

## **Building a Christian Community**

### **Forgive One Another**

#### **Ephesians 4:32**

### **Introduction**

The past few weeks, we've been talking about what it takes to build a solid Christian community and how crucial it is for us to be involved in one another's lives. Our base text is John 13:34,35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

(John 13:34-35 NKJV)

The apostles taught this truth in several different "one another" imperatives, and our lesson today echoes this same teaching of Jesus. In Ephesians 4:32, Paul writes, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32 NKJV)

The question is, are you involved enough with some Christian friends that you know how to extend and receive forgiveness? Or do you throw a fit, pout, and refuse to talk about it?

Forgiveness is the only way to preserve closeness in relationships with sinful people. Virtually every writer who has weighed in on the subject of bitterness has followed the Bible's lead on the ultimate remedy: forgiveness. Forgiveness alone allows you to let go of grievances, grudges, hatred, and resentment.

But before we look closely at what forgiveness is and how to practice it, let's consider the alternative to forgiveness. Ephesians 4:31 says, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice." (Ephesians 4:31 NKJV)

### **I. Avoid Bitterness**

The Alternative is Bitterness. Bitterness is prolonged retributive anger toward another person because of an offense committed. The root of bitterness is always somehow tied to an offense. It happens when you hold a grudge against someone because of something they said or did that offended you. There is an infinite variety of causes:

- It can be an incident from your past or something relatively recent.
- It can be a major offense or some rather minor.
- It can be something done to you or someone else.
- It can be an aggressive offense or something passive.
- It can be an actual event, or something imagined.

It can happen as a result of:

- Not forgiving others.
- Not forgiving yourself.

- Developing an all-or-nothing mentality
- Holding others to a higher standard than you have for yourself.
- Thinking that things will never get better.
- Believing you have no control over your life.
- And overgeneralizing things.

Add contributing factors like temperament, the seriousness of the offense, or your closeness to the offender - the temptation to become bitter can be slight to feelings of being overwhelmed. The irony is that the real cause of bitterness is about YOU and how YOU respond to the offense. It has everything to do with how you view the situation or act towards the person and your decision whether to react defensively or with openness and honesty. Why is it that some people become deeply embittered over relatively minor offenses while others who have good reason to be deeply offended remain free from bitterness? We'll want to take a closer look at this in a minute.

How do you know when you're becoming bitter? While bitterness is usually evident to everyone in its advanced stages, it is generally very subtle in the early stages. Unfortunately, bitterness always destroys the wrong person. Your bitterness has absolutely no impact on the offender, but it will destroy you! Christians know that bitterness is wrong, so what do they do? Many become experts at denying it instead of dealing with it biblically.

The symptoms of bitterness fall into two categories. The first symptom is you try to justify your anger. As you continually replay the situation, you begin to exaggerate the offense, rehearsing over and over the negative effects. And often, we try to find people who will join us in justifying all of the negatives.

Another symptom is when you aggressively pursue all the negatives until you're seething with anger and hostility. Bitterness causes you to be delighted when your offender faces misfortune, but you express outrage over their good fortune. Bitterness will cause you to withdraw from a relationship and refuse to reconcile. Instead, you give them the silent treatment and isolate yourself from them. We're not talking specifically about dealing with abuse here; we're talking about dealing with bitterness.

Bitterness is when you try to make yourself less vulnerable by not being available for fellowship. A bitter person likes to rehearse to themselves what nasty things they'd like to say or do to the person who offended them. Bitterness can even cause you to plot how you'd like to take revenge and get even with them. Bitterness will cause you to gossip and slander a person. Bitterness can be very abusive. And all the while, you're consoling yourself, believing your actions are justified because you're the offended one. Why would we do this? Maybe we think it will soothe the pain and hurt we have sustained from the offense. But before you decide it's time for payback, you need to consider the price you will pay for doing this!

Anger is an empowering emotion, it feels good, but it has a short-term shelf life. Bitterness, however, takes a long-term toll on your emotional life and drains your emotional reserves. That's why it's better to focus on gratitude towards God and forgiveness towards others. Gratitude, especially towards God, keeps on the positive side of life and helps us develop an emotional buffer that makes us resilient and gives us hope even when we must deal with offenses. Bitterness, however, drains your reserves and causes you to become more vulnerable to depression and negative behavior.

Bitterness also affects your other relationships. You may think you can localize bitterness without it affecting your other relationships, but that's simply not true. Bitterness is like a cancer; it keeps spreading until it affects all of your important relationships. It will even attach itself to others who remind you of your offender. You might even be getting mad at me for talking about this today, and I had nothing to do with what offended you!

Long-term bitterness will poison your personality. It expresses itself in self-pity, cynicism; your tone of voice; and even your facial expressions. For Christians, the most disturbing consequence of bitterness is spiritual because we value relational closeness with God above all else. While nothing (including bitterness) will cause God to reject you, the Bible warns that unresolved bitterness will effectively block the transforming power of God's love in your life.

Hebrews 12 tells us to, "Pursue peace with all *people*, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;" ([Hebrews 12:14-15](#))

Ephesians 4:30 teaches these same truths. Paul writes, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." ([Ephesians 4:30 NKJV](#))

1 John 2:9-11 warns us that it will plunge us into spiritual confusion. "He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes." ([1 John 2:9-11 NKJV](#))

Bitterness is always counter-productive. Instead, we need to learn how to practice biblical forgiveness towards all of our offenders!

## **II. Extend Forgiveness**

Secondly, we need to learn how to extend forgiveness to offenders. So what does it mean to forgive? I can't give you a formula or recipe for how to forgive someone. But if you ask, the Holy Spirit will show you what steps you need to take. But there are some foundational issues we can examine.

There are usually two main reasons why people refuse to forgive. The first misconception is about what forgiveness involves, and the second is that they are simply unwilling to forgive. Forgiveness does not deny the offense actually occurred, nor does it deny the offender's responsibility or the painful effects. God's plan of forgiveness does not deny the offense occurred or the truth surrounding the offense.

Biblical forgiveness is honest and forthright. It honestly acknowledges the offense, including the feelings of emotional pain. But it also acknowledges other truths as well. Instead of totally annihilating or villainizing the offender, biblical forgiveness works to restore and help the offender. It also is willing to consider the possibility of how you may have exaggerated the offense and of how you may have offended your offender.

Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. If you wait until you are overwhelmed with feelings of compassion or pity before you can forgive someone, you may be waiting forever. Of course, biblical forgiveness does involve feelings, but it is primarily a crisis of the will. It's crucial to your own health and well-being that you lay down the right to pay back your offender.

As a Christian, your choice is be based on the biblical conviction that refusing to forgive is really blasphemy and hypocrisy. It's blasphemy because God and God alone has the legitimate right to pay people back for their sins. Romans 12:19 says, " Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. Therefore "IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM; IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP COALS OF FIRE ON HIS HEAD." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. ([Romans 12:19-21 NKJV](#))

If you insist on payback yourself, you wind up usurping God's role. That doesn't mean you let the offender off the hook; it means you transfer the case to a higher court. For a believer to harbor unforgiveness is hypocrisy because God has forgiven you of far more and far greater offenses against him. Ephesians 4:32, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." ([Ephesians 4:32 NKJV](#))

According to Matthew 18:21-35, Peter came to Jesus and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a

hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took *him* by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses." (Matthew 18:21-35 NKJV)

Who is the first debtor? All of us--before God! And who is the second debtor? All of our offenders!

### III. Receive Forgiveness

This is why asking and receiving God's forgiveness is crucial in learning to forgive others. Experiencing God's forgiveness is what motivates us to forgive others. So the first question is, "Have you personally received God's forgiveness through Christ?" If you haven't done this, don't put the cart before the horse—get your own life in order first! Ask God to help you see yourself as the first person who needs forgiveness. Take a look at your own hypocrisy and your need for God to accept you by His grace. Receiving God's grace is the biblical way you to relate to others with grace.

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. If you believe that "to forgive is to forget," you may be unwilling to forgive, or you may wrongly conclude that you are not forgiven. Biblical forgiveness begins with God declaring that you are forgiven and with your choice to receive that forgiveness. Forgiveness often involves the ongoing affirmation of your choice to receive God's forgiveness. Unfortunately you can't eradicate offenses from your memory, but you can refuse to focus on the offense. When you have been wronged, you can choose not to retaliate against the offender. You can choose not to gossip about it or constantly remind the offender of it.

Forgiveness does not passively tolerate abuse or injury or naively agree to trust an untrustworthy offender. You don't prove your forgiveness of a child molester by entrusting your children to them. You don't prove your forgiveness of a chronically lying teenager by choosing to believe them. You don't prove your forgiveness of a violent person by continuing to let them beat you or your children. That isn't forgiveness; how many of you know that's foolishness. Forgiveness is something we extend to others because we know how liberating it is to be forgiven.

On the other hand, trust is something that is earned; that's why we speak of some people as being "trustworthy." In the Old Testament, Joseph is an excellent example of this. ("You meant it to me for evil, but God meant it to me for good.")

Forgiveness does allow for disciplinary and protective measures (including legal prosecution) for redemptive rather than retaliatory reasons. But forgiveness is also willing to let offenders rebuild responsible trust when appropriate. Biblical forgiveness is neither passive nor negative.

The primary reason to forgive others is to represent God accurately and redeem the other person if possible. That is why biblical forgiveness is active and positive. Remember what Romans 12:14 said? "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." (Romans 12:14)

And verse 20, "Therefore, "IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM; IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP COALS OF FIRE ON HIS HEAD." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."  
(Romans 12:20-21)

--even if all you can do is pray for the other person.

## **Conclusion**

Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Forgiveness is deciding to lay down the right to pay back by accepting the responsibility to demonstrate love. Reconciliation is the mutual agreement of both parties to come together again. You must truly forgive someone to be reconciled; however, you can still forgive someone and remain unreconciled if they refuse to repent.

Biblical forgiveness makes us willing to work toward reconciliation. This is the ultimate goal of forgiveness, and it is a beautiful thing to experience. The advice of the scriptures is to resolve past bitterness and don't let present ones get a foothold!

The only difference between the word, Bitter and Better is the letter I. If you can get past yourself, you can get rid of your bitterness and become a better person! It's up to you!