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THE SCRIPTURE
Colossians 3:9-14 (*The Message*)

Don't lie to one another. You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete. Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious, and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ. So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

THE MESSAGE
“Then Sings My Soul: No Hard Feelings?”
Mark Briley

[Editor’s Note: It would be helpful to listen to “No Hard Feelings” by the Avett Brothers. Follow this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFGs7HP15d4>]

I sat with blurry eyes in front of my computer screen this week. I argued with myself about that darn blinking cursor on the screen – was it taunting me? Was it simply flashing a reminder... a sign of life? I’m not sure. But there I sat carrying every moment of my 43 years into a moment, in my office, holed up in the dark with a blinking cursor. Maybe they call it a *cursor* for a reason.

This week was harder, deeper, when it came to focusing on the song of focus today. Maybe I was avoiding it. I readily found other things to focus on... the to-do list is never short of things to do after all. We even got a new puppy this week. Perhaps I agreed to this in avoidance of addressing this song: “No Hard Feelings.” It may be why I put it at the end of the series, too. We’ve got one more next week that you won’t want to miss... but I’ve preached enough sermon series to know, it’s that middle one, or that one that nears the end, but isn’t the end that’s the toughest of all.



It’s the first week of school, and all that comes with it. I thought of each of my children, our students here at Broadway, our teachers, and administrators. I thought of brave backpacks of courage bouncing up and down on the backs of four-foot-tall students, who walked into a world of uncertainty. My heart drifted to the research, to the stories of our Broadway friends who submitted this song for our series – a song I had never previously heard, mind you. I knew of *The Avett Brothers*,¹ but I clearly wasn’t an insider. I couldn’t avoid it anymore. It was time. *No Hard Feelings*².

Literally, after turning from Lenny Kravitz last week to this new tune, I heard three separate people speak into the world unknowingly on Monday and Tuesday – “No hard feelings,” they said as they described some personal situation in their lives. *Dang*.

There it is. You search wherever you listen to music and the country band, *Old Dominion*, also has a song entitled, *No Hard Feelings*. It popped up first. Its light and

¹ www.theavettbrothers.com. While you can find stories and background details about the brothers, the band, and the song itself in many places, this is the band’s official website – a great place to start as you learn about their music and their lives.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFGs7HP15d4>

fun and an easy happy hour, “*Cheers!*” sort of song. That’s not the *No Hard Feelings* submitted for our consideration. I found it. I had listened to it as the series was drafted weeks ago but now, I was *listening* to it. Do you know the difference?

I read a blog someone had written about the song who said, “*In the three-hour drive from Chicago to Fort Wayne, Indiana, you can listen to The Avett Brothers’ “No Hard Feelings” four-dozen times. You may notice that by the time you hit the twentieth replay, those mournful opening strums on the guitar no longer make you tear up. By then, you can crawl into the notes and from within them, you can watch the farms whiz by — silos, cows, and smatterings of trees next to billboards promising eternal life if you [follow their particular politic]. You can feel your pulpy heart become the strings of the instruments, your far-away thoughts the beats of the drum. You can float into the music and forget that someone you love is gone and you’ve received all the texts from her you’re ever going to get.*” Now we’re *really* listening. *No Hard Feelings*.³

Are you holding any hard feelings this morning? I imagine you have a few. If you’re free of all of them, then you’ve done some major internal work, and I celebrate that with you fully. But I’m guessing most of us are a work in process. I could quip all the religious clichés about hard feelings – about forgiveness – and there *is* spiritual and scientific support for the positive health benefits of forgiveness. Many have suffered illness, or an early death aided by the bitterness of unforgiven hurts. An inability to forgive is always worse for the one withholding that gift even when it is not being sought by the one who has caused the harm.

Jesus taught a math lesson about forgiveness where he invited Peter to come to the chalk board at the front of the classroom to solve a little equation. “*How many times should you forgive, Peter?*” Peter was the student, who raised the question in the first place after all. Pete holds the chalk in his hand as the other students snicker behind him, and he’s sweating it out in his mind and spirit... “*How. many. times.*” He could have said, “*None.*” That’s what he wanted to say. He could have been the class clown and named some astronomical number. He goes with a generous number – maybe his lucky number. I don’t know why he picked it, but he writes a big “*Seven*” on the chalk board. In those days and that culture, seven was a perfect number, so maybe Peter was being sarcastic after all.

Jesus looks at the class. “*What do you think? Do you agree? Anyone? Bueller.*” Nobody really knows. Jesus says, “*Add a seven, Peter. Seventy-seven times.*” Well, that’s just ridiculous. And who’s going to count all of those? And is saying the words really forgiveness, or does that even matter if your heart is still hardened? In another teaching moment found in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says, “*If an offender turns back to you*

³ <https://atticusreview.org/no-hard-feelings/>

seven times in the same day, then you forgive them seven times that day.” That’s some 2,500 acts of potential forgiveness in a given year. And that is just emotionally exhausting.

To the Colossian church, Paul writes, *“Forgive as quickly as the Lord has forgiven you.”* I remember an old spiritual song that, speaking of Jesus, goes, *“He not only forgives. He forgives and forgets.”*

Okay. Okay. If it were this easy, though, when I asked you earlier if you’re holding any hard feelings this morning, every one of us could have said with full transparency, *“No. No hard feelings. Every matter fully resolved. Spirit free in every relationship and situation.”*

But it’s more complex than that, right? It’s more layered. The betrayal. The blatant vindictive behavior. The passive aggressiveness. The enabling. The affair. The money. The broken partnership. The abuse. The addiction. The fool me once shame on you; fool me twice shame on me realities. C’mon, c’mon, c’mon. Not easy. And in our heart of hearts that believes we can read every person better than they can read themselves, we say, *“It’s on them. Not on me.”* And... you *may* be right. *“And they don’t want forgiveness!”* you protest. You *may* be right. I remember a high-profile American who shall remain nameless once say, *“I’ve never had to ask for forgiveness.”*

We most readily see forgiveness as a two-way street. Takes two to tango. Two to reconcile. No hard feelings? That same blog post about this song? The woman writes of her initial thoughts that this song was about a simple break up with no hard feelings. How nice. She was a decade into her marriage but says, *“I still remember every breakup, several of which left me, if not with hard feelings exactly, but with the residue of white-hot disappointments and deep purple bruises of regret.”*

Wrestling with my own hard feelings in front of that blinking cursor, I thought, *“Can I really get up there and dump on you the three easy steps to forgive?”* I wasn’t convinced, so I didn’t figure you would be either.



I looked into these Avett Brothers a bit further. How could they write this song having figured out forgiveness so easily? Seth and Scott Avett are about my age. Grew up in Concord, North Carolina. Grandpa was a Methodist minister and grandma a concert pianist. Their dad was a welder and mom an elementary school teacher. Salt of the earth. It was a normal childhood of garage type bands and the like. And yet they can

sing such a piercing and mature lyric: *“Lord knows, [hard feelings] haven't done much good for anyone. They've just kept me afraid and cold.”* Do they really know what it means to let all bitterness go until, as they sing, *“It's only hallelujah?”*

Scott and Seth don't shy away from addressing life's challenges in their music, which creates a very real and raw ... and often moving ... look at what it means to be human. This song is found on their *True Sadness* album which followed Seth's divorce. In addition to this song, the album has other titles like *Victims of Life* and *Divorce Separation Blues*. Let's just get to it, right? As the album was being released in 2016, Seth had this to say about it: *“Lessons were learned, forgotten, repeated,”* he writes. *“The concepts of marriage, as well as divorce, became realities. Babies were born. Homes were built. We saw loved one's fight cancer in seemingly every form imaginable. We saw this battle won and lost — souls victorious in either outcome. We allowed these concepts to take root in our lives, and when they would allow it, we wrote songs with and for them.”*

Their sentiment adds to the meaning of this song that speaks about how we want to come to the end of our lives. *“When my body won't hold me anymore and it finally lets me free, will I be ready? Will my hands be steady when I lay down my fears, my hopes, and my doubts? When I lay down the rings on my fingers and the keys to my house [can I do so] with no hard feelings?”*

These brothers are going through life... just like you and me... the ups and downs, the joys and pains and Seth writes, *“Somewhere along the way, the line between music and life faded. The change was imperceptible at first. Then, when we weren't paying attention, it evaporated altogether.”*

How do we learn about life? Experience is a hard teacher because the test comes first, and the lesson is learned later. But experience certainly brings some wisdom if we let it. A friend going through the sadness of transitioning a child from home to college says to me, *“I would have been such a better friend to those who went through this before me knowing what I know now.”*

I knew exactly what she meant. We often feel we know best – even when we haven't had the experience. You've never parented adult children, but you think you know exactly how that should be done. You've never been cheated on before, but you know exactly how one should react. You've never been judged by the color of your skin or your economic status or family situation, but you've got the obvious advice for those who have. We don't know what we don't know. And sometimes we need to be humble enough to extend grace to those who are handling things the best they can; dealing with situations we've never encountered ourselves.

The Avett Brothers seem to get it. Do they? The video was interesting to me. It's actually a sequel of sorts to the song from the album they released ahead of this one. It's called *Ain't No Man* which challenges cultural notions of race, religion, and fear and ends with Scott and Seth, along with the band's bassist, Bob Crawford, sitting down for a photoshoot which is where *No Hard Feelings* takes off from as they sit in the same clothes and on the same stools. *Ain't No Man* is a colorful and upbeat look at the importance of loving our fellow human beings, which speaks to understanding one another before diving deeply into the introspective *No Hard Feelings* that calls for forgiveness for others and maybe hardest of all... forgiving ourselves.

In ministry, most every week is filled with at least a few people coming with a heaviness of heart that is wrought with the guilt and shame of something for which they can't forgive themselves. I'm not sure why, speaking of the video, why *The Avett Brothers* bassist, Bob Crawford, sits stoically and silently for the entirety of the video. What's that about? I wondered if he represents that part of us that's not ready to talk about it... not ready to deal with it... not ready to pull it out in the open. Instead, we choose to leave all the hard feelings suppressed in the depths of our soul because we can't bear to say it out loud. I'm curious for sure. *What about Bob!?*

Forgiving ourselves is tough and we may deny the need for it for far too long. A woman said to a panel in Nashville recently, "*You'll know you've hit rock bottom when you've broken your own heart.*" Whew. And country song writers in the house immediately started writing. "*You'll know you've hit rock bottom when you've broken your own heart.*" How can we truly live free?

This song struck a chord for sure. It was the song that, at minimum, tied for the highest number of times submitted for our series. This says to me we're all living, dynamic beings who struggle with pain, brokenness, sin, recovery, joy and, yes, this quest for a peace that surpasses all understanding... a peace that may only come when we can release others, and ourselves, from our shortcomings with no hard feelings.

I wish I could just read the full messages of our Broadway friends who submitted this song for the series with some tremendous *whys*. One shared of a mother-in-law's passing. The doctors said the end was close and given their beloveds wishes, life support would be removed. Our friend wrote, "*I left to get some food and this song came on the CD player. It caught my attention, and I actually **listened** to the words for the first time. I believed right then that my mother-in-law was doing just this... putting away the rings on her finger and all her worldly possessions and releasing any hard feelings she had, simply walking into the light, hand in hand with her Savior. She died that night and I believe she was ready. Were we? Every time I hear the song, it helps with the sadness of losing our loved ones.*"

Our friend added that the song also reminds us to let go of guilt and hard feelings, stew less over things, and focus on the love and beauty that surrounds us, seeing every breath we take as a gift from God and opportunity to do something good.

Another submitter admitted to the struggle of letting go of hard feelings, naming hurt and injustices like multiple hostile work environment experiences, a soul sucking divorce, heartbreak, losing a job, tragic death and devastating illnesses of loved ones, politics, the pandemic – all of it. Are you with me, here? We get this. *“How easy it is,”* she says, *“to let anger and petty dramas of life overtake any sense of grace and empathy.”* She’s come to find the health and strength in thinking about death. It’s the Ash Wednesday reality – *from dust we have come, to dust we shall return.* Death rate still hovering at 100% remember? She notes the Bhutan practice that suggests contemplating death five times a day brings happiness.



There’s an app for that, of course, and it’s called *“We Croak.”*⁴ Five times a day you get a ping that says, *“Remember, you are going to die.”* It’s not intended to be morbid. It’s an invitation to be humbled, present, engaged in relationships now, to be part of today’s healing because we are not promised tomorrow.

So, we show up today at church... we hear of the one who forgave better than anyone; even forgiving from the cross his own executioners in hopes that we, too, can lay some stuff down and replace some bitterness with grace.

A third submitter says, *“I have been consumed by anger, resentment and refusal to forgive a few times in my life.”* He names 12-step programs and the Bible, which teach against such a spirit. *“Judge not, forgive all,”* is where it’s at, he writes. Being in a profession where death was an ever-present reality, he said, *“I came to truly believe that death was not my enemy, or I would have been miserable in my career. I tried to help people live the remainder of their lives in a better place. There were times when I was able to help a person, or their family learn to forgive, and I saw the benefit many times at the end of life.”* Facing some of his own life or death moments, he leans into the power of unconditional love and forgiveness. *“I now try to think about that almost daily. A failure to forgive on my part would be the most major regret I would have when I die. I want to go to my death free of those emotions to be ready to enter whatever comes next.”*

The Avett Brothers name their own questioning about what comes after death in the song. It’s a beautiful image as they sing, *“Will I run into a Savior true and shake hands laughing?”* Do you ever *live* that image? Do you have that friend that when you

⁴ <https://www.wecroak.com/>

approach, their smile matches your own so deeply that when you shake hands, you just laugh and rejoice that you're in the presence of one another for *real*? Our Broadway friend says, "*I can never be perfect in this, but forgiveness of everyone is a more finite goal than most goals, totally within my grasp and power with immediate positive results.*"

So, I'm sitting with this blinking cursor, blinking at me 70 times seven and on repeat and I swept through my own soul. "*God, help me release. God, help me forgive. God, help me live free.*" Maybe you need that prayer today, too. And maybe that prayer is from this song itself:

*Under the curving sky
I'm finally learning why
It matters for me and you
To say it and mean it too
For life and its loveliness
And all of its ugliness
Good as it's been to me
I have no enemies*

And as if to be sure they come to believe it themselves in their singing of it and me in my praying of it, they repeat that last line three more times. *I have no enemies. I have no enemies. I have no enemies.*

Paul writes to the Colossians – put away that old life; that outfit of bitterness, judgment, and hatred. "*It's not a good look. Besides,*" he says, "*You've got some new threads to wear,*" and it coordinates as stunningly well as John Witherspoon's mushroom suit with his matching belt and socks. Those threads God picked out for you especially: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline, even-temperedness, contentment with not always winning, complete forgiveness, and "*The best of all,*" he says, "*Wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.*"

May it be so.

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