Practicing Forgiveness

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Colossians 3:12-17

Sermon Series: The Kingdom of God

... Jesus puts the priority of healthy relationships even above worship.

One of the most significant teachings in the New Testament is the health and vitality of our fellowship with one another. Jesus said, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother (or sister) has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

Amazingly, Jesus puts the priority of healthy relationships even above worship. Yet, we know that our relationships are not always what God intends them to be.

Two sisters, Matilda and Alice, kept up a feud for 30 years. On Matilda's 70th birthday, Alice felt a pang of remorse, but it passed. Yet later, when she heard Matilda was ill, she felt compelled to visit. From her sickbed, Matilda looked sternly at her sister. At last she said in a faint voice, "The doctors say I'm seriously ill, Alice. If I pass away, I want you to know you're forgiven. But if I pull through, things stay as they are."

The story of Matilda and Alice sets up our Scripture for the morning. As I read the text, think about how Kingdom of God relationships are meant to be conducted among us, and think about how the relationships in your own life are doing.

12 As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This passage says a tremendous amount about Kingdom of God relationships. If you were to read verse twelve and fourteen and skip verse thirteen for a moment, you would be encouraged to clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and love. Ah, that sounds so nice: “compassion, kindness, humility and love.” That sounds so pleasant, so rewarding. Then, we read verse thirteen that I skipped. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a
Don’t grumble about your grievance. Resolve it if all possible.

Pete is leading us in a series of sermons thinking about the Kingdom of God and Kingdom of God relationships. It would be helpful this morning for you to think about a relationship in your own life that is in some way injured—not whole. Some relationships break because something truly “wrong” has been done. You may have a relationship that is damaged because of hurtful words that were spoken or attitudes that have been held, or some very painful action that has been taken.

The Apostle Paul was a realist. He knew that when it comes to our unity and our spirit our relationships are fragile. He knew how easy it is to have a complaint against someone else, to be ticked off with someone, to feel anger because of perceived injustice or injury. All the Apostle is saying is when you are annoyed or hurt by someone or something they are doing, that very grievance is your green light to deal with it. And, while much can be said about dealing with difficult relationships, in this text Paul gives us just two ways. Bear with people. Forgive people.

Bear with people. Don’t grumble about your grievance. Resolve it, if at all possible. The word “bear” means the power to sustain without breaking (Webster’s). Bluntly, it means putting up with people and doing it graciously. The word “bear” is directly related to the word “for-bear-ance,” which means to hold back when you are provoked. I switched lanes on an interstate and inadvertently cut off another car trying to merge. The other driver was provoked. Instead of “forbear-ance,” bearing with me, he rolled down his window and, with words and various demonstrations of affection, he let me know his view of it all. To forbear is to withhold a punishment that is due; it is to control yourself when you are pro-voked. In fact, the Book of Romans says this wonderful thing: Do you despise the riches of God’s kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (Romans 2:4). God’s forbearance means He controls Himself when we provoke Him in order to make possible a reconciliation. In Kingdom of God relationships we are to bear with people when we are provoked.

Second, forgive. Our text says, Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. The word “complaint” is a word that means literally “blame.” Blame—it’s your fault. The NIV translation puts it this way: Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. A grievance is something I hold against you. What is interesting here is that Paul says, “Forgive
You perpetuate your feelings of being wronged or give up your grievance with an act of grace that the other person doesn’t deserve.

whatever grievances you have.” No exceptions! You say, “That’s not fair. You have hurt me, damaged me, insulted me, yelled at me, deserted me, ignored me, disappointed me and I have a grievance. I am angry, resentful, and bitter at you.” Your grievance is your green light to choose between the grievance and grace. You perpetuate your feelings of being wronged or give up your grievance with an act of grace that the other person doesn’t deserve. You do it because you are leaning on Jesus who freely gave grace to you when you didn’t deserve it either.

Charles Allen tells of a time when he was in the fourth grade and the superintendent of the school mistreated him. There was no doubt about it. The man deliberately mistreated Charles because he had fallen out with Charles’s father. Afterwards, Charles’s family moved out of town and many years went by. Now grown and living in a different city, Charles heard that his old antagonist was seeking a job with the schools in the area. Charles knew that as soon as he told his friends on the school board about the man, they would not hire him. Charles says, “I went out to get in my car to go see some of the board members and suddenly it came over me what I was doing. Here I was, out trying to represent him [Christ] who was nailed to the Cross and me carrying a grudge. That realization was a humiliating experience. I went back into my house, knelt by my bedside, and said, ‘Lord, if you will forgive me of this, I will never be guilty of this attitude anymore.’ That experience and that promise are among the best things that ever happened in my life.” He realized that he had to choose between his grievance and God’s grace and God’s grace won. You can make the same choice!

I remember many years ago Dick Halverson talking about the priority of our relationships in the Kingdom of God and talking about the events described in the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 18. The twelve disciples have been together for quite awhile, and they are quite a mix of personalities. James and John are called “Sons of Thunder,” which would not indicate they were wall flowers. Simon was called the Zealot and surely was highly opinionated. Judas had his hands on their money. Philip wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer. Peter could be impulsive. They get on each others’ nerves and, perhaps, Peter is fed up when he says to Jesus, “If my brother sins against me, how often do I have to forgive him? Seven times?” Rabbinic law said you needed to forgive three times but not four, so how magnanimous Peter was in suggesting seven times. Imagine his surprise when Jesus replied, “Not seven but seventy times seven.” In other words, infinity. And then Jesus tells what has become a famous story.

He said that the Kingdom of God may be compared to a king who wanted to settle some debts with his servants who owed him some money. A servant was brought before him who owed him ten thousand talents, which in the unit of
money of the day was sixty million denarii, which was many times the amount of money required to run the governments of Judea, Samaria and Galilee combined. It was the equivalent of zillions of dollars, an immense debt. That servant could never repay that debt. Hebrew law would have permitted the king to sell the servant and his family into slavery until the debt was paid, which would mean never. The servant throws himself down and says, “Lord, have patience with me and I will repay you everything,” which was, of course, ridiculous. He could never repay that debt. Yet, the king had compassion and let him go.

To forgive means literally “to let go,” to release someone from a legal obligation. A debt is forgiven when we no longer demand it be repaid—that’s what is meant by “we forgive our debtors” in the Lord’s prayer—we let go of the grievance we hold against another person. I may feel wronged by you, annoyed, injured, offended by you. To forgive you means I “let go” of any obligation I think or feel you owe me. It means I am actually paying the price for your behavior. You may say, “It’s not fair!” It’s not about fairness. It is about grace. Grace is sometimes explained as GRACE—God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. Your grace is your riches at your expense. You forgive when you lay aside, give up, let go of a wrong done to you.

Practically speaking, that is often not a one-time action. Today, you may let go of some injustice or injury someone has brought into your life and tomorrow, the pain comes back and you let it go again and again, perhaps seventy times seventy times—until it is really gone. And in the 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 is a two-way street. If the other person will not be a party to reconciliation, you can still let the grievance go. You say, “I can’t do that! I am too angry, too hurt, too much is owed me.” Yes, you can do it. Jesus is telling you that God has forgiven your zillion dollar debt to Him, and God expects you to lean on Jesus for His grace and love to so stir in you that you actually let the injury go.

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 choose to take offense. Our anger or grief burns and swells. It’s easy not to let go but to hold on to the hurt and the injustice of what has happened—which, of course, means the initial injury only grows on us. If we wait until we feel like forgiving, get real, we will never forgive. Forgiving, letting go, is not a matter of feeling, it is an act of the will. I will forgive you. I choose not to hold it against you. To fail to forgive is never a can’t but a won’t!

Yet, Jesus’ story isn’t over. It seems that the servant, having been forgiven of a zillion dollar debt, goes out and finds a fellow servant
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Who owes him some few hundred dollars. The King’s servant violently grabs his fellow servant and says, “Pay what you owe!” That phrase is the catch word for any of us who feel offended, hurt, injured, or wronged by someone else. We are mad, we feel anger and resentment – “You owe me!” We could care less about forgiveness. You hurt me, damaged me, cheated me, irritated me, annoyed me and you owe me. So we want what is due us, and we don’t mind if the other party suffers in paying it. A lot! And relationships suffer. When you choose grace over your grievance, you know that there is a debt to be paid and you, the forgiver pay it. This is God’s grace working through you!

Believe me, I am not talking theory. Last summer, I was in the mountains near San Bernardo, California, where I was getting no cell phone service. One evening I was taking a walk, and while climbing a hill, I heard the “beep” of a voice mail message. It said, “Stan, it’s your aunt. Is it true my sister died? Please call me.” She gave a phone number and hung up. My aunt? My mother’s parents had divorced when she was 18-months-old. Her mother remarried and a sister was born. In time the relationship among them blew up for a variety of reasons. I hadn’t talked to my aunt in over twenty years and probably only three times in my whole life, and none of us had talked to her after my mother died. I called her and we had a long talk. How sad that in the choice between grievance and grace that grievance was chosen and the relationships of her generation can now never be healed. Don’t let that happen to you! Jesus calls us to let go of the grievances we hold against another!

The fellow servant threw himself down before the King’s servant and in almost the same words of the King’s servant said, “Have patience with me and I will repay you,” and he could have paid that debt. The King’s servant, who had his own zillion dollar debt forgiven and let go by the King, refused the pleading of his fellow servant, whom he had thrown into prison until he paid his debt. When this was reported to the King, the king was enraged and now adds the word “wicked” when addressing the servant! “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you asked me. Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?” And now we have to be very careful. Jesus wasn’t telling this story to entertain. He is talking to you and to me about how our God and Father, the King of the kingdom of God reacts when we refuse to forgive. And in anger, Jesus reports, the King had that servant, whom he now describes as “wicked,” delivered to the jailors until he should pay all his debt.

Jesus is blunt and to the point. He is the Lord of compassion. He is the one who says, “Come to me all who are weak and heavy laden” “Let not your heart be troubled, trust God trust also in me.” He understood that sometimes the grievance we hold against another person is very, very hurtful. Nevertheless, what he is
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saying is that nothing we ever have to forgive another human being for will ever even remotely compare to the debt God has forgiven of you and me. Therefore, every grievance you and I have is God’s green light to bring grace into a relationship of pain. This is not to suggest that we are to have fake-y relationships with people and pretend we get along. At times, another person’s continuing behavior is offensive and hurtful, and while forgiving them and letting them go, we also know that a healthy relationship is a two-way street. Sometimes we have to move on, but as we move on, letting the relationship go, we also let the grievance go with them.

To underscore the importance of his words, Jesus ends his story with what is called a hard teaching. As Jesus describes how the King turned over the wicked servant to the jailors until he should pay all his debt, Jesus goes on to say, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother (or your sister) from your heart.” Forgiveness is at the heart of the fellowship of the King, at the heart of kingdom of God living. If we refuse to forgive, refuse to let go of a grievance, our Lord is looking us in eye and saying, “How dare you? I have forgiven all your debt to me. Now allow my love to so fill you that you forgive the debt others owe you.” Which is why the Apostle Paul wrote our text for this morning: Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. May you take our God’s Word to your heart and make it so in your life. If you walked into this room with a grievance in your heart toward another I invite you to let it go—right now! Oh Lord, you have shown grace and mercy to us when we least deserved it. Help us show the same grace and mercy to others. Amen.

Footnotes:

1 Dr. Walter Ray, “We Forgive Because We are Forgiven,” First Presbyterian Church, Bellvue, WA, January 20, 2002.
3 Matthew, A Commentary: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12, Frederick Dale Bruner

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