

EXCLUSION AND EMBRACE

Colossians 3:12-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Resolving Conflict and Forgiving Ourselves

By

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Opening.

“Therefore,” wrote Paul in Colossians 3, **“as God’s chosen People, holy and *dearly* loved** [This is an incredible picture of the ‘People’ of God: you are both ‘holy’ *in* Him and ‘dearly loved’ *by* Him.], **clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive *as* the Lord forgave you** [*Charizomai*, from the noun *charis* {‘grace’} = ‘give something *freely* and *graciously*, as a favor,’ thus to ‘forgive’ in this same way. It means ‘to forgive ...and graciously, kindly, *humbly*, *gently*.’ You with me?]. **And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity,”** vv. 12-14.

If we’re to keep our souls from being burdened with a lengthy list of unforgiven grievances— with scores to settle and vengeance to take— if we’re going to **“guard our hearts”** against the enemies of bitterness, rage, and resentment, we’re going to have to *choose* to forgive **“one another... as the Lord forgave us”** and to **“bear with each other”** in love, to ‘*put up* with each other’ patiently {*anecho*}. How different will the atmosphere of worship be, how much stronger will the cords of relational connection be— for *us* or *anybody*— when we begin to obey the Word of the Lord, when we choose to live in Jesus’ love?

There are plenty of occasions in the course of our lives where we *don’t* want to forgive, aren’t there? Even though it’s in our best interest, even though we can’t be healthy and whole without it, something inside screams, “No... *no!* I cannot, I *will* not, let this go. They don’t *deserve* to be forgiven.” With that I would overwhelmingly agree, and so would the rest of the world. **They don’t deserve it. But neither did we, and yet we have been.** By our Father-God through Jesus Christ His Son. Forgiven of every sin, crime, mis-step and mistake, every angry word, every envious eye, every lying tongue or lustful thought, every arrogant attitude to ever pass through our hearts. All of it, without exception, paid for by Someone else, our hearts and lives now purified by the blood of the Lamb.

Setting the Scriptural Stage.

In Nehemiah 9 the Levites prayed before the People, recounting the history of Israel’s disobedience and rebellion and *Yahweh’s* lovingkindness and forgiveness. **“But they, our forefathers, became *arrogant* and *stiff-necked*, and did not obey Your commands** [Sound familiar?]. **They *refused* to listen and *failed* to remember** [Hear the indictment, O People of God: ‘they refused to *listen* and failed to *remember*.’] **the miracles You performed among them. ...But You are a *forgiving God*, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore You did not desert**

them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, ‘This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt....’ Because of Your great *compassion* You did not abandon them in the desert. By day the Pillar of Cloud did not cease to guide them on their Path, nor the Pillar of Fire by night to shine on the Way they were to take. You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold Your manna from their mouths, and You gave them water for their thirst. ...For many years You were patient with them. By Your Spirit You admonished them through Your prophets. Yet they paid *no attention*, so You handed them over to the neighboring peoples [First, the Assyrians, then the Babylonians— in 721 and 586 BC.] But in Your great mercy You did not put an end to them or abandon them, for You are a *gracious and merciful* God,” vv. 16-17a and c, 18a and b, 19, 30-31.

Why should we forgive? Because our God is a “**forgiving God.**” Our *Abba* is the Father of Forgiveness, “**gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.**”

Jesus in Luke 24 told His Disciples, “**This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and *forgiveness of sins* will be preached in His Name to *all* nations, beginning at Jerusalem,**” vv. 45-47. Repentance is woven into the very fabric of faith, the faith which sets aside *every* human effort at approaching God and lays everything it is at the feet of Jesus, trusting *Him* alone for forgiveness and redemption.

The last thing Peter told the household of Cornelius before the Holy Spirit fell upon them was, “**All the prophets testify about**” Jesus “**that everyone who *believes* in Him receives *forgiveness of sins* through His Name**” {Acts 10:43}.

Paul in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch said, “**My Brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the *forgiveness of sins* is proclaimed to you. Through Him *everyone* who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses**” {Acts 13:38-39}.

When the Son of God knocked Saul off his ...donkey ...on the Damascus Road, He spoke these words: “**I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and *turn them*** [the essence of repentance, a ‘turning’] **from darkness to Light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive *forgiveness of sins* and a place among those who are sanctified *by faith* in Me,**” Acts 26:17-18.

2 Corinthians 5:19 tells us, “**God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, *not counting men’s sins against them....***” “Not counting our sins against us” is *logizomai*. *Logizomai* is an accounting term: it means ‘no adding up and factoring in’ —

God is not ‘taking a tally in order to lay down the law!’

The philosophical foundation of forgiveness, the ‘why’ behind the ‘what,’ is simply this— our God is a forgiving God, a God who poured out His own Life in the Triumph of Jesus’ Cross for the sake of we who had abandoned Him, we who had betrayed Him, we who spit in His face and drove nails in His flesh. Yes, *we*. We are the Men and Women who hung the Son of God on Calvary for all the world to mock and scorn. *We* are the criminals hurling vilification and abuse; *we* are the guilty... now washed clean by the blood of the Lamb {Rev. 7:14 and 12:11}! Our “hearts” now “purified by faith” {Acts 15:9}, free ...and free forevermore.

Essay— Resolving Conflict in the Kingdom of Christ.

I’d like to believe this is inherently understood by the Children of God, but I’ve seen too much and been alive too long to take this for granted, so I’ll share it once more from the very beginning. **Forgiveness is absolutely essential to our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.** *Abba’s* forgiveness of us, *our* forgiveness of others, even our forgiveness of *ourselves*. What we don’t want is to continue doing the same things expecting different results. I don’t want to keep seeing a steady distancing of people who cared deeply for each other at one point in Time now no longer trusting one another. It’s so much better for the soul to just put things out on the table as the New Testament commands us to do, and deal with them. How do we resolve conflict in the Kingdom of Christ?

Read Matthew 18:15-20.

This passage makes one thing unmistakably clear about what forgiveness does *not* mean. It doesn’t mean, as many abuse victims imagine, ‘letting someone get away with it.’ This is the part of forgiveness Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf called ‘exclusion and embrace.’ There must be an exclusion, a *naming* of the wrong which was done, before there can be a forgiving embrace. If somebody’s done something wrong to us, even at a deeply personal level, the righteous thing to do, holiness in action, is not to run around telling everybody in earshot, not to allow resentment to smolder, and most definitely not to start slyly plotting our revenge. **The righteous thing to do, according to our Lord Himself, is go and tell them directly. And humbly, in the Spirit of the Lord.**

My experience with the people who are really good at this— that is, the ‘telling someone how wrong they are,’ not the humility— is they are precisely the ones who *don’t* need to do it. **The pleasure they get from telling others how wrong they are precludes them from qualification!** Maybe the best qualification for this scenario is you’d rather do anything *but* this, and you have to seek God and pray for both courage

and grace to speak with them face to face.

Forgiving Ourselves.

As other writers and theologians have noted before me, “It takes *spiritual discipline* to forgive others; it takes a different, though *related* discipline, to forgive myself, to echo within my own heart the glad and generous offer of forgiveness which God holds out to me and which, if I’m fortunate, my neighbor holds out to me as well.”¹ **Here’s where a sense of Eternal Identity comes into play.** The thing which is so incredibly difficult for seekers, searchers, and wannabe-philosophers the world over to wrap their melons around is the almost inconceivable value *Abba* places on a single human soul. He is our Creator. And He has not left His Creation to flounder in the aimless dark! He has come for us in the Person of His Son, *invading* the devil’s domain in the Mission and Ministry of Jesus the Messiah to redeem our fallen Humanity and rescue us “**from the dominion of darkness,**” setting us firmly in the “**Kingdom of the Son He loves**” {Col. 1:13}. And it’s in His Son “**we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins**” {Col. 1:14}. This was accomplished all because of love, because Jesus loved you enough to die in your place!

This, my Friends, is where a healthy sense of self-worth comes from, an ‘eternal identity’ — how my Savior sees me, what my King was willing to do so that we might live together forever. When I look at my life in the Light of God’s limitless Love I discover I’m *secure* in His love, I’m *significant* in His love, and I’m *accepted* in His love. There is nothing which can stand — not now, not ever — between *it* and *me*. Paul at the end of Romans 8 says there is nothing “**in all of Creation**” which “**will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,**” v. 39.

The kind of faith which sets our hearts at rest is the astonished, overwhelmed, unendingly grateful acceptance of the tender love of a perfect Father. Faith, or *trust*, is acceptance and embrace of *Abba’s* unconditional acceptance of me! One theologian in the middle part of the 20th century defined faith as “the courage to accept acceptance,” to which I would add “unconditional acceptance.” Which “is absolutely central to our mental, emotional, and spiritual health.”² Part of receiving *Abba’s* forgiveness in Christ, both eternally and experientially, is opening up our hearts {the same inner faculty God gave us for giving and receiving forgiveness} in vulnerable trust and thus learning the secret not only of accepting ourselves — who we are and who Christ created us to be, that *this* is *who* I am and *that* is who I *long* to be, and learning to live comfortably in the tension between the two — but also of forgiving ourselves. **Both acceptance of *who we are* and forgiveness of *what we’ve done*.** I embrace the offer of a merciful Father and let it soak my being to the centre of my soul.

Forgiving myself means recognizing in utterly ruthless honesty that I have done sinful, hurtful, and damaging things to other people, to myself, and to the God

in whose image I am made. And because He forgives me I can *now* learn to forgive myself. The same thing holds true for the forgiveness we offer others. This is for those prone to riding the river of denial, living in the realm of unreality: forgiving ourselves in light of a righteous, holy God does *not* mean pretending, “I wasn’t so bad after all,” or “This didn’t really happen,” or “It didn’t matter as much as so and so makes out.” Yeah, it was *bad* {sometimes horrifically}, it *did* happen and it *did* matter. **But God has dealt with it at the Cross and forgiven you completely.**

So, if you’ve made genuine amends as best you can with any other people involved — Paul said “**as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone**” {Rom. 12:18} — then even our sins, mis-steps, and mistakes can be woven into the tapestry of eternal beauty {8:28}. These things become part, if we’re authentic individuals, transparent people, of living a truly Christian Life. **This is core to learning to forgive yourself.**

Finale.

What’s it going to take to get there? It will take [i] **prayer**, even *intensive prayer*; [ii] **worship** in the presence of Jesus; [iii] **tears** of heartache shed at the hurt we’ve caused becoming tears of *joy* and *immense* gratitude for the forgiveness we’ve received. And [iv] perhaps the assistance of a wise and compassionate counselor to whom we can bare our deepest wounds, even the self-inflicted ones. But this is the Way we’re called to walk, the way to wholeness and healing. Those Children of God who cling to a sense of shame over who they *think* they are and guilt over things they can’t *forgive* themselves for become the people who pass these toxins on to their children, their spouses, their friends and coworkers, even their Family of Faith. **Since they refuse to live in the Freedom of Grace they have no way of knowing how to lead anyone else there!** So they pass on the only thing they know, to shame and to blame. **Oh mighty God, our Warrior-King, set us free!**

We’ve been promised a world one Day, *guaranteed* a New Creation in which all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, “a world in which forgiveness is one of the foundation stones and reconciliation is the cement which holds everything together.” And we’re given this guarantee in and through the Lord of Glory, Jesus Christ, through His Cross, Resurrection and Ascension — His ‘Mission Accomplished,’ if you will. “When we understand forgiveness, flowing from the work of Jesus and the Spirit” of Jesus making His work come alive within our hearts, “...we begin to realize that God’s forgiveness of us, and our forgiveness of others, is the knife that cuts the rope by which sin, anger, fear, recrimination and death are still attached to us.”³ **Evil will not have the final word!**

And the best news of all is we don’t have to wait for the glorious Day of God to start experiencing our deliverance from evil and from the evil one.

We're invited this very moment, summoned by the King of all Kings, bidden by the Father of mercies to start living this way in the present. To live in the Light of *Abba's* Forgiveness and to graciously offer His forgiveness to others... every moment of every day, by means of the Holy Spirit.

1 : N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, p. 162

2 : Ibid.

3 : *ibid.*, pp. 164-5

- I owe an enormous debt to Bishop Wright for his insight on forgiveness and the phenomenal power it wields, through Christ and His Spirit, to solve the deepest relational, political, and even economic problems of our time. Much of my present language and structuring of this topic comes from his brilliant little book.