

Practicing Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-35 and Colossians 3:12-17
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M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

When was the last time you thought about your closet? Walk-in closets, storage closets, cedar-lined closets, linen closets, coat closets. I have never met anyone who thought they had too much closet space. In fact, our contemporary obsession with closets tells an important part of the story of our evolution as a society. Because we've become more consumer-oriented, we now have more stuff, which of course has to be put somewhere....hence the demand for builders to dedicate more of a home's square footage to storage and our willingness to pay for more and more elaborate closet systems. For those of us who live in older homes, built before so many storage features were standard, it can be hard not to suffer from "closet envy."

The audience to which the Apostle Paul was writing would have had no idea how to relate to our closet fetish. The idea of having multiple pairs of shoes or racks and racks of clothing and accessories would have been an alien concept. In the ancient world, clothing was expensive. There were no factories to manufacture it, so each piece had to be painstakingly stitched together by hand. Few people outside the aristocracy owned more than one or two sets of clothes, and changing clothes was not something you did willy-nilly like we do today. For the ancients to receive a new outfit was a big deal.

That's why the metaphor of putting on new clothing was such a powerful image in the early church. It was common for new converts to faith to literally strip off their old clothes before entering the baptismal waters, then emerging to put on new clothes which signified a whole new beginning. But Paul is reminding the faithful that there is more to being kingdom citizens than just a change of wardrobe. With the new duds comes a new mindset, new ways of speaking and interacting, and new attitudes and behaviors. Paul is giving the Colossians a description of how to "dress for success," if you will, but what Paul has in mind is attire for our souls. "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

Paul believes his audience is undergoing a fundamental change—the start of spiritual transformation. To clothe themselves in the likeness of Christ will take focus and intentionality. Bearing with one another and forgiving each other is not

for the faint of heart. This is not conflict-avoidance advice. Forget putting on a happy face and accentuating the positive. This is about what to do when bare-knuckled emotional brawls break out, when nice platitudes cannot paper over our differences, when we've been cut to the core by the attitudes or actions of another.

As with other traits of kingdom living that we've discussed, the forgiveness Paul has in mind won't be possible without the new nature that comes with living as part of God's kingdom. Surely, we are not at all surprised that as soon as Paul tells us to forgive, his very next exhortation is, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love." As we've discovered every week of this sermon series, love is the only way to live in the kingdom because it is the only way to practice the kingdom life. Paul goes on to add that we're to "let the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts and we're to be thankful." When we choose to do the hard work of love, when we abide in Christ and trust him, which allows us to experience his peace, and when we have grateful hearts—these are all ways in which we open ourselves to the work of the Spirit who is transforming us into kingdom women and men. These are the practical ways we cooperate with God so that we can be remade from the inside out into the kind of people who give up the right to our anger in order to pursue relationships of radical love; who are more concerned with what our words do to another than in being right or winning an argument; who reject judging in favor of maintaining relationship; and who forgive those who commit wrongs and injustices against us that wound us.

To forgive means literally "to let go," to release someone from a legal obligation. A debt is forgiven when we no longer demand that it be repaid. I may feel wronged, injured, or offended by you. To forgive you means I let go of any obligation I believe you owe me. It means I am actually paying the price for your behavior. I have a grievance or complaint because of something you have said or done. I am holding that against you, and I am faced with a choice. I can either perpetuate my feelings of being wronged, or I can give up my grievance—that is, forgive it—with an act of grace that you don't deserve.

What is our most common, visceral response to the exhortation to let go of a grievance? "It's not fair!" You're the one who did the wrong, you're the one who hurt me, and now I am the one who is asked to do the hard work of forgiveness. That's right. That is what we are being called upon to do. We need to remember that forgiveness is not about fairness, or even justice; it's about grace. Just as we have received grace from God who forgives ~~our~~ sins even though we don't deserve it, we offer grace to others in forgiving them when they don't deserve it.

Because we have also been recipients of grace, we lean on God so that we love and forgive through God's divine power. We don't, in fact, we can't do it on our own.

Practically speaking, forgiveness is often not a one-time action. Today you may let go of some injustice or injury someone has done to you and tomorrow, the pain of that wound is back, and you let it go again. In telling the disciples to forgive "77 times", Jesus is not giving them a literal number but telling them to forgive as many times as it takes until the anger or resentment is really gone. In the process of forgiving and letting go, if the behavior of the other person continues to be offensive or hurtful, you may have to adjust the ongoing nature of your relationship. Forgiveness is a one-way street. You let go of your grievance no matter what the other person does. Reconciliation, however, is a two-way street. If the other person does not acknowledge their wrong and change the offensive behavior, you can still forgive but reconciliation may not be possible.

Jesus did not say forgiving would be easy. He just makes it non-optional. When we are hurt, we tend to dwell on the injury. We relive the offense. Our anger or grief burns and swells. It's easy to hold on to the hurt rather than let it go which means, of course, that the initial injury only grows in us. If we wait until we feel like forgiving, it will never happen. Forgiving is not a matter of feeling; it is an act of the will, a choice that we make. I will forgive you. I will extend grace to you. I choose not to hold your sin against you. To fail to forgive is never a "can't" but a "won't."

For some of us, the hardest part of forgiveness is forgiving ourselves. We have made an art form of rehearsing our failures and shortcomings over and over and over again. We beat ourselves up, sometimes for years or decades, and we are meaner, more critical and condemning of ourselves than we would ever be with someone else. I had a hospice patient once who was in her 80's, and she wanted to make a confession to me of something she had done as a teenager nearly 70 years prior. She had been carrying that weight and burden of regret all those years. What a needless tragedy. God's forgiveness was readily available to her, but she couldn't accept it because she wouldn't let go and be gracious with herself. We need to practice the same step of letting go that we do with others and live in the freedom of the grace that has been given to us.

For others of us what our unwillingness to forgive exposes an attitude of duality about sin. What do I mean by that? Our tendency is to minimize the severity and impact of our shortcomings while simultaneously overinflating the severity of someone else's. In Jesus' parable of the king who forgave his servant's

debt, we invariably identify ourselves with the servant who owed the small sum, not with the servant who owed such an enormous debt that it was literally impossible to repay it. We set up yardsticks, often unconsciously, by which we compare our fault to other peoples', and isn't it an interesting coincidence that we almost always come out looking better than they? It's a way to justify holding on to our grievances against others, while believing that what God forgives in us is not such a big deal. The problem is that nowhere in scripture will you find such a skewed understanding of sin. All sin separates us from God, and therefore, all forgiveness comes at the same price: God absorbing the cost of forgiving us.

Forgiveness is a testimony to the depth and breadth and height and length of God's love for us. And when we grasp that truth, how can we, then, as kingdom citizens refuse to forgive somebody else? Forgiveness is at the very heart of our relationship with God and at the heart of all kingdom relationships.

Pastor and theologian Walter Wangerin captures the work of letting go with what he calls the Six Step Program to forgiveness. Although written specifically for couples to be used in maintaining healthy marriages, these steps apply to all our relationships where forgiveness is needed.

1. Be realistic which involves asking 3 questions: What is the exact offense? Against who was it committed? And what are the specific consequences of the offense? The goal of this step is to identify this particular instance of offense and to separate it from any other history of similar offense we may have suffered. It is also to be sure we're dealing with the right person on the right issue, not lumping all our frustrations of the day and blaming them on the person who's handiest.
2. Remember our own forgiveness. This step is a reminder that we are more similar to the sinner who has hurt us than we are to our holy and righteous God.
3. Sacrifice our right in prayer. This is Wangerin's way of saying, "let go." Give to God your "right" to feel heard or seen, to be vindicated or validated or to see justice done. We put in God's hand our need to be healed and restored, and we give the other person to God as well. We get out of the "get even" business. Forgiveness does not keep score.
4. We compassionately confront the wrong-doer. The specific wrong is identified and the hurt is named, which of course, means we make ourselves vulnerable. This is no easy task. Sometimes it is far easier to suffer in silence, nursing personal injury than risk bringing it in to the open and talking about it which holds the possibility of aggravating the hurt. But, it is a necessary task if we hope to achieve reconciliation.
5. Follow words with actions. By this Wangerin means that we take responsibility for our own actions and choose not to continue to punish the offender. This step

helps us move out of victimhood as a defining story which also loosens the hold another's wrong has over us.

6. Establish or re-establish a covenant between oneself and the one forgiven. This enables the two parties to define what kind of behavior will be asked of each other in the future.

Our Colossians text ends with this exhortation by Paul: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." When you're struggling with hanging on to a hurt, ask yourself:

- Can you hold on to your bitterness "in the name of the Lord Jesus?"
- Can you honestly vow to "get even" with a liar or a cheat "in the name of the Lord Jesus?"
- Can you justify sabotaging a colleague "in the name of the Lord Jesus?"
- Can you still clutch your fingers around hatred "in the name of the Lord Jesus?"

Perhaps another way to think of it is, is this the kind of clothing you want hanging in your closet? Racks upon racks of unforgiven grievances, bitterness that rots your soul, feuds that are so old and ingrained you can't even remember what they're about? Or, might you be willing to do it the kingdom way, to put on the clothes of new life and forgiveness?

You always have a choice to let go or hold on, to forgive or to dig even deeper into anger and resentment. Today, will you choose to let God transform you through the power of the Holy Spirit or will you turn away from the kingdom work God longs to do in and through you as you practice forgiveness? The choice is yours.

Thanks be to God. Amen.