

Living an Incredible Life
God's Incredible Gift: Forgiveness
Ephesians 4:1-3 and 4:31-5:2
April 13, 2008

Will she return home or not? If she does, will she forgive her father? Will her father forgive her? More importantly, is there someone you need to forgive? Are you living a life of forgiveness? Do you even want to practice forgiveness? Is it worth it to forgive? It's easy to talk about forgiveness when you've never really been hurt, but when you've been wounded, abused, betrayed, ignored, snubbed or just plain constantly annoyed by someone – perhaps over and over again – then forgiveness becomes a difficult journey. And perhaps it seems even unfair or outrageous. “After what he did to me? Now God wants me to forgive them? Why should I? Even if I wanted to forgive, how can I?”

Here's the problem in a nutshell: (1) Forgiveness isn't optional, but (2) Forgiveness isn't easy.

Forgiveness isn't optional. Forgiveness is built right into the foundation of the Christian faith. If you pull it out, the entire building collapses. That's the point of 4:32 – “... forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Just as ... God forgave you. Last week we explored God's riches – God acts lavishly towards us. We needed it; we were in trouble. Read Ephesians 2:1-3. That's big trouble. Now look at verses 4-5 “But because of his great love for us ...” and Ephesians 1:7. God forgave us and not only forgave us but lavished us with grace. Do you believe in miracles? I do. I'm walking in miracle-land every day of my life. I am forgiven! Now, to turn around and not extend forgiveness to others – even others who have hurt me deeply – doesn't make sense.

Jesus told a story (see Matthew 18) about forgiveness, which I will summarize and adapt like this: Let's say you owe someone \$100,000 and you can't pay it. They have the power to ruin your life – take your house, destroy your credit, hound you, etc. But through a miracle of undeserved grace, your creditor forgives your debt. All of it! Every penny! The debt is gone, absorbed, and wiped clean – never to be brought up again. You are free! As you skip out the door, you bump into your friend Bill. You start hugging him until you realize he never paid you back for the no-foam, low-fat, sugar-free decaf caramel macchiato you paid for him at Starbucks. He said he forgot his debit card so you loaned him the money and he still hasn't paid you back. What a jerk! So you grab him and say, “Pay me back right now or I will punch your lights out or ruin our reputation or hold this over your head forever.” That's how God looks at our unforgiving attitudes, actions and lifestyle. It doesn't make sense. So Paul says, “Get rid of all bitterness ... forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

So, first of all, forgiveness isn't optional. “Okay,” you say, “I get it. I get it. I expect to hear that from Jesus. Forgive. Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. I know all that in my head, I just can't do it – or my heart keeps telling me, “Don't do it. Don't let him or her or them off the hook. They don't deserve it. Besides, you deserve to be bitter. You deserve to slander them. You can't let go of the bitterness; they'll hurt you again. You'll become weak and empty without your bitterness!”

So that leads us to our second truth about forgiveness: **Forgiveness is difficult.** Maybe even impossible. We might be tempted to read Paul's words in Ephesians 4:31-32 and assume (mistakenly) that's it all so easy. Let me tell you: it is not easy. So how do we pull it off? How do we practice forgiveness? I use the word "practice" intentionally because none of us are good at forgiveness. It is an unnatural act – like doing stomach crunches. Forgiveness has to be learned, and practiced, and relearned and practiced again. Sometimes we have to practice it with small, daily offenses. That's what Paul meant in Eph 4:2: "Bearing with one another" refers mainly to the daily irritations and conflicts of life. Examples: a spouse who can't stop snoring, a friend who is chronically late, a child or a spouse or a friend who can't get organized (like you), a spouse or a parent who has to travel often for work. This is the daily grind of forgiveness, the ordinary offenses that, if allowed to accumulate over the years, can bury your heart in bitterness. This is daily forgiveness, bearing with others when they irritate us.

But then there is what I'll call deep forgiveness, rooted in deep wounds, deep betrayals, deep hurts, deep offenses. How do we deal with deep forgiveness?

1. **Assess and Express the damage**

Every time we practice deep forgiveness, dealing with a wound of betrayal. Someone has hurt us deeply. Yes, we are called to forgive, but we can't just extract Ephesians 4:32 out of the Bible, put it on a verse-for-the-day Bible calendar and assume that this is the Bible's entire teaching about forgiveness. The Bible tells us to forgive but it also tells us how to grieve our losses. It also trains us in the art of lament and even arguing with God. We must hold all this in creative tension. In other words, when we're left deeply wounded we will grieve, get angry, feel hurt AND forgive. Part of forgiveness involves honestly assessing the damage of the sin of others against us.

Example: A woman who has been raped or a child who has been sexually abused. "Why don't you just forgive and forget?" First of all, this sin was also against the law. It's illegal and the offender may do it again. Second, the violation, the outrage, the wound is horrendous. It's odious to God who said, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." And "You are fearfully and wonderfully made." The temple of the Holy Spirit, fearfully and wonderfully made image bearer of God has been violated, desecrated, treated like trash. How does God respond to this outrage? Listen to what God says in the Bible, "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord. "I will repay." God will assess the damage and deliver justice to all of us. We can pay for it later (by our own merit – which I wouldn't try) or we can accept God's full payment when Jesus died for us.

You can't truly forgive until you honestly assess the damage that's been done. That's a painful process and many people won't do it. They gloss over it: "Oh, it didn't hurt. It was a long time ago. He didn't mean it. It's no biggie." It sounds so spiritual, but it's classic denial. It's cheap grace. God's grace was never cheap. God never glossed over our sin. God honestly assesses the damage of our sin - and He even tells us about it. Part of our forgiveness may involve speaking

the truth, not just assessing but expressing the pain and the loss, “You did _____ and it hurt me deeply.”

And if you’re the one who has caused the pain – we need to listen. Don’t run away. Just listen.

2. Chart a new Course –

Most of us have learned very specific patterns and practices for dealing with the pain in our lives. Some of us have learned to withdraw from others – give them the silent treatment, go passive, ignore them, snub them. Some of us have learned to lash out, to gossip. Some of us have taken a silent, personal vow – like “I will never get hurt again. I will never open my heart again.” Most of us have never learned to forbear with others. So we live with edgy irritability towards others.

How was forgiveness practiced in your family? You learned some powerful lessons about forgiveness. Now Jesus comes along and says, “I have a better way to live. It’s called grace. It will set you free from your past. It will set you free from bitterness and rage and fear and self-protection and tension and illness and negativity and Satanic foothold in your life.”

That’s what we’re told to do in Ephesians 4. Notice verses 17-18. Then skip down to verses 20-24. That is so powerful. Jesus opens a door and says, “I don’t care where you’ve been. I don’t care what your family was like. I don’t care how you’ve failed to learn or practice forgiveness. That’s all part of your old self and your old life with its old practices. Come to me. Believe in me. I’ll teach you and train you and introduce you into a brand new life.”

If it helps, picture this in your mind: You are standing in the presence of Jesus. Right now you are clothed in the soiled rags of your old self: bitterness clings to your skin and so does slander and self-protection and rage. Then Jesus approaches you, clothed in rags, and he says, “You don’t need those rags anymore. Take them off and put these on.” And then he hands you a beautiful new set of clothing. He says, “Take this. Put it on. This is the new you, the real you, the deepest, most true part of you. This is the way I always intended you to live.” That’s what Paul is talking about in verse 24.

3. Release the offender

That’s what the word “forgive” means in the New Testament: to release someone, to set him free. When we forgive, we choose to release another human being from the grip of our rightful claim of revenge. We have Bill in our grip. He hurt me. He lied to me. He betrayed me. He never loved me. They treated me like trash. Now he owes me. We are bound together by the pain, the wound, his sin and my claim for revenge. You and me, bound together for life. Will the chains be broken? Only you can decide.

There's an incredible scene in a powerful film called "The Mission." In a fit of jealous rage, a young soldier murders his only brother. The living brother is sent to jail where he serves his time, but even after his release he cannot release his burden of guilt. So he throws his army clothes and weapons into a large bundle, puts a net around it and then with a strong rope he ties the bundle to his foot. For the next months and years he chooses to drag the bundle behind him wherever he goes. It never leaves him. In the same way, when we fail to forgive others, we put them in a bundle and drag them around with us – for as long as we remain bitter. They owe us. We suffered, we lost, we were abused, we were tormented, we were gyped; now they must pay for it!

But when we choose to forgive – just as God has forgiven us through Jesus Christ – we release the bundle that is our betrayer. Forgiveness means saying to the one who hurt us, "I set you free. I give up my claim on you. I will not seek revenge. And more than that, I bless you. I pray that you will do well and find mercy and grace before God."

We begin to realize that the bundle is another human being. They too have a story. They too will stand before the judgment seat of holy and righteous God to account for their lives. So we pray for them and we release them.

4. And then something astounding happens: you release yourself in the process.

It takes time. It takes practice. And then it takes more practice because none of us are very good at forgiveness. We may have to walk through a journey of grief and anger. We may have to be brutally honest about what we've lost. It will be painful. But as we release the offender, we discover an even greater miracle: we become free. You realize that the one in the tightest chains was actually you.

Here's perhaps our biggest fear about forgiveness: it will make us weak, maybe even pathetic. It will enslave us to those who have hurt us – and we can't stand the thought of being slaves to their cruelty again. Never, we say. But actually, the opposite is true: our bitterness makes us slaves, our unforgiving attitudes and practices make us weak. Forgiveness frees us and makes us strong.

That's what Jesus meant when he said, "someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38). It's a picture of forgiveness, but most people read it too literally so they miss the point. When was the last time someone slapped you on the right cheek? Probably not for a long time. So you're off the hook, right? No, this is a picture of a lifestyle of forgiveness, the freedom and strength that come from choosing to forgive. What Jesus is saying here is this: "Don't allow other people to ruin your life. Don't let them – even with their hurtful actions – fill your heart with the poison of revenge and bitterness. No, you love them and you show them your resolve to love. By turning the other cheek you're saying, 'You can hit me if you want, but I'm free. I'll just give you my other cheek. You cannot ruin my life by making me bitter. I belong to God and he belongs to me now through the good news of Jesus Christ. You cannot take

that away from me so, you see, I am free in Christ. And I can now choose to forgive you as I have been forgiven. I'm not a victim anymore. I am established in Jesus Christ.”

(Story here).

So Jesus says, “Ah, yes, my son, my daughter, you are experiencing the freedom that comes when you choose to forgive and love like I forgave you and love you.”

So forgiveness requires incredible strength, tenderness, wisdom, courage and security. The insecure can't forgive. They can't let it go. Because they think, “If I let it go, then who am I?” You are a new creature in Christ. Let it go.