

**The Walk of the True Christian, Part 4**

Scripture: Ephesians 4:31-32

Code: 49-27

We come now to the study of the Scriptures, and I want you to turn to Ephesians chapter 4, if you will. We will finally get to the end of this chapter. We have been going at a slow pace because of the significance and importance of these instructions that are being given to us by the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul. So I want to read again the portion, just so you have the entire context in mind.

Ephesians 4, and I'll begin reading in verse 17: "So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles"—or the pagans—"also walk"—and here's how they walk: "in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

"Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."

There seems to be a lot of confusion in the world today, and certainly in our culture, about what a true Christian is. We struggle with the reality of that fact because we wish it were clearer who the Christians were, so Christians claiming to be Christians didn't do so much damage to our reputation. The range of Christianity extends all the way from the true believers on the one hand, to the false teachers who claim the name "Christian" but who really are the agents of the devil—and everything in between. You might say somehow God missed the target in developing Christianity and developing His kingdom in the world, because it is so very difficult to tell true Christians from false Christians. I just want to encourage you to let you know that God knows the difference. The challenge is not before Him, it's before us, and before the watching world.

So many so-called Christians misrepresent Christ and Christianity. You would assume maybe that this is some default in the plan of God, but you would be very wrong to assume that because at the very outset of His ministry, Jesus said it was going to be exactly like this. Jesus said, "There are

going to be many people who say to Me in the end, when they come to the judgment, 'Lord, Lord, we did this in Your name and that in Your name.' And I will say to them, 'Depart from Me, I never knew you, you workers of iniquity.'" And for them, the entrance to hell will be from what they assume is the gate to heaven. So Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, which is the first sermon you run into in the New Testament, the book of Matthew, said, "There are going to be false Christians who are not even going to realize their false Christianity until they face the judgment."

And then in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus gave a number of parables that explain the character of the kingdom of God in this age between His comings, or the character of the church, the visible church, and He said, "It's going to be a mixture. It's going to be wheat"—that's the genuine believers—"and tares"—that's the false believers—"and you're not going to be able to tell them apart, and we're going to have to wait till the harvest, and the Lord will do the separating." He said, "The kingdom is going to be like a dragnet thrown into the sea that's dragged along the bottom, and it comes out with some things that you want and a whole lot of debris that's just lying on the bottom; and the kingdom is going to be like that. There are also going to be some people who hear the Word and show some external interest in the Word, but they never have any root, they never have any fruit, and they wither and die."

So our Lord was instructing His disciples, and all of us, from the very outset that it was going to be very difficult to sort out the true Christians from the false ones. And that then begs the question, How do you do that, if it's that difficult? And the answer was given by our Lord in the context of Matthew 7. Listen to what our Lord said; here's the definitive answer, verse 17 of Matthew: "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit." That's a pretty obvious analogy. "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. . . . So then, you will know them by their fruits." There it is. How do you tell a true Christian from a false Christian? By the fruit of their life.

And then He goes on into that section, "Many will say to Me . . . 'Lord, Lord . . .'" and He will say to them, "I never knew you." "Not everyone who says . . . 'Lord, Lord,'" He says, "will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter." It's not what you say, it's not what you claim, it's what you do. It's the fruit.

The end of the Sermon on the Mount, He said there were two people who built houses; one built on sand, one built on rock. The flood came, and the house on sand was destroyed. The house on sand looked good on the outside, but it was not built on a foundation of obedience, of doing the will of God.

James picks up this same reality and writes in James 1:22, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." You can't audit Christianity; you can't audit the Bible. You have to prove yourselves doers of the Word, not just those who listen. In fact, James goes on in verse 26 to say, "If anyone thinks himself to be religious"—in the true sense—"and yet does not bridle his tongue [he] deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless." So you may claim to be a Christian, but what comes out of your mouth will give evidence of whether or not you are. And then in chapter 2, the famous words of James in verse 17: Faith without works is dead, being by itself. You can't have a legitimate "Christian" faith that doesn't show up in your life, because "if any man is in Christ, he's a new creation; old things are gone, and new things have come."

Now this gets us back to Ephesians, and take a look at chapter 2 again. This is kind of a launch point for us. In verse 8, familiar verses: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of

yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God beforehand prepared so that we would walk in them.” So there you have the connection back to what Jesus said in Matthew 7: We have been chosen for transformation; “by grace you have been,” and you have become His workmanship—that is, God has recreated you; you have been born again unto good works. You are now a good tree producing good fruit. Paul in Romans 6 says you were a slave of sin; now you’re a slave of righteousness.

So how do you tell a true believer? Not by a profession, but by the production of spiritual fruit. It could be attitude fruit—love, joy, peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control—fruit of the Spirit. And the result of that controlling attitude fruit of the Spirit is the action fruit of righteous conduct. That’s how you know a Christian: not by what they claim but by how they live.

And that is the essence of chapter 4. Paul is telling us here that when you came to Christ, when you were saved by grace, you were saved unto good works; and He refers to it as having learned Christ, back in verse 20. So you have learned Christ. In other words, you have really learned. You haven’t just been taught, you have learned. You have literally taken on Christ. You have heard Him; you have been taught in Him. The truth is in Jesus. As a result of that, verse 24 says God has recreated you “in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” You are a new person. That newness manifests itself for what it really is, and that is the life of God in the soul of man.

Now since this is the transformation, it immediately begs the issue of: What should we see in the life of a transformed person? And Paul chooses some default sins to take a look at in verses 25 to 32. And these are the characteristic sins. You could say these are sort of the generally typical sins of unconverted people, people who are, in the language of verse 17, empty in their minds; verse 18, “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God,” ignorant, hard-hearted”; verse 19, callous, sensual, impure, greedy. These are the things that—this is kind of the default of human behavior, human depravity. Verse 25, they lie; verse 26, they’re angry; verse 28, they steal; verse 29, they have corrupt communication; verse 31, they are bitter, angry, wrathful, clamorous, and slanderous.

So here we have some characteristic sins of unregenerate people that are exchanged dramatically when a person is truly born again and receives a new nature. And we’ve been looking at that. What happens—it’s so dramatic. Verse 25 says you stop lying, and you start speaking the truth. Verse 26 says you’re no longer unrighteously angry, but you are angry in a righteously indignant way when God is dishonored. Verse 28, you no longer steal, but you work to share with those who have need. Verse 29, unwholesome, corrupt communication is out of your mouth, and in its place is that which is a word for goodness, edification, and to give grace to those who hear.

So you see all these exchanges: from lying to speaking the truth, from unrighteous anger to righteous indignation, from stealing to sharing, from corrupt speech to gracious words. And again, it points to the fact, unmistakably to us, that they’re known by their character. We are to be identified as true Christians not by a profession, but by our life pattern—how we walk. And “walk” is a term He used when referring to a nonbeliever, back in verse 17, as much as to us. It’s the daily pattern of life.

So having gone through, all the way down to verse 30, I want to pick up verses 31 and 32 this morning. Here is the fifth exchange, and this is a very, very, very common one you’ll understand. When you are radically transformed, you go from lying to speaking the truth, from unrighteous anger

to righteous indignation, from stealing to sharing, from corrupt communication to gracious words; and you go from retaliation to forgiveness. You exchange retaliation for forgiveness.

It was back in 2017, I preached a message called “Forgiveness in an Age of Rage.” Forgiveness is alien to the normal, depraved, sinful human being. Occasionally you find the milk of human kindness, you could say, in some people, because they have been trained that way or because they understand that that calms their conscience or that makes them more desirable for some people around them. But it is pretty basic to the human heart to understand that it tends to retaliate rather than forgive. Again, it’s possible that human beings under the right kind of influences can come to a place of forgiveness, but it’s not the normal pattern. Wherefore, us who are regenerated by the power of God, we have moved categorically, you might say, from retaliation to forgiveness.

We see that in our society. This is an angry society; this is a hostile society; this is a vengeful society; this is full of retaliation—because that’s in the human heart. “You did something to me; I’m going to get you back.” That’s just how it goes, and it starts from the smallest child, retaliating. When something happens to that child that he doesn’t like, he will react; that’s the innate fallenness of the human heart. Anger and vengeance, of course, have been justified in the media, in movies. There are all kinds of movies, sort of the Dirty Harry philosophy: “Make my day. Take one step in one direction, and I’ll blow your brains out because of what you’ve done.” So retaliation is modeled as if it’s some kind of heroism. You’re elevated to the point of the ultimate macho man if you retaliate; and when something wrong is done to you, you make sure you leave the streets littered with dead bodies, and that’s your heroism.

It also is aided and abetted by psychologists who think you shouldn’t keep in your animosity toward someone else because you’re doing self-harm. And so psychologists for years are saying, “You’re never going to be a whole, self-confident person unless you find the person that wounded you somewhere in your life and unload on that person; and make sure you pour out all the vitriol that’s been mounting up in your heart, or you’re going to harm yourself.” So unleash on him, and that way it’ll be less harmful to you to keep it in. This is being demonstrated to us certainly in the wokeism of today. Wokeism is all about vengeance; it’s all about retaliation; it’s all about getting back at people. It’s all about, “You did this to me or my ancestors, and now I’m going to do this to you or your ancestors”—I should say, “the people that come after you in the future”—“so we’re going to pay you back for what you’ve done.” Payback. Payback is innate in the human heart; that is a self-defensive mechanism. And it’s taken on literally massive proportions in our society, where women want to make sure they pay back every man who ever lived for any abuse that ever was heaped upon a woman by any man, anytime. Other people have other aspects of wokeism, for which they want to make sure they create a comfort in their own heart they think can only come if they can get some vengeance on somebody.

Ecclesiastes 7:9 speaks to this when it says, “Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the heart of fools.” Just so you know, “anger resides in the heart of fools.” And the word “anger” there is “vexation,” which is a broader thing than just to be angry. Vexation means “trouble,” “torment,” “distress.” It’s long, smoldering hostility. Only a fool would sentence himself to that. But people do, and they get so upset and so angry and so hostile, they destroy everything in sight; and they will destroy as much as you’ll stand and watch them destroy.

Cultivating that foolish self-injury is standard operation procedure for people described in verses 17 to 19, and the same description in verse 22. They are corrupted in accordance with the lusts of their

heart, which are deceptive. They think they get fulfillment from it; they don't. So depravity has built-in malice, built-in anger. It dominates human relationship everywhere, from even in a marriage all the way to national conflict in war.

But I want to make one thing clear: Retaliation is like Satan. Satan is a revengeful being if he's anything. He was thrown out of heaven, along with his hosts. He's been angry with God ever since. He is the enemy of God, the archenemy of God. He wants vengeance—he wants vengeance against God; he wants vengeance against those who belong to God, and that's why he does what he does in the world. So mark this, just file it in your mind: Never are you more like Satan than when you want retaliation. When you decide you want to harm somebody because of something that's been done to you or somebody you are concerned about, you're never more like Satan than when you seek to harm someone else as a means of retaliation. That's satanic.

On the other hand—and we'll say more about it later, you're never more like God than when you forgive. So you have the alternative. You can be like Satan, and give the devil an opportunity, as verse 27 says, by retaliating, or you can be godlike by forgiving. That's really the point of verses 31 and 32.

The devil's children are described in verse 31; let's look at this exchange. Here's how the devil's children are identified: by bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and all malice. All bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and all malice—all of it. None of it is righteous; it's all characteristic of the children of the devil. Proverbs 19 says, "A man's discretion makes him slow to anger," like God, as we read in Psalm 103. "A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression."

You think manhood is to mow down everybody who offended you? You think that's manhood? That's not the glory of a man, that's base. No one is a hero who seek vengeance, retaliation. The glory of a man is to overcome, overlook a transgression. Forgiveness is the glory of a man, just as forgiveness is the very manifestation of the glory of God. In fact, 1 Peter 4:8 says, "Love covers a multitude of sins." You remember that? "Love covers a multitude of sins."

Now out of all the virtues, forgiveness is the most powerful one in human society and human relationships because it abbreviates, abruptly, long-term destruction. As soon as you forgive, the path of destruction is vacated. I wrote a book some years ago on the power and freedom of forgiveness. Nothing is as freeing or as empowering as forgiving. The most powerful tool in all relations is forgiveness—in a marriage, in a family, in any kind of relationship, certainly in a church.

So we're not surprised, then, to come to verses 31 and 32 and expect that if we are believers, that we would have exchanged bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and all malice for tenderhearted forgiveness; that's to be expected. We should be marked by forgiveness.

Now let's look at verse 31 and see a little bit more of the detail here. First of all, just to take a look at the word "all"—"all bitterness," and you see it toward the end of the verse: "all malice." There are no exceptions to this. And you see there, first of all, the word "bitterness." It's *pikria* in the Greek. It's a figurative term that describes a kind of enduring, irritable state of mind that keeps someone locked in perpetual animosity. It's what Hebrews talks about as the "root of bitterness." It inclines the heart to hate. It inclines the heart to uncharitable opinions. It makes a person repulsive in their general

demeanor. They're angry; they're venomous; their words come out to do damage, to slice and dice and even kill. That's the bitterness. It's a deep-down, enduring, perpetual kind of hatred connected to someone who did something to offend you.

Then he gives another word, just covering the whole scope of this attitude with multiple words: the word "wrath," *thumos*—"a wild passion," "a fiery feeling inside," not benign but explosive. And then he uses the word "anger," which in the Greek is *orgē*, "smoldering hate." So these words overlap somewhat—every possible term to describe someone who has a perpetual animosity, a repulsive general demeanor, who spews venom on someone else, who has not only deep bitterness but a raging passion against someone, and whose hate smolders inside.

Then when you come to the next two words, you move outside. Following the word "anger" is "clamor." That's *kraugē*, and it means "to shout," "to shout out loud." This is where you voice your hatred, you voice your animosity, you spew out the venom of hostility toward those who have offended you. It's used in the gospels for any kind of a verbal outcry, such as in Matthew 25. So this is where the bitterness and the anger and the rage come out, and they come out in this animated vocalization of hatred.

And then the next word is "slander." That's a Greek word, *blasphēmia*, "blaspheme." To slander is to blaspheme. It means "to revile with contempt," "to curse." This is the enduring manifestation of all that inner anger and hatred and revenge, bent on getting vengeance for an offense; and it comes out in reviling, blasphemous curses pronounced on people.

This is ugly, but this is a default for unregenerate people. And where you see that, you know what kind of person you're dealing with. They may try to claim to be a Christian, but this is the kind of behavior that makes them like Satan and not like God. And just to sweep everything away, he says, "Put it away; get rid of all of this. And in fact, while you're at it, get rid of all malice, all malice." The word "malice" is *kakia* in the Greek, and it's a generic term; it means "badness" or "bad-heartedness." This is the vice behind all the other nouns that are used here. This is what is at the bottom of it: You're just bad at a deep level. In fact, this would be where the vernacular, "You're bad to the bone," would come into play—with the word *kakia*. It's a very generic word—"a bad-hearted person." And we know that every unregenerate person is a bad-hearted person because Jeremiah 17:9 says the heart of man is deceitfully wicked; it's desperate and deceitfully wicked.

So bad-hearted people are bent toward bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander. So they come out tortured on the inside by their hatred and hostility, and it explodes on the outside. That's what you see in all of this cultural action that's going on, whether it's the riots and burning things or whether it's crime being committed, there's something in the human heart. It's bigger than just wanting to steal. It's bigger than wanting to find the next meal. There is a deep-seated tendency in every human being, badness that is so profound and so far-reaching that people feel like they have to do bad to fulfill their strongest impulses. Those are the natural vices, you can say, of the children of the devil. Those who are content to live like that are reflecting their father the devil. So you don't really want to join them; you don't want to excuse them; you don't want to justify them for that. That would be to accommodate the deeds of Satan.

They're under his power. Back in chapter 2, you remember the first few verses: "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins"—and this is all unbelievers—"in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit now working in

the sons of disobedience.” There is a spirit working in the sons of disobedience, and it’s Satan and his demonic forces connecting with the fallen nature of unregenerate people. And the combination of the wicked heart—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—and the agency of Satan makes these kinds of people behave in the way that verse 31 describes them.

The price for that kind of behavior is very high, by the way, extremely high. If you want to be a bitter person, an angry person, a hostile person, a person seeking revenge, you’re imprisoning yourself in the chains of your own making. You are keeping the pain alive so that you’re compounding your suffering; and the more you rehearse it to yourself, the more you compound it, and the more unhappy you become. It’s like picking at an open sore; it can never heal. You’re perpetuating bad feelings, which tear you down. You are growing into a malignant, nonstop kind of bitterness; and that metastasizes eventually into revenge. And it might be one thing to have that all developing in you, but when you can find a whole lot of other people who want the same revenge, then you are more than justified enough to do whatever you think you need to do to retaliate.

We don’t act like that. Christians don’t do that; we forgive. To forgive is very different. The Bible describes forgiveness with some very interesting metaphors. To forgive is to set a prisoner free. To forgive is to write across a debt, “Nothing owed.” To forgive is to declare, “Not guilty.” To forgive is to shoot an arrow so far, it is never found. To forgive is to take out the smelly garbage so the house is left clean and sweet. To forgive is to loose the anchor and set the ship free to sail. To forgive is to grant a full pardon. To forgive is to sandblast graffiti so it can never be seen again. To forgive is to smash a clay pot into bits that could never be reassembled. An attitude of forgiveness is basically to be understood this way: You bless instead of curse. You bless.

So the world pronounces curses on all those who offend them. The world is angry and hostile and vengeful. Believers, we just pronounce blessing; we pronounce blessing. True believers bless other people; they don’t slander them. They don’t explode in fury and bitterness and find some megaphone to scream out their rage; they forgive. “Forgive”—that word is almost alien in the culture that we live in, but the freedom and power to forgive flows only from a strong soul, really. It takes a strong soul, a secure soul, a selfless soul who rises above the trivial impulse of resentment, which will steal joy and steal peace and make your life miserable.

Now just to be sure you understand this: That’s not how we live. True Christians don’t behave like that. We are described in verse 32: “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” We will do this, and we must do this. It’s that combination again. We will because we’re new creations, but we must. Yes, we will. It’s the new default position of a transformed heart to be a forgiving person, and we need to make sure that we cultivate that consistently.

But let me just give you nine reasons to forgive, now that you’re into category 2. Verse 32, those of us who know the Lord, what should motivate us to forgive? We have some biblical motivation, and it’s powerful motivation. So let me just give these to you; I’ll run down them very rapidly.

Number one, we forgive because it’s the most godlike thing you can do. And I suggested that a little bit earlier. But let me read you what Matthew 5:43 says: “You have heard that it was said”—Jesus speaking, “You have heard,” to the Jewish leaders—“that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” It was part of Jewish sort of cultural theology to hate. You had to hate your enemy; that was legitimate. You hated your enemy, and you loved your neighbor.

But Jesus said, “Let Me give you another way”: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Why would you do that? Verse 45, “So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” You want to be known as a son of God? Then bless people, forgive people, even the people who persecute you—and that assumes they’ve done damage, they’ve done harm to you.

God forgives. You’re never more like God than when you forgive. The forgiveness of God obviously is laid out all through Scripture. Just a couple of reminders. In the thirty-fourth chapter of the book of Exodus when God introduces Himself to Moses, this is how He describes Himself. He describes Himself this way: “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin.” Amazing.

God is compassionate, and God forgives. We saw that in the reading from Psalm 103. And I would just remind you briefly of Psalm 103; you can start at about verse 8, perhaps. And we just read that a little bit ago, so you’ll recall it. But listen to verse 8: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness.” That’s an echo of Exodus 34. “He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heaven is above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” You’re never more like God than when you forgive.

In Isaiah 43:25 we read, “I, even I”—God speaking—“I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” Amazing. You see an illustration of that on the cross, where Jesus says to His crucifiers, essentially, “I want to bless you.” And the greatest blessing He could possibly render to them would be to ask the Father to forgive them: “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.” We don’t curse, we pronounce blessing on our worst enemies.

So we forgive because it’s the most godlike thing you can do. Secondly, we forgive because it avoids guilt, because not forgiving is a sin. Listen to the words of our Lord again in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:21. Listen to this: “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you, everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’—this is cursing your brother—“shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into fiery hell.” Cursing another person, calling another person names in retaliation, is enough sin to send you to eternal hell—serious sin, as if you killed someone. Jesus said, “You think that all I care about is murder. I care about you even speaking evil to another person.” If you do that, you have become guilty enough to go to hell. You could only be saved from the consequence of that sin through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It’s that serious.

There’s a third reason also why you forgive, and it’s this: God is more offended than you, and He forgives. In other words, whatever your sin was, whatever the sin against you was to offend you, it was far more serious in offending God. Psalm 51:4, David says, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight.” So David understood that sin was primarily against God; the collateral damage was against somebody else. So if God, who is most offended, forgives, then you, who are least offended, should forgive as well, unless you want to make yourself a higher court than

God, unless you are more holy than God, more righteous than God, or have some other reason to be more demanding than God, to withhold forgiveness.

Why do we forgive? Because it's the most godlike thing we can do, because it avoids guilt, and because we don't want to set ourselves up as some more righteous standard than God, who forgives.

Now there's even more. Here's a fourth reason to forgive, and it's in Matthew 6. Listen to these familiar words in the Disciples' Prayer: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." "You forgive us because we have already forgiven others. You forgive us because we have already forgiven others, meaning that if we haven't forgiven others, then we don't expect forgiveness from You," and that's explicitly stated in verse 14: "If you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." This is being told to disciples. It's not saying that your sins aren't covered in the death of Christ in the eternal sense, but in the sense of your sanctification and usefulness and fellowship, you have sins—we all do, and we need to come, like Peter did, to have his feet washed. We need to come and be washed on a regular basis by repentance and confession.

So if you're holding a grudge of unforgiveness against someone else, that sin is not going to be forgiven you by God, and that renders you in a position where you can't enjoy the fruit of the Spirit, the truth of assurance, usefulness, peace, joy. Forgive so that you can be forgiven. You don't want things going on in your life that restrict God from washing your dirty feet of those sins, because that's going to render you useless in His service.

And in that same passage I would add a fifth reason to forgive—back to Matthew, where Jesus says, "If you come to worship and offer your offering to the Lord, and you have some conflict with someone else, don't bring your offering; go back, make it right, and then come back." So the fifth reason we forgive is in order to worship. Psalm 66 says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." He's not going to answer my prayers if I am a bitter, sinful person and I'm not willing to repent and turn from that sin. I can't enter into His presence to worship because I have something of conflict going on with one who is also a brother.

So why do we forgive? Because it's like God to forgive, because it avoids guilt, because it makes sure that we don't set ourselves up as a higher standard than God; we forgive to be forgiven, and forgive to worship.

Number six, we forgive to avoid discipline. James 2:13, "Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy." Did you get that? "Judgement will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy." Mercy triumphs over judgment. I don't know any believer who would affirm that they want judgment in their life. You wouldn't want that. You wouldn't want divine discipline in your life. It can get pretty serious. There are occasions where the Lord even takes the life of a believer because of the sin. You don't want God's discipline; you want to avoid that. So the way to avoid the discipline of God is for mercy to triumph over judgment. That means you should be a merciful person, and that mercy shows up in constantly overlooking transgressions and sins, offering forgiveness, showing mercy.

Number seven, and this is a very important one. We forgive because of what James 1 says: "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials," because trials have a perfecting work. Think of it this way:

Every offense against you was a trial for the purpose of your spiritual perfection. It is the trials that perfect you. This is Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. He prays three times for the trial to be removed, the Lord says no, and Paul finally says, “I now understand that when I am weak, He is strong. I accept all these things that are coming at me”—and they were severe trials. People were doing deadly damage to his ministry, to his person, and to his church in Corinth. And he realized that these were the trials that humbled him, and these were the trials that sanctified him, and when he was weak, he was strong.

So understand that all the offenses against you are the trials that perfect you. Peter puts it this way, 1 Peter 5:10: After you’ve suffered a while, the Lord make you perfect. Spiritual maturity, spiritual perfection, requires trials. And some of the toughest trials are the trials of those who persecute, reject, and show sinful harm somehow to you. Embrace it as a trial the Lord will use to make you humble and strong.

Number eight, we forgive to avoid irreverence. What do I mean by that? Well the most irreverent thing a person could do, the most irreverent thing any human could do would be to equate himself with God. You don’t want to do that. But that’s what you do if you cultivate vengeance and revenge.

Listen to Romans chapter 12, verse 14: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” So there’s the very simple principle. That’s the essence of forgiveness: You bless, you don’t curse. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” Verse 17, “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.” Never. Never. Verse 19, “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

That’s why I say you forgive in order to avoid irreverence. Really, how irreverent could you possibly be, if you tried to usurp the role of God? God is the one who will avenge. God is the one who possesses the authority and the knowledge, the omniscience to bring about a just revenge. You don’t do that. You don’t set yourself up as God bringing revenge on people. But rather, verse 20, “If your enemy’s hungry, feed him, if he’s thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” An expression to say you’ll make him embarrassed, you’ll make him feel guilty for mistreating you if you return his mistreatment with loving forgiveness.

And now let’s go back to Ephesians chapter 4 for the final in this little list of nine, this quick list.

So for all these reasons, we forgive: because it’s most like God. It avoids guilt. It makes sure that the one who is most forgiven—most offended, God, forgives; and we also, who are far less, should forgive. We forgive to be forgiven. We forgive to worship. We forgive to avoid discipline. We forgive to grow in grace. We forgive to avoid the irreverence of taking God’s place. Finally, we forgive—and here’s the big one—because we have been forgiven. We forgive because we’ve been forgiven, and that’s verse 32: “Be kind to one another”—benevolence—“tender-hearted”—meaning compassionate—“kind and tender-hearted”—and how does that manifest itself?—“forgiving each other,” *charizomai*, to literally “show grace.” The word “grace” is bound up in that verb: “freely forgiving by grace”—not that they earned it; it’s a grace act. And why do we do it?—“just as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

That then begs the question, “How has God forgiven us?” Well, that’s the whole story of the gospel, right? He forgives us when we don’t deserve it, He forgives us when we can’t earn it, He forgives us

when we could never pay reparations that would satisfy Him, and He forgives us completely and forgets our sin and removes it as far as the east is from the west. That's how God forgives. And that's how we have to forgive each other.

The great reality of this truth is found in—and I'll close with this—go back to Matthew 18. Very familiar portion of Scripture. I know we covered a lot of Scripture this morning, and I don't want to give you too much, but we have to end at Matthew 18, verse 21. So Peter came to Jesus, and he said, "Lord, how many times shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" The rabbis said three, so Peter thought he'd double it and add one, and the Lord would think he was spiritual. "'Seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I don't [even] say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'" Four hundred and ninety times? This is just saying endlessly. No, you just keep forgiving. The assumption is, "Well, do I only have to forgive once or three times or seven times, and then if he comes back and does it again, I'm off the hook?" No. No. It's endless.

And then He gives an illustration to explain this: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began to settle [those accounts]"—the picture here would be of a king who probably put tax franchises in the hands of some of his agents, and they went out to various countries and collected taxes, and they needed to give back what was rightfully the king's when the accounting came. And when he began to settle, "one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him." There are some who would say if that's a gold talent, one gold talent would take fifteen years of wages to equal the value. This is a lot. If fifteen years for one talent, and this guy owes ten thousand talents, this is supposed to be a hyperbole; this is outrageous kind of depiction by our Lord. So you have a completely unpayable debt.

Verse 25, the man didn't have the means to pay. "His lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made." So there would be an indentured service of the whole family, and they would earn back whatever they could, not even coming close to what was possible. But the slave responded falling to the ground prostrating himself; he said, "Have patience with me and I'll repay you everything." That's ridiculous, not possible.

But in spite of the ridiculous nature of the appeal, and in spite of the crime committed, "the lord of [the] slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt." At this point the Jewish people listening to this would be in an outrage, because they believed in restoration. They believed that whatever you wasted, you had to pay back, that the only way back into favor with God was you earn your way back. And so they would have seen this kind of king as a fool, who would feel compassion and free the debt.

And then it gets even more interesting: The slave then "went out, found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii"—that's about a hundred days' work, a wage for a hundred days, denarii a day—"he seized him, began to choke him, [and said], 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I'll repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what he was owed." I don't know how that was going to work; how do you earn anything in prison?

So this is an incongruous story. This is a shocking, bizarre story, where a king forgives a man's unpayable debt. The forgiven man goes out and strangles somebody for a minor debt and says, "And if you're not going to pay me, I'm going to put you in prison." The outrage of someone who would receive that level of forgiveness and not offer a measure of that forgiveness is beyond

comprehension.

Verse 31, the “fellow slaves saw what had happened, were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.” They went and told the king that he who was forgiven much wouldn’t forgive the other man. “Summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way I had mercy on you?’” That’s the point, isn’t it? That’s the point. Now you can go back to Ephesians 4:32. We forgive because “God in Christ . . . has forgiven” us.

So do an inventory. How do you know you’re a Christian? Second Corinthians 13:5, “Examine yourselves, whether you’re in the faith.” Ask yourself this: In my life, characteristically, has the truth replaced lying? Has righteous indignation replaced unrighteous anger? Has sharing replaced stealing? Has gracious speech replaced corrupt speech? And has forgiveness replaced retaliation? If it has, then in the language of Ephesians, you have not given the devil an opportunity, and you have honored God because both the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all three, are in this particular passage. You have learned Jesus, you have not grieved the Holy Spirit, and you’ve acted consistently with the Father who forgave you. So you give honor to the triune God when you are a forgiving person and you demonstrate that you have been transformed. That’s the exchange.

How is it that God could forgive us? How did He do that? The answer is right here, isn’t it? At the cross. This is a perfect point in which we come to the Lord’s Table, understanding that the Lord is able to forgive us because our sins were paid for in full by Christ on the cross. God has to be just, and therefore there must be just punishment. He also wants to be the justifier. So how can God be just and the justifier of sinners? By substituting His Son, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, putting Him on the cross to bear the divine punishment for all the sins of all who would ever believe.

This is magnanimity beyond comprehension. God is so forgiving that He went to the extent where He did the most severe damage, you could say, to His own Son. He put a curse on His own Son in order to put a blessing on us. Did you get that? He put a curse on His own Son to put a blessing on us. His Son didn’t deserve a curse; we didn’t deserve a blessing. But that’s how forgiving God is; and so should we be. Let’s bow in prayer.

Father, as we come now to the Table, and we look back at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and consider the sacrifice that was made there where You made Him a curse for us. Lord, help us to see there, not just the salvation aspect, not just the work of justification taking place, the work of substitution taking place, but may we see the power of the cross as a motivation for sanctification, seeing that You cursed Your Son to bless us; and You are perfectly holy and loving. If we curse instead of bless, we betray our relationship to You; we don’t act like Your children. We’re never more like You than when we forgive, when we pronounce a blessing and not a curse. Free us from any attitude of retaliation, and may we be forgiving, merciful, offering grace, being a blessing to all, even those who persecute us.

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