

The Old vs. the New Life: Forgiveness

Ephesians 4:31-32

³¹ *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, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

Three Commodities We Should Have

We live in a culture that doesn't trade in kindness, compassion, or forgiveness. We'd like to think we do, but we don't.

- **Kindness**

Rarely does kindness extend beyond those whom we get along with. **We're kind only to those we like. And we're kind only to those who are lovable.** That's how we work. It's the reason why, in any community setting - unless we pause to think of others around us, and their needs - we will always gravitate towards those we like, love, and get along with.

- **Compassion**

The same holds true for compassion. Rarely does compassion extend beyond our friends. Rarely do we weep or feel for those outside our circle. **Or if we are compassionate, it's confined to doing what doesn't cause us too much inconvenience. And so we sometimes confuse guilt with compassion.** We give to charity, more out of guilt than compassion (E.g. sponsoring the 40 Hour Famine, or donating clothes for the homeless, or cans for the hungry). And it's much easier, isn't it, to show our compassion this way because it doesn't inconvenience our lives.

- **Forgiveness**

And it's even truer when it comes to forgiveness. **Forgiveness is a rare commodity, not just in culture and society, but it's also a rare commodity in the church.** The general response when we are unfairly treated, hurt by others, or abused, used, or cheated by others, is this: 'don't forgive, get even'.

You turn that rage into something constructive; you either work hard to get even, or work hard to show them up. *Rather than forgive, we prefer to brood, and let it simmer in our lives; replaying it over and over again.*

What I want to do is look at these three commodities that should mark God's people: kindness, compassion, and then narrowing down on forgiveness. In fact, **they are three commodities of God that reflect God Himself, and His dealing with us in the gospel.** So it's no surprise to read here that **it should also mark us as His people.**

Everything We are Called to Do is Grounded in the Gospel's Work for Us and in Us

Even as Paul speaks here, of how we are to be marked by kindness, compassion and forgiveness, we need to be reminded that **what we're called to do here, and how we're called to live, is grounded in Jesus and His saving work for us and in us.**

So we need to keep coming back to verses 20-24, which reminds us of the new reality that the gospel has brought about in our lives. We are no longer slaves to the old way of life (hardened

hearts, darkened minds, spiritually ignorant, callous to God, and alive and living only to pander to our self-centered desires and affections).

When you heard the truth of the gospel, and when you came to know Jesus, He didn't just forgive you, and He didn't just save you; He saved you out of your old way of life (v.22); you put off the old self, and in its place He gave you a new self to put on (v.24), a new self created in the image of Jesus, reflecting God Himself (v.24).

Or as Ephesians 2:5-6 puts it: previously you were dead, a slave to the self, world, and devil, but He made you alive in Jesus, and raised you to new life in Jesus. You were previously dead, and now alive; not trying to be alive, but you are alive. You were previously living to the old life, and are now given a new life; not trying to gain a new life, but you are living a new life.

This is the new reality that the gospel has secured in our lives – a change has taken place (or as we saw in v.30 last week: you have been sealed by God's Holy Spirit right now. This is the reality for believers. God has set His seal of ownership, love, commitment, and faithfulness on you by sealing you with His Spirit. You're no longer a slave, but a son or daughter; no longer dead, but alive to Him).

Everything that comes after v.24 is the new life that matches that new reality, and the new normality that matches the new reality. **Everything that comes after v.24 is how saved people live, and NOT how people get saved.** It is about how saved people live out the new life Jesus has secured for them, and **NOT** about how people can work to secure that new life. It is about how saved people live out the new reality the gospel has achieved for them, and **NOT** about how people can work to achieve the new reality.

NOTE: It is critical to understand the mechanics of the gospel as it relates to Christian living. It is critical to understand the sequence: God saves you; your works don't (Eph.2).

1. God has saved you (the new reality)
2. And He shows you how a saved person lives (the new normality in your life).

If you don't keep your eyes on the new reality - on what Jesus has already done in your life - you will lapse into a works based faith, doing what God commands out of guilt or fear, obeying to secure God's approval, and working to secure God's forgiveness. Paul wants us to grasp the logic of the gospel as it relates to Christian living: you start with the new reality – the gospel and what Jesus has done, what He's secured for you (sin is paid for, and guilt is paid for; you were a slave but are now a son or daughter, and you were dead but are now alive) – then He moves to show you what that means for your life as a new creation in Jesus.

Paul's Framework

Here are three new commodities that are to mark our lives under the gospel, as His new creation in Jesus.

- **The negative:** Put aside all bitterness and maliciousness in your relationships
- **The positive:** Put on kindness, compassion, and forgiveness in your relationships
- **The reason:** Because God, in Jesus, has forgiven you

³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

The Negative: Put Aside All Bitterness and Maliciousness (v.31)

Paul gives us a string of six unpleasant attitudes and actions which belong to the old self: the life under the old normality that we have been saved from and freed from. They all reflect the many different expressions of anger. In effect, **he is saying that anger, in all its forms, is to be removed in our lives as believers.** He moves from the inward expressions of anger to the outward expressions of anger – inner resentful attitudes, through to explosive outburst and simmering rage, to public yelling and abusive language.

Paul says that under the gospel, as God's new creation in Jesus, we should put aside or put away:

- **Bitterness/ Resentment** is an embittered, resentful, and critical spirit that refuses to be reconciled, is spoiling for a fight, and constantly looking for faults.
- **Wrath and anger** (or rage and anger) are similar. It is a passionate rage and a settled or sullen hostility. The first one (wrath/rage) speaks of an outburst of rage, and an exploding anger. The second one speaks of a brewing, festering, and seething anger. It is simmering, slow, and boiling, and goes on and on and on.
- **Clamour / Brawling** speaks of someone who shouts a lot or yells. It is the shouting of people who are quarrelling back and forth, and people who love screaming and shouting at other people.
- **Slander/ blasphemy** is abusive speech, not just against God, but also in speaking abusively against others - defaming them, lying about them, gossiping about them, speaking evil of others behind their backs, or defacing and working to destroy the reputation of others.
- And all of this is summed up in **maliciousness**, which is the wishing of evil and failure on others, and hoping others will suffer and get hurt; not just looking for payback, but wishing for payback; that's maliciousness.

Paul says it's all to be put aside in our lives. Normally we don't go around being bitter, angry or wrathful, clamouring, slandering, or being malicious.

So what causes these attitudes/actions?

It's the default position of the heart when our rights have been trampled on, when our way has been rejected, when we've been hurt by someone's words or actions, when we've been unjustly treated, when we've been taken advantage of, when we've been taken for a ride, when we've been made to look bad, when we've been wronged, when our reputation has been sullied, or when we haven't been appreciated, when someone has inconvenienced us. **The only reason why anyone would feel and express any of this is when the 'I' in us gets pushed aside, or when the 'self' or 'ego' in us gets bruised, either rightly or wrongly.**

They're all attitudes and actions that are considered normal and commonplace in our culture, and that's how people live under the old reality, with *me*, *self*, and *I* at the centre. For example, my workmate slanders me so I slander them back; my colleague raises his voice at me, so I raise my voice back; my classmate refuses to help me in an assignment, so I express my anger in a cool hostility towards them.

The world works this way: 'don't get angry; get even. Plot their downfall'. That's malice. The world works this way: 'when pushed, push back, or you'll get walked over'. That's clamouring.

Under the old normality, I only love those who love me, and I repay evil with evil. But Jesus says in Matthew 5:46 that there's nothing special about that; even the worst criminals operate on that principle!

The gospel changes that; you now love those who hate you, and you now repay evil with good. And that shouldn't surprise us, because isn't that how Jesus dealt with us, by loving us when we hated Him (hardened hearts, darkened minds, ignorance, callous and alive to self), and repaying our evil with kindness (incomparable kindness, looking at our enslavement with compassion, and responding to our sin against Him with forgiveness)?

So Paul says that if you've been clothed with Jesus, and if you're a new creation in the image of Jesus, all this must now be put aside. Cast it aside and be done with it. Every single one of these attitudes and actions are destructive; they destroy relationships and people.

The stains of the old self might be there, and you'll gravitate towards bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice, but that's not who you are. Instead, look at who you are in Jesus. You are clothed with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, in the image of Jesus.

The Positive: Put on Kindness, Compassion, and Forgiveness (v.32a)

And so here is the positive (the contrast): the old is gone, and in place is the new self, with new attitudes, after Jesus. We are told to put aside certain things (v.31), and instead, **v.32** ³² *Be kind to one another, tender-hearted/compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

At the heart of the new self is a new creation marked by the grace of the gospel! In fact, **kindness, compassion, and forgiveness are all commodities, not just of God, but at the very heart of the gospel itself, and what you have received!**

In Ephesians 2:7, Paul tells us that God's work of grace, in our lives into eternity, is to experience never-ending and ever expanding 'kindness'.

Ephesians 1:7 talks about redemption, by the blood of Jesus, which brings about forgiveness of sins, and is in line with the riches of God's grace.

Paul says that under the gospel, as God's new creation in Jesus, we are to put on:

- **Kindness** - Kindness is not looked upon kindly by everyone because it carries a cost. It is time-consuming to be kind. It is demanding, and it interferes. And in our culture, a place where everyone is taught to only look out for themselves – a dog-eat-dog world, and survival of the fittest and most ruthless – **kindness is sometimes too hard, especially when it comes to those who are not likable, lovable, or an enemy.**

Have you ever tried handling a growling German shepherd with kindness? Ever tried showing kindness to a difficult colleague at work? Ever tried showering kindness on an ungrateful classmate at university? Ever tried responding in kindness to an abusive parent? It's costly, isn't it? It inconveniences you, it takes your time, and it drains you emotionally, doesn't it? Yet, **kindness is a quality used to describe God in His dealings with us.** You and

I are that growling dog, that difficult colleague at work, that ungrateful classmate, or that abusive parent.

Repeatedly in the Old Testament, the prophets speak of the kindness of God in the face of Israel's sin. (Jer.33:11; 24:2, 3, 5 – I'm going to restore them, and I'm going to lift them up). He shows them kindness, over and over again, in the face of constant ungratefulness, unthankfulness, disobedience, them spitting in His face, them accusing Him of not loving them, them expressing a distrust in Him, them questioning His love for them, them being unfaithful to Him, and them swapping Him for other gods. And in it all, He remains kind. **He treats them with grace, and gives them what they don't deserve: kindness.**

When you move to the New Testament, the kindness of God comes to a climax in the Gospel. For doesn't He show incomparable kindness to unrepentant, ungrateful, disobedient, and idolatrous people, in such a way that even when they abuse His kindness, He persists with them? **He uses His kindness as a means of drawing them to Himself, and to repentance** (Rom.2:4).

The way we work to bring people to repentance is to beat them over the head with their sinfulness and disobedience, and hang them over the pit. Yes, people need to know their sin and hear of wrath, but it's worth noting that **God uses kindness to break the hardened heart. Paul says it's His kindness that leads us to repentance.**

Biblical Examples:

- In Ephesians, Paul speaks of the incomprehensible kindness of God to those who are dead to Him.
- In Luke 6:35, Jesus says that the Father is kind to the ungrateful and evil. **Kindness is a commodity that is at the heart of the Father and the Son.**
- Galatians 5:22 says that one of the fruits of the Spirit is kindness.
- You also read in Titus 3:4 that the work of Jesus (the coming of Jesus to redeem us) is described in terms of His loving kindness.

Kindness is to speak and act graciously towards others (whether they deserve it or not).

It is to act in love, at my expense, even when the recipient does not deserve it; to speak in love towards those who are hurting, at my expense; to spend time loving those who are in pain, at my expense, even when they've stuffed up themselves. **Cultivate and clothe yourselves with kindness in your relationships, just like the Father, and just like Jesus, in whose image we've been created.**

- **Tender-heartedness/compassion** - And like kindness, compassion is used repeatedly in the Scriptures to speak of God's unlimited mercy to sinners: His overflowing mercy to the undeserving (Matt.14:14; 18:27).

Biblical Examples:

- In Matthew 9:36, Jesus' response to the crowds is filled with compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. They were spiritually lost, searching, meandering, looking for answers and solutions in their lives, being fed everything and anything but the truth, and being taken for a ride by the wolves.

- In Luke 15:20 (the story of the lost and rebellious son), the father has been waiting and is filled with compassion for his son. He sees his son's lostness and brokenness, but his son deserved what? He deserved judgment, exclusion, and punishment. But **he shows him mercy because he is compassionate!**

Compassion is to show mercy towards others (whether they deserve it or not). *We are to be compassionate people by showing mercy towards the undeserving, and being sympathetic to the needs of others.* Compassion is to see people's lostness, and feeling for them. Compassion is to see people's needs, and feeling for them.

The great contrast in our culture is that when we meet lost son's our response is far from compassionate – he got himself into his situation, serves him right, it's his own fault. The great contrast in our culture is that when we meet lost sheep our response is far from compassionate – they're dumb, they're gullible, it's their problem. **Cultivate and clothe yourself with compassion in your relationships, just like the Father, and just like Jesus, in whose image we've been created.**

So it's no surprise that Paul tells us to pursue forgiveness in our relationships. **Kindness and compassion all siphon into this: the act of forgiveness. We can't forgive without kindness or compassion.**

- **Forgiveness** – We need to forgive others, not just once or twice, but again and again and again. This is what Paul is saying. **We are to persist in forgiveness that is unceasing and unwearying** (In Matt.18:21-22, Peter asks how many times he should forgive his brother. Peter says 7 times and believes he is being generous, but Jesus answers 77 times).

Forgiveness, just like kindness and compassion, is at the heart of the gospel, and the ministry of Jesus and the Father (Eph.1:7 – redemption secures the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus!)

Biblical Examples:

- Matthew 6:12 is the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples. To pray not just that we might know God's forgiveness in our lives, but that we might forgive others who have sinned against us.
- Luke 23:34 is Jesus' response at the cross: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (hardened hearts, darkened minds, ignorant, and callous).

Forgiveness is all that God has been towards us in Jesus, so it's no surprise that if we're clothed with Jesus, and remade in His image, we should also overflow unceasing forgiveness. **Forgiveness is not an optional extra in the Christian life, it's the new normality that we should foster, desire, and overflow in our lives.**

Understanding the Anatomy of Forgiveness.

Christians struggle with this; not just within the church, but also in our relationships with people in our work places, with family members, in places of study, and marriages; so we want to under the gospel begin to bring this area of our lives under him.

- 1. Forgiveness suggests that there is both a victim and perpetrator, or perceived perpetrator** - There is an offended and an offender, or perceived offender ('perceived' because sometimes we believe we are victims when there has been no offense. It is only a perception on our part; again because of the *I, me, and self* in us). There would be no need to forgive if I wasn't a victim of a crime, unjust act, or hurtful words or actions.
- 2. Forgiveness and forgetting are not the same** – Don't confuse the two. **Paul says we are to forgive, but he didn't say that we should just forget about the hurt or offense.** *In fact, there's no command in Scripture calling us to forget the past.* Even in passages where we are told that God remembers no more (Is.43:25), we have to understand it rightly. **God cannot forget.**

In forgiving us He no longer holds it against us, and He no longer holds our sin against us; He removes it. He doesn't brood over my sin, and He doesn't brood over what I have done against Him.

Forgiveness means no longer dwelling on the sin that was forgiven. Forgiveness means no longer replaying the offense or hurt in my mind over and over again. **In forgiveness we are called to no longer hold the offense against the one who has offended us, to no longer hold the crime against the one who has hurt us.** It doesn't mean you have to forget what has happened, but it does mean that you have to not bring it up again against them, to no longer hold that offense over them, and to no longer dwell on it yourself by replaying it over and over again.

And it's grounded in the gospel. **We are called to forgive each other, as God in Christ has forgiven you.** The father is not going to dredge up your past sins again, He's not going to mull over it and hold it against you, and He's not going to play the 'remember when you did this?' game and say 'remember when you said this and failed?' or 'remember when you broke your promise?'

- 3. My offer of forgiveness is not to be dependent on the response of the perpetrator or my feelings** - Should I forgive if the person who has hurt me, abused me, slandered me, or taken me for a ride, if they're not sorry? If they've not repented? Or if I don't believe they have truly repented? And the answer is yes. Should I forgive if I don't feel like forgiving? The answer is yes. Forgiveness is to be given.

In the Lord's Prayer, we are taught to pray 'forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who have sinned against me.' We are placed under the obligation to forgive, under the gospel.

See what Paul says: *forgive as God in Christ has forgiven you.* Consider the question put to Jesus by his disciples in Matthew 18:21-22: *Forgiveness is not even conditioned on the fruit of the person who has hurt you.* **The call to forgive is an obedience issue, not a feeling issue.** Jesus tells us what we're to do. To forgive is a hard word.

In Luke 17:7-10, Jesus tells a parable about a servant ploughing and tending sheep. He comes home after working the fields, and his master says to him: 'go and prepare a meal for me'. The servant is hungry and tired; his feelings - as he cooks and prepares the meals for his master - tell him to just eat it first himself. But he has a command to prepare and serve the meal; to obey. And against his feelings, he does what he is commanded.

Forgiveness is a command of God under the new reality, and it's not hypocritical to forgive against your feelings, just as it's not hypocritical for a slave to prepare the meal for his master against his feelings; he's doing what's expected of him. Every morning I don't feel like getting out of bed to go to work, but I do. That's not hypocritical, and neither is forgiving against my feelings. What would be hypocritical would be to get out of bed and pretend that I enjoyed it; **to forgive and pretend that it wasn't hard, that it didn't hurt, and was easy; that would be hypocritical!**

NOTE: Just because you have forgiven someone, it does not mean that they are forgiven. We are called to forgive, to hold out forgiveness, and to no longer hold the offense, sin, crime, or hurt against a perpetrator. But **whether they are forgiven depends on their repentance. So if they're not repentant, they're not forgiven;** not because you have not forgiven them, but because they have rejected your offer of forgiveness. You can hold out forgiveness, but if the recipient does not receive it, then they aren't forgiven. The same holds true with the gospel: God offers forgiveness, but if men or women are not repentant, then they aren't forgiven either.

- 4. Forgiveness is costly to the one who offers it.** It's painful to forgive. **Whenever we are placed in a position where we are hurt, we're meant to see that forgiveness is free to the one being forgiven, but costly to the one who gives it.** It always cost us to forgive. You should know this, every time you forgive unconditionally.

The pain doesn't go away, it doesn't change the hurt you've experienced, and it doesn't improve the circumstances you find yourself in. You forgive someone who has slandered you, you forgive someone who has cheated you, and you forgive someone who has abused you, and it's painful. And sometimes the person you forgive doesn't see that, they don't acknowledge that, and they don't think much of it.

It's a reminder to us that when God forgave us it was free for us receiving it, but it was costly to Him, and it was painful for Him. **Every time you're placed in a position where you're called to forgive, remember that it was just as costly for the Lord to forgive you, more costly that it will ever cost you to forgive someone.** And sometimes we forget that. *We only realise the magnitude of God's forgiveness when we ourselves are placed in a position where we are asked to forgive.* **Forgiveness is free to the recipient, and costly to the giver.**

Paul says that this is the reason why we are to forgive (v.32b): because God has forgiven you in Jesus. This is the key to holding out forgiveness in our lives: look up every time you are placed in a position where you are called to forgive. **You will never pay the cost Jesus paid to secure your forgiveness, and whatever cost you pay to forgive someone will never come close to what it cost the Lord to forgive you.** Whatever hurt, abuse, or unfairness you receive from someone, will never come close to the way you treated the Lord before He forgave you.

The Reason: Because God has Forgiven You in Jesus (v.32b)

5. **Forgiveness must always be grounded in our experience of God's forgiveness in our lives**
- *Until you see the cost of God's forgiveness in your life, you will never be a forgiving person.* Until you see the costliness of God's forgiveness towards you, you will never be prepared to bear the cost of forgiving others.

The power to overcome your hurt, to rise above injustice done to you, to extend mercy when you have been treated without mercy, and to forgive when you have been abused, comes from knowing the kindness, compassion, and forgiveness of God in the gospel.

This is why Paul says that our forgiveness must always be grounded in what God has first done for you. **There will never be any hurt, wrong, or injustice you experience in this life that is greater than how you have treated God; so to not forgive someone is to say that the hurt, wrong, or injustice you have experienced is greater than the way you have treated God.** There is no sin that people can commit against me that will be greater than the sin I have committed against God, who has forgiven me.

6. **The refusal to forgive reflects the old self and suggests that I am still a slave to the old reality** – This is especially true if I am still marked by bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice.

The refusal to forgive is totally opposed to the gospel and the new creation; it is totally opposed to Jesus (Rom.5:8-10). In fact, I would go as far as saying that **the inability to forgive, and the holding on to malice and everything in v.31, is a mark of the unregenerate heart.** For isn't that how we respond to situations and people who hurt us, offend us, abuse us, or use us?

Remember Jesus' story of the man who owed a great debt (**Matthew 18:23-35**)? He owed 10,000 talents, which is a 164,383 years debt. In v.27, the master, out of compassion, forgave him his debt! He experienced what? He experienced kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. He experienced it, but it didn't win his heart; it hadn't taken root in his life and he overflows with bitterness, anger, rage, brawling, harsh words, and cruelty.

Right after experiencing kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, he meets a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii, which is 100 days work. But instead of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, he throws him in prison.

Where there is no kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, there is probably no new self. **By forgiving, we are overflowing the grace of the gospel, giving expression to the new self, and becoming Jesus to others; the new normality in our lives reflects the new reality.**

So where there is no forgiveness given, it probably means there is no new reality. The conclusion of the parable that Jesus tells is this:

³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly

Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

In Matthew 6:14, Jesus is not saying that if you don't forgive, you won't be forgiven. He is saying that **if you won't forgive, it probably means you haven't experienced forgiveness.** *If you cannot forgive the lesser transgression in your life, how can you expect God to forgive the greater transgression in your dealing with Him?*

Conclusion

So here, Paul says, as men and women who have experienced the gospel: the kindness, compassion, and forgiveness of God, in Jesus His Son, and where the new reality has taken over in here (heart), where the new creation in Jesus lives, and where the new self clothed in Jesus now resides, there you will find kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, just as God, in Jesus, has forgiven you.