

EPHESIANS #70 4:31,32 6-2-13

FORGIVEN FORGIVERS

(Ephesians 4) Years ago when we had three morning services at our church, I met a woman who said she wanted to start coming to our church but her ex-husband happened to be attending at the time. She asked me which service he attended. When I told her he came to the early service she was relieved and said, “Oh good, then I can come at 11:00.” I guess that is one advantage of having three services, huh? People can hate each other and still be a part of your loving fellowship, without ever having to actually see each other. Her comments also made me wonder how many people choose their church or choose their worship time to avoid someone else. Unresolved conflicts, unforgiving spirits. A lot of people even have to leave the church over this kind of thing, or so they say. I think of a couple of families who left our fellowship saying, “Oh, Pastor Dan, we will miss your preaching, but so and so said such and such. Or she did this, or he didn’t do the other, that any decent person should have done.” I hear these stories and I have two griefs. The smaller grief is that we Christians do and say some unkind, inconsiderate things. The bigger grief is that some people refuse to get over the hurt and refuse to forgive. Our text this morning addresses this very problem. It is one of my favorite Scriptures on the subject of forgiveness.

In this fourth chapter of Ephesians the apostle is using a certain formula for his teaching. He says in verse 22, *lay aside the old self*, and in 24 he says, *put on the new self*. In 25 he says, *lay aside falsehood, and speak truth*. In 28 he says, *put away stealing and labor*. Then in the final two verses of chapter 4 he says to put away bitterness and start forgiving. Ephesians 4:**31-32** *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.* We could approach this text in several ways but I have chosen to focus on the main thought of verse 32, which is forgiveness. Let’s look at the opposite of forgiveness, the call to forgiveness and the standard of forgiveness.

First, we consider verse 31 which presents what stands in contrast with forgiveness. If your life is marked by the stuff in verse 31 it is surely not marked by forgiveness. So, what is this stuff? The list goes like this: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander. When I memorized this I used the acrostic B-WACS to remember those five. Then at the end is thrown in malice. I suppose we could spend time dissecting the differences between these rotten cousins, but I think it a wasted effort. They are all basically the same thing, aren’t they? They have to do with being angry, acting angry and not getting over the anger. As I speak today I will use primarily the word “bitterness” to refer

to this sextet of vices, all of which flow from a heart that refuses to forgive. Paul says, “put them all away.” Get them out of your life. The reason is not given, but I’ll be happy to supply it for you. These things are deadly. These things destroy lives. To begin with, bitterness can eat you up personally. If our lives are gas tanks and the Holy Spirit is the fuel, then bitterness is like a big ole hole in the tank’s bottom. Some time back, I read a book by Henry Brandt called *Breaking Free From the Bondage of Sin*. In that book, Brandt, who is a psychologist, writes of individuals with any number of different problems: substance abuse, depression, physical illness. He describes how various individuals were led into freedom and the primary thread that I noticed in their stories centered around unresolved anger. These people were generally addicted, depressed and sick because they had failed to forgive. Sometimes, often, they were holding on to offenses that had occurred 20, 30, 50 years before. Their present responses to people in the here and now were dominated by something that happened years earlier in the there and then - a something they had never put away. I think of cases that I have seen - individuals who have been victimized by the sin of someone else and refused to forgive. I think of how miserable those people are. Just imagine this with me. Imagine that you have Joe and Sally living as man and wife. Joe has a mid-life crisis, commits adultery, spends their life savings in wild living and publicly ridicules his wife. Pretty awful huh? But suppose that Joe sees just how awful it is, repents of his sin and apologizes. But Sally won’t forgive him. Sally is marked by bitterness, wrath and anger. Tell me now, from what you know of the Bible, who is better off in God’s sight, Sally or Joe? Joe clearly has some regrets he is going to face, but if he repents he is in a far better state than Sally who won’t forgive. Sally feels like what Joe did was so awful it would be wrong for her to forgive him. She just couldn’t do that, but who is really being punished by her refusal to forgive? She is. Bitterness can destroy your life.

Then too, Paul says to put away bitterness because of its impact on others. Bitterness, without question, is a contagious disease. Hebrews 12:**15** *See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.* Who gets defiled by bitterness? Many. Unresolved anger easily spreads. In his autobiography entitled, *Number 1*, Billy Martin told about hunting in Texas with Mickey Mantle. Mickey had a friend who would let them hunt on his ranch. When they reached the ranch, Mickey told Billy to wait in the car while he checked in with his friend. Mantle’s friend quickly gave them permission to hunt, but he asked Mickey a favor. He had a pet mule in the barn who was going blind, and he didn’t have the heart to put him out of his misery. He asked Mickey to shoot the mule for him. When Mickey came

back to the car, he pretended to be angry. He scowled and slammed the door. Billy asked him what was wrong, and Mickey said his friend wouldn't let them hunt. "I'm so mad at that guy," Mantle said, "I'm going out to his barn and shoot one of his mules!" Mantle drove like a maniac to the barn. Martin protested, "We can't do that!" But Mickey was adamant. "Just watch me," he shouted. When they got to the barn, Mantle jumped out of his car with his rifle, ran inside and shot the mule. As he was leaving, though, he heard two shots, and he ran back to the car. He saw that Martin had taken out his rifle too. "What are you doing, Martin?" he yelled. Martin yelled back, face red with anger, "We'll show that son of a gun! I just killed two of his cows!" Uh-oh. This is why Proverbs 22:24-25 *Do not associate with a man given to anger; Or go with a hot-tempered man, 25 Or you will learn his ways And find a snare for yourself.* You see, we actually learn the ways of anger from one another. You parents here, what ways are you teaching your kids? By your deeds as well as words. Do they see you continually hostile toward a family member, or a neighbor? Are they picking up the ways of bitterness from you? Your kids are rather trapped in your family aren't they? This Proverbs exhortation is kind of hard to apply when the hot-tempered man is your own father or maybe your mother. And so we see so often bitterness being passed down like a genetic disease. This explains the Hatfields and McCoys, the Montagues and Capulets, the Arabs and the Jews. Racism is simply unresolved bitterness on a large scale isn't it? What a gift for your children! "*Here, dear child, as my inheritance I leave you a spiteful, bitter spirit. Cherish it, and guard it and pass it down to your kids too.*" Are you leaving a heritage of grace or malice? This bitterness thing you must put away because it affects you and those nearest you. I heard a missionary story from a man in a tribal setting who noticed little odds and ends hanging from the roof all over a native's house and he asked, "what are these for?" They answered, "these are there to remind us of times when we have been offended and they stay there until we have obtained revenge." Some of you have things hanging from the roof of your soul today. God's word says to take those offenses down and throw them in the deepest sea. Put them far from you and move on to verse 32.

Verse 32 *Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.* Whoa, here is a simple command of God. Forgive each other. It should not really need to be said to a Christian. Our faith is all about forgiveness isn't it? Of course, Christians are to be forgivers. Our faith demands it. Christ models it, and our happiness requires it. We cannot, we must not seek to go thru life with an unforgiving spirit. You aren't strong enough to carry a grudge and still walk in the joy of the Lord. Freedom is spelled f-o-r-g-i-v-e. Someone wrote this:

To forgive is to put down your 50 pound pack after a 10-mile climb up a mountain. To forgive is to fall into a chair after a marathon. To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. To forgive is to reach back into your hurting past and recreate it in your memory so that you can begin again. To forgive is to dance to the beat of God's forgiving heart. It is to ride the crest of love's strongest wave. No revenge is so complete as forgiveness. Corrie Ten Boom was a concentration camp survivor and tells the story of how she was speaking in a German church after the big war. She had spoken about the need for God's forgiveness when after the service as she was standing at the door of the church a large man approached her, a man that she recognized as one of the guards that had terrorized her and her friends. He approached her and said, "Ah yes, Frauline, is it not wonderful that our God forgives." As he said this he extended to her his hand. Corrie says she saw that big hand and in a moment that seemed much longer she recoiled in disgust and then remembered her own sermon. She says she extended her hand in what was for her a gesture of monumental forgiveness, and as she did she felt her soul fill up with a new and glorious freedom - the freedom of forgiveness.

For Corrie Ten Boom and for any of us this forgiveness that we extend to others is grounded, it must be grounded, in the forgiveness of God. This is where the apostle points us. We forgive because we have been forgiven. We extend grace because we receive grace. It is not something we originate. We are not the spring of grace, we are just a vessel through which God's grace either flows, slows or gets stopped up. But to understand forgiveness you have to include the Lord in the picture. Where you have an offense there are always at least three parties involved: The offender, the offended and the One who is Judge of all men and the Savior of all who believe. It is His grace that makes our forgiveness both possible and necessary. Jesus taught that our treatment of others is grounded in His treatment of us. The classic parable on this is told in Mathew 18:23-27 *the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 "When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 "But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 "So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' 27 "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.* There now, the context for the rest of the story is this massive forgiveness of great debt. The Master has bestowed grace upon his servant. What does the Master expect in return? Read on 28-31

But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' 29 *"So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.'* 30 *"But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.* 31 *"So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. What do you think they were grieved over? Were they grieved over the failure of that sorry servant to pay his fellow-servant the 100 denarii? Not at all. That may not be good, but the grievous part of this is the unforgiving spirit of the ungrateful, unmerciful servant. **32-35** Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' 34 "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." If you sit here today with a bitter heart, with an angry heart, with a heart locked up because of resentment toward another, get before God in prayer, with an eye on Mathew 18 and don't leave that place until God has wrought in you a thorough conviction of sin and change of heart!! What does it say happens to those who will not forgive? It speaks of being handed over to torturers. That sounds like hell to me. Listen, maybe that bothers you but this is God's word, not mine. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "If I am not merciful there is only one explanation; I have never understood the grace and the mercy of God; I am outside Christ; I am yet in my sins, and I am unforgiven." This is serious, serious stuff we are talking about here today. Forgiveness is required of us and the requirement is rooted in the forgiveness of Christ.*

Now, I'm not suggesting that this is an easy thing. Surely it isn't. Our pride militates against it. The devil hates forgiveness. The world extols the satisfactions of revenge. Some sins against us are especially egregious. To do this is going to take a lot. Let me mention two adjustments to your mental focus that will be required. Angry, bitter people are focused in on what? Bitter people know a whole lot about one subject - their pain, their hurt. When we're bitter we are focused on self, my hurt, me, me, me. Forgiveness requires that we take the focus off our hurts and put it on God's grace. After all, which is bigger? Which is greater? Which is more worthy of our attention? It is folly to ignore your pain. It needs to be addressed, but when you focus on your hurts too long and too exclusively you are practically saying that your pains are greater than God's grace, but you can't be Christian and really believe that. I mean, how can you sing, "Amazing grace, how sweet

the sound, that saved a wretch like me” and then turn around refuse to forgive that person who said something unkind to you. When you focus on grace we see how outrageous it is, how lavish God is with His mercies and it has to impact your dealings with others. You see the sufficiency of His grace for everyone else’s sins. I remember years ago, back when I did door to door evangelism, a woman with whom I shared the gospel. I asked her if she believed God forgave sinners and she said, “Yes, but not criminals.” She said, “I can’t believe He’d forgive criminals.” A lot of us think that way. God’s grace is only so amazing that it forgives little sins. That’s the way the ancient Jews thought. When Jesus forgave Zaccheus - oh what a scandal! We think, “Come on, you can’t forgive Zaccheus, he was a dirty thief. You can’t forgive David, he was an adulterer. You can’t forgive Saul, he persecuted believers. We say, “No” but God says, “Yes.” His grace is outrageous, amazing and awesome and if we are going to forgive we need to bathe our minds in its beauty.

Secondly, if we are going to forgive we have to take our focus off of self and its hurts and put it on the offender and his needs. There is an old gospel tune I really love that says of the Lord that He looked beyond my fault and saw my need. ⑩ Are you glad God did that for you? Then you do it for others. Lewis Smedes says that forgiveness is like a spiritual surgery in which you remake the offender in your sight. He says, *You think of him now not as the person who hurt you, but as a person who needs you. You feel him now not as the person who alienated you, but as the person who belongs to you. Once you branded him as a person powerful in evil, but now you see him as a person weak in his needs.* You got that? We need to turn our anger into pity. That is an emotion consistent with love. Here is what you do then? You lay aside all your bitterness. You contemplate the amazing grace of God for you. You consider the needs of the offender and you take out a big, red-ink stamper and over every relationship you mark the word FORGIVEN. That stamp means you have given up any resentment, any claim to requital on account of an offense. Stamp it in red to remind you of Christ’s blood. Put the cross in the background so you won’t forget the why. And cover every relationship, past, present and future in that blood-stained FORGIVEN. That is what Christ calls us to, and that is freedom.

Our third major heading now, is the standard of forgiveness. ⑩ Here we look at how we forgive and our text is quite plain in that last phrase 32d *just as God in Christ also has forgiven you* We read the same in Colossians 3:12-13 *as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.* Just as the Lord forgave you. That answers at least four questions

for us. First it handles the “how often” question. You know that one? How many times am I supposed to forgive Lord? Peter asked that question. Not in those exact words, but in Matthew 18 just before the parable we read earlier he said, **21,22** *Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times? 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.* Put another way, I’ll just say that you forgive others as frequently as the Lord forgives you. How often, how much has He forgiven you? That answers your question. Next question is, “how severe a sin should be forgiven?” Is there some limit to the wickedness that we forgive? I mean, must we forgive for murder? Or rape? Or embezzlement? Or verbal abuse? We tend to think, “Oh, it wouldn’t be right to forgive something this big, this hurtful! This is unforgivable!” Some of you are going to be really offended when you get to heaven. Question: Does God forgive it? Then you forgive it. I Corinthians 6 speaks of fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, swindlers and he says, “such were some of you, but you were washed, you were justified in the name of Jesus.” I’ve heard some people say to me, “Pastor, I just can’t forgive him for what he did to me.” And I guess you expect me to say, “Oh, I understand.” But God’s word says you can do all things thru Christ’s strength.” You say, *I can’t*. He says, *you can*. Who should I believe? Move beyond that “I can’t” business and admit the fact that you have made a choice not to forgive. Repent of that choice, no matter how big the sin seems to you. It is not as big as God’s grace. ®

Third question the standard answers is the “how quickly” question. Do I have to forgive him right away or can I stew for a while at least? Can’t I punish him with an angry look or a cold shoulder for at least a few days, or a few weeks? Surely, Lord, we can’t let him think he can get off this easy, can we? Some people will set the offender before the blowtorch of their indignation and when they have scorched him enough then they forgive him. Listen now – restoration of trust often does take some time. Trust is different from forgiveness. But, with respect to forgiveness, we answer the “how quickly” question the same way we did the others. How does the Lord treat you? Does He delay the forgiveness until you have done a few millennia in purgatory? Or is it delivered right away? Full, fresh and free? You know the answer, now apply it to your life. The fourth question answered by our standard is the “how completely” question. Often we want to forgive halfway. “I won’t seek full revenge for what you have done to me, but I am going to get at least a little bit of skin. I won’t treat you like an enemy, but don’t think I will ever be friendly with you again.” Thank God He doesn’t do it like that. The Scriptures say that God’s forgiveness is so complete that our sins are forgotten. It says they are buried in the bottom of the sea. Psalm 103:**12** *As far as the east is*

from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us. Hebrews 10:17 their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. How completely have our sins been forgiven by God? I asked Him and He said to me, “What sins?” He says they are all forgotten. What that means for us is that when we forgive we no longer treat a person on the basis of what they have done. We don’t bring it up any more. We join with the Lord, and we bury it forever. Hallelujah!! Isn’t God’s forgiveness awesome? And this is our standard. His example tells us how we should forgive.

Now I know that some of you here are a little befuddled by what I’m saying here today because you have never really understood this forgiveness stuff. You thought Christians were just nice people who tried to do good. You give us far too much credit. In fact, we are bad people who have discovered we can be forgiven by a very good God. Forgiveness of sins is the fundamental and foundational blessing upon which all others are offered. And really until you have forgiveness you have nothing at all. So, I invite you to confess your sins to your Creator. Look to Jesus Christ alone as your hope of salvation and discover for yourself the awesome forgiveness of which I’ve been speaking.

To you who know the forgiveness of Christ my closing exhortation is that you look closely at your relationships and at your heart. David said in Psalm 139:**23,24a** *Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; 24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me.* See if there is any root of bitterness in me, any unresolved anger, any relationships needing that red stamp of forgiveness. Is there something you need to say to someone else? Now, you don’t need to call anybody up this week and say, “I’m calling to tell you I forgive you for that awful, wicked, cruel and dastardly thing you did to me six years ago.” That kind of communication does no good. If the problem is in your heart, resolve it there and the Lord will show you what you need to do and say, if anything at all.

So, you take a moment as Brooke plays to do business with God on this issue, then I will come to close us.....Spirit of the Living God. *Oh, Holy Spirit, clean us out just now. Probe and penetrate us to find within us that bitter root that defiles and poisons. Give us tears over selfish ways, tears over hateful hearts, tears over failure to forgive and love. And with those tears scrub us clean to be like Jesus. Fill us, control us, so we will remember the truth we’ve studied today the next time it is needed. Oh God we confess our need. Now make us strong where we are weak and lead us to be obedient and triumphant for Christ’s sake and your glory. Amen.*