

***“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”***

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

You are walking through a mall, and someone carelessly bumps into you, knocking the packages you are carrying all over the floor. You stand waiting for that person to say something, but they walk away without a word.

It is 6:30 in the evening. A working mother comes home after a long day, makes a nice supper for her family, but no one is home yet, and not one of them has called. When they do get home, all they do is complain that the food is cold and overcooked.

You confide a deep, dark secret to your best friend. But in an unexpected slip, they betray your confidence—and then act as if it never happened.

In every one of these examples, the frustration, anger, or hurt that we would feel could be averted with just a few simple words—words of repentance and apology. All that has to be said is “I’m sorry.” When those words are sincerely spoken, they can make a world of difference. And yet how hard it is for us to say them! But what is worse is the difficulty that comes in speaking the three most important, sweetest words in the world. As hard as it may be for us to say, “I’m sorry”, it can be even harder for us to say to someone, “I forgive you.”

C. S. Lewis said: “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive”. While we will eagerly accept forgiveness from others for the wrongs we have done, we are less likely to want to forgive those who have wronged us in any way. If we find it hard to forgive even those who come and ask for our forgiveness, then imagine how hard it is for us to forgive those who won’t come and apologize or repent of the wrongs they have committed against us.

In our text today, Paul speaks of the life we have as children of light—as those who have the blessing of forgiveness and life in Jesus Christ. As those who have experienced the grace of God, as those who have been forgiven, we need to show that same grace and forgiveness to others. The words of God through the apostle Paul are very simple and very clear: ***“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”*** When we take this lesson to heart, we find that the forgiveness we have in Christ and the forgiveness we share with others brings wonderful joy and freedom to our lives.

Forgiveness is hard, because we feel that there are certain actions, certain deeds and perhaps certain people just don’t deserve to be forgiven. Does the drunk driver who kills innocent people, or the terrorist who blows up a building killing hundreds deserve mercy? Do drug dealers, murderers and abusers deserve forgiveness? We may forgive an unkind word from a friend that was said in haste—until we hear those same unkind words over and over again. We may forgive certain acts of indiscretion—but we don’t want to forgive the person who betrayed our confidence by gossiping about a secret we shared with them, or the spouse who cheated on us. If we are honest, we really want people who have wronged us in any way to get what’s coming to them. We feel they deserve to be judged and punished—not forgiven—because of their actions.

A young, Nazi SS officer was dying in a Polish concentration camp hospital and asked a nurse to bring him a Jew from the camp. He wanted to confess his horrible misdeeds and receive forgiveness. Then he thought he could die in peace. The Jew she brought was Simon Wiesenthal, who survived the Holocaust and is well known for promoting knowledge of it. He listened to the deathbed confession of this soldier. The soldier told him how several hundred Jews were herded into a house in a Russian village. Cans of gasoline were put in the house, and then it was set afire with grenades. The soldiers were ordered to shoot anyone who tried to escape. The soldier confessed, in great anguish, how a father, his clothes on fire, jumped out of a second story window holding a baby. “We shoot”, he says. “Oh God, I shall never forget it—it haunts me. Please forgive me and let me die in peace.” Wiesenthal later wrote: “I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands. At last I made up my mind and without a word left the room.” Later, some rabbis affirmed his actions when they wrote: “Whoever is merciful to the cruel will end up being indifferent to the innocent. ... Let the SS man die unforgiven. Let him go to hell.”

I won’t deny how horrible those actions in the Holocaust were. It is hard to set aside the hurt, the bitterness and the anger that we feel. Yet saying, “let the SS man die unforgiven. Let him go to hell”, is exactly the opposite of what God teaches us in His

Word. If the members of the early church had treated Paul the way the rabbis said the SS man should be treated, what would have happened to the church? God calls us to forgive, even as we have been forgiven. Jesus says to us: ***“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”*** (Matthew 6:14–15, ESV) Our gracious Lord doesn’t just suggest, but He insists that we, who have experienced His grace and mercy show that same mercy to others, as we forgive, with all our heart, those who wrong us.

But don’t people have to repent? Don’t they have to say they are sorry before we can forgive them? Don’t they have to prove to us that they are truly sorry? We often have the idea that forgiveness can only be given to people who make up for all the bad they have done. We want people to do penance, to atone for their actions. That penance will show us they are sincere in their repentance. It will show us they deserve to be forgiven. And if they don’t come grovelling to us, we won’t forgive them.

In our text, Paul doesn’t say anything about repentance or about what those who have wronged us should do. He speaks to forgiven Christians and calls us to forgive even as God in Christ has forgiven us. I am always drawn to the words of Scripture that assure us: ***“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** (Romans 5:8, ESV) God didn’t wait to forgive us until we had made up for all our wrongs (which we could never do, no matter how hard we tried). In the same way, we forgive without a claim for punishment or reparation. Forgiveness isn’t about balancing the scale; it is about wiping the slate clean and freely passing on what we ourselves have received from God.

We tend to resist Paul’s view of forgiveness. After all, it’s just not fair. People can’t simply be let off the hook! I am not suggesting that there is no consequence to sinful actions. Forgiveness is not a license to do whatever we want, knowing it will just be forgiven. Forgiveness is the removal of the condemnation of sin so that we can live a life free from sin and its evil influence over us. Even the Lord of Life, who speaks so powerfully of forgiveness makes it very clear that sin is not excused: ***“The soul who sins shall die.”*** (Ezekiel 18:20, ESV) God does deal with sin. Judgment and punishment are His prerogative. We must always remember that judgment for sin is God’s domain, not ours. Remember too, dear people loved by God, how greatly you have sinned against God and His holy will. Even the best Christian, the greatest of saints, is far from perfect. We like to think of ourselves as not all that bad. But like St. Paul, we all need to acknowledge: ***“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”*** (1 Timothy 1:15, ESV)

Thankfully, God loves us even though we are sinful people. He loves us so much that He made it possible for us to know the relief, the peace, and the comfort that comes from the sweetest words in the world. God says to sinners like you and me, ***“I forgive you”***. I forgive you for your thoughtless words, your indifference to my Word of Life, for your disregard for those around you. I forgive you for your sexual impropriety, for your spiteful feelings toward one another, for your drunkenness, your lying, your cheating. I forgive you for the countless sins that you have committed in violation of my law, and for all the times you have taken advantage of my love. I forgive you because I have paid the debt of your sinfulness in My Son, who bore the burden of your guilt and shame and who suffered the consequences of your sin upon the cross. I forgive you, for He died to take away your sin. I forgive you, and so that you may know it is true forgiveness, I guarantee it in the resurrection of My Son, who lives as a testimony to that everlasting forgiveness.

Our forgiving God also calls us to have that same heart of forgiveness for others. Peter once asked Jesus, ***“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”*** (Matthew 18:21, ESV) Peter probably wasn’t too happy when the Lord answered, ***“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”*** (Matthew 18:22, ESV) Isn’t that what the Lord has done for us? He has forgiven us—not seven times, or even seventy-seven times, but countless times! He has such a heart for forgiveness. God grant us that same heart to one another! If we hold a grudge and insist that the wrong be held as debt against another person, we sin against God and jeopardize our own forgiveness. Whether or not that person repents, makes amends, or asks for our forgiveness makes no difference. We simply forgiven them. That individual will still have to face God for what they have done, but this is between God and that person, not us. Jesus does ask that we, as loving brothers, go and point out our sin to our brother—not in judgement, but that they may repent and know the redeeming grace that Jesus Christ gives us through the cross. But even before we go to our brother, we must forgive him.

Paul’s whole point is that we forgive as God, in Christ, has forgiven us. It can be hard to forgive with that God-like forgiveness. But think of the Saviour on the cross. There we see how hard it was for God to forgive us. The forgiveness we need was painful and involved the greatest of sacrifices, as God gives Himself for the people who have sinned against Him. On the cross we see the only innocent and sinless man who ever lived on the earth being cruelly treated by the people who were jealous of Him and who refused to believe what the Word of God and their own eyes were telling them—that Jesus was the Messiah, God Himself come to rescue His people. If ever there was someone who deserved to say, “Father, let them suffer what they deserve because

of their actions', it was Jesus. But His words from the cross are far different. He says: "***Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.***" (Luke 23:34, ESV) That promise of forgiveness is for us, too, and it becomes the power and strength for forgiving others—both those who ask for our forgiveness, as well as those who don't.

We are sinful people and when interact with other sinful people, we experience hurts, disappointment and any number of situations that can only be solved through forgiveness. But if you find yourself wondering if you should forgive, just remember the cross, and all that Jesus has done for you. God has been merciful to you. Now, empowered by His Spirit and by the forgiveness we have in Christ, show that same mercy in a heart of forgiveness for those who need it from you, too. Amen.