



The Beauty of Forgiveness

In the last few weeks I have been involved in some intensive mediations—but believe it or not—they have stimulated praise to the Lord as I have witnessed individuals forgiving one another. In these situations there had been great pain as relationships had shattered because of the effects of sin, but the power of the gospel was on display as forgiveness was extended. If you're like me, you yearn to see this portrayed more often in the church, because *it is* needed!

Paul also yearned for Christ-centered healing in relationships and was deeply concerned when there was none. This is evident in Ephesians where the context reveals that one of the motivations for the apostle's writing was his concern for Christian relationships. Just imagine the potential for broken relationships between *Roman* Gentiles and new *Jewish* converts who were now in the church *together*. Talk about different backgrounds and potential misunderstandings!

He brings to bear on these relationships the meaty theology of "Christ is the head of His body, the Church; so now live in submission to Him (particularly in relationships)."

Ephesians 4:31-32

With this backdrop I would like to explore yet again some verses that are talked about often in the biblical counseling and conciliation worlds—Ephesian 4:31-32. What does it mean to be Christ-like in relationships, especially the area of forgiveness? Paul writes:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.[\[1\]](#)

This raises significant questions. What does the "just as" mean? Does a person have to repent before full forgiveness should be granted? Or, can we grant full forgiveness even when the other party is not willing

to acknowledge sin? In other words, is Paul setting conditions or emphasizing a demeanor? Is he endeavoring to follow a step by step process for forgiveness, or is he encouraging an atmosphere?

The Immediate Context

Let's look at some key words to help properly interpret the forgiveness Paul is promoting. I'm sure you understand the significance of this especially when considering, "bitterness is the poisonous pill we swallow hoping it will kill someone else"!

First, "Just as" in verse 32 is used ten times in Ephesians. This adverb could be understood a number of different ways. Some understand it as, "in comparison to." Or, others as "to the degree that." Another legitimate option is a causal meaning, "since" or "because." If this "just as" means that the other party must meet conditions, and if Paul is emphasizing an exact parallel to how we were forgiven by God, wouldn't it follow that two verses later when he uses the same word that we would have to die on a cross to show sacrificial love to others (5:1-2)? I believe this would miss the lavishness of the forgiveness he is encouraging and the emphasis of the book. Therefore, I favor the causal sense. This is also the way a leading Greek lexicon categorizes its usage here.[\[ii\]](#)

Also, consider the word he chose for "forgiveness." There are numerous words used for forgiveness in the New Testament, but this beautiful word is related to grace and implies something is undeserved. He is calling us to grant unmerited favor generously. Furthermore, we are being challenged to be agreeable and even indulgent in the way we give grace (see [Romans 8:32](#)). This word reinforces that the forgiveness is full, lavish, and without conditions because it displays the power of Christ as head of our relationships. In other words, *we make a decision to grant undeserved favor to another based upon the lavish forgiveness we have been given in Christ*(see also [Matt. 18:21-35](#)).

In addition let's contemplate the implications of "kindness" and "tender-heartedness." These words are calling us to a disposition or demeanor of niceness and compassion instead of harshness and hard-heartedness. This is the same demeanor he taught them to have earlier in the chapter. In other words, based upon the gracious forgiveness we have been given in Christ, we should graciously grant abundant forgiveness to others which will counter any bitterness and wrath. Kindness and tender-heartedness make the church a beautiful place to be!

The verses also fit into a section where "put off, be renewed in the spirit of the mind, and put on" are the focus (verses 19-21). As a good teacher Paul gives illustrations of the "put off/put" dynamic in verses 25-32. In each case he gives a purposeful motivation for doing so. An example of this in verse 28 would be "... to share with him who has need." In verse 29 the motivation for godly speech is "to give grace to those who hear." He is doing the same in verses 31 and 32. He is not placing conditions; he is giving motivation. The motivation he offers to his readers is "forgive lavishly because you were forgiven lavishly."

The Broader Context

The broader context of this beautiful book also supports my understanding of 4:31-32. In chapter 1 Paul lays a foundation by saying, "In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He *lavished* upon us (1: 7-8). This forgiveness is something done for us, and there is no evidence in the flow of the book that there is something we do to get it.

Then in chapter 4 we are called to walk in a manner worthy of this amazing calling, and it should not surprise us that the first thing he does is address relationships. We show patience based upon the patience shown us; we put up with others based upon God's tolerance of us. This all flows into those who individually are endeavoring to keep the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"—and the focus here is not based upon what others do but on individuals' personal responsibility. It is as if he is saying, "Just as you have been shown gentleness now show gentleness to others." It would not make sense to say, "Wait until a person shows you gentleness before you are gentle."

This attitude flows all through the book. The same disposition that God has toward us in Christ is the attitude with which we are to approach others.

Consistency with Other Passages

As I have heard the conditional forgiveness view, I have wondered how that fits with other passages. In Matthew 5 Jesus tells us, "Whoever shall force you to go one mile. Go with him two" (verse 41). And, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (verse 44). If I am to love an enemy, who certainly is not going to repent, shouldn't I grant lavish forgiveness to someone in the church even if he does not repent?

Also, as I read these passages, I have a hard time imagining the Lord telling someone to withhold forgiveness (see also [Col. 3: 12-14](#)).

Why Does This Matter?

It should be obvious that we don't want people living in a state of unforgiveness or giving them excuses for doing so. Whether it's because of racial tension, marital disharmony, or church conflict, there is abundant need to understand and practice forgiveness. Therefore, based upon the Lord's radical, undeserved, unconditional, and lavish forgiveness, let's pass it on "in Christ" to others. Let's remove the conditions and unleash the power of the gospel.

Join the Conversation

How have you tried to help others understand the nature and necessity of forgiveness in the church? How might we help people grasp the *lavishness* of the forgiveness that we have received and that we ought to share with others?

[i] All quotations are from The New American Standard translation.

[ii] Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 493-494.

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