

Forgiven to Forgive

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Key Scripture

Colossians 3:13 (ESV) 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.

Sermon in One Sentence

Having received the boundless mercy and complete forgiveness of God through Christ, believers are morally and spiritually obligated to extend that same forgiveness to others, reflecting God's character and walking in freedom.

Introduction

We all carry wounds. Some are fresh, inflicted by recent betrayals or harsh words, while others are old scars, reminders of deep injustices suffered years ago. These wounds, when left untreated by forgiveness, fester into bitterness, resentment, and a hardening of the heart that can poison every relationship and even our own spirit. We wrestle with the undeniable human desire for justice, for retribution, for the "eye for an eye" that seems so instinctively fair. Yet, the Christian life, at its very core, calls us to transcend this natural inclination, to step into a supernatural realm of grace where wounds are healed, and brokenness is restored.

The problem, then, is not merely how to forgive, but *why* to forgive, especially when it feels undeserved, impossible, or even dangerous. We often view forgiveness as a weakness, a capitulation, or a burden. But what if forgiveness is not primarily about the offender, but about the forgiver? What if it's the pathway to our own liberation, a direct command from the One who first forgave us?

Our passage today, Colossians 3:13, cuts straight to the heart of this theological and practical struggle. It doesn't offer a suggestion, but a divine imperative, rooted in the greatest act of love and mercy humanity has ever known. It reminds us that our capacity to forgive others is not generated from within our own limited well of endurance, but flows directly from the infinite reservoir of God's forgiveness poured out upon us. As we unpack this verse, we will see that the command to forgive is inextricably linked to the experience of being forgiven, transforming us from victims of others' wrongs into conduits of God's grace.

Historical & Biblical Context

The Epistle to the Colossians was written by the Apostle Paul, likely from prison, to the church in Colossae, a city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Paul had not personally founded this church, but had learned of their faith and love from Epaphras (Colossians 1:7-8). The church was facing various theological threats, particularly a syncretistic heresy that combined elements of Gnosticism, Jewish legalism, and ascetic practices, diminishing the supreme deity and all-sufficiency of Christ. Paul's primary purpose in writing was to exalt Christ as the head of all creation and the church, emphasizing His preeminence and the

completeness of salvation found in Him alone (Colossians 1:15-20; 2:9-10).

In chapters 1 and 2, Paul lays the doctrinal foundation, reminding the Colossian believers of their identity "in Christ." In chapter 3, he shifts to practical exhortation, demonstrating how this theological truth should be lived out in daily life. Having been raised with Christ, they are to "seek the things that are above" (Colossians 3:1). This includes putting off the "old self" with its sinful desires and putting on the "new self," which is renewed in the image of its Creator. It is within this context of "putting on" the virtues that define the new creation in Christ – compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience – that the command to forgive appears. It's not a standalone ethical instruction, but an essential expression of the new life received through Christ's complete work. Forgiveness, therefore, is not optional or peripheral; it is a vital sign of genuine spiritual transformation and a reflection of Christ's character within us. The "why it matters today" is clear: this is not just ancient advice; it is the blueprint for healthy relationships and spiritual vitality for all who bear the name of Christ.

Main Point I — The Divine Mandate: Forgive As You Have Been Forgiven

Scripture: Colossians 3:13a: "Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other..."

Paul begins with two foundational interpersonal commands: "bearing with one another" and "forgiving each other." "Bearing with one another" speaks to patient endurance, a willingness to overlook minor annoyances, eccentricities, and small offenses that inevitably arise in community. It's the daily grit of Christian love that allows for human imperfection. But Paul recognizes that not all offenses are minor; some are significant, leading to "a complaint against another." In such cases, mere forbearance is insufficient; what is required is active, intentional forgiveness. This isn't just about letting go of a grudge; it's a deliberate act of grace that absorbs the cost of the wrong and chooses not to hold it against the offender. It's a decision, empowered by the Spirit, to release the debt owed and surrender the right to retribution.

This part of the verse sets the imperative. It identifies forgiveness as a core aspect of Christian community life. It's not limited to specific types of offenses or relationships; it's a general command to be applied whenever "one has a complaint against another." This means facing uncomfortable truths, engaging in difficult conversations, or, when reconciliation is not possible, unilaterally extending forgiveness in your heart. The instruction implies that such complaints *will* arise among believers, and rather than letting them fester, the divine solution is forgiveness. This act of forgiveness is not earned; it is extended as a mirror of the grace we ourselves have received.

Main Point II — The Divine Motivation: Because God Forgave You

Scripture: Colossians 3:13b: "...as the Lord has forgiven you..."

Here lies the profound theological anchor for the command to forgive: the boundless forgiveness we have received from God in Christ. The Greek word "kathos" (as) indicates a direct comparison and serves as the fundamental motivating force. We are to forgive *because* and *in the same manner that* the Lord has forgiven us. This is not a suggestion; it's a theological imperative. Our forgiveness of others is not merely a good human act; it is a divine reflection, a demonstration that we have truly grasped the magnitude of God's grace

in our own lives. Consider the debt we owed Him: a debt of sin, rebellion, and spiritual bankruptcy that we could never repay. Yet, through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, that immense debt was fully canceled, not because we deserved it, but because of God's extravagant love and mercy (Romans 5:8).

This motivation transforms forgiveness from a burdensome duty into a grateful response. How can we, who have been forgiven so much, withhold something so fundamental from another? When we grasp the depths of God's grace—His unmerited favor shown to us despite our utter unworthiness—it cultivates an overflowing gratitude that inevitably extends outward. Our forgiveness of others becomes a tangible sign of our comprehension and acceptance of God's forgiveness toward us. It's a statement that says, "I understand the cost of a debt, I know the joy of its cancellation, and because of what Christ did for me, I too will cancel the debt owed to me." To refuse to forgive is, in essence, to diminish the value of the forgiveness we ourselves have received, demonstrating a profound spiritual amnesia regarding our own salvation.

Main Point III — The Divine Imitation: So You Also Must Forgive

Scripture: Colossians 3:13c: "...so you also must forgive."

The final phrase takes the motivation and translates it into an absolute command. The "so you also must forgive" is not a weak suggestion but a powerful, unavoidable conclusion to the preceding truth. The manner in which the Lord forgave us—fully, freely, undeservedly, and at immense cost to Himself—sets the standard for our forgiveness of others. It implies a forgiveness that is not conditional on the offender's repentance (though reconciliation often requires it), but a willingness of heart to release the offense and surrender our right to hold it against them. This is active, costly grace. It means choosing to bear the pain, choosing to release the bitterness, choosing to bless rather than curse. It is a decision to absorb the injustice rather than perpetuate it.

This command positions forgiveness not as an option for advanced disciples, but as a fundamental characteristic of every believer. It's about conforming our character to Christ's. We are called to imitate God Himself (Ephesians 5:1), and one of God's most glorious attributes is His forgiving nature. When we forgive, we are not just doing a good deed; we are participating in the very nature of God, demonstrating His character to a watching world. This act of forgiveness, while challenging and counter-cultural, ultimately brings spiritual freedom to the one who forgives and opens the door for healing and reconciliation, should the offender be repentant. It is the practical outworking of Christ's love residing within us, empowering us to do what we could never do in our own strength.

Illustration

Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who helped Jews escape the Holocaust, was imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp. Years after the war, speaking in a church in Munich, she saw one of the most cruel former SS guards from Ravensbrück in the audience. After her sermon on forgiveness, he approached her, beaming, and said, "A wonderful message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all my sins are forgiven." He extended his hand. Corrie, frozen with horror, recognized him immediately. The hatred and bitterness surged within her. She struggled to lift her hand. "Lord Jesus," she prayed silently, "forgive me and help me to forgive him." She forced herself to take his hand. "As I took his hand," she recounts, "a most

incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and into my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me." It was not her strength, but God's love flowing through her, enabling her to obey the divine mandate.

Practical Application

- 1. Identify Unforgiveness:** Take time this week to search your heart and mind. Is there anyone you are holding a grudge against, anyone you haven't fully forgiven? Acknowledge the pain and the desire for justice, but then actively choose to release that person from your spiritual ledger.
- 2. Pray for the Offender:** Forgiveness is often a battle fought in prayer. Regularly pray for the person who has wronged you. Pray for their well-being, their salvation, and for God's blessing on their life. This act breaks the power of bitterness in your own heart.
- 3. Reflect on God's Forgiveness:** Spend time meditating on Bible passages that describe God's forgiveness of you (e.g., Psalm 103:10-12, Romans 5:8, Ephesians 1:7). The deeper your appreciation for the grace you've received, the more capacity you will have to extend it.
- 4. Practice Small Acts of Grace:** Start with smaller, everyday annoyances. When someone cuts you off in traffic, or a colleague makes a careless mistake, practice letting it go quickly. These small muscles of forbearance train your heart for larger acts of forgiveness.
- 5. Seek Reconciliation (where appropriate):** While forgiveness is primarily an inward act, genuine repentance from the offender should motivate us to seek reconciliation, which means rebuilding trust and restoring relationship (Matthew 5:23-24). This requires wisdom, as reconciliation may not always be possible or safe, but the spirit of reconciliation should always be present in the forgiver.

Discussion Questions

1. How has understanding the depth of God's forgiveness towards you personally impacted your ability or willingness to forgive others?
2. What are some common barriers that prevent believers from forgiving others, and how can we biblically overcome them?
3. Is forgiveness a feeling, a choice, or both? How does our emotional state influence our act of forgiveness?
4. What is the difference between forgiving someone and forgetting what they've done? Is it healthy or biblical to "forget" an offense?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the incomprehensible gift of Your forgiveness, offered to us through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. We confess that our hearts are often slow to forgive, clinging to hurt and demanding justice. Forgive us, Lord, for our unforgiveness. By Your Holy Spirit, empower us to bear with one another and to forgive as You have forgiven us, reflecting Your character and extending Your grace, for Your glory. Amen.

Benediction

Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21, ESV adapted)