. You will remember; the difference will be that you will no longer need or desire to use it against them. The memory remains, but the bitterness and vindictiveness leaves.

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Paul's Words on Forgiveness

- **The first place we are invited to practice this reconciliation is with one another.** A community who has been forgiven must become a community who forgives. It is God's work, but we are God's ministers, because the God who reconciled the world to God entrusted to us "the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19). Forgiveness is a gift we receive and a gift we give. When we do, our communities become like God—good and beautiful.
- God's forgiveness toward us is unrestricted, so what restricts our forgiveness for one another? **First, our inability to forgive another is often based on our own sense of justice.** We may think it's unfair, unjust, to forgive the person who hurt us. Why? Perhaps they have not "earned" our forgiveness. True. But forgiveness does not condone or excuse wrong doing. In other words, by extending forgiveness, we are not saying that what happened was ok or that the person is free to act that way toward us again. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves how we want to be treated: by mercy or by justice? How can we look to God and ask for our rights when it comes to those who have sinned against us, but ask for mercy when it comes to our own trespasses?
- **Second, even when we're able to forgive, there are parts of our self that will try to cling to the wound, seeing forgiveness as weakness or using forgiveness to place conditions between us and the one whom we are asked to forgive.** Sometimes we can hold onto our resentments as a way of attempting to demonstrate strength, boundaries, self-respect, etc. However, forgiveness in its purest form is actually an act of great courage and requires significant strength, compassion, and love for self as well as for the offender. As Henri Nouwen describes:

"I have often said, 'I forgive you,' but even as I said these words my heart remained angry or resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return—if only the praise for being so forgiving! But God's forgiveness is unconditional; it comes from a heart that does not demand anything of itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking. It calls me to keep stepping over all my arguments that say forgiveness is unwise, unhealthy, and impractical. It challenges me to step over all my needs for gratitude. Finally, it demands of me that I step over that wounded part of my heart that feels wronged and that wants to stay in control."
- **Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer are reminders that we need to hear repeatedly: You have been forgiven much; therefore you must forgive — and we have a power greater than ourselves that enables us to do so.** It isn't easy, but it's also not impossible. Once we stand firmly entrenched in the larger story of our own forgiveness, we can then forgive — a process that often takes time. **Not surprisingly, this is exactly what Paul taught in his letters.** In two places Paul calls the church to bear with each other and forgive each other, and in both places he does so on the basis that we have been forgiven by God:

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)
- **As ones God has chosen, set apart as holy and loved, Paul calls to the Colossians to make sure their behavior matches up with their identity; their outside should match their inside.** Knowing who they are helps them to clothe themselves with behavior that fits. As opposed to the fiery and combative disposition described in 3:8-9, they should display quiet and calm maturity and demonstrate heart-felt compassion. They should be kind, humble, gentle, and patient, and give their fellow believers the benefit of the doubt by opting for forgiveness when a reason for complaint occurs. Just as they were forgiven by Christ for their previous way of life, they should be willing to forgive one another. Because they are loved by God, the most important thing they can do is to love. They can welcome those who want to return with the same compassion as that with which the Father welcomes them.

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- From Paul's perspective, it's difficult to imagine that Christians would willfully not forgive those who have harmed them, because they themselves have been forgiven. N.T. Wright explains: "Paul here makes two points...First, it is utterly inappropriate for one who knows the joy and release of being forgiven to refuse to share that blessing with another. Second, it is highly presumptuous to refuse to forgive one whom Christ himself has already forgiven."

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

- Prior to this statement, Paul warns the Ephesians not to "let the sun go down on your anger" (4:26). He recognizes that anger can quickly become obsessive. Instead of being upset over a thoughtless word or deed, we have a tendency to make it "personal" in a hurry. We nurse a grudge and think of ideas for revenge. Once we have slipped into this realm we have opened the door for the devil (4:27). The well-being of the community then becomes secondary and our main purpose is simply to get even. Thus, Paul reminds us of the need to let forgiveness have the last word (4:32).
- Many commentators helpfully connect Ephesians 4:32 to Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-35). The servant is a familiar character. Having had his enormous debt forgiven, he immediately demands repayment of a much smaller debt from a fellow servant. What was the unforgiving servant's problem? He forgot himself and the size of his own debt. Just as Paul's ultimate call is to imitate both God and Christ (5:1-2), it's crucial to see our forgiving not simply as our own act, but as participation in God's forgiving.

The Pattern and Power of Forgiveness

- From these passages we see both the pattern and the power of forgiveness. Paul is not merely suggesting we forgive. He is commanding us to "bear with one another" and to "be kind to one another." And what's one way that's done? By forgiving. **As Christ forgave us, so we also forgive. It's not something we do — it's something we participate in. That's the pattern of forgiveness.** As L. Gregory Jones writes, "The pattern of our experience of forgiveness, and hence our discipleship as forgiven and forgiving people, is none other than the pattern we find in Christ."
- **Our ability to forgive is not only patterned after Christ but also empowered by Christ.** The heart of the Christian story is that in God we find a love that is stronger than death, and that the God who once called us into life calls us to life again and again. **This is the power of forgiveness. It is the love by which we call one another to life again and again.** We learn from the story of Jesus, especially his death on the cross, that sometimes the only way love can conquer death and restore us to life is by taking the form of forgiveness. As Miroslav Volf says so well, "Christ forgives through us, and that is why we can forgive."
- **To tell the story of Jesus is to live a forgiven and forgiving life, because without forgiveness everything is just "more of the same" — more broken relationships, more lingering hurt and bitterness, more vengeance and revenge.** We know from the example of Jesus that forgiveness, however costly, works and is ultimately much more effective than retaliation. We know that forgiveness, however difficult, liberates, while anger and resentment only enslave.
- **In sum, to forgive another person from the heart is an act of liberation.** We set that person free from the negative bonds that exist between us. We also free ourselves from the burden of being the "offended one." As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we carry them with us or, worse, pull them as a heavy load. The great temptation is to cling in anger to our enemies and then define ourselves as being offended and wounded by them. Forgiveness, therefore, liberates not only the other but also ourselves. It is the way to the freedom of the children of God. (Nouwen)

DISCUSSION

1. What's one thing you did as a young child that you asked forgiveness for? What did you learn from your experience?
2. One author observes that “we are more skilled at nursing hurts than offering forgiveness, more skilled at plotting revenge than risking reconciliation. And many of us believe when we have been hurt by another that the only way to restore the balance is by hurting them in return.”
 - What is your reaction to this statement? In your experience, where does this kind of reaction usually take us? What’s the result?
 - Do you think Jesus, in his call to renounce retaliation and violence, asks too much of us? Why or why not? Is it possible to follow his “way of peace” in the world today?
3. What are some things that restrict or limit our willingness to forgive one another and why?
4. Share an example from your own experience when refusing to forgive hurt you (e.g. bitterness, resentment, anger, anxiety, etc.).
5. How does extending forgiveness heal a relationship? How might it heal the other person? How might it heal you?
6. Why is receiving forgiveness sometimes difficult? (*It can be very hard to say, “Without your forgiveness I am still bound to what happened between us. Only you can set me free.” That requires not only a confession that we have hurt somebody but also the humility to acknowledge our dependency on others.*)
7. Only when we know we have been forgiven will we find healing and become able to forgive. As one author states that “Christ forgives through us, and that is why we can forgive.” Discuss how you feel about these ideas. How does this affect your interaction with the world around you?