

Colossians 3:12-17

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS

I want to give you a belated Christmas present this morning. I want to give you the gift of forgiveness. I want to give you this gift because I know what is going on in your life.

The end of each year is filled with regret. There are acts of kindness that you should have done that you didn't do. There are times when you should have been

compassionate and instead you were impatient and angry. There were times when you should have been loving but instead you were selfish and self-serving.

Don't act like you don't need my gift. You need that forgiveness and so do I.

And besides that, forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Forgiveness is why Jesus came into the world.

Have you heard the declaration of pardon that I've been using during the Christmas season? "God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved." (John 3:16-17)

Christmas, like every other season of the Christian Year is about forgiveness.

But, there's one caveat when it comes to forgiveness. If you're going to receive the gift of forgiveness you have to give the gift of forgiveness. It's a mutual gift exchange. You know what I mean, "forgive us our debts as we forgive others."

And therein lies the problem. We might like to receive this gift of forgiveness, but it seems like an awfully expensive gift to give.

PUT ON FORGIVENESS

In our lesson for today Paul suggests that we put on forgiveness just like we put on those new clothes that we got for Christmas. Paul tells us to clothe ourselves with kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness.

In other words we are to wrap ourselves in the blanket of love so that we might live together in perfect harmony.

Paul makes forgiveness sound just like one of those “Snuggly” blanket commercials on TV doesn’t he? Let’s just get all warm and fuzzy with each other.

Sometimes that Apostle Paul just irritates the life out of me. How can he suggest that forgiveness is just like putting on your clothes or tying your shoe?

Oh sure Paul let’s just love one another right now. Let’s just teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.

And while we’re at it we can pull up a chair, drink a coke with Osama Bin Laden and make everything all right.

When you get right down to it, forgiveness is not easy. In fact, in some cases, it almost seems impossible.

THE LAWYER WILL BE IN TOUCH

A preacher told of seeing a car accident several years ago. He was traveling down a six lane road with constant traffic.

It was a lot like 192, a street lined with taco stands, hamburger joints, used car lots and convenience stores.

The light at the intersection turned red, and the traffic stopped. A bunch of teenagers who had just finished the day at a nearby high school started into the crosswalk in front of the traffic.

They were happy, laughing and flirting with each other. This happened before the advent of the i-pod because on this day one of the girls was carrying a large boom box on her shoulder.

The rock music was blasting out at full volume. You couldn't miss them.

But, apparently one woman did miss them. As she made a left hand turn in her pickup truck she slammed into the girl carrying the radio with fearsome force.

The girl was knocked across the road. Her radio bounced all over the pavement and shattered into jagged pieces.

Drivers jumped out of their cars and ran over to the girl. Fortunately she seemed more bruised and scared than seriously hurt. She asked them to call her mother which they did.

In about ten minutes the police came and another car also screeched up to the scene. The girl's mother jumped out of her car and cradled her weeping daughter in her arms.

Soon the woman who had been driving the pickup truck finished speaking to the police, came over to the mother and begged for forgiveness. With her lips trembling with fear and grief she said,

“I am very, very sorry. I did not see you. Honest to God I did not see you. I am so sorry. I am so sorry.”

The mother looked toward the woman. Her face tightened in rage. She was practically spitting as she spoke, “Our lawyer will be in touch.”

Yes, true forgiveness is a rare gift. In fact it's hard to find many examples of true forgiveness in this world.

Most folks want revenge instead of forgiveness. Our lawyers will be in touch.

SEARCHING FOR AN EXAMPLE OF FORGIVENESS

Tom Long is a professor of preaching at Emory University. One day he asked his students to spontaneously describe basic theological concepts using examples from their own life.

As he put it he wanted them to take abstract theological concepts and show how they can become flesh and blood realities.

The first word was hope.

The students began to write. He said that they all knew about hope. They wrote about hoping for babies to be born. They wrote about standing at a bedside and praying hopefully for healing. They wrote about standing at the graveside and praying for hope to rise from sorrow.

They knew all about hope.

The second word was faith.

They knew about faith as well. They wrote about how they had stepped out in faith to come to seminary. They talked about how they had left secure careers to become ministers. They had trusted that inner voice and answered a call to serve.

They knew all about faith.

The third word was forgiveness. Tom said that the pens stopped writing. They had a hard time coming up with anything and what they did come up with was not very good. What they wrote was, by their own admission sort of trivial.

They wrote about a mother's forgiving words after breaking a vase. They wrote about a high school teacher that did not count a bad grade against them. They wrote about a teammate who said "Don't worry about it" when a final shot was missed.

This was extremely troubling to this professor of preaching. He was trying to train these young people to be ministers of the gospel and yet they couldn't come up with one example of deep, healing forgiveness.

How could they preach the gospel with credibility if they hadn't experienced forgiveness?

Tom wrote,

"Surely there were in their lives places where forgiveness was needed ... broken relationships with parents, pain

with a spouse, trouble with children--but they were silent about these areas.

No memory of deep down forgiveness could be found.”

FORGIVENESS IS IMPOSSIBLE

Let me suggest that there's a reason that examples of forgiveness are so rare.

Forgiveness is not just hard to do. Forgiveness is impossible to do. When people do things that are really bad, things that really need forgiveness other people are harmed in terrible ways.

When you're talking about child abuse and alcoholism and domestic violence forgiveness is not like putting on a new set of sneakers. Forgiveness becomes a life long project.

A wife might find the strength to work through a divorce with a husband who was unfaithful. A child who has been assaulted might find the courage not to return evil for evil later on in life.

We can learn to be civil.

But, real forgiveness is another matter entirely.

In fact it just doesn't seem possible or even morally right to ask people to forgive and forget some of the atrocious things that have been done to them. Some actions are so harmful that the pain and guilt remain no matter how long we pray or stay in therapy.

True, deep down New Testament style forgiveness seems like a pipe dream. Real forgiveness doesn't seem like a human possibility.

TO FORGIVE IS DIVINE

I know what we read this morning. Paul did tell the Colossians to bear with one another and forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven them.

But, notice that ultimately forgiveness is not based upon what we can do. Forgiveness is based upon what God in Christ has already done.

I can't give you the gift of forgiveness this Christmas. But, God can. God already has.

The child that was born in Bethlehem grew up to be a Savior. And when he was being crucified by people he loved, he said,

“Father, forgive them because they don’t know what they’re doing.”

He still says that on our behalf.

That’s the important point. Forgiveness at its heart is not a New Year’s resolution that we make or a gift that we give to others.

Forgiveness is a gift that God gives to us. What is impossible for human beings is possible for God.

So when Paul says that we should forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven us, he is saying that we should use the gift that we have been given.

Each week after the confession I say,
“In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.”

That’s not me saying that. It’s Jesus.

And Paul is saying that our vocation, our calling in life is to live into the gift that we have already been given.

It’s a process.

It’s a journey.

It’s something that we work on every day of our lives.

MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE

You may have noticed that the Bible is always calling upon us to do impossible things. We are commanded to love our enemies. We are commanded to bless those who persecute us. We are commanded to pray without ceasing, and here's the really hard one be perfect as God in heaven is perfect.

The New Testament commands us to live these impossibilities because what is impossible with human beings is possible with God.

I guess in a way Paul did have it right after all. In some ways the Christian life is like putting on new clothes each day.

Each day we put one foot in front of the other and seek to live out these commands ... not because we are delusional enough to believe that we're perfect but because we are blessed enough to know that we are forgiven.

All our efforts to forgive others will always fall short, but we need not despair. We know that the gift has already been given, that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

We don't need to live our lives trying prove ourselves worthy. We aren't called to create forgiveness; that is beyond us.

Instead, we have the opportunity to participate in a forgiveness that is given to us as a gift.

Our lesson for today shows us the way. It is a matter of gratitude.

Paul said that we should do everything with gratitude in our hearts ... giving thanks to God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Colossians 3:16-17)

In a way it was unfair of my old preaching professor to ask those students to give flesh and blood examples of forgiveness. When you think about it there is only one good flesh and blood example of forgiveness.

His name was Jesus, and the example was on the cross long ago.

But, we can tell the story of forgiveness to those who are desperate to hear it. We can, as the Bible puts it, be ambassadors for Christ. We can go and offer a word of forgiveness in the name of Jesus.

FORGIVE ME CHARLIE

The pastor of an inner city church had planned a relaxing evening with his wife. They were going to a nice restaurant to celebrate her birthday. And so they met at the church at the end of the day.

But, just as they headed out the door to the church parking lot, they encountered a crisis in progress. An elderly man and his wife had been walking by the church, the man had evidently suffered a heart attack. He was lying on the sidewalk and his wife was bending over him, frightened and desperate.

The minister rushed over to the man while the minister's wife ran back inside the church to call for an ambulance. The pastor loosened the man's shirt, reached out for his hand, and said,

“Try to relax. We're right here with you and an ambulance is on the way.”

To the pastor's surprise and puzzlement, the man looked up at him and said, “Forgive me, Charlie.”

(The pastor didn't learn until later that Charlie was the man's son. The son and father had been estranged for many years.)

The pastor squeezed the man's hand and tried to reassure him.

"I'm not Charlie. My name is Sam. I'm a minister and I'll stay here until help comes. Don't be afraid."

But, the man responded in an urgent voice,
"Charlie, please forgive me."

"I'm not Charlie," the pastor repeated. "Stay calm now, and we'll get you to a hospital soon."

Abruptly the man's breathing changed. The color dropped out of his face. It looked like his condition was getting worse. Maybe he wouldn't make it to the hospital.

The man whispered hoarsely,
"Charlie, I'm begging you. Please forgive me."

The pastor suddenly realized what he must do. He embraced the dying man and said,
"I forgive you. I forgive you."

A look in the man's eyes signaled that he had heard these words. Then his breathing stopped, and he was gone.

The next day the pastor thought a lot about what happened. He worried about what he had said.

What right had he to speak a word of forgiveness on behalf of the man's son? The son was not there. The father and son were still estranged.

What right had he a stranger to speak words of forgiveness when the son and father had not been reconciled?

But, gradually it came to him. His entire ministry and all of his Christian life was about doing what he did that day.

We are living God's future in a broken present. The Gospel is a word of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is spoken from God's future ahead of its time.

The sins of the past create the troubles of the present. But, God calls us to speak a word of comfort and joy to this present age, "In Jesus Christ, God has forgiven you." This is God's gift to us today.

A good way to summarize our lesson for today is an old saying taken in a new way.

"To err is human; to forgive is divine."

Amen.